

PLATONISTS AND GNOSTICS ON NEGATIVE THEOLOGY AND TRUE INNER SELF

VICTOR ALEXANDRU PRICOPI*

Abstract: Late Antiquity is characterized by a strong search for human's true nature. This is proper to almost all philosophical and religious movements in the first three Christian centuries. Christians, Gnostics, and philosophers of those days aim to find the true nature of man. In this study we will deal mainly with anthropology and gnoseology of Valentinian Gnostics and Platonists. In their case, knowledge of human nature is inextricably linked to knowledge of God's true nature. These thinkers say that the first Principle/the Father/the source of this universe is inherently unknowable, indescribable and unspeakable. However, God can be known, either through secret revelation (Gnostics) or through a purely rational approach (Platonists). For these thinkers, the true knowledge of the Divine Principle and knowledge of the human being or the world we live in is carried out in a double sense. By knowing God is possible the knowledge of human nature, while knowing human nature unfolds the nature of the first Principle. This is due to the fact that although the creator is alien to this world, he is now here through man true nature. In other words, in man there is a spark of the divine that has fallen or was dropped in the sublunary world. These ideas are found in Plato's *Phaedrus*, *Meno* or *Phaedo* and also in some Valentinian gnostic texts as *Gospel of Truth*, *Tripartite Tractate*, *Gospel of Philip* and *Treatise on Resurrection*. Therefore, in this paper we will analyze the Platonists conceptions about human nature in comparison to Gnostic conception of man, as it appears in Plato's works and Coptic texts discovered in Egypt, at Nag Hammadi.

Keywords: Gnostic, Plato, Negative Theology, Divine origin, Dualism.

INTRODUCTION

In the first Christian centuries, the Mediterranean region was the witness of some very different forms of spirituality. The first centuries are characterized by a strong religiosity that was in a continuous agitation. All religious currents of that era are characterized by the

* Victor Alexandru Pricopi (✉)

“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, Carol I Bd., 11, Iasi – 700506, Romania
e-mail: pricopi@gmail.com

essential role played by man¹. The philosophical and religious movements of Late Antiquity are characterized by a perpetual search of the true human nature.

Prominent are three religious and philosophical currents. We refer here to Platonists, whose philosophical doctrines are most influential at that time, to Christians and Gnostics. In this study I will deal mainly of gnoseology and anthropology of Platonists and Valentinian Gnostics, since for members of these two groups these themes are unbreakable. Also, we will notice in this paper that only knowing God we can know the true nature of the human being, and therefore we will know how to act properly and in accordance with God's will.

PLATONIC NEGATIVE THEOLOGY

In the Platonic tradition, in order to know the things from this world, we have to accede to their model. To be able to think such an intelligible model, we must conceive a supra-intelligible principle². This principle, source and cause of everything, is previous to the intelligible model and it cannot be treated with thinking, because it is something above and beyond thinking. Plato is the first philosopher who approaches this first principle, which is beyond thought.

The Athenian thinker does not treat this topic in a direct way. Rather, we find in Plato the basis whence the Platonic tradition started to develop this recurring theme. In other words, we find in Plato's works only the triggering factor of this type of philosophical speculation. From this starting point was developed the negative theology in Platonism. Plato's successors discuss this issue in a more or less direct way. We cannot deny that Plotinus' vision upon the One, which is the first principle, is deeply indebted to *Parmenides* dialogue.³ Thus, Plato isn't the founder of negative theology, as

¹ Giorgio Jossa (2008). "Dalle origini al concilio di Nicea"/"De la origini până la Conciliul din Niceea" in Giovanni Filoramo (coord.), *Storia delle religioni*. Romanian translation: *Istoria religiilor*, Vol. II. Iași: Polirom Publishing House, p.196.

² Marilena Vlad (2011). *Dincolo de ființă: neoplatonismul și aporiile originii inefabile/Beyond Being. Neoplatonism and the Aporias of Ineffable Origin*, Bucharest: Zeta Books Publishing House, p.6.

³ Deirdre Carabine (1995). *The Unknown God. Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena*. Louvain: Peeters Press, p.111.

Deirdre Carbines⁴ notes, although there are authors who assert the contrary⁵.

Plato approaches the topic of “something beyond” in *Republic* 509b and *Parmenides* 137c, 142a. For example, he writes in *Republic* the following words: “not only do the objects of knowledge owe their being known to the good, but their being is also due to it, although the good is not being, but superior to it in rank and power.”⁶ Also, in *Parmenides*, Plato writes about Good the following lines : “it is not named or spoken of, nor is it the object of opinion or knowledge, nor does anything that is perceive it”⁷.

In the history of the exegesis of this problem, E. R. Dodds is the first scholar who shows the dependence of the first hypothesis of the Plato’s One and the Neoplatonic hypostases. Dodds has accomplished a list of parallels between the *Parmenides* and the *Enneads*, and he has shown in an article from 1928, that Plotinus is the first philosopher who obviously uses *Parmenides*’ hypotheses in order to identify them with the hypostases of his own philosophical system⁸.

Modern scholars traced a parallel between *Parmenides* 137c-d, where we read about One that it “cannot be a part of it nor can it be a whole” and thereby “it will neither be a whole nor have parts”, with passages from *Ennead* VI.7.18 and V.5.11, where Plotinus writes that “Good has no parts” or “It has no shape, then, because it has no parts, and no form”. In *Parmenides* 137d we also read about the One: “it could have neither a beginning nor an end nor a middle”, fragment that can be linked with *Ennead* V.5.10: “But he is not unlimited like a magnitude eithe: for where should he proceed to, or what should he intend to gain when he lacks nothing? But he has infinity in the sense of power: for he will never be otherwise, or fail, since the things which do not fail exist through him”.

What interests us in this study is the following fact: through *Parmenides*, Platonists will reach an ontological conclusion and an epistemological one. Belford Darrell Jackson shows a similarity

⁴ *Ibidem*, p.21.

⁵ William Franke (2007). *On What Cannot Be Said. Apophatic Discourse in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, Vol. 1: *Classical Formulations*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, p.37.

⁶ Plato, *Republic*, 509b.

⁷ Idem, *Parmenides*, 142a.

⁸ E. R. Dodds (1928). “The Parmenides of Plato and the Origin of the Neoplatonic One”. *The Classical Quarterly* 22. 3-4, pp.132-133.

between ontological conclusion of Parmenides and *Enneads*. Also, the epistemological conclusion of Plato's dialogue, the fragment 142a, will be found in the Plotinian corpus at V.3.12-14, V.4.1, V.5.6, VI.7.41⁹.

In conclusion, Plato's Good is beyond being and through it Ideas can be known. In the same time, the One, who is admitted as one in the first hypothesis is beyond being. So, One cannot be known, cannot be named and he is not even one. Good or One, that is cause for everything, cannot be himself being, but he must be higher than being itself.

Consequently, for the followers of Plato, One is the principle that is above being and at the same time is basis for it. The following fragment can be considered the quintessence of Plotinus' negative theology. Here Plotinus describes the One in the many negative terms. Here is the excerpt in question:

It is not therefore Intellect, but before Intellect. For Intellect is one of the beings, but that is not anything, but before each and every thing, and is not being; for being has a kind of shape of being, but that has no shape, not even intelligible shape. For since the nature of the One is generative of all things it is not any one of them. It is not therefore something or qualified or quantitative or intellect or soul; it is not in movement or at rest, not in place, not in time, but "itself by itself of single form", or rather formless, being before all form, before movement and before rest; for these pertain to being and are what make it many.¹⁰

Plotinus' *Enneads* gives us a lot of occurrences that evoke negative theology concerning the first principle. We find in the works of Plotinus the following descriptions: the One is not limited, the One is not exhausted, the One is not eternal, the One is not being, the One is not generated and it is without beginning and end, and last but not least, about the One is neither speech, nor knowledge. It follows that One cannot be an object of knowledge or subject of predication because "it would be one-in-many rather than purely one"¹¹. The One is not an object of knowledge, but of mysticism, an experience that goes beyond knowledge.

⁹ B. Darrell Jackson (1967). "Plotinus and the Parmenides". *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 5.4, pp.319-320.

¹⁰ Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.9.3.

¹¹ Curtis L. Hancock (1992). "Negative Theology in Gnosticism and Neoplatonism" in Richard T. Wallis (ed.), Jay Bregman (associate ed.). *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, p.174.

VALENTINIAN NEGATIVE THEOLOGY

Gnostic texts show us that their negative theology is very similar to the platonic (or neo-platonic) one. Regarding the first God, Valentinian Gnostics use the same terminology as Plotinus does. They apply almost exclusively negative theology on their highest deity. The *Tripartite Tractate* abounds in such descriptions, but such names are also found in other texts belonging to Valentinian Gnostics. It can be also found in heresiologists' testimonies.

Hippolytus of Rome tells us that Valentinians believe about their God the following things: It is unborn, eternal, incomprehensible, inconceivable, and productive and It is the cause for all things¹². In the same place, the third-century theologian tells us that for Valentinians, Father is unborn, he is not in a place, not in time, he has no counselor and he is not of any other substance through which we can know Him with the help of common senses. Irenaeus of Lyons writes that Valentinus' God is ineffable, ingenerate and incomprehensible¹³.

Another Gnostic text, *A Valentinian Exposition*, devotes a lot of space concerning negative theology of the Father. The author insists on the ineffable aspect of the Father, but it insists also on the fact that He is incomprehensible. Thus, we read that God is ineffable at 22:20-21, 24:39, 25:30, 29:31 and he is incomprehensible at 32:39 and at 34:36-37. The *Gospel of Truth* is not as rich in the name attributed to the Father as the *Tripartite Tractate*, but here we read that Father is "incomprehensible, inconceivable one who is superior to every thing"¹⁴ and for this reason we cannot know him. As a primary conclusion, both Platonists and the Gnostics think that One or the Father, as first principle, is incomprehensible and superior to every thing and therefore, he cannot be known.

PLATO'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

We have discussed about the source of the intelligible and physical world, namely about the first principles from which all things come into being. It is necessary now to study the way man accedes to the first principle and how through this kind of knowledge, man discloses his true nature. Once again, Plato is the first philosopher who addressed the issue of knowledge in the clearest way. Giovanni Reale shows that the answer to the problem of Plato's gnoseology is found in *Meno*. In

¹² Hippolytus, *Refutatio*, VI.24.

¹³ Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus Haereses*, I.11.1-2.

¹⁴ *Gospel of Truth*, 17:7-9.

this dialogue we read that knowledge is anamnesis, which is a reminder of what already exists in our soul. The myth is Orphic in origin and it consists in the assertion that the soul is eternal and it gets more rebirths or reincarnations. Thus, the soul passing through many bodies came to know the reality of the world beyond.

Therefore, the soul is capable of knowing and learning because it holds always the truth and, with Plato's words, "As the soul is immortal, has been born often, and has seen all things here and in the underworld, there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both about virtue and other things"¹⁵. In the same dialogue Socrates discusses a geometry problem with Meno's slave. Although the slave does not have any geometry knowledge, he manages, with the help of maieutic strategy, to find the correct answer to the problem. In this way, Socrates succeed in demonstrating that "the slave-boy, as every human being in general, can draw and recover from himself a truth that he did not know beforehand and that no one had taught him"¹⁶.

Professor Giovanni Reale, who follows the German scholar Hermann Bonitz, shows that in *Phaedo* are offered three evidences for the immortality of soul¹⁷. The first proof appeals to remembrance. Another proof states the following fact: soul is capable to perceive the realities, but in order to achieving, it must have the same nature with those unchanging realities. Therefore, if Ideas are eternal and unchanging things, then the soul must be like them. Another proof is based on some features of eternal Ideas. More exactly, contrary Ideas cannot exist together. Consequently, any sensible objects participating to these Ideas cannot exist together. The soul is such an object and, it is characterized by life and it participates to the Idea of life. How death is contrary to the Idea of life, the soul cannot participate to the Idea of death and, in conclusion the soul is immortal.

As we can clearly see, for Plato, man has a divine soul and in this way he is immortal and unchangeable. Just ascending to the highest principles, man discovers his true essence, which is his divine essence. This ascent to knowledge of God is revealed in a double sense. By knowing the Principle of the world, Platonists get to know the divine

¹⁵ Plato, *Meno*, 81c-d.

¹⁶ Giovanni Reale (1990). *A History of Ancient Philosophy*, Vol. 3: *Plato and Aristotle*. Albany: State University of New York Press, p.118.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp.241-249.

nature of the human being, and by having this knowledge, the first Principle of this world is known.

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN BODY AND SOUL

This aspect is even more evident in the case of Valentinians, as we shall see. For them, acquaintance of the Father is revealed through gnosis and it reveals both knowledge of the eternal truth and some aspects of human nature. We must return now to Plato and Platonists, because it is important to expose the problem of the body in Platonic philosophy.

For Plato, the body has negative connotation. For example, we read in *Cratylus*: “some people say that the body (*sōma*) is the tomb (*sēma*) of the soul, on the grounds that it is entombed in its present life”¹⁸. And a few lines later Plato writes that there is a punishment and that “the soul is being punished for something, and that the body is an enclosure or prison in which the soul is securely kept (*sózetai*) — as the name ‘*sōma*’ itself suggests — until the penalty is paid”¹⁹. In *Phaedo* 82e-83a, Socrates discusses the topic of soul imprisoned in the body:

The lovers of learning know that when philosophy gets hold of their soul, it is imprisoned in and clinging to the body, and that it is forced to examine other things through it as through a cage and not by itself, and that it wallows in every kind of ignorance. Philosophy sees that the worst feature of this imprisonment is that it is due to desires, so that the prisoner himself is contributing to his own incarceration most of all.

In *Gorgias* we read: “Perhaps in reality we’re dead. Once I even heard one of the wise men spoken that we are now dead and that our bodies are our tombs, and that the part of our souls in which our appetites reside is actually the sort of thing to be open to persuasion and to shift back and forth”²⁰.

For Plato, the association between soul and body leads to a degradation of the latter and the result of this union is seen as a drama or as a cosmic catastrophe. The body makes the soul to be asleep, dazzled and disturbed. The incarnation is the result of the fall of soul; in this body with the role of prison, souls are unfortunate. Their goal is to return to their place of origin and to live next to beauty and truth.

¹⁸ Plato, *Cratylus*, 400c.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 400c.

²⁰ Plato, *Gorgias*, 493a.

This kind of opposition between body and soul can be found in Gnostics too. Therefore, there is continuity between Platonists approach to this theme and Valentinians' approach. For both sides the divine and immortal soul is what makes man to be distinguished by the rest of creation. The human being is an unhappy mixture of corruptible and incorruptible, rough matter and divine soul.

VALENTINIAN GNOSIS

For these Gnostics revealed gnosis plays a special role in their doctrine. Gnosis refers primarily to acquaintance of the divine mystery, but it brings with it the response to all questions. In this regard it is noteworthy a fragment of Theodotus, a valentinian gnostic, which states that through gnosis lies the answer to the questions "who we were and what we have become, where we were and into what we have been thrown, where we hasten to and from what we have been redeemed, what is birth and what is rebirth."²¹ In the *Gospel of Truth* we read that "He who is to have knowledge in this manner knows where he comes from and where he is going"²². These texts reveal that gnosis discovers human's origin and destiny. In many texts is repeated the phrase "where I come", which implies that the Gnostic has a different origin and that he out of this world. So, the Gnostic, as his Unknown God, is alien to the material world. The true origin of the Gnostic is in Pleroma, the eternal and immutable reality. Otherwise, some text evokes that Sophia secretly put the divine spark in the human soul²³.

This we find also in *Tripartite Tractate* 101:19, but it emerges also from *The Gospel according to Philip*:

The soul of Adam came into being by means of a breath. The partner of his soul is the spirit. His mother is the thing that was given to him. His soul was taken from him and replaced by a [spirit]. When he was united (to the spirit), [he spoke] words incomprehensible to the powers. They envied him [...] spiritual partner [...] hidden.²⁴

Although Nag Hammadi texts have not a heterogeneous character, it still posses a characteristic that can be summarized as follows: in man there is a bit of the divine that must be stimulated in order to be

²¹ *Excerpta ex Theodoto*. 78.2.

²² *Gospel of Truth*, 22:2-37.

²³ Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus Haereses*. 1.5.6.

²⁴ *The Gospel according to Philip*, 70:22-31.

reintegrated into the place of origin. In this way there is a divine identity between the knower, the object of knowledge and the process through which this knowledge is possible²⁵. We may see here an echo of Plato's theory of the immortality of the soul, its fall and its divine origin.

In *The Treatise on the Resurrection* the author insists on the fact that resurrection results from the contemplation of divine things. For the author of this Gnostic work, the resurrection represents self-knowledge. Resurrection begins as soon as the Gnostic contemplates the intelligible world.²⁶ The same thing is found in Plato, for him, philosophy is the only method that shows us how we can reach the true being.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, for Gnostics, philosophical practice is replaced by Gnosis. Although, as method these processes are different, they have the same purpose: to return to the place of origin. Gnosis reveals to man his true nature, the unchanging and genuine nature, and makes the individual to recognize who he is, what he is in himself and what he never ceased to be²⁷. Thus, this knowledge shows to the Gnostic that he will return from where he came, it remembers his original nature.

Gnosis not only reveals the true nature of the Gnostic or the path he have to follow, but it also shows which are the true principles that underlie the world, it shows that the world and the body are illusions and sources of ignorance. Also, this kind of knowledge indicates how to live and how to act in accordance with God's will. This knowledge about the eternal Truth is linked to the true nature of the Gnostic, because he discovers now that he has a spark of the divine. In other words, relationship between salvation and knowledge defines not only the Gnostic myth, but also the Gnostic true nature. We see now that for the Gnostics the immortal human nature plays an important role. As for the Platonists, the Gnostics proclaimed an identity between the soul and the divine, a situation that leads us to true knowledge and salvation.

²⁵ Claudio Moreschini (2009). *Storia della filosofia patristica*. Romanian translation: *Istoria filosofiei patristice*. Iași: Polirom Publishing House, p.37.

²⁶ *The Treatise on the Resurrection*, 45:23-46:2; 48:19-49:9.

²⁷ Henri-Charles Puech (2007). *En quête de la Gnose*. Romanian translation: *Despre gnoză și gnosticism*. Bucharest: Herald Publishing House, p.234.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: This work was co-financed from the European Social Fund through Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013. Project number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/140863, Competitive Researchers in Europe in the Field of Humanities and Socio-Economic Sciences. A Multi-regional Research Network

REFERENCES:

- Carabine, Deirdre (1995). *The Unknown God. Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena*. Louvain: Peeters Press.
- Clement d'Alexandrie (1948). *Extraits de Theodote*. Paris : Editions du Cerf.
- Dodds, E. R. (1928). "The Parmenides of Plato and the Origin of the Neoplatonic One". *The Classical Quarterly* 22. 3-4, pp. 129-142.
- Franke, William (2007). *On What Cannot Be Said. Apophatic Discourse in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, Vol. 1: *Classical Formulations*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Hancock, Curtis L. (1992). "Negative Theology in Gnosticism and Neoplatonism" in Richard T. Wallis (ed.), Jay Bregman (associate ed.). *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Jackson, B. Darrell (1967). "Plotinus and the Parmenides". *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 5.4, pp. 315-327.
- Jossa, Giorgio (2008). "Dalle origini al concilio di Nicea"/"De la origini până la Conciliul din Niceea" in Giovanni Filoramo (coord.) *Storia delle religioni*. Romanian translation: *Istoria religiilor*. Vol. II. Iași: Polirom Publishing House.
- Meyer, Marvin (ed.) (2007). *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition*. New York: HarperOne.
- Moreschini, Claudio (2009). *Storia della filosofia patristica*. Romanian translation: *Istoria filosofiei patristice*. Iași: Polirom Publishing House.
- Plato (1997). *Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Plotinus (1984). *Enneads V. 1-9*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Plotinus (1984). *Enneads VI. 6-9*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Puech, Henri-Charles (2007). *En quête de la Gnose*. Romanian translation: *Despre gnoză și gnosticism*. Bucharest: Herald Publishing House.
- Reale, Giovanni (1990). *A History of Ancient Philosophy*, Vol. 3: *Plato and Aristotle*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Roberts, Alexander and James Donaldson (eds.) (1870). *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, Vol. 6: *Hippolytus, Bishop of Portus*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Roberts, Alexander and James Donaldson (eds.) (1913). *The Ante-Nicene Fathers. The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, Vol. 1: *The Apostolic Fathers – Justin Martyr – Irenaeus*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Robinson, James McConkey (ed.) (2000). *The Coptic Gnostic Library: A Complete Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices*. Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill.
- Vlad, Marilena (2011). *Dincolo de ființă: neoplatonismul și aporiile originii inefabile/Beyond Being. Neoplatonism and the Aporias of Ineffable Origin*. Bucharest: Zeta Books Publishing House.