

Richert, Friedemann: *Platon und Christus. Antike Wurzeln des Neuen Testaments*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 2011. ISBN: 978-3-534-24058-6; 168 S.

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Friedemann Richert approaches in this book the earliest roots of Christian primitive theology and its relationship with Greek Classical thought, through the comparison of the works of Plato with St. John's Gospel and the works of St. Paul. The book is divided into four chapters: chap. 1 „Wahrheit“ (Truth), pp. 9-53; chap. 2, Gott (God), pp. 54-122; chap. 3 „Leben“ (Life) pp. 123-159 and finally a brief „Die Wendung zu den Alten“ (return to the ancients), pp. 160-164. With the exception of the last one, all chapters offer the reader a brief and useful conclusion where the main ideas outlined in the chapter are summarised; the parallels and affinities between the works of Plato and those of St. John and St. Paul are also enumerated.

Richert's work unfolds around three concepts which are of equal importance for pagan and Christian thought: truth, God and life. This is a pertinent starting line, because for both pagan and Christian authors the concept of truth is intimately related to the issue of the knowledge of God, and therefore to wisdom as a sacred virtue.<sup>1</sup> This directly affects the existential and subjective perspectives, the way men understand life as a spiritual fact, an individual phenomenon and a collective or social reality. The book thus focuses on the three key ideas for the spiritual and cultural life of human beings, not only in antiquity but also today. The works of Plato, John and Paul are successively examined through these three concepts with the support of abundant quotations. The book is a true display of erudition aimed at identifying, enumerating and contextualising some aspects of Platonic philosophy later revisited by early Christian thought.

In the book, textual selection and exegesis are determined by the main thesis, which is that the origins of Christian thought are more closely related to the Classical world than to

the Jewish heritage.<sup>2</sup> Richert suggests that a strong comprehension of the main Christian writings, especially the fourth Gospel and the works of Paul, demands a strong previous understanding of Platonic ideas. These ideas would filter down to Christian authors through the Hellenistic learning which was in the background of all educated Christians. Hellenistic education, therefore, helped to lay a bridge between Plato and the Christian tradition: „Deren geistige Nähe zu Platon ist doch wohl als eine bildungsbedingte Verwandtschaft zu verstehen, die Platon und seine Gedanken über die Brücke des Hellenismus sowohl zu Johannes als auch Paulus gebracht haben“ (p. 161). The enormous relevance of the Hellenistic school, exercises of rhetoric and the availability of anthologies with selections of texts from Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics would explain the frequent references in Paul and John (as shown by the particularly interesting examples indicated in p. 161, note 7).

On the other hand, and developing an idea originally shaped by Karlmann Beyschlag<sup>3</sup>, Richert suggests that during the first half of the Roman imperial period (between 30 BC and AD 284) the trend was to reject new philosophical theories and to reassert and even venerate the doctrine of the great old philosophers, in whose work, due to the quality of their old doctrine (*palaiós lógos*), philosophy and revelation merged. It was thus a 'return to the ancients' („Wendung zu den Alten“). Plato and his work (supplemented with ideas from other philosophical schools) occupied a place of honour in this conception, and it would become a major source of inspiration for Christians and Hellenistic Jews (indeed Philo of Alexandria referred to 'the most holy Plato'). This cultural environment would ultimately facilitate the adoption of Platonic ideas and lexicon for the construction of the three pillars of ancient Christianity: truth, God and life. This is the essence of Richert's final thesis: the theology of John and Paul

<sup>1</sup> Regarding this issue, see Marcel Detienne, *Les maîtres de vérité dans la Grèce archaïque*, Paris 1969.

<sup>2</sup> As already suggested by Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*, Cambridge/ Mass. 1961.

<sup>3</sup> Karlmann Beyschlag, *Grundriß der Dogmengeschichte*, Darmstadt 1988-2000.

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can only be fully comprehended on the basis of a good understanding of Platonic philosophy: „Wer die Theologie des Evangelisten Johannes und des Apostels Paulus in ihrem traditionsgeschichtlichen Hintergrund wirklich verstehen will, der muss die Philosophie Platons kennen.“ (p. 160)

In our opinion, Richert is undoubtedly right in pointing out the influence of Platonic ideas on the early Christian authors. It is possible, however, that he has overestimated the direct knowledge of Plato's work among early Christians, possibly overlooking the role played by Middle Platonism (mid 1st century BC to 2nd century AD). Middle Platonism has a number of features in common with early Christian thought, such as an emphasis on the supra-sensitive and the value of assimilation with God, the similarity with God as the essential cornerstone of morality. The influence of Classical education on early Christian thought is beyond doubt, but it ought to be limited to the strictly scholarly and technical spheres. Among Christians, the relationship with Paganism was always a delicate one, due to the conscious rejection of anything that could question the Christian revelation, and in fact it was recommended not reading of Pagan works as early as the publication of the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (3rd century). Additionally, the impact of Plato's works among the 1st century Christian authors and the eclectic cultural environment of Late Antiquity is barely touched upon (pp. 163-164); this matter may have deserved somewhat more attention. It is also true that the aforementioned veneration towards the works of an ancient master and the primacy given to ancient doctrines (again, *palaiós lógos*) was hardly an exclusive feature of the 1st century AD, being a much earlier characteristic of Greek thought.

This topic is certainly complex, and it has a long scholarly tradition. For this reason, the lack of a literature review and of a more systematic critical appraisal (citations, reference works, etc.) are certainly detrimental. Richert's aim, to publish a digestible text within the scope of the general reader and not only of the specialist has, however, certainly been met. The style of writing is clear and agile, and attention to detail is well served without being over-exhaustive or baroque.

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