

# The Pomegranate

## Readers' Forum

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LEONARD GEORGE WRITES:

Dear Pomegranate:

I would like to commend Donald Frew on his article "Harran: Last Refuge of Classical Paganism" (*Pomegranate* #9), and to offer a few comments. The pagan philosophies of late antiquity can provide a valuable stimulus to the development of modern pagan thought, and Mr Frew performs a service in drawing to our attention Harran's legacy as a preserver and transmitter of ancient wisdom. Theurgical Neoplatonism in particular, which was most likely what those mysterious "Sabians" of Harran were up to, embraced both ritual/contemplative practices and intellectual studies as mutually supportive approaches for deepening pagan life.

Now some neopagans shun anything "Platonic", believing that Platonism sets up a dualism—a pure "realm of Ideas" divided from a corrupt material world from which Platonists try to escape. And indeed there have been scholars (primarily Christian) through the ages who have offered dualistic glosses of Plato. But Iamblichus (c. 240—c. 325 CE), the genius of the theurgical tradition, explicitly rejected this divide. He made the case that Plato and Plotinus (the founder of Neoplatonism) never meant their

work to be understood in dualistic terms. As classical historian Polymnia Athanassiadi put it, Iamblichus spoke "as an expert and fully confident Platonist, who believes in the essential, though incredibly complex, unity of the cosmos. To him duality, let alone plurality, is a figure of speech, not a way of being; for being exists in unity and can only be comprehended by a simple act of intellection, rather than by analytical thinking" ("Dreams, theurgy and freelance divination: The testimony of Iamblichus" *Journal of Roman Studies* (1993) 83, 115-130). Theurgists held that conceptual analysis and ritual performance can remove obstacles to this "simple act" of insight, but cannot directly induce it.

Both of the critical commentators (*Pomegranate* #10) on Mr Frew's piece get caught in a dualism that the theurgical philosophers of Harran would themselves have disavowed. Dr Hanna Kassis alleges that if the Harranian Sabians were acceptable to the Moslems, then they cannot be called 'pagans'. Mr Aaron Walker suggests that if the Harranians were thought to be monotheists, then they could not be polytheistic pagans. Moslem/Sabian, or Monotheist/Polytheist—however you choose to parse the realm of spiritual perception, theurgical Neoplatonists would not have reified the boundaries. All such doctrinal designations are "figures of speech" as Athanassiadi states, not fixed realities. Ideas about the Divine are to be valued according to their effects on the theurgist's maturation, not their supposed accuracy in describing abstract spiritual objects. The disciples of Iamblichus, those relentless monists, happily invoked a whole spectrum of sacred beings: heroes and daimones, angels and archons, goddesses and gods, cosmic souls and transcendent powers, sentient numbers, etc. They felt it was useful to personify the

unity and the multiplicity of reality. Relating to these personifications through ritual helped theurgists to know, and to feel, their own profound inclusion in the paradox of existence: its dual nature as oneness and diversity. Those interested in learning more about theurgical Neoplatonism should consult Gregory Shaw's book *Theurgy and the soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1995) and two of Shaw's papers—"The

*Empedocles and Pythagorean tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) and two of his papers, both in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*: "Poimandres: The etymology of the name and the origins of the Hermetica" (1993) 56, 1-24 and "From Pythagoras to the Turba philosophorum: Egypt and Pythagorean tradition" (1994) 57, 1-13.

Mr Frew argues for a "direct line of transmission" from Neoplatonic theurgy to the

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mortality and anonymity of the Iamblichean soul" (*Syllecta Classica* (1998) 8, 177-190), and "Eros and arithmos: Pythagorean theurgy in Iamblichus and Plotinus" (*Ancient Philosophy* (1999) 19, 121-143).

Harran was undoubtedly a crucial link in the transmission of pagan philosophy to both Moslem and Byzantine civilizations (and thence to the West). But Mr Frew's description of Harran as classical paganism's "last refuge" and "last haven" might overstate the case a little. There also seems to have been a vital preservation of pagan doctrine and practice in the Egyptian city of Panopolis (later known as Akhmim) at the time of Harran's supposed lastness. Panopolis and Harran were what Hakim Bey refers to as "temporary autonomous zones", domains of radical tolerance. Concerning Panopolis and the Egyptian transmission in general I recommend the excellent scholarship of Peter Kingsley. Everyone interested in these matters should read his book *Ancient philosophy, mystery, and magic:*

inception of modern witchcraft. This may be true, but only in a broad sense—the "direct line" is not very specific to modern witchcraft. Theurgy was a wellspring of the entire Western esoteric current, through the largely Neoplatonic atmosphere of late antique high magic, later through the seminal grimoire *Picatrix* and later still through that sage of the Florentine Renaissance, Marsilio Ficino (who translated Iamblichus' only complete surviving work, *De Mysteriis*, into Latin; the Greek manuscript he worked from came to Florence from Constantinople, but its ultimate origin was probably Harran). Insofar as modern witchcraft is one of the latter-day eddies of western occultism it is in the "direct line of transmission" in this very general way. As Mr Frew notes, Gerald Gardner quoted the Neoplatonist Sallustius approvingly. But almost any Western esotericist could do so with respect to whatever his/her tradition is. Also contra Mr Frew's

*continued on page 53*