

THE STRANGE ENIGMA OF PLOTINUS

Charles Getts

For five centuries after the death of Aristotle in 322 BCE, the ancient Western world produced no great philosophers. The grandeur and power of Rome had risen to its zenith and was now sinking. The classic deities were beginning to fade before the light of the new religion, Christianity. Then, in the third century, all of the glory of old Greece in the days of the great Plato returned in the genius of a humble man by the name of Plotinus. While some of the world's thinkers, since his time, have not agreed with his ideas, and many have not understood them, they have all accorded him the highest accolades. In this article, Charles Getts introduces us to "The Strange Enigma of Plotinus."



He has been called one of the world's greatest mystic-philosophers as well as the greatest individual thinker between Aristotle and Descartes. Plotinus is considered to have surpassed Plato, the man whose teachings he so admired, in spiritual profundity of thought. He added the fire of inspiration to Neoplatonism, the last school of Greek

philosophy, and his name is often given as its founder instead of that of Ammonius Saccas. After his death, his writings had an incalculable effect upon Christianity up to the period of the Middle Ages.

Then, if these words of praise from later historians are true, why were his ideas and teachings seemingly lost to the world and his name now known to few apart from students interested in ancient philosophy?

Let us consider the few facts and the scattered information that have come down to us regarding his life. Then, as we consider a small part of his writings expressing a few of the ideas of his great mystical philosophy, together with the later course of history at that time, we will be able to piece together the answer to this enigma.

He was born in Lycopolis, Egypt, in either 204 or 205 CE. As his name is Roman, it is believed that his parents were of Roman descent. This is conjecture as Plotinus never talked of his parents or of his personal life. As it is known from his writings that he believed in reincarnation, one writer is of the opinion that his reticence in talking of his private life indicated his regret and



even shame at the necessity of being reborn upon Earth. In his youth he is said to have searched for knowledge in the great Egyptian city of Alexandria which was a center of world culture and outranked even the glory of Athens. In it stood Jewish synagogues as well as temples for the worship of the deities of Egypt; Greek schools of idealistic theories competed for disciples with the preachers of Christianity. It was here, in Alexandria, that Plotinus, now twenty-eight years of age, found a teacher of the ideas of Plato whose name was Ammonius Saccas.

Saccas, who was known as the “Divinity-instructed,” was also the teacher of Origen, recognized as one of the world’s greatest scholars. He left no writings but there is little doubt that he was an Initiate and well informed as to the occult teachings including the Egyptian Mysteries. He must have also been acquainted with Indian religion.

It was probably an introduction to the teachings of Buddha given to him by Saccas that made Plotinus determine to learn more of Indian and also Persian religions. After ten years of study under his brilliant teacher, he left Alexandria and joined the Emperor Gordian III in an expedition to the East in the year 244 CE. This soon proved to be disastrous when the Emperor was murdered and Plotinus was forced to flee to the city of Antioch. Later in this same year he went to Rome where he lived the rest of his life.

School of Mystical Philosophy

It was in Rome, at the age of forty, that Plotinus formed a school in which he taught a mystical-philosophical system based on the ideas of both Plato and Aristotle as well as upon his own experiences in cosmic revelation while in a state of superconsciousness.

For many years he taught only orally, following the ancient custom of the sages of the Mysteries as well as of his teacher Saccas, in which the secret knowledge is given only to those proved to be trusted seekers of Truth.

However, as he became more famous, he was persuaded to put his ideas and lessons into writing. It was at this time, 263 CE, that a student by the name of Porphyry came to him from Greece. It was Porphyry who began the task of putting the writings into a systematic order. He arranged fifty-four discourses of Plotinus into six groups of nine and, because of this, the entire work is known as the *Enneads*. Porphyry also added a short biography of Plotinus to the collection of writings.

During these later years of his life in Rome, we see a brief glimpse into his personal character when we learn that his house was often filled with orphan children left in his care by wealthy guardians for short periods of time.

In the unsettled capital of the collapsing Roman Empire, the house and school of Plotinus became an island of refuge and peaceful inspiration to many of the nobility who realized that the days of Rome’s greatness were over.

So effective was the personal charm of Plotinus in his relationship with his guests that, in the course of time, he even gained the favor of Emperor Gallienus. Plotinus took advantage of this good fortune to request the aid of the Emperor in the fulfilling of a personal dream. He desired permission to rebuild a ruined town in Campania and make it into a Utopia which he proposed to name Platonopolis in honor of the famous Greek philosopher. It would be a city ruled by philosophic ideas of humanity’s inherent

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goodness and its true relationship with the Absolute One.

This idealistic venture failed to materialize evidently because of either court jealousy and intrigue or perhaps simply a change of heart on the part of the Emperor.

In the year 270 CE, Plotinus became seriously ill of a throat infection which, in the opinion of one biographer, was a form of leprosy. He left Rome and took a house in Campania where he died at the age of sixty-five.

Gaining Wisdom

It would, of course, be impossible to explain in the length of this article the substance of the philosophy of Plotinus. He went far beyond the intellectualism of the old Greek schools and into a vibrant, mystical division of consciousness as being sleep, dream, ecstasy that he claimed to be the only way of reaching an understanding and union with the Divine which he termed the One, or Good. The wisdom of this Supreme One, he stated, would never be reached by humanity through any process of sole reason.

It is apparent that the realization described by Plotinus is very similar to that found in both Buddhism and Hinduism. This is revealed in such phrases as “immersed in the Divine” and “One preserves nothing of one’s I.”

Porphry tells us that this state of being in union with the One happened to Plotinus on four occasions and during the period in which he taught in the school at Rome. Another source states that Plotinus had three of these experiences before Porphyry became his student, so this would make a total of seven times that he entered into Cosmic Consciousness.

These psychic revelations in a state of ecstasy, which was apparently a condition similar to Nirvana, clearly indicate that Plotinus was an Initiate and versed in the occult mysteries, taught to him no doubt by Ammonius Saccas.

It cannot be expected that the person unfamiliar with such things as the Cosmic will understand much of these highly mystical revelations. While they may seem illogical to skeptics, they are in reality superlogical. The Hindu statement, “That art thou,” (*Tat twam asi*) is one of the most profound truths ever discovered by humanity; yet to the uninitiated it holds no meaning whatsoever and even appears absurd. Much of the writings of Plotinus suffer this same misunderstanding due to their high logic and occult meaning.

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One of the tenets of his philosophy was that the person who sees, “is itself the thing, which is seen.” The great German mystic-priest of the Dominican Order, Meister Eckhart, said the same thing in his words, “The knower and the known are one.”

The well-known Russian philosopher, Ouspensky, explains the above words of Plotinus by stating that he meant the faculty of seeing is related to, and a form of, consciousness. Ouspensky then mentions the Hindu divisions of consciousness as being sleep, dream, waking, and *turiya*, or Samadi. This last condition is what Plotinus calls a form of ecstasy which is the highest attainable by humans.

In the *Letters to Flaccus*, Plotinus claims that “external objects present us only with appearances.” Therefore, he states, we would be more accurate in saying that we have only an opinion of them and not a knowledge. The truth, to him, cannot be found in anything external as it is within us. The words of Christ are brought to mind, “the



kingdom of God is within you.” All of the ideas of which the world is made up are, in the theory of Plotinus, within our own thinking. Therefore the action necessary to reach truth is an “agreement of the mind with itself.”

Let us now return to our question: Why did his name fade into obscurity?

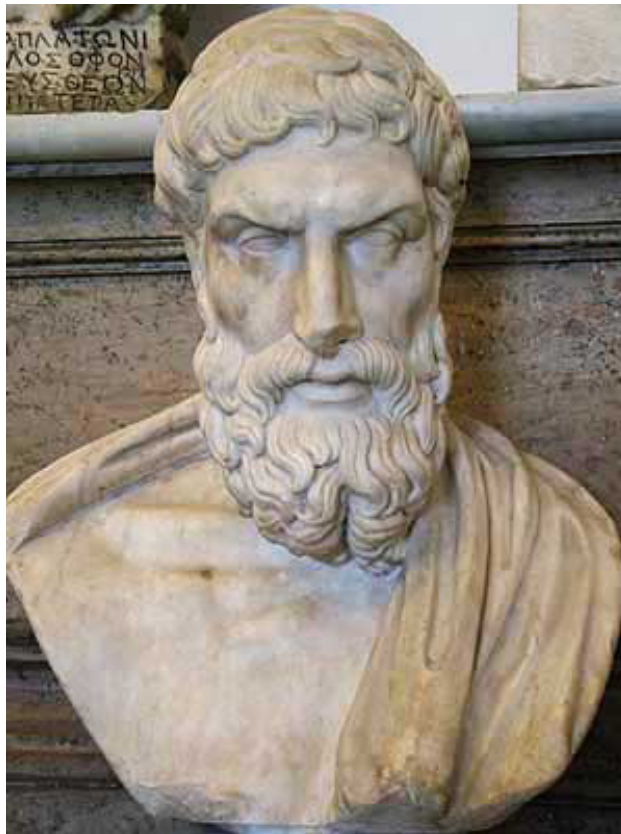
First it must be understood that while Plotinus was the last of the pagan Greek philosophers, he was also, although this fact is unrecognized, the first of the great religious mystics of the Christian Church.

His mystical ideas were absorbed into the Christianized Western world by two men in particular, Augustine and Dionysius in the fourth century. In his book *The City of God*, Augustine plainly reveals the powerful influence Plotinus had over his

thinking when he repeatedly uses his ideas in describing the spiritual aspects of the Divine.

In the opinion of one biographer, the personal testimony of Plotinus in regard to the truth of his mystic revelations and the beauty of the world of spirit was, of course, no longer available after his death, and his “ideal world no longer was attainable by others but became something visionary and dreamlike.” Another writer states that, through the “spiritual intermediary” of Augustine, the ideas of Plotinus have endured in Christianity down to the present day.

Thus it came about that, in an ironic twist of history, the thoughts of a great person who lived back in the third century have endured even to the present, while the name of the person himself is long lost in obscurity.



Plotinus (204 – 270 CE).