

Ritual, Philosophical Religion, and Power

Elizabeth Digeser

University of California, Santa Barbara

According to Porphyry's *Vita Plotini*, at Plotinus' Neoplatonist school in Rome one could learn the "true philosophy" from the master's teaching and, through his example, acquire the virtues and contemplative skills that led to union with the transcendent One. A close reading of Porphyry, however, illuminates disagreements among Plotinus' closest followers regarding the role of traditional ritual or theurgy in the soul's ascent. Porphyry followed Plotinus, but Amelius, Plotinus' senior pupil, increasingly valued participation in ritual. With Plotinus' mortal illness and the subsequent dispersion of his circle, these differences among Plotinus' former students become even more pronounced.

In this context, Iamblichus began to advocate a new approach to philosophy, drawing in important ways on Plotinus' teaching (Eunapius suggests that he studied with Porphyry), but with a different emphasis. Rejecting Plotinus' (and Porphyry's) notion that part of each human soul remained in contact with the intelligible world, Iamblichus argued that the soul's estrangement from this realm meant that all people needed and benefited from a deep engagement with traditional ritual practice and divination. Iamblichus' system thus provided a universal path to the divine, since all types of souls needed the benefits of traditional ritual acts and since salvific contact from the divine occurred at every level—ritual, philosophical or theological reasoning, and contemplation. This system mirrors Christian teaching in important respects.

The challenge that Iamblichus posed to the authority of Plotinus' teaching seems to have affected Porphyry deeply, especially as students—according to Eunapius—began to flock to Iamblichus' school. Iamblichus threw into question not only Porphyry's own philosophical assumptions, but also his standing among those eager to learn Neoplatonist philosophy—either for its own sake or because it was a good route to a government career (Plotinus' and Iamblichus' students included senators and courtiers). As is clear from the *Vita Plotini*, Porphyry saw himself as his master's chosen heir, responsible for bringing "true philosophy" to a new generation of Romans. Accordingly, I will argue, first, that Iamblichus' claim to have found a universal path to salvation through traditional ritual or theurgy provoked a significant reaction from Porphyry. While still maintaining that only philosophy could bring true, salvific union with the One, Porphyry, in this view, nevertheless was forced to consider the role of traditional ritual and divination with respect to the problem of salvation for the ordinary person. He seems to take on this task in fragments attributed to *On the Return of the Soul*, the *Philosophy from Oracles* and *On Images*. Next I will explore the possibility that Porphyry's anti-Christian writings—which also challenge Christianity's claim to be the "true philosophy" and the universal path to salvation (see Eus. *HE* 6.19 and Aug. *Civ.* 10)—should be seen, not as an independent attack on the faith, but rather as part of his opposition to *all* such universalizing claims. If this argument holds, then an intramural Neoplatonist debate over dogma, ritual and power produced both the arguments against Christianity and the revalorization of traditional ritual that fueled the Great Persecution.