

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

Augustine and Plotinus.

WHEN we quote, as we so often do, the well-known prayer of Augustine: "Thou didst make us for Thyself, and our heart is restless until it rest in Thee,"¹ we should reflect that Augustine (354-430 A.D.) derived the thought so expressed from the great Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus, who died in 270 A.D. Indeed the words themselves are strongly reminiscent of a passage in Plotinus' *Ennead* 5/9/2. ("Arriving at the fatherland he will cease from travail, but not before"). Augustine, before his conversion to Christianity, was deeply versed in the philosophy of Plotinus, and throughout his Christian life his mind was saturated with Neoplatonist conceptions. His famous prayer, therefore, which is probably the most oft-repeated prayer in Christendom after the Lord's Prayer, owes its origin to that deep and fructifying stream of thought which took its rise in the mind of Plato and flowed on in ever-widening dimensions till it reached its fullest scope in the Neoplatonism of Plotinus, and thence passed through the mind of Augustine and other Christian philosophers into the boundless ocean of Christian truth.

Plotinus taught that God is our home and heaven our fatherland, and that our soul will never be free from pangs of restlessness and pain until it arrives there. Only in communion with the One Eternal unchanging God can the soul find repose. As Augustine said, following Plotinus,² "With Thee is rest entire and life imperturbable."³ Like Jesus Himself, Plotinus taught that sinful men should hate themselves as they are, and seek to lose themselves in God, that so they might find themselves in the life eternal. The Neoplatonic and Christian streams of thought meet in Augustine who, in his treatise on *True Religion* (chap. 48) writes: "Whosoever loves himself in his folly will make no progress towards wisdom, nor will become such as he wishes to be, unless he hates himself as he is." The goal of the spiritual man is to "lose himself in heaven above."

Professor Whitehead's definition of religion as being "what

¹ Confessions 1, 1.

² *Ennead* 1, 1, 2; 3, 7, 4.

³ Confessions 2, 10.

a man does with his solitariness" was not original. It goes back to Plotinus, who pleads for simplicity and singleness of heart, and finds the essence of religion in the soul's withdrawal from the crowd, coming apart and resting in the invisible God, "a flight from the many to the One, a flight of the alone to the Alone."⁴ Augustine follows Plotinus very closely in this belief. In "*True Religion*," (chap. 21) he writes: "The multiformity of temporal things did by the senses distract fallen man from the unity of God," and in his *Commentary* on Psalm 4, he says that we ought to stand alone and single, that is, refuse to lose our individuality in the crowd and our souls in the multitude of things that decay and perish, so that we may be lovers of eternity and unity and be able to cleave to our One God and Lord. The spiritual man seeks the approval of God rather than of men.

Part of the secret of Augustine's tremendous intellectual power was the absorption of his mind in that conception of the One perfect, beautiful, holy, true, invisible, eternal, unchanging, impassible God, which was clarified for him in the teaching of Plotinus. When Augustine wrote: "In the Eternal there is neither anything past, as though it had passed away, nor anything future, as though it was not as yet, but whatever is, only is,"⁵ he was freely quoting Plotinus, *Ennead* 3/7/4. Like Plotinus, Augustine teaches that God has His centre everywhere and His circumference nowhere. God is infinite and indefinable. "We can know what God is not, but not what He is."⁶ Discursive thought cannot apprehend the Ineffable One.⁷ It is enough to apprehend Him by a kind of "spiritual intuition." "*Un Dieu défini est un Dieu fini.*"

In the view of Plotinus and Augustine, fellowship with this Eternal One is in itself heaven, and is attainable in some degree by men on earth, though fully realised only in the realm of endless bliss "above." The abode of God is filled with perfect peace, serene and calm, beyond perturbation and passion, untroubled by sin, sorrow, pain or fear; and even on earth the lover of God can enjoy a foretaste of this "peace of God which passeth all understanding." Such peace is received by faith. But what is faith? Plotinus says that it is surrender to the Good and True and Beautiful—involving travail of soul, the girding up of the loins of our mind, spiritual discipline and self-denial. For the pilgrim on earth, the crown of inner peace and blessedness involves the cross of self-sacrifice.

The man, then, whose restless heart learns to rest in God, is

⁴ *Ennead* 5, 13, 17.

⁵ *Lib.* 83, *Quaest.* 19.

⁶ *De Trin.* 8, 2.

⁷ *Cf. Ennead* 5, 3, 17.

the "lover"; and by "lover" Plotinus⁸ and Augustine⁹ mean the soul that loves divine truth, beauty and goodness, and is drawn by them into fellowship with the Eternal Godhead. There is an affinity between God and man, for man participates in God.¹⁰ Man's true quest, therefore, is God Himself. "Man's true honour is the image and likeness of God, which is only retained by reference to Him by whom it is impressed. Men cleave, therefore, the more to God, the less they love anything of their own."¹¹ "Whosoever seeks from God any other reward but God, and for it would serve God, esteems what he wishes to receive more than Him from whom he would receive it . . . The reward of God is God himself."¹² "*Habet omnia qui habet habentem omnia.*"

The quest of the "lover" is for the transcendent, spiritual, eternal Beauty, which is God. Plotinus and Augustine, however, do not despise physical and natural beauty. For them, as for Plato and Wordsworth, the love of Nature is the first stage in the ascent to the love of the divine, invisible and eternal values of the spiritual world. Nature cannot be truly appreciated except by those who have passed through the veil of the visible world and have grasped by a spiritual intuition the reality which is unseen and eternal. He whose soul is *in patria* with God returns to behold natural beauty with a fresh and divinely inspired comprehension, "a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused." Those who are made meek by this reverence are the true inheritors of the earth. The others, who lose their own souls to gain the world, do not inherit the earth; but, as John Oman says, the earth inherits them.

The study of Platonism and Neoplatonism is still, as it was for Augustine, a fountain of inspiration springing from the same wells of eternal Truth from which Jesus drew, Who is Himself the Eternal Truth of God. Plotinus made clear, as never before, the non-spacial non-material, non-quantitative nature of God and the soul.¹³ Augustine found in Christianity the confirmation of all that is true in Neoplatonism, with the incomparable addition of the Incarnation and all that flowed from it.¹⁴ The Truth as it is in Jesus is no other than the Truth which the true philosopher seeks. "For our knowledge of first principles we have recourse to that inner truth which presides over the mind. And that

⁸ Ennead 3, 8, 9; 5, 9, 2; 6, 7, 35.

⁹ Confessions 3, 6; 13, 9.

¹⁰ cf. Pascal: "Tu ne me chercherais pas, si tu ne m'avais déjà trouvé." Bernard: De Diligendo Deo, 7, 22. "Nemo Te quaerere valet nisi qui prus invenerit." cf. Aug. Confess. 1, 1; 10, 27.

¹¹ Aug. De Trin. 12, 11.

¹² Aug. in Ps. 72, sect. 32.

¹³ Ennead 2, 4, 9. cf. Aug. Confess. 3, 7.

¹⁴ Confess. 7, 9.

indwelling teacher of the mind is Christ, the changeless virtue and eternal wisdom of God, to which every rational soul has recourse. But so much only is revealed to each as his own good or evil will enables him to receive."¹⁵

"The thing itself, which is now called the Christian religion, existed among the ancients, nor has it failed from the beginning of the human race, until Christ Himself came in the flesh, whence the true religion, which already existed, began to be called Christian."¹⁶ The ultimate authority, which alone is infallible, is and always has been the eternal and living and self-authenticating Truth. Only in Him Who is the Truth and the Life can the obstinate questionings of the human mind find their answer and our hearts find rest.

A. W. ARGYLE.

¹⁵ De Magistr. 38.

¹⁶ *Retract.* 1, 13, 3.

The Independent Press has recently issued two books in the devotional field. P. T. Forsyth's *The Soul of Prayer* (5/-), is not one of his biggest or best known works, but it is well worth re-issuing along with the others. It is typical in its energy and in its cascade of language and ideas. He ranges into one or two aspects of prayer seldom touched by other writers and other, more familiar, ideas come over with the characteristic Forsythian difference. The book is practical in the way that good theologising always is. There are reminders of the 1916 background against which it was written but only one or two sentences have an antiquated ring. All the rest is relevant and likely to remain so. The Greek quotation on p. 59 has a wrong breathing and a superfluous iota subscript.

The first part of *Sonship* by K. L. Carrick Smith (1s. 6d.) is good, interpreting, in the light of the New Testament and with considerable freshness, the filial consciousness of Christ. Neither freshness nor concentration are sustained and the practical application of a valuable thesis is spoiled by a tendency to make digs of a negative kind. Forsyth left one feeling rebuked but helped; the value of this book will be minimised by the irritation it creates in the mind. Granted that Christians are often misguided, reluctant in the use of divine resources, and labouring in their handling of important problems, but not all the Gordian knots with which they wrestle can be cut with a sentence. One's ultimate disappointment with this book is not diminished by the impression that the author has the ability to offer help of a kind he has withheld.

G. W. RUSLING.