

Niketas Siniossoglou, *Plato and Theodoret: The Christian Appropriation of Platonic Philosophy and the Hellenic Intellectual Resistance* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008)

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The main purpose of Niketas Siniossoglou's book *Plato and Theodoret: The Christian Appropriation of Platonic Philosophy and the Hellenic Intellectual Resistance* is to examine Theodoret of Cyrrhus's *Graecarum Affectionum Curatio* from the perspective of the Hellenic elites to whom it was addressed. This book, which was developed from the author's dissertation, attempts to address the academic dilemma of how interpretations of ancient philosophy should be viewed. Siniossoglou argues that Theodoret, a late antiquity Christian apologist, attempted to appropriate Platonic concepts in order to demonstrate that Christianity, and not the Neoplatonic tradition, was the true heir of Platonic philosophy. Siniossoglou focuses on Theodoret's work because his *Curatio* has been considered "one of the best Christian replies to pagan philosophy." The book is divided into five sections. The first examines the conflict between Hellenism and Christianity in late antiquity. The author attempts to place Theodoret in his correct historical context, primarily by asking the question of whom the *Curatio* addressed. He argues that Theodoret's intended audience was those educated *Hellenes*, the so-called

Neoplatonists, who not only resisted Christianity, but also claimed to be the descendents of Platonic philosophy.

The author does an excellent job of outlining the objective and direction of the book at the outset. He is clear about what the argument will be and is consistent throughout the book. It would have been beneficial, however, if he had spent more time explaining who Theodoret was and why he is important. The author seems to assume that his significance is self-evident as the only reference he makes is the line quoted above, that Theodoret is considered one of the best responses to pagan philosophy. Siniosoglou makes a detailed case for why Theodoret's intended audience, which was not explicitly stated, was the educated Hellenes and even the emperor Julian himself. Taken together his arguments are convincing although many of the points are quite weak when examined individually. For example, relying on some of Theodoret's letters, Siniosoglou concludes that "Theodoret was preoccupied with the conversion of members of the educated pagan elite" (p. 42). Based on the evidence that this had been Theodoret's objective once, the author makes the questionable leap that this must also be the objective of the *Curatio*. Individual weaknesses aside, the whole of Siniosoglou's argument are persuasive and he does a good job of bringing in a breadth of evidence to support his case. The second section of the book focuses on Theodoret's attempt to demonstrate the essential monotheism of Plato and the polytheism of the Hellenes. In this way he was able to argue that Christianity, with its one God, was the philosophical descendant of Plato. The author

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demonstrates, however, that the conflation of Plato with monotheism, the Hellenes with polytheism, and even Christianity with monotheism, is misguided. Additionally, he clarifies why portraying Plato as a monotheist was important to Theodoret. This was because “the aim was to assimilate into Judeo-Christian monotheism the philosophical basis of any alternative version of monotheism, rather than confront the philosophy and practice of paganism as one and the same enemy” (p. 108). |470

This section of the book is very interesting as it challenges the theological position of Christianity as an essentially monotheistic religion and Hellenism as polytheistic. The author does an excellent job of investigating these claims by exploring the semantic usage of these terms as well as looking at how these religions are believed by followers. He provides a compelling account for why Christianity cannot be considered truly monotheistic by examining the theological implications of the trinity as well as the role of “heavenly messengers” in the Christian tradition. Although interesting, Siniosoglou spends a disproportionate amount of time on the theological details at the expense of explaining the significance of this finding. The central point of this section for his thesis is that Theodoret is attempting to (a) appropriate Plato as a monotheist, and therefore a predecessor to Christianity, and (b) denounce the Neoplatonists as polytheists. This important point gets relegated to the conclusion of the chapter with little discussion or development.

The third section examines the alignment in Theodoret’s thought on Christian asceticism and Plato’s

views of the body as presented in the *Phaedo*. The main argument is that Theodoret attempted to portray the ascetics as the true heirs of Plato; however, in order to do this Theodoret was required to separate the concept of *askesis* from its Greco-Roman social and political context and reinterpret it according to Christian doctrine. The value of this argument for Siniosoglou is that it demonstrates one of the main techniques of Theodoret, namely, taking a Platonic concept out of its original context and reinterpreting it so it accords with Christian philosophy. In this way, Theodoret was able to incorporate Platonic ideas into Christianity, and able to attack the Neoplatonists with their own vocabulary which had been re-imagined.

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Although the discussion of the essential difference between the Christian and Platonic conceptions of *askesis* is interesting, it again obscures the central point. Siniosoglou dedicates almost forty pages to the discussion of asceticism in order to demonstrate that Theodoret misappropriated Platonic terms to align with Christian concepts. This point, which is quite important to the overall argument, gets a little lost in the details of Christian ascetics with rotting bodies that have pus and worms coming out of their feet. Particularly so because at no point does Siniosoglou explain why the example of *askesis* is the best example Theodoret's semantic trickery. It is unclear whether this is the only example, or merely the best of many examples. The central point could have been emphasized more and the details less.

The fourth section looks at Theodoret's treatment of the cosmological and eschatological myths in Plato's

Timaeus, the *Gorgias*, and the *Republic*. Siniossoglou argues that Theodoret followed the apologetic technique of selectively appropriating those Platonic myths that can be interpreted in accordance with Christian doctrine. For example, Theodoret relied on the Myth of Er in the *Republic* as evidence that Plato believed in a heaven and hell, similar to Christianity. The central argument of this section, however, is that Theodoret only made these connections by isolating Platonic myths from their larger philosophical context and through selective interpretation. Theodoret determined that only the myths that coincide with Christian doctrine are “true” while all that do not are Platonic “fallacies”. The implication of this selective technique for Siniossoglou is that this interpretation of Platonic myth resulted in a disunited and inconsistent Platonic philosophy. The essential point is that Theodoret, in attempting to align Platonic myth with Christian doctrine, misrepresented Plato beyond recognition. The connection therefore is extremely problematic and demonstrates the philosophical difficulty for later Christians who relied upon Theodoret’s interpretation.

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Siniossoglou does an excellent job in this section of articulating the Neoplatonic interpretation of Platonic myth and comparing that to Theodoret’s interpretation. He demonstrates with the use of examples and discussion that Theodoret had a specific agenda in interpreting Platonic myth. Specifically he demonstrates that Theodoret’s purpose was to “discredit mythological pluralism (*Polymythos*), thus enhancing the authority and exclusivity of the Bible (*Monomythos*)” (p. 187). To put it another way,

Theodoret aimed to turn myth into dogma. This section would have been stronger if Siniossoglou had explained exactly how Theodoret's selective interpretation of Platonic myth resulted in philosophical contradiction, rather than just stating that it did. The author presumes that the Platonic contradictions are self-evident when perhaps they are not. Additionally, Siniossoglou assumes that a discordant Platonic philosophy is necessarily bad, which is perhaps a valid assumption, but his case would have been stronger if he had articulated the philosophical implications of such discordance.

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The final section examines the political implications of Judeo-Christian monotheism. He argues that Theodoret drew an essential comparison between polytheism and anarchy, and monotheism and the strength of the Christian empire. Theodoret saw in the Christianized Empire the first stages of the "kingdom of god" which was promised in Jewish prophecies. This would result, he believed, in the end of warfare and the beginning of an age of peace. This was only possible, however, with the influence of the Church. Theodoret argued that Christianity had succeeded where pagan Rome had failed, as such, it was necessary for emperors and citizens alike to align under the banner of Christianity. As justification for this claim, Siniossoglou argues that Theodoret attempted to draw a connection between Jewish tradition and Plato, in order to show that the Christianization of the Roman Empire was an extension of Platonic philosophy not accomplished by the Neoplatonists. Siniossoglou concludes this section with a discussion of Theodoret's perspectives on law and society

and concludes that his position was contradictory because Theodoret attempted to justify slavery, tyranny and social injustice as self-induced punishments while arguing for the triumph of the peace of Christianity.

This section provides a nice conclusion to the overall argument as it demonstrates the significance of Theodoret's work both historically and philosophically. It is unclear, however, what the conclusion of this section, which examines Theodoret's perspectives on society, contributes to this goal. Examining Theodoret's perspectives on slavery and tyranny does not appear to contribute anything to the broader implications of his work and actually comes across as Siniossoglou's chance to do some Theodoret-bashing. This issue aside, the final section of the book does an excellent job of summarizing the implications of Theodoret's techniques that were examined in detail throughout the book.

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Overall, Siniossoglou has done well with this book. The work is meticulously researched and incorporates insights from multiple disciplines including theology, philosophy, history, and more. He succeeded in examining a complex topic with the detail and intellectual rigor which it deserves while simultaneously maintaining an interesting and engaging read through his writing style, excellent organization, and consistency of argument. Perhaps most importantly, Siniossoglou makes a case for the importance of examining interpretations of Platonic philosophy. He demonstrates the problems that can be associated with relying on interpretations, which may have their own objectives. These insights will recommend this book to

anyone interested in Christian theology, particularly the influence of the apologetic tradition, Platonic philosophy, or the development of the Western intellectual tradition.

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