

Navigating Intellectual and Traditional Crossroads: Plotinus, Sethian Gnostics, and Early Trinitarians

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“Navigating Intellectual and Traditional Crossroads: Plotinus, Sethian Gnostics, and Early Trinitarians” examines how various intellectual and religious traditions in Late Antiquity accommodated seemingly conflicting ideas. Three traditions—Platonism, Gnosticism, and Trinitarian Christianity—had to respond to general inconsistencies and the opposing worldviews of the wider Greco-Roman world that simply could not go unchallenged. This paper argues that modern religions could take similar steps to reconcile their own traditional worldviews with those of modern society while retaining sacrosanct convictions about the nature of the divine.

Throughout human history, as new ideas are created and spread, individuals inevitably find themselves standing, intellectually speaking, between several opposing worldviews and are then faced with the task of somehow reconciling these various systems of truth. In the twenty-first century, due to globalization as well as new discoveries in science and archaeology, traditional worldviews are regularly challenged. In the American Southeast, for example, religious views regarding human origins are often understood to be contradictory to the scientific theory of evolution. While both the religious and scientific views are valuable, one cannot help but notice the glaring differences between the creationist and evolutionist perspectives. In this paper, we will examine a select group of philosophers and theologians who navigated an equally significant intellectual crossroads in Late Antiquity (3rd – 7th c.) with the intention of discovering possible methods that we might use today as we attempt to resolve conflicting foundational conceptions of reality.

As a result of Hellenization following the conquest of Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.E.), the intellectual culture of the Near East in Late Antiquity was dominated by the works of seminal Greek philosophers, such as Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.), Zeno of Citium (334-262 B.C.E.), and, of course, Plato (429-347 B.C.E.). In this context, various traditions of Judaism and early Christianity attempted to reconcile aspects of Greek and Jewish theological perspectives, while still others understood them to be fundamentally incompatible. This investigation begins with one such purist of Greek philosophy, Plotinus (3rd c.), before exploring the more syncretic developments of the Sethian Gnostics and the early Christian thinkers Victorinus (3rd c.) and Saint Augustine of Hippo (4th—5th c.).

Plotinus

Plotinus was born in Egypt in 204 C.E. He is widely considered the father of Neoplatonism, though he would have called himself a Platonist. His writings are contained in the *Enneads*, which was edited by his student Porphyry in the 3rd century C.E. Plotinus’s ideas had a profound impact on subsequent Christian theologians, in their conception of God, yet he himself did not advocate

for the Christian or Jewish God. The way that Plotinus conceived of perfection and creation could not be reconciled with the creation narratives found in Genesis. In fact, the most striking aspect of Plotinus's philosophy that truly separates him and Neoplatonism from contemporary and subsequent thinkers was his rejection of the idea that a conscious, divine being planned and directed the creation of the universe. He also had different ideas about how mankind could connect with the perfect entity.

Plotinus's main ideas were based around three primary underlying realities or hypostases: the One, *nous* (Intelligence or Mind), and *psyche* (Soul). The One is not a divinity, not God, in the modern Christian understanding. According to Plotinus, the One is perfectly simple and ineffable, and it transcends activity, mind, and thought. By saying that the One is perfectly simple, it can be used as an Aristotelian First Principle, the one from which all else originated. Therefore, all that exists in the world emanated from the One, and the further something is from the One, the more inferior it becomes. From the One came *nous*, the divine mind or intelligence, and from *nous* came *psyche*, the soul. The last of the emanations, the lowest one which proceeded from the soul, is matter. While the One caused all things to come into existence, it did not create the world. In fact, the One is not conscious of anything, not even of itself, since self-recognition would presuppose a duality; but the One is pure and undifferentiated.¹

Plotinus did not support the notion that creation could have been divinely planned or that the One could have had a direct and active hand in creating the universe the way a potter creates pots. The One is perfect, and so it is unchanging. A divinely planned creation would represent a change in the One, in which the One would have to decide to create the world, going from a stage where it is not creating, to creating, and then not creating once again. Such a change would indicate either: 1) an improvement, meaning that the One was not already perfect or 2) a deterioration, meaning that things should have been left the way that they were, so the One is not actually perfect. According to Plotinus, both of these ideas are absurd and untenable. A preconceived plan of creation "would suggest something outside the divine when there was nothing outside it."² If something were outside of the Divine, it would mean that there is a beginning to time, or that at one time the world did not exist, ideas that Plotinus, like most Platonists, rejected.³ The One exists, it always has, and it always will. In fact, the One is beyond existence. All that exists in the material world emanated out from the ineffable and transcendent One.

Vital to Plotinus's philosophy is the soteriological goal of achieving the union of the Soul with the One. If we are to use light to represent the One, that which is closest to the light is brighter than that which is farther away. Matter, which is below the Soul, is farthest from the One, and so it is the darkest. The objective is to free the Soul from the darkness of the material world and enter into union with the One. The imperfections of this world stem from its materiality, the lowest of the emanations, not the malice of some malevolent being—Satan in Christianity, Yaldabaoth in

¹ Willis Barnstone, ed. *The Other Bible* (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 2005), 725.

² E.P. Meijering, "God, Cosmos, History. Christian and Neoplatonic Views on Divine Revelation", *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol 28, no. 4 (Dec. 1974), 250.

³ *Ibid*, 250.

the Sethian Gnostic tradition. To come into union with the One, the soul must shake its desire for earthly things, and when it apprehends the light of the One, it becomes like the One. Therefore, as opposed to the Christian God, the One does not seek you; you have to seek the One instead. Plotinus compares someone who strives for worldly things, striving for them as if they are reality, to a man who grasps for the beautiful reflection on the water, when he says, "...one that is held by material beauty will not break free and shall be precipitated, not in body but in Soul, down to the dark depths loathed of the Intellective-Being (*nous*)..."⁴ It is foolish to want worldly delights, because, hearkening back to Plato's forms, the things of this world, no matter how beautiful, are merely representatives of the forms, not reality itself. By going into union with the One, from which all else emanates out, is to see the actual forms directly, not mere representatives of those forms in the material world. With his emphasis on escaping materiality, Plotinus's philosophy sounds self-centered, concerned only for the individual soul and not for well-being of others. However, after the soul has achieved union with the One, she—the soul is personified as being female—should return to the world in order to describe her experience to others.⁵ Therefore, while Plotinus mainly focused on the transcendent reality, the world of forms, he also emphasized the need to act virtuously in the corporeal world, in spite of its imperfections and inferiority to the world above.

Plotinus did not feel the need to try to accommodate the foundational elements of other religious traditions into his philosophy. He did incorporate the ideas of other Greek philosophical traditions, but in a Platonic mold. He probably believed that his ideas—the Three Primary Hypostases, mystical union with the One—were all implied by Plato. Ultimately, Plotinus managed to stay true to the core principles of Platonism, even if his ideas led Platonism down a new path.

Plotinus and Gnosticism

Plotinus was very critical of the Gnostics, who flourished in the 2nd and 3rd centuries C.E. While it is not quite clear what Gnostic sect he was targeting, one group that he most certainly knew about was the group today known as the Sethians, and it is well known that a number of Sethian manuscripts were circulating among his students.⁶ The Sethians saw themselves as the offspring of Seth, the son of Adam and Eve.⁷ They also frequently praised a being called Barbelo. The name "Sethian" is a typological category used by modern scholars to describe the authors and followers of up to sixteen treatises, most of which come from the Nag Hammadi library in Egypt.

⁴ *Enneads* I. 6. 8.

⁵ Euree Song, "Ethics of Descent in Plotinus", *Hermathena*, No. 187 (Winter 2009), 33.

⁶ John Turner, "Zostrianos", Marvin Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 541-542.

⁷ Marvin Meyer "Literature of Gnostic Wisdom: Introduction" Willis Barnstone and Marvin Meyer ed. *The Gnostic Bible* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2009), 109.

None of the authors of these treatises refers to themselves as “Sethians,” although early Christian church fathers did use the term in their polemics against this heresy.⁸

For the Gnostics, the Father of Light, or Invisible Spirit, was the highest being, and from him came a number of lesser divinities, like Sophia (Wisdom) and Barbelo (Forethought). The Gnostics themselves had a kind of Trinity: The Father (Invisible Spirit), the Mother (Barbelo), and the Child (Allogenes). These three established the Four Luminaries, from whom came many Aeons, one of whom was Sophia.⁹ Barbelo was particularly praised. Many Christian polemicists referred to the Sethians as “Barbeloites” or “Barbelognostics” because of their devotion to this divinity.¹⁰ The Gnostics believed that the God of the Old Testament, the God of the Jews, was not the same God who sent Jesus Christ down to save humanity. In fact, it seemed inconceivable to the Gnostics that the One, the Father of Light, would create an imperfect world with so many evils and problems in it. That is why, from the Gnostic perspective, some other vile, abhorrent being, one not associated with the Father of Light, must be responsible for the creation of this world, where we are imprisoned by materiality. So it is that Sophia acted out of her own accord to spawn Yaldabaoth (meaning “child of chaos”), a foolish and arrogant being, and he created and rules over the material world. This Gnostic creation myth is based on the creation story in Genesis, but the story gets turned on its head. For example, “God” (Yaldabaoth) modeled Adam, but he did not become a living soul until the Spirit (Barbelo) came to dwell within him. This same Spirit later came in the form of the Snake to Adam and Eve to instruct them to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, freeing them from ignorance. Yaldabaoth, however, declared that he was the one true god out of his arrogance and ignorance, for which he is later reprimanded.¹¹ In this version of the Garden of Eden myth, the snake is actually benevolent, giving humanity knowledge, similar to the role played by Prometheus, who in Greek mythology gave man fire, which symbolizes knowledge, in spite of Zeus. Rather than introducing sin and death into the world, the serpent is the champion of humanity, and, like Prometheus, is then, in the Biblical narrative, punished by God. The Gnostics valued *gnosis*, or knowledge, so a god who tried to keep his creations ignorant must be detested. In fact, in *The Secret Book of John*, Yaldabaoth defiles Eve to produce Yahweh and Elohim, who are also called Cain and Abel, respectively, giving further reason to loath the creator.¹² This story of the rape of Eve also elevated Seth to a higher level of importance, since he was the first son of both the first man and first woman. Since the Sethians believed themselves to be the spiritual offspring of Seth, this would put them in a more distinguished position.

The Sethian Gnostics and Plotinus described the divine in familiar ways. As has been stated above, Plotinus viewed the world as emanating from the One, with matter, from which earth and

⁸ John Turner, “The Sethian School of Gnostic Thought” Marvin Meyer, ed. *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 784.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 785.

¹⁰ Marvin Meyer, 109.

¹¹ Bentley Layton, trans. “The Hypostasis of the Archons”, Willis Barnstone, ed. *The Other Bible*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 2005), 76-80.

¹² Marvin Meyer, trans. “The Secret Book of John”, Willis Barnstone and Marvin Meyer, ed. *The Gnostic Bible* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2009), 179-180.

our bodies are made, being the last emanation from the One. The Gnostic description of the Father of Light (or, the One) is strikingly similar to Plotinus's One. Take, for example, this description from The Secret Book of John that claims that the One is:

illimitable, since there is nothing before it to limit it,
 unfathomable, since there is nothing before it to fathom it
 immeasurable, since there was nothing before it to measure it,
 invisible, since nothing has seen it,
 eternal, since it exists eternally
 unutterable, since nothing could comprehend it to utter it,
 unnamable, since there is nothing before it to give it a name.¹³

Here, the tendency to describe the One in negative terms, explaining the glory of the One by describing what it is not, is on full display. In fact, Plotinus appears to advocate for such in his description of the One, claiming that when describing the One as “oneness”, “goodness”, or “beauty”, such discourse is analogical, not a literal description of the One.¹⁴ For Plotinus, the One is “beyond all statement: any affirmation is of a thing” and we try “to indicate, in our own feeble way, something concerning it” but the One is beyond all things.¹⁵ The Gnostic description of the One lines up well with Plotinus's in this respect.

The Gnostics, however, clearly had a very negative view of the *demiurge* (craftsman), the creator of the world. The Sethians interpreted the Hebrew God as an evil god (Yaldabaoth), but he was not the highest god. The highest god, the Father of Light, had no hand in creating Yaldabaoth. Sophia, an Aeon within Eleleth (one of the Four Luminaries) wanted to create “something like herself” but she did not have the approval of the Father.¹⁶ Sophia's creation, called Yaldabaoth, Sakla, or Samael, created the earth and ruled over it. He tried to keep Adam and Eve ignorant and he also claimed that he was the one and only God, leading, of course, to the confusion of the Jews and Trinitarian Christians, who have fallen for his lies. The Gnostic disdain for the material world stemmed from their idea of this vile creator, who has imprisoned humanity on earth. Gnostic pessimism really upset Plotinus. Plotinus objected to the idea that such an evil entity created the world. Matter, from which the world is made, is evil, not because of some malevolent being, but as a result of its separation from the One, which is perfect. Plotinus was not influenced by, and therefore did not have to explain, the Jewish scriptures like the Sethians did, but to suggest that the source of all things is evil is to deny the intrinsic beauty and perfection of the forms. While Plotinus agreed that the world is inferior to the intelligible realm, the realm of Forms, this world is the best possible imitation of those forms. Therefore, one should accept the ordering of the

¹³ Meyer, 160.

¹⁴ Donald L. Ross, “Thomizing Plotinus: A Critique of Professor Gerson”, *Phronesis*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (1996), 200.

¹⁵ *Enneads*, V.3.13.

¹⁶ Marvin Meyer, trans. “The Secret Book of John” Willis Barnstone and Marvin Meyer ed. *The Gnostic Bible* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2009), 166.

world, and should not hate the creator of the world. The material world still exhibits the beauty of the world of forms, even if it is an imperfect copy.¹⁷

Plotinus also disapproved of confining divine revelation to one man—Jesus Christ—as the Gnostics did.¹⁸ Delegating divine revelation to just one man might suggest that the powers of the One are finite, a criticism that, of course, could have been levelled at the Christians as well. In the Sethian tradition, Barbelo sometimes made appearances in the primordial world, such as in the Garden of Eden, but her final appearance in contemporary times comes in her masculine guise as *Logos* (Word), Seth, or Jesus.¹⁹ She is the one who embodied Jesus Christ and was sent down to reveal secret knowledge to humanity. The Sethian tradition, therefore, identified the serpent in the Garden of Eden with Jesus Christ, as Jesus was just the male guise of Barbelo, who also inhabited the serpent. Both Jesus and the serpent gave humanity knowledge, or *gnosis*, so both deserved to be revered.

The Gnostic creation narrative illustrates how the Gnostics applied Platonic principles to Jewish scriptures and also the creativity involved in reinterpreting the scriptures. The Old Testament God was, in many ways, fickle and wrathful, which ran counter to the idea of the all-benevolent God that Jesus described. By claiming that the gods are different—the one from the Hebrew scriptures and the one who sent down Jesus Christ—the Sethians could demonstrate that the ultimate God of the universe was in fact perfectly good even though the world is not perfect. They tried to strike a balance between the traditional ideas of the Judaism and the core principles of Platonic philosophy. Ironically, in doing so, they ultimately deviated from the mainstream ideas of both.

Plotinus and Christianity

Early Christians from the fourth and fifth centuries drew heavily from Platonic philosophy to try to understand the nature of God, which should not be surprising given that Christianity was nurtured in the culture of the wider Greco-Roman world. At the very least, Neoplatonic writings lined up enough to give Christian theologians a philosophical basis from which to make an argument for their triune God. The crisis for Christianity during the first few centuries of its existence was, in addition to being highly fragmented, that the traditional Jewish views of the Hebrew Scriptures could not be easily accepted in the wider Greco-Roman world, partly because they could not stand up to the intellectual scrutiny of the time. The church fathers needed to find a way to ensure that their religion was intellectually sound, while also staying true to the message proclaimed by Jesus Christ. Plotinus's ideas about the nature of the divine influenced much of early Christianity and its ideas about the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

The texts of Plotinus were translated into Latin by Marius Victorinus (4th century C.E). Victorinus was a Neoplatonist philosopher before he converted to Christianity himself, and he

¹⁷ Joseph Katz, "Plotinus and the Gnostics", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (April, 1954), 289.

¹⁸ Meijering, 249.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 787.

came up with his own description of the Holy Trinity. He saw no conflict between Neoplatonism and Christianity, as Albert Haig explains:

Victorinus did not see Neoplatonism as merely providing some useful concepts which may be employed in the service of Trinitarian theology [...] Rather, he believed that Neoplatonism was itself intrinsically truly Trinitarian, and that a careful analysis must demonstrate that the orthodox Christian view merely articulated what was already implicit in Plotinus and Porphyry.²⁰

For Victorinus, the three hypostases are called “To Be” (the Father), *logos* (the Son), and *nous* (the Holy Spirit). The triad is not a perfect parallel of Plotinus’s three primary hypostases of the One, *nous*, and *psyche*. Victorinus’s Trinity shows more influence from Porphyry, Plotinus’s student, than from Plotinus himself.²¹ At any rate, it does show just how deeply the works of Plotinus and other Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophers influenced the early Christian church in its conception of the one true God. The main problem with Victorinus is that his “Trinity” appears far too similar to Neoplatonic metaphysics, and the parts of his trinity can easily be interpreted as separate entities, since he describes the “To Be” as incomprehensible, but the *logos* as not incomprehensible. Later Christian theologians, still heavily influenced by Neoplatonic principles, identified all three persons of the Trinity with the One.²²

Additionally, the Platonists had a strong effect on the religious philosophy of Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430 C.E.), arguably the most influential early Christian thinker. In his *Confessions*, Augustine described the influence of the Platonists on his conception of God:

By having thus read the books of the Platonists, and having been taught by them to search for the incorporeal truth, I saw how your invisible things are understood through the things that are made [...] I was assured that you were, and that you were infinite, though not diffused in a finite space or infinity; that you truly are, who are ever the same, varying neither in part nor motion.²³

Although his mother was a Christian, Augustine rejected Christianity, favoring instead Manicheanism (another Gnostic religion). However, he was not satisfied with the Manichean conception of the divine, so he eventually rejected it and truly converted to Christianity. Through the Platonists, and by applying their concepts to scripture, Augustine formulated an idea of the divine that satisfied him.

A major area of disagreement between Christianity and Neoplatonism was the Christian rejection of subordination on the part of the persons of the Trinity.²⁴ With Plotinus, there is an obvious subordination, with the Soul being lower than the Intellect, and the Intellect being lower than the One. Trinitarian Christianity conceived of a Trinity—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—that was ultimately One. Such an emphasis on the unity of the Holy Trinity comes in part from

²⁰ Albert Haig, “Neoplatonism as a Framework for Christian Theology: Reconsidering the Trinitarian Ontology of Marius Victorinus”, *Pacifica: Journal of the Melbourne College of Divinity*, vol. 21, no. 2, (June 2008), 126.

²¹ *Ibid*, 128.

²² *Ibid*, 139.

²³ *Confessions*, 7.20.26.

²⁴ Thomas A. Wassmer, “The Trinitarian Theology of Augustine and his Debt to Plotinus”, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Oct., 1960), 262.

Plotinus, who thought that anything other than Absolute Unity “is to be an ordered whole of parts” and for Augustine to stress the Unity “he equally affirms the being and the Trinity of God.”²⁵ The perfect Absolute Unity to Augustine was the Trinity-in-Unity, the Three-in-One, which still dominates the Christian idea of God to the present day. All three persons are equal to each other, which runs counter to the subordination of the three primary hypostases of Plotinus, and to the various hypostases of the Sethian Gnostics. The texts of Plotinus and other Neoplatonists, such as Porphyry, cannot fully account for Augustine’s trinity, since the doctrine of the Holy Trinity had been confirmed by the church years earlier. Also, as a Manichaean, Augustine had learned to think of three levels in his soul: *psyche*, *pneuma*, and *nous*.²⁶ However, Neoplatonic philosophy helped to give intellectual credence to the Christian Trinity.

The Christians were very certain that only one God existed. The challenge was to find a way to accommodate the Father, the Son (Christ), and the Holy Spirit in a way that was not polytheistic, pantheistic, or panentheistic. Christianity from the start was a monotheistic religion, and Christian theology reflects that monotheism. Any time that Christian theologians borrowed from the various philosophical schools of thought, they had to find a way to fit it into the monotheistic mold, as is clear with Victorinus and his interpretation of Plotinus and Porphyry. Where Plotinus believed that because the One was perfect it could not have created the world, Christians believed that a perfect triune divinity created a perfect world. The Christian God is not just perfect, but he is also all-powerful, and creating the world is a reflection of the power that he possesses. Problems on earth are associated with sin, which came in to the world when Satan, in the form of a serpent, tricked Adam and Eve into eating the Forbidden Fruit in the Garden of Eden.

The Christian God, the God that Augustine knew, and the one that most Christians know today, in addition to being the creator of the universe, was also a personal God, concerned with the livelihoods of those beings whom he made in His image. Throughout *Confessions*, Augustine praises God for leading him in the right direction at the times in his life when he was led astray from the truth, such as when he finally rejected the Manichaeans, writing “For your hands, my god, in the hidden design of your providence did not desert my soul; and out of the blood of my mother’s heart, through the tears that she poured out by day and by night, there was a sacrifice offered to you for me, and by marvelous ways you dealt with me.”²⁷ According to Augustine, God is working in people’s lives, helping to lead them down the right path to spiritual truth and salvation. The One of Plotinus is not a personal deity like the Christian God is, so it does not work to influence the lives of people to find its truth. Discovering truth is up to individuals. However, Christians still said that the world came from a perfect God, a deified One, and not from some lower, vile being, so Plotinus’s criticism of Christianity would probably not have been as harsh as his criticism of Gnosticism. The Christians still believed that the world came from a perfect source. However, they disagreed with Plotinus and the Neoplatonists about how the world deviated from

²⁵Ibid, 262.

²⁶ Robin Lane Fox, *Augustine: Confessions to Conversions*, (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 242.

²⁷ *Confessions* 5.7.13.

that perfection. Plotinus saw this deviation as the inevitable result of emanation, not a consequence of mankind's sin.²⁸

Conclusion

Several techniques were used by philosophers and theologians in Late Antiquity to reconcile their belief systems with the rest of society. Plotinus stayed true to Platonic principles, but incorporated certain elements of other philosophical traditions to better explain those principles. Platonic philosophy was already a widely accepted part of Greco-Roman society at the time, so his reconciliations did not need to be drastic like those of the Sethians and the Trinitarians, who had to incorporate Greek philosophy into the foundational tenets of Jewish religious tradition. The Sethians attempted to find a middle ground between the Jewish texts and Platonism, combining the two traditions into a syncretic mystical religion. Where Plotinus wanted to stay true to Plato, the Trinitarian Christians remained firmly grounded in the Jewish scriptures and the new writings about Jesus that circulated in the first couple of centuries after his death. The Trinitarians used Greek philosophical ideas and language in order to ground their religion within the intellectual framework of the time and to explain the problems in the religion itself. Surely there are other ways to reconcile one's religion or philosophy with accepted intellectual truths. What is important to note is that Plotinus, the Sethians, and the Trinitarians did not outright reject the intellectual truths. Today, we might call the intellectual truths "science." The people of the past did not reject their science; therefore, perhaps Christians and those of other faiths do not have to reject modern-day science like so many fundamentalists and literalists do. Reconciliations can actually augment religions, giving them greater flexibility and perhaps even ensuring their survival by allowing them to flourish alongside modern-day secular society.

²⁸ Katz, 295.