

Neoplatonism in historical context

Nathan Bjorge

The most significant problem with the current neopagan revival of interest in Iamblichus' philosophy has been the lack of critical engagement with the historical context of his thought. Specifically, there has been a failure to recognize Iamblichus as a deeply conservative figure, in stark contrast with the prevailing modern neopagan climate of liberal pluralism. Iamblichus exists at the endpoint of a long, complex and diverse taxonomy of development, and is the theoretical apologist for a cultural tradition already in decline and under threat by the growing political influence of Christianity within the Roman Empire of late antiquity. In 386 CE, about half a century after Iamblichus' death, the sacrificial rites of the pagan temples, the backbone of the pagan cult within civic society, were closed by imperial decree at the orders of the Christian government established by the Emperor Constantine in the wake of his conversion to the faith.¹ Pockets of resistance persisted before the rising tide of Christian hegemony, but the decisive death knell of Hellenic paganism as the civic form of religious life had been struck. A notable moment of resistance was the "apostasy" of the Emperor Julian, who, over the years of his short reign from 361-363 of the common era, tried and failed to return the empire to a theologically reconstituted paganism organized along Iamblichian lines.² The incident illustrates the prestige and influence Iamblichus had acquired during the twilight of the old gods. Nevertheless, the old religion was defeated by the new. For over a millennia and a half paganism was extinct under the cultural sway

¹ Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 1.

² Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (New York, NY: Norton, 1989), 73, 91-3.

of Christendom and Islam, only to undergo an unanticipated revival under the conditions of modernity.

An analogy can be drawn between Iamblichus and the Christian bishop Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE), whose synthesis and summarization of the Christian tradition under the shadow of the collapse of the Empire provided later medieval Christians with an authoritative framework to interpret the diversity of the patristic tradition. Likewise, Iamblichus serves a similar function for pagans today, as one of the last great pagan philosophical system makers of late antiquity. Both Iamblichus and Augustine codified the late antique form of their traditions prior to the breakup of the empire and the social disruptions that followed, and therefore serve as an important resource for the Christian reformation or neopagan reconstruction of the ancient content of these religions. Both figures are also concerned to reconcile the content of traditional religious practices with their own redaction of platonic philosophy. An uncritical acceptance of either authority therefore begs the question of whether platonic philosophy provides an adequate hermeneutical platform for understanding either theistic faith or theurgic gnosis.

The goal of Iamblichian theurgy is to provide an interpretation of the cultic rituals, especially the rites of civic public temples, whose intelligibility and cultural relevance had declined for the citizens of the Roman Empire. In particular, Iamblichus is concerned to link the somatic, embodied and socially performative aspect of temple paganism—its sacrifices, oracles and symbolic ritualism—with the dialectical-discursive and contemplative aspects of platonic philosophy. Gregory Shaw writes, “Iamblichus revealed the integral connection between the rituals of cultic worship and the intellectual disciplines of philosophic *paideia* [education].”³ The contemplative tradition was exemplified in the late empire by the popularity of the philosophy of

³ Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 2.

Plotinus, whose thought emphasizes the noetic transcendence of the material/phenomenal world as the goal of authentic spiritual practice. Such robust transcendentalism threatened to strip the traditional temple rites of significance, by deemphasizing ritual in favor of meditation and asceticism.

Furthermore, the traditional function of the civic temple as the location of a common Roman political identity was under increasing challenge from the cosmopolitan diversity of the empire. The universality of Christianity, which offered salvation to anyone of any class who received baptism professing faith, proved more flexible in adapting to the diverse milieu of the late empire than the elitist pagan traditions, which viewed salvation as normative only for the privileged few who had cultivated their educated (and therefore class restricted) rationality. As a result, Christianity achieved increasing cultural influence within the empire, especially among slaves and those of the lower classes excluded from full participation and salvation within the pagan cults.

Peter Brown describes the pagan Roman gentry of late antiquity: “By 200, the empire was ruled by an aristocracy of amazingly uniform culture, taste and language. In the West, the senatorial class had remained a tenacious and absorptive elite [...]; in the East, all culture and all local power had remained concentrated in the hands of the proud oligarchies of the Greek cities. [...] Such astonishing uniformity, however, was maintained by men who felt obscurely that their classical culture existed to exclude alternatives to their own world. Like many cosmopolitan aristocracies—like the dynasties of late feudal Europe or the aristocrats of the Austro-Hungarian empire—men of the same class and culture, in any part of the Roman world, found themselves far closer to each other than to the vast majority of their neighbours, the ‘underdeveloped’ peasantry on their doorstep. The existence of the ‘barbarian’ exerted a silent, unremitting pressure on the

culture of the Roman empire. The ‘barbarian’ was not only the primitive warrior from across the frontier: by 200, this ‘barbarian’ had been joined by the non-participant within the empire itself. The aristocrat would pass from reassuringly similar forum to forum, speaking a uniform language, observing rites and codes of behaviour shared by all educated men; but his road stretched through the territories of tribesmen that were as alien to him as any German or Persian. In Gaul, the countrymen still spoke Celtic; in North Africa, Punic and Libyan; in Asia Minor, ancient dialects such as Lycaonian, Phrygian and Cappadocian; in Syria, Aramaic and Syriac.”⁴

The neoplatonic philosophers were emphatically part of this world of class privilege. “At the nadir of the public fortunes of the empire, in the 260s, the philosopher Plotinus had been able to settle down undisturbed in a Campanian villa, patronized by Roman senators; and pupils came to him from Egypt, Syria and Arabia. [...] More even than in the case of the landed aristocracy, we are dealing with a world of long traditions, that changed slowly and had merely regrouped itself, without any break from the past.”⁵

Iamblichus reifies his received cultural traditions as the historically unchanging and unchangeable locus of self-validating truth, hence his injunction not to change the invocations used in the temple rites, despite the obscurity and unintelligibility of their language: “For if any thing else in religious legal institutions is adapted to the Gods, this must certainly be immutability. And it is necessary that ancient prayers [...] should be preserved invariably the same, neither taking any thing from them, nor adding any thing to them which is elsewhere derived. For this is nearly the cause at present that both names and prayers have lost their efficacy, because they are continually changed through the innovation and illegality of the Greeks. For the Greeks are

⁴ Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 14.

⁵ Ibid, 70.

naturally studious of novelty, and are carried about every where by their volatility; neither possessing any stability themselves, nor preserving what they have received from others; but rapidly relinquishing this, they transform every thing through an unstable desire of discovering something new. But the [Egyptian] Barbarians are stable in their manners, and firmly continue to employ the same words. Hence they are dear to the Gods, and proffer words which are grateful to them; but which it is not lawful for any man by any means to change.”⁶

The first issue in understanding the philosophy of Iamblichus, therefore, is to understand his profoundly conservative sense of tradition the details of which he declares derive from the gods and are “not lawful for any man by any means to change.” The irony of his insistence on this point, of course, is that his own philosophy turns out to be significantly innovative, precisely because of the necessity of developing new theories and concepts to make sense of a tradition filled, as all traditions are, with internal contradictions and ambiguities. In this sense Iamblichus provides an excellent example of how conservative philosophies fail on their own terms because they must always innovate to describe a “Tradition” that never historically quite possessed the unity and cohesion desired. The very act of framing a tradition out of the diverse content of the past retrospectively creates what conservatives claim to only preserve and describe.

⁶ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* (Frome, Somerset, UK: Prometheus Trust, 1999), 135.