

commentaries on Plato are veritable monuments of exegesis. To take another example: Damascius' reflections on the problems implied by the notion of "Principle of the All" achieve great profundity. It is not surprising that Proclus' "system" exercised a fundamental influence on the whole history of Western thought, especially during the Renaissance and in the period of German Romanticism.

The activity of the Neoplatonists later than Plotinus was devoted above all to the exegesis of texts by Plato and Aristotle. Some of their commentaries on Aristotle were translated into Latin, and played a considerable role in the interpretations of this philosopher that were proposed in the Middle Ages.

Way of Life

For the later Neoplatonists, as for Plotinus, philosophical discourse was intimately linked to concrete practices and a way of life. For Plotinus, however, life according to the Spirit consisted in a philosophical life—that is, in *askēsis* and moral and mystical experience. The situation was wholly different for the later Neoplatonists. To be sure, they preserved the philosophical practice of *askēsis* and of virtue;⁷² but they considered what they called "theurgical" practice equally important, or even, in the case of Iamblichus, apparently even more important. The word "theurgy" does not appear until the second century A.D.; it seems to have been created by the author or authors of the *Chaldean Oracles* to designate rituals capable of purifying the soul and its "immediate vehicle," the astral body, and thus allowing it to contemplate the gods.⁷³ These rituals included ablutions, sacrifices, and invocations using ritual words that were often incomprehensible. What differentiated theurgy from magic was that it did not claim to force the gods, but aimed at submitting to their will by carrying out the rites which they themselves supposedly ordained. As

Iamblichus says, the only thing that can bring about our union with the gods is not theoretical philosophy, but rites which we do not understand.⁷⁴ It is not by intellectual activity that we can carry them out, for in this case their efficacy would depend on us. It is the gods who take the initiative; they have chosen the material signs, or "sacraments," which attract the gods, allow contact with the divine, and enable us to see the divine forms. Thus, we are in the presence of a kind of doctrine of salvific grace. In this conception, the idea of mystical union does not disappear but is included within the overall perspective of theurgy. Like the other gods, the supreme deity can also manifest himself to the soul in the mystical experience by means of what Proclus calls the "one of the soul," or the supreme, transcendent part of the soul.⁷⁵ This "one of the soul" thus somehow corresponds to the *sign*, which attracts the gods into the soul in ordinary theurgical practice.

This invasion of Platonism by theurgy is mysterious to us. It is hard to understand why Neoplatonism of the end of antiquity introduced theurgical practice into philosophical practice. As H.-D. Saffrey has pointed out, such an attitude can be explained by the later Neoplatonists' conception of man's place with regard to the divine.⁷⁶ Whereas Plotinus believed that the human soul was always in unconscious contact with the Intellect and the spiritual world, the later Neoplatonists believed that because the soul had fallen into the body, it needed to go through material and sensible rites in order to be able to rise toward the divine. This was similar to the move made by Christianity, in which man, once corrupted by original sin, needs the mediation of the incarnate Logos and the sensible signs of the sacraments in order to enter into contact with God. For Neoplatonism and Christianity, the two spiritual movements which dominated the end of antiquity and opposed each other, man cannot save himself by his own strength but must wait for the divine to take the initiative.