

Systematizing the Sacred: Neoplatonism and the Reconfiguration of Theology and Religious Beliefs in the Roman Empire

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Abstract¹

This study examines the profound theological transformation in the reformulation of religious concepts that took place in the Roman Empire from the third century CE onward under the influence of Neoplatonism. This epoch marked the apogee of pagan doctrine, characterized by its dynamic interaction with Egyptian religious systems and the broader philosophical heritage of the era, which was intimately embedded in social and cultural life. The transformation extended across a wide range of mythological ideas, religious beliefs, and ritual practices, signaling a shift beyond the traditional polytheistic framework of Greco-Roman religion towards the abstract, hierarchical monotheism that distinguished Neoplatonic thought. The research contends that this transformation did not entail a wholesale rejection of long-standing mythological beliefs; rather, it represented a systematic reorientation in which central religious elements were retained and reinterpreted through philosophical abstraction and hermeneutic innovation.

Through comprehensive analysis, this study aims to illuminate the specific mechanisms by which Neoplatonism adapted, reimagined, and systematically transformed the core religious concepts of Greek myth, cosmology, and ritual practice. It is argued that Neoplatonism was not a radical departure from the deeply entrenched religious and mythological foundations of Greco-Roman society. Instead, it functioned as an advanced intellectual reformulation, synthesizing essential elements of Greek religious traditions with the precise philosophical abstraction pioneered by Plato. This process resulted in the development of a new epistemological and conceptual lexicon through which reality and existence could be articulated within the context of the Roman Empire, paving the way toward a more abstract and comprehensive reconstruction of divine concepts and cosmological order.

Consequently, Neoplatonism emerged as a wellspring of religious, intellectual, and spiritual renewal in Roman society. It provided the theoretical and doctrinal foundation on which figures such as Emperor Julian would later depend in their efforts

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to revive and reorganize pagan traditions during the final centuries of Roman imperial rule.

Keywords: Neoplatonism, Monotheism, Roman religion, Theological transformation, Reconfiguration of religious concepts, Greek mythology, Cosmology, Prayer, Philosophical reinterpretation, Paganism, Emperor Julian, Religious rituals, Deities, Hedonism, Magic.

"منهجة المقدّس: الأفلاطونية الجديدة وإعادة صياغة اللاهوت والمعتقدات الدينية في الإمبراطورية الرومانية"

ملخص:

تتبع هذه الدراسة التحول اللاهوتي العميق في إعادة صياغة المفاهيم الدينية التي شهدتها الإمبراطورية الرومانية منذ بداية القرن الثالث الميلادي تحت تأثير الأفلاطونية الجديدة. تلك الفترة التي شهدت ذروة العقيدة الوثنية وتفاعلها مع المعتقدات الدينية المصرية، وكذلك مع الموروث الفلسفي الذي لم يكن معزولاً عن المجتمع. شمل هذا التحول طيفاً واسعاً من المفاهيم الأسطورية والدينية وكذلك بالنسبة للطقوس الدينية، تلك المفاهيم التي خرجت عن الإطار التعددي للمعتقدات الدينية اليونانية الرومانية القديمة إلى التوحيد الهرمي المجرّد للأفلاطونية الجديدة. تفترض الدراسة أن هذا التحول لم يكن رفضاً للمعتقدات الأسطورية الشائعة بقدر ما كان إعادة توجيه منهجيّ، حُفظت فيه العناصر الدينية الأساسية من خلال إعادة تفسير فلسفية.

يهدف البحث إلى تقديم رؤية شاملة توضح الآليات المحددة التي من خلالها قامت الأفلاطونية الجديدة بإعادة صياغة المفاهيم الدينية الجوهرية في الأساطير اليونانية وعلم الكونيات والممارسات الطقسية وإعادة تفسيرها وتحولها.

يفترض هذا البحث أن الأفلاطونية الجديدة لا تشكل انقطاعاً تاماً عن المعتقدات الدينية والأسطورية الضاربة بجذورها في عمق المجتمع اليوناني-الروماني، بل تمثل إعادة صياغة فكرية متقدمة تجمع بين عناصر التقاليد الدينية اليونانية ومبادئ التجريد الفلسفي الدقيق الذي وضع أسسه أفلاطون. أدى هذا التحول إلى صياغة منظومة معرفية ولغوية جديدة عبّرت عن الواقع

والوجود ضمن نسق الإمبراطورية الرومانية، مع إعادة إنتاج المفاهيم الإلهية وبنية الكون على نحو أكثر تجريداً وشمولاً.

ونتيجة لذلك، برزت الأفلاطونية المحدثّة كمصدر للتجديد الديني والفكري والروحي في المجتمع الروماني. حيث شكّلت الأساس العقائدي الذي استند إليه الإمبراطور جوليان المرتد لإحياء وتنظيم التقاليد الوثنية في أواخر الإمبراطورية الرومانية.

الكلمات الدالة: الأفلاطونية الجديدة، التوحيد، الديانة الرومانية، التحول اللاهوتي، إعادة صياغة المفاهيم الدينية، الأساطير اليونانية، علم الكونيات، الصلاة، إعادة التفسير الفلسفي، الوثنية، جوليان المرتد، التوحيد، الطقوس الدينية، الآلهة، الهديونات، السحر.

Significance of the Study

This research offers a critical exploration of a pivotal phase in the religious and intellectual evolution of the Roman Empire: the systematic reconfiguration of theological and religious beliefs through the lens of Neoplatonism. The significance of this study unfolds along four main axes:

1. Intellectual History:

The study highlights a dynamic interplay in Late Antiquity, where philosophy and religion were not antagonists but engaged in a mutually transformative dialogue. By elucidating how Neoplatonism systematically reinterpreted and assimilated elements of Greco-Roman myth, ritual, and theology into a unified metaphysical synthesis, the research demonstrates how traditional religious narratives maintained their societal influence while gaining renewed philosophical meaning. This process of systematizing the sacred decisively shaped the conceptual and cultural fabric of the Roman Empire, leaving an enduring imprint on theological and philosophical thought in subsequent civilizations.

1. Religious Studies:

Departing from reductive models of religious “decline” or “replacement,” this study advances a nuanced framework for examining religious transformation within the Roman Empire. It demonstrates that central features of traditional religion—including anthropomorphic gods, ritual practices such as sacrifice and prayer, and cosmogonic myths—were not merely displaced, but instead underwent processes of philosophical abstraction and systematized reinterpretation. Through reconfiguration within the paradigm of Neoplatonism, these elements were integrated into a unified intellectual structure that responded to the evolving spiritual aspirations of imperial society,

encompassing ideals of transcendence, personal salvation, and rational understanding of the divine.

2. **Philosophical Theology:**

The research highlights the singular synthesis achieved by Neoplatonism, which integrated rigorous philosophical inquiry (*theoria*) with ritual engagement (*theurgy*). By focusing on leading figures such as Iamblichus and Proclus, the study articulates how Neoplatonism within the Roman Empire negotiated the tension between the transcendent, ineffable One and the pluralistic world of the gods, cults, and local rituals. This Neoplatonic synthesis challenges modern binaries of “philosophy” and “religion,” establishing Neoplatonism as a holistic philosophical religion uniquely adapted to the context of Roman imperial pluralism.

3. **Enduring Legacy:**

The findings elucidate the foundational role of Neoplatonism as a vital bridge between the religious world of pagan antiquity and that of the Middle Ages. Core Neoplatonic concepts—such as emanation (*πρόοδος*), return (*ἐπιστροφή*), and hierarchical participation—came to shape theological discourses across Christian, Islamic, and Jewish traditions. Thus, understanding the Neoplatonic transformation of Greco-Roman religiosity is indispensable for tracing the continuity, adaptation, and transmission of concepts pertaining to God, the cosmos, and the soul across the long arc of Western intellectual history.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research, with an explicit focus on the Roman imperial context, are as follows:

1. To delineate the fundamental characteristics of ancient Greek and Roman religious belief, with particular attention to anthropomorphic divinity, narrative cosmology, and a ritual-based model of divine-human engagement (*χάρις* and *τιμή*), as manifested within the cultural and public life of the Roman Empire.

2. To analyze the philosophical and theological structure of Neoplatonism, elucidating its central doctrines—the ineffable One (*τὸ ἕν*), the emanative hierarchy (*Nous*, Soul, Cosmos), and the ascent (*ἐνωσις*) of the individual soul—with reference to their particular development and reception within the Roman world.

3. To trace and document the mechanisms by which Neoplatonism, from its inception in the Roman Empire, transformed and redefined traditional Greco-Roman theological concepts. This includes:

- The reorganization of the Olympian pantheon into a hierarchical system of divine henads (*ἐνάδες*) and metaphysical principles fit for a universal empire.

- The legitimation and philosophical integration of ritual practices as theurgy (**θεουργία**), especially in the theurgical innovations of Iamblichus and Proclus within the late imperial context.

- The allegorical hermeneutics (**ἀλληγορία**) applied to mythic narratives—such as those of Prometheus, Psyche and Eros, and chthonic gods—as symbolic representations of the soul's descent and ascent within the Neoplatonic metaphysical order.

4. To demonstrate, using representative case studies, how the transformation of the Olympian pantheon and the integration of ritual practice as theurgy produced a coherent religious and metaphysical system that could address the spiritual and intellectual aspirations of the Roman imperial era.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, hermeneutic methodology designed to investigate the evolution of religious belief within the sociocultural environment of the Roman Empire. The research is interdisciplinary, synthesizing approaches from intellectual history, philosophy, and the history of religions to produce a nuanced account of religious transformation in antiquity.

1. **Textual and Hermeneutic Analysis.**

At the core of the study is a meticulous analysis of primary sources using hermeneutic and exegetical methods. The research examines works central to Neoplatonism, including Plotinus's *Enneads*, Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo*, Iamblichus's *De Mysteriis*, and Proclus's *Elements of Theology*, as well as foundational Greek literary and religious texts such as Homer's epics, Hesiod's *Theogony*, and the Homeric Hymns. This stage aims to uncover ways in which these texts reinterpreted, preserved, or transformed traditional religious concepts under Roman rule.

2. **Historical and Contextual Analysis.**

The study situates religious developments within the broader context of the Roman imperial era, characterized by intense religious pluralism and cross-cultural exchange. Particular attention is given to the intellectual currents of Late Antiquity, where philosophical movements like Middle Platonism and Stoicism laid the groundwork for the Neoplatonic system. This historical lens clarifies how Roman religious life was shaped by both continuity and innovation.

3. **Comparative Conceptual Synthesis.**

A systematic comparative approach is employed, mapping the transformation of religious practices and concepts from the polytheistic traditions of Greece and Rome to their philosophical reinterpretations in Neoplatonism. Case studies include the Neoplatonic structuring of the Olympian pantheon, the integration of theurgical rites into

philosophical practice, and the allegorical reformulation of mythic narratives to align with prevailing metaphysical doctrines.

4. **Critical Engagement with Modern Scholarship.**

The interpretation of ancient evidence is supported and challenged by extensive engagement with modern scholarship on Greek and Roman religion (notably, Burkert, Parker, Chaniotis, Mikalson, Vernant, Kindt, and Bremmer) and on Neoplatonism (including Armstrong, Dillon, Shaw, and Gerson). This dialogue with contemporary research ensures that the study is situated within ongoing academic debates and contributes original insights to the field.

Previous Studies

Research into ancient Greek and Roman religious belief—and its subsequent reinterpretation in the context of the Roman Empire—has been formed by a rich and expanding scholarly tradition. This study draws on key works that have established the parameters for understanding religious life under imperial rule.

• Greek and Roman Religion:

Seminal works by Burkert (1985) and Parker (2011) have defined Greek religion as a fundamentally communal and ritualistic phenomenon, considering the centrality of myth, practice, and civic engagement (Burkert, 1985; Parker, 2011). Mikalson (2005) extends this civic perspective, exploring how religious institutions and concepts of purity shaped daily life in Greek and later Roman societies. Vernant (1991) and his structuralist school provided crucial models for analyzing the underlying social and symbolic structures of religion and myth—a perspective that, when applied to the Roman Empire, reveals patterns of adaptation and integration. Chaniotis (2010; 2018) has highlighted the relational nature of religious experience, grounding divine–human interaction in a framework of mutual obligations—a framework especially relevant to the multicultural tapestry of the Roman period. Work by Kindt (2012, 2019, 2020) and Bremmer (1994) establishes anthropomorphism as a sophisticated cultural strategy for bridging divine presence with civic identity, a point of particular importance in the context of Roman imperial ideology and its appropriation of Greek precedent.

• Neoplatonism and Religious Transformation:

Studies by Armstrong (1984), Shaw (1995), Dillon (1996), and Gerson (2010) have clarified how Neoplatonism responded to and reimagined the inherited religious landscape, especially as it adapted traditional Greco-Roman elements to fit a new philosophical and metaphysical framework, vital for understanding both continuity and change under imperial Rome.

2. The Emergence and System of Neoplatonism

The rise of Neoplatonism during late antiquity represents a transformative chapter in the intellectual and religious history of the Roman Empire, marking the

systematization of Platonic philosophy within a complex metaphysical and theological framework. The movement crystalized in the third century CE, rooted in the teaching of Plotinus (c. 204–270 CE) and sustained through the works of his successors, including Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus (Armstrong, 1966–1988; Gerson, 2013; Dillon, 1996; Wallis, 1995).

The foundational architecture of Neoplatonism was extensively mapped by the translations and commentaries of A.H. Armstrong, whose English edition of Plotinus' *Enneads* remains a cornerstone for Anglophone scholarship. E.R. Dodds's study and translation of Proclus' *Elements of Theology* further advanced the field (Dodds, 1963). Lloyd P. Gerson (2013) offered a sweeping survey of the Platonic tradition, elucidating its evolution from Plato through Middle Platonism into Neoplatonism in the Roman imperial context. John Dillon (1996), in a meticulous study, traced the development of Platonic thought across these periods, emphasizing the reinterpretation of philosophical and religious ideas under Roman influence. The dominant triad of the One, Nous, and Soul—expounded by Plotinus and developed by Rist (1967) and Wallis (1995)—constitutes the core scaffolding of Neoplatonic ontology and cosmology.

A key transformation within later Neoplatonism is the pronounced shift toward ritual, visible especially in the Roman imperial era. Gregory Shaw (1995, 2014) provides the definitive analysis of Iamblichus, positing theurgy (θεουργία) as a pragmatic metaphysical practice integral to Neoplatonic philosophy. The translation and commentary of Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbelle (2003) on Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis* have become essential for understanding the ritual and magical dimensions that flourished within the Roman world.

3. Theurgy, Magic, and Ritual Continuity

Research into ritual, magic, and theurgical practices in the Greco-Roman world—especially during the Roman Empire—has become increasingly nuanced. Hans Dieter Betz (1986), through the *Greek Magical Papyri* project, revealed the extensive landscape of ritual and magical practice in this era. Graf (1997) and Johnston (1999) skillfully distinguished between everyday magic and the more philosophical and elevated practice of theurgy. The dialectical debate between Porphyry's rationalist critique and Iamblichus' robust defense of ritual is pivotal for understanding Neoplatonism's systematization of Roman sacred traditions (Shaw, 1995; Addey, 2014). Tanaseanu-Döbler (2013) traced the invention of theurgical ritual, while Uždavinys (2003, 2008) situated Neoplatonic practice within a broader philosophical and sacramental context, highlighting influences from Egyptian and Near Eastern traditions. Pejovic (2024) has recently illuminated the embodied aspect of theurgy, showing how rituals incorporating supernatural assistants

(παρέδροι) reflect the integration of daimones into Neoplatonic celestial orders in the context of Roman religion.

4. Allegorical Interpretation and the Reconfiguration of Myth.

The Neoplatonic strategy of allegorical interpretation marks a profound reconfiguration of myth within the Roman Empire. Robert Lamberton (1989) demonstrated how Porphyry and Proclus approached Homer as a theologian, while Luc Brisson (2004) systematically explored how Neoplatonic philosophers 'saved' the myths by discerning their hidden philosophical meanings. Peter Struck (2010) highlighted how allegory facilitated the soul's ascent, imbued with upward, anagogic purpose. Case studies, such as Kenney (1990) on Cupid and Psyche, reveal how mythological motifs were transformed into spiritual and philosophical parables. Recent research by Struck (2023) (delves into the symbolic logic of "σύμβολα" and "συνθήματα" in Iamblichus, emphasizing their function as divinely instituted channels of communication between gods and souls in Roman metaphysical religion.

5. Cosmology and Philosophical Theology

Reinterpretations of cosmology in the Roman Neoplatonic tradition are significant for understanding the adaptation of Hesiodic and Platonic models. Gábor Betegh (2004) analyzed the Derveni Papyrus to demonstrate the pre-Socratic roots of cosmogonical allegory. Proclus' works, including *Théologie Platonicienne* (Saffrey & Westerink, 1978–1997) and Festugière's commentary on the *Timaeus* (1966), provide intricate readings of the theogonic tradition as theology. Dillon (1996) and Phillips (1997) further dissect the transposition of the succession myth (Ouranos–Kronos–Zeus) into a narrative of metaphysical emanation within Roman theology. Claridge (2024) synthesizes this late antique movement, showing how myth, cosmology, and metaphysics converged into a unified theological system.

Gap and Contribution

Despite the depth and breadth of these scholarly literatures, there remains a need for synthesis that explicitly traces the transformation of Greco-Roman religious and philosophical traditions within the Roman Empire. This study integrates the most recent findings—such as Claridge (2024) on cosmological reinterpretation, Pejovic (2024) on embodied theurgy, and Struck (2023) on symbolic mediation—to offer a systematic account of how Neoplatonism reconfigured the sacred landscape of the Roman world and established new foundations for metaphysical and theological inquiry.

Introduction: Greek and Roman Mythological Beliefs in the Roman Empire.

The religious-mythological worldview that emerged in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds—especially as it developed under the Roman Empire—was characterized by a dynamic tension between the vividly anthropomorphic Olympian gods and a higher, often impersonal, cosmic order to which even these gods were subject. In Homeric epic,

this principle is personified as **Μοῖρα** (Moirai) or **Αἶσα** (Aisa), forces of destiny that govern both mortals and immortals. Thus, (**Ποσειδῶν**) acknowledges his subjection to **Μοῖρα** (Odyssey 9.528–535), and even (**Ζεύς**), though sovereign of the gods, cannot prevent the death of his son (**Σαρπηδῶν**), ultimately resigning himself to fate while only delaying its fulfillment (Iliad 16.431–461). As Allan (2006) has argued, such episodes reveal the limits of divine will and the centrality of fate in Homeric thought. The death of (**Πάτροκλος**) further illustrates this interplay: Homer in the Iliad attributes his fall variously to Ζεύς (16.252, 647, 800), to Ζεύς’s intent (688), to the collective will of the gods (693), to (**Ἀπόλλων**) (791, 804, 816), to both Ζεύς and (**Ἀπόλλων**) (844), and finally to the convergence of Μοῖρα, (**Ἀπόλλων**), (**Εὐφορβος**), and (**Ἑκτωρ**) (849–850). Sarischoulis (2016) emphasizes that this shifting attribution underscores the narrative strategy of presenting divine action as always mediated by an overarching necessity. Graziosi and Haubold (2010) likewise note that Homer’s poetic technique consistently frames the gods as powerful yet constrained agents within a larger cosmic order. Roman religion, while adopting much from Greek mythology through **interpretatio graeca**, emphasized the civic and functional dimensions of divine worship, integrating Greek deities into its pantheon while preserving Roman cults. Claridge (2024) has recently highlighted how this structural subordination of the gods to fate remained a defining feature of Mediterranean religiosity, shaping both Greek and Roman conceptions of divine power.

Early Christian authors frequently acknowledged that even pagan peoples, despite their devotion to idols, retained an awareness of a supreme transcendent deity. Cyprianus (Thascius Caecilius Cyprianus, c. 200–258 CE), Bishop of Carthage, records the statement of Saturninus of Tucca: “***Gentiles quamuis idola colant, tamen summum Deum patrem creatorem cognoscunt et confitentur***” (Sententiae Episcoporum, 52) — “*Although the nations worship idols, yet they know and confess the supreme God, the Father and Creator.*” This recognition of a transcendent God among pagans has been noted by modern scholars as part of the Christian apologetic strategy to demonstrate continuity between pagan religiosity and Christian monotheism (Claridge, 2024).

Augustine (354–430 CE) interprets this phenomenon as the transmission of divine teaching to the pagans through the prophets. He remarks: “***Mirantur autem quidam... Platonem de Deo ista sensisse... unde nonnulli putauerunt eum, quando perrexit in Aegyptum, Hieremiam audisse prophetam uel scripturas propheticas in eadem peregrinatione legisse***” (De Civitate Dei, 8.11). — “*Some, indeed, marvel that Plato held such views concerning God; whence certain persons have supposed that, when he journeyed into Egypt, he either heard the prophet Jeremiah or read the prophetic Scriptures during that same sojourn.*”

Augustine thus explains Platonic theology as a partial reception of biblical revelation. Scholars such as O'Donnell (1992) and Inge (2005) have emphasized how Augustine's interpretation reflects his broader reliance on Platonic and Neoplatonic categories to articulate his doctrine.

Yet, it is too restrictive to locate the beginning of this recognition only in the time of Plato. Earlier indications appear already in the fragments of Heraclitus (**Ἡράκλειτος**) (c. 535–475 BCE), who declared: **“νόμος καὶ βουλὴ πείθεσθαι ἐνός”** (Fragment B33 DK) — *“The law is to obey the will of the One.”* This fragment has been interpreted as an early articulation of a unifying principle that transcends the plurality of gods (Kahn, 1979; Mouraviev, 2011).

The same intuition appears in the Stoic tradition, culminating in Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (121–180 CE), who in his *Meditations* describes the cosmos as governed by a single divine principle: **“κόσμος τε γὰρ εἷς ἐξ ἀπάντων, καὶ θεὸς εἷς διὰ πάντων, καὶ οὐσία μία, καὶ νόμος εἷς, λόγος κοινὸς πάντων τῶν νοερῶν ζώων, καὶ ἀλήθεια μία”** (*Meditationes*, 7.9). — *“For there is one cosmos made up of all things, and one god through all things, and one substance, and one law, and one reason common to all rational beings, and one truth.”*

Modern interpreters have emphasized (Dillon, 1996; Hadot, 1998; Gerson, 2013), Neoplatonism functioned as a grand synthesis that provided the late antique world with a comprehensive metaphysical framework, one that could integrate philosophy, religion, and ritual practice.

To fully appreciate the Neoplatonic synthesis, one must first understand the rich and complex tapestry of Ancient Greek and Roman religion, which was an inherently polytheistic system deeply embedded in the civic and cultural life of the **πόλις** (pólis). The Olympian and Chthonian deities were not abstract principles but vividly anthropomorphic figures, often portrayed in conflict, as seen in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (e.g., *Iliad* 1.446–474; *Odyssey* 3.430–463), where sacrifices (**θυσίαι**,) and libations (**σπονδαί**) are described in detail as communal acts binding mortals and gods. Hesiod's *Works and Days* (lines 336–341) situates such rituals within the agricultural and seasonal rhythms of Greek life, while the Homeric Hymn to Demeter (lines 270–300) provides the foundational myth for the Eleusinian Mysteries (**Ἐλευσίνια Μυστήρια**), one of the most significant communal religious ceremonies in Greece. Pausanias, in his *Description of Greece* (1.24.3), further records the centrality of public sacrifices and festivals in maintaining civic identity. These sources collectively demonstrate that Greek religion was fundamentally ritualistic and communal, structured around reciprocal relationships of **τιμή** (honor) and **χάρις** (favor) between humans and the divine, ensuring both civic cohesion and cosmic balance (Burkert, 1985; Mikalson, 2005; Parker, 2011).

As anthropologist Angelos Chaniotis (2010) has argued, the relationship between mortals and gods in Greek religion can be understood as a “contract of mutual obligations” (p. 122), in which ritual acts such as sacrifice (θυσία) and libation (σπονδή,) established reciprocal bonds of τιμή (honor) and χάρις (favor). This reciprocal framework is vividly illustrated in Homeric epic: in the *Iliad* (1.446–474), the Achaeans perform a communal sacrifice to Apollo, burning the thigh bones and sharing the roasted meat in a ritual meal, while in the *Odyssey* (3.430–463), Nestor leads a sacrifice to Poseidon that reinforces both divine favor and civic solidarity. Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (336–341) situates such rituals within the agricultural calendar, underscoring their role in maintaining cosmic and social order. The Homeric Hymn to Demeter (270–300) provides the mythic charter for the Eleusinian Mysteries, a paradigmatic example of how ritual practice could bind communities together through shared religious experience. Pausanias, writing in the second century CE, repeatedly emphasizes the civic dimension of sacrifice and festival, noting, for example, the public sacrifices at the altar of Zeus in Athens (*Description of Greece* 1.24.3). As Walter Burkert (1985) has shown, these practices were not merely symbolic but constituted the very fabric of Greek religion, where myth and ritual were inseparably intertwined. Myths, transmitted by poets such as Homer and Hesiod, functioned as cultural vehicles for moral instruction, etiological explanation, and the reinforcement of communal identity (Burkert, 1985; Mikalson, 2005; Parker, 2011). Together, these sources reveal a religious system that was simultaneously narrative and performative, mythic and ritualistic, and profoundly communal in its orientation.

Central Features of Greek and Roman Religious and Mythological Traditions within the Roman Empire.

a. Anthropomorphic Deities.

Ancient Greek and Roman religions, especially within the context of the Roman Empire, were distinguished by their radical commitment to anthropomorphism. The gods were imagined not as distant, abstract principles but as beings possessing distinctly human bodies, emotions, passions, and vulnerabilities (Bailey, 2020, pp. 23-26). Their narratives—depicting love, jealousy, rage, and intervention—mirrored and magnified human experience at the cosmic level, enabling worshippers to relate to the divine on familiar terms, yet always aware of the gods’ transcendent superiority (Vernant, 1991, pp. 41-45; Kindt, 2019, pp. 158–161).

In Homer’s *Iliad*, the gods are portrayed as deeply entangled in human affairs: Zeus debates with Hera over the fate of Troy (*Iliad* 4.1–20), Athena intervenes to restrain Achilles’ rage (*Iliad* 1.194–222), and Aphrodite is wounded in battle by Diomedes (*Iliad* 5.330–370), underscoring the paradox of divine power and human-like vulnerability. Similarly, in the *Odyssey*, Athena’s protective guidance of Odysseus (*Odyssey* 1.44–62)

and Poseidon's wrathful obstruction of his return (Odyssey 9.528–535) illustrate how divine personalities directly shaped human destinies. Hesiod's Theogony (lines 886–900) presents the gods as a family whose rivalries, alliances, and successions mirror human social and political structures, while Euripides' Bacchae (64–169) dramatizes Dionysus as both liberator and destroyer, embodying the ecstatic and dangerous dimensions of divine-human interaction.

Recent scholarship asserts that this anthropomorphism was not a simple projection of human qualities onto the divine, but a sophisticated strategy deeply embedded in Greco-Roman culture. As Kindt (2020a, 2020b) demonstrates, the human-like characteristics of the gods allowed them to operate as "culturally embedded agents" to explain nature, society, and morality. Bremmer (1994, pp. 113–129) and Osborne (2010, pp. 75–76) underscore the role of anthropomorphism in forging civic identity and ritual continuity. Cognitive studies by Zelinová and Škvrná (2023) further illuminate how this approach created an intelligible connection—a cognitive bridge—between the human and divine realms, ensuring awe and accessibility. For Roman society, these tendencies were reinforced through the absorption of Greek deities and myths into Roman cults, rituals, and institutions (Claridge, 2024, pp. 20–21).

b. **Cosmology.** The cosmology of Ancient Greek religion provided a narrative and theogonic framework for understanding the universe's origins and structure, articulated most fully in Hesiod's Theogony (c. 700 BCE). The poem begins with **Χάος** (Cháos), "the Gap" or primordial void, from which the first entities emerged: Gaia (**Γαῖα**, Earth), Tartarus (**Τάρταρος**, the abyss), and Eros (**Ἔρως**, desire) (Theogony 116–122). From Chaos also came Erebus (Darkness) and Nyx (Night), whose union produced Aether (Brightness) and Hemera (Day) (Theogony 123–125). This sequence reflects what Burkert (1985) calls a "genealogical cosmology," in which the cosmos unfolds through successive generations of divine beings rather than abstract principles.

Gaia (**Γαῖα**), the fertile Earth, parthenogenetically produced Uranus (**Οὐρανός**, Sky), Ourea (**Ὅρη**, Mountains), and Pontus (**Πόντος**, Sea) (Theogony 126–132; West, 1966). Her union with Uranus generated the Titans (**Τιτᾶνες**), the Cyclopes (**Κύκλωπες**), and the Hundred-Handers (**Ἑκατόγχειρες**), primordial beings embodying both creative and chaotic forces (Theogony 133–153). The first cosmic rupture occurs when Uranus, fearing his children, imprisons them within Gaia. In response, Gaia fashions a sickle of adamant, and her son Cronus (**Κρόνος**) ambushes and castrates Uranus (Theogony 154–182). This violent act, as Vernant (1991) and Couprie (2011) emphasize, symbolizes a fundamental cosmogonic separation: the distancing of Sky from Earth, which creates the ordered space (**χάσμα**) in which the cosmos can develop. From the blood of Uranus spring the Erinyes (**Ἐρινύες**, Furies), Giants (**Γίγαντες**), and Meliae

(Μελίαι, ash-tree nymphs), while from the sea foam of his severed genitals arises Aphrodite (Ἀφροδίτη) (Theogony 188–206).

The succession myth continues with the Titanomachy (Τιτανομαχία), the ten-year war between the older Titans and the younger Olympians (Ὀλύμπιοι) led by Zeus (Theogony 617–720; Nagy, 2015). With the aid of the Hundred-Handers, Zeus triumphs, hurling the Titans into Tartarus and establishing a new divine order. This victory, as Hesiod narrates, institutes Zeus as the guarantor of δίκη (justice) and κράτος (sovereignty). The Olympians' triumph thus represents not only a generational shift but also the stabilization of cosmic and moral order. As Martin (1940) and Kahn (1960) argue, the succession myth functions as a mythological charter for political legitimacy, projecting onto the cosmos the dynamics of kingship, rebellion, and the establishment of lawful rule.

Many texts reinforce this cosmological vision. In Homer's Iliad (15.187–193), Zeus recalls his victory over the Titans, underscoring his role as cosmic sovereign. The Homeric Hymn to Apollo (lines 1–25) situates Zeus's authority within a divine hierarchy that mirrors the ordered cosmos. Modern scholarship has highlighted how these myths were not merely stories but frameworks for understanding the relationship between divine power, natural order, and human society. Betegh (2004) shows how the Derveni Papyrus reinterprets Hesiod's cosmogony in allegorical and philosophical terms, while Bartninkas (2023) and Boutsikas (2020) emphasize the ritual and astronomical dimensions of Greek cosmology, linking myth to cult practice and celestial observation.

Thus, the Greek cosmological tradition, beginning with Hesiod's Theogony (West, 1966; Miller, 2001) and elaborated in epic, hymn, and later philosophical texts, provided not only an account of the universe's origins but also a mythological blueprint for reality itself. In this framework, the establishment of divine hierarchy and cosmic order is inseparable from the very structure of the universe (Burkert, 1985; Allan, 2012). As scholars have emphasized, Hesiod's succession myth and the narratives of divine conflict articulate a vision in which the consolidation of Zeus's rule embodies both cosmic stability and moral justice (Vlastos, 1947; Vernant, 1991). In this way, Greek cosmology functioned as a theological and political charter, projecting onto the cosmos the principles of hierarchy, justice, and lawful rule (Allan, 2012; Miller, 2001).

Although the cosmogonic myths narrate the transition from primordial chaos to ordered cosmos, with a full personification of the forces of nature and an emphasis on the emergence of a hierarchical system ultimately headed by Zeus (Ζεύς), I would argue that this progression does not yet constitute the supreme hierarchy. What becomes evident is that, at this stage, the gods themselves remain subject to the authority of prophecy, which warns Uranus of the loss of his sovereignty and later Cronus of his downfall (Theogony 154–210; Burkert, 1985). This suggests that the gods, despite their

cosmic dimensions, do not possess foresight into the future but are themselves bound by a higher principle of order. In my view, this principle is expressed in the figure of the Moirai (**Μοῖραι**, Fates) or Aisa (**Αἶσα**, allotment), who embody the divine law (**νόμος**) that transcends even the Olympian order (Vernant, 1991, pp. 65–71; Nagy, 2015, p. 229). Thus, the succession myth should not be read merely as a generational struggle for power, but as a revelation that the divine hierarchy itself is subordinated to an overarching law of destiny and necessity (**ἀνάγκη**), a law that defines the very limits of divine authority.

b. **Theurgy. (θεουργία, “divine work”) and Magic .**

In the religious life of the Roman Empire, communication between gods and mortals was orchestrated through a complex array of rituals. While some, like sacrifice and prayer, were sanctioned within the civic and religious life of the polis, others, such as incantations and magical spells, occupied a more ambiguous position, straddling the line between legitimate worship and suspect practice (Kowalzig, 2020, pp. 68–70; Fowler, 1995, pp. 19–20). Both the traditional and the unconventional approaches reflected persistent efforts to access and influence divine power.

Within this landscape, magic (**μαγεία**) and theurgy (**θεουργία**, 'divine work') emerged as two related but distinct avenues for establishing contact with the divine. Magic, as evidenced by the Greek Magical Papyri (PGM)—a rich collection of ritual handbooks from Greco-Roman Egypt, dating from the 2nd century BCE to the 5th century CE—encompassed an astonishing array of ritual technologies: spells for healing and protection, erotic charms, curses, amulets, and visionary experiences (Betz, 1986, pp. 66–68). The PGM display a syncretistic fusion of Greek, Egyptian, Jewish, and other Near Eastern religious traditions, attesting to the cosmopolitan spirit of the Roman Mediterranean (Betz, 1986, p. xlvii). Among the most famous is the “Mithras Liturgy” (PGM IV.475–829), a ritual text that describes mystical ascent through cosmic realms **via hymns, voces magicae, ritual purifications**, and symbolic objects. These ritual acts commonly employed the concept of cosmic **“συμπάθεια”** (sympathy)—the idea that all parts of the cosmos are interconnected and could be manipulated ritually.

Literary sources echo this conception: **Κίρκη** (Circe) in Homer’s *Odyssey* (10.210–240) wields **“φάρμακα”** (drugs, charms) to transform men into animals, while **Μήδεια** (Medea) in Euripides’ *Bacchae* (lines 395–405) invokes **Ἑκάτη** (Hekátē) as patroness of her magical arts (Bracke, 2009, pp.44–45). Similarly, Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* (2nd c. CE) ¹dramatizes the ambivalent cultural perception of magic,

¹ One of the striking paradoxes of Apuleius’ persona lies in the testimony of St. Augustine, who acknowledged his skill in magic and the performance of wonders (*Epistulae* 36.1). Augustine further remarked that Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*—which we now regard as a purely literary work, especially given that Apuleius wrote no other novel—was, according to Apuleius’ own claim, in fact an autobiographical account of his personal experience (*De Civitate Dei* 18.18). This possibility is not

portraying Thessalian witches who manipulate divine forces for erotic and destructive purposes (Graf, 1997).

In the third century CE, ritual technologies that had long been practiced across the Roman Empire underwent a significant reinterpretation within the context of Platonic philosophy, giving rise to the distinctive phenomenon of theurgy (**θεουργία**, “divine work”). The Chaldean Oracles, central texts for later Neoplatonists such as Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus, presented a revealed theology positing that the soul’s ascent within the cosmic hierarchy depended on the effective use of ritual tokens (**συνθήματα**) and specific invocations (Majercik, 1989, pp. 3–12).

Within this cosmological framework, the Oracles established Hecate (**Ἑκάτη**) as the pivotal mediating authority positioned between the transcendent Father (**Πατήρ**) and the material realm, serving as the conduit for divine influence. The Oracles prescribed the implementation of fiery rites and sacred utterances, which functioned not merely as symbolic gestures but as metaphysically necessary operations for the liberation of the soul from material constraints (Majercik, 1989, pp. 132–145; Addey, 2014, pp. 87–115). This synthesis of Platonic metaphysics and ritual innovation was instrumental in shaping the Neoplatonic spiritual path, emphasizing that salvation required not only philosophical contemplation but also active engagement in theurgic practice orchestrated under the guidance of Hecate as the transcendent mediatrix.

Neoplatonism: The Philosophical-Religious Synthesis from Plotinus to Proclus.

Neoplatonism, which arose with Plotinus (**Πλωτῖνος**) in the third century CE, is at the center of a continual scholarly debate over whether it should be classified primarily as a philosophy or a religion. The foundation of the movement, as articulated in Plotinus’ *Enneads*, is a sophisticated philosophical system that extends and deepens Plato’s metaphysics. Plotinus presents a hierarchical ontology that begins with the ineffable One, followed by Intellect (**Νοῦς**) and Soul (**Ψυχή**), emphasizing a contemplative ascent that relies on dialectic and spiritual purification (Dodds, 1963, pp. xxi–xxiii; Dillon, 1996, pp. 361–370).

For Plotinus, the ultimate goal of philosophy is to return to the One, and he distinctly rejects rigid dogmatic theology, opting for an experiential and rational approach to transcendent reality. However, as Neoplatonism developed—with figures such as **Iamblichus** (**Ἰάμβλιχος**) and **Proclus** (**Πρόκλος**)—the tradition came to incorporate ritual practices of theurgy (**θεουργία**), which were presented as indispensable companions to philosophical contemplation. In his *De Mysteriis*, Iamblichus contends that abstract theoretical reasoning alone cannot liberate the soul;

entertained by modern scholars; nevertheless, were it accepted, it would decisively alter the scholarly approach to the work, transforming its interpretation from fiction into self-representation.

instead, ritual acts—sacrifices, prayers, and divine symbols (**συνθήματα**)—are necessary for true union with the divine (Shaw, 1995, pp. 5–7, 120–125; Clarke, Dillon & Hershbelt, 2003, pp. 45–52). Proclus further integrated theurgy into his metaphysics, arguing that pure reasoning reaches fulfillment only when supplemented by ritual and mythic practices that allow genuine participation in the cosmic order.

Thus, Neoplatonism ultimately forms a synthesis in which philosophical thought and ritual practice reinforce each other, resisting the strict separation between philosophy and religion that marks modern categories. Neoplatonists maintained that wisdom is legitimized not only by rational analysis and the authority of ancient sages, but also by divine confirmation through sacred texts and ritual action. This renders Neoplatonism both profoundly philosophical and religious in orientation, method, and cultural influence, presenting it as a cosmic liturgy that enacts ritually what philosophy explicates intellectually (Elements of Theology prop. 121; van den Berg, 2016, pp. 223–239).

Modern scholarship thus stresses that Neoplatonism resists reduction to either philosophy or religion in isolation: it was, instead, a ‘philosophical religion’ or ‘religious philosophy’, merging metaphysical speculation and ritual action as inseparable components (Shaw, 2014, pp. 33–36; Tanaseanu-Döbler, 2013, pp. 101–140). The tradition assimilated central Platonic doctrines—mediated through centuries of Middle Platonic interpretation and Aristotelian critique—and combined them with the religious, mystical, and theological currents of late antiquity. Plotinus stands at the heart of this development, with his Enneads offering a thorough metaphysical vision wherein all reality emanates from a transcendent source known as the One (**τὸ ἓν**), which is ineffable, completely simple, and beyond being (**ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας**)—a view foreshadowed by Plato’s Republic (509b).

Unlike the anthropomorphic gods of the Greco-Roman world, the One is wholly formless and without multiplicity, functioning as the ultimate cause (**αἰτία**) and first principle (**ἀρχή**) of all that exists (Greig, 2020, pp. 33–40). From the One proceeds a hierarchy: first Intellect (**Νοῦς**), the domain of intelligible realities, then Soul (**Ψυχή**), mediating between the realms of the intellect and the senses (Griffin, 2021, pp. 77–83). Plotinus insists on the absolute transcendence of the One, and maintains that it remains completely unaffected (**ἀπαθής**) by its creative acts—a doctrine known as “the freedom of the One”, meaning that all emanation or differentiation leaves the One unchanged and whole (Giardina, 2022, pp. 55–58; Blazevic-Bastow, 2021, pp. 112–115).

This metaphysical system blends philosophical rigor with theological vision: Plotinus preserves Plato’s insight of the Good as beyond being (Republic 509b), absorbs Aristotelian criticisms, and engages with the mystical-religious aspirations of late antiquity (Rist, 1967, pp. 108–110; Gerson, 2013, pp. 89–94; Greig, 2020, pp. 38–40). The radical transcendence of the One is not just a continuation, but a transformation, of

Plato's Form of the Good (ἡ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέα)—first identified in the Republic as the ultimate source of intellect and being.

Plotinus reinterprets Plato's concept of the Good as the ineffable One, elevating Plato's ethical-metaphysical ideal to a supra-rational, theological principle (Long, 2022, pp. 121–143; Gkatzaras, 2020, pp. 45–52). In doing so, Neoplatonism maintains Platonic tradition but also reshapes it, aligning philosophy with the mystical aspiration to unite with the ineffable source of all existence—a transformation of Platonism that centers both on intellectual rigor and ritual participation (Shaw, 2014, pp. 33–36; Tresnie, 2021, pp. 145–150).

- **Core Doctrines of Neoplatonic Thought: The One and Mystical Ascent.**

- a. **The One**

Plotinus articulates the **One** as the **supreme and transcendent principle** from which all levels of reality emanate. It is ineffable, absolutely simple, and beyond both being and thought, incapable of possessing any attribute or quality that would compromise its absolute unity (Enn. VI.9.3.35ff.; V.5.12.47–50; Armstrong, 1988, vol. VII, pp. 53–55). Its perfection requires it to be non-composite, unlimited, and without internal distinction, in contrast to substantial being, which is always limited, determinate, and intelligible. Plotinus emphasizes that the One is at once identical with and distinct from noetic thought (Enn. V.3.10; Armstrong, 1966, vol. V, p. 65), transcending both sensible being and ordinary dianoetic reasoning. The practice of negative theology begins in the everyday world, which is constructed by perception and discursive thought, and it is only through relentless purification and sustained intellectual inquiry into the nature of intelligible being—by the mutually supportive exercise of negation and affirmation—that the soul can participate in νόησις, a form of non-discursive, meditative “thinking” (Enn. V.9.7; Rist, 1967, pp. 103–105). Ontologically, this ascent moves the philosopher from reflection on immanent, enmattered forms to communion with transcendent, paradigmatic forms, and to describe the soul's meditative absorption in pure being requires a radical shift in perspective: what initially appeared as transcendent to sense-perception and discursive reason is now fully present, i.e. immanent, to the noetically active soul (Gerson, 2013, pp. 92–94). When the soul “becomes Intellect,” its awareness is identified with perfect thought, and it experiences states of bliss, illumination, and ecstasy (Wallis, 1976, pp. 92–95). As Lloyd observes, “an individual who has exercised the faculty whose thoughts are those of Pure Intellect can give a phenomenological description of his experience—what Intellect or the life of eternity feels like and looks like” (Lloyd, 1990, p. 125). He further notes that the affective and visionary features so common in mystical literature function as substitutes for a direct description of the object itself—pure being—which, by its very nature, cannot be described (Enn. V.8.7; VI.7.31ff.; Armstrong, 1988, vol. VII, pp. 211–213). This

substitution signals the initial use of mystical language and marks the partial suspension of both negative and positive discursive accounts of Intellect, for ultimately, full entry into noetic activity transcends rationality altogether (Armstrong, 1966, vol. V, pp. 117–118).

Modern commentators, however, have often warned against a dogmatic application of Plotinus' apophatic method. John Findlay, for example, cautions that such an approach risks reducing the One to "the irremovable blank background, the void logical space, of everything and anything" (Findlay, 1967, p. 108). For him, the philosophical quest is not best understood as a movement toward emptiness and negation, but rather as a striving for fullness and perfection (p. 138). This critique highlights the danger of construing Plotinus' negative theology as a mere theology of absence, rather than as a dialectic that integrates both negation and symbolic affirmation.

In conclusion, Plotinus' doctrine of the One is not reducible to negation, abstraction, or a void-like metaphysical background. Rather, it represents a vision of transcendence and plenitude, in which the One is both beyond being and yet the inexhaustible source of all reality. Through the interplay of apophatic restraint and mystical evocation, Plotinus portrays the One as the supreme principle of unity and perfection. In this sense, his account of the One can be seen as presenting the divine in a mode of absolute transcendence (ὑπεροχή)—a form of sublimity that surpasses both discursive thought and intuitive grasp, situating the One as the ultimate horizon of philosophical and mystical ascent.

The Neoplatonic doctrine of the One, as the transcendent source of all reality, necessarily entails a corresponding movement of return (ἐπιστροφή) by which the soul seeks to reorient itself toward its origin. Plotinus describes this dynamic as the soul's ascent through contemplation, a process of interior purification that culminates in mystical union with the ineffable principle as Plotinus describes:

Ἐαυτὸν μὲν οὖν ἰδὼν τότε, ὅτε ὁρᾷ, τοιοῦτον ὄψεται, μᾶλλον δὲ αὐτῷ τοιούτῳ συνέσται καὶ τοιοῦτον αἰσθήσεται ἀπλοῦν γενόμενον. Τάχα δὲ οὐδὲ ὄψεται λεκτέον, τὸ δὲ ὀφθέν, εἴπερ δεῖ δύο ταῦτα λέγειν, τό τε ὁρῶν καὶ ὁρώμενον, ἀλλὰ μὴ ἐν ἄμφω· τολμηρὸς μὲν ὁ λόγος. Τότε μὲν οὖν οὔτε ὁρᾷ οὐδὲ διακρίνει ὁ ὁρῶν οὐδὲ φαντάζεται δύο, ἀλλ' οἷον ἄλλος γενόμενος καὶ οὐκ αὐτὸς οὐδ' αὐτοῦ συντελεῖ ἐκεῖ, κακείνου γενόμενος ἔν ἐστιν ὥσπερ κέντρῳ κέντρον συνάψας". (Enneads VI.9.11)

"When one sees oneself at that moment of vision, one will behold such a nature; or rather, one will be united with it and will feel oneself to have become such a one, simple. Perhaps, indeed, it should not even be said that one 'sees'; for what is seen—if we must speak of two things, the seer and the seen—is not two, but both are one. Bold, indeed, is the statement." "Then indeed the one who sees neither sees nor distinguishes, nor does he imagine two; but as if having become another, and no longer himself nor

belonging to himself, he is brought to completion there. Having become one with that [reality], he is one, as if center were joined to center.”

Plotinus describes the soul’s union with the One (τὸ Ἕν), or the Good, as the highest goal of the Neoplatonic ascent—a transformative state in which all dualities dissolve and the soul attains absolute simplicity. This union is not merely intellectual but ontological: it entails the radical deconstruction of subject-object distinctions, moving beyond the metaphor of vision (ὁρᾶι, ὁψεται), commonly used in philosophical discourse, to the lived reality of identity with the One. In this mystical condition, Plotinus insists that the soul does not just “see” or contemplate a divine object, but actually becomes “such a one” (τοιούτον), experiencing itself as “simple” (ἁπλοῦν) and unified with its source.

This transition marks a shift from νόησις (intellection)—which still presupposes a distinction between νοῦς (intellect) and its object—to a state of pure, undifferentiated being, or ἔνωσις (union). Plotinus boldly asserts that the seer (τὸ ὁρῶν) and the seen (τὸ ὁφθέν) are not two (δύο) but one (ἓν): not a perceptual unity, but a true ontological coincidence accomplished through unification. In this condition, all forms of distinction (διακρίνει), imagination (φαντάζεται), and even self-reflection (αὐτοῦ) are relinquished. The soul experimentally “becomes another” (ἄλλος)—not as a new instance, but by transcending its individuality and separateness, ceasing to belong to itself.

Plotinus, to express this radical unity, uses the simile of one center coinciding with another (κέντρῳ κέντρον): just as two circles intersect only in a single, identical center, so the soul’s innermost being coincides with the One. This is not a process of mixture, but a perfect “coincidence of essence,” where the core of the self and ultimate reality are one and the same. Thus, his mystical teaching charts a journey beyond νόησις and λόγος (discursive reason), leading to a silent, immediate, non-dual reality—the ultimate telos of Neoplatonic spirituality.

Later Neoplatonists, most notably Iamblichus, radicalized the Plotinian framework by insisting that intellectual contemplation (νόησις) alone was insufficient for the soul’s true return (ἐπιστροφή). Instead, he argued that theurgy (θεουργία)—ritual acts invoking divine symbols and powers—was indispensable for effecting genuine union with the divine. In *De Mysteriis* I.12, Iamblichus explicitly rejects the sufficiency of purely intellectual activity, affirming that only through divinely instituted rites can the soul transcend its embodied condition and achieve authentic reversion to its source (Clarke, Dillon, & Hershbell, 2003, pp. 50–53). Within this perspective, prayer and ritual are not peripheral or secondary practices but rather central to the very metaphysical economy of Neoplatonism: they enact ritually what metaphysics describes conceptually, binding the human soul to the divine through the principle of cosmic (συμπάθεια), the

universal interconnectedness of all levels of reality (Clarke, Dillon, & Hershbell, 2003, pp. 96–99).

As Gregory Shaw has persuasively argued, theurgy represents the ritual embodiment of Neoplatonic metaphysics, a form of “practical metaphysics” in which the soul’s return to the One is realized not merely through abstract contemplation but through symbolic and sacramental action (Shaw, 1995, pp. 3–5, 33–36). In this sense, theurgy is not an optional supplement to philosophy but its necessary completion, for it provides the means by which the finite soul participates in the infinite through divinely revealed symbols and rites. Thus, the One is not only the apex of the metaphysical hierarchy, the transcendent source from which all reality emanates, but also the telos of religious striving—the ultimate object of prayer, ritual, and mystical ascent (Shaw, 1995, pp. 150–155).

Later Neoplatonists—above all Iamblichus—recast the Platonic ascent by arguing that intellectual contemplation is necessary but not sufficient; the soul’s authentic **ἐπιστροφή** requires theurgy (**θεουργία**), ritually enacted operations that engage divine symbols (**σύμβολα**) and tokens (**συνθήματα**) to bind the human to the gods through cosmic sympatheia (**συμπάθεια**). (Clarke, Dillon, & Hershbell, 2003). In *De Mysteriis*, Iamblichus insists that contemplation reaches only to the level of νοῦς, whereas ritual unification invokes the gods themselves, effecting a change in the soul’s mode of being rather than merely its cognition (I.12). This “practical metaphysics” is not superstitious accretion but the ritual embodiment of Neoplatonic first principles: symbols are the divine signatures through which the One’s procession (**πρόοδος**) and the soul’s return (**ἐπιστροφή**) are realized in embodied life. Iamblichus further integrates local theologies—most strikingly Egyptian—by mapping divine orders and names onto Neoplatonic hierarchies, showing how cultic forms and divine names correspond to strata of the One and Intellect; in this way, the theurgic liturgy becomes a cosmology in action, aligning ritual practice with metaphysical structure. As scholars have emphasized, Iamblichan rites aim at unification rather than discursive knowledge, recruiting voice, number, and material media as sunthemata to reorient the soul from multiplicity to unity. Thus, prayer and ritual are not peripheral devotions but the central mechanisms by which Neoplatonism’s soteriology is enacted: the One stands both as the apex of the ontological hierarchy and the telos of religious striving, the ultimate object of prayer, purification, and symbolic ascent.

b. The doctrine of emanation (**πρόοδος**) describes the eternal and necessary procession of multiplicity from the supreme unity of the One (**τὸ ἓν**). This is not to be understood as a temporal act of creation ex nihilo, but rather as a timeless and hierarchical unfolding of reality, in which each subsequent hypostasis is an image (**εἰκὼν**) or

reflection of the one above it, and thus possesses a diminished degree of unity and ontological fullness (Plotinus, Enn. V.2.1; Proclus, Elements of Theology prop. 23).

The first emanation from the One is the Nous (**Νοῦς**, Divine Intellect). As the One's initial "otherness," Nous turns back toward its source in an act of *epistrophē* (ἐπιστροφή, reversion). In this contemplative return, Nous generates within itself the Platonic Forms (**εἶδη**), the eternal and immutable archetypes of all things (Plotinus, Enn. V.9.7). Nous is therefore the realm of pure being (ὄν, on) and intellection (**νόησις**), the locus of divine thought in which subject (**νοερόν**) and object (**νοητόν**) are unified in a single act of self-thinking thought (Aristotle, Metaphysics XII.9, 1074b; Plotinus, Enn. V.3.5).

In Neoplatonic metaphysics, Nous is simultaneously Being, Life, and Intellect (Plotinus, Enn. VI.7.13), containing within itself the complete intellectual paradigm of the cosmos. The sensible world is but a shadow or image of this intelligible order, a copy (**μίμημα**) of the eternal archetypes contained in Nous (Proclus, In Timaeum I.303.10–15). Thus, Nous functions as the blueprint of reality, mediating between the ineffable transcendence of the One and the generative activity of the Soul (**Ψυχή**), which unfolds the Forms into the temporal cosmos. (Chistyakov, 2022; Gelmi, 2021; Sammon, 2021; Schultz, 2018; Ciucu, 2007; Mukhopadhyaya, 2002; Perl, 1994; Wallis, 1995).

From the Nous (**Νοῦς**) proceeds the World Soul (**Ψυχή τοῦ κόσμου**), which functions as the indispensable intermediary between the intelligible, immutable realm of Intellect and the dynamic, temporal order of the sensible cosmos. The World Soul is the principle of life (**ζωή**), motion (**κίνησις**), and order (**τάξις**). It animates the material universe and impresses upon the receptacle of matter the rational structures (**λόγοι**) derived from the Nous, thereby producing the ordered cosmos (**κόσμος**) (Enn. IV.3.9; Armstrong, 19⁸⁷, vol. IV, pp. 245–247; Proclus, In Timaeum I.303.10–15; Festugière, 1966, vol. I, pp. 303–305).

The World Soul itself is twofold: its higher aspect remains turned toward and contemplates the Nous, while its lower aspect governs and administers the physical cosmos, regulating the cycles of nature, the flow of time, and the laws that govern the material world (Enn. IV.4.13; Armstrong, 1984, vol. IV, pp. 315–317; Proclus, Elements of Theology, prop. 191; Dodds, 1963, p. 162). From this universal principle proceed the individual souls (**ψυχαί**), which are particularized expressions of the divine life-principle. These souls descend to animate physical bodies, yet retain an intrinsic connection to the higher realms. Plotinus famously speaks of the "*undescended soul*" (**ἀναπόβλητος ψυχή**), the aspect of the soul that remains perpetually rooted in the intelligible order, even while another part engages with embodiment (Enn. IV.8.8; Armstrong, 19⁶⁶, vol. IV, pp. 381–383).

Modern scholarship has emphasized the mediating and dynamic role of the World Soul. Dillon (1996, pp. 45–49) highlights its function as the living bond between Nous and the cosmos. Peterman (2015, pp. 12–15) stresses its explanatory role in the continuity of natural order. Gersh (2014, pp. 210–215) interprets the World Soul as the structural principle of cosmic harmony, while Corrigan (2005, pp. 98–103) underscores its twofold nature as both contemplative and administrative. More recently, Chlup (2012, pp. 143–148) situates the doctrine within the broader Neoplatonic hierarchy, showing how the World Soul guarantees the ontological continuity between the intelligible and the sensible.

This ontological tether guarantees that human souls retain an innate capacity to reverse the downward process of emanation and to reorient themselves toward their divine source. Through philosophical contemplation (**θεωρία**) and disciplined spiritual practice, the soul may ascend once more toward the Nous, and in its highest achievement, attain union (**ἕνωσις**) with the ineffable One. Plotinus describes this ascent in *Enneads* VI.9.11, where he emphasizes that the soul, by transcending discursive thought, can participate in the Good itself (Armstrong, 1988, vol. VII, pp. 345–347). Similarly, Iamblichus in *De Mysteriis* I.12 insists that contemplation alone is insufficient, and that only through theurgy—ritual acts invoking divine powers—can the soul’s reversion (**ἐπιστροφή**) be fully effected, transforming its very mode of being rather than merely its cognition (Clarke, Dillon, & Hershbell, 2003, pp. 50–53).

C. Hierarchical Cosmos:

A defining feature of Neoplatonism is its rigorously hierarchical conception of reality, often described as a “**great chain of being**.” The cosmos is structured in a descending order from the supreme unity of the One, through the intellectual plurality of the Nous, the animating principle of the World Soul, and finally down to the material world. As the furthest extension from the source, matter is the least real, the most multiple, and thus the most imperfect level of reality—yet it remains a necessary and beautiful image (**εἰκών**) of the higher intelligible principles (*Enn.* V.1.6; Armstrong, 1989, vol. V, pp. 15–17; Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, prop. 23, Dodds, 1963, pp. 211–213).

This hierarchical structure is not merely descriptive but also prescriptive for the spiritual life. It provides a metaphysical map for the soul’s journey of return (**ἐπιστροφή**). The human soul, situated in the lower realms, is tasked with transcending its material attachments and ascending through the hierarchy. As Pierre Hadot has emphasized, this ascent is achieved through a structured curriculum of ethical purification (**κάθαρσις**), dialectical reasoning (**διάλεκτος**), and—especially in the later Neoplatonists—theurgical practices (**θεουργία**) (Hadot, 1995, pp. 269–272). These practices aim at re-establishing the soul’s connection with its divine source and actualizing its latent divinity. Thus,

Iamblichus insists in *De Mysteriis* I.12 that contemplation alone cannot suffice, but that theurgy is required to transform the soul's very mode of being (Clarke, Dillon, & Hershbelt, 2003, pp. 50–53). Similarly, Proclus in his *Commentary on the Timaeus* (I.211.13ff.) integrates ritual and cosmology, showing how liturgical acts mirror the metaphysical order and facilitate the soul's reversion to its source (Festugière, 1966, vol. I, pp. 211–214).

A defining feature of Neoplatonism is its rigorously hierarchical conception of reality, often described as a great chain of being. The cosmos is structured in a descending order from the supreme unity of the One, through the intellectual plurality of the *Nous* (Νοῦς), the animating principle of the World Soul (Ψυχή), and finally down to the material world. As the furthest extension from the source, matter is the least real, the most multiple, and thus the most imperfect level of reality—yet it remains a necessary and beautiful image (εἰκὼν) of the higher intelligible principles (Plotinus, *Enn.* V.1.6; Proclus, *Elements of Theology* prop. 23).

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Thus, the Neoplatonic cosmos is both an ontological hierarchy and a spiritual itinerary: a descending order of emanation (πρόοδος) and an ascending path of return (ἐπιστροφή), culminating in the soul's union (ἔνωσις) with the One. (Cary, 2021; Tresnie, 2021; Epsen, 2020; Casas, 2018; Riggs, 2009; Hadot & Chase, 2004; Perl, 1994; Rappe, 2000; Hadot, 1995).

Transforming the Divine: Neoplatonism's Reinterpretation of Greco-Roman Religious Traditions in the Roman Empire.

Rather than simply rejecting the cults and myths of ancient Greece and Rome, Neoplatonic philosophers engaged in a process of creative adaptation and sublimation. This transformation is especially evident in the way Neoplatonism reinterpreted the hierarchies of the divine realm. Instead of abandoning older religious systems, Neoplatonists worked to elevate and restructure them within a new intellectual framework, preserving their symbolic richness while integrating them into a unified metaphysical vision centered on the One and the process of spiritual ascent.

The transformation of mythological gods into divine henads (ἐνάδες).

Neoplatonism undertook a thorough reinterpretation of the divine order found in classical Greek religion by integrating the multitude of gods and goddesses into a unified metaphysical system. Rather than eliminating the traditional pantheon, Neoplatonist thinkers, notably Proclus, situated these deities within the hierarchy of emanation, assigning each god a place as a *henad* (ἐνάς)—a unique divine unity—or as a principle within the realm of Intellect (Νοῦς). In this scheme, every *henad* presides over a distinct domain of reality, acting as a mediating channel (μεσότης) for the power of the One (Gerson, 2013, pp. 92–95).

This interpretive move enabled Neoplatonists to preserve the diversity and individuality of the gods—including their traditional mythic personalities—while also grounding all divine activity in a singular, transcendent source (Saffrey & Westerink, 1968, vol. I, pp. xv–xx). The transition thus marks a shift from a focus on mythological tales of divine succession, such as the stories of Uranus, Cronus, and Zeus, toward a systematic, causal explanation of divine influence. The once-anthropomorphic and sometimes quarrelsome gods of the Greek pantheon were abstracted into stable metaphysical powers, forming a rational, ordered hierarchy of causation. In this structure, each god occupies an ontological niche within a continuous cascade of emanation, clarifying the relationship between the gods and the broader unity of existence (Casas, 2018, pp. 41–65; Lankila, 2016, pp. 147–166; Rangos, 2000, pp. 47–84; Perl, 1994, pp. 77–83; Herrmann, 2007, pp. 1–20).

From Moral Purity to Divine Union: The Role of Ethical Discourse in Ancient Philosophy and Neoplatonism.

In both Greek philosophy and Roman Stoicism, the ethical purity of the soul (καθαρότης ψυχῆς) was regarded as the indispensable condition for the efficacy of ritual (θυσία) and prayer (εὐχή). Plato, as so often, transcended the immediate context of civic cult by emphasizing the moral conditions required for the acceptance of rituals and prayers. He did not deny their genuine efficacy, but he insisted that their benefits were contingent upon both the nature of the petition and the ethical character of the petitioner.

In the *Laws* (XI, 715e–717a), Plato makes this principle explicit. He declares that “ὁ μὲν σώφρων ἡμῶν θεῶ φίλος, ὁμοίος γάρ” (716d), “*the temperate man is our friend of God, for he is like Him*,” and further insists that “δῆλον δὲ τοῦτό γε· ὡς τῶν συνακολουθησόντων ἐσόμενον τῷ θεῷ δεῖ διανοηθῆναι πάντα ἄνδρα” (716b), “*every man ought so to devise as to be of the number of those who follow in the steps of the God*.” For Plato, the path to ὁμοίωσις θεῷ (likeness to God) is through σωφροσύνη (moderation, self-control). He concludes that “παρὰ δὲ μισαροῦ δῶρα οὔτε ἄνδρ’ ἀγαθὸν οὔτε θεὸν ἔστιν ποτὲ τὸ γε ὀρθὸν δέχεσθαι· μάτην οὖν περὶ θεοῦς ὁ πολὺς ἐστὶ πόνος τοῖς ἀνοσίοις, τοῖσιν δὲ ὁσίοις ἐγκαιρότατος ἅπασιν” (716e–717a), “*it is never right for either a good man or for God to accept gifts from polluted hands; wherefore all the great*

labor that impious men spend upon the gods is in vain, while that of the pious is most seasonable and profitable.” Thus, for Plato, virtue (ἀρετή) and purity (καθαρότης) are prerequisites for effective sacrifice and prayer, while μῦσμα (pollution) renders ritual void.

Seneca, echoing this Platonic principle in Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium (Ep. 10.5), insists that true freedom from desire is attained only when one prays for nothing that cannot be prayed for openly: *“tunc scito esse te omnibus cupiditatibus solutum, cum eo perveneris ut nihil deum roges nisi quod rogare possis palam.”* —“Then know that you are freed from all desires, when you have reached the point that you ask nothing of God except what you can ask openly.” He criticizes the folly of men who *“turpissima vota dis insusurrant; si quis admoverit aurem, conticiscent, et quod scire hominem nolunt deo narrant”*—“they whisper the basest of prayers to heaven, but if anyone listens, they are silent at once; what they are unwilling men should know, they tell to God.” His counsel is therefore: *“sic vive cum hominibus tamquam deus videat, sic loquere cum deo tamquam homines audiant”*—“live among men as if God beheld you, speak with God as if men were listening.” Both Plato and Seneca thus converge on the principle that prayer and sacrifice are not mechanical transactions but moral acts, effective only when grounded in virtue and transparency of soul.

Neoplatonism assigns a central role to ethics in the soul’s ascent to union with the divine One. For Plotinus, moral discipline and the cultivation of virtues are essential steps in the purification and elevation of the soul, enabling it to transcend material limitations and approach the divine source (Gerson, 2013, pp. 92–94; Musacchio, 2025, “The ascent of the soul”). Ethical living liberates the soul from attachments to the body and external concerns, facilitating its transformation and participation in the higher realms—first aligning with Intellect (Νοῦς) and ultimately seeking mystical union with the ineffable One (Armstrong, 1988, vol. VII, pp. 53–55).

This process is not merely philosophical contemplation but requires a profound intellectual and moral effort, as philosophical conversion in Neoplatonism is defined by the “turning away... from the life of the body” and the mastery over its desires, awakening one’s true intellectual vision (Britannica, “Neo-Platonism, Plotinus, Mysticism”; Gerson, 2013, pp. 92–94). Late Neoplatonic systems, from Plotinus to Proclus, continually stress that virtuous conduct is the path to the highest reality, and moral purification is indispensable for ultimate liberation and union with the divine principle (Herrmann, 2007, pp. 1–20). Thus, in Neoplatonism, ethics is interwoven with metaphysics: the soul’s ascent cannot occur without virtue and the transformation of character, establishing an unbreakable connection between ethical life and the realization of divine unity.

Modern scholarship confirms that this ethical prerequisite was not incidental but central to ancient religious thought. Robert Parker (1983, pp. 32–38; 198, 210–215) has shown that **μίασμα** (pollution) in Greek religion was simultaneously ritual and moral, undermining both civic and personal piety. Christian Frevel and Christophe Nihan (2013, pp. 1–25) emphasize that purity regulations across the Mediterranean bound ethical conduct to ritual efficacy, shaping the very formation of religious traditions. Algis Uždavinys (2003, pp. 41–50) and Gregory Shaw (1995, pp. 33–36, 150–155) demonstrate that in Neoplatonism and theurgy, **κάθαρσις** (purification) was the necessary precondition for **ἀνάβασις** (ascent) and **ἔνωσις** (union) with the divine. Even contemporary psychology supports this ancient intuition: Schnall, Benton, and Harvey (2008, pp. 1219–1221) confirms the ancient intuition that symbolic cleansing rituals can modulate the stringency of moral judgment, revealing the cognitive depth of ritual purity in human life.

Many aspects of this argument reflect a standard position within Middle Platonism, where the relationship between gods, **daimones**, and human ritual was a central concern. Yet Porphyry appears to be the first Platonist to treat prayer (**εὐχή**) explicitly—traditionally associated with questions of destiny and divine providence—within the framework of a Platonic interpretation of Greek religion (Timotin, 2012, pp. 238–241). The crucial distinction between the gods (or the supreme God) and **δαίμονες**, articulated in terms of diminished intellection and the presence or absence of passion, is already attested in the pseudo-Platonic *Epinomis* (984d–985b). This conceptual division was subsequently elaborated by Xenocrates, Plutarch, Apuleius, Maximus of Tyre, and Calcidius, thereby formalizing an idea first expressed in Plato’s *Symposium* (202d–203a), the classical locus of Platonic demonology.

Within Middle Platonism, the scholastic differentiation between God and **δαίμονες** served an important explanatory function: it provided a philosophical rationale for Graeco-Roman religious practices, including Homeric mythology, mystery cults, oracular divination, and civic sacrifice (Dillon, 1996). Porphyry adopts this framework in his *Letter to Anebo*, where he questions the appropriateness of sacrifice on the grounds that the gods as pure intellects, are unaffected by external influences (Porphyry, *Ep. ad Anebonem*; cf. Dillon, 2007). In *De abstinencia*, he makes the point more explicit: the bloody sacrifices of civic cults are directed not to the gods, who cannot receive material offerings, but to **δαίμονες** (Porphyry *Ἀλλὰ τὰ προσαγόμενα, φησίν, ὥς πρὸς αἰσθητικοὺς καὶ ψυχικοὺς προσάγεται*. (Porphyry, *Letter to Anebo*, fr. 20) — “But, he says, the things that are brought forward are presented as to those who are sensory and psychic”).

Modern Scholarship Integration for this Group: Modern scholarship has emphasized the continuity of this tradition: Dillon (1996, pp. 206–210) highlights

Xenocrates' systematic demonology; Smith (1995, pp. 48–50) underscores Porphyry's rationalist critique of prayer; and Timotin (2016, pp. 88–107) situates Porphyry's reflections within the broader Platonic theories of prayer. More recently, Chase (2019, pp. 55–60) has examined Porphyry's "demonic epistemology," showing how daimones mediate between divine intellect and human perception, while Muscolino (2020, pp. 133–140) stresses the influence of Near Eastern ritual traditions on Porphyry's demonological framework.

Neoplatonism and the Interpretation of Myth in the Roman Empire.

In the context of third-century Roman imperial culture, the Neoplatonists formulated a nuanced hermeneutic method grounded in allegorical interpretation (**ἀλληγορία**, *allegoria*; **ὑπόνοια**, *hyponoia*), empowering them to recast the traditional Greek myths as multilayered narratives encapsulating metaphysical and spiritual insights. Drawing directly on previous Stoic practices of allegoresis and on Platonic myth-interpretation (e.g., Republic II.376e–383c; Phaedrus 246a–257b), this exegesis enabled Neoplatonic philosophers to preserve the authority of canonical poets such as Homer and Hesiod, as well as mystery traditions, while simultaneously reorienting the content of these narratives towards their own metaphysical system.

Luc Brisson maintains that allegory thus became an essential philosophical tool by which myth was preserved—elevated from being seen as primitive superstition to serving as a vessel for truth and esoteric wisdom. Robert Lamberton demonstrates further that major Neoplatonic commentators, including Porphyry, Proclus, and Damascius, interpreted Homer not merely as an author of imaginative tales but as a theologically profound poet whose lines veiled rich doctrines concerning the soul and the cosmos. Consequently, in their hands, myth was not discarded but integrated into philosophical pedagogy, operating as an instructive vehicle illustrating the soul's descent (**κάθοδος**) into material existence, its necessary purifications, and its eventual ascent (**ἀνάβασις**) to the divine.

Central mythic themes reinterpreted by the Neoplatonists included the motifs of descent (**κάθοδος**, *katabasis*) and ascent (**ἀνοδος** / **ἀνάβασις**, *anabasis*), which they saw as allegorical representations of the soul's journey (**ψυχῆς πορεία**). The descent of mythic characters such as Orpheus into the underworld signified, for them, the soul's entry into the realm of becoming and death (**γένεσις**), while apotheosis stories—for example, Heracles' elevation to Olympus, or Phaethon's tragic ascent—symbolized the soul's arduous effort to transcend corporeality, to master the irrational part (**ἄλογον τῆς ψυχῆς**) and to achieve union (**ἔνωσις**) with the divine. Lamberton (1989, pp. 162–170) notes that these myths systematically dramatize the Platonic teaching of fall and return.

Crucially, this framework drew explicitly from Platonic doctrine. In the Phaedrus (247c–e), Plato identifies the soul's true home as the "supercelestial place"

(**ὑπερουράνιος τόπος**), from which it tumbles into bodily existence—a fall (**πτῶσις**) that sets the stage for its philosophical, purificatory, and contemplative return. By construing Homeric and Orphic tales through such a Platonic lens, Neoplatonists converted myth into a spiritual cartography for the soul’s descent and return, encoding within it the drama of emanation (**πρόοδος**) and reversion (**ἐπιστροφή**). As Layne (2017, pp. 55–62) discusses, this interpretive strategy allowed Neoplatonism in Roman imperial times to absorb myth fully into its metaphysical structure, ensuring the myth’s didactic—not merely decorative—function within philosophical theology.

a. Prometheus

Within the framework of Neoplatonic philosophy, the myth of Prometheus stealing fire from the gods is systematically reinterpreted as a metaphor for the soul’s reception and assimilation of divine intellect (**νοῦς**). In this reading, Prometheus does not merely transgress divine boundaries, but, more importantly, signifies the soul’s striving to acquire the light of divine intelligence and self-awareness. This fire is emblematic of intellectual illumination, the essential prerequisite for the soul’s journey of return and reintegration with its transcendent source. The ensuing punishment—Prometheus chained to a rock, perpetually tormented by an eagle devouring his liver—is read as an allegory for the soul’s embodied existence. Here, the “rock” symbolizes materiality and corporeal confinement, while the eagle’s repetitive attack stands for the ceaseless tumult of discursive reason (**διάνοια**), which, albeit essential for philosophical progress, ultimately scars and disturbs the soul’s quest for higher knowledge (Adamson, 2015, pp. 205–210).

Expanding on this allegorical reading, Baldry (1971, pp. 253–260) interprets Prometheus’ suffering as an archetype for the philosopher’s existential ordeal, wherein the soul, although illuminated by a divine spark, remains afflicted and entangled by corporeal limitations and the passions. Mouzala (2022, pp. 7–18) situates this motif within Proclus’ metaphysics of participation: the soul’s rational principle, though ontologically divine, finds itself fettered and subject to suffering until it is emancipated through sustained philosophical discipline and theurgical activity.

This Neoplatonic interpretation is supported by earlier Platonic traditions. Plato (*Timaeus* 45b–c) already associates the element of fire with the illumination of intellect, while later Platonists, such as Proclus, make explicit the connection between Prometheus’ theft and the soul’s intellectual endowment (In *Cratylum* 19.12–20.5; In *Timaeum* I.303.10–15). As Brisson (2004, pp. 27–30) argues, allegorical exegesis empowered the Neoplatonists to preserve the poetic and symbolic density of the Promethean narrative, even as they incorporated it into a systematic metaphysical scheme. Shaw (1995, pp. 150–155) goes further, demonstrating that the Promethean allegory had an explicit ritual application in theurgical practice: the invocation of divine

fire became an operative part of the soul's transformative journey, enabling its ascent toward reunion with the divine.

Thus, for Neoplatonism, the Promethean myth functions as a conceptual parable for the human existential predicament. The soul, granted the illuminating fire of divine mind yet bound to the world of matter, must endure a process of ongoing purification, suffering, and philosophical transformation. Only through the synthesis of contemplation, virtue, and theurgical rites can the soul fulfill its soteriological destiny—breaking the chains of embodiment and regaining union with the ultimate divine principle (Adamson, 2015, pp. 205–210; Baldry, 1971, pp. 253–260; Mouzala, 2022, pp. 7–18; Brisson, 2004, pp. 27–30; Shaw, 1995, pp. 150–155).

b. Psyche and Eros

The myth of Psyche (Ψυχή, “Soul”) and Eros (Ἔρως, “Love”) as recounted in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* was received by later Neoplatonists as far more than a mere romantic folktale; it emerged as a paradigmatic allegory of the soul's spiritual journey toward divine union. Rather than lingering on the literal narrative, Neoplatonists interpreted Psyche's demanding ordeals—such as sorting mixed seeds, retrieving golden wool, and descending into the underworld—as emblematic representations of κάθαρσις (katharsis), or the soul's purification, achieved through rigorous philosophical discipline and ethical trial. The descent into Hades, in particular, signified a confrontation with the chthonic aspects of existence and the ever-present reality of death and mortality.

The culmination of Psyche's path in mystical union with Eros was read as the soul's ultimate assimilation to divine love, thus conferring immortality and granting participation in the life of the divine. As Kenney (1990, pp. 178–180) demonstrates, Apuleius consciously weaves Platonic philosophical themes into his narrative, while Opsomer (2006, pp. 150–158) highlights the story's value as a spiritual roadmap delineating the stages of ascent. Further scholarship has illuminated the soteriological significance: van den Berg (2016, pp. 223–225) interprets Psyche's tasks as philosophical allegories of purification, contemplation, and theurgic practice, and Vasilakis (2021, pp. 89–90) situates the myth within the Neoplatonic theology of ἔρως (Eros) as the cosmic force binding soul to the divine and culminating in ἑνωσις (henōsis), or ultimate union.

Through this hermeneutic lens, the tale of Psyche and Eros becomes a symbolic map of the soul's journey—charting its descent into matter, its ongoing purification and trial through virtue and philosophy, and its final restoration in unity with its transcendent origin. This reading encapsulates the Neoplatonic conviction that ancient myth, properly interpreted, serves not merely as poetic ornament but as encoded spiritual doctrine, revealing the dynamics of ascent, purification, and divine union at the heart of the philosophical quest.

c. Chthonic Deities

The chthonic deities, such as Hades (Ἅδης) and Persephone (Περσεφόνη), rulers of the underworld, were reinterpreted by the Neoplatonists in a symbolic and philosophical key. Rather than being feared merely as gods of death, they came to represent the soul's connection to the generative, dark, and potentially regenerative dimensions of the material cosmos. The underworld itself was conceived as the realm of potentiality and the root (ρίζα, rhiza) of life, from which the soul must be spiritually liberated through the mysteries of philosophical enlightenment and theurgical initiation.

Kevin Clinton (1992, pp. 45–52) has shown how the Eleusinian Mysteries provided a symbolic framework for this reinterpretation, while Curry (2006, pp. 112–118) emphasizes the ritual dimension of Persephone's descent and return as paradigmatic for the soul's own cycle. Deacy (2015, pp. 77–83) highlights Persephone's dual role as both queen of the dead and guarantor of renewal, underscoring the ambivalence of chthonic symbolism. More recently, Pejovic (2024, pp. 5–7) situates this reinterpretation within the broader Neoplatonic cosmology, where chthonic powers are not merely destructive but integral to the cycle of descent and return (κάθοδος–ἐπιστροφή).

Through this allegorical hermeneutic, the Neoplatonists transformed the entire mythological corpus of Greece into a reservoir of spiritual instruction and ontological insight. Myths became symbolic maps of the soul's journey: illustrating its descent into matter, the necessity of purification, the guiding role of divine ἔρως (erōs), and the ultimate unity of all reality in the transcendent One. Averintsev and Maslov (2021, pp. 99–123) demonstrate how mythic symbolism can be reinterpreted as a vehicle of metaphysical truth. Fletcher (2021, pp. 210–215) stresses the continuity between poetic imagination and philosophical abstraction in late antiquity. Kutash (2020, pp. 128–152) shows how allegory and inspired symbolism were systematically employed by Neoplatonists to integrate myth into metaphysical discourse. Additional studies, such as Addey (2014, pp. 142–150) and Brisson (2004, pp. 25–30), confirm that this hermeneutical strategy allowed Neoplatonism to preserve the spiritual wisdom of antiquity within a new, systematic philosophical framework.

Neoplatonic cosmology represents one of the most ambitious philosophical reinterpretations of Greek and Roman religious and cosmogonic traditions. Rather than rejecting the mythic narratives of Hesiod or Homer, Neoplatonists such as Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Proclus absorbed and transformed them into a systematic metaphysical framework. The result was a vision of the cosmos that was at once faithful to the Greek sense of a living, divine universe (κόσμος ἔμψυχος) and rigorously ordered according to the principles of emanation (πρόοδος) and return (ἐπιστροφή).

From Theogony to Theology

The mythic narrative of divine succession—Ouranos, Kronos, Zeus—which in Hesiod’s *Theogony* (133–210) appears as a violent cycle of generational conflict, was radically reinterpreted by the Neoplatonists, especially Proclus, as a symbolic account (αἶνιγμα, *ainigma*) of the emanative process. In this allegorical reading, the succession of gods does not describe literal conflict or anthropomorphic violence, but rather the progressive unfolding of metaphysical principles. Ouranos represents the transcendent unity of the One, the ineffable source beyond being. Kronos embodies Intellect-in-potential (νοῦς δυνάμει), the latent fullness of intelligible reality, while Zeus symbolizes the fully actualized Nous (Νοῦς), the Demiurge, who articulates the intelligible order and generates the Forms (Proclus, *In Timaeum* I.211.13–212.5; Festugière, 1966, vol. I, pp. 211–214; Phillips, 1997, pp. 112–118).

This reinterpretation marks a decisive shift from theogony (θεογονία)—the mythic account of the birth and conflict of gods—to theology (θεολογία), a rational and systematic account of divine causality. As Dodds (1963, pp. 211–213) notes in his commentary on Proclus’ *Elements of Theology*, the Neoplatonists sought to demonstrate that the apparent chaos of myth concealed a coherent metaphysical structure. The plurality of mythic deities was unified into a hierarchical narrative in which all levels of reality emanate from the One and ultimately strive to return to it (Proclus, *Elements of Theology* prop. 23; Motta, 2023, pp. 45–52). In this way, Hesiod’s violent succession myth was transformed into a cosmological allegory, reconciling the poetic imagination of early Greece with the metaphysical rigor of late antiquity.

The Living Cosmos

Despite the abstraction of their metaphysical system, the Neoplatonists preserved and even intensified the ancient Greek and Roman intuition of a living, ensouled cosmos. Plato’s *Timaeus* (30b–37c) had already described the universe as a living creature endowed with soul and intelligence (ζῷον ἔμψυχον καὶ ἔννοον), fashioned by the Demiurge as the most perfect image of the intelligible realm. The Neoplatonists radicalized this vision: the World Soul (Ψυχή τοῦ κόσμου) mediates between the Nous and the sensible cosmos, animating the universe with life (ζωή), reason (λόγος), and purpose (τέλος).

For Plotinus (*Enn.* IV.3.9; Armstrong, 1984, vol. IV, pp. 275–277), the World Soul is the principle that imposes order on matter, ensuring that the cosmos is not chaotic but a sacred image (εἰκὼν) of the intelligible world. Proclus (*In Timaeum* II.155.20–156.10; Festugière, 1966, vol. II, pp. 155–160) elaborates this further, describing the cosmos as a living temple in which every part participates in the divine order. This conception preserved the religious reverence for the cosmos found in pre-Socratic thought—for example, in Anaximander’s *apeiron* as the boundless source of order, or

Heraclitus' logos as the rational principle pervading all things—while integrating it into a systematic metaphysical framework.

As Vassallo (2020, pp. 133–150) argues in his study of the World Soul, the Neoplatonic cosmos is not a passive stage for human activity but a divinely infused organism, animated at every level by soul and intelligence. Wright (2013, pp. 221–244) similarly emphasizes that embodiment itself, far from being a degradation, is a mode of participation in the living order of the cosmos. Thus, Neoplatonism preserved the religious awe of earlier cosmologies while grounding it in a rational metaphysical system that united theology, cosmology, and soteriology.

Procession and Return

At the heart of Neoplatonic cosmology lies the dynamic of procession and return (**πρόοδος καὶ ἐπιστροφή**). All things proceed outward from the One in a hierarchical cascade: first the Nous, then the World Soul, then individual souls, and finally the material cosmos. Yet this procession is not a fall into disorder but a necessary unfolding of the divine plenitude. Every level of reality, while distinct, retains an innate orientation back toward its source, striving for reversion (**ἐπιστροφή**) and ultimately for union (**ἕνωσις**) with the One.

Plotinus describes this vividly in *Enneads* VI.9.11 (Armstrong, 1988, vol. VII, pp. 345–347), where the soul, through contemplation, rises beyond discursive thought to touch the ineffable source. Proclus (*In Timaeum* I.211.25–26; Festugière, 1966, vol. I, pp. 211–214) systematizes this principle, showing that procession and return are the very grammar of divine causality: everything that proceeds from the One must, by its very nature, turn back toward it.

This dual movement—emanation and return—transforms cosmology into soteriology. The structure of the universe is simultaneously the map of the soul's ascent: by contemplating the order of the cosmos, the philosopher retraces the path of return, moving from the sensible to the intelligible and finally to the ineffable One. As Uždavinys (2003, pp. 39–53) has shown, Neoplatonic ritual and theurgy enact this ascent symbolically, while Cary (2021, pp. 115–130) emphasizes that procession and return are not abstract metaphysical schemes but the lived reality of the philosopher's spiritual itinerary. In this way, Neoplatonism unites cosmology, theology, and soteriology into a single vision: the cosmos itself is both the emanation of the divine and the pathway of return to it.

Julian the Apostate and the Neoplatonic Hierarchy: Philosophical Foundations and Imperial Reform

Julian the Apostate (331–363 CE) exemplifies the Neoplatonic reinterpretation of religious hierarchy during late antiquity. Profoundly influenced by the metaphysical system developed by Plotinus and his successors, Julian adapted Neoplatonic

hierarchical thought to legitimize and reorganize pagan cults in the Roman Empire (Dillon, 1996, pp. 361–370; Clark, 1997). Instead of merely reviving traditional mythic polytheism, he integrated the Neoplatonic view of a cosmos emanating from the supreme transcendence of the One, descending through successive levels—Intellect (Nous), Soul, and, finally, the material domain (Gerson, 2013, pp. 92–95; Julian, 1923).

Julian's religious policies and writings present the gods as hypostases or divine intelligences, each occupying a particular ontological station within this structured hierarchy (Lankila, 2016, pp. 147–166; Saffrey & Westerink, 1968, vol. I, pp. xv–xx). He insisted that cultic rituals, priesthoods, and ethical requirements align with the Neoplatonic vision, where participation in rites must reflect the soul's journey of ascent through the ranks of being (Mleczek, 2020, pp. 119–138). Through this approach, Julian's project was not a simple restoration of past practices, but a deliberate, philosophical reform aiming to have Roman religious order mirror the cosmic hierarchy of Neoplatonic metaphysics (Casas, 2018, pp. 41–65; Perl, 1994, pp. 77–83).

Thus, Julian's policies and writings demonstrate the extent to which Neoplatonic hierarchy—placing every existing thing, from gods to humans, in a coordinated ontological chain—provided both the intellectual justification and the organizational structure for late pagan religiosity in the Roman Empire (Herrmann, 2007, pp. 1–20).

Conclusions

Neoplatonism's reconfiguration of Greco-Roman religious traditions in the Roman Empire is best understood not as a process of rupture or arbitrary alteration, but as a comprehensive and deliberate restructuring of sacred thought and practice. Through sophisticated philosophical abstraction and interpretive innovation, the Neoplatonists conserved and elevated the symbolic, ritualistic, and cosmological pillars of earlier paganism, integrating them into a new metaphysical system fundamentally governed by the primacy of the One.

Key figures such as Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Proclus reconceptualized myth, ritual, and cosmology as progressive stages in the soul's journey toward its transcendent origin. Central mythic patterns—including descent, ascent, and the succession of divine powers—were allegorically reimagined as existential paradigms for spiritual ascent, unification, and return. Rather than diminishing the complexity and multiplicity of ancient pantheons, the Neoplatonists rationalized the gods into a hierarchy of henads and principles, each serving as a conduit for distinct aspects of divine order.

This intellectual transformation crucially harmonized philosophical inquiry with ritual practice. Pure contemplation was regarded as insufficient by itself for achieving the soul's highest aim; only through active, meaningful engagement in ritual and symbolic acts—especially theurgy—could the soul attain authentic union with the divine. In this synthesis, Neoplatonism preserved the insight of Plato concerning the Good as an

ineffable source, while simultaneously enriching it through Aristotelian analysis and the evolving religious sensibilities of antiquity. The result was a dynamic, philosophical religion integrating rational speculation, ethical discipline, and spiritual participation.

In its systematic approach, Neoplatonism established a hierarchical worldview flowing from the One down to the material cosmos, outlining both an ontological schema and a practical itinerary for the soul's ascent. Theoretical cosmology was thus mapped directly onto personal experience, requiring not only understanding but also lived commitment through purification, meditation, and ritual.

Importantly, Neoplatonism's legacy reaches far beyond antiquity; its metaphysical concepts and ritual paradigms profoundly shaped subsequent Christian, Islamic, and Jewish theology, influencing Western spiritual and intellectual traditions well into the modern era. This adaptability demonstrates that the Neoplatonic synthesis provided both a framework for continuity and the creative resources necessary for the sacred to persist and evolve in radically changing cultural settings.

Neoplatonism illustrates the remarkable adaptability of ancient religious and philosophical traditions, showing how inherited Greek and Roman wisdom can be transformed to meet the needs of new intellectual environments. Through its creative reinterpretation, Neoplatonism prevented classical doctrines from becoming static or obsolete, instead revitalizing them as living, dynamic resources that continued to shape—and enrich—the development of Western thought across changing historical circumstances.

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