Late pagan alternatives: Plotinus and the Christian gospel[[1]](#endnote-1)

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# Abstract

Philosophical pagans in late antiquity charged Christians with believing ‘without evidence’, but were themselves accused of arbitrariness in their initial choice of philosophical school. Stoics and Platonists in particular adopted a form of cosmic religion that Christians criticised on rationalistic as well as sectarian grounds. The other charge levelled against Christians was that they had abandoned ancestral creeds in arrogant disregard of an earlier consensus, and of the world as pagans themselves conceived it. A clearer understanding of the dispute can be gained from a comparison of Heracles and Christ as divinized ‘sons of God’. The hope on both sides was that we might become, or somehow join with, God. Both sought an escape from the image of a pointless, heartless universe – an image that even moderns find difficult to accept and live by. The notion that pagans and Christians had of God, and of the divine life we might hope to share, was almost identical – up to the point, at least, where both philosophical and common pagans conceived God as Pheidias had depicted him (the crowned Master), and Christians rather as the Crucified, ‘risen against the world’.

# Faith, reason and philosophy

‘Many people’, said Hilary Armstrong years ago, ‘are looking for an unorganized and unorganizable Good as the only true object of worship, the source of value and the goal of desire, whose light shines everywhere in this ever-changing world as we contemplate it with our ever-changing minds.’ (Armstrong (1975), 88). Times, perhaps, have changed: popular assaults on theism – and chiefly Abrahamic theism – typically neglect any such possibility, and assume, without much argument, that ‘humane values’ can easily survive ‘the death of God’, and the end even of ‘disorganized’ religion. It is widely supposed that *sincerely* ‘religious’ people are bound to be ‘fundamentalists’, and would be ‘murderous extremists’ if they had the courage. The only alternative, it seems, is to make our futures up: we must – simultaneously – accept the limits on our knowledge and future action set by ‘scientific materialism’, and expect that ‘scientific advances’ will one day achieve, for us or our descendants, all that our hearts desire. The cosmos we inhabit will never be ‘on our side’, but we can – perhaps – engineer a little happiness before the darkness falls. Maybe, if the wilder thoughts of transhumanists have any substance, our successors might even remake the worlds to suit us better (but that is another story). Our situation, in brief, is rather like the Late Antiquity of Mediterranean lands – and Armstrong’s study of Plotinian spirituality may turn out to be more relevant than at first it seems.

The routine charge made by philosophical pagans against the Christians in late antiquity – like modern attacks on ‘believers’ - was that they demanded belief in propositions that they could not prove (at least from within the frame familiar to philosophical pagans).

For some have supposed that Christianity has no reason to support it, but that those who desire the name confirm their opinion by an unreasoning faith and an assent without examination; and they assert that no one is able by clear demonstration to furnish evidence of the truth of the things promised, but that they require their converts to adhere to faith only, and therefore they are called ‘the Faithful,’ because of their uncritical and untested faith (Eusebius (1903), 2 [1.1]).

Eusebius denied the charge, claiming that there were both reasons in the historical record to support the truth of Christian claims, and reasons to believe as Christians did (namely that the spread of Christian faith had been accompanied by an improvement in morals and civilization[[2]](#endnote-2)). Origen, writing against Celsus, pointed out that even pagans may accept the teachings and discipline of a particular philosophical school for no better reason than that they have come across an impressive teacher, and that everyone relies on indemonstrable assumptions in their daily lives:

Who goes on a voyage, or marries, or begets children, or casts seeds into the ground, unless he believes that things will turn out for the better, although it is possible that the opposite may happen – as it sometimes does? But nevertheless the faith that things will turn out for the better and as they wish make all men take risks, even where the result is not certain and where things might turn out differently. Now if it is hope and the faith that the future will be better which maintain life in every action where the result is uncertain, why may not this faith be accepted by a believer in God more reasonably than by a man who sails the sea, or sows seeds in the earth, or marries a wife, or undertakes any other human activity?[[3]](#endnote-3)

‘To plant a tree, to cultivate a field, to beget children; meritorious acts, according to the religion of Zoroaster’ (Hume (1963), 142 [2.2]) – and all these things are undertaken ‘in faith’, the more unreasonably and absurdly if we have no good ground for expecting that the universe is, in any way, ‘on our side’, or even that we can reliably predict the future.

That some philosophers take their beginning from ‘*nous*’ and others from ‘revelation’ (though neither can offer any further demonstrative argument for those beginnings) does not mark any clear or convincing difference. ‘*Nous*’ and ‘Spirit’ are functionally equivalent. And even ‘scientific investigation’ depends on taking an hypothesis as something possibly true, and possibly worth testing: those who believe and act on only what they have already ‘proved’ have little chance of proving anything. ‘A great deal of the scepticism of the present day is for these reasons not worthy of respect. Men reject what they have never tried and condemn what they have never seriously or systematically reflected upon’ (Jones (1922), 67).

Pagan philosophers – perhaps especially the Cynics (see Downing (1992)) – could agree with many Christian aphorisms, even if they did not accept their historical or theological ideas: to that extent, they were all engaged in trying out ways of life at odds with conventional notions of success. ‘A man has not failed if he fails to win beauty of colours or bodies, or power or office or kingship even, but if he fails to win this and only this’ – namely the enjoyment of an abiding beauty (Plotinus *Ennead* I.6 [1].7, 34f).[[4]](#endnote-4) Of course he may fail in this as well – and so come to think his enterprise misguided. Hermotimus had ‘heard everyone saying that the Epicureans were self-indulgent and pleasure-loving; the Peripatetics were avaricious and argumentative; and the Platonists arrogant and vainglorious. But many said that the Stoics were manly and understood everything, and that the man who followed their path was the only king, the only rich man, the only wise man, and the only everything’ (Lucian (2006), 95). But he has in the end to acknowledge that neither he nor his teacher had achieved the equanimity their school had promised. The Christian Churches were a little wiser, remembering instead that we are all still sinners, ‘and if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us’ (*I John* 1.8*)*. It remains true that such ongoing and sometimes unrepentant failures may cause ‘a loss of faith’ – not a reasoned rejection of the associated credal propositions, but the same sort of dejection that may end a marriage, a profession or a life. Without some such faith it is unlikely that even science survives. As Charles Taylor remarks, ‘we should treat our deepest moral instincts, our ineradicable sense that human life is to be respected, as our mode of access to the world in which ontological claims are discernible and can be rationally argued about and sifted’ (Taylor (1989), 8).

Sometimes the similarities between Christian and pagan schools suggest a personal association. Plotinus’s teacher, Ammonius Saccas, had once – it was said – been a Christian:[[5]](#endnote-5) Eusebius indeed claimed that he continued thus to his life’s end (Eusebius (1890),196 (6.19.4)). Amongst Ammonius’ other pupils were Heraclas, later Bishop of Alexandria, and Origen, an influential Christian writer later judged to be on the verge of heresy (and *possibly* identical with the Origen who was one of Ammonius’ inner circle). Amelius, Plotinus’s earlier editor, had read at least the opening of John’s Gospel (Eusebius (1903),11.9.1; see Dillon (2009)). Numenius, himself an influence on Plotinus, knew, respected and commented upon passages of the Hebrew Bible (see Dodds (1960)). One of Porphyry’s own friends, Fabricius, converted to Christianity, and abandoned the Pythagorean diet (so provoking Porphyry into writing the first major defence of our duties towards the non-human: Porphyry (2000)). Porphyry himself wrote vehemently, both in that latter treatise and elsewhere, against the Christians – whether or not he wrote a specific treatise *Against the Christians* (Berchman (2005)). Some have thought that the target of Plotinus’s own indignation in the grand treatise ‘against the Gnostics’ (II.9 [33]) was at least a Christian sect – though one heretical by the standards of the Orthodox tradition.

‘Heresy’ is not a category confined to Christians! The other principal pagan attack on Christians was that they had abandoned their own tribes’ traditions. Jews, though they stood aside from the *consensus gentium*, at least had their own, unusual, traditions: Christians, being drawn from every race and station, had betrayed their own ancestral gods, the values and distinctions in which they and their ancestors were reared – as of course Abram and his father Terah had done long before (*Genesis* 11.31-12.5). ‘It is impious’, Celsus said, ‘to abandon the customs which have existed in each locality from the beginning’ (Origen (1953), 283 (5.26)). This criticism might almost seem ‘postmodern’: the only truth worth minding about, the critics might have said, was the ‘truth’ of our consensual reality. What reason – and especially what reason acceptable to traditionalists – could there ever be to step aside from tradition, however absurd or even vile the customs seem to other eyes? As Origen pointed out, this is much an assault on those philosophers ‘who teach men not to be superstitious’ but rather ‘to present the soul to the Creator’ as on the Christian churches (Origen (1953), 291 (5.35)). There is an issue here: on the one hand, none of us can do more than begin from where we are, with the character and axioms we have inherited or imbibed; on the other, it is required by those very axioms that we should seek a real truth and virtue, and not be content with seemings. Whether this will ever be possible without a direct intervention from Elsewhere remains uncertain.[[6]](#endnote-6) Even Odysseus needed the intervention of Hermes, on Circe’s island and Calypso’s.

# Gods, daimones and the material

Pagan Platonism influenced the development of Christian thought, both in the West and in the East, as it also influenced Islamic philosophy. Some elements of the pagan version were reckoned inconsistent with the Abrahamic faiths. Gregory Palamas, for example, writing in the thirteenth century, summed up the Orthodox critique as follows:

These people have arrived at a certain conception of God, but not at a conception truly worthy of Him and appropriate to His blessed nature. For their ‘disordered heart was darkened’ by the machinations of the wicked demons who were instructing them. For if a worthy conception of God could be attained through the use of intellection, how could these people have taken the demons for gods, and how could they have believed the demons when they taught man polytheism? In this way, wrapped up in this mindless and foolish wisdom and unenlightened education, they have calumniated both God and nature. They have deprived God of His sovereignty (at least as far as they are concerned); they have ascribed the Divine Name to demons; and they were so far from finding the knowledge of beings – the object of their desire and zeal – as to claim that inanimate things [that is, the stars] have a soul and participate in a soul superior to our own. They also allege that things without reason are reasonable, since capable of receiving a human soul; that demons are superior to us and are even our creators (such is their impiety); they have classed among things uncreated and unoriginate and coeternal with God, not only matter, and what they call the World Soul, but also those intelligible beings not clothed in the opacity of the body, and even our souls themselves (Palamas (1983), 26 [I.1.18]). [[7]](#endnote-7)

Some of this criticism rested on familiar misunderstandings of the pagan philosophical tradition, and are matched by the pagans’ own misunderstandings of the Abrahamic. Each side thought the other culpably irrational. But there are real issues to debate, whether or not they are the ones that Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Julian and other pagans, on the one hand, supposed, or those identified by Philoponus, Augustine, Maximus the Confessor or Palamas on the other. My own stress here is phenomenological or psychological rather than metaphysical (though the metaphysical theories themselves have psychological effects). Whether the material world has always existed; whether it is constituted as a single living being; whether we ourselves have been, and shall be, for ever; and whether or to what extent we can rise up or return from exile by our own endeavours: all these are questions without fully agreed or authoritative answers. All that we can usually manage here and now is to realize what *difference* might be made by entertaining one thought or another (or by withholding any rash consent). Christians, in the main, concluded that this world here had a beginning, and would have an end (although it might be resurrected as immortal diamond along with all God’s Chosen, and have no end thereafter). They also, in the main, preferred to think that space, the universe, the whole material world was a neutral arena for the children of God to play in, rather than the largest of living things itself. We too had our beginnings, in our mothers’ wombs, and could hope to be resurrected as the individual persons we now think ourselves,[[8]](#endnote-8) rather than being simply phases or stages or twigs of an eternal spirit which was somehow both eternally at rest in God and struggling over generations in the material world. And our rescue from material corruption could only be by God’s good grace. At the same time, Christians expected ‘to judge angels’ (Paul, *1 Corinthians* 6.1-4),[[9]](#endnote-9) and reckoned themselves superior in rank and – hopefully – in eventual virtue even to the highest of created spirits. This – in all the Abrahamic traditions – was the sin of Satan: not to acknowledge Adam (which is to say, Humanity) as God’s Chosen. The angels’ fall, so tradition tells us, began in Satan’s outrage that he could be expected to bow down before an animal![[10]](#endnote-10) Angels, gods and *daimones*, even if they are real and more powerful or cleverer than us, are still not to be worshipped:

These gods are visions of the eternal attributes, or divine names, which, when erected into gods, become destructive of humanity... When separated from man or humanity, who is Jesus the Saviour, the vine of eternity, they are thieves and rebels, they are destroyers (Blake (1966), 571).

The aphorism that we, as human beings, may err by becoming or imitating ‘beasts’ (*Ennead* III.2 [47].8, 9-13) in this life or another, should be balanced by a similar warning against too readily thinking ourselves ‘gods’: ‘as intemperance and sensuality make us Beasts; so Pride and Malice make us Devils’.[[11]](#endnote-11) Pagan Platonists, though they too reckoned that gods and *daimones* were only our fellow creatures, and not to be given any absolute authority, preferred to remember that they were our natural superiors, and at least deserved *respect* (*Ennead* II.9 [33].9, 53-60) – though it was also important that they be contained within Zeus or Kronos rather than rebelling against Him. Whereas Christians in particular were persuaded that this world here was fallen, and that there might and should ‘one day’ be a better world, God’s Kingdom, pagan Platonists thought this too disrespectful: how could there be a better *material* world than this?

Despising the universe and the gods in it and the other noble things is certainly not becoming good. Every wicked man, in former times too, was capable of despising the gods, and even if he was not altogether wicked before, when he despised them he became so by this very fact, even if he was not wicked in everything else(*Ennead* II.9 [33].16, 1-5; see also II.9 [33].4, 25-32).

Wasn’t the hope of a new creation vulgar, or – at best – a misunderstanding of an expectable phase, the Golden Age, of cosmic history? Origen’s errors – as they were later, and perhaps mistakenly, supposed - were of a piece with this: he thought that we were eternal spirits, and that even once we had been restored to ‘heaven’ we might still, over the unending ages, fall again.[[12]](#endnote-12) This was at once our misfortune, and a necessary element, as Plotinus also seems to have thought, of the whole cosmic enterprise. ‘The nature of this universe is of a kind to bring these sorts of misfortune [as being captured in war], and we must follow it obediently’(*Ennead* I.4 [46].7, 41-2).[[13]](#endnote-13) Any expectation that the earth – the material or the phenomenal universe - will ever be so full of the knowledge of the Lord that none will ever hurt or destroy another (as *Isaiah* 65.25) seems no part of late pagan religion. Origen has also been criticised, also perhaps unjustly, for so emphasising the *allegorical* interpretation of Scripture as to disregard the *historical*: ‘for Origen, history was merely symbolic or parabolic of higher truths, not a place or event where God encounters people’ (Martens (2012), 8, summarizing Hanson (1959)). It is easy to suppose that pagan Platonists in general would have thought the same – except that Plotinus is emphatic that the divine is at work in the visible cosmos, and in human history: justice is always being done, even if no *final* justice. And conversely, Christians were insistent that ‘God hates nothing that He has made’, not even matter.[[14]](#endnote-14) Ps-Dionysius may seem to be contradicting the Plotinian message, but they are closer than their followers admitted:

There is no evil in our bodies, for ugliness and disease are a defect in form and a lack of due order. What is here is not pure evil but a lesser beauty. If beauty, form, and order could be destroyed completely the body itself would disappear. It is also obvious that the body is not the cause of evil in the soul. Evil does not require a body to be nearby, as is clear in the case of demons. Evil in minds, in souls, and in bodies is a weakness and a defect in the condition of their natural virtues. There is no truth in the common assertion that evil is inherent in matter *qua* matter, since matter too has a share in the cosmos, in beauty and form. If matter lacked these, if it were inherently deficient in quality and form, if it lacked even the capacity to be affected, how could it produce anything?[[15]](#endnote-15)

*Mere* Matter is a fantasy, a metaphor, an extrapolation. Actual material things, precisely because they are actual things, have their own form and beauty, and ‘evil’ resides in the choice of a lesser beauty, a failure to be at one (with themselves or with their neighbours and the world).

# Incarnation and theiosis

All three major Abrahamic faiths[[16]](#endnote-16) acknowledge the significance of Torah, Koran or Logos, and all agree that this derives its being from God. Judaism and Islam are more easily reconciled with Plotinus than is orthodox Christianity, in that Torah and Koran alike are subordinate realities, even if they are true expressions of what God requires of all. All three traditions also speak of the divine Spirit that proceeds from God, and is – variously – as much of God as creatures have any present hope of experiencing. In Christendom, the Logos is as clearly God as the Father is. Though it is permissible to reckon that the heavenly Koran is uncreated, and - perhaps – enscripted or ‘inlibrated’,[[17]](#endnote-17) God can have no companion or necessary helper. Nor is it just one *copy* of the Torah that is the Word. That the heavenly Word should be *identical* with a particular, contingent entity, something ‘which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled’ (*I John* 1.1) seems absurd or blasphemous, even though it could more readily be agreed that some contingent entity housed or represented that Word, very much as the dedicated philosopher might ascend to an equality with the World Soul, and self-identification with Intellect. Plotinus does allow the abstract possibility of Zeus’s taking human form (and looking like Pheidias’s Zeus: *Ennead* V.8 [31].1),[[18]](#endnote-18) and any of us *may* rise to the level of ‘a god’, the god we once were or eternally still are, but God the Intellect isn’t the One’s equal, and can’t be *localized*. In a way, Zeus (the Soul) already is embodied, multiply, but not always in bodies worthy of Soul, or fully representing the *whole* Soul. Even the World Soul, which has a worthy body, is not All the Soul There Is, let alone the Intellect or the One. But, as Augustine pointed out, Platonists cannot then consistently deny the *possibility* of a divine incarnation:

You (sc. Porphyry) who say that all body must be avoided, kill the universe! You are saying that I should escape from my flesh: let your Jupiter [taking Jupiter here to be the World Soul] escape from heaven and earth![[19]](#endnote-19)

At best, they could suggest that *our* bodies are incapable of embodying the divine, whereas the whole cosmos, and the stars, are worthier vehicles, as also (according to Porphyry) are statues of wood, bronze or stone.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Plato identified the goal of philosophical virtue as the imitation of the divine, with a view to becoming a god (Plato, *Theaetetus* 176a7; see also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.1177b33), and the same aim (seemingly) was expressed in Christian doctrine: God became Man so that Man might become God.[[21]](#endnote-21) It does not follow that pagan and Christian meant just the same by this. Stoic philosophers reckoned that Dion, if wise, was the equal of Zeus himself (Plutarch, *On Common Conceptions* 3.246, Long & Sedley (1987), I, 380 [61J]) because they were ‘of the same mind’, but that ‘mind’ rested in the intellectual recognition of necessity. Paul’s suggestion that we should have the ‘same mind’ that was in Christ Jesus (‘who being in the form of God thought not to snatch at equality with God, but became obedient to death, even the death of the cross’ (Paul, *Philippians* 2.6) could be taken with similar effect – but was rather an ‘ethical’ than an intellectual choice, and not merely a decision to accept ‘what always happens’.

There was an analogue of the Christian Saviour available to the pagan imagination, more influential than an abstract ‘Dion’ or philosophical sage. Might they expect *Heracles* – or at least our image of Heracles - to help us free from our chains(*Ennead* IV.3 [27].14, 16-18)? Consider the obvious congruence between that pagan hero and the Christian: both Heracles and Jesus were reputed Sons of God, born of a mortal mother, required to labour in the service of humanity despite – or because of – being the rightful king. They were both tempted, and resisted the temptation, to take the easier, pleasanter path. They perished through the treachery or folly of a trusted friend, but were raised up to Heaven and thereafter served as an ideal, an inspiration, even a supernatural aid. Both harrowed Hell. Their double nature led some to suppose that there were two of each – one in Heaven, and the other (a mere shadow) in the land of the mortal dead (*Ennead* IV.3 [27].27 after Homer, *Odyssey* 11.601ff). Christians preferred, in the main, to insist that there was only one such Jesus, with two natures united in one identity – a doctrine lying outside my present brief. The much easier option for the early Church would have been to follow the Heraclean and Hellenic model, distinguishing one Heracles from another, or at least the archetype from the image: he was identified with a Mesopotamian god, Nergal, as well as with the Tyrian Melqart (see Kingsley (1995), 274-5). His name was also given to the First Born of creation[[22]](#endnote-22). Worshippers – for example on Thasos – distinguished the Olympian, to whom they gave the sacrifices due an immortal, from the other to whom ‘they delivered funerary honours as with a hero’ (Herodotus *History* 2.44). The Cynics especially took him as their patron, as one who had chosen the path of Virtue[[23]](#endnote-23) and showed it was possible to live entirely by one’s wits and courage, even in the face of celestial – that is, Hera’s – malice.

It is generally agreed that during the whole time which Heracles spent among men he submitted to great and continuous labours and perils willingly, in order that he might confer benefits upon the race of men and thereby gain immortality (Diodorus *History* I, 1.2.4).

Socrates had sworn by him, and Xenophon’s band of mercenaries regularly prayed to ‘Zeus the Saviour and Heracles the guide’ (Xenophon *Anabasis* 4.8; 6.5). He was honoured in Carthage as well as Rome, and by emperors as well as wandering Cynics.

The imperial theology of the greatest of the persecutors [for example, Diocletian (244-311 AD)] had important features in common with the religion which they persecuted. Jupiter is the supreme god. His son, Hercules, acts as his executive representative, and is a benefactor of man. The resemblance to Christian theology is obvious[[24]](#endnote-24).

The resemblance, however obvious, is also superficial. Jupiter (Zeus) and Hercules (Heracles) are – theologically – distinct entities in a way that the First and Second Persons of the Christian Trinity are not (though this thought seems not to have convinced other Abrahamic believers).[[25]](#endnote-25) And though this image was a possible anagogic resource it does not seem likely that the mass of Mediterranean peoples could place their trust even in the Olympian Heracles, even though he shared their troubles (including enslavement, treachery, madness – and his own sins and follies). Nor were his followers encouraged to think themselves part of ‘the Body of Heracles’, illuminated by a divine Spirit. His elevation to the heavens was an *escape*, and his harrowing of Hell had only rescued Alcestis. Christ, by contrast, rescued all who would come with Him. Plotinus interpreted Prometheus’ rescue by Heracles as Prometheus’ own self-liberation (*Ennead* IV.3 [27].14, 16-7) – and perhaps this might be allegorically significant: whatever help the gods, as Porphyry supposed, might offer, we must learn to liberate ourselves.

And yet there might still be something to learn from pagan thought and religious feeling. *Escape* is not the only way of thinking about our rescue from the ‘dream and delirium’ of ordinary life (Marcus Aurelius *Meditations* 2.17.1). As Plotinus insisted,

We cannot get there on foot; for our feet only carry us everywhere in this world, from one country to another. You must not get ready a carriage, either, or a boat. Let all these things go, and do not look. Shut your eyes, and change to and wake another way of seeing, which everyone has but few use (*Ennead* I.6 [1].8, 16-28). [[26]](#endnote-26)

There may be more metaphysical implications of the comment than I need address here-now. But the simplest way of taking Plotinus’s remark is that we have no need to *go* anywhere, but only to look differently at things. I am here, for the moment, endorsing Armstrong’s suggestion that Plotinus’ account of the One actually marks the *end* of two world thinking: we are not being invited to abandon *this* world in favour of some quite other realm, but to begin to experience thisworld differently. There are not, on Platonic terms, *two* real worlds, but only one. That one world is perceived, more or less reliably, from many different points and personalities: *phenomena* are plural. We come closer to that one real world by allowing *Nous* its say. ‘The Eternal Mind seems to become something very like our minds seeking God, and the Eternal World our world seen ‘from the inside’’ (Armstrong (1975), 84, 85; see Wagner (1982)).

By Aristotle’s account – which is only a step away from the Plotinian - God actually *is theoria,* and in living thus ‘theoretically’ (that is, in mindful enjoyment of reality) we live by what is most divine in us, and at the same time what is most really human. ‘We must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything’(*Nicomachean Ethics* 10.1177b30ff). So ‘contemplating God’ is the same as ‘contemplating contemplation’: ‘knowing God’ is the same as ‘God’s knowing’ (*Metaphysics* 1.983a5). And what is it that God knows? According to Aristotle’s analysis, Himself (*Metaphysics* 12.1072b18ff).

This notion – taken literally - was criticised very early. According to the author of the Ps-Aristotelian *Magna Moralia,* ‘whoever is preoccupied with himself is counted as insensible: a god like that would be absurd’ (Ps-Aristotle *Magna Moralia* 1213b4ff). But later Platonic and Aristotelian tradition lived happily with the supposed absurdity, recognizing that God’s knowledge, if it is to be incontrovertible, must somehow *contain* its objects. God is not, as we are, merely externally related to the things He knows, for if He were He could not Himself be sure that reality was as it was represented, even to Him. ‘If intellect (*nous*) were not the same as what it intuited (*ta noeta*), there will be no truth; for the one who is trying to possess realities will possess an impression different from the realities, and this is not truth’ (*Ennead* V.3 [49].5, 23ff: See Clark (1997)). God’s thinking, the divine thinking, is one with what is thought(*Metaphysics* 12.1075a4). Conversely, the one real world *is* God, or is at least contained in Him.

But this is not merely the conclusion of an abstract argument, and it has more than merely epistemological implications. As I remarked forty years ago (Clark 1975, 179), this description of ‘divine intelligence’ is strikingly like Buddhist (and other mystagogic) accounts of Enlightenment. It is a ‘knowing without touching things: that is, without making things into objects in one’s consciousness’.[[27]](#endnote-27) ‘*Sunyata* is experienced only when it is both subject and object… “Knowing and seeing” *sunyata* is *sunyata* knowing and seeing itself’ (Suzuki (1956), 315). And as Aristotle also said, ‘on such a principle depend the heavens and the world of nature. And it is a life such as the best that we enjoy, and enjoy for but a short time… So that life and *aion* continuous and eternal belong to the god, for this is what the god is’(*Metaphysics* 12.1072b13f). God *is* Eternity – as Boethius also said some centuries later: ‘the complete, simultaneous and perfect possession of everlasting life’ (Boethius (1999), 132 [5.6]). It follows that we ‘know’ God in the only way that God can be known, when we experience the life that identically *is* God, when God lives us.

Or remembering for a moment another parallel: ‘God is love; he who dwells in love is dwelling in God, and God in him’ (*I John* 4.16). ‘*Theorein* *ton* *theon’* is not to reason one’s way to an abstract conviction that there is a god, an ultimate authority or good, but to experience, to live, a certain sort of life, the sort to which all other lives aspire, and which does not depend for its existence on *our* experiencing it – since it is experienced, exactly, as something that is forever. And what is forever, for Plotinus as well as for John, is love: the One, Plotinus says, is at once beloved, lover and the love between (*erasmion kai eros ho autos kai autou eros*: *Ennead* VI.8 [39].15).

# Naturalism and nightmare

Where I differ from Armstrong is made clear in his comment – concerning Plotinus’s recognition of the star-gods - that ‘it would be difficult for us, imaginatively as well as intellectually, to recognize and venerate the goddess Selene in the dreary, dusty receptacle for excessively expensive junk with which we have all become so boringly familiar of late years’.[[28]](#endnote-28) On the contrary, we have cause to be grateful, in a way, to just that goddess. Looking only at the material, we may suppose that the Moon, Selene, is indeed no more than rubble. But consider instead what it is to look *back* from the Moon. Consider the images of Earth seen from the Moon which have decorated websites and student bedrooms for the last thirty or more years. That vision of our little segment of the wider world, the blue and silver bubble against a darkened sky, has helped to remind us - at the deepest imaginative level - that we do indeed inhabit a single, beautiful world, and that our political and social divisions must fade before that insight. Looking in turn towards the Moon herself what we should see is the love that binds, the universal sympathy that makes causality possible. What Plotinus called magic or enchantment we now recognize as universal law - but our words make no clearer than Plotinus’s what explains that law, that magic. Those who can think of the Moon - or the Earth itself - as no more than rubble may indeed feel themselves to be in that imagined hell which Armstrong evoked in his account of third century sensibility:

It was a period in which the sense of individual isolation in a vast and terrifying universe was perhaps more intensely felt than even immediately after the breakdown of the city-state into the Hellenistic world. For in the Roman Empire, under Babylonian influence, the view of the ruling power of the universe as a cruel, inaccessible Fate, embodied in the stars, worship of which was useless, had come to its full development. The individual exposed to the crushing power of this Fate, and the citizen also of an earthly state which seemed almost as vast, cruel and indifferent as the universe, felt to the full the agony of his isolation and limitation.[[29]](#endnote-29)

The hell-world is one that we ourselves create, by looking on things as meaningless collections or expanses of stuff governed by immutable and indifferent law. That is why Matter as such is Evil (or the principle or beginning of evil) - not because *bodies* are evil, but because our seeing bodies (that is, entities) as stuff encourages us to despise them, and drags us further down into depression. According to Northrop Frye, in his reading of the Bible, we shall not escape the hell-world ‘until [we] know thoroughly what hell is, and realize that the pleasure gained by dominating and exploiting, whether of [our] fellow man or of nature itself, is part of that hell-world’ (Frye (1982),76).

People who live in a traditional, anthropomorphic universe will necessarily deal with it in human terms. Those who live in an abstract universe will deal things and others as abstractions. Those who live in a mechanistic universe will treat everything as a machine. Those who find the universe cold and uncaring will reciprocate (Chittick (2007), 87).[[30]](#endnote-30)

Might the pagan religious thought and feeling I have described go some way to satisfying the wish that Armstrong identified for an ‘unorganizable good’? Might my description, on the other hand, serve simply to identify what is missing, by comparison with the orthodox Christian gospel, and what modern naturalistic theory, in its turn, neglects? There are still other forms of ‘pagan’ sensibility that may fit more easily the naturalistic story - most obviously the Norse expectation of Ragnarok, and the absolute destruction of whatever grace and meaning has emerged from Fire and Ice. In the words of a recent revisionist short story, based in H.P.Lovecraft’s mythos:

All of man’s other religions place him at the center of creation. But man is nothing— a fraction of the life that will walk the Earth. Earth is nothing— a tiny world that will die with its sun. The sun is one of trillions where life flowers, and wants to live, and dies. And between the suns is an endless vast darkness that dwarfs them, through which life can travel only by giving up that wanting, by losing itself. Even that darkness will eventually die. In such a universe, knowledge is the stub of a candle at dusk. … What our religion tells us, the part that is a religion, is that the gods created life to try and make meaning. It’s ultimately hopeless, and even gods die, but the effort is real. Will always have been real, even when everything is over and no one remembers.[[31]](#endnote-31)

But that sort of paganism leaves us without any reasonable hope even of discovering how *this* world works, nor any secure recourse against depression. If that hope is to be realistic then something more like Plotinian paganism is the better bet, honouring the forms of beauty in the world and in our intellects. Whether it allows us also to hope that we may have any help in this, is moot. These pagans perhaps made one important error, in supposing that it was Pheidias’s Zeus, however benign his lordship, which best represented Godhead:

Some see God like Guthrum,  
Crowned, with a great beard curled,  
But I see God like a good giant,  
That, labouring, lifts the world.  
 Wherefore was God in Golgotha,  
Slain as a serf is slain (Chesterton (1933), 262).

That error also includes the notion that there can be no better material world than this, and that our piety must consist – at best – in glad or glum endurance. These are notions, certainly, that have not been wholly absent from later Christian (and other Abrahamic) thought and practice. But there is another possibility, better in tune with the original.

Follow a light that leaps and spins,  
Follow the fire unfurled!  
For riseth up against realm and rod,  
A thing forgotten, a thing downtrod,  
The last lost giant, even God,  
Is risen against the world (Chesterton (1933), 268).

If we must choose what meaning to give, or to accept, then we had better acknowledge both the vast cruel emptiness that so often seems to surround us, and also a faith that there is a real escape, not on the heels of Heracles but of the risen Christ. If that is not a faith that we here-now can manage, the old pagan answers, of their various sorts, will perhaps be the best we can.

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# Endnotes

1. I have explored the Plotinian world at greater length, incorporating some of the same material, in Clark (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. So also Origen (1953), 60 (1.64): ‘the critics of Christianity … ought to have confessed their gratitude to the gospel when they observe its services to the community, and borne testimony to it that, even if it may not be true, at any rate it is of advantage to the human race’. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Origen (1953),14 (1.11), following Cleitomachus [Hasdrubal] of Carthage and the New Academy (187-109): see Cicero, *Lucullus* 109. That at least the initial choice of philosophical school was essentially random was also claimed by Lucian in his ‘Hermotimus’: Lucian (2006), 96: ‘There have been a lot of philosophers, Plato, Aristotle, Antisthenes, your own school founders, Chrysippus and Zeno, and all the others. So, what persuaded you [Hermotimus] to ignore the others and to decide to choose the creed you did to guide your studies? Did Pythian Apollo treat you like Chaerephon, and send you to the Stoics as the best of all? His practice is to direct different people to different philosophies, as he knows each individual’s requirements’. Lucian’s own answer to the epistemological problem was simply to follow common opinion, without supposing that this ‘inherited conglomerate’ had any stronger claim to truth. It is only easier (and safer). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. All passages from Plotinus are borrowed from A.H.Armstrong’s version: Armstrong (1966-88). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Watts (2006), 143-68, for a succinct account of the mixing of pagan, Christian and other traditions and teachings in third-century Alexandria. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. According to Porphyry ‘the gods often set [Plotinus] straight when he was going on a crooked course’ (*Life* 23.18). Armstrong, *Enneads,* I, 71 remarks in contrast (and perhaps mistakenly) that ‘Plotinus normally thinks that the philosopher can attain to the divine level without this sort of special assistance’. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See also Palamas ‘150 Texts’, 26, in Palmer et al (1995) 357: [the Greek sages attributed] ‘to the sense-perceptible yet insensate stars an intelligence in each case proportionate in power and dignity to its physical size [and] … wretchedly worshipped these things, calling them greater and lesser gods, and committed the lordship of all things to them’. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Williams (2002) found this the crucial argument in his move from Buddhism back to Catholic Christianity, that *Christians* reckon our current corporeal selves are real. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See also *1 John* 4.1: ‘Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God’. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. ‘We created you and then formed you and then We said to the Angels, ‘Prostrate before Adam’ and they prostrated except for Iblis [which is the Arabic term for Satan]. He was not among those who prostrated. God said, ‘What prevented you from prostrating when I commanded you?’ He (Iblis) replied, ‘I am better than him. You created me from fire and You created him from clay’. God said, ‘Descend from heaven. It is not for you to be arrogant in it. So get out! You are one of the abased.’’ (*Koran* Surah 7 (al-A`raf), 11–13). See also *Life of Adam and Eve* aka *Apocalypse of Moses*, chs.13-14. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Benjamin Whichcote, *Moral and Religious Aphorisms* (1703): Patrides (1980 [1969])*,* 327. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Though Origen rejects the Stoic notion that the world’s history is to be repeated unendingly and without change: Origen (1953), 238, 280 (4.67-8; 5.20-1). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. The Emperor Valerian had recently been captured and humiliated by the Persian King Shapur, leaving Gallienus – a friend and patron of Plotinus – as sole emperor. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. *Wisdom of Solomon* 11.25, cited vehemently by Origen (1953) 203 (4.28). Origen also insists (204-5 (4.29-30)) that there are many creatures (angels, thrones, principalities and the rest) more honourable than human beings, though they are not therefore to be worshipped. On the other hand, he suggests, in arguing for the familiar thesis that the world was made for rational beings alone (and the irrational only incidentally benefit), that the stars are our servants: 245 (4.77). On this point (the standing and nature of the supposedly irrational creation) I personally side with Celsus, though I do not know whether ‘by the implication of his words, the entire human race [has] a worse and inferior understanding of God than the irrational animals’: Origen (1953), 255 (4.90). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ps-Dionysius, ‘Divine Names’ 728d-729a: (1987), 92; see also ‘Celestial Hierarchy’ 141b: (1987)*,* 150: ‘There is nothing which lacks its own share of beauty, for as scripture rightly says ‘Everything is good’’ (after *Genesis* 1.31). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. There are still other Abrahamic lines not easily reckoned subsets of those three: in speaking of ‘Abrahamism’ (as it were) I intend no *essentialist* account of the lineages, but rather a genealogical. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Eaton (1994)*,* 80: ‘for Christians the Word was made flesh, whereas for Muslims it took earthly shape in the form of a book, and the recitation of the Quran in the ritual prayer fulfils the same function as the Eucharist in Christianity’. See also Scholem (1954), 14: ‘the Torah … is the living incarnation of the divine wisdom’. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. This was a standard trope, found also in Cicero, *Orator* II.8-9. See Dio Chrysostom, ‘Man’s First Conception of God’ (at Olympia, in 97 AD): (1989),II, 57 (12.51)), for a description of the statue’s usual effect: ‘His sovereignty and kingship are intended to be shown by the strength in the image and its grandeur; his fatherhood and his solicitude by its gentleness and kindliness; the “Protector of Cities” and “Upholder of the Law” by its majesty and severity; the kinship between gods and men, I presume, by the mere similarity in shape, being already in use as a symbol; the “God of Friends, Suppliants, Strangers, Refugees”, and all such qualities in short, by the benevolence and gentleness and goodness appearing in his countenance. The “God of Wealth” and the “Giver of Increase” are represented by the simplicity and grandeur shown by the figure, for the god does in very truth seem like one who is giving and bestowing blessings.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Augustine, *Sermon* 241.7: O’Daly (1987), 67. Celsus, by Origen’s account, (1953),192-7 (4.14-19), tried to rebut the notion by appealing to God’s unchangeability (any change would either be for the worse or the better). As Origen argues, this is to misunderstand the incarnation, change, and evil. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Porphyry objected especially to associating the divine with a womb ‘full of menstrual blood and gall and things even more unseemly’: *Against the Christians* fr.76 Harnack, cited by Miller (1983), 109. Plotinus was probably less squeamish. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 54.3: ‘the Word of God Himself assumed humanity that we might become God’. It is a doctrine more emphasised in Orthodox than in Western traditions, but it is not unknown even in Protestant circles. See Russell (2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. According to Orphic testimony, the third principle after water and earth was ‘Unaging Time (Chronos), and also Heracles’, conjoined with Ananke or Adrasteia (which is Necessity): Damascius, *Princ.*123 bis (i.317 R: Orpheus fr.54), cited by West (1983), 178, 180. West further suggests (192-4) that ‘Heracles’ labours represent everything that happens in cosmic time’, and that this allegory was probably originated by the Stoic Cleanthes. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Xenophon (1923), 95-9(*Memorabilia* 2.1.21-34), quoting Prodicus. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Liebeschuetz (1979), 242-3. De Blois (1976), 149-50 notes that it was Plotinus’s patron Gallienus who revived Heracles as a focus for imperial loyalty, and his own self-image (he also invoked Mercury, ‘Genius Populi Romani’, Demeter, Zeus and the Sun: 150-9). None of this is to suggest that Christians modelled their Christology on pagan templates: rather the reverse. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Orthodox Christians, it is necessary nowadays to emphasise, do not suppose that Jesus is a second god, *alongside* the Almighty (as Muslim, Jewish and atheistical critics sometimes suggest), nor yet that ‘God’ designates a particular ‘very large’ entity – but this is a still longer story. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Gregory of Nyssa used the same image, as it were in reverse: ‘“Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord” (*Psalm* 117:26). How does He come? He crosses over into human life, not by boat or by chariot, but through the incorruption of a Virgin’*: Homily on the Nativity of Christ* (*Patrologia Græca*, XLVI, 1128A-1149C). We have no need to go ourselves, since He (the Word of God) has come to us. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Dumoulin (1963)*,* 165, paraphrasing the Zen master Eihei Dogen (1200-53); see Dogen (2013), 123: ‘in stillness, mind and object merge in realization and go beyond enlightenment’. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Armstrong (1976, 187-98), reprinted in Armstrong (1979), ch.XVIII, 192. See also Moore (1989)*,* 17-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Armstrong (1936), reprinted in Armstrong (1979), ch.I, 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. See also Sherrard (1987), 71-2: ‘there is a price to be paid for fabricating around us a society which is as artificial and as mechanized as our own; and this is that we can exist in it only on condition that we adapt ourselves to it. This is our punishment’. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Emrys (2014), after Lovecraft’s ‘The Shadow out of Time’: Lovecraft (2008), 555-606. See also C.S.Lewis ‘Cliché come out of its Cage’ in Lewis (1964), 3-4: ‘Make it your hope/ To be counted worthy on that day to stand beside them;/ For the end of man is to partake of their defeat and die/ His second, final death in good company. The stupid, strong/ Unteachable monsters are certain to be victorious at last,/ And every man of decent blood is on the losing side./… Know your betters and crouch, dogs;/ You that have Vichy water in your veins and worship the event/ Your goddess History (whom your fathers called the strumpet Fortune)’. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)