

The Doctrine of Deification in
the Greek Patristic Tradition

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Introduction

1. The Metaphor of Deification

All the earlier patristic writers who refer to deification, although sometimes conscious of the boldness of their language, took it for granted that their readers understood what they meant. Clement of Alexandria was first to use the technical vocabulary of deification, but he did not think it necessary to explain it. No formal definition of deification occurs until the sixth century, when Dionysius the Areopagite declares: 'Deification (*θεώσις*) is the attaining of likeness to God and union with him so far as is possible' (*EH* 1. 3, PG 3. 376A). Only in the seventh century does Maximus the Confessor discuss deification as a theological topic in its own right.

The reason for this is that deification language is most often used metaphorically.¹ The implications of the metaphor were clear to its first hearers or readers and did not need to be spelled out, the context of the utterance enabling them to construe its meaning. But by the sixth century the metaphorical sense was fading. Deification was becoming a technical term susceptible of definition.² That is to say, the same truth which was originally expressed in metaphorical language came in the early Byzantine period to be expressed conceptually and dogmatically.

The subject of this book is Christian deification from its birth as a metaphor to its maturity as a spiritual doctrine. The early Fathers use deification language in one of three ways, nominally, analogically, or metaphorically. The first two uses are straightforward. The nominal interprets the biblical application of the word 'gods' to human beings simply as a title of honour. The analogical 'stretches' the nominal: Moses was a god to Pharaoh as a wise man is a god to a fool; or men become sons and gods 'by grace' in relation to Christ who is Son and God 'by nature'.³ The metaphorical use is more

¹ On the role of metaphor in theological discourse the best study is Soskice 1985. See also McFague 1983.

² 'Metaphorical usages which begin their careers outside the standard lexicon may gradually become lexicalized' (Soskice 1985: 83).

³ When attached to the word 'gods', the phrase 'by grace' (*κατὰ χάριν*) functions, in Aristotelian terms, as a 'negative addition' (Aristotle, *Poet.* 21. 1457^b30-32) denying the attribute of uncreatedness. It indicates that 'gods' is not to be taken literally.

complex. It is characteristic of two distinct approaches, the ethical and the realistic. The ethical approach takes deification to be the attainment of likeness to God through ascetic and philosophical endeavour, believers reproducing some of the divine attributes in their own lives by imitation. Behind this use of the metaphor lies the model of *homoiosis*, or attaining *likeness* to God. The realistic approach assumes that human beings are in some sense transformed by deification. Behind the latter use lies the model of *methexis*, or *participation*, in God.

Homoiosis and *methexis* are two key terms used by Plato with long and distinguished careers in later Platonic thought. Their meanings are distinct, but their spheres of reference overlap. Although the latter is the stronger term, they both seek to express the relationship between Being and becoming, between that which exists in an absolute sense and that which exists contingently. *Methexis* has been defined in the following way: ‘“Participation” is the name of the “relation” which accounts for the togetherness of elements of diverse ontological type in the essential unity of a single instance. In this sense it is a real relation, one constitutive of the nexus qua nexus which arises from it’ (Bigger 1968: 7). In other words, participation occurs when an entity is defined in relation to something else. For example, a holy person is an entity distinct from holiness, but is defined as holy because he or she has a share in holiness. Without holiness there is no holy person, but the holy person has a separate existence from holiness. To say that the holy person ‘participates’ in holiness conveys a relationship which is (a) substantial, not just a matter of appearance, and (b) asymmetrical, not a relationship between equals. ‘Likeness’ is the name of another ‘relation’ which accounts for the togetherness of elements of diverse ontological type, but in a weaker, non-constitutive way, closer to analogy than to participation. Likeness occurs when two entities share a common property. For example, two holy people resemble each other because they both possess holiness. The boundaries between these distinctions, however, are not rigid. ‘Participation’ can be strong or weak depending on whether it is used properly (*κυρίως*) or figuratively (*καταχρηστικῶς*).⁴

Analogy, imitation, and participation thus form a continuum rather than express radically different kinds of relationship. Furthermore, the realistic approach, which is based on the participation model, has two aspects, one ontological, the other dynamic. The ontological aspect is concerned with human nature’s transformation in principle⁵ by the Incarnation, the dynamic with the individual’s appropriation of this deified humanity through the

⁴ The best study of participation in Plato is still Bigger 1968; see also Allen 1965. The later Platonic tradition explores the mechanics of the whole system, taking in Aristotelian insights.

⁵ Here and elsewhere I use the expression ‘in principle’ as a convenient way of referring to God’s action in the Incarnation before the benefits accomplished by it come to be internalized by the believer through the life of faith.

sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist. These four basic approaches, nominal, analogical, ethical, and realistic (in both its ontological and dynamic aspects) will be used as a framework for much of what follows.

2. The Need for the Study

Metaphors, as Andrew Louth has observed, ‘disclose a way of looking at the world, a way of understanding the world. If we wish to understand the way in which any of the ancients understood their world, we must pay heed to their use of metaphors’.⁶ But Western scholars have rarely given the metaphor of deification sympathetic attention. The tone was set by Adolf von Harnack. Towards the end of the nineteenth century he correctly identified deification as a leading theme in Irenaeus of Lyons that found ready acceptance among his contemporaries because it not only surpassed the Gnostic conception of salvation but also accorded with Christianity’s eschatological tendencies and the mystical currents of Neoplatonism. Moreover, it came close but ‘in a very peculiar way’ to Pauline theology (1896–9: ii. 240–1). But in Harnack’s view the ‘exchange formula’ encapsulating this doctrine (God became man that man might become god) was fundamentally derived from the mystery cults and was consequently to be deplored: ‘when the Christian religion was represented as the belief in the incarnation of God and as the sure hope of the deification of man, a speculation that had originally never got beyond the fringe of religious knowledge was made the central point of the system and the simple content of the Gospel was obscured’ (1896–9: ii. 10, 318). More precisely, deification presented redemption as ‘the abrogation of the natural state by a miraculous transformation of our nature’; it distinguished the supreme good from the morally good; it excluded an atonement; and it called for christological formulas which contradicted the picture of Jesus in the Gospels (1896–9: iii. 164–6).

Biblical scholars today are less confident about the simplicity of the Gospel, but Harnack’s judgement on deification has endured. In 1960 Benjamin Drewery declared: ‘I must put it on record that deification is, in my view, the most serious aberration to be found not only in Origen but in the whole tradition to which he contributed, and nothing that modern defenders of *ἀποθέωσις* . . . have urged has shaken in the slightest my conviction that here lies the disastrous flaw in Greek Christian thought’ (1960: 200–1). Drewery’s protest is not to be dismissed lightly. In 1975 he published a brief but well documented study of deification which may still serve as a good, if provocative, introduction. After reviewing the relevant texts, his evaluation was still negative. He considered the doctrine unbiblical and irrational, its modern

⁶ Louth 1983a: 19, summarizing a central idea of Giambattista Vico’s.

champions being 'guilty of pushing a paradox into the realms of the non-sensical' (1975: 52).

Drewery's hostility is partly to be explained by the fact that he was reacting against the confident and somewhat polemical accounts of deification put forward by three Orthodox writers, Myrrha Lot-Borodine, Vladimir Lossky, and Philip Sherrard. It was Lot-Borodine who first drew the attention of Western readers to the doctrine's centrality in the Eastern Orthodox tradition in a series of articles entitled 'La doctrine de la "déification" dans l'Église grecque jusqu'au XI^e siècle' published in the *Revue d'histoire des religions* in 1932–3 and subsequently reissued with a preface by Cardinal Daniélou in 1970. Daniélou says that when he first read them, the articles had a profound effect on him: 'They crystallized for me something for which I had been searching, a vision of man transfigured by the divine energies' (Lot-Borodine 1970: 10). They were to exercise a powerful influence on his important work of 1944 on the mystical theology of Gregory of Nyssa. Lot-Borodine's articles, however, had appeared without a full scholarly apparatus. In Daniélou's words, they abounded instead 'with something more precious', with a profound sense of the Byzantine spiritual tradition (Lot-Borodine 1970: 11). At the same time this Byzantine interpretation of the early Greek Fathers could be seen as a weakness. Even a sympathetic reader like Daniélou could not accept an account of early patristic theology couched in the language of Gregory Palamas. This seemed to him to fall into an error mirroring that of Western scholasticism. Nor did he accept Lot-Borodine's neat opposition between Eastern and Western theology.

A similar polemical tendency is also evident in the work of Vladimir Lossky, who has perhaps done more than anybody else to explain Orthodox spirituality to a Western public. His *Essai sur la théologie mystique de l'Église d'Orient* of 1944, translated into English in 1957, made the doctrine of deification widely known as the crowning achievement of Byzantine mystical theology. Deification is the final end of humankind, the fullness of mystical union with God, seen in terms of a participation in the divine and uncreated energies which can begin even in this life. Lossky draws a strong contrast between the dynamic theology (in the strict sense) of the East, as represented by the later Fathers and St Gregory Palamas, and the static theology of the West, as embodied in the writings of St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas. His polemical tone has attracted adverse comment even from fellow Orthodox. 'As a controversialist and apologist', John Meyendorff writes, 'Vladimir Lossky was sometimes intransigent and harsh' (Lossky 1963: 5). The intransigence was not all one-way. At the time, Orthodox theology was often treated by Western writers in a hostile or patronizing manner, as the writings of Martin Jugie, for example, witness. Lossky's reaction is understandable: 'In the present state of dogmatic difference between East and West it is essential, if one wishes to study the mystical

theology of the Eastern Church, to choose between two possible standpoints. Either, to place oneself on western dogmatic ground and to examine the eastern tradition across that of the West—that is, by way of criticism—or else to present that tradition in the light of the dogmatic attitude of the Eastern Church. This latter course is for us the only possible one' (Lossky 1957: 12).

Philip Sherrard's influential study, *The Greek East and the Latin West* (1959, 2nd edn 1992) also deemed Lossky's course the only possible one. Disenchanted with Western attitudes—'the spiritual dereliction, not to say slump into systematic barbarity, of the modern western world' (1992: v)—Sherrard came to Orthodoxy in later life. Convinced that Christianity is a 'Way of salvation', not a system of thought, he presents the Greek theological tradition from a soteriological perspective in which man's conscious participation in the divine 'realizes' his own spiritual principle with consequences for all creation (Sherrard 1992: 43–4). As with Lossky and Lot-Borodine, the patristic doctrine of deification is viewed from a Palamite perspective with a strong colouring, in Sherrard's case, of Christian Platonism.⁷

In the meantime, the investigation of the doctrine of deification according to modern notions of impartial scientific study was advancing steadily. The first tentative survey was a brief general account by V. Ermoni, published in French in 1897. A much more thorough treatment in Russian by I. V. Popov appeared in 1906, but had little impact outside the Russian-speaking world. An ambitious attempt to cover the same ground in German was begun by Louis Baur in 1916. In the difficult conditions prevailing in Germany after the First World War, however, his monograph remained unfinished. There were only two further articles of a general nature by O. Faller (1925) and M.-J. Congar (1935), the latter responding to Lot-Borodine, before Jules Gross published his landmark study in 1938.⁸

Gross set out to answer Harnack. He denied that deification was an importation from Hellenism, claiming instead that it was a biblical idea in Greek dress, the equivalent of the Western doctrine of sanctifying grace (1938: vi). Inspired by Leipoldt (1923) and Faller (1925), he saw the doctrine of deification fundamentally as the re-expression by the Greek Fathers in the language of their own culture of two themes already present in the New Testament, namely, the Pauline teaching on mystical incorporation into

⁷ It may be mentioned that Greece at this time was dominated by an academic theological tradition that did not pay much attention to deification. The important work by Greek theologians since 1960 is discussed in Chapter 9, 5, below.

⁸ Appearing on the eve of the Second World War, this book, despite its importance, survives in very few copies. The welcome publication of an English translation in 2000 came too late for me to refer to, but fortunately the translator, for ease of reference, has included the page numbers of the French edition in the margins.

Christ, and the Johannine idea of the incarnate Logos as the source of divine life (1938: 105–6). To prove his thesis, Gross first examines the analogues to deification in contemporary pagan culture, then discusses the beginnings of deification in the Old and New Testaments, and finally reviews the entire Greek patristic tradition from the Apologists to John Damascene. The results are impressive. For the first time all the evidence is examined in great detail, and a wealth of material adduced to prove the ubiquity of the doctrine of deification, particularly in writers of the Alexandrian tradition. But there are a number of weaknesses. First, Gross does not study the vocabulary. He treats deification as a concept that is embodied in different writers as it is transmitted from one generation to another, without looking closely at the terminology that was developed to express it. Secondly, he does not examine the questions to which the patristic discussions of deification were the answers. The doctrine is presented simply as it appears from time to time in various Fathers. Thirdly, although the different aspects of deification are not ignored, he focuses perhaps too strongly on incorruptibility and immortality: ‘All the Greek doctors insist that to participate in the divine nature is to participate in incorruptibility. In effect they often identify the terms “to deify” and “to immortalize”’ (1938: 350). Close attention to the context of patristic discussions of deification suggests a broader range of meanings.

A brief response to Gross by A.-J. Festugière was published in 1939. After the war, however, the emphasis changed. Two remarkable studies, one of Maximus the Confessor by Hans Urs von Balthasar (1941), the other the study of Gregory of Nyssa by Jean Daniélou already mentioned (1944), inspired deeper investigation of the spiritual teaching of individual Fathers. Walther Völker, after his monograph on the ideal of human perfection in Origen of 1931, resumed his work with a series of important studies of Greek spiritual writers from the second to the fourteenth century.⁹ Subsequently there have been a number of significant monographs specifically on the doctrine of deification in Gregory of Nazianzus (Winslow 1979), Athanasius of Alexandria (Norman 1980), Irenaeus of Lyons (de Andia 1986), Maximus the Confessor (Larchet 1996), and Cyril of Alexandria (Keating 2004). The findings of these studies have not yet been incorporated into an overview. The last general surveys of deification were undertaken in the early 1950s, the fruits of which were I.-H. Dalmais’ expert summary, which appeared in the third volume of the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* (1954–7), and A. Theodorou’s fine dissertation, arranged on a systematic rather than a historical basis, which was published in Athens in 1956. While these remain

⁹ These are on Clement of Alexandria (1952), Gregory of Nyssa (1955), Dionysius the Areopagite (1958), Maximus the Confessor (1965), John Climacus (1968), Symeon the New Theologian (1974), and Nicholas Cabasilas (1977).

very useful, there is a need for a new evaluation of deification in the light of later research.

3. Scope and Method

The section Eric Osborn devotes to deification in his book, *The Beginning of Christian Philosophy* (1981: 111–20) is one of the liveliest of the more recent contributions to the debate. Osborn stresses the importance of method in any discussion of deification, the available methods he lists being the cultural, the polemical, the doxographical, and the problematic. The cultural method presents deification as an integral part of the Eastern Christian ethos, treating it as the expression of a homogeneous tradition with each patristic author adding his stone to the edifice. The polemical method attacks it as wrong from the standpoint that truth is univocal and any proposition which does not accord with that truth (which is to be found in one's own tradition) must be erroneous. The doxographer simply collects the opinions of each writer. The problematic method seeks to identify the problems to which deification was the solution. Osborn considers this the only method which, with the help of the cultural and doxographical approaches, can really shed much light on deification. Indeed, 'it is a waste of time writing on deification unless some attempt is made to elucidate the problem' (Osborn 1981: 113).

Osborn identifies an important but previously neglected aspect of deification. A problematic approach investigates the questions that arose from the need to demonstrate the rational coherence of the faith of the New Testament in language which had to take cognizance of Greek categories of thought. An early difficulty arose from the very notion of immortality. If immortality was a fundamental divine attribute—which no one disputed—in what sense did believers attain it without blurring the distinction between themselves and God? In this connection Psalm 82: 6, 'I said, you are gods and all of you sons of the Most High', needed to be reconciled with the biblical insistence on the transcendence of God. As solutions were suggested, these in turn gave rise to new problems. For example, after Athanasius' successful struggle against Arianism, Origen's account of how the soul ascended to God was no longer acceptable in its original form. The problem now became one of reconciling the ascent of the soul and its attainment of likeness to God with the profound gulf which was perceived to exist between the 'genetic' and 'agenetic' orders of reality.

Another difficulty arose from the doctrine of the Incarnation. Many Fathers, particularly of the Alexandrian tradition, considered the concepts of the Incarnation of God and the deification of man to be correlative to one another. The opponents of Arianism could therefore use the doctrine of

deification as an argument for the fully divine nature of Christ: human beings could be deified only if Christ was indeed God. As has often been pointed out, soteriological concerns lay behind the christological disputes of the fourth century and later. If salvation was seen in terms of an interpenetration of the human and the divine, christological doctrine needed to reflect this. Conversely, the development of christology had implications for the development of the doctrine of deification.

The problematic approach, however, is not exhaustive, because deification is more than a conceptual term, the fruit simply of intellectual analysis. As a widely accepted metaphor, it had become part of tradition and had somehow to be accommodated in theological discourse. Even a writer such as Augustine, whose cast of mind was different from that of his Greek contemporaries, accepted their exegesis of Psalm 82: 6, with its sacramental implications. The Fathers were much more aware than we are today of the unity of theology and spirituality, and also of the unity of divine revelation. According to the Alexandrian exegetical tradition, the whole of Scripture at its deepest level is about the mystery of Christ—both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, not just the New with the Messianic prophecies of the Old. All of Scripture concerns the divine economy, and in ways not immediately obvious.

The present study confirms Gross's thesis that the deification metaphor has biblical roots and that during the second and third centuries it came to be expressed in the language of Hellenism. After examining the first Christian ideas about deification and their relationship to pagan and Jewish parallels, I trace how successive writers gave different meanings and connotations to deification and show how they arose according to the specific philosophical, theological, or exegetical problems they addressed. Unlike Gross, however, who concludes with John Damascene, I take my account up to Maximus the Confessor, whose teaching on deification represents the true climax of the patristic tradition. Finally, I describe briefly the concept as inherited by the Byzantine Church.

I am aware of the limitations of word studies, but as the vocabulary of deification has not yet been examined in detail, I list and discuss almost every instance of *θεοποιέω*—*ἀποθεώω*—*θεόω* and *θεοποίησις*—*ἀποθέωσις*—*θέωσις* in context until the end of the fourth century, together with significant examples from the fifth to the eighth centuries. Usage determines meaning. Deification's meaning cannot be established a priori or by generalizing from a few examples. The full range of usages must be considered. Appendix 2 summarizes my lexical findings. Briefly, the Christian usage of deification terms expressing the soul's ascent to God precedes the pagan usage rather than the other way round, as is often assumed.

Heeding Osborn's advice, I look at the problems that each writer was addressing. In what sense may human beings (on the authority of Psalm 82: 6)

be called gods? How is the destiny of the Christian related to the divine economy of the Incarnation? How does the Christian philosopher (not to be outdone by his pagan rival) attain 'likeness to God so far as possible' (Plato, *Theaet.* 176b)? How is the soul's ascent to God to be reconciled with the distinction between 'genetic' and 'agenetic', created and uncreated? How does a human being 'participate' in God and still remain a creature? What is the role of the sacraments and the moral life? Few writers confront all these problems simultaneously. With each author it is necessary to identify the problems he was trying to solve, and place them in their context.

At the risk of over-schematization, I use my classification of the various approaches to deification as nominal, analogical, ethical, and realistic as a key for analysing the historical development of the doctrine. The earliest approaches are the nominal and the analogical, both of which are used by Philo, from whom they pass into the Christian tradition. The next is the realistic, which also, surprisingly, has Jewish antecedents. Inspired by Rabbinic exegesis, Justin Martyr laid claim to the 'gods' of Psalm 82: 6 for the Church, as a consequence of which Irenaeus takes it for granted that Christians may be called 'gods' on the authority of Scripture because they have been incorporated into Christ through baptism, thereby attaining a potential immortality. A new approach appears alongside this in Clement of Alexandria and Hippolytus of Rome, who are the first to use the verb *θεοποιέω*. The Christian philosopher may be called a 'god' because he has become like God through the attainment of gnosis and dispassion. By the fourth century all four approaches are well developed, with the realistic, expressed in the language of participation and relating to the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, and the ethical, expressed in the language of imitation and relating to the ascetic and contemplative life, predominating. Many writers use both approaches, though the realistic is especially characteristic of the Alexandrian tradition, the ethical of the Cappadocian. The two approaches are successfully integrated by Cyril of Alexandria and, most impressively, by Maximus the Confessor.

This study aims to be as comprehensive as possible within reasonable limits, which would have been exceeded if the scope of the book had not been confined to the Greek Fathers. As no mention at all of the Syriac and Latin Fathers, however, would have left the reader with an incomplete view of the role of deification in patristic thought and spirituality, a summary account of their teaching is included in Appendix 1.

4. Overview

Before Constantine, Christians lived as a minority in a strongly polytheistic environment in which the deification of human beings was commonplace.

Not only were there numerous temples to gods who had once been men, but in every city pride of place was given to the cult of the emperor. Deceased emperors had been deified from the time of Augustus. Since Domitian the reigning emperor was also regarded as a god. How were Christians to react? With regard to pagan religion in general, Christian intellectuals readily adopted a Euhemeristic approach. If all the gods had once been human, polytheism did not present a threat. The imperial cult was more difficult to fit into a Christian perspective. Under persecution, Christians may have been determined not to render to the emperor the worship due to God alone, but in times of peace they were more flexible. Throughout the Graeco-Roman world the imperial cult excited popular devotion. Indeed, it played a vital role in unifying society. It is no surprise that the cult survived the transition to a Christian empire by more than a century. Christians in practice could be very tolerant of it. Moreover, the deification conferred by the imperial funeral rites became available by a process of 'democratization' to ordinary citizens, so that by the second century 'apotheosis' could mean no more than solemn burial.

For an approach to deification connected with the religious development of the individual, we need to turn to the mystery cults and Orphism, and ultimately to antiquity's most noble expression of the religious instinct in the Platonic philosophical tradition. Philosophical religion was based on the conviction that the attainment of the divine was fundamentally the realization of something within oneself. A significant number of Christians could accept the aspirations of philosophical religion with very few reservations. A pupil of Origen's, for example, could refer to the dictum 'Know thyself' as a sublime method 'for attaining a kind of apotheosis'. Alongside the high philosophy practised by the educated elite, however, there was also a 'demoticized' version available to the students of Hermes Trismegistus. Hermetists aimed to return to God through spiritual awakening under the guidance of an experienced teacher in a manner that dispensed with the need for serious philosophical study. Christian writers do not refer to Hermetic texts until the fourth century. But the verb *θεοποιέω* in a spiritual context is first attested in Clement of Alexandria and the Hermetic corpus more or less simultaneously. Perhaps this is not a coincidence.

If we leave aside later exegesis, there is no evidence of deification in the Old Testament. But the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures was the product of Rabbinic Judaism, the successor to only one of the forms of Judaism which flourished at the time when Christian convictions were taking shape. Of the other forms, the Hellenistic and Enochic were particularly influential and made fundamental contributions to the development of the doctrine of deification.

A Jewish idea of blessed immortality is first encountered in Hellenistic Judaism. The author of the Book of Wisdom is the first Jewish writer to conceive of human fulfilment in terms of the destiny of the immortal soul.

This approach is taken much further by Philo of Alexandria with the help of Platonism. Philo identifies four different ways in which the soul ascends to God. The first is the religious, when the soul abandons idolatry and turns to the true faith; the second is the philosophical, raising the mind from sensible to intelligible objects of contemplation; the third is the ethical, for the virtues confer immortality by making the soul like God; and the fourth is the mystical, enabling the true philosopher to go out of himself and come as close to the divine as a human being can in so far as he has become pure *nous*. Moses was such a man. As an embodiment of wisdom, he occupied a mediating position between God and man. But even he can be called a god only figuratively in the sense that he came to share in the divine attributes of incorporeality and immortality.

Enochic Judaism is less accessible to us today but may be studied in the earlier parts of 1 Enoch and in the writings of the breakaway Essene sect that established itself at Qumran. This form of Judaism also had a doctrine of a transcendent life beyond the grave that had developed independently of Hellenism. The righteous were predestined to transcend death and be promoted to a community of life with the angels. The leader of the Qumran community was a new Moses who would lead his fellow sectaries to the fulfilment of the angelic life, which was to be identified with the life of the 'gods' of the psalmist's heavenly court. This divine life could already be anticipated in the liturgical worship of Qumran.

Even Rabbinic Judaism had its own version of deification. Merkabah mysticism—a spiritual approach that grew out of meditation on Ezekiel's vision of the throne-chariot of God—offered a rich alternative, expressed in anthropomorphic terms, to the intellectualizing Platonic version of the ascent to God. Even more important, from the Christian point of view, was the Rabbinic exegesis of Psalm 82: 6. The teaching that the 'gods' of the psalm were those who had won immortality through the faithful observance of the Torah was, in its Christian form, to exercise a decisive influence on the development of the doctrine of deification.

Did Paul have an idea of deification? He uses various expressions for participatory union—'in Christ', 'with Christ', 'Christ in us', 'sons of God', and so on, but does not isolate 'participation' for special consideration. Moreover, these expressions are images. 'Deification' as a technical term only emerged later when Paul's metaphorical images were re-expressed in conceptual language. The same may be said with regard to the Johannine writings, which reveal an approach to participatory union with Christ not unlike that of Paul.

Among Christian authors contemporary with the last New Testament writers, only Ignatius of Antioch takes up the theme of participatory union. He does not use the terminology of deification but prepares the way for it by speaking of Christ as God. If participation in Christ is participation in God,

it will not be long before the Christian who is christified will be said to be deified.

The earliest explicit discussion of deification in a Christian writer arose from a consideration of Psalm 82: 6. Who is it that Scripture is addressing as gods? In around 160 Justin Martyr, drawing on the Rabbinic exegesis already mentioned, put forward the view that as the people of Christ were the new Israel, the gods were those who were obedient to Christ. Justin's younger contemporary, Irenaeus of Lyons, went on to draw out the implications of the conjunction of 'gods' with 'sons' and claim that the gods were the baptized. Through baptism they had recovered their lost likeness to God and therefore had come to participate in the divine life which that likeness entailed. God had come to dwell within them, making them sons of God and gods. This status was not secure, for it was vulnerable to loss through sin—we are gods but can die like men, according to the next verse of the Psalm—but nevertheless the fundamental transition from death to life, from mortality to immortality, had been made, enabling the baptized to be called 'gods'.

Towards the end of the century Clement of Alexandria also taught that the gods are those whom God has adopted through baptism. But alongside this he brought in a new philosophical dimension. The 'gods' are at the same time those 'who have detached themselves as far as possible from everything human' (*Strom.* 2. 125. 5). Through mastery of the passions and the contemplation of intelligibles they have transcended their corporeal state and come to participate in the divine attributes themselves. Clement links these two approaches, the ecclesiastical and the philosophical, through his teaching on the attainment of the divine likeness, which, although requiring intellectual effort, is at its deepest level 'the restoration to perfect adoption through the Son' (*Strom.* 2. 134. 2). Origen was also interested in the philosophical ascent of the soul to God but in a different way from Clement. Deification for him was not the perfection of the Christian Gnostic through ethical purification but the participation of the rational creature, through the operation of the Son and the Holy Spirit, in a dynamic divinity that derives ultimately from the Father. His emphasis was less on ethics, though it was by no means neglected, than on the nature of the dynamic relationship which connects the contingent with the self-existent. Life, goodness, and immortality are attributes which do not originate in the contingent order but belong properly to the Father alone. The rational creature is deified as these attributes are progressively communicated to it through its responding to the active reaching-out of the second and third Persons of the Trinity. Athanasius took this aspect of the dynamic participation in God further. But because his approach to God was more apophatic than that of Origen, it was only possible in his view for human beings to participate directly in the deified flesh of the incarnate Logos. Through participation in the body of Christ

believers participate in the divinity with which that body was endowed, which leads them to participate in incorruption and immortality, and ultimately in the resurrected life and eschatological fulfilment of heaven.

The Cappadocians took the doctrine of deification from the Alexandrians and adapted it to a Platonizing understanding of Christianity as the attainment of likeness to God so far as was possible for human nature. Only the body of Christ, the ensouled flesh which the Logos assumed, is deified in the sense of being 'mingled' with the divine. Human beings are not deified in accordance with a realistic approach, the emphasis being as much on the ascent of the soul to God as on the transformation of the believer through baptism. This is because of the centrality of the concept of imitation: Christianity is essentially the imitation of the incarnate life of Christ, who deified the body which he assumed in order to enable us to return to the likeness we have lost. But such imitation is not simply external. Although it consists largely in overcoming the passions and freeing the soul from the constraints of corporeal life, it is also a putting on of Christ in baptism. We imitate God through the practice of virtue; we also imitate him by clothing ourselves in Christ. But we can never become gods in the proper sense; that is to say, we can never bridge the gap between the contingent and the self-existent orders of reality. For the Cappadocians, deification never went beyond a figure of speech. Gregory of Nazianzus made extensive use of it in his discussion of the Christian life. Gregory of Nyssa, by contrast, while accepting it in the case of the physical body of Christ and, by extension, of the bread of the Eucharist, was unwilling to apply it to the believer.

The fifth century marks the beginning of new developments. The Alexandrian theological tradition came to full maturity with Cyril, who developed his ideas on deification in the context of his polemics against Judaism, Apollinarianism, and Nestorianism. The technical terminology of deification became problematic for him even before his struggle with Nestorius. He uses it in those of his early works that are heavily influenced by Athanasius but subsequently drops it. In its place 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1: 4) comes to the fore for the first time. This Petrine phrase, used previously (but very sparingly) only by Origen, Athanasius, and Theophilus of Alexandria is quoted or alluded to by Cyril with great frequency. In Cyril's usage *physis*, or nature, seems to have a more dynamic sense than *ousia*, or substance, representing not the divine essence but that aspect of the divine which is communicable to humanity. Accordingly, the deification of human beings is seen less in terms of an Athanasian transformation of the flesh than as a recovery of the divine likeness in our inner life. In Cyril's scheme, in which the moral life and the reception of the sacraments are well integrated for the first time, participation in the divine nature implies our regaining of the divine image or likeness, which in turn finds expression in our sanctification, our filiation, and our attainment of incorruptibility.

Deification entered the Byzantine tradition, however, not through Cyril but through Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor. Theosis for Dionysius was primarily the attaining of unity and likeness. In his treatment of deification he took his language and his conceptions from both Gregory of Nazianzus and the Neoplatonist Proclus, combining Gregory's ascent of the soul with Proclus' thrust towards unity. Deification is the condition of the saved, which begins with baptism and is nurtured by participation in the holy *synaxis*, by reception of the Eucharist, by opening the mind to divine illumination. For Maximus it was not the problem of oneness and multiplicity that was central, but how a mortal human being can participate in a transcendent God. He took up the Gregorian and Dionysian approach but supplied a major corrective, for Dionysius has little to say about the Incarnation. In Maximus God is operative in the world through his divine energies. By virtue of the Incarnation the believer can participate in these. Theosis is God's gift of himself through his energies. On analogy with Maximus' christology, in the believer the human and the divine interpenetrate without confusion. The eschatological fulfilment of this deification is summed up in the following definition: 'Theosis, briefly, is the encompassing and fulfilment of all times and ages, and of all that exists in either' (*Var. Cent.* 4. 19; trans. Palmer, Sherrard, and Ware).

In summary, until the end of the fourth century the metaphor of deification develops along two distinct lines: on the one hand, the transformation of humanity in principle as a consequence of the Incarnation; on the other, the ascent of the soul through the practice of virtue. The former, broadly characteristic of Justin, Irenaeus, Origen, and Athanasius, is based on St Paul's teaching on incorporation into Christ through baptism and implies a realistic approach to deification. The latter, typical of Clement and the Cappadocians, is fundamentally Platonic and implies a philosophical or ethical approach. By the end of the fourth century the realistic and philosophical strands begin to converge. In Cyril the realistic approach becomes more spiritualized through the use he makes of 2 Peter 1: 4; in Maximus the philosophical approach comes to be focused more on ontological concerns under the influence of his post-Chalcedonian christology.

The Antiochene fathers are different. They speak of men as gods only by title or analogy. When the Antiochenes are compared with the Alexandrians, the correlation between deification and christology becomes clear, the contrast between the metaphysical union of the Alexandrians and the moral union of the Antiochenes in their christology being reflected in their respective attitudes to deification. For the Alexandrians the transformation of the flesh by the Word is mirrored in the transformation of the believer by Christ. For the Antiochenes the deliberate and willed nature of the union of the human and the divine in Christ finds its counterpart in the moral struggle that human beings need to experience before they can attain perfection. Just

as without Platonism there is no philosophical approach to deification, so without a substantialist background of thought in christology there is no basis for a realistic approach.

Through Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor deification became established in the Byzantine monastic tradition as the goal of the spiritual life. The two most influential teachers of this final phase, Symeon the New Theologian of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries and Gregory Palamas of the fourteenth, emphasized the experiential side of deification. The controversies in which Palamas became involved were the result of his conviction that the hesychast was transfigured both spiritually and physically by the immediate vision, in prayer, of the divine light. The distinction between the imparticipable essence of God and his participable energies was passionately defended by Palamas as the theoretical basis of a strongly realistic view of participation in the divine. In the last phase of the controversy deification as a merely nominal or analogous term was expressly excluded. It was in this form that deification was handed on to the Orthodox Church of today.

Deification in the Graeco-Roman World

1. The Origins of Deification

When Paul and Barnabas were visiting Lystra in the province of Galatia, their healing of a man who had been a lifelong cripple provoked an enthusiastic response from the local population: ‘When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, because he was the chief speaker, they called Hermes. And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was in front of the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the people’ (Acts 14: 11–13). Despite the scepticism of biblical scholars, historians have detected in this story the ring of authenticity (Lane Fox 1986: 99–100). Pagans could provoke the same reaction; Apollonius of Tyana did so on several occasions, according to Philostratus (*V. Apoll.* 4. 31; 5. 24). The divine and human worlds were not separated by an impenetrable barrier. Ordinary people met the gods in their dreams or as apparitions in their sleep; natural disasters were unexpected visitations of divine power. If someone gave evidence of superhuman power, it was natural to assume that he must really be a god in disguise.

Evidence of superhuman power could suggest a human being who had joined the gods as well as a god in human form. This is why Paul was credited with divine power in Malta when he was bitten by a viper without coming to any harm (Acts 28: 1–6) or why Apollonius of Tyana was worshipped as a god at Ephesus for having banished the plague (Philostr. *V. Apoll.* 7. 21). The awarding of divine honours to human beings was relatively new. Originally the human recipients of cult were clearly distinguished from the gods. We know of over eighty historical persons who were worshipped in the Greek world from classical times to the Roman period (Farnell 1921: 420–6). These subjects of heroic cult were the founders of cities, soldiers killed in the wars against the Persians, statesmen, legislators, athletes, poets, and philosophers—in short, anyone who was a benefactor of his city-state

and therefore deserved the gratitude of his fellow citizens. The first to have received a specifically divine cult was Lysander, whose victories at the end of the Peloponnesian War had raised him to a position of unprecedented power (Plutarch, *Lysander* 18. 4; Habicht 1970: 3–6, 243–4). Divine honours were not the result of the devaluation of heroic honours, as was formerly thought. They arose through the need, as S. R. F. Price has argued, ‘to come to terms with a new kind of power’ (1984*b*: 29). The power exercised by the Hellenistic kings after Alexander was of a completely new order. It could no longer be accommodated within the legal and social structure of the city-state. Divine cult was rendered to the ruler on analogy with the cult rendered to the gods in order to give expression to the new relationship of power which had come to exist between the ruler and the cities. We do not need to appeal to ‘oriental influences’ to account for the voting of divine honours to their rulers by citizens of Hellenistic cities. ‘The cults of the gods were the one model that was available to them for the representation of a power on whom the city was dependent which was external and yet still Greek’ (Price 1984*b*: 30).

The divine cult rendered to Hellenistic rulers probably inspired Euhemerus (fl. 300 BCE) to suggest in his travel romance, the *Sacred History*, that all the gods of popular worship had once been rulers or heroes. This view was taken up by Diodorus Siculus, who explains in his *World History*, written in Alexandria between 60 and 30 BCE, how Ouranos, the inventor of urban life, was accorded immortal honours after his death because the accurate way in which he predicted the movements of the heavenly bodies convinced his subjects that he ‘partook of the nature of the gods’ (3. 57. 2). Euhemerism attained its greatest influence in the second and third centuries. Sextus Empiricus (fl. 200 CE) says approvingly that ‘Euhemerus declared that those considered gods were certain men of power, which is why they were deified by the rest and reputed to be gods’ (*Adv. Math.* 9. 51). He gives the Stoic sage as an example of a man who ‘was in all respects considered a god because he never expressed a mere opinion’ (*Adv. Math.* 7. 423). Sextus’ Christian contemporary, Clement of Alexandria, also found Euhemerism helpful. Unlike the Apologists, he does not see why Euhemerus and other rationalists should be regarded as atheists, for even if they did not see the full truth at least they stripped away error, leaving the field clear for the one supreme God who is the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. All the gods that are not the personifications of inanimate forces or qualities, he insists, had once been men (*Prot.* 2. 29. 1; 2. 38. 1). This is proved by the existence of their tombs, such as those of Ares, Hephaestus, and Asclepius, by the human passions characteristic of their lives, and by the relative newness of their worship. Among recently invented gods Clement lists Eros, Serapis, Demetrius, and Antinous (*Prot.* 3. 44. 2; 4. 48. 1–6; 4. 49. 1–2; 4. 54. 6). The many benefactors who have been accorded divine status include the Buddha,

whom the Indians 'have honoured as a god on account of his great sanctity' (*Strom.* 1. 71. 6). Clement's lead is followed by Origen and Athanasius, who adopt the same Euhemeristic perspective.¹

Clement not only accounts for pagan religion in terms of deification but is the first to speak of the deification of the Christian. G. M. Schnurr has noted in a suggestive article that Christian deification comes to the fore after Greek myth language has become secularized: 'Without giving any ontological sanction to the old myths, which were already secularized, mythological categories can provide a descriptive shorthand for the end and goal of Christian life' (1969: 103). In Clement's case it was more precisely the secularization implicit in Euhemerism that enabled him to appropriate the language of deification and put it to Christian use without at the same time taking over the content of pagan religion. If those whom the pagans called gods had been men who were able to achieve immortality, at least in the popular estimation, how much better a claim to the title had perfected Christians, who enjoyed a direct relationship with the source of immortality, Jesus Christ.

2. The Ruler-Cult

In the imperial period the men of power par excellence were the emperors. The emperor was the Roman *paterfamilias* writ large: the holders of the chief 'secretarial' posts were his freedmen; his subjects were his extended family over whom, like any *paterfamilias*, he had the power of life and death. Although in the provinces his rule was mediated by the local *ordo*, the notables who ran the cities as autonomous units, on occasion whole communities could feel his wrath, as Alexandria did in 215 with Caracalla or in 298 with Diocletian. On the latter occasion the emperor swore to punish the rebellious Alexandrians by plunging the city in blood up to his horse's knees. When the animal stumbled on entering the city, the citizens in their gratitude honoured it with a statue (Bowman 1996: 45). For the inhabitants of the empire the emperor was a figure of absolute power on a colossal scale. Moreover, he was present everywhere through his portrait, to which honour had to be paid as if to the emperor in person. The office of a priest of the imperial cult was one of the most prestigious to which a local notable could aspire. And the *sebasteia*, the temples of the cult, occupied the most prominent sites in the cities. The ruler-cult was not simply a fiction or a formality. For his Greek-speaking subjects in particular, the emperor was a living god who stirred feelings of fear, gratitude, and devotion.

¹ Origen: *Hom. Jer.* 5. 3, GCS iii. 33. 21; *C. Cels.* 4. 59, GCS i. 331. 19; Athanasius: *CG* 9. 34-42, Thomson 24; *De Inc.* 49. 4-11, Thomson 256-8.

The origins of the imperial cult go back to the practices of the Hellenistic kingdoms. Since the time of the *diadochoi* the peoples of the Greek East had been accustomed to giving their rulers divine honours. The most extravagant of these, the honours awarded to Demetrius Poliorcetes at Athens, are also the most Greek (Scott 1928: 164–6). Demetrius was honoured as incarnate power, as present and manifest might at the service of the Athenian state. An insight into popular sentiment is provided by the ithyphallic song with which the Athenians greeted him in 290 BCE when he brought home his bride Lanassa from Sicily:

Other gods are either far away,
or they have no ears,
or they do not exist, or pay no attention to
us, not in the least;
but you we see before us,
not made of wood or stone but real.
(Athenaeus, *Deipnosoph.* 6. 253c)

Once Demetrius' power began to wane, however, the Athenians turned against him and all his divine honours evaporated overnight. His divinity belonged to his role, not his person.

The Ptolemaic version of the ruler-cult was similarly Greek in inspiration but was shaped in a distinctive manner by the Egyptian milieu in which it developed, that is to say, by a centrally organized 'state church' and the tradition of regarding the dead pharaoh as an Osiris.² Ptolemy I did nothing more than institute a cult of Alexander. The Ptolemaic dynastic cult dates from 271 BCE when images of Ptolemy II and Arsinoe were incorporated into the temple of Alexander next to the *sema* as the Brother and Sister Gods. On Arsinoe's death in July 270, her statue in the form of a ram was placed in every temple in Egypt, an unprecedented distinction indicative both of the awe in which Arsinoe was held in her lifetime and of the control which Ptolemy II had acquired over temple worship. It is this remarkable development that Callimachus celebrates in his poem *The Deification of Arsinoe*. The cult of Arsinoe became immensely popular, helped no doubt by her assimilation to Isis and Aphrodite, and before long had spread to the Aegean islands and beyond.

The state cult of the next royal couple, Ptolemy III and Berenice, the Benefactor Gods, did not follow immediately upon their accession. It seems to have been added to the cults of Alexander and the Brother and Sister Gods after Ptolemy's victorious return from his Syrian campaign in 241 (Bevan 1927: 207–8). Three years later the Benefactor Gods, together with their recently deceased daughter Berenice, were incorporated by a formal

² Nock 1930: 16; Cerfaux and Tondriau 1957: 209. On the Pharaonic ruler-cult see Morenz 1973: 36–41.

assembly of the entire priesthood of Egypt into all the temples of the country, as is recorded by the Canopus Decree of March 238 BCE.³ This decree, which records the first dated instances of ἀποθέωσις and ἐκθέωσις, reveals an interesting blend of Greek and Egyptian elements. The assumption that death for the princess is a transition to the gods, the ceremonies of deification to be carried out on analogy with the deification of Apis and Mnevis, and the form of the prescribed annual festival are clearly Egyptian. On the other hand, the awarding of divine honours to the rulers in gratitude for their achievements, the voting of a decree of deification by an assembly (in this case of priests rather than of citizens), the form of the decree, and the sharing of a temple with a high god are all fundamentally Greek.

The Egyptian precedent was followed in Syria but developed there along rather different lines (Bikerman 1938: 256–7). Syria, unlike Egypt, had no state religion. Each autonomous city therefore honoured the sovereign in its own way. By the end of the third century a state-organized dynastic cult had been initiated by Antiochus III (Welles 1934: no. 36; Bikerman 1938: 247), but this had no relation to the municipal cults, which maintained an independent existence. In the Hellenistic period there were thus two kinds of royal cult, that of the living ruler, which was fundamentally a municipal cult by which the citizens sought to represent to themselves the majesty of the royal power, and that of the dynasty, which was initiated by the rulers themselves and sought to overcome the threats to security and stability inherent in the mortality of kings. Both these forms were to prove useful under the Roman empire.

The Roman imperial cult was not simply a continuation of the Hellenistic royal cult.⁴ Indeed, just as the cult of Demetrius Poliorcetes had ceased when he fell from power, so the dynastic cults came to an end along with the dynasties they sustained. There is, however, a connection between the Hellenistic and Roman forms of the cult. The same motivation that had prompted the one also gave rise to the other, the Greeks adapting their traditional cults as they ‘attempted to represent to themselves first the Hellenistic kings and then the power of Rome’ (Price 1984*b*: 47).

This power began to be experienced by the Greeks at the end of the third century BCE. Their response was to award temples and cult to the goddess Roma, the people of Rome, and individual Roman officials who had impressed them with their authority and just administration.⁵ The cults of individuals died away in due course to be replaced by the cult of the

³ *OGI* 56. There are four surviving exemplars of the decree, which was set up in temple precincts in Greek, Egyptian (i.e. hieroglyphics), and demotic. The text is given in translation in Bevan 1927: 208; and Bowman 1996: 169–70.

⁴ For the history of the ruler-cult in the Roman empire see Nock 1928, 1930, and 1957; Charlesworth 1935 and 1939; Cerfaux and Tondriau 1957; and esp. Price 1984*b*.

⁵ The earliest was probably Marcellus, who received a cult at Syracuse in 212 BCE (Cicero, *Vér.* 2. 51).

emperors. Julius Caesar himself took active steps to promote his cult, building a Caesareum at Alexandria and starting another at Antioch (Weinstock 1971: 296–9), and under Augustus the imperial cult rapidly acquired its permanent characteristics (Price 1984*b*: 53–77).

After the deification of Julius Caesar by the Senate in 42 BCE, Octavian, as he then was, became known as *divi filius*. As his power grew so did the honours accorded to him. In 30 BCE, after his victory at Actium, the Senate decreed that libations should be offered to his genius. In 27 BCE he received from the Senate the title of Augustus (*Sebastos*), which though not divine gave him the aura of divinity, and the month Sextilis was renamed after him. Moreover, the reorganization of the city into 265 wards (*vici*) in 12 to 7 BCE enabled him to introduce his genius among the *Lares compitales* of each ward. But this was as far as the cult of the living ruler went in the capital. Constitutionally the position of Augustus and his successors was different from that of the Hellenistic kings. The Roman *princeps* was in theory the elected leading citizen of the empire. Such was Augustus' skill in endowing his unique position with the appearance of constitutional legality that in Rome itself any of the trappings of a Hellenistic monarch, such as temples and cult, would have been out of place. On the provincial level, however, steps were taken by Augustus to foster the ruler-cult through the provincial assemblies. The oldest of these was the Assembly of the Greeks of Asia, an institution which had been inherited from the Attalids. As a consultative council which met annually, it had from Hellenistic times included among its duties the regulation of cult and the awarding of honours to benefactors. It was found to be a useful means of communication between Rome and the local population which could report on the activities of bad governors, but its religious duties soon became the most important ones. In 29 BCE the assembly was entrusted with the cult of Augustus and Roma at Pergamon (Magie 1950: 447–9; Price 1984*b*: 56). Besides instituting a sacrifice, it also announced a prize for the person who could propose the greatest honours for the god (i.e. Augustus). Roman citizens had separate arrangements. They worshipped Roma and Divus Julius in their own temple at Ephesus (Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 51. 20; cf. Tacitus, *Ann.* 4. 37). The Greek emphasis, however, as in earlier times was on the living ruler. Other provinces that had also been Hellenistic kingdoms, such as Bithynia, also had assemblies and these too were authorized to worship Augustus in conjunction with Roma. Such an institution was too useful not to be transferred to the West. By the time of the Flavians every province with the exception of Egypt had its *concilium*. The native Egyptians, of course, already worshipped the emperor as their pharaoh.⁶

⁶ Reliefs portrayed the reigning emperor as pharaoh engaged in traditional Egyptian rituals. See Bowman 1996: 168–70.

On the municipal level the imperial cult was purely a matter for local initiative. An interesting insight is provided by an inscription from Mytilene which records one of the first uses of the verb *θεοποιέω* (*OGI* 456; cf. Price 1980: esp. 34–5). The citizens of Mytilene were happy to assimilate Augustus as closely as possible to Zeus. They decreed that the prizes at the quadrennial games in honour of Augustus should be the same as those specified for games in honour of Zeus, and also that a monthly sacrifice should be made to Augustus at which the animals should be distinguished from those offered to Zeus only by the fact that they should be *ἑφελιομένοι*, which probably means ‘with a spot on the brow’ (i.e. with a small differentiation from animals considered suitable for sacrifice to a high god). Finally they decreed that ‘if anything more distinguished than these [honours] should be discovered in later times, the zeal and piety of the city will not fail to carry out anything that can deify him further’. There is no mistaking the profound sense of gratitude that people felt towards Augustus. While there are some elements of continuity with the past, there is a new dimension of universality. The benefits that Augustus had brought to the whole Mediterranean world merited his assimilation to Zeus himself.

When Augustus died in 14 CE, the Senate voted him divine honours, declaring him a *divus* as they had done with Julius Caesar. This time the comet that had accompanied Caesar’s funeral could not be expected, so at the funeral an eagle was released from the pyre to represent the soul soaring to the heavens. Subsequently the eagle became a regular feature of the *consecratio*. The funeral was an important rite in Rome which initiated the cult of the *divus*.⁷ The Greek East, by contrast, had no special ceremony to mark an imperial funeral but focused its attention on the living ruler. Unlike the Italians, the Greeks did not distinguish between *deus* and *divus*. The *divus* was a *theos* like the living ruler. In the Latin West there was a contrast in terminology between the living emperor and a deceased predecessor, and between such a deceased predecessor and the high gods, that was absent in the East.

The pattern established by Augustus proved enduring. The only significant change before the reign of Constantine was brought about by Domitian. This emperor began his reign in a constitutional way, refusing the title *dominus* and preferring *princeps*. Then in 85/6 there occurred a change of policy. From that year Domitian wished to be addressed as *dominus* and *deus*. This did not mark the onset of megalomania but was a deliberate decision to have the state fully represented in the emperor’s person. The living emperor was henceforth to be exalted and worshipped even in Rome as a focus of unity and loyalty (Scott 1936: 103–10).

The characteristics of the Roman imperial cult may therefore be summed up as follows: it was popular, being not only a creation of Augustus but also a

⁷ On the imperial funerary ceremony and Christian attitudes towards it see MacCormack 1981: 93–144.

response to initiatives from below; it was based on the traditional way the Greeks had of defining their relationship to royal power; and it aroused strong feelings of devotion. In illustration of this one may compare the ithyphallic song sung for Demetrius (quoted above) with a panegyric celebrating Diocletian's crossing of the Alps in 291:

When you were seen more closely . . . altars were lit, incense was burned. People did not invoke gods whom they knew from hearsay, but Jupiter close at hand, visible and present: they adored Hercules, not a stranger but the emperor himself. (*Panegyrici Latini* iii (11) 10)

Although this is the composition of a court orator, we are probably not wrong in assuming that it reflects popular feeling. Like the Athenians six centuries previously, the citizens of the Roman empire saw their ruler as the visible manifestation of divine power.

3. Jewish and Christian Attitudes to the Ruler-Cult

It is commonly assumed that there was a dual attitude towards the ruler-cult, the mass of people taking it at face value, while the educated elite regarded it with a certain amount of scepticism (Bowersock 1973; Price 1984b: 114–17). The evidence for this lies in the critical comments of moralists such as Plutarch, Seneca's satirical *Apocolocyntosis*, Vespasian's wry deathbed remark, 'Vae, puto deus fio' ('Oh dear, I think I'm becoming a god'), and the absence of treatises on the significance of the cult. Such evidence, however, may be interpreted differently. Plutarch objected not to the imperial cult itself but to the grandiose titles of Hellenistic kings. Power, along with incorruption and virtue, was one of the divine characteristics in which a human being could participate. But of the three it occupied the lowest rank. It was when power went with moral attainment that a human being could most readily be described as divine. Insofar as these remarks may be applied to the imperial cult, they urge emperors to become worthy of devotion in their moral lives as well as in their exercise of power (Plutarch, *Aristides* 6). Seneca's *apocolocyntosis* (or 'pumpkinification') of Claudius reflects personal malice towards the emperor rather than cynicism with regard to the imperial funerary ceremonies. Vespasian's remark was probably an expression of modesty or may just have been a nervous joke.⁸ Nor is the absence of technical treatises significant, for they would only have been needed to explain the cult to outsiders. Herodian's account of the apotheosis of emperors for a Greek readership (c.240) demonstrates this, for he dwells precisely on that aspect of

⁸ Suetonius (*Vespasian* 23. 4) takes it to have been a joke although he himself documents Vespasian's unassuming manner and simplicity of life.

the cult which was not known in the Greek East, the solemn funeral of the deceased emperor (*History* 4. 2).

The assumption that the educated elite formed a superior level of society with a more 'rational' approach to such matters as the ruler-cult is anachronistic. The educated elite were not outsiders, nor were they alienated from the imperial cult through adherence to a sceptical attitude. As Price says, we cannot determine whether the symbols of the cult evoked different responses in the educated and the uneducated, but we can say with confidence that both participated in the cult with equal enthusiasm (1984*b*: 116–17). Educated outsiders, on the other hand, notably Jews and Christians, may be thought to have experienced some difficulty. In fact they were able to accommodate the imperial cult with relative ease. The Jews did not find a certain degree of participation in it problematic except in times of particular stress. There were two reasons for this. First, unlike the Christians, the Jews were respected as a people with an old and venerable religion, and therefore were not coerced into offering sacrifices to the gods. Nor were they perceived to be especially disloyal, in spite of the bitter Jewish wars of the first and second centuries. Indeed, there is evidence that in the third century Jews played a prominent part in the civic life of a number of Greek cities (Lane Fox 1986: 429–30). Secondly, until the destruction of Jerusalem, animal sacrifice played an important part in Jewish religious practice, a part which was readily intelligible to the pagans and could accommodate the imperial cult up to a point. Sacrifices could be offered 'on behalf of' the emperor rather than directly to him. This accommodation goes back to Hellenistic Alexandria, where inscriptions have been found recording the dedications of synagogues 'on behalf of' the reigning Ptolemy (Fraser 1972: i. 283, 298–9).

Philo's comments on the imperial cult illustrate these points. In 39 CE he was chosen by the Jewish community of Alexandria to travel with an embassy to Rome in order to make representations against Gaius' proposal to set up a statue of himself in the Temple at Jerusalem. The Jews had a record of assisting the spread of Roman power in the eastern Mediterranean. In keeping with this, Philo remarked in the presence of the emperor that the Jewish Temple had been the first to offer sacrifices on behalf of Gaius' rule. He pointed out, furthermore, that since Gaius' accession there had been two further occasions when sacrifices had been offered, once in thanksgiving for his escape from the plague, and again for victory in his German war (*Leg. ad Gaium* 45, 356). In the *In Flaccum* he stresses the law-abiding nature of the Jewish community and reports a speech in which the Jews ask the authorities how they are going to show their religious veneration for the imperial house if the synagogues are destroyed, leaving them with no place or means for paying their homage (*In Flac.* 49). The normal Jewish attitude was one of loyalty and accommodation. Only under pressure does

Philo insist on the merely human nature of the emperor in comparison with the one God who is 'the Father and Maker of the world'.

The apparent disloyalty of Christians, on the other hand, attracted the attention of the authorities early on. In response the Apologists took pains to explain the Christian attitude and protest their loyalty. Justin (c. 150) is the first of several Christian authors to discuss the cult, but the only one to venture any criticism of the apotheosis of deceased emperors: 'And what shall we say of the emperors who when they die among yourselves are always deemed worthy of deification (*ἀεὶ ἀπαθανατίζεσθαι ἀξιούντες*) and you produce someone who swears that he has seen the cremated Caesar ascending from the pyre to heaven?' (1 *Apol.* 21). Justin is here generalizing for polemical effect. Not all the emperors had been deified after death; Gaius, Nero, and Domitian had suffered *damnatio*. Nor, after the funeral of Augustus, did someone swear every time that he had seen the soul of the dead Caesar rise to heaven. But it is not the details he is objecting to; it is the whole notion that just because men have been emperors they could be declared by rescript to have transcended the limitations of their human status (1 *Apol.* 55). The emperors, insists Justin, were simply men like everyone else: 'they died the death common to all' (1 *Apol.* 18).

These are bold comments but they echo contemporary, and particularly Middle Platonist, sentiments. Plutarch had rejected the bodily translation to heaven of Romulus and others because 'this is to ascribe divinity to the mortal features of human nature as well as the divine' (*Romulus* 28. 4–6). Philo, combining his Platonism with his Jewish piety, had declared with reference to Gaius' self-deification that nothing could have been more offensive than 'when the created and corruptible nature of man was made to appear uncreated and incorruptible by a deification which our nation judged to be the most grievous impiety, since sooner could God change into a man than man into a god' (*Leg. ad Gaium* 16, 188; trans. Colson, LCL). Even a pagan historian, Justin's younger contemporary, Dio Cassius, could assert that it was impossible for a man to become a god merely through a show of hands (*History* 52. 35. 5). Yet all these could admit that virtue deifies. Justin himself goes on to use *ἀπαθανατίζομαι* for 'those who have lived a holy and virtuous life close to God', contrasting the immortality conferred by decree of the Senate with that won by virtue (1 *Apol.* 21).

In their attitude to the living emperor the Christian Apologists follow the Jews. Justin says that they acknowledge his authority and pray for him (cf. Tit. 3: 1; 1 Tim. 2: 2) but they will not worship him: 'We worship God alone' (1 *Apol.* 17). The later Apologists repeat Justin's views. His pupil Tatian says that he pays the taxes which the emperor imposes but he will honour him only as a human being (*Orat.* 4. 1; cf. 1 Pet. 2: 7). Athenagoras assures Marcus Aurelius that Christians pray for his reign, for the peaceful succession of the imperial power from father to son, and for the extension of the imperial

authority (*Legat.* 37. 2). Theophilus says that he will pay honour to the emperor not by worshipping him but by praying for him. The emperor is a man appointed by God and entrusted with a stewardship, but worship must be given to God alone (*Ad Aut.* 1. 11).

Although the attitude of the early Christians was similar to that of the Jews, the newness of their sect did not entitle them to the same respect from the Roman authorities. The imperial cult, however, did not play an important role in the persecution and martyrdom of Christians (Beaujeu 1973; Millar 1973; Price 1984*b*: 220–2). In times of crisis arising from natural or political disasters it was the anger of the gods that was held to blame and the ‘atheism’ of Christians that was believed to have provoked it. When Christians refused to sacrifice to the gods, sacrifice to the emperor was often offered by the judge as an easy way out: ‘at least’ sacrifice to the emperor, defendants were told. The authorities simply wanted a gesture of respect for tradition and of loyalty to the emperor (Lane Fox 1986: 425–6). The imperial cult itself was not the main issue. Indeed, in the Eastern empire it survived the official adoption of Christianity with only the most essential modifications. Under Constantine temple and cult were allowed to continue provided there were no sacrifices. Theodosius finally closed the temples in 392 but the *consecratio* went on for much longer (Bowersock 1982; MacCormack 1981: esp. 121–32). None of these developments provoked any expressions of outrage from Christian writers. Insofar as they comment on them at all it is with a voice scarcely distinguishable from that of educated pagans. Writing in about 320, Athanasius objects to the *consecratio*, in a manner reminiscent of Dio Cassius as much as Justin Martyr, on the grounds that the Senate has no authority to deify when its members are merely human: ‘those who make gods should themselves be gods’ (*CG*9, Thomson 27). In an oration delivered towards the end of 380 Gregory of Nazianzus apostrophizes the Christian emperors, telling them like Plutarch before him to become gods to those under them by exhibiting virtue and beneficence (*Or.* 36. 11; cf. Winslow 1979: 184–5). Christian intellectuals by the fourth century were no longer outsiders.

4. The ‘Democratization’ of the Ruler’s Apotheosis

The ruler-cult, giving expression as it did to a popular religious sentiment, came to be very widely disseminated. It is therefore not surprising in an era of social mobility and change to find it affected by a process of ‘democratization’. What was originally reserved to the emperor and his immediate family, namely, the ascent after death to a divine destiny among the stars, came in the age of the Antonines to be appropriated by the less exalted. The earliest private deification for which we have evidence is that carried out by Cicero of his beloved daughter, Tullia (*Ad Att.* XII. 18. 1, 12. 1, 36. 1). Cicero

was rather self-conscious about the prominence of his daughter's shrine on the Appian Way, but by the second century deification could be taken for granted as following upon death without any implied claim to high social status. Indeed, a number of inscriptions from the Greek cities of Asia Minor use the word *ἀποθέωσις* with reference to ordinary citizens simply as an expression for solemn burial (Keil and von Premerstein 1908: 85. no. 183; Waelkens 1983: 259–307; *CIG* ii. 2831–2).

In Egypt this process of 'democratization' had been going on for many centuries. In the Old Kingdom only the pharaoh, by virtue of his divine office, was ranked with the gods.⁹ During his lifetime his role was to mediate between the divine and the human worlds; on his death he became one with Osiris, the Lord of the Underworld.¹⁰ Gradually the privilege of Osirian burial was appropriated by great officials and eventually by the population at large, at least by those who could afford it, for the required mummification and the provision of the customary funerary goods always remained expensive. By preserving the body intact as an earthly anchor for the *ka* (the life-force) and the *ba* (the soul) and burying it with the proper ritual even the ordinary Egyptian could be assured assimilation to Osiris, who as an ancient vegetation god had himself been raised from the dead. This development is reflected in the evolution of the mortuary texts, the magical formulae that enabled the *ba* to avoid judgement and achieve a satisfactory transition to the next world. In the earliest period they were incised on the chamber walls of the royal tombs and are known as Pyramid Texts. Later, when they no longer applied solely to the king, they were painted on the coffins of private persons, so becoming Coffin Texts. Finally, when Osirian burial became widespread, they were inscribed on papyrus rolls and buried with the mummy, sometimes being inserted into the wrappings themselves, turning thus into Books of the Dead. These texts refuse to accept the finality of death: 'Rise alive,' they proclaim, 'you did not die; rise to life, you did not die' (Morenz 1973: 205). Osiris long before Ptolemaic times could encompass everyone.¹¹

Amongst the most haunting surviving artefacts of the ancient world are the mummy portraits of Roman Egypt. Something of how their subjects perceived themselves and how they conceived of the afterlife can be deduced from the fusion of Roman, Greek, and Egyptian elements in these skilfully rendered images. The clothing, the hairstyles, the techniques of portraiture are Roman, providing striking evidence of the uniformity of culture among

⁹ The one notable exception is Imhotep, author of wisdom literature and architect of the Stepped Pyramid of Djoser, who was raised to the pantheon at some point after his death. Evidence for his cult, however, only dates from the New Kingdom, when he was joined in the pantheon by his fellow architect and scribe, Amenhotep. The cult of both deified sages lasted well into Graeco-Roman times. See further Wildung 1977: 31–110.

¹⁰ Only outstanding kings, however, were the recipients of cult after their death (Wildung 1977: 1–30).

¹¹ On the 'democratization' of Osirian burial and the widening of access to immortality see Morenz 1973: 54–5; Griffiths 1986a: 20–9.

the upper classes of the empire. A number of the mummies in which the portraits are inserted are inscribed with standard Greek funerary valedictions: 'Farewell! Be happy!' (Walker and Bierbrier 1997: no. 32, no. 99). But the religious context is thoroughly Egyptian. Apart from mummification itself (the rhomboid pattern of bandaging intending to recall the mummy of Osiris), the Egyptian Lord of the Underworld is often explicitly represented or invoked. A linen shroud of the Antonine period, for example, shows a young man in Hellenistic dress and pose being guided by a jackal-headed Anubis towards Osiris represented as a mummy (Walker and Bierbrier 1997: no. 105). A beautiful young woman, dressed in the fashionable style of the Trajanic period, carries an inscription across her throat in demotic: 'Eirene, daughter of S . . . May her soul rise before Osiris-Sokar, the Great God, Lord of Abydos, for ever' (Walker and Bierbrier 1997: no. 111). Many of the subjects of these portraits were contemporaries or near-contemporaries of Clement of Alexandria. Whether Greeks of pure descent or Hellenized native Egyptians, they bear witness to the widespread belief in Egypt amongst people of Greek culture and high social standing that after death, like the kings of the past, they would become one with Osiris.

5. The Mystery Cults

Concern for the afterlife, so far as we can tell from funerary art, seems to have been particularly intense in Egypt. Elsewhere in the empire funerary art, as evidence for religious belief, should be used with caution (Veyne 1987: 232–3). Mythological motifs on sarcophagi, for example, with their scenes of voluptuous enjoyment have more to do with dispelling the fear of death than with evoking a bliss beyond the grave. And inscriptions, for all their occasional references to *ἀποθέωσις*, are more concerned to proclaim the status and achievements of the deceased in this life than to make any statement about their fate in the next. A remarkable second-century verse inscription by Titus Flavius Secundus from the mausoleum of the Flavii at Cillium in Roman North Africa brings out well the ambiguities of the Roman attitude to death. Secundus is not sure if the dead still have feelings but he is confident that his father is immortal because of the rectitude of his earthly life and the fact that his mausoleum is more a temple than a memorial. From its pinnacles the dead man can continue to survey the woods and vines of his estate and enjoy the familiar skyline of the mountains.¹² There can be little doubt that most people, as Clement said, 'clinging to the world as certain seaweeds cling to the rocks of the sea', held immortality of little account (*Prot.*

¹² For an English translation with full references see Davies 1999: 221–4. For a general survey of Roman beliefs in the afterlife and their connection with funerary practice see Toynbee 1971.

9. 71; cf. Plato, *Rep.* 611d). Indeed, insouciant statements such as ‘I was not, I was, I am not, I don’t care’—in its Latin form, ‘non fui, fui, non sum, non curo’, often abbreviated simply to N.F.F.N.S.N.C.—were not at all uncommon (Cagnat 1914: 291; cf. Bowman 1996: 187). What, then, are we to make of the mysteries? Did they not offer to initiates from all social classes solace in this life and the hope of a blissful immortality in the next?

Apart from a few autobiographical statements emanating from a tiny cultural elite, the mysteries are the nearest that we can get to a genuinely personal religion in antiquity. Yet the documentary evidence is scanty. Initiates were sworn to secrecy about everything but the preliminaries to the rites. And although profanations occurred from time to time, the vow was well kept. We have only one first-person account of an initiation, the famous narrative of Apuleius of Madaura in Book XI of the *Metamorphoses*, and even that does not reveal the secrets of the climax of the rite. But if the details of what occurred are not known to us, we have ample testimonies to the effects of the rites on initiates. The most celebrated of these is that of Plato, who in the *Phaedrus* compares the philosopher’s joy at the vision of true Being with the elation and sense of liberation that comes to the initiate at the climax of the mystery, the moment of final revelation (250bc).

The mystery to which Plato was referring was that of Eleusis, the oldest and most venerated of them all. Even Socrates bathed with his sacrificial piglet in the Saronic gulf and underwent the other prescribed purifications before being initiated into the mystery in the hall at Eleusis. Many distinguished people followed him over the centuries. Cicero came (*De leg.* 2. 36), so did Plutarch, who speaks of the joy and confusion mixed with hope that initiates experience (*De aud. poet.* 47a). Eleusis retained its power to move and inspire right up to its destruction in 395 CE. Writing in the fifth century, the Neoplatonist Proclus gives us the last testimony to the effects of the rites, which he had received from the daughter of one of the last hierophants:

They cause sympathy of the souls with the ritual in a way that is unintelligible to us, and divine, so that some of the initiands are stricken with panic, being filled with divine awe; others assimilate themselves to the holy symbols, leave their own identity, become at home with the gods and experience divine possession. (*In Remp.* ii. 108. 17–30, cited by Burkert 1987: 113–14)

The experience of initiation is everything. There is no salvation from sin, no theology of death and rebirth, no higher spirituality. The emphasis is always on ‘blessedness’, an intense feeling which carries with it the hope of a better life in the next world.

The other great mystery cult of the classical period, the Dionysiac, was different in many respects from the Eleusinian. It was not attached to a great sanctuary but, in the early days at least, initiation was administered by

itinerant priests and charismatics. Another difference is that it did endow initiates with a group identity, which in Italy drew hostility from outsiders with catastrophic results. In 186 BCE the Roman Bacchanalia were bloodily suppressed by the Roman Senate in an action which cost 6,000 lives. Finally, it had a much more developed doctrine of the afterlife than did the other mysteries. For Bacchic views on the afterlife we have not only literary evidence but inscribed gold leaves from the fourth century BCE that have been found in tombs in southern Italy, Thessaly, and Crete. The oldest, the Hipponion *lamella*, which was discovered in 1969, maps out the journey of the soul after death (Vermaseren 1976; Burkert 1983: 293–5). The initiate is to say to the guardians at the spring flowing from the Lake of Recollection that he is the son of the earth and the starry sky. He will then be allowed to drink and sent along a sacred way to a blessed eternity. Other similar gold leaves from Thurii in southern Italy speak of the dead person as the child of earth and heaven but really of the heavenly race alone. ‘Happy and blessed one,’ he is told, ‘a god you will be instead of a mortal’ (Zuntz 1971: 301. 8).

The overcoming of mortality was also characteristic of Orphism. It has been disputed whether Orphism was any more than a collection of writings attributed to a mythological singer (Linforth 1941: 291–9). Certainly with the appearance of *Orphica* literacy became important for the first time. And this new form of transmission gave rise to a new kind of authority, that of the written text. Plato mentions itinerant priests who ‘produce a bushel of books of Musaeus and Orpheus’ (*Rep.* 364e), which, like medieval pedlars of indulgences, they use to carry out rites for the remission of sins and the deliverance from evils in the next life. Modern scholarship, encouraged by the texts discovered on the gold leaves, is more inclined to see Orphism as a unified spiritual movement akin to that of the Pythagoreans. At its centre lay a distinctive anthropology. The human race was created from the ashes of the Titans, who had been destroyed by Zeus because they had devoured Dionysus, the Divine Child. As a result of its creation from matter that was at once both Dionysian and Titanic, human nature had a dual character. The Titanic element was the body (*σῶμα*) or prison (*σῆμα*) of the soul. The Dionysian element was the soul, the divine spark or *δαίμων* trapped in the body until it could be released through a life of asceticism and purification, or rather, through several lives, for only thus could the soul realize its true divinity and mount upwards never to return.

The Orphics were not an organized cult, but their honouring of Orpheus, the singer of hymns and rescuer of Dionysus’ mother Eurydice from the Underworld, and their belief in the divine destiny of their immortal *δαίμονες* gave them a distinct group identity. The ‘Pythagoreans’ as described by Plato were a similar group distinguished by their devotion to Apollo rather than Dionysus, but holding the same views on immortality and the transmigration of the soul. Unlike the Orphics the Pythagoreans were

founded by a historical figure whom later generations revered as a 'divine man' (*θεῖος ἀνὴρ*).¹³ Pythagoras was a charismatic figure, a philosopher with shamanistic powers who left behind him a reputation as a wonderworker. His belief in metempsychosis is well-attested (Xenophanes, fr. 7; Heraclitus, frs. 40, 129; Empedocles, fr. 129; Ion of Chios, fr. 4; Herodotus, *Hist.* 4. 95) as is his learning and cultivation of Apolline purity. These beliefs and pursuits were characteristic of the religious society that Pythagoras established at Croton in southern Italy, a society dedicated to the practice of an ascetic way of life (which included abstinence from meat) and to the pursuit of an esoteric study of nature with the aim ultimately of escaping from the cycle of rebirth. Like the Bacchic groups in Italy, however, it provoked hostility and was eventually ruthlessly suppressed.

A notable figure in the Orphic-Pythagorean tradition was Empedocles of Acragas in Sicily, who in his work entitled *On Nature*¹⁴ proclaimed to his fellow-citizens: 'I go about among you as an immortal god, now no longer mortal, honoured by all as is fitting, crowned with fillets and luxuriant garlands' (fr. 102 [112]).¹⁵ Evidently in Empedocles' view his soul had arrived at the last of its embodied lives. After death it would return no more to the 'roofed-over cave' (fr. 115 [120]) of this world as 'an exile from the gods and a wanderer' (fr. 107 [115]) but enjoy immortality for ever in the abodes of the blessed. It was Plato, however, who gave this tradition its definitive expression (Claus 1981: 183). In his hands the idea of the soul as the essential self that can exist independently of the body (*Laws* 12. 959b) rapidly reached its full development with profound consequences not only for the Platonic philosophical tradition but also for Judaism and Christianity. Pythagorean metempsychosis serves to underline the soul's independent existence. It is striking that in two of Plato's more important discussions of the soul the mysteries are mentioned as paradigms of the soul's primeval vision of blessedness when it was still free of the prison-house of the body (*Phaedo* 81a; *Phaedr.* 250b). All human souls have experienced that vision at one time or else they would have descended not into human bodies but into some lower form of animal life. The philosopher's soul alone, however, is able to recover that vision, to reverse the effects of the fall and flee to a realm which, like itself, is divine and immortal never to return.

In imperial times Pythagoreanism was revived as a mystical and ascetical

¹³ The term is applied to Pythagoras by his Neoplatonist biographer, Iamblichus. Pythagoras' thaumaturgic ability was regarded as proof of his sharing in one of the chief attributes of divinity, that of power. Iamblichus himself, however, is the first philosopher 'whom posterity conventionally rather than exceptionally referred to as "divine"' (Fowden 1982: 36).

¹⁴ The following fragments are still printed by Wright as belonging to the *Katharmoi*, but recent scholarship believes that the supposed fragments from the *Katharmoi* all belong to Empedocles' main work, *Peri Phlyseos*.

¹⁵ Cf. Pythagoras, of whom Iamblichus says, 'It is generally agreed that as a result of his exhortatory addresses he procured that no one should refer to him by his own name but that all should address him as "divine" (*θεῖον*)' (*V. Pyth.* 10 [53]).

tradition within Platonism. The mysteries also benefited from the renewed interest in religion characteristic of the age. The Eleusinian continued to hold its ground, as we have seen, but newer mysteries also flourished. One of the most successful was that of Isis. We know something of the rites through the remarkable account of them given in the late second century by Apuleius of Madaura in Book XI of the *Metamorphoses*. Although the *Metamorphoses* is a work of fiction, the eleventh book is generally believed to be based on personal experience. Isis, a Hellenized Egyptian deity, was a saviour goddess who had delivered her consort Osiris from the underworld and could similarly deliver her devotees once they had been initiated into her mysteries. At the climax of the rites the hero, Lucius, baptized and fasting, is led to the innermost part of the temple of Isis, where on the appointed holy night he says he 'saw the sun flashing with bright effulgence' and 'approached close to the gods above and the gods below and worshipped them face to face' (ch. 23, trans. Griffiths). After the rites are over, Lucius is given special robes and presented to the crowd outside in the guise of an Osiris, wearing 'a crown of gleaming palm' with the leaves pointing outwards like rays. To the onlookers he appears 'adorned like the sun and set up in the manner of a divine statue' (ch. 24, trans. Griffiths). The identification with the god, even if temporary, is complete. Thereafter he will carry with him the promise of a blissful union with Isis after death (Griffiths 1986*b*: 46–59).

The cult of Isis was widespread throughout the Mediterranean world. Another new cult that enjoyed a following in the Roman period was that of Mithras (Burkert 1987: 84–7; Martin 1987: 113–18). This, too, had an Eastern, syncretistic origin, but in this case Iranian rather than Egyptian. With its cult of *deus invictus* it appealed especially to soldiers. In fact it was entirely masculine. No women were admitted, nor were there itinerant priests or *thiasoi* or temples, as with the other mysteries. Groups of men met in windowless chapels—'caves' they were called, although the imagery of Mithraic myth is astral rather than chthonic—where their worship seems to have aimed at a transcending of the world. There were seven grades of initiation, corresponding to an ascent through the seven planetary spheres. The goal of the worshipper was to become one with the cosmos. 'I alone', says a fragment of a Mithraic liturgy, 'may ascend into heaven as an enquirer and behold the universe' (*P. Graec. Mag.* iv. 434–5, cited by Martin 1987: 118).

Perhaps the most remarkable of these new cults was that of Antinous (Lambert 1984: esp. 177–97). In 130 CE during an imperial visit to Egypt the young *eromenos* of the Emperor Hadrian was drowned in the Nile, either by accident or, perhaps, as was popularly believed, as a voluntary sacrifice to restore the emperor to health and avert evil to the empire. Hadrian was inconsolable after the death of his beloved. He lingered in Egypt while the body of Antinous was prepared for Osirian burial. In October 130 he founded the city of Antinoopolis in his honour and instituted annual games.

Without promulgating any official decrees, he immediately set about promoting the cult of Antinous-Osiris in Egypt and throughout the empire. In the eight years until his death the cult grew rapidly. Temples were constructed, notably at Antinoopolis, the chief centre of the cult, at Bithynion, Antinous' birthplace, and at Mantinea, Bithynion's mother city. Mysteries were organized at Antinoopolis and Bithynion. Coins, medallions, and domestic busts were produced in large numbers. Plaques were manufactured for fixing to coffins. In spite of his origins, or rather, because he had died for love, Antinous became the god of triumph over death, as a number of dedications witness (Lambert 1984: 191–2). In Egypt he was enthroned in the temples with the other gods in the manner initiated by the enthronement of Arsinoe three and a half centuries earlier. Elsewhere he was assimilated to Hermes or Dionysus. The high-minded might censure the cult, but popular devotion endowed the worship of Antinous with a real vitality: having conquered death himself he offered to others the prospect of eternal life.

The 'sacred nights' of Antinous that were celebrated at Antinoopolis very soon became notorious (Clem. Alex. *Prot.* 4. 43). Other mysteries, however, were much more sedate. The Dionysiac, which in the imperial period was re-established in Italy, had very little to do with the ecstatic *orgia* represented by Euripides, the details of which in any case are more literary than historical. The later mystery drew on the aspect of Dionysus as a god connected with the Underworld that was prominent among the Orphics. But the surviving evidence does not convey the impression of an intense Orphic spirituality. An inscription of 176 CE, for example, gives us a detailed account of a meeting of an Athenian Bacchic society called the Iobacchi (*SIG*³ 1109, discussed by Lane Fox 1986: 85–8). The inscription lays down rules of conduct and procedure at meetings rather than express the religious aims of the society. Members were to elect various officers, pay subscriptions for the wine consumed at monthly meetings, and discipline those who behaved badly or did not attend. Yet the religious side was also present. There were theological speeches, ceremonies honouring the presence of Dionysus, and the choosing by lot of a member as 'Dionysus'. But whether this indicates an identification with the god we do not know.

The Christian attitude to the mysteries was one of disgust and contempt. The most detailed denunciation of them, Clement of Alexandria's (*Prot.* 2. 11–19), holds nothing back in condemning them as savage, obscene, and deceitful. And yet in his peroration to the *Protrepticus* Clement clothes the true mysteries of the Logos in the very imagery of their pagan counterpart:

O truly sacred mysteries! O pure light! In the blaze of the torches I have a vision of heaven and of God.¹⁶ I become holy by initiation. The Lord reveals the mysteries; he

¹⁶ *δαδούχουμαι τοὺς οὐρανούς καὶ τὸν θεὸν ἐποπτεύσαι*. These are technical terms of initiation into the mysteries. *Δαδούχουμαι* is to be illuminated, and alludes to *δαδούχος* (lit: 'torch-bearer') the holder of a hereditary office at Eleusis. *Ἐποπτεύω* is to be admitted to the highest grade of the mysteries.

marks the worshipper with his seal, gives light to guide his way, and commends him, when he has believed, to the Father's care, where he is guarded for ages to come. These are the revels of my mysteries! If you will, be initiated too, and you shall dance with angels around the unbegotten and imperishable and only true God, the Logos of God joining with us in our hymn of praise. (*Prot.* 12. 93, trans. Butterworth)

Clement woos his audience, capitalizing on the longing for illumination and assurance that the mysteries sought to satisfy and trumping the pagan version with his own images of joy and self-forgetful union with God. We shall observe a similar desire to go one better than paganism in his use of the vocabulary of deification.

6. Philosophical Religion

By imperial times many of the mysteries had become 'socially acceptable and legally recognized religious clubs that required membership and functioned in accordance with laws governing spiritual meetings' (Filoramo 1990: 27–8). For an expression of a more intense quest for union with the divine we must turn to the small groups that in the second and third centuries gathered round charismatic spiritual teachers (Fowden 1982; Brown 1988: 103–5). These teachers were leaders of *didaskaleia*, or study circles, dedicated to the deepening of spiritual life through intellectual enquiry. They could be Platonists or Christians or Gnostics or Hermetists but they had a number of things in common. One was the intense devotion they inspired in their disciples. Towards the end of the second century Clement, for example, made a number of journeys to different centres of learning before arriving in about 180 at Alexandria and discovering in Pantaenus an inspired lecturer 'who engendered in the souls of his hearers a deathless element of knowledge' (*Strom.* 1. 1. 11). Some fifty years later in the same city Plotinus experienced a similar elation when he was directed to the lectures of Ammonius Saccas after having been bitterly disappointed by other philosophers. 'This is the man I was looking for,' he exclaimed and spent the next eleven years studying with him. While Plotinus was attending lectures at Alexandria, Origen, who had also studied with Ammonius Saccas, was conducting similar classes at Caesarea in Palestine. One of his students, Gregory Thaumaturgus, has left us an account in a panegyric delivered in 238 of what it was like to sit at Origen's feet. To him Origen was 'the pattern of the wise man', or rather, 'one who vehemently desires to imitate the perfect pattern' (*Pan.* 11, PG 10. 1081D–1084A). He taught his students in the early stages of his course of studies how to put into practice the precept 'Know thyself'. By looking into their souls they may see reflected there an image of the divine mind, which Gregory, as already noted, describes as a sublime method 'for attaining a kind of apotheosis' (1084C).

Six years after the delivery of this panegyric Plotinus, ‘the philosopher of our times’ (*V. Plot.* 1), arrived in Rome, where he began to hold classes attended by a learned circle that included a number of medical men and members of the Senate. Among those who came, ‘fired by a real enthusiasm for philosophy’ (*V. Plot.* 7), was Porphyry, who studied with Plotinus for six years and became his biographer and literary executor. He describes Plotinus at work, sweating gently with concentration, answering questions courteously and never losing his patience or train of thought in spite of the fact that Porphyry once questioned him relentlessly for three days—to the annoyance of other members of the group—on the soul’s relationship with the body (*V. Plot.* 13). The fruits of these lectures and discussions were formally set out in the treatises arranged and edited by Porphyry. Plotinus’ interests were almost entirely metaphysical: they were centred on the nature of ultimate reality and on how the soul was to come into contact with it. In this as in all things his supreme authority was Plato. But Plato himself discusses problems rather than provide solutions. The Platonism which Plotinus inherited had undergone a long period of systematization and development under Stoic, Peripatetic, and Neopythagorean influences.

One of the key figures in the revival of Platonism in the first century BCE was Eudorus of Alexandria. It was he who established ‘likeness to God’ as the *telos* of human life for all the Platonists who came after him. Previously the Stoic ‘conformity to nature’ had prevailed in the Academy. Eudorus’ formula, from the *Theaetetus* (176b), marks a return to Plato and the adoption of a more spiritual perspective. In Middle Platonism it becomes a central concern but its meaning is not immediately evident. What is the nature of the God whom we are to resemble? What aspect of us can become like him? And how can we achieve this? Let us take each of these questions in turn.

As commentators have often pointed out, the English word ‘god’ does not adequately express the Greek *theos*. Without the article *theos* means ‘a god’, or used as a predicate it can simply mean ‘divine’, ‘more than human’ (Jones 1913; Skemp 1973; Grube 1980: 150–1). On the philosophical level the divine was equivalent to true ‘being’ (Kenney 1991: xvii–xviii, 3–32). We are accustomed to thinking of ‘being’ in terms of existence: something either exists or does not exist. But for the Greeks ‘being’ was contextual. Things did not just exist; they existed in a particular way. ‘Being’ was thus bound up with evaluative judgements, which enabled the Greeks to conceive of degrees of being or degrees of reality. That which was most real was divine in an absolute sense. Conversely, whatever was deficient in ‘being’ (i.e. was on a lower level of reality) was in certain respects deficient in divinity. In Plato’s thought the highest level of reality (and therefore of divinity) was occupied by the Forms, ‘the immutable divine paradigms of order and value’ (Kenney

1991: 22). In the mature dialogues the One of the *Parmenides* or the Form of the Good of the *Republic* are especially representative of this transcendent aspect of the divine which is the ultimate cause of all lesser degrees of being, not through any kind of activity but by exemplifying their quality or value. Below them the dynamic or cosmogonic aspect of God is represented mythologically by the demiurge of the *Timaeus*. And below him come the gods of cultic polytheism. In the earlier dialogues Plato portrays them in a conventional way as manifestations of powers that are more than human. But in the *Euthyphro* he establishes that the gods are not free to do as they will but must conform to a higher moral reality. This hierarchical arrangement of the divine in Plato's writings was to be fundamental for later Platonic theology.

Aristotle's concept of God is fundamentally that of Plato, though by discarding the doctrine of Forms and the Platonic mythology Aristotle is able to give a more coherent and systematic account of God. In *Metaphysics* XII. 6–7 God is described as immaterial, eternal substance whose only activity is a direct intuitive knowledge not of anything external, because that would imply change, but of himself. His dynamic aspect is represented by his role as the unmoved mover and first cause, a role which he exercises solely by being the supreme object of desire, for any physical causation would involve a change in him through being acted upon by the moved. Yet he is not thereby reduced to a dry abstraction. Aristotle represents him as a perfect, living and intelligent being (1072^b26–30). Below God in this absolute sense are the heavenly bodies, the 'moved movers', which are also alive and divine. And below them on a descending scale are the gods, human beings, animals, and plants, though divine intelligence does not extend below the human level.

With the revival of Platonism in the Roman empire, the emphasis, which through Stoic influence had moved to a monistic pantheism, was again placed on a transcendent God who was the unmoved source of the stability and order of all that existed. This transcendent God clearly owed something to Aristotle's criticism. In a typical representative of early Middle Platonism such as Plutarch of Chaeronea, the Forms and the demiurge are brought together to make a supreme intellectual principle, the 'really real' (τὸ ὄντως ὄν), whose intellection is the divine Forms. Thus the primary divine principle is not only a self-orientated mind but is a paradigm for the world of 'becoming' whose effect is felt on lower levels of reality as 'the object of striving for all Nature' (Dillon 1996: 199–202; Kenney 1991: 43–54).

Under the stimulus of Neopythagorean dualism a further important development took place which is associated particularly with Numenius of Apamea, who through Ammonius Saccas exercised an influence on Plotinus. This development is characterized by the demotion of the demiurge, who because of his contact with recalcitrant matter had to be separated from the first principle of the cosmos. The first principle is a *nous* engaged in self-

intellection, the content of which is the Forms. It is, indeed, the totality of the Forms, 'being' in itself, which may be thought of as a mind to which the whole of reality is simultaneously present. The second principle is also *nous* but its intellection is extrinsic. It is directed 'upwards' as it contemplates the first principle, and 'downwards' as it exercises its demiurgic function. The latter causes it to be divided into the second and third gods, the further division being made because matter is now the Pythagorean dyad. By coming into contact with the dyad, the demiurge endows it with unity but is himself divided on account of the instability of matter. Numenius thus proposes a triad of gods: the One, the demiurge as an intellectual principle, and the demiurge as a cosmogonic principle. There is no discontinuity in these three gods. They are simply modes of divine being as the deity unfolds progressively down the scale of reality (Dillon 1996: 366–72; Kenney 1991: 59–74).

With Plotinus the final step is taken of placing the first principle, the One, actually beyond 'being' and intellection as the inexhaustible source of life on which all finite things depend for their existence. The second hypostasis, the intellectual principle (*nous*), emerges out of the first without changing or affecting it in any way, the One producing it only because perfection is necessarily productive. The third hypostasis, an inferior but still rational principle (*psyche*), emerges from the second as the second does from the first. At its lowest level *psyche* becomes Nature, the immanent power of life and growth. All the time it seeks to turn back on its source, as the *nous* does upon *its* source. There is therefore not only a procession *from* the One but a movement back towards it, for these principles are not separate, hierarchically ordered divinities, but modes of the One's disclosure at different levels of reality (Rist 1962; 1967*b*: 21–129; Armstrong 1970: 236–49; Wallis 1972: 47–61; Kenney 1991: 91–156).

That *nous* and *psyche* are replicated within each human being is one of the fundamental tenets of later Platonism. In Plato himself we can discern a development in his understanding of the soul. In the *Phaedo*, the dialogue set on the last day of Socrates' life, it is a unitary model of the soul which is discussed. Drawing on Orphic and Pythagorean ideas, Plato has Socrates present the soul as not simply a life force, which according to conventional wisdom perished upon death, but as the true self, the inner man 'chained hand and foot in the body, compelled to view reality not directly but only through its prison bars' (82e). Less metaphorically, the soul is the directing principle that controls the body and its passions (94d). Its unity is proved by its immortality, for only that which is not composite is indestructible (78c). And its immortality is proved by a series of converging arguments, notably the way learning is fundamentally recollection based on memory of a previous life (91e), the inability of the cause of life to participate in death (105de) and above all by the soul's ability to apprehend the Forms, which makes it akin to the divine (100b). The tripartite division of the soul first appears in

the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*. This elaboration marks a great advance on what had gone before because the passions and desires are now included within the soul, allowing for struggle and conflict within the human psyche. The famous image of the charioteer and the two horses appears in the *Phaedrus* (246a) as Plato explains how the intellect struggles to bring the unruly faculties of the soul into line with the more tractable ones. The whole theory is restated mythologically in the creation story of the *Timaeus*. There the demiurge himself does not create human beings because if they received life at his hands they 'would be on an equality with the gods' (41c). The creative movement initiated by the demiurge comes down to men at one remove through the gods created by him, thus ensuring that human beings are mortal. A divine element, the soul, is provided by the demiurge but the rest is the work of the gods. It is when the soul becomes incarnate in the body that it acquires its tripartite character. The noblest part is the intellect (*nous*), which is 'a god to each person' (90a), and it is the purpose of philosophy to cultivate this part, for only the *nous* is immortal, the incensive and appetitive parts perishing with the body (90cd).

Aristotle, while despising the doctrine of reincarnation, retained the kernel of Plato's psychology, that is to say, the immortality of at least some part of the soul. In Book II of the treatise *On the Soul* he sets out his position in terms of his favourite principles of matter and form, potentiality and actuality. He equates the soul with the form and the body with the matter of animals, and then goes on to define the soul as 'the first actuality of a natural body that potentially has life' (412^a27–8). Form and actuality are different ways of saying that the soul is that which makes a living being what it is. By implication the soul would then perish with the body upon death, for body and soul form a composite whole. But Aristotle, unable to break entirely with his Platonist formation, makes an important qualification with regard to the intellect. 'It seems', he says, 'that this is another kind of soul, and that this alone may be separable, as that which is eternal from that which is perishable' (413^b25–7). In Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* he speaks more confidently of the intellect as something if not absolutely divine at least the most divine element in us which makes us immortal when we strive to live in accordance with it (1177^a16; 1177^b27–35).

Aristotle's reinforcement of the fundamental duality of the soul in the *Dialogues* had repercussions for later Platonism. Alcinous, for example, in his reaction to the Stoic unitary view of spiritual reality (all human souls as 'parts'—*apospasmata*—of the World Soul), separates the rational and irrational parts of the soul so strongly that they tend to become two distinct souls. The irrational part was created by the young gods, as in the *Timaeus*, but does not participate in *nous* and is not immortal. The embodiment of this composite soul is regarded as a kind of fall, the result fundamentally of a wilful desire for pleasure. Alcinous has an ambivalent view of the world

which strengthens the dualistic tendencies of Platonism. We find this ambivalence turning into downright hostility towards the world in Numenius. For him the descent of the soul is a complete disaster, for Matter exists independently of Good and is identified with Absolute Evil. Numenius represents human souls as congregating in the Milky Way before descending through the planetary spheres to earthly bodies, drawn down by the lure of pleasure. As a result of the acquisition of accretions on the way down and finally of embodiment, the rational soul now finds itself with an irrational counterpart. The human being is thus dominated not by different aspects of a single soul but by two distinct and warring souls. Plotinus, although influenced by Numenius, is much less radical in his dualism. The soul's descent is the result of metaphysical necessity, not moral evil. Evil comes from matter after the soul's embodiment, or rather, after the embodiment of that part of the soul which descends into the material world. Plotinus usually works with a twofold division of the soul, in which the rational level is identified with discursive reason and the irrational with sense perception, the emotions and so on. But sometimes the problems he is considering lead him to use a threefold division. In such contexts the highest level is the unfallen soul which has not descended into matter and remains in contemplation of *Nous*. The second level then becomes discursive reason and the third the irrational soul (Wallis 1972: 73–4). There are no sharp divisions, however. All soul forms a continuum but the different levels reflect a fact of experience. We feel drawn in different directions but we can choose on which level to live, whether the contemplative, the rational, or the irrational, and our choice assimilates us to that level and defines our identity.

Eudorus, as already mentioned, had made 'likeness to God' the *telos* of human life. The relevant passage in the *Theaetetus* has Socrates say that because of the evils in 'this region of our mortal nature . . . we should make all speed to take flight from this world to the other, and that means becoming like the divine so far as we can' (176b; trans. Cornford). The phrase hitherto understood as 'so far as we can' — *κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν* — is now taken to mean 'according to that part which is able'. It is only the higher, rational soul that can become like God and flee to the other world. The irrational soul must be trained to accept the guidance of reason and can then be ignored until it is discarded.

The fullest account by a Middle Platonist of the soul's return is given in Sulla's myth at the end of Plutarch's essay *On the Face in the Moon* (*Mor.* 943–4). There are in fact two deaths which human beings must undergo before they can achieve their *telos*. The first separates the body from the rest and takes place here on earth. The soul then ascends to the region between the earth and the moon, where 'the unjust and licentious souls pay penalties for their offences' (943c). The just arrive at the moon, where they enjoy the pleasant life of Elysium, having now become daemons. They are not entirely pure, nor is their state permanent, because they have not yet been freed from the

influence of irrationality. After further improvement the best daemons undergo a further death separating the intellect, which alone is capable of immortality, from the lower soul. With the freeing of the intellect by this second death the last vestiges of irrationality are left behind. The intellect ascends to the sun, returning to the gods, from whom it originally came, under the impulse of a yearning in which all nature shares.

With Plotinus we encounter a different approach, couched in metaphysical rather than mythological terms and concentrating more on this earthly life. The beginning of the return to our source for Plotinus consists in turning inwards. 'If you are amazed at the soul in something else,' he says, 'be amazed at yourself' (*Enn.* v. 1. 2. 50–1). Divinity is already within us by virtue of our being ensouled: we are gods at the furthest that the divine descends from its source and archetype, the One. The first thing we must do is to purify our lower soul by stripping away everything alien to it so that it can be totally one with our higher soul, which does not need to be purified because it has not descended into the body. Purification, however, is not enough on its own: 'Our concern . . . is not to be out of sin but to be a god' (*Enn.* I. 2. 6. 2–3). The attainment of the good necessitates reaching up to the divine world where the archetype of the good is to be found.

Since all soul is one *ousia*, or substance, there is no inherent difficulty in becoming one with *psyche* once the lower part of our souls has been fully subjected to the higher part. There is no sin to overcome; we simply have to decide to be guided by what is immediately prior to us. The world soul is like the higher individual soul in that it is not affected by the material world, while it differs from it in its direct control of the entire cosmos. When the individual soul becomes one with it, it shares in the direction of the universe (*Enn.* iv. 8. 2. 19–30).

Purification prevents us from being dragged down to sub-human, and consequently sub-divine, levels. But it is contemplation that enables us to rise to the intelligible world. This is because thinking and the object of thought ultimately become the same: the human soul is assimilated to the things it contemplates as it presses on towards the *nous*.¹⁷ When the soul has become one with the *nous*, it can be said unequivocally to have become a god, for henceforth it lives on the level of the eternal (*Enn.* II. 9. 9. 50–1; VI. 4. 14. 16–22). But there still remains a further step, union with the One. This is different in kind from union with the *nous*, which requires in the soul a process of abstraction and purification in order to revert to its prior. This further step is described by Plotinus as requiring a leap towards the One (*Enn.* v. 5. 4. 8; cf.

¹⁷ The key text is *Enn.* III. 8. 8. 1–9, in which Plotinus, alluding to Parmenides fr. B3DK, declares that at the end of the soul's ascent the objects of knowledge become one with the knower, not by mere appropriation or the attaining of moral likeness (*οἰκειώσει*), as in the case of the outstandingly virtuous, but substantially (*ὀνσίᾳ*), because 'thinking and being are the same'. Cf. Siorvanes' summary of Proclus' theory of knowledge quoted below (p. 257).

Rist 1967*b*: 220). It is the ultimate stage of the soul's journey, the final annihilation of all duality. The soul becomes one with the object of its search, and yet is not absorbed into it. This causes fear, for the soul must open itself to the infinite, and pain, for the soul loses its familiar points of orientation. The union is described as vision, but 'vision' is not an adequate term because it still implies duality—a seer and the seen (*Enn.* III. 9. 10. 11–13; VI. 9. 11. 4–7; cf. VI. 9. 11. 22–5). It is also described as touch, as blending, as self-surrender, as ecstasy, as erotic mingling (*Enn.* VI. 9. 9. 33–44 and 44–6). A striking analogy is that of the superimposed centres of two circles. The centres are then indistinguishable from each other and yet they are still seen to be two points when they move apart (*Enn.* VI. 9. 8. 11–16). In spite of the union with the One being a dizzy leap into the infinite – 'the mind reels before something thus alien to all we know' (*Enn.* VI. 9. 7. 1–3)—it is not a leap into anything outside ourselves. Plotinus stresses that the journey is an inward one: 'we must ascend to the principle within ourselves' (*Enn.* VI. 3. 3. 20–1); 'when the soul begins again to mount, it comes not to something alien, but to its very self' (*Enn.* VI. 9. 11. 38–40). It is at that point, says Plotinus, that a man has become a god—but he at once corrects himself: 'or rather, is one' (*Enn.* VI. 9. 9. 58). We are already gods in our true, higher selves. We do not need to *become* gods but simply to realize what we are, which we attain in its fullness through union with the One: 'for a god is what is linked to that centre' (*Enn.* VI. 9. 8. 8–9; cf. Armstrong 1976).

All this was not merely a matter of philosophical theory to Plotinus. The quest for union with the divine dominated his life. Porphyry testifies that on several occasions Plotinus became rapt in ecstasy in his presence:

To Plotinus 'the goal ever near was shown': for his end and goal was to be united to, to approach the God who is over all things. Four times while I was with him he attained that goal, in an unspeakable actuality and not in potency only. (*V. Plot.* 23. 14–18; trans. Armstrong)

What this 'unspeakable actuality' felt like is described by Plotinus himself in the following words:

Often I have woken up out of the body to my self and have entered into myself, going out from all other things; I have seen a beauty wonderfully great and felt assurance that then most of all I belonged to the better part; I have actually lived the best life and come to identity with the divine; and set firm in it I have come to that supreme actuality, setting myself above all else in the realm of Intellect. Then after that rest in the divine, when I have come down from Intellect to discursive reasoning, I am puzzled how I ever came down, and how my soul has come to be in the body when it is what it has shown itself to be by itself, even when it is in the body. (*Enn.* IV. 8. 1. 1–11; trans. Armstrong)

The experience of going out of the body (which for Plotinus means ascending to the highest part of one's being), of beholding an incomprehensible

beauty, of feeling deflated on returning to the body will be repeated by other Neoplatonists and not only pagans.¹⁸ That these transitory ecstasies were only a foretaste of a union with God after death was confirmed for Porphyry by the oracle uttered at Delphi in response to a question put by another member of Plotinus' inner circle, Amelius. The soul of Plotinus, Amelius was told, having left the tomb of the body and become a daemon, had joined the company of Minos and Rhadamanthus, Plato and Pythagoras and 'all who have set the dance of immortal love and won kinship with spirits most blessed' (*V. Plot.* 22. 45–60; 23. 15–17).

As long as the Platonists maintained the doctrine of the undescended soul, deification in a technical sense was not possible. A major change comes with Iamblichus, for Iamblichus could not believe in the existence of an undescended element in the human person. In his view the Plotinian notion that the higher soul always remained in the intelligible world whether we were aware of it or not contradicted not only experience but the fundamental principle (going back to Aristotle) that the nature of a substance could be inferred from its acts. He could appeal to Platonic authority for his refusal to accept the doctrine of the undescended soul, for the charioteer in the Phaedrus myth does not continue on an uninterrupted course with the gods but sometimes rises and sometimes sinks (*Phaedr.* 248a). Moreover, the Plotinian doctrine cannot account for the existence of sin or unhappiness. If the higher soul is unaffected by the passions, how does the free will, which belongs to the ruling faculty, come to be seduced by the images of the sensible world? And if the highest part of the soul is constantly engaged in contemplation, with the bliss of fulfilment which that activity would bring, then the whole of our being ought to enjoy uninterrupted happiness, which is not the case (Proclus, *In Tim.* 3. 334–5; cf. Steel 1978: 40–4).

The result of Iamblichus' criticism of the higher soul was for the first time to turn the hypostases into a hierarchical series of different essences. These essences were connected with each other by the Law of Mean Terms, which resolved all beings into unparticipated terms, participated terms, and participants.¹⁹ This law, formulated by Iamblichus himself, proved to be very influential. It enabled lower principles to be affected by higher ones and to move up the scale 'by participation' without compromising the transcendence of the latter.

¹⁸ The only comparable personal testimony in a Christian writer is that of Augustine, *Confessions* 7. 17 (23) and 9. 10 (24) (Chadwick 1991: 127, 171). But Gregory of Nyssa attributes similar experiences to David (*De Virg.*, PG 46. 361B) and to Abraham (*C. Eun.* 12, PG 45. 940A–941B) (Musurillo 1961: 105, 119). Cf. also *The Book of the Holy Hierotheos*, discussed in Appendix 1.

¹⁹ Our informant is Proclus (*In Tim.* 2. 105, 240, 313), who develops this principle in a systematic way (cf. *El. Theol.* 23 and 24). Its purpose is to solve the problem of the relationship between the transcendent and the immanent, the Form and the particular. For discussions of the concept of participation in the later Neoplatonists see Lloyd 1982; Niarchos 1985; Siorvanes 1996: 71–86; Siorvanes 1998.

Some foreshadowing of this Iamblichean development is already apparent in Plotinus' pupil, Porphyry, who is accordingly the first Platonist to use the technical language of deification (c.300). In a letter to his wife Marcella he presents a simplified version of his view of the purpose of philosophy:

He who practises wisdom practises knowledge of God, not by constantly offering prayers and sacrifices but by showing piety towards God through his deeds. For no one could become pleasing to God either through the opinions of men or through the empty words of rhetoricians. On the contrary, he makes himself pleasing to God and deifies himself (ἐαυτὸν . . . ἐκθεοῖ) by assimilating his own condition to that which is blessed through incorruptibility. (*Ad Marcellam* 17)

It has rightly been pointed out that 'in his ethical consideration Porphyry starts from the *distance* that separates the soul from the higher levels of being' (Steel 1978: 32). In other words, in his ethical writings he is nearer to the Iamblichean position than to the Plotinian, as his use of ἐκθεόω in this instance suggests. Normally in Porphyry's writings gods, daemons, and the souls of human beings are in essence the same, differing only in how much of the sensible world they control (the human soul controlling only the human body) and in the extent to which they participate in the passions. Here through practical philosophy a person is said to become like God in one of his most important attributes, that of incorruptibility, and this attainment of likeness is said to deify him.

With Iamblichus, Porphyry's pupil, the conditions that make deification in the proper sense possible become firmly established. As long as the human soul is considered to be part of the same essence as that of the gods in whole or in part, the realization of the human *telos* consists in waking up to what we really are: transcendent beings trapped in the world of sense. But once the notion of the undescended soul has been rejected and the soul of a human being is conceived of as essentially different from that of a god, some ontological transformation is needed before the soul can ascend to the divine life. This transformation is the result of theurgy, a concept which entered into Platonism from the *Chaldean Oracles*. 'Doing philosophy' could no longer in itself raise the soul to the level of the divine because the divine essence transcends the essence of the human soul to such a degree. It is therefore necessary for the divine to descend by a 'providential love' before the lower reality can be perfected through participation in the characteristics of the higher. Iamblichus speaks of theurgy as taking place through wordless symbols beyond the act of thinking. But his insistence on theurgy is accompanied by an extension of the term to cover intellectual activity as well as ritual. While we are still unpurified and weighed down by the body we still need material ritual; but this does not mean that all embodied souls need it. The few more perfect souls practise an intellectual and incorporeal kind of theurgy. It was the transformation wrought by theurgy, by 'the power of the

wordless symbols intelligible to the gods alone', that enabled Pythagoras, for example, 'to be deified in a way surpassing human understanding' (*V. Pyth.* 23. 103).

These are almost the only instances of the use of the terminology of deification in philosophical writings before the fifth century (cf. also *De Myst.* 10. 5). It is only with Proclus that we meet with it frequently. Proclus' chief concern is to clarify the relationship between self-existent reality and the material world. Self-existent reality is 'that which is beyond all things and to which all things aspire' (*El. Theol.* 113). It is 'the One', 'the Good', or simply 'God'. The character of divinity is unity. Only the One possesses unity without any privations or contradictions. But unity can be shared. The participable 'ones' are the henads. Every entity in the world possesses unity in the manner appropriate to it through its relationship with its head-principle, or henad. Thus:

Every divine body is such through the mediation of a deified soul, every divine soul through a divine intellect, and every divine intellect by participation in a divine henad; the henad is natively (*αὐτόθεον*) a god, the intellect most divine, the soul divine, and the body deisimilar. (*El. Theol.* 129; trans. Dodds, modified)

Deification in this late development is central to an understanding of how God is simultaneously detached from and present in the world. Proclus does not separate the One's ineffable aspect from its causal aspect. As Siorvanes has put it, God is both apophatic and the first positive term of existence. The principle of deification explains how this can be so (Siorvanes 1998, esp. 16–18).

7. The Egyptian Hermetists

In the new spiritual climate of the second and third centuries the intimate contact with the One God that could be attained by members of a cultural elite after years of rigorous intellectual training was not going to be confined to the tiny minority that had the necessary wealth and education to qualify for membership. There was a demand for such teaching amongst the many merchants, artisans, and government officials who thronged the major cities of the empire and to cater for their needs there was a new class of men—'orators, lecturers, teachers who constitute a sort of turbulent, lively intellectual proletariat'.²⁰ Among these 'new men' were the teachers of Gnosis. Thanks to the polemics of their ecclesiastical adversaries brief details have come down to us of the leading Christian Gnostic teachers. Nothing is

²⁰ Filoramo 1990: 36. This new class, of course, only constituted a proletariat from the supreme vantage point of the intellectual elite. For the social context of Gnosticism see Filoramo 1990: 34–7, 173–8, and for that of Hermetism, Fowden 1993: 186–95.

known, however, of their pagan counterparts other than what we can deduce from their writings. These have survived in two forms, the philosophical, which are concerned with theology and the fate of the soul, and the technical, which are magical texts. The philosophical collection known as the Hermetic Corpus was probably made in late antiquity, although our earliest attestation is from the eleventh century and in its present form is a selection probably reflecting the tastes of its Byzantine compiler. The technical texts, which can seem bizarre to the modern eye, are not likely to have been considered different in kind by the Egyptian Hermetists themselves. A fascinating insight into how Hermetic works circulated in the middle of the fourth century is provided by Codex VI of the Gnostic library discovered at Nag Hammadi, which contains extracts from three Hermetic tractates. After the Prayer of Thanksgiving towards the end of the codex the scribe has added a note saying that although a large number of discourses had come to him, he was only copying the one he had just set down and was sending it on to his correspondents because he did not want to burden them, as they probably already had copies of the same texts (*NHL* VI. 7a).

The character of the Hermetic groups responsible for the tractates has been disputed. Against Reitzenstein and Cumont, Festugière insisted on the fundamentally Hellenic character of the Corpus (Festugière 1943–54: ii, xiii). More recently, however, scholarly opinion has tended to see the Corpus as primarily of Egyptian inspiration.²¹ The Egyptian atmosphere is certainly strong. The teacher at the centre of the tractates is not a philosopher engaged in intellectual debate with his disciples in the Graeco-Roman manner. He is more like a priest imparting ancient wisdom within the precincts of a great temple. Indeed, the setting for the *Perfect Discourse* is such a temple filled with a numinous divine presence (*Ascl.* 1). The appropriate attitude of the hearer is one of hushed reverence: the teacher—often Hermes Trismegistus himself—expounds; the disciples listen in awe. Prayers or hymns sometimes conclude the tractates (*CH* I. 31; XIII. 18; *Ascl.* 41) because the highest expression of wisdom is worship: true philosophy is ‘to adore the Godhead with simple mind and soul’ (*Ascl.* 13). The physical presence of Egypt is strong in other ways too. Egypt is seen as an image of heaven, as ‘the temple of the whole world’ (*Ascl.* 24). Pride is expressed in the Egyptian language in which ‘the very quality of the speech and sound of Egyptian words have in themselves the energy of the objects they speak of’ (*CH* XVI. 2). Yet Egypt is in decline. One of the most moving passages in the Corpus is a lament for departed glory as the gods (perhaps under pressure from

²¹ Cf. Dillon 1996: 213: ‘the whole thought-world of the Hermetic Corpus is alien to that of Plato’. Fowden 1993: 73: Hermetism according to Mahé is ‘mythical Egyptian thought translated into Greek’. Frankfurter 1998: 240: The Hermetic Corpus was composed by ‘some shadowy conventicles of Greek-proficient [Egyptian] priests’.

Christian laws against pagan worship) withdraw from Egypt, leaving her desolate, with every sacred voice silenced (*Ascl.* 24, 25; *NHL* VI. 8. 70–3).

It is not only the local colour, however, that is of Egyptian provenance. There is evidence that such central themes as the spiritual father/son relationship, the filiation of man to the divine, and the deification of the initiand's soul are native Egyptian ideas (Daumas 1982: 13–16; Théodoridès 1982: 30–5; Griffiths 1986*b*: 56–9). But the expression of these is Greek. And the view of God as a triadic *nous*, demiurge, and world soul, to whom the individual soul is assimilated in successive stages, owes much to the standard themes of Platonism.

The Hermetic Corpus presents a God who is at once both transcendent and immanent. Some tractates stress one aspect, some the other. On the one hand God is beyond words and beyond the imagination (*CH* I. 32; v. 1). He is the first of all entities, eternal, unbegotten, creator of all that is (*CH* VIII. 2). He is the source of eternity and being (*CH* XI. 4; III. 1). He is master and father (*CH* IX. 7; XVIII. 12; *Ascl.* 22), light and life (*CH* I. 21), energy and power (*CH* XII. 20). He cannot be detected in anything in the cosmos (*CH* VI. 4). On the other hand, in the pantheistic fifth tractate he is reflected in the entire cosmos (*CH* V. 2). He is both 'invisible and wholly visible' (*CH* V. 10). He is the source of all things and yet there is nothing in the cosmos that he is not. All things that exist are in him; nothing is outside him and he is outside nothing (*CH* V. 9). God as *nous* gives birth to a second god, the demiurge in the *Poemandres* (*CH* I. 9) or the sun in the *Perfect Discourse* (*Ascl.* 29). It is worth noting that there is very little dualism in the Corpus. The demiurge, about whom there is nothing evil or shameful (*CH* XIV. 7), made the whole cosmos. In other versions the cosmos itself is the second god. Humankind then comes into being as the third god (*CH* VIII. 3; X. 14; *Ascl.* 10).

At the heart of Hermetism is a sense of wonder at the astonishing range of the human mind. In the twinkling of an eye the mind can travel to India or shoot up to the heavenly bodies (*CH* XI. 19). It is not bound by place or time. It can imagine itself in any place or before its own birth or even after its own death (*CH* XI. 20). It is truly capable of anything. This wonder at the godlike qualities of the mind finds mythical expression in the Hermetic anthropogony (which draws on Jewish *midrashim* on the book of Genesis) (*CH* I. 12–15). Anthropos was created in the image of the father as a 'brother' of the demiurge, the second god. He broke through the vault of heaven and looked down through the cosmic framework, 'thus displaying to lower nature the fair form of god'. Anthropos saw the beauty of his own form reflected in the water and reached down to take Nature into an erotic embrace. He wished to inhabit nature and 'wish and action came at the same moment'. Because of these origins the progeny of Anthropos possess a mortal body but an immortal inner self (*CH* I. 15). One part of ourselves is *οὐσιώδης*, our essential being, the other *ὕλικός*, our material outer form

(*Ascl.* 7). Some tractates, perhaps under Pythagorean influence, take a negative view of the body: it is 'the garment of ignorance, the foundation of vice, the bonds of corruption, the dark cage, the living death, the portable tomb' (*CH* VII. 2; cf. IV. 6). Others, and not only the more pantheistic, avoid such language. Looking within oneself and even at the marvellous way in which the body is constructed draws one to God.²² There is a kinship, a community of being, with God: earthly man is a mortal god and the celestial God an immortal man (*CH* X. 25; XII. 1).²³

In the *Perfect Discourse* man is said to have been created 'good and capable of immortality through his two natures, divine and mortal' (*Ascl.* 22). In fact the possession of mortality as well as divinity makes men better than the gods, who only possess a single nature. This superiority is developed in a striking way. The reciprocity that exists between man and the supreme God means that just as God has made the heavenly gods (the stars and planets), so man has made the temple gods. Man is not only deified but he also deifies. 'Not only is he god but he also creates gods,' as the Coptic version puts it (*NHL* VI. 8. 68; cf. *Ascl.* 23). Some sections further on Trismegistus makes it clear what he means. In Egypt there are three kinds of earthly gods: the images that are made of matter but animated by the theurgic drawing-down of a daemonic soul; the human benefactors like Asclepius' ancestor, the discoverer of medicine, who have been deified after death; and the holy animals, which have been deified while still alive (*Ascl.* 37, 38). Here we have a combination of Hellenistic and ancient Egyptian belief (cf. Mahé 1982: 98–102, 224, 315, 385). This human fashioning of the earthly gods far from diminishing their stature only points to the divine nature of human beings themselves. The whole thrust of this teaching is summed up in the final Prayer of Thanksgiving: 'While we were in the body you made us divine through your knowledge' (*NHL* VI. 7. 18–19; *Ascl.* 41).

The return to God, the 'way of immortality' (*NHL* VI. 6. 63), has been described as a journey with three stages: *gnōsis*, the awakening; *logos*, the process of attaining maturity; and *nous*, the vision of the divine intellect (Mahé 1991: 351). Gnosis is a spiritual awakening that is stimulated by amazement at the powers of the human mind. Consciousness is divinity itself (*Ascl.* 18). To become fully conscious is to become aware of the divine within oneself, for divine consciousness is found only in God and human beings (*Ascl.* 7, 32). The opposite to gnosis is ignorance, which is likened to drunkenness or sleep (*CH* VIII. 1). Ignorance is the worst evil (*CH* VIII. 2; X. 8). For the ignorant soul is blind and a slave to the body. The soul which attains gnosis, however, can begin the ascent of Olympus (*CH* X. 15); or, less metaphorically, 'He who has understood himself advances towards God' (*CH* I. 21).

²² *CH* V. 6; cf. Job 34: 13; 38: 4–38, and the Egyptian Hymn to Khnum cited in Mahé 1982: 293–5, 279.

²³ On *CH*'s anthropology see most recently Mazzanti 1998.

The second stage is that of the acquisition of knowledge and the attaining of maturity through revelatory discourse. It involves, in Mahé's words, the spiritualization of popular piety. Death is merely an illusion (*CH VIII. 1*). Upon death there is a general dissolution of the physical and psychic elements which releases the essential man. The material body is given over to corruption, the form becomes invisible, the habitual character (*étbos*) is given over to one's personal daemon, the bodily senses return to their sources, becoming again parts of the astral energies, and the incensive and appetitive faculties return to irrational nature. The essential man then rises through the planetary spheres, stripping away certain powers at each level—at the first the power of increasing or diminishing, at the second the power of doing evil, at the third the delusion of desire, at the fourth ambition, at the fifth presumption, at the sixth the appetites that come from wealth, and at the seventh falsehood—until he enters into the eighth sphere 'possessing his own power' and is able to sing hymns to the Father in the company of the other Powers that inhabit that sphere, because at last he has become like them. Those who have achieved this state 'ascend towards the Father in order, and surrender themselves to the Powers, and having become Powers themselves, come to be in God. This is the blessed end of those who possess gnosis, to be deified (*θεωθῆναι*)' (*CH I. 26*; cf. *NHL VI. 6. 59–60*; Festugière 1943–54: iii. 124–52).

The final stage is the vision of *nous* that draws one up like a magnet (*CH IV. 11*). The rapture of seeing the beauty of God culminates in deification as the pure *nous*, separated progressively from the bodily senses, the psychic faculties, and the vices, is able to share a community of being with the Father and all his celestial powers. Such deification is not the exclusive prerogative of the elect but is open in principle to all. It is only necessary for human beings to be awakened for the return to become possible.

The discussion of deification in *CH X* introduces the term *μεταβολαί*, the transformations which the soul undergoes after death. Asclepius says to his disciple Tat that it is impossible 'for a soul that has contemplated the beauty of the Good to be deified (*ἀποθεωθῆναι*) while in a human body' (*CH X. 6*). He goes on to explain that all souls in the world are from one universal soul, and the transformations they have undergone distribute them among various kinds of creatures. Then in a passage reminiscent of Plutarch he says: 'Human souls begin to enter into immortality by transforming themselves into daemons and then in the same way into the choir of the gods' (*CH X. 7*; cf. *Mor. 943–4*). Gnosis and moral effort together produce a good soul, which after death undergoes a transformation and 'becomes entirely *nous*' (*CH X. 6*). The bad soul remains as it is and punishes itself.

When Poemandres is asked whether all human beings do not possess *nous*, he evades the question (*CH X. 6*). In the fourth tractate, however, it is stated categorically that *nous* is not distributed to all. God keeps it, as it were, in a

great mixing-bowl and gives it as a reward to those who respond to the proclamation of gnosis (*CH* iv. 3–4). The response to gnosis is a fundamental orientation towards the invisible rather than the visible, the divine rather than the mortal. The author recognizes the difficulty of this. It is hard to abandon the familiar and to set aside the delights of the visible world. Yet this is necessary, for although the world is the work of God, and whoever contemplates it can recognize its maker, it is inimical to spiritual progress: ‘If you do not first hate your body, my son, you will not be able to love yourself; but when you have come to love yourself, you will have *nous*, and having come to possess *nous* you will participate in knowledge’ (*CH* iv. 6). It is this correct choice which deifies human beings, though not before they have departed from the body and passed through choirs of demons and the orbits of the planets as they press on towards the One (*CH* iv. 7). The choice of gnosis brings about baptism in *nous* and is the beginning of the pursuit of the good. The opposite choice enmeshes human beings in bodily pleasures and leads to destruction.

In *CH* XIII the essential core of humanity similarly needs to be made divine through being endowed with *nous*. In this context a further term is introduced, that of *παλιγγενεσία*, or regeneration. Hermes teaches Tat that regeneration means a new birth *ἐν νῶ* or *ἐν θεῶ*—equivalent expressions because the *nous* belongs to the divine world—which results in a change from a life that is mortal to one that is immortal and therefore divine. Although the agent of regeneration is another human being who has become a god, regeneration is not taught but is the result of God’s mercy (*CH* XIII. 3, 10). It comes about when the corporeal senses are set aside and the twelve punishments or vices (ignorance, sorrow, unchastity, desire, injustice, greed, deceit, envy, fraud, anger, rashness, and malice) are driven out by the ten divine powers or virtues (knowledge of God, knowledge of joy, chastity, endurance, justice, sharing, truth, and finally the Good, Life, and Light) (*CH* XIII. 7–9). ‘You know, my child,’ concludes Hermes, ‘the manner of regeneration. When the Decad is present, my child, a spiritual generation has been contrived and it drives out the Dodecad, and we have been deified by this generation’ (*CH* XIII. 10; cf. Grese 1979: 133–45). It is striking that in this tractate deification is not postponed until the end of the journey through the spheres after death. It comes about when a human being no longer lives a corporeal existence but through the coming together of the ten divine powers acquires *nous* and is thus able to transcend the limitations of the physical world.

These differing anthropologies seem to imply at least two distinct senses of the term ‘deification’, the one signifying the reduction of human beings to their divine core, the immortal *nous*, the other their endowment with a divine *nous* which they did not previously possess. These distinct senses, however, do not imply rival doctrines of the soul’s ascent. The Hermetists

were not particularly anxious about consistency. What we have here is a difference of emphasis rather than a difference of doctrine (cf. Fowden 1993: 108). Each tractate is able to present a different emphasis without compromising the whole. Thus a fall and a corresponding ascent are central to the teaching of the *Poemandres*. Deification in this tractate is described as a stripping away to the bare *nous*, which can only reach its fulfilment in the divine pleroma. *CH X* implies the same doctrine, glossing it by explaining the ascent as a series of transformations first into a daemon and then into a god. *CH IV* recognizes a pre-existent man who is sent down by God not as a punishment for sin but to adorn the Earth. He is endowed with *logos* but not with *nous*, which is only given to him when he commits himself to gnosis. It is this gift of *nous* that deifies human beings by enabling them to wing their way up to the One. In *CH XIII* there is neither a primordial fall nor an ascent. There is no innate divinity in humankind waiting to be recovered. Rather, human beings are deified by regeneration, which really changes them, transforming them into *nous* so that they can know God. This is not just an eschatological possibility but a present reality. The divine life can begin now and the body and earthly concerns be left behind.

The technical Hermetica do not contradict this teaching; they simply dispense with the need for a teacher. Through the use of the right magical formulae a spiritual initiation could be effected on one's own which would lead to ascent, rebirth, and the vision of the divine. In one early fourth-century papyrus the entire rite, which leads through lesser experiences to the vision of the supreme God, Aion, is called an *ἀπαθανατισμός*—an 'immortalization' or 'deification' (*P. Graec. Mag.* iv. 741, 747; Fowden 1993: 82–4). But in this case the effects are not permanent: the *ἀπαθανατισμός* 'can be performed three times a year'. For its purpose is not to effect an escape from the body but to obtain an oracle directly from the god, which can only be done if the human mind is raised to the level of the divine.

8. Interaction with Christianity

The Graeco-Roman environment of the first three centuries CE was not simply the background against which the early Church developed, either keeping itself free from contamination or succumbing to 'Hellenization'. Christians were part of the Graeco-Roman world and interacted with it. They were familiar with the idea of deification from the beginning, not only from the philosophical schools but also from the ruler-cult, the mysteries, and the study circles of popular teachers. Even if they repudiated it, they lived on intimate terms with it.

The figure of the philosopher commanded immense respect. But whether he was viewed as a *θεῖος ἀνὴρ*, or 'divine man', before the third century CE is

doubtful.²⁴ Philostratus' publication of the life of the Pythagorean thaumaturge, Apollonius of Tyana, in the 220s set an example in this respect, followed by biographies of Pythagoras himself by Porphyry and Iamblichus at the beginning of the fourth century. The Christian portrayal of Origen as a *θεῖος ἄνθρωπος* may have been partly in response to such literary activity.²⁵

After Iamblichus the philosopher acquires a more deeply religious character, allowing modern scholars to refer to him as 'the pagan holy man'. The most enthusiastic admirer of the pagan *θεῖοι ἄνδρες* (although he does not use the expression) was Eunapius, whose *Lives of the Sophists* appeared in the last decade of the fourth century. But by then pagan holy men had become marginalized. In an aggressively Christian empire they survived only by leading lives of philosophical contemplation and theurgical worship in quiet seclusion. Yet when the true Christian philosopher is described, it is in the exact terms of his pagan counterpart. Writing in the 430s, Cyril of Alexandria claims:

In reality a sage is, and is described by us as being, a man who has been enriched by clear and unambiguous doctrine relating to the God of all things, and has made as careful an enquiry as possible into the matters that concern him, I mean as far as is permissible to human beings, and has acquired along with this a perfect knowledge of all necessary things, so as to be in a position to enable those who follow his teaching with righteousness to conceive a desire for adorning themselves with the splendours of virtue. (*C. Jul.* 5, PG 76. 773AB)

On a more popular level, the Hermetic texts also had their Christian readers. We know from the contents of the sixth codex of the Nag Hammadi library that the spiritual teaching of Hermetism appealed to fourth-century Christian Gnostics. Amongst catholic Christians Hermes figures chiefly as a pagan prophet foretelling the triumph of Christianity (Fowden 1993: 179–80). In Egypt the first catholic Christian to quote from the Hermetica is Didymus the Blind (c. 313–98). The next is Cyril of Alexandria, who quotes Hermes at some length in his attack on Julian's *Contra Galilaeos* to show that the very teacher relied upon by Julian was really a prophet of Christ (*C. Jul.* 1, PG. 76. 552D–553B). The Hermetica passed very early through Latin translation into Roman Africa (Fowden 1993: 198). Tertullian

²⁴ The idea of the *θεῖος ἄνθρωπος* was taken up in Germany between the wars by members of the History of Religions School, notably Ludwig Bieler (1935), who developed it as a way of linking the New Testament to the wider Roman world. Bieler conceived of the *θεῖος ἄνθρωπος* as an *allgemeine Typus*, an inclusive category, which could explain how Jesus fitted into his ancient milieu as a sage and wonderworker. Although the expression *θεῖος ἄνθρωπος* is first attested in Pindar and Plato (LSJ s.v. *θεῖος* (A)3), the evidence for its early use is rather meagre. Opponents of the History of Religions School such as Carl Holladay (1977) have disputed whether a Hellenistic concept of the 'divine man' ever really existed at all. In fact the *θεῖος ἄνθρωπος* as a recognizable figure only comes into prominence in the later Roman empire. For the debate on Bieler's *Typus* see Corrington 1986.

²⁵ For the late antique flowering of pagan holy men, and the part played by their biographies in the rivalry between paganism and Christianity, see Fowden 1982 and Cox 1983.

mentions 'the Egyptian Mercury' as a teacher of belief in the transmigration of souls (*An.* 33. 2). Lactantius, who was of African origin, and Augustine both appeal to Hermes as a pagan prophet of Christianity. This became his established role in the Christian world, in spite of Marcellus of Ancyra's attacking him (along with Plato and Aristotle) as the inspirer of all heresies (Fowden 1993: 209). The spiritual and theurgical side of Hermetism did not make its full impact on Christianity until much later. In the third century it was taken up enthusiastically by Iamblichus, who passed it on to the later Neoplatonists. It was thus through Proclus and Ps.-Dionysius that Hermetism influenced the Christian mystical tradition. Nevertheless it is curious that the use of the verb *θεοποιέω* in a spiritual sense appears for the first time in the second century, very possibly simultaneously, both in the Hermetic Corpus and in Clement of Alexandria. There is no evidence that Clement had direct knowledge of the Hermetic tractates, though of course he had certainly studied Gnostic texts at first hand for polemical purposes. Yet the declaration in the *Poemandres* that the blessed end of those who possess gnosis is to be deified (*CH* I. 26) resonates with Clement's assertion that the teaching of Christ, which is true gnosis, deifies the believer (*Paed.* I. 98. 3).

What is beyond doubt is Clement's and his successors' debt to Platonism. The definition of likeness to God as the goal of the spiritual life, the concept of participation, the metaphor of the soul's ascent, and the notion of reaching out to God in ecstasy are all of Platonic origin. But in the development of the idea of deification and its distinctive vocabulary, it was Christianity that led the way. By the time Porphyry first wrote of the philosopher deifying himself, Christians had already been speaking of deification for more than a century.