

**On the Occasion of the 1,600<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Birth of Proclus (2/08/12)**  
Edward P. Butler

It is often thought that Platonism looks primarily to another world, but all of the Platonist's worlds are here and now. Writers write for whomever can understand them, and whenever and wherever that person is, is the writer's here and now. I firmly believe that we are the first generation since the destruction of the institutions and traditions of the Platonic Academy with the possibility of truly understanding Proclean thought.

To understand Proclus properly is to grasp the significance of the whole of classical thought, of which he is the inheritor. He did not merely receive and transmit a body of doctrine, nor did his predecessors. At every stage, classical philosophy was defined, not by doctrines, but by the transformative labor of ideas, from its founding moments in cosmogonic poetry, to the discovery of dialectic in the era of the sophists and of Socrates, through the age of arguments between Platonists, Peripatetics, Skeptics, Stoics and Atomists that refined its concepts, to an age of existential engagement and crisis under the imperiate. In this era of late antiquity, stretching from Plotinus through Iamblichus to Proclus and beyond to Damascius, the final successor, Platonism, having grown to embrace all that had been successful in the competing schools of the Hellenistic age, transformed and renewed itself to confront the antic cosmic movements that threatened through their nihilism the enlightenment achieved in the Mediterranean world. This Mediterranean enlightenment promised, if it could be sustained, to propagate itself without bounds. Though the language in which it was practiced was still, for the most part, Hellenic, its practitioners, native speakers of the language of philosophy, were of every nation. There was no reason to think that this dialogue could not propagate itself in

every direction, transformed by the civilizations it encountered, but remaining true to its faith in reciprocal enlightenment and the intelligibility of the universe.

The Platonic movement did not remain aloof to the gathering threat in the imperial era. Rather, it tapped anew into the reservoir that had always sustained it, the cosmogonic revelations of the Gods. Plotinus led a shift from the concern with intellectual formation to a profound focus on existential henology, so as to better engage the new apocalyptic movements on a common experiential basis. Iamblichus clarified the relationship of philosophy to revealed theologies. Philosophy is informed by theologies, and can assume a critical disposition toward them, but theologies, with their primary cosmogonic function operative at every moment, can neither be exhausted by philosophical appropriation nor reduced to types. The application of philosophical hermeneutics to the sacred texts of diverse traditions unleashed tremendous creative forces. It was this vital relationship to the cosmogonic narratives, to the salvific images, and above all else, to the ineffable persons of the Gods, that made the outstanding philosophical achievements of late antique Platonism possible.

Amid the storms of their era, Proclus and his colleagues labored with clarity in their awareness of the presence of a moment such as our own, in which problematics immanent to philosophy, even deprived of a cultural basis fully supportive of the insight into truth, would arrive at a fortunate configuration, and in which the forces of historical change, as obscure as they are, would conspire to make it possible for greater numbers of people, be they wholly deprived of philosophical instruction, to pursue the existential commitments that make the study of philosophy fruitful in life. Through his uncanny combination of inspiration and discipline, Proclus left as his legacy a body of thought so

organic and systematic as to make it possible, with the correct basic orientation, not merely to understand authentic Platonism, but to engage in its living practice.