

# *Unio Magica*: Part I: On the Magical Origins of Plotinus' Mysticism

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In the *Vita Plotini* (23.8–18), Porphyry declares that Plotinus' "end (*telos*) and goal (*skopos*) was to be united to (*henôthênai*), to approach the God who is over all things," and that, moreover, four times during the period that the two men were together, he attained this goal "in unspeakable actuality and not in potency only" (*energeiai arrêtôi kai ou dunamei*).<sup>1</sup> This aspect of Plotinus' philosophical practice represents a significant, if often overlooked, turning point in the history of Western thought. On the one hand, Plotinus' mysticism—in particular his conception of the sudden, ineffable experience of union with what he calls alternately the One (*to hen*), the Good, or God—appears to be an original development without an explicit precedent in the Greek philosophical tradition. On the other hand, his conception of ecstatic union with the divine was extremely influential upon subsequent Christian, Jewish, and Islamic thought; for this reason Plotinus has been aptly referred to as the "father of Western mysticism."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, so great is the apparent discontinuity between Plotinian mysticism and prior Greek thought that scholars have occasionally looked for possible sources far afield of the conventional philosophical tradition.<sup>3</sup> The essential point of this paper is to

1. A.H. Armstrong, *Plotinus: Enneads*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Press, 1966) 71–72. Hereafter all translations of Plotinus' works will be from Armstrong's translation, with minor alterations.

2. J. Rist, *Plotinus: the Road to Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1967) 213. For a sample of comments to the same effect, see, e.g., A.H. Armstrong, *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1940) 44–45; E.R. Dodds, "Tradition and Personal Achievement in the Philosophy of Plotinus," *Journal of Roman Studies* 50 (1960): 1–7; R. Arnou, *Le Désir de Dieu dans la philosophie de Plotin* (Rome: U Grégorienne, 1967) 289; B. McGinn, *The Presence of God: a History of Western Christian Mysticism, vol. 1: the Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 54.

3. For example, some have suggested that Plotinus was influenced by Indian thought; see esp. E. Bréhier, *La Philosophie de Plotin* (Paris, 1928) [= *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, trans. J. Thomas (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1958)] ch. 7. This however is by no means a unanimous view: cf. A.H. Armstrong, *Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1967) 200; A.M. Wolters, "A Survey of Modern Scholarly

suggest that Plotinus derived the central aim of his life and his philosophy—namely, that of mystical union—at least in part from contemporaneous ritual practices which were thought to enable the practitioner to “conjoin” his or her self with a god. This possibility has remained unexamined in part because much of the previous scholarship has consciously or unconsciously assumed that magic is a category radically distinct from both philosophy and ‘high’ religion, of which Plotinian mysticism is considered a paradigmatic example. This thesis has implications not only for our understanding of the sources and nature of Plotinus’ thought but also for the broader issue of the relationship between the categories of magic, religion, and philosophy in the late antique Mediterranean world.

### 1.1 Plotinus’ conception of union with the One

Despite the large volume of scholarship on Plotinus’ mysticism, his notion of union with the One remains the subject of considerable controversy.<sup>4</sup> Here I would like to propose a new hypothesis for the genesis of this idea; first, however, it may be helpful to provide a brief outline of this aspect of his thought. Plotinus’ mysticism is not easily separable from the more discursive aspects of his philosophy, and it may even be understood as the culmination of both his metaphysics and his epistemology,<sup>5</sup> although it is subsumable to neither. In essence, Plotinus envisions a contemplative, nonspatial “ascent” (or rather, a progressive interiorization)<sup>6</sup> through the successive hypostases Soul and Intellect (*Nous*),<sup>7</sup> and thence towards the utterly transcendent and

Opinion on Plotinus and Indian Thought” in *Neoplatonism and Indian Thought*, ed. R.B. Harris (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982) 293–308.

4. On the conflicting scholarship, see Rist, *Plotinus: Road to Reality* 213 and n. 1; for a bibliographic overview see J. Bussanich, “Mystical Elements in the Thought of Plotinus,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.36.7 (1994) 5300–330.

5. This opinion is expressed, for instance, by Bussanich, “Mystical Elements” 5300; J. Trouillard, *La Purification plotinienne* (Paris: Presses U de France, 1955) 194.

6. Plotinus, *Enneads* I.6.9; III.8.6.37–40; V.1.11.6–12; V.8.10.36 ff.; V.8.11; VI.9.3.20–21; VI.9.7; VI.9.8.3–4 *passim*.

7. The attainment of the hypostatic Soul involves the progressive abandonment of sense-perception (Plotinus, *Enneads* I.3.1; I.6.3–4; III.6.6.65 f.; IV.8.8; V.5.1) and purification from the passions (I.1.7–13; I.2.6.1–5; I.6.7.1–8; II.3.9.20–24; III.6.3–5; VI.9.9.13–15, 50). The ascent to the Intellect is achieved through a more direct type of apprehension in which subject and object of cognition become progressively identified (e.g., III.8.8). The Forms abide in the Intellect as an inchoate unity (V.3.7.30–31; V.4.2; V.8.4; VI.7.14–15); therefore *noësis* occurs only when the soul-as-intellect grasps the Forms all at once by means of an immediate, ineffable intuition (IV.4.2.16–34). Yet the highest portion of the individual soul is *always*, albeit usually unconsciously, in contact with the hypostatic Intellect (I.1.13.8–9; IV.4.2; IV.8.1.1–11; IV.8.3–4, 7–8; IV.8.7–8; V.1.3, 6, 10–12; V.3.5.22; VI.4.14; VI.7.31.8; VI.9.8–11 *passim*); therefore Plotinus occasionally explains the union of the soul with the Intellect not as a real change but as

unknowable One, which is said to be “beyond Being” itself.<sup>8</sup> At the final stage, all intellection—even at the unified and non-discursive level of *Nous*—is entirely inadequate and, as he repeatedly insists, must be actively discarded.<sup>9</sup> Instead, one must somehow transcend the subject-object duality involved in cognition, and “grasp” the One—since it is impossible, strictly speaking, to “know” it—by its ineffable “presence” (*parousia*) within the innermost core of one’s self.<sup>10</sup> Yet by virtue of its unity, the hyper-noetic awareness of this presence verges on a remarkable proximity, or even *identity*, with the transcendent principle itself.<sup>11</sup> Plotinus’ most explicit accounts of this event describe an ecstatic contact or fusion with the One in terms anachronistically redolent of later mystics—Sufis, for example, like al-Bistami or al-Hallaj<sup>12</sup>—

the progressive purgation of the illusion of multiplicity (I.6.7.1–8; I.6.9; II.3.9; IV.3.32.20; IV.8.1.8; V.1.12; VI.5.7; VI.9.3.24).

8. See, e.g., Plotinus, *Enneads* I.6.7.1; III.8.8.1–3; V.1.1.1–5; V.1.10.1–7; V.4.2; V.6.6.30; VI.8.19 (in reference to Plato, *Republic* 509b9).

9. Plotinus’ insistence that intellection must be abandoned during the final approach to the One (e.g., at *Enneads* V.3.13–14; V.3.17.20 f.; VI.7.35.1; VI.7.36.15; VI.9.10.5 f.) follows, entirely rationally, from his epistemology. The basic problem is twofold: first, ordinary cognition occurs through an identity of the Form in the individual and hypostatic intellects (I.1.8; V.3.2; V.3.4–5; V.9.3–7, following Aristotle, *de Anima* 430a3–5, 19–20 etc.). The One, however, cannot be known in this manner, because it is itself the *source* of the Forms and thus is situated—ontologically, not spatially—“above” the hypostatic Intellect in which the Forms abide (Plotinus, *Enneads* I.6.9.34 f.; V.3.12–14; V.5.6; cf. Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 23.9; Plato, *Republic* 142a3–4). Second, ordinary cognition involves an inherent *duality* between the subject and object (Plotinus, *Enneads* V.3.5; VI.9.3.10–13) which inhibits knowledge of the One, since the latter is absolute unity and can admit no duality whatsoever: not even that minimally implied by the relation of knower and known.

10. Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.9.4.1–10. Not coincidentally, the word *parousia* is pregnant with theological connotations; on its use as a technical term for a sudden theophany, see W.F. Arndt and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1957) 635. Yet sometimes Plotinus also suggests that the One might be grasped by a superior form of intellect itself, e.g., at VI.9.3.26–27, by the “primary part of intellect” (*tou nou tōi prōtōi*); at V.3.14.15, by the “inner intellect” (*endon nous*); at VI.7.35.19–25, by the “intellect in love” (*nous erōn*: as distinguished from the ordinary intellect); at III.8.11.22 and VI.7.33.30 by the “trace” (*ichnos*) of the Good in the intellect; or, more apophatically, at V.5.8.22–23, by the part of intellect which is *not* intellect (*tōi heautou mē nōi*).

11. See, e.g., Plotinus, *Enneads* III.8.10.31; V.5.8; V.8.11.17; VI.7.36; VI.9.3.10–13; VI.9.10; VI.9.11.32. Union connotes not only the convergence of two discrete entities, but also the subtraction of extraneous and inferior elements. On the delicate ambiguity between these two models, see J. Bussanich, *The One and its Relation to Intellect in Plotinus*, *Philosophia Antiqua* 49 (Leiden: Brill, 1988) 181–88.

12. According to ch. 125 of Sarraj’s *Book of Flashes*, quoted in *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur’an, Mi’raj, Poetic and Theological Writings*, ed. M.A. Sells and C.W. Ernst (New York: Paulist Press, 1996) 221, al-Bistami (d. ~877 C.E.) declared, “I search the secret of my heart for desire for you, but find only myself and that I am you . . .” According to the *Akhbar al-Hallaj* no. 74, discussed by L. Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, abridged ed.,

whose unitive exclamations were deeply threatening to religious authorities intent on maintaining a substantive separation between human and divine.

One problem in interpreting this aspect of Plotinus' thought arises from the unfortunate fact that he never specifies in precise practical terms how one attains the ultimate stage of ascent. He describes the initial phase of the process with typical Platonic metaphors for philosophical practice: it is a form of heavenly ascent; one is propelled upward by the erotic desire for the Good; and the first glimpse of the One arrives as a sudden illumination after a long period of preparation and patient attention.<sup>13</sup> Yet to evoke the ultimate goal, Plotinus employs images—images of contact, fusion or identification with the deity—which apparently do not occur in the prior philosophical tradition and which cannot be expressed in ordinary philosophical language. It must be stressed that whatever type of dialectical practice Plato had meant to illustrate with the fantastical imagery of heavenly ascent in the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, the final stages of Plotinus' contemplation (*theôria*) did *not* involve any sort of scholastic cogitation. Perhaps he envisioned a kind of contemplation analogous to certain Asian meditational practices—he does advise comparable visualization exercises<sup>14</sup>—or perhaps he meant something quite different, but the issue remains unresolved.<sup>15</sup> It is clear, however, that Plotinus conceived the process not only as an epistemological technique but also as a form of self-transformation, whose goal—the ineffable union—was simultaneously an objective ontological condition and, as Porphyry's account confirms, a discrete moment of extraordinary subjective experience.

trans. H. Mason (Princeton: Princeton U Press, 1994) 64–71, al-Hallaj (d. 922 C.E.) is supposed to have exclaimed "I am the Truth (God)!" On this variety of "intoxicated" Sufism, see A. Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History*, Themes in Islamic Studies 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2000) ch. 4.

13. Heavenly ascent: Plotinus, *Enneads* III.4.3.18–28; III.5 *passim*; V.3.4.13–15; VI.9.11.13 f., to which compare Plato, *Phaedrus* 246a–247b; *Phaedo* 109d–111c. Erotic desire: Plotinus VI.7.22; VI.7.35.20 f.; VI.9.9.24–46; cf. Plato, *Phaedrus* 252c ff.; *Symposium* 211b–c. Sudden appearance of the One: Plotinus V.5.8; VI.7.36.10 ff.; cf. Plato, *7th Letter* 341c–d.

14. See, e.g., Plotinus, *Enneads* V.1.2.1 ff.; V.5.10; V.8.9.1–28; VI.4.7.23–40.

15. The liminal terrain between Plotinus' discursive philosophy and his contemplative practice deserves more direct attention than it has thus far received. *Vis-à-vis* Asian techniques, see the comments of E.R. Dodds in *Les Sources de Plotin*, Entretiens Hardt 5 (Vandoeuvres-Genève, 1960) 338–39; also R.T. Wallis, "Nous as Experience" in *The Significance of Neoplatonism*, ed. R.B. Harris (Albany: SUNY Press, 1976) 121–53; and now the essays in *Neoplatonism and Indian Philosophy*, ed. P.M. Gregorios (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002); without direct reference to Asian thought, see J. Dillon, "Plotinus and the Transcendental Imagination," in *Religious Imagination*, ed. J.P. Mackey (U of Edinburgh Press, 1986) 55–64, esp. 58–59; G. Shaw, "Eros and Arithmos: Pythagorean Theurgy in Iamblichus and Plotinus," *Ancient Philosophy* 19 (1999): 121–43; S. Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism: Non-Discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 2000) esp. chs. 3 and 5.

1.2 *The central question: What are the sources of Plotinian union?*

This enigmatic conception of union with the One raises a fundamental question, one which has remained unanswered despite the considerable volume of scholarship on the topic of Plotinian mysticism: how did Plotinus arrive at this idea? As intellectual historians are well aware, the precise identification of the genesis of any new idea often involves the artificial imposition of discontinuity onto an otherwise continuous historical process. Here Plotinus' mysticism is no exception, although I would not be alone in suggesting that it does represent a significant discontinuity at least with respect to his immediate philosophical context. Indeed, the conception of union with the One, in a robust sense, does not seem to have occurred among his philosophical predecessors.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, somewhat surprisingly, it also appears to be without precedent in the other popular traditions upon which one might expect Plotinus to have drawn, such as the pagan mystery-religions or the conventional Jewish and Christian thought of his time.<sup>17</sup> The genesis of his conception of mystical union therefore demands some additional explanation.

I should qualify this, however, by noting that other aspects of Plotinus' mysticism do reflect some continuity with conventional philosophical notions. First, in a broad sense Plotinus must be dependent upon Plato, who uses the imagery of mystery-religions to describe philosophical wisdom; the latter also discusses the goal of becoming "as godlike as possible," the desirability of divine possession, the separation of body and soul followed by heavenly ascent, and the sudden, ineffable flash of non-verbal illumination that culminates the arduous practice of dialectical philosophy.<sup>18</sup> One might

16. This fact has been insufficiently noted, even by those scholars (as in n. 2 *supra*) who stress Plotinus' originality and his powerful influence on subsequent mystics; but see, e.g., P. Henry, intro. to *Plotinus: Enneads*, trans. S. MacKenna (London: Faber, 1930) xxxiii; E. Bréhier, *Philosophy of Plotinus* 112; H. Thesleff, "Notes on Unio Mystica in Plotinus," *Arctos* 14 (1980): 101–14, esp. 113; D. Merkur, comments in *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: an Ecumenical Dialogue*, ed. M. Idel and B. McGinn (New York: Continuum, 1996) 175.

17. On the absence of mysticism *per se* in the Mysteries, see W. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Press, 1987) 112–14. Philo and Origen are the clearest representatives of biblical mysticism prior to or contemporaneous with Plotinus, but they apparently do not describe a full-fledged experience of union with God; see D. Winston, *Logos and Mystical Theology in Philo of Alexandria* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1985) 53; E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (New York: Norton, 1965) 71, 96–97 n. 5, and A. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1981) 31–35, 70–73.

18. Godlike: Plato, *Theaetetus* 176b; divine possession: *Phaedrus* 244a–245c, 265b; separation of body and soul: *Phaedo* 65e–67e; 81a; *Phaedrus* 246b–247e; *Symposium*, 211c; *Republic* 514a ff.; flash of illumination: *Symposium* 210e; *7th Letter* 341c–d. It should of course be noted the notion of the divine nature of the soul has roots in ancient Greek thought (e.g., Empedocles

also compare Plotinian union with an older complex of beliefs about divine possession, in which the bodies of oracles were thought to be penetrated by the god's *pneuma*.<sup>19</sup> But perhaps more importantly, it has been pointed out that Plotinus' notion of the identity of the intellect with its objects—which has itself often been understood as a form of mysticism<sup>20</sup>—derives from the Aristotelian idea of the union of the potential and active intellects at the instant of successful cognition.<sup>21</sup> Although Aristotle himself was ambiguous about the theological implication of this doctrine, most later Aristotelian commentators equated the Active Intellect with the Divine Intellect,<sup>22</sup> and Alexander of Aphrodisias even seems to have suggested that self-divinization is possible through knowledge of God, since, according to this Aristotelian epistemology, the individual intellect *becomes* the object of knowledge so long as that object is incorporeal.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Plotinus' apophatic descrip-

frag. 126 D–K, Plato, *Phaedo* 80a–b; *Philebus* 28c), and in Roman Stoicism (e.g., Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 12.26; Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.8.11; Seneca, *Epistulae* 120.14); then in Hermetism (e.g., *Corpus Hermeticum* I.6; XII.1) and in Gnosticism (e.g., Basilides *apud* Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnium haeresium* 7.21, etc.) where the identification of the immanent with the transcendent god became progressively more robust. On the distinction between a *fully* divine soul, i.e., one consubstantial with the supreme god, and one merely of divine *origin* see A.-J. Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 4 (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1990) 211–18; H.D. Betz, “The Delphic Maxim ‘Know Yourself’ in the Greek Magical Papyri,” *History of Religions* 21.2 (1981): 156–71.

19. See, e.g., Plutarch, *De Pythiae oraculis* 404e; *De defectu oraculorum* 414e; *Quaestiones Conviviales* 718b; Origen, *Contra Celsum* VII.3, etc.

20. The mystical aspect of the union with the hypostatic Nous has been stressed esp. by P. Hadot, “L'Union de l'âme avec l'intellect divin dans l'expérience mystique plotinienne,” in *Proclus et son influence: actes du Colloque de Neuchâtel, juin 1985*, ed. G. Boss and G. Seel (Zurich: Éditions du Grand Midi, 1987) 3–27; *idem* “Les Niveaux de conscience dans les états mystiques selon Plotin,” *Journal de psychologie normale et pathologique* 2–3 (1980): 243–66; *idem* “Neoplatonist Spirituality: Plotinus and Porphyry,” in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, ed. A.H. Armstrong (New York: Crossroad, 1986) 230–49.

21. Aristotle, *De Anima* 430a3–5, 19–20; 431a1–2; 431b20–2a1; *Metaphysics* 1074b38–1075a5; for the influence of this on Plotinus, see A.H. Armstrong, *Architecture of the Intelligible Universe* 39–42; P. Merlan, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness: Problems of the Soul in the Neoplatonist and Neoplatonic Tradition* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1963) 16 ff.; H.J. Blumenthal, *Aristotle and Neoplatonism in Late Antiquity: Interpretations of the De Anima* (Ithaca: Cornell U Press, 1996) ch. 11; now S. Menn, “Plotinus on the Identity of Knowledge with its Objects,” *Apeiron* 34.3 (2001): 233–46.

22. Later commentators and the scholastic tradition took the Active Intellect to be unproblematically synonymous with the self-thinking divine Nous of *Metaphysics* Lambda and hence with the Aristotelian Prime Mover; modern scholars however tend not to be so sure. See H.A. Davidson, “Alfarabi and Avicenna on the Active Intellect,” *Viator* 3 (1972): 109–78.

23. Alexander of Aphrodisias, *De Anima* 88.3–10 and discussion in A.P. Fotinis, *The De Anima of Alexander of Aphrodisias: a Translation and Commentary* (Washington: U Press of America, 1979); also P. Moraux, *Alexandre d'Aphrodise: exégète de la noétique d'Aristote* (Liège: Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres, 1942) esp. ch. 3. Alexander is thus usually credited with being

tion of the hyper-noetic One seems to have been foreshadowed in Neopythagoreanism, and in particular by an anonymous middle-Platonic commentary on Plato's *Parmenides*, which enigmatically describes a "divine possession" (*enthousiasmos*) leading to apprehension of the One.<sup>24</sup> This complex of ideas thus comprises the traditional background of Plotinian mysticism.

Yet I would nevertheless insist that there is a significant gulf between these ideas and Plotinus' unitive thought. Plato's metaphors for the climax of the philosophical ascent describe a *vision* of the Good, not contact or identity with it,<sup>25</sup> and in any case it is unclear how much of this—like the common Platonic goal of "assimilation to God"—is merely a banalized metaphor for dialectical practice. Mantic possession (as Plutarch describes it) typically involved the inspiration of divine *pneuma* by a relatively passive subject who would then serve as the god's mouthpiece; this process thus did not entail a substantial self-divinization or identity with the god. The Aristotelian model of union with the Active Intellect, even when interpreted theologically, merely implies some consubstantiality of human and divine minds during *ordinary* cognition, not at a moment of an extraordinary, hyper-noetic ecstasy.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, this model of cognition requires an *intelligible* object, which the Plotinian One most certainly is not.<sup>27</sup> And finally, while the anony-

the first to interpret the Active Intellect in unambiguously theological terms, although even this too has recently been questioned; see D. Papadis, *Die Seelenlehre bei Alexander von Aphrodisias*, European U Studies Philosophy Series vol. 349 (Bern: Peter Lang, 1991), who thinks that neither Aristotle *nor* Alexander equated the Active Intellect with God.

24. Fr. I, p. 2.29 in G. Bechtle, *The Anonymous Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, Berner Reihe philosophischer Studien, Band 22 (Bern: Paul Haupt, 1999); on the new pre-Plotinian dating of this text see now K. Corrigan, "Platonism and Gnosticism: the Anonymous Commentary on the *Parmenides*: Middle or Neoplatonic?" in *Gnosticism and Later Platonism: Themes, Figures, Texts*, ed. J.D. Turner and R. Majercik, SBL Symposium Series 12 (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2000) 141–77. Also with respect to Middle-Platonism, some have suggested that Plotinus was influenced by mystical ideas in his enigmatic predecessors Numenius and Ammonius Saccas; see E.R. Dodds, "Numenius and Ammonius," in *Les Sources de Plotin* 3–61. On the one hand, too little is known about Ammonius for any position to be decisive; see esp. *ibid.* 24–32. On the other hand, the only mystical fragment of Numenius (fr. 2 des Places, in which he compares the apprehension of the Good with a sudden glimpse of a distant fishing-boat) differs fundamentally from Plotinian mysticism, since it involves vision from a great distance, not extreme proximity or identity.

25. This point is stressed by Rist, *Plotinus* 221–22.

26. On this difference, Rist, *op. cit.* 179.

27. The recent tendency among historians of philosophy has been to minimize the difference between Plotinus' intellective and mystical practice, and to treat the latter as no more than a kind of intensification of the former. Several scholars—e.g., P. Hadot, as cited *supra* n. 20; R. Sorabji, "Non-propositional Thought in Plotinus," *Phronesis* 31 (1986): 261–74; J. Rist, "Back to the Mysticism of Plotinus: Some More Specifics," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 27.2

mous *Parmenides* commentary shares much of Plotinus' epistemology, the author nevertheless believes one can grasp (*chôrêσαι*) the hyper-noetic One through a kind of meditative "non-apprehensive apprehension" (*akatalêptôi katalêpsei*: fr. 1, p. 2.16–17) and makes no mention of self-identification or mystical union with the supreme principle.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, I would suggest that despite his evident dependence upon earlier Greek thought and his use of Platonic (and occasionally Aristotelian) terminology, Plotinus' conception of mystical union departs significantly from his philosophical predecessors, in (a) its reliance upon intense subjective experience; in (b) its abandonment of all ordinary ways of knowing and its suggestion of a radically altered state or even extinction of consciousness akin to the ecstasy or trance found in non-philosophical contexts; and finally in (c) its evocation of extreme proximity or even complete identity between the individual and the transcendent Absolute at the apex of the ascent.

Having said this, however, I should still anticipate a two-pronged objection. Lest someone argue that Plotinus' notion of mystical union is not in need of explanation because the term itself refers either to (a) a relatively widespread and loosely-defined religious phenomenon, or to (b) a universal, cross-cultural category of human experience, I should insist that I use the phrase "mystical union" to indicate something quite precise, something which Plotinus describes with verbal phrases based on *hen* or with other comparably vivid terms of contact or blending, and by which he appears to express the subjective experience of an extremely close conjunction or even identification with the god. What I *do not* mean by it is the somewhat vaguer sense the term has acquired, that of almost *any* form of intense religious experience. Some confusion arises from the fact that this latter interpretation was made commonplace by the medieval Christian tradition, whose theological presuppositions usually allowed it to be understood only in its diluted sense; and it was from this tradition that the term "*unio mystica*" was subsequently adopted by historians of religion to refer to a broader category of human

(1989): 183–97; J. Bussanich, "Plotinian Mysticism in Theoretical and Comparative Perspective," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 71.3 (1997): 339–65—have pointed out that Plotinus envisioned the attainment of the hypostatic Intellect as itself a form of mystical union; as a consequence, however, they de-emphasize the exceptional nature of union with the One. On the one hand, this has been a much-needed corrective to an earlier tendency to dismiss Plotinus' mysticism as being incidental to his rational philosophy and thus wholly beneath the scope of responsible scholarship. On the other hand, this attitude has, in my opinion, failed to recognize a sufficient *difference* between what is merely the apex of ordinary intellection and Plotinus' extraordinary moments of contact with the One.

28. See Bechtle, *op. cit.* 219–20.



experience.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, “*unio mystica*” has often been treated unproblematically as a phenomenon occurring in several disparate religious or cultural contexts.<sup>30</sup> Yet to this I would respond that the case for the universality of mystical union, when taken in the acute sense I have mentioned above, is extremely weak.<sup>31</sup> Even if one grants the widespread occurrence of certain distinct “unitive” states of consciousness, there are nevertheless sufficient historical grounds to question the claim that such states have always been identified as a *conjunction or unification with a god*. This explanation is, rather, an *interpretation* based upon a specific religious conception with a traceable history.<sup>32</sup> And, historically speaking, the introduction of this idea to the discourse of Western philosophical theology is largely due to Plotinus, who appears to be the first in this tradition to have thus formulated it. Its apparent universality derives primarily from its occurrence in later Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mysticism: traditions which owe much to Neoplatonism and are thus either direct or indirect heirs of Plotinus. The assumption that the experience of union is a universal phenomenon and the resultant decontextualization of this idea among intellectual historians may have served to obscure both its originality and the nature of its actual sources.<sup>33</sup> The

29. Examples of this latter (weak) sense include, for example, a vision of a deity, an experience of communion among the members of a congregation, an assimilation to a divine ideal of ethics, the union of human and God in Jesus Christ, the ineffable sense of the presence of the divine, and so on. See B. McGinn's comments in *Mystical Union* esp. 185, n. 3 *et passim*.

30. See, e.g., I. Marcoulesco's entry *s.u.* “Mystical Union,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. M. Eliade, vol. 10 (New York: Macmillan, 1986) 239–45.

31. This touches upon the subject of an ongoing methodological debate in which I will not get embroiled, since it is irrelevant for my historical argument whether or not a mystical experience (or any experience, for that matter) is necessarily mediated by prior linguistic, cultural, or religious assumptions. Stephen Katz has attempted to argue that (a) there are no good philosophical grounds for positing a common core experience underlying the diverse expressions of mystical experience, and that (b) the traditional context of the individual mystic affects the nature of the experience itself and not just its expression, e.g., in his “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” in *Mysticism and Philosophical Experience*, ed. S. Katz (New York: Oxford U Press, 1978) 22–74. *Contra* Katz cf. *inter alia* D. Rothberg, “Contemporary Epistemology and the Study of Mysticism,” in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, ed. R. Forman (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1990) 163–210; M. Adam, “A Post-Kantian Perspective on Recent Debates About Mystical Experience,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70.4 (2002): 801–17.

32. See D. Merkur, “Unitive Experience and the State of Trance,” in *Mystical Union* 125–53, esp. 153.

33. Thus, e.g., while E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian* 84, says that Plotinus and Porphyry are the *only* individuals of late antiquity who experienced a genuine mystical union, he nevertheless fails to note that—according to his own strict definition—they are also the *first* to have done so. This omission on the part of such an astute historian (and one so inclined to emphasize Plotinus' originality) can only be due to the assumption that “union with god” is a more or less universal phenomenon.

origin of Plotinus' notion of union with the One therefore remains to be explained.

### 1.3 *The structure of Plotinian union*

At this point a closer examination of the structure of Plotinus' various descriptions of union with the One may guide us back towards the sources of this idea. Although Plotinus does not clearly elaborate the practical method used to attain the One, he does dwell upon the final result, evoking the ineffable experience by means of several images whose variety and occasional incommensurability illustrate the difficulty he finds in expressing what was for him undoubtedly an actual experience and not merely a theoretical position. These descriptions of union usually appear as sudden eruptions of remarkably evocative, experiential language into otherwise objective and discursive arguments. They typically contain some or all of the following elements: (a) a vision of the god, frequently associated with (b) a vision of one's deified self; then union itself, meaning either (c) an extremely intense moment of contact or conjunction between the contemplator and the god (or the divinized self), in which, however, each seem to retain some distinct identity; or (d) a coalescence or complete identification, which eventually leads to (e) a lasting transformation: either a more permanent divinization of the contemplator, or the establishment of a particularly close relationship with the god.<sup>34</sup>

(a) *Vision of the god.* Plotinus commonly describes the initial stage of the encounter with the One in terms of a vision, usually of a god. At I.6.7.9 he compares the final ascent to the celebration of a mystery rite in which one must doff one's clothes before entering the sanctuary; at this point "one sees with one's self alone That (One) alone" (*autôi monôi auto monon idêi*). At V.5.8.10–12 the individual Intellect is described as "standing first to its contemplation (*hestêxetai men gar ho nous pros tèn thean*), looking to nothing but the Beautiful." At V.8.11.2, having been "possessed" (*katalêphtheis*) by the god, one must "bring one's contemplation to the (point) of vision" (*eis to idein propherêi to theama*). At VI.7.34.13, the contemplator "sees (the One) in itself suddenly appearing." At VI.7.36.20, the soul rides the crest of the "wave" of intellect, at which point "the vision fills the eyes with light" (*hê thea plêsasa phôtos ta ommata*). At VI.9.7.20, "ignoring even himself" (*agnoêsanta de kai hauton*) the contemplator "will come to a contemplation of that (One)" (*en têi theai ekeinou genesthai*). At VI.9.9.56 total contact with god will result in a vision.

34. I take as paradigmatic the following examples of Plotinus' mystical passages: *Enneads* I.6.7.1–14; V.5.8.9–24; V.8.11.1–9; VI.7.34.8–22; VI.7.36.10–22; VI.9.7.17–26; VI.9.9.50–60; VI.9.10.14–21; VI.9.11.4–25.

(b) *Vision of the deified self.* The vision of god is also typically preceded by, or identified with, a vision of the deified self. Thus at V.5.8.13, Plotinus says that while gazing at the Beautiful, the individual intellect will nevertheless first see a vision of itself having been beautified (*eide men ta prôta kalliô genomenon heauton*) because of its proximity to the One. At V.8.11.3 the contemplator “presents himself [to himself] (*heauton propherei*) and looks at a beautified image of himself.” At VI.7.34.13 the soul’s vision of the One is said to occur “in itself” (*en hautêi*). At VI.7.36.10 one has become at once the “contemplator of himself and the object of contemplation” (*homou theatês te kai theama autos hautou*). At VI.9.9.56 one is able to see simultaneously God and one’s divinized self—“the self glorified, full of intelligible light...having become a god” (*theon genomenon*).<sup>35</sup>

(c) *Close contact between distinct entities.* Several of Plotinus’ descriptions imply that union with the One consists of a close contact between entities whose identities remain distinct. He evokes this aspect of union with the language of “presence” and with the prepositional prefixes *sun-* and *meta-* denoting proximity and “togetherness.” For example, at V.8.11.5–7, after the initial vision, the contemplator “is one and altogether with that god silently present (*hen homou panta esti met’ ekeinou tou theou apsophêti parontos*), and is with him as much as he wants to be and can be.” This results in the contemplator becoming “close” (*ephexês*) to the god, and enables the former to return to be “present” to the latter (*autôi pareinai*) whenever he wishes. At the point when the contemplator has become the self-reflexive object of contemplation, the Good is “nearby” (*eggus*: V.5.8.10.13; VI.7.36.13). Yet Plotinus also emphasises the residual duality in this incomplete mode of union with the curiously concrete imagery of physical contact, often expressed with the verb *haptô* and its derivatives.<sup>36</sup> At VI.7.36.4, the best thing is “either the knowledge (*gnôsis*) of or the touching (*epaphê*) of the Good.” At VI.9.7.4, the One is always “present (*paron*) to one able to touch (*thigein*) it.” At VI.9.9.55 he says that we must “embrace” (*periptuxômetha*) and entirely “touch” (*ephaptometha*) God. At VI.9.11.24, the final approach to the One is a “pressing towards contact” (*epheis pros haphên*). Plotinus also uses imagery of less physical interpersonal encounters; thus, at VI.9.7.23 he de-

35. In other, apparently non-mystical passages Plotinus similarly emphasizes the vision of the self, although in these cases the visionary language may be meant as a metaphor for self-knowledge, e.g., at *Enneads* IV.7.10.30–33; I.6.9.16–26. It might also be possible to see here the influence of Middle-Platonic interpretations of the (possibly spurious) Platonic *1st Alcibiades* (133b–c); see H.D. Betz, “The Delphic Maxim *Gnôthi Sauton* in Hermetic Interpretation,” *Harvard Theological Review* 63.4 (1970): 465–84.

36. Also Plotinus, *Enneads* V.3.10.42; V.3.17.34; VI.7.40.2; and discussion in Rist, *Plotinus* 222.

scribes the union with the One as “conversation,” “intercourse,” or “community” (*homilêsis, sunousia*), and compares it to a myth according to which Minos descended into the Idaean cave every nine years to commune with Zeus and to receive divine laws.<sup>37</sup> Finally, he describes contact with the One with the evocative image of lovers mingling in sexual intercourse, a theme often used by later mystics but somewhat risqué in Plotinus’ time, even among Platonists.<sup>38</sup> At VI.7.34.15, for example, he says that lovers imitate union with the One in their desire “to be united” (*sugkrinai*) in sexual congress; and, at VI.9.4.19, that it is “a kind of passionate experience like that of a lover resting in the beloved” (*en hôi erai anapausamenou*).

(d) *Coalescence or complete identification.* In several of these passages, Plotinus uses imagery which evokes the coalescence or the complete identification of the contemplator and the god. At I.6.7.13, he says that one who has glimpsed it will long to be “blended” or “commingled” (*sugkerasthênai*) with it. At V.5.8.22 the language of vision alternates with that of identification: if the intellect were able to remain in the transcendent “nowhere,” it would “not behold him (the One) but be one with him and not two” (*hen ekeinôi ôn kai ou duo*). At VI.7.34.13, the soul sees the One appearing suddenly, “for there is nothing between, nor are there still two but both are one” (*metaxu gar ouden oud’ eti duo, all’ hen amphô*). Plotinus also expresses this idea by modifying the metaphor of vision to eliminate the duality inherent in perception; thus, for instance, in his “bold statement” (*tolmêros logos*) at VI.9.10.13: “But perhaps one should not say ‘will see,’ but ‘was seen,’ if one must speak of these as two, the seer and the seen, and not both as one” (*hen amphô*). Likewise at VI.9.11.5, “the seer was one with the seen, for it was not really seen but united to him” (*mê heôramenon, all’ hênômenon*). In another image Plotinus assimilates the Platonic theory of perception through likeness to the philosophical motif of introspection: the One is the intelligible light seen only by someone who has *become* intelligible light; the seer must be one both with the seen and that by which sight occurs.<sup>39</sup> Finally, in a frequent geometric analogy, he describes the One as the center point of a

37. Ps.-Plato, *Minos* 319c–e; cf. also Plato, *Laws* 1.624a; Homer, *Odyssey* 19.178–9; Strabo, *Geography* 10.4.8; 18.2.38.

38. The controversial nature of this imagery, even in Plotinus’ immediate circle, is suggested by Porphyry’s anecdote (*Vita Plotini* 15) about the reception of his own mystical-erotic poem entitled “On the Sacred Marriage.” Plotinus is not the first, however, to conflate mysticism with eroticism; R. Ferwerda, *La Signification des images et des métaphores dans la pensée de Plotin* (Groningen: Wolters, 1965) 87, points out that this form of erotic imagery occurs in contemporaneous Gnostic texts.

39. Plotinus, *Enneads* V.8.11.17 ff.; VI.7.36.10–27; VI.9.10.9–21; VI.9.11.6 ff.; cf. Philo, *Legum Allegoriarum* 3.97–103.

series of concentric circles or spheres which correspond to the subsidiary hypostases. A similar concentric model represents the individual human; union occurs when the microcosmic and macrocosmic center-points coincide.<sup>40</sup>

(e) *Lasting results of union.* Finally, although the ineffable moment of union is a temporary state,<sup>41</sup> it nevertheless entails a lasting transformation of the contemplator. At V.8.11 the experience enables one to remain permanently close to the god and to commune with him again whenever one desires. At VI.9.7 the union serves as a form of pedagogical training: one who has experienced it is able to encourage another along the path of ascent. At VI.9.11.47 ff., when one has fallen from the visionary state, one nevertheless has awakened the virtue in one's soul and thereby comes to live "the life of the gods and divine and blessed men."

### 2.1 *Conjunction with deities in mysteriosophic ascent literature*

Now this striking set of images is apparently without precedent in the philosophical tradition, but I would suggest that it does point toward a possible extra-philosophical antecedent which is both historically and conceptually close to Plotinus. The reintegration of the soul with its divine source was a common goal of late antique soteriology, even in contexts which were not mystical in any strict sense.<sup>42</sup> More specifically, the mention of self-divinization through "conjunction" or "union" with a deity occurs in several roughly contemporaneous mysteriosophic texts, primarily in those from Sethian Gnostic and Hermetic sources. These examples evoke three alternate modalities of union which correspond, broadly speaking, to the various Plotinian images: (a) close *contact* between the initiate and the deity, whose identities nevertheless remain distinct; (b) *mixture* of the initiate and deity or the incorporation of the deity into the initiate's body (*or vice versa*); and finally, (c) total *identification* between them.

(a) *Conjunction or contact between two or more entities with separate identities:* The Gnostic and Hermetic texts often describe a conjunction or close contact between the initiate and the god. Although the two entities remain distinct, the initiate receives power from the god and is thus in some way divinized. In the Hermetic *Asclepius*, for instance, Hermes informs the dia-

40. See, e.g., Plotinus, *Enneads* IV.4.16.21–28; V.1.11.7–15; VI.5.5.1–3; VI.8.18.1–8; VI.9.8.22–30; VI.9.10.17.

41. Plotinus, *Enneads* IV.8.1.1–10; VI.9.11.46; Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 23.

42. See Festugière, *Révélation* vol. 3, ch. 4; H. Jonas, "Delimitation of the Gnostic Phenomenon—Typological and Historical," in *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo*, ed. U. Bianchi, Numen Supplements 12 (Leiden: Brill, 1967) 90–108; Th. G. Sinnige, *Six Lectures on Plotinus and Gnosticism* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999) ch. 3.

logue's namesake that one who has "joined himself to the gods in divine reverence" (*diuina religione diis iunxerit*) will become like the gods; one who has joined himself to the *daemones* will become correspondingly daemonic (5.12–15). In the Nag Hammadi tractate *Zostrianos*—significant because a version of it was known in Plotinus' school—the treatise's namesake says that he "joined" or "united" (Coptic: *aiehôtp*) with several divine hypostases prior to his own divinization.<sup>43</sup> In the *Thought of Norea*, the latter (a beneficent principle) seeks to be "joined" (*s-hôtp*) with superior powers known as the "Imperishable Ones."<sup>44</sup> In the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, Jesus announces that he has come so that the elect might be "joined" or "yoked" (*eyenoyhb*) with the divine spirit (*pipna*) and breath (*pnifê*).<sup>45</sup>

(b) *Mixture / absorption / incorporation into the deity*: Another frequent model of union involves the curiously spatial and even physical imagery of mixture or incorporation of the human and divine entities. For example, in the Hermetic *Poimandres*, the divine namesake informs the narrator, presumably Hermes, that initiates who have purified themselves of the passions may ascend into the ogdoadic region (the region immediately beyond the heavens), at which point they will "surrender themselves" (*heautous paradidoasi*) to the heavenly "powers" (*dunameis*)—presumably subsidiary deities—and so *become* powers themselves, and that having done so, they may "enter into god" (*en theôi ginonta*). Subsequently Poimandres himself is said to have "mingled" (*emigê*) with the powers.<sup>46</sup> In the Nag Hammadi *Gospel of the Egyptians*, the narrator invokes the supreme deity, saying "Now that I have known thee, I have mixed myself (*aeimoyjê*) with the immutable."<sup>47</sup> In the *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* the narrator—perhaps Seth or even Jesus himself—says that the elect have "blended" (*ayjôrq*) into "the One," (presumably a divine Monad akin to the Plotinian One).<sup>48</sup> In the *Untitled Text* of the Codex Bruce, the elect (either humans or divine aeons) are said to "flee to" and "stand within" the supreme god.<sup>49</sup>

(c) *Total identification with the deity*: Finally, one may also find reference to divinization as the actual identification of an individual with a deity, so

43. *Zostrianos* (NHC VIII,1) 129.2–16.

44. *The Thought of Norea* (NHC IX,2) 27.24–28.12.

45. *Sophia of Jesus Christ* (NHC III,4 and BG 8502,3) 122.

46. *Poimandres* (*Corpus Hermeticum* I) 26; also CH I.27.

47. *Gospel of the Egyptians* (NHC III,2) 66.22–67.4, trans. A. Böhlig and F. Wisse, in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. J.M. Robinson (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990) 218.

48. *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* (NHC VII,2) 67.21–27; also, possibly, *Marsanes* (NHC X,1) 4.24–5.10.

49. *The Books of Jeu and the Untitled Text in the Bruce Codex*, ed. and trans. C. Schmidt and V. MacDermot, Nag Hammadi Studies 13 (Leiden: Brill, 1978) §9, 242.15–19.

that what are originally two distinct entities are conflated into one. In *Corpus Hermeticum* V.11, the high god is invoked in the concluding hymn, "You are whatever I am, you are whatever I make, you are whatever I say..." In the *Gospel of Philip*, this is said to result from a vision of the deity: "You saw the spirit, you became spirit. You saw Christ, you became Christ. You saw the father, you shall become the father" (*knashôpe neiôt*).<sup>50</sup> In the *Trimorphic Protennoia*, the hypostatized "first Thought" of the true god instructs the elect in five "ineffable seals"—presumably baptismal rituals—which will allow them to abide in him and him to abide in them: a mutual indwelling equivalent to a substantial identification between them.<sup>51</sup> And in the conclusion of the passage of the *Sophia of Jesus Christ* cited above, Jesus utters his wish that the elect "might from two become one" (*nshôpe mpesenay noya*) with the divine spirit.<sup>52</sup>

## 2.2 *Magical techniques of conjunction with deities*

From these examples, we may infer that intimate conjunction with a deity was considered a desirable soteriological goal in Plotinus' broader intellectual milieu.<sup>53</sup> The majority of references to union occur in the narrative context of mythical eschatology; it remains unclear, however, whether this reflects an actual practice to be undertaken in this life. It is therefore significant that there is contemporaneous evidence for a specific ritual practice, most often (but not always) termed *sustasis*<sup>54</sup> or designated with variants of the verb *sunistêmi*, whose goal was to enable the practitioner, while still alive, to "unite" or to "conjoin" with a deity for a brief moment. There are a few mentions of the term in historical contexts, where they occur most frequently in connection with the *Chaldaean Oracles* (probably composed in the late second century C.E.).<sup>55</sup> In his biography of Proclus, Marinus says enigmatically

50. *Gospel of Philip* (NHCII,3) 61.20–35, W.W. Isenberg, trans. in *Nag Hammadi Library in English* 147.

51. *Trimorphic Protennoia* (NHC XIII,1) 50.9–11; see also J.-M. Sevrin, *Le Dossier baptismal séthien: études sur la sacramentaire gnostique*, Bibliothèque Copte de Nag Hammadi, Section "Études" 2 (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1986).

52. *Sophia of Jesus Christ* (NHC III,4) 117.1–2.

53. The presence of this idea in Hermetic literature is discussed by Festugière, *Révélation*, vol. 3, ch. 4, esp. 148–52 and H.D. Betz, "The Delphic Maxim" (1970) 166–67.

54. The word *sustasis* itself, according to LSJ 1734–35, is defined first as a "bringing together," "introduction," or "recommendation"; the secondary significance is a "communication" between man and god.

55. On Chaldaean *sustasis* see H. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy: Mysticism, Magic and Platonism in the Later Roman Empire* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1956) 229, who considers it merely preparatory for the principal theurgical ritual, perhaps on the basis of the later testimony of Olympiodorus, which, however, concerns the Mysteries and not private ritual (see n. 59 *infra*). Lewy is mistaken in his opinion that *sustasis* is restricted to conjunction with lesser "spirits," and that the technique itself is derived from "demonology"; as

cally that the former participated in the “conjunctions” (*sustaseis*) of the Chaldaeans,<sup>56</sup> while Proclus himself mentions that the Chaldaean theurgists revealed the “conjunctive” (*sustatika*) names of the gods of the Night, Day, Month, and Year.<sup>57</sup> The technique is associated with the origin of the Chaldaean tradition itself: Michael Psellus recounts that Julian the Chaldaean somehow “conjoined” (*sunestêse*) the soul of his infant son (Julian the Theurgist, the eventual author of the *Oracles*) with that of Plato and all the other gods so as to provide him with access to both philosophical and oracular wisdom.<sup>58</sup> Mention of *sustasis* also occurs in a few other non-technical sources associated with theurgy. Although Plotinus does not directly mention the technique of *sustasis* (and never explicitly refers to the *Chaldaean Oracles*), a handful of additional references to it do occur in the writings of other Neoplatonists, where, unfortunately, they reveal little about its nature.<sup>59</sup>

The evidence from the technical magical papyri, however, proves to be more helpful. A relatively rapid search of Preisendanz’s *Papyri Graecae Magicae* with the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* database turned up 28 instances of various forms of *sustasis* or the related verb *sunistêmi* used to indicate this type of praxis.<sup>60</sup> There are also number of references to magical conjunction which

we shall see below (cf. esp. n. 63 *infra*), the evidence from the PGM does not support this. Also on Chaldaean *sustasis* see the comments of R. Majercik, *The Chaldaean Oracles: Text, Translation and Commentary*, Studies in Greek and Roman Religion 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1989) 25–26, 127, 215.

56. Marinus, *Vita Procli* 28.

57. Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentarii* 4.89.15.

58. Psellus, *De aurea catena in Annuaire de l’Association pour l’encouragement des études grecques en France* IX, ed. C. Sathas (1875) 215–19.

59. Thus, for example, Porphyry, *Letter to Anebo* 2 (Sodano); twice in Iamblichus, *De mysteriis* 3.14, where *sustasis* is used to designate the spell, not the event; and Olympiodorus, *In Platonis Phaedonem* 120.29–121.8, where it is mentioned second among a hierarchical series of rituals (*katharseis*, *sustaseis*, *muêseis*, and *epopteiai*) used in the Mysteries (*en tois hierois*); these are then compared to the various epistemic stages of the philosophical ascent; analogous to the *sustaseis* are “contemplative acts about intellectual things” (*hai de peri ta dianoëta theôrêtikai energieiai*). Interestingly, Plotinus does use the term at VI.7.35.38 to describe the union of soul and intellect; otherwise, where it occurs in the *Enneads* it means “constitution” or “combination,” usually in a physical sense; see J.H. Sleeman and Pollet, *Lexicon Plotinianum* (Leiden: Brill, 1980) 979–80.

60. *Papyri Graecae Magicae* [=PGM] I.57, 180; II.43, 73; III.197, 588, 695, 698; IV.168, 209, 215, 220, 260, 779, 930, 949; Va.2; VI.1 (twice), 39; VII.505; XIII.29, 38, 346, 379, 611, 929, 932. Text from *Papyri Graecae Magicae: die griechischen Zauberpapyri*, ed. K. Preisendanz, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1928/1931). Translations, with alterations, from *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation Including the Demotic Spells* [=GMPT], ed. H.D. Betz (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1996). The translators of the Betz edition render *sustasis* variously as “encounter,” “conjunction,” “union,” “joining,” “alliance,” or “meeting”; for simplicity I follow their translations of this word verbatim even where I disagree on the sense.



appear to fall into the same general category but which are described without use of the term *sustasis*.<sup>61</sup> From examination of these references in context it appears that the term designates a ritual event which was intended in the most general sense to allow the magician to identify with the god and to have a share in his supernatural power so as to obtain practical benefits such as foreknowledge, a divine revelation, or material goods. However, the *sustasis* could also occasionally be an end in itself.<sup>62</sup> Judging from the frequency with which individual deities are mentioned in these spells, it appears that the ancient practitioners most often sought *sustasis* with a 'high' god, typically Helios, but other celestial deities (e.g., Selene) and aerial spirits (*pneumas*) were also involved.<sup>63</sup> The spells which make reference to this sort of conjunction portray three different models of human-divine relationship, parallel to those evoked by the mysteriosophic literature: (a) a 'conjunction,' or a brief period of extremely close contact with the god; (b) an actual incorporation or absorption of the god into the psycho-physiological complex of the practitioner, which would nevertheless leave their identities distinct; and (c) a total identification of the practitioner and the god through mutual self-predication.

(a) *Conjunction or close contact between two or more entities with separate identities*: The most common sense of *sustasis* in these spells is a brief period of close contact between the practitioner and the god, which may, however, initiate a lasting relationship or alliance, often described in terms of friendship. For example, the stated goal of *PGM*I.42–195 is the acquisition of a daemonic assistant (*paredros*).<sup>64</sup> After an invocation addressing an unspecified high god as "King, God of gods, mighty...Aiôn," the practitioner is enjoined to interrogate the god and then to invite him to a feast. The initiate thus becomes a "friend" (*philos*) of the god, who serves the former in numerous practical ways during life; this also ensures the immortality of the practitioner's spirit (*pneuma*). This type of alliance was believed to confer aspects of the god's power upon the practitioner and even lead to the latter's eventual deification. At I.180 the *sustasis* results in knowledge of divination and healing; subsequently the practitioner is worshipped as a god him- or her-

61. See, e.g., *PGM*I.80, 164–66; IV.122; VII.560–63, 668; VIII.1; XIII.790.

62. See, e.g., *PGM*III.494–611; Va.1–3.

63. Of the *PGM* spells in which *sustasis* and its cognates occur, the deities conjoined break down as follows: Helios, 5 times; unspecified deity, 3 times; aerial *pneumas*, Apollo-Helios, Horus, Helios-Re, and the "gods of the hours" twice each. Apollo, Helios-Mithras, Selene, Aion, Serapis, and one's "personal *daimôn*" are mentioned once each.

64. On *paredroi* in the *PGM*, see L.J. Ciruolo, "Supernatural Assistants in the Greek Magical Papyri," in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed. M. Meyer and P. Mirecki, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 129 (Leiden: Brill, 1995) 279–95.

self, because he or she “has a god as a friend.” At III.588 the *sustasis* leads to divine *gnôsis* and deification while the initiate is still alive. The *sustasis* with the god’s “holy form” (*hiera morphê*) at IV.215 culminates with the practitioner’s return “as lord of a godlike nature.” In this type of conjunction, therefore, the deity remains distinct from the practitioner although a certain amount of the former’s supernatural power rubs off, so to speak, on the latter.

(b) *Interpenetration or incorporation of the god.* These magical techniques are sometimes described with the curiously physiological imagery of incorporation or penetration of the deity into the human body or soul.<sup>65</sup> In *PGM* XIII.734–1077, after a lengthy invocation to an unspecified high god and a recitation of a series of *voces magicae*, the initiate is required to invoke the god thus: “Therefore (*dio*) I am brought together with you (*sunistamai soi*) by the great commander-in-chief Michael, lord, the great archangel of [*voces magicae*]. Therefore (*dio*) I am conjoined (*sunistamai*) [with you], O great one, and I have you in my heart (*en têi kardiai mou*)”<sup>66</sup> This seems to imply that the *sustasis* actually results in the incorporation of the god in the initiate’s heart: an image which may have been intended literally, perhaps having been derived from the Stoic location of the *hegemonikon* in the heart.<sup>67</sup> One might also compare this idea with passages elsewhere in the *PGM* which refer to the god Hermes as “in the heart” (*enkardie*), or which adjure him, in physiologically resonant terms, to “come to me ... as foetuses do to the wombs of women.”<sup>68</sup> It is also evident that the notion of divine incorporation within the human body or soul is not uncommon in the magical corpus even in passages where the technical terminology of *sustasis* is not employed.<sup>69</sup> Thus the initiate is advised at XIII.790 to adjure the god to “come into my mind and my understanding (*eiselthois ton emon noun kai tas emas phrenas*) for all the time of my life and accomplish for me the desires of my soul.” And at III.415: “Enter, Master, into my soul (*eis tên emên psuchên*) and grant me memory.” Similar passages describe a divine *pneuma*—either a breath or a daimon—entering the practitioner; thus, at IV.1122: “Hail, *pneuma* who enters me (*to eiserchomenon me*), convulses me (*antisphômenon mou*), and leaves

65. It is possible these conceptions derived from contemporaneous notions of divine possession, as in n. 19 *supra*.

66. Lines 927–31, trans. in Betz, *GMPT* 193.

67. See, e.g., Galen, *On the Formation of the Foetus* 4.698=SVF 2.761; Calcidius 220=SVF 2.879. Cf. also the Nag Hammadi *Gospel of the Egyptians* (NHC III,2) 66.21, where the divine revealer Yesseus is addressed as “in the heart.”

68. “In the heart”: *PGMV*.400; XVIIb.1; *in utero*: VIII.1.

69. The occurrence of this notion in Hermetism is discussed by Festugière, *Révélation*, vol. 3, 172–4; on its use in the *PGM* see Betz, “Delphic Maxim” (1981).

me kindly according to the will of god"; and VII.560–63: "Come to me, *pneuma* that flies in the air ... and enter into (the boy's) soul (*embêthi autou eis tèn psuchên*) that he may receive the immortal form in mighty and incorruptible light." The image of the deity incorporated within the individual illustrates the intimacy of the relationship involved.

(c) *Total identification with the deity.* The intimacy implied by the physical imagery of interpenetration or incorporation still allows for some duality between the deity and the practitioner. Yet there is a further image which implies that a complete identity of human and god was thought to result from this praxis. In several instances the magician must utter a statement of mutual self-predication to the god. In *PGM* XIII.795 one finds the invocation to an unspecified god, "You are I, and I, you"; in VIII.37 a similar utterance is addressed to Hermes: "For you are I, and I am you," and, again, later in the same spell, "I am you, and you are I" (line 50). This may be related to the conventional Near Eastern "I am ..." formula of self-predication used either in aretology or in spells adjuring a deity, but in this case the reflexive utterance emphasizes the totality of the human-divine identification.<sup>70</sup>

### 2.3 Structural similarities between Plotinian union and magical conjunction

It is thus evident that both the magical papyri and the mysteriosophic literature describe a process in which the human initiate attains an extraordinarily intimate relationship with a god.<sup>71</sup> Where they differ is in both the duration and goal of the event: in the mysteriosophic texts, the union endures for an indefinite period of time and generally occurs in an eschatological context, while in the magical papyri it is sporadic and often practically-oriented. Yet the apparent differences between the two bodies of literature should not conceal the structural unity of their conception of the relationship with the divine. We have seen that in both cases this relationship may take the form of a close contact between two distinct entities; it may imply a more complete integration, often described with the physical imagery of mixture, absorption, or interpenetration; or it may involve a total identification between the human and the deity. It is also evident that these various models

70. On this formula in magic, see Betz, *op. cit.* Similar formulae occur in the Gnostic *Gospel of Eve* (according to Epiphanius, *Adversus haereses* 26.2.6) and the *Pistis Sophia* 96 Schmidt.

71. Their proximity is additionally suggested by the fact that the ascent narratives frequently hint at techniques similar to those of the *PGM*. On the use of letter-combinations and incantation of vowels in ascent texts, see B.A. Pearson, "Gnosticism as Platonism: With Special Reference to Marsanes (*NHC* 10,1)," *Harvard Theological Review* 77.1 (1984): 55–72, esp. 68–69; J.D. Turner, "Ritual in Gnosticism," in *Gnosticism and Later Platonism* 83–139, esp. 120–28.

of conjunction are broadly analogous to Plotinus' descriptions of union with the One, which progress from the relatively dualistic images of vision or contact towards the more unified models of coalescence or identity.

Now the suggestion that there is a significant parallel between Plotinian mysticism and ritual techniques is not entirely new, but has been made in various forms by previous scholars.<sup>72</sup> In fact, the possibility that Plotinus' conception of union with the One could specifically be compared to the magical *sustasis* has previously been raised, but, as I will attempt to show, too hastily dismissed. In an influential 1942 article, the eminent Norwegian scholar Samson Eitrem suggested that later Neoplatonic theurgy had derived in part from Plotinus' thought, but summarily rejected the possibility of a typological comparison between Plotinus' philosophical mysticism and the magical *sustasis*.<sup>73</sup> His argument for this claim had appeared in a previous article, in which he maintained—without reference to Plotinus—that when the word *sustasis* occurs in magical contexts it does not connote as close a relationship between the parties involved as is implied by the term *henôsis* or “union with God” (*Vereinigung mit Gott*), but rather means simply “meeting” or “encounter” (“*Begegnung*,” “*rencontre*”).<sup>74</sup> This argument evidently rests upon the precise technical sense of the word *sustasis* in the magical papyri and theurgical literature. Yet this semantic question is more problematic—and Plotinian union more ambiguous—than Eitrem admitted, and I would suggest that a more thorough investigation of the use of the word in these texts shows that his interpretation is incorrect. In fact, upon careful examination not only does the categorical distinction between *sustasis* and Plotinian union appear less clear than one might at first suspect, but other structural parallels become apparent as well.

Let us return to the various uses of the word *sustasis* in the *PGM*. In some cases it *could* simply signify “meeting” or “encounter,” as Eitrem suggested (and as it is often translated in the *GMPT*). In no case, however, is this interpretation absolutely necessitated by the context. And there are in fact several instances in which the word *cannot* mean “meeting,” but unques-

72. In a little-noticed 1922 article, “Le culte égyptien et le mysticisme de Plotin,” *Fondation Piot: Monuments et Mémoires* 25 (1921–22): 77–92, Franz Cumont suggested that several important elements of Plotinus' mystical imagery may have derived from Egyptian cult practice.

73. “La Théurgie chez les Néo-platoniciens et dans les papyrus magiques,” *Symbolae Osloenses* 22 (1942): 49–79, esp. 56: “Il va sans dire que nous devons pas mettre sur le même plan les systases sublimes, espérés par des Plotin, des Porphyrius, et les systases aux quelles atteignent les magiciens grâce à leurs prières, formules, recettes et manipulations.” Eitrem was followed by others such as E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1951) 286, 302 n. 34, and R. Majercik, *Chaldaean Oracles*, who insists that “the term [*sustasis*] refers to ‘communication’ or ‘contact’ but not ‘union’ with a particular god or spirit” (25).

74. “Die *sustasis* und der Lichtzauber in der Magie,” *Symbolae Osloenses* 8 (1929): 49–53.

tionably implies some other, closer and more durable form of relationship between the human and the deity. Indeed, it is ironic that E.R. Dodds—similarly struggling to differentiate Plotinian from magical union—argued conversely (in his celebrated and still-influential *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*) that the magical conjunction entails a *permanent* state while an ostensibly genuine mystical union lasts only a brief moment.<sup>75</sup> These two aspects of union are not mutually exclusive; the magical union could imply *both* a brief moment of ecstatic contact with a god *and* the lasting beneficent effects of such contact. Consider, for example, *PGMI.42–195*, in which the practitioner hosts the god at a banquet. The effect of the *sustasis* extends to the after-life: upon the practitioner's death, the divine *paredros* will carry the practitioner's *pneuma* into the air, since, in the words of the spell, “no aerial spirit (*pneuma*) joined (*sustathen*) with a mighty assistant will go into Hades, for to him all things are subject.” In this case, the aorist *sustathen* implies a sudden event whose effect nevertheless endures long after the direct encounter described in the spell.<sup>76</sup> One might also compare an earlier instance in the same spell, where, although the technical term *sustasis* does not occur, it is evident that the effects of conjunction with the god are supposed to endure in some manner. Thus, for example, line 80 reads: “You adjure [the god] with this [oath] that he *meet and remain inseparable from you*” (*akinêtos sou tugchanôn meinêi*). The persistent duration of this state, even after the god's immediate departure, is indicated a few lines later (83–90), where the practitioner must declare that the god will remain as a faithful *paredros* and appear on earth whenever he is called, presumably as a result of the ritual. That the injunction to be “inseparable” is a permanent state and does not refer only to the duration of the direct encounter is evident later in the spell (line 164), where the phrase is repeated: “Be inseparable from me (*akinêtos mou ginou*) from this day forth through all the time of my life.” It is thus apparent that the relationship with the deity sought by the magician did not merely last for the moment of encounter, but could endure for an entire lifetime.

Moreover, there are other cases which demonstrate that *sustasis* cannot be synonymous, as one might otherwise assume, with a mere vision of the god, or with, as it is often phrased in the magical papyri, a “direct vision” (*autoptos*). For instance, in *PGMIII.695*, the practitioner is told, “when you encounter (*sustathês*) the god, say the formula for direct vision (*autopton*), and request foreknowledge from the master.” Likewise, at *PGMIV.949*, one is advised

75. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian* 78–79.

76. See Smyth, *Greek Grammar* 432–33, §1940–41 for the use of the aorist with a perfect sense.

to entreat the deity, “Stay allied (*sunestamenon*), lord, and listen to me through the charm that produces direct vision.” Both passages indicate a clear differentiation between the *sustasis* and the vision: the former represents a continuous state which is punctuated by the latter. Rather, *sustasis* and its variants imply a more abstract and mysterious connection or alliance between the god and the aspiring visionary which consequently *enables* one to obtain a direct vision.

At this point we may try to reassess the structural proximity of magical conjunction to Plotinus’ mystical union. Can we agree with Eitrem that a qualitative difference exists between them? His argument for dissimilarity rests on two assumptions: (a) magical *sustasis* means only a superficial “meeting” with a god, and (b) Plotinian union entails a fusion or an identification which is more substantial than what is implied by *sustasis*. On the one hand, we have seen that the first assumption is untenable, since the magical conjunction may entail either an intimate contact in which a subject-object duality is retained, or, as I have tried to show above, it may mean a more total integration which no longer permits any duality but suggests rather the coalescence or even the complete identity of the two. On the other hand, we have seen that Plotinus’ unitive mysticism reveals a similar variety of divine encounter. Indeed, there has been considerable scholarly disagreement about the exact nature of Plotinian union; whether, for instance, it falls into the “monistic” or “theistic” category, according to R.C. Zaehner’s now outmoded classification.<sup>77</sup> Plotinus’ vacillation between images of vision, contact, and coalescence leave a substantial uncertainty about an experience which, as he repeatedly warns us, ordinary language is inadequate to describe.<sup>78</sup> Both Plotinian union and magical conjunction share an inherent ambiguity, one

77. According to Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1969) ch. 8, “monistic” mysticism, typical of Asian religion, involves a total dissolution of individual identity into a supreme, all-encompassing and unitary principle. Conversely, “theistic” mysticism, more typical of Western religious thought, implies that the union occurs between two entities who retain their distinct personalities. Partisans of the common view that Plotinus’ union is of the “theistic” type include A.H. Armstrong, *Cambridge History* 262–63; *idem*, “Tradition, Reason, and Experience in the Thought of Plotinus,” in *Plotino e il Neoplatonismo in Oriente e in Occidente* (Roma: Accademia Nazionale de Lincei, 1974) 171–94; and J.M. Rist, *Plotinus* ch. 16. The “monistic” option is preferred, *inter alia*, by P. Mamo, “Is Plotinian Mysticism Monistic?” in *The Significance of Neoplatonism*, ed. R.B. Harris (Albany: SUNY Press, 1976) 199–215; E. Bréhier, *Philosophy of Plotinus* ch. 7; R. Arnou, *Désir de Dieu* 242–52, 266–82, and, with reservations, by J. Bussanich, *The One and its Relation to Intellect* 183–87.

78. This vacillation between duality and unity may be an attempt to evoke the experience of union through what Michael Sells has identified as the “meaning event” arising from a dynamic tension between apophasis and kataphasis; see his *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1994) esp. ch. 1; *idem*, “Apophasis in Plotinus: a Critical Approach,” *Harvard Theological Review* 78.3–4 (1985): 47–65.

parallel to that of the English word “union,” which may mean a substantial fusion or identification, but equally suggests a close association or alliance between entities which nevertheless retain their individual identity (as in, for example, the “United States”). There is no reason to assume that Plotinus’ union exclusively entails total identification while magical conjunction merely implies “contact,” “encounter” or “vision”—or *vice versa*. Although Eitrem rightly admits some connection between Plotinus’ thought and later theurgical practice, it seems that he is motivated (like Dodds) by a tacit desire to keep Plotinus’ mysticism—supposedly ennobled by its religious or philosophical purity—distinct from the ‘lower’ category of magic.

### 3. *Historical and textual evidence for Plotinus’ familiarity with techniques of conjunction*

Thus far we have seen a structural similarity between Plotinus’ conception of mystical union and the contemporaneous ritual practices of conjunction. The historical significance of this similarity becomes apparent if we recall that Plotinian union had no precedent in the prior philosophical tradition. Could it not be the case, then, that Plotinus derived this idea at least in part from these ritual practices, which were common in his broader intellectual and cultural milieu? Support for this hypothesis is provided by the fact that he was almost certainly aware of techniques of this sort. Gnostic texts—including the tractates *Allogenes* and *Zostrianos*, both of which mention conjunction with deities—were carefully read, and refuted, in his school.<sup>79</sup> He also devoted a large portion of one of his own treatises (IV.4.30–44) to the theory of enchantment and sorcery. More importantly, however, a substantial amount of anecdotal evidence suggests that Plotinus was acquainted not only with the theory of magic but also with its practice, and, further, it appears that this knowledge influenced his philosophical thought.<sup>80</sup> In one celebrated anecdote, we learn from Porphyry (*Vita Plotini* 10.15–34) that Plotinus “readily” (*hetoimôs*) participated in a ritual evocation of his guardian *daimôn* by an Egyptian priest, who was duly impressed when the *daimôn* turned out to be a full god (*theos*) and not one of the lesser order (*tau*

79. Plotinus, *Enneads* II.9.10; Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 16; see, *inter alia*, T.G. Sinnige, “Gnostic Influences in the Early Works of Plotinus and in Augustine,” in *Plotinus Among Gnostics and Christians*, ed. D.T. Runia (Amsterdam: Free U Press, 1994) 73–97; C. Elsas, *Neuplatonische und gnostische Weltabkehrung in der Schule Plotins*, Religionschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 34 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975); H.-C. Puech, “Plotin et les gnostiques,” in *Les Sources de Plotin* 161–90.

80. Porphyry reports (*Vita Plotini* 10.1–14) that Plotinus suffered a magical assault from a jealous philosophical rival, and somehow, by means of his superior power, caused the spell to rebound upon the perpetrator. Perhaps in relation to this event, Plotinus argues at IV.4.44.1 that only contemplation (*theôria*) is immune to magical enchantment.

*hupheimenou genous*) of *daimônês*. While some modern scholars dismiss this as a youthful indiscretion of no importance,<sup>81</sup> Porphyry does claim that this experience led Plotinus to write his fifteenth treatise (III.4, *On Our Allotted Guardian Spirit*). Although the anecdote does not mention a “conjunction” with the *daimôn*, one may compare it with a (similarly Egyptianizing) spell in the *PGM* (VII.505) whose goal is a “*sustasis* with your own *daimôn*,” an entity addressed in terms more appropriate for a high god.<sup>82</sup>

There are additional details which seem to confirm that Plotinus’ thought was influenced by specific magical techniques. Thus, for example, in one passage (V.3.17.25–37) he describes the experience of the One as a sudden, ineffable illumination:

One must believe one has seen [the One], when the soul suddenly takes light (*phôs labêi*): for this is from him and he is it; we must think that he is present, when, like another god whom someone called to his house (*hōsper theos allos [hotan] eis oikon kalountos tinos*), he comes and brings light (*elthôn phôtisêi*) to us: for if he had not come, he would not have brought the light. So the unenlightened soul does not have him as god; but when it is enlightened it has what it sought, and this is the soul’s true end, to touch that light and to see it by itself, not by another light, but by the light which is also its means of seeing.<sup>83</sup>

Plotinus’ phraseology here goes beyond the common Platonic metaphor for intellectual apprehension; rather, he appears to be describing the arrival of the god in terms of a subjective photic experience. Perhaps he had in mind a particular type of private spell known as *phôtagogia* (“light-bringing”) which was intended to summon a divine being in the form of a luminous apparition.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, the notion of “calling a god to one’s house” is well-attested among the magical papyri,<sup>85</sup> and is functionally homologous with *phôtagogia*. One such instance of *phôtagogia* is described in the *PGM* in terms which are strikingly reminiscent of Plotinus. As in the Plotinian passage, the light is experienced internally, as a sudden illumination within the soul:

81. Thus E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* 289–90, followed by A.H. Armstrong, “Was Plotinus a Magician?” *Phronesis* 2 (1957): 73–79, esp. 76.

82. Betz, “Delphic Maxim” (1981) 162, rightly compares this spell to the incident in the Iseum.

83. Armstrong, *Plotinus* vol. 5, 133–34.

84. Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* 3.14; G. Luck, “Theurgy and Forms of Worship in Neoplatonism,” in *Religion, Science, and Magic in Concert and in Conflict*, ed. J. Neusner, E.S. Frerichs and P.V.M. Flesher (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1989) 185–225.

85. See, e.g., *PGM*I.42–195; III.187–262; IV.52–85; IV.154–285; VII.540–78; VII.724–39; XIII.1–343; *PDM* xiv.117–49 etc.



After saying the light-bringing spell (*phôtagôgia*) open your eyes and you will see the light of the lamp becoming like a vault. Then while closing your eyes say ... and after opening your eyes you will see all things wide open and *the greatest brightness within, but the lamp shining nowhere*. Then you will see the god ....<sup>86</sup>

One may also connect Plotinus' mention of "calling a god to one's house" to a biographical anecdote related by Porphyry (*Vita Plotini* 10). On the feast of the new moon, Plotinus apparently refused his colleague Amelius' invitation to make the rounds of the temples to offer sacrifices to the gods, saying, "they [the gods] ought to come to me, not I to them." Porphyry claims he did not dare ask his teacher what he had meant by this "exalted utterance." Some scholars have interpreted this to mean that Plotinus believed the true philosopher to be superior to the lesser gods of the sort who inhabited temples and thrived on sacrifices. A.H. Armstrong even sardonically suggested that Plotinus, being more rational-minded than Amelius, felt he did not have time for this sort of superstitious "church-crawling."<sup>87</sup> In other words, Plotinus would have meant not that these deities obeyed his commands but rather that they were not worth his effort. Yet in light of Plotinus' curious analogy between a deity "called to one's house" and the experience of the One, I suspect one may now read Porphyry's anecdote slightly differently. For Plotinus, the true god, the One, is simultaneously immanent as well as transcendent; it is not situated in space or time, but rather is in some sense perpetually "present."<sup>88</sup> Plotinus thus seems to be indicating that he did not believe the public sacrifices were important because he could, figuratively speaking, summon the gods to himself through private techniques alone. Again he appears to be using metaphors drawn from magical praxis to describe subjective experience.

There are also more subtle suggestions that Plotinus patterned the final stages of the approach to the One upon specific ritual practices. As we have seen, Plotinus believes that a prerequisite for union with the One is a vision of one's divinized self during the penultimate stage of the mystical ascent. At V.8.11.3 the visionary "presents himself to his own mind and *looks at a beautified image of himself*;" or, at VI.9.9.57, he "*sees both [God] and oneself* as it is

86. PGM IV.1104–110 in Betz, *GMPT* 59 (italics added).

87. Armstrong, "Was Plotinus a Magician?" 77.

88. Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.9.7.5. One may compare this with a later text by the Hellenized Egyptian alchemist Zosimos of Panopolis (b. circa 300 C.E.) in which he advises his alchemical colleague not to roam about seeking God externally, but to sit at home and meditate, and to quell the various passions within herself, at which point God, "who is everywhere and nowhere," will come to her. See Zosimos of Panopolis, *On the Final Count* 7, trans. in G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: a Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Princeton: Princeton U Press, 1993) 122.

right to see: the self glorified, full of intelligible light.” This of course may refer to a vision of that part of the self which is equivalent to the personal *daimôn* described in III.4: precisely that entity which, in Plotinus’ case, the Egyptian priest had evoked by means of ritual. Yet this may also correspond to a more widespread conception of ritual divinization. One may find descriptions of epiphanies of the deified self at crucial moments in several Gnostic, theurgical, and apocalyptic ascent texts. For instance, in two places in one of the Nag Hammadi Hermetic treatises, the *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth*, (NHC VI,6 58.8; 60.32–61.1) Hermes declares “I see myself” (*tinay eroei*). In the Gnostic apocalypse *Allogenes*, the treatise’s namesake describes the ascent as an ecstatic vision of the self immediately followed by divinization: “[... my soul went slack] and I fled [and was] very disturbed. And [I] turned to myself [and] saw the light that [surrounded] me and the Good that was in me; I became divine.”<sup>89</sup> This theme similarly occurs in apocalyptic pseudepigraphica and late antique Merkabah mysticism.<sup>90</sup> It thus appears that Plotinus has adapted a motif of ritual ascent to his technique of contemplation.

The cumulative weight of this evidence suggests that Plotinus derived his mysticism at least in part from the transmutation of a ritual technique into a form of inner praxis which lent support to, and was simultaneously confirmed by, his philosophical system. It would make sense for him to have adapted the structure of these techniques to a goal which he believed to be unattainable through discursive philosophy alone and, once attained, inexpressible in direct speech. I should clarify that I am not hereby suggesting that Plotinus actually used techniques such as those that occur in the *PGM*. Nor am I suggesting that the genetic derivation of Plotinus’ mysticism from what was originally an objective ritual implies that his subjective experience of union was somehow not genuine, or that his descriptions were merely

89. NHC XI,1 52.7–12 trans. in Robinson, *Nag Hammadi Library in English* 494 (italics added).

90. See, e.g., 2 (Slavonic) *Enoch* 9.18–19; *Hymn of the Pearl* (*Acts of Thomas*) 112.76–78; *Cologne Mani Codex* 17.8 and 24.1 ff.; Zosimos of Panopolis, *Frag. Syr.* XII=B 2/262–3 in M. Berthelot and C. Ruelle, *Collection des anciens alchimistes grecs*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1887); *Maaseh Merkabah* 23, lines 729–32 in N. Janowitz, *The Poetics of Ascent* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989). Similar notions are reflected in several Hermetic texts preserved in Arabic, discussed at length by H. Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, trans. N. Pearson (New Lebanon, NY: Omega, 1994) ch. 2. On self-transformational mysticism, see G. Filorama, “The Transformation of the Inner Self in Gnostic and Hermetic Texts,” in *Transformations of the Inner Self in Ancient Religions*, ed. J. Assmann and G. Stroumsa, *Studies in the History of Religions* 83 (Leiden: Brill, 1999) 137–49; G. Quispel, “Genius and Spirit,” in *Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts in Honor of Pahor Labib*, ed. M. Krause, *Nag Hammadi Studies* 6 (Leiden: Brill, 1975) 155–69.

patterned on traditional forms of ritual *discourse* without reference to an actual practice. On the contrary, his mystical passages appear to describe intensely-lived experience. Yet this type of experience may have resulted from a highly intentional inner practice which, like yogic or Buddhist meditation, could result in a specific experiential content—even if, as he says, the final union with the One cannot be induced directly but must be awaited patiently after the requisite propaedeutic exercises.<sup>91</sup> If I am correct, it would seem that Plotinus' transformation of exterior ritual to inner mysticism is an individual example of a broader phenomenon familiar to historians of religion, who have noted the tendency in late antiquity towards a progressive privatization and interiorization of previously public ritual: a process which transforms public ritual into private magic, and mystery-cult into subjective mystical experience.<sup>92</sup>

#### 4 Conclusion: mystical versus magical union

Thus far I have argued that Plotinus' mysticism is both conceptually and historically related to magical techniques of conjunction. Yet the significance of this thesis is not limited to Plotinus himself; it also obliges us to reconsider the triangular relationship between the categories of magic, religion, and philosophy in the ancient world: categories whose boundaries have only recently—belatedly—come under serious question.<sup>93</sup> To give one typical example of the value-laden but persistent assumption that 'magical' and 'religious' or 'philosophical' mysticism are mutually exclusive, let us return to E.R. Dodds, a still-respected scholar from the past century who is both sympathetic to Plotinus and duly renowned for his appreciation of the putatively "irrational" aspects of ancient rationality. We have seen that Dodds rejected the comparison between magical conjunction and genuine religious

91. On the ritual induction of specific experiences in Hellenistic ritual, see now H.D. Betz, *The Mithras Liturgy*, Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 18 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003) 132–41.

92. J.Z. Smith has recently suggested, in "Trading Places" (in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power* 13–28), that a significant (if not defining) feature of magic in late antiquity is the reproduction of public ritual on a small scale at the domestic level; see also his "The Temple and the Magician" 172–89 in *idem, Map is Not Territory* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1978). In a brilliant essay, "Myth and Mysticism: a Study of Objectification and Interiorization in Religious Thought," *Journal of Religion* 49.4 (1969): 315–29, Hans Jonas illustrated the process by which the objective myth of the mystery-cult is integrated into the subjective mystical experience of the individual.

93. C. Faraone, "The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells" and F. Graf, "Prayer in Magic and Religious Ritual," in *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, ed. C. Faraone and D. Obbink (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1991) 3–32 and 188–213; P. Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and the Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1995).

mysticism (of which he considered Plotinus the paradigmatic example) by claiming that the permanent, eschatological divinization implied in the magical texts is “entirely distinct” from genuine mystical union, “an experience of brief duration which recurs only at long intervals if at all.”<sup>94</sup> Specifically, Dodds attempted to contrast the phrase “Thou art I and I am Thou” uttered by a thirteenth-century Christian mystic (Angela de Foligno) with the same formula as it occurs in the *PGM*, where, for example, the magician is advised to announce to Hermes, “For you are I, and I am you; your name is mine, and mine is yours.”<sup>95</sup> Of this invocation, Dodds writes,

Plainly here there is no question of mystical union: the reciprocal identity has been magically induced by the preceding incantations; it is to be lifelong; and the magician’s motive for inducing it is the acquisition of personal power. The most we can say is that the author may have picked up a formula of religious origin, ascribed magical virtue to it, and utilized it for his own ends: the magical papyri constantly operate with the debris of other people’s religion.<sup>96</sup>

Here Dodds implicitly differentiates magical from religious mysticism on the basis of four criteria: (a) the *method* used to obtain the state, (b) the *duration* of the state obtained, (c) the *motive* of the practitioner, and finally (d) historical *precedence*. Yet upon careful examination, each of Dodds’ four differentiae dissolves.

(a) The distinction between the supposed *ritualism* of magic and the more intellectual approach of philosophical or religious mysticism is far more ambiguous than Dodds admits.<sup>97</sup> In the forthcoming Part II of this paper I shall suggest that Plotinian contemplative praxis itself has elements which are remarkably parallel to the more outward rituals of theurgy. For the moment, however, one might simply consider that the more typically ‘religious’ mystics often induce altered states of consciousness through ascetic praxis such as repetitious prayers, chants, fasting, retreats, or abstinence: practices which cannot be easily distinguished from ritual. More importantly, however, one might note that subjective mystical experience cannot be qualified as ‘genuine’ or not solely on the basis of the techniques used to induce it; this has been argued against those who categorically dismiss drug-induced mystical states as ‘false.’<sup>98</sup> So too with magically-induced union, which often

94. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian* 78.

95. *PGM* VIII.36, 50; XIII.795.

96. Dodds, *op. cit.* 72–73.

97. On this false dichotomy see J.Z. Smith, “Great Scott! Thought and Action One More Time,” in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, ed. P. Mirecki and M. Meyer, *Religions in the Graeco-Roman World* 141 (Leiden: Brill, 2002) 73–91.

98. See the arguments of W.J. Wainwright, *Mysticism: a Study of its Nature, Cognitive Value, and Moral Implications* (Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 1981) ch. 2.

entailed a subjectively altered state of consciousness: commonly in the form of dreams or waking visions, but also, occasionally, in ecstatic trances.<sup>99</sup> The mystical 'authenticity' of such states cannot automatically be rejected because of their ritual context.

(b) The assumption that the magical union necessarily entails a *permanent* state is factually incorrect: recall that—as Eitrem argued—a *sustasis* is itself a brief moment, although, as I have tried to show, it is one with lasting (if impermanent) consequences. The *apathanatismos* of the Mithras Liturgy (PGM IV.475–829), for example, must be repeated anywhere from thrice a year to once a month (line 795). This assumption is also irrelevant, since we have seen that Plotinian union, which Dodds considers paradigmatic, also confers lasting effects; indeed it would be hard to imagine a genuine mystical union which entails *no* lasting transformation of the soul.<sup>100</sup>

(c) The presumption that the *motive* of the practitioner is an essential differentia between 'mystical' and 'magical' union is erroneous. When the categories are contrasted, religion is generally seen as a means of establishing a relationship with a deity for its own sake, while magic is thought to be used for other, more practical advantages.<sup>101</sup> As we have seen above, however, the magical conjunction can be a means to acquire "personal power," but it can also have as its ultimate goal the establishment of a "relationship with a deity" apparently for its own sake.<sup>102</sup> But it is also uncertain that "personal power" could *not* be a corollary of the sort of mysticism Dodds would qualify as religious.<sup>103</sup> And even though the spells themselves often aim at practical goals, it is worth noting that magicians, like philosophers, often sought *knowledge*: foreknowledge, knowledge of the divine realm, or even—through an encounter with one's personal *daimôn*—*self*knowledge.<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, in

99. On magical trances see, for example, *antispômenon* at PGM IV.1122; *kataspathênai* at VII.550; the unusual psychosomatic experiences described throughout the Mithras Liturgy, IV.475–829; and Thessalus of Tralles' self-annihilation during his encounter with Asclepius described in A.-J. Festugière, "L'Expérience religieuse du médecin Thessalos," in *Hermétisme et mystique païenne* (Paris: Aubier-Montagne, 1967) 141–80, esp. 162–63 and n. 85. Also, Corpus Hermeticum I.1 Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* 2.8; Proclus, *On the signs of divine possession*, in É. des Places, *Les Oracles Chaldaïques* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1971) 219–20; G. Luck, "Theurgy and Forms of Worship" 192–99.

100. See B. McGinn, "Love, Knowledge, and *Unio Mystica* in the Western Christian Tradition," in *Mystical Union* 59–86.

101. Thus H. Versnel, in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 909, differentiates magic from religion by its "pursuit of concrete goals."

102. See, e.g., PGM II.64–184; IV.1115–66; IV.1167–226.

103. See, e.g., the transformation of the soul of the mystic described by St. John of the Cross in his *Spiritual Canticle* §39; *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1979) 557–63.

104. Betz, "Delphic Maxim" (1981).

some complex spells—even in those which do result in practical advantages—the logical relationship between the means and the end is often circular or ambiguous. Consider again the Mithras Liturgy, by means of which the “inquirer” may (i) encounter Helios-Mithras, (ii) ascend to heaven and observe the divine world there, (iii) receive a hexameter revelation from the deity (lines 724–31), and (iv) obtain “immortalization” (475, 749). Which of these are means, and which are goals?

(d) Finally, it is intriguing and also somewhat ironic that the evidence regarding mystical union, as I have argued, in fact points to a historical transmission in the opposite direction: in this case it is not “magic” that has borrowed the “debris” from the putatively distinct category of “religion,” but rather the other way around. Plotinus is apparently the first in a long tradition of philosophical theology to describe a subjective experience of unification with god. Previously, the notion of an experiential “union” with god had been exceptional for both philosophy and the predominant currents of Christian thought, but it was ubiquitous in magical ritual; and, as I have argued, it was in part from this latter source that Plotinus derived his mysticism. His conception of union survived among the subsequent Neoplatonists, and especially in the language of theurgy used by Iamblichus and Proclus. From the later Neoplatonic academy as well as Christian Neoplatonists such as pseudo-Dionysius, this idea was transmitted to medieval Christianity where it became a commonplace theological notion, and continues to this day to inform the phenomenological study of religion. Indeed, scholars of comparative religion often evaluate non-Christian mysticism according to the ideal of “*unio mystica*”—an example of ‘genuine’ religious experience *par excellence*—while neglecting the fact that the idea itself seems to have originated historically not with a Christian but with a pagan philosopher, and one, moreover, who derived his conception from a magical technique. This case illustrates the profound interdependence of magical and religious mysticism, and suggests that the boundary between these categories is far more porous than we have come to imagine.