

LA PRIÈRE DANS LA TRADITION PLATONICIENNE



TIMOTIN, ANDREI (2017).
La prière dans la tradition platonicienne, de Platon à Proclus.
RRR 22. Turnhout: Brepols. 296 pp., 80,00€ [ISBN 978-2-5035-5748-20].

GARY M. GURTLER, S. J.
BOSTON COLLEGE
GURTLERG@BC.EDU

THIS BOOK PROVIDES A MARVELLOUS RETRIEVAL of Greek philosophical reflection on the nature of prayer in the wider context of Greek culture and its evolving understanding of the relation of the human and the divine. It thus joins a remarkable project overcoming the scholarly assumptions of the last two centuries. This project is international and multilingual, as Andrei Timotin (AT) makes clear in his notes and bibliography here and his collaboration with John Dillon in *Platonic Theories of Prayer* (2016). The bibliography, spanning 20 pages, has references in English, French, German, and Italian. Where the religious dimension of ancient thought had been relegated to the fringes, it has now become a central topic. Where the prayers in Platonic dialogues had been passed over in silence, they are now examined with all the resources of modern scholarly method. AT's approach is both chronological, from Plato to Proclus, and thematic, examining philosophy, religion, and rhetoric.

Beginning with Plato, AT divides his attention between the discussion in the *Laws* and the *Republic*, with the relation of prayer to the religious tradition and the role of civic cult, and the examination of Homer and religious poetry. In both instances, AT shows that Plato sees his task as defining the proper prayer for individuals and cities and critiquing those expressions of prayer that fall outside what is proper, whether in the writings of the poets or the attempts of the immoral to influence the gods. The attacks on Homer, for example, in *Rep 2*, have often been taken as attacks in general on traditional Greek religion, but AT shows that the goal of Plato is to sort through Greek religious practice to clarify what is true and to expose and remove what is not. Plato ties the efficacy of prayer with the moral virtues (*Laws* 10. 906ab, 26), a philosophical innovation that carries through the chronological story as philosophers react to different contexts. Similarly, the critique of the poets in *Rep 2* is precisely part of this more general approach.

In developing a theory of prayer, we find the application of this critique with the recommendation that prayer of any kind depends on individuals or cities becoming like the divine, as discussed in *Laws* 4. 716cd. At this point, AT brings in what is familiar to readers of the dialogues, the prayers attributed to Socrates. His analysis shows how these prayers are models that take philosophy itself as a kind of prayer, integrating one's prayer with the actions of one's life, especially illustrated in the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*. One can ask of the gods for the goods of life that do not depend on oneself, not merely at the end of life, as with Cephalus in *Rep 1*, but throughout life as Socrates does in the *Phaedrus* and at the time of his death in the *Phaedo*. AT alerts us that these themes continue in Aristotle's *Ethics*, in Maximus of Tyre, and in Marcus Aurelius.

Plotinus is the next major pivot for the philosophical analysis of prayer. AT points out areas where he seems to innovate or to differ from his predecessors. First, is the relegation of petitionary prayer to the lower soul (the vegetative soul, 119). Next, those engaged in the practical life remain with traditional religion, which the sage abandons to follow the path of apophatic contemplation. Finally, the words of petitionary prayer, magic and astrology contrast with the development of an interior and intellectual prayer that moves beyond the discursive to a wordless contact with Intellect and the One. He sees these moves as connected to Plotinus' notion of the undescended soul, with the ascent of soul as a process of depersonalization (134). The critique of petitionary prayer, in its turn, traces to the notion of sympathy, especially as developed in IV 3-5 [27-29], the great treatise on the soul. This reading needs some qualification in light of most recent scholarship about Plotinus' complex description of the embodied soul and the empirical self, centered on reason.

While the sage, or anyone for that matter, should focus attentively on the intelligible, that fact does not eliminate navigating the sensible world and those we share

it with, thus the break is less rigid than it appears. We thus need to clarify more carefully the discussion of the undescended soul and the nature of sympathy. AT takes Plotinus's position on the undescended soul as unusual, given perhaps the consensus of later Neoplatonists that the soul is restricted to the sensible cosmos. In IV 3-5 [27-29], however, Plotinus explains his view of the soul: without the body, it is entirely in the intelligible (IV 5[29] 1, 5-6). It is body that stands outside the intelligible. Soul, even with its secondary incorporeality, remains within the intelligible and thus has access to it by its nature. This assumption, further, forms the basis for understanding why it remains undescended and what the ascent of the soul means. This ascent is described as a purification in which the soul becomes "alone", a word that has often been misconstrued and seems behind AT's description of the ascent as a process of depersonalization. K. Corrigan, *Love, Friendship, Beauty, and the Good* (Eugene, OR, Cascade Books, 2018), indicates that this purification is not an abstraction from things but rather the soul's recognition of its kinship with other souls and intellects. Further, the image behind the process of purification and its result in being "alone" is of purifying gold where the dross is removed and one is left with gold "alone". In the case of the soul, this means the soul recovers its identity with other souls as well as with intellect and the One, consistent in the *Enneads* from I 6[1] 5-6 on. Admittedly, Plotinus does not have a vocabulary for understanding the personal, but it is the soul's embodiment that limits and isolates it, not its ascent.

Sympathy, by contrast, is used to indicate the relation among all sensible beings, based on Plotinus' assumption that the whole cosmos and all its parts are ensouled in various degrees. This allows for the possibility not only of sensation but also of the influence of one part of the cosmos on another. IV 4[28] 30-45 deals with the influence of the planets, and the role of prayer, magic, and astrology, as AT notes. In this context, there is not a rigid demarcation between the philosophical sage and ordinary mortals, but a nuanced description of the common human experience they share, the topic of IV 4[28] 43-45. The sage is immune to magic and spells only in the rational part of the soul, while his body is open to influences, for good or ill, from the things around him, whether disease or spells of one kind or another. Further, the primordial magic is exercised by nature itself. The difference, then, between the sage and the practical man concerns the principles of one's action, from reason rather than appetites and affections, and the attitude toward those actions, complete indifference to consequences rather than any concern even for the most beautiful of actions. Contemplation thus does not serve to cut the sage off from necessary action while in the body, but carefully to preserve one's freedom from them. Finally, Plotinus does not restrict the influence of the cosmos to the vegetative, true on the level of life, but also on the sensitive level, where the signifying role of the planets seems to lie (IV 4[28]

35). For later Neoplatonists, a slightly different understanding of the soul leads to a more prominent role for prayer, especially developed in terms of theurgy.

These clarifications do not put into question the importance of this book for a thorough discussion of prayer in the Platonic tradition, with its rich analysis of texts from many different periods. It is a work that deserves to be taken seriously and read assiduously.