Raymond Shiner

Terrance MacMullan

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*Christianity – A Platonic Religion*

In western culture, Christianity is incredibly strong. As of 2014, 83% of Americans said that they were either fairly certain or absolutely certain of the existence of God (Pew Research Center), while 74% of Americans identified themselves as Christians (BBC News). Christianity, however, was not always around. So, where did it come from? Obviously the Christian scriptures were and are the foundation of almost all denominations of Christianity. But little is it known that the ancient Greek philosophy of Platonism and its child philosophies had an incredible impact on Christianity. We will be looking closer at what Platonism is as well one of its later versions, Neo-Platonism, discussing their founders and the core of what they believed and how it changed over time. We will then be observing how they influenced one of Christianity’s most influential early leaders, St. Augustine of Hippo, who in turn majorly affected the religion itself. We will lastly be looking at how ideas found in Platonism and Neo-Platonism relate to Modern day Christian beliefs – Ultimately we will be looking at how these philosophies have helped not only in spreading early Christianity, but how they helped in molding it into what it is today. Without Platonism, Christianity as we know it would not exist.

The founder of Platonism is the Ancient Greek Philosopher Plato (428-348 BCE), who is also the founder of the Academy of Athens, which is also known as Plato’s Academy, which Plato founded in 387 BCE (Wikipedia). The Academy, the origin of our English word “Academics”, is considered to be the first place of higher education and is arguably the one part of the ancient world that has had the longest lasting effect on Modern day society. Plato was considered a true master of Rhetoric (he was very good at the wordy words, a master of verbal kung-Fu, like a lawyer) and created the basis of his philosophy using logic and reasoning to decipher what he knows of the world and reality. This is seen in his written texts, many of which are still around today, being used as topics of study in higher education. The content of Plato’s works are extremely spiritual in nature, as they focus heavily on the soul - speaking on topics such as justice, truth, the nature of the soul, and death. The ideas taught by Plato at his academy have shaped and molded western society into what it is today. Not many people realize that the core ideas of common beliefs accepted by nearly every on the planet believe nowadays were first taught by Plato at his academy. This is true for all people, not just Christians, the effect that Plato has had on the modern world is incredible.

‘I am me; this is just my body.’ This is the core idea of many modern and common beliefs, especially modern Christian beliefs; ideas such as the afterlife, the existence of a supreme deity or a higher power, the thing that connects all human beings, and the thing that separates us from other creatures in the animal kingdom are all based around this one idea – that the soul is separate from the body. It is seen all the time in modern society as an argument against various types of sexual, racial, or even religious discrimination. It doesn’t matter what race, religion, or gender you are, because we all have a soul that’s different from our bodies. Deep inside we are all the same. Although many people on the planet nowadays would agree with this statement, especially in western culture, it was not always so. One of the main reasons that Christianity could not exist without Platonism has to do with the common beliefs of the ancient western world and how they affected the early spreading of Christianity. Plato’s Academy was the crucial turning point in changing common beliefs found in the ancient western world, which in turn is the foundation for almost all of western culture’s common beliefs.

In Ancient Greece it was believed that the body was no different from the soul, and that you *are* your body. The soul was considered to be simply something that either died with your body, or went to the underworld after death as a reflection of your body (Lorenz). Although other regions and cultures of the world already had beliefs about the separation of the soul and the body (such as the Jewish tradition in the Middle East), the ancient western world was stuck believing in this idea – ‘I am my body, when I die it will either be sent to the underworld or completely obliterated.’ It wasn’t until Plato came around and started the Academy that the idea that the soul is different from the body began to be common. This is an incredibly important change in the ancient western world – the change from the idea that the soul is one with the body. In order to truly understand this change and how it relates to the early spread of Christianity we will look closer at what Plato taught in his academy via some of his works.

Plato believed not only in the separation of the body from the soul, but in a transcendent and ultimate reality, which is incredibly similar to many modern Christian ideas of God and heaven. These different levels of reality, which Plato called forms, stem from the ultimate reality, which is the form of good, and descend into matter and the shadows of material things, the lowest form of reality. He believed that things such as truth and justice were ultimate, not relative. (Plato, Sterling and Scott 198) Since Plato believed that a person’s body is nothing more than a vessel in which the soul travels, the soul being the true person, his main focus was on the betterment of the soul. Plato makes claims about the soul and its needs being closer to ultimate truth and reality than the needs of the body (Plato, Sterling and Scott 277). This is incredibly similar to many Christian beliefs, even though the Christian scriptures would not be completed until nearly 400 years later when they were finished by the end of the first century (Wikipedia).

Jesus is quoted saying, “Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it,” - Matthew 10:39 – New International Version (Bible Hub). For those who had studied under Plato, a simple recollection of one of Plato’s earlier lessons would make the meaning of this statement crystal clear. “The difficult thing, gentlemen, isn’t escaping death; escaping villainy is much more difficult, since it runs faster than death,” (Plato and Reeve, The Apology of Socrates 777). Platonists look at Jesus’ statement and understand what Jesus is really saying. If you focus on your life in this world, you will lose your real life – which is your soul. But, if you focus on your soul by following me and my teachings instead of focusing on this life, you will find true life, life eternal. If you have studied under Plato this is a simple connection. This same sentence, however, makes zero sense if you believe that the soul and the body are identical, which was the common idea in ancient Greece did before Plato started the academy.

What Jesus says here, as well as many other ideas found in the Christian scriptures, can only be understood if one recognizes that there is a distinction between the soul and the body. That gives rise to the idea that there is something other than just the world our bodies exist, another reality, *an afterlife*. This is all hinged on Plato’s original teaching that the body is different from and less important than the soul, which he taught at the Academy in Athens. What if, however, Plato had never started the Academy, and people of the ancient world would have continued thinking the idea that the soul and the body are synonymous. Without Plato’s ideas comes no understanding or acceptance of the scriptures in the ancient western world and Jesus just sounds like a fool when he is quoted in Matthew. If the people of the Ancient world continued believing that the soul and the body are synonymous, how much differently would people have reacted to the words of the Christian scriptures? How would that, in turn, affect the history of western culture and the ¾ of the American population that call themselves Christians today? Without Platonism, Christianity now would without a doubt look different, whether that be in its beliefs or its overall popularity. There is even a chance that Christianity *might* *not even exist* in modern times.

Platonism, however, did more than just affect how the western world would receive the Christian scriptures by changing how the people viewed the body and the soul. The themes from Plato’s works greatly influenced the interpretation of Christianity as well. One later version of Platonism specifically, Neo-Platonism, would go on to heavily influence one of the most influential figures in modern Christianity, St. Augustine.

St. Augustine of Hippo (what is now Algeria), Born in the middle of the 4th Century, is widely considered to be one of the greatest influential minds on Christian thought in its history. A Neo-Platonist philosopher, He is credited with merging Platonistic and Neo-Platonistic thought with Christianity to create what is the modern idea of a transcendent and ultimate heaven; this a view that is so common nowadays it almost seems weird to think of it any other. Although during his lifetime and his career as a bishop in Northern Africa he failed to make his own view of Christianity very popular. His many writings went on to be highly revered, for thousands of years. “His distinctive theological style shaped Latin Christianity in a way surpassed only by scripture itself,” (O'Donnel). Many people in the Christian faith nowadays still recognize his works as being incredibly important and influential on their beliefs. “. . . His responses are still considered by some to be the church's most important writings after the Bible,” (Christianity Today). For thousands of years people have viewed him as an authority on the interpretation of the Christian Scriptures. Such as a church split almost 1000 years later, in which both opposing sides cited him as an authority on doctrine (Mendelson). This man, who has had arguably as much influence on Christianity as Paul and even Jesus Christ himself, was a Neo-Platonist philosopher for years before converting to Christianity. Because of this, his views and writings concerning the interpretation of the Christian Scriptures were heavily influenced by a form of Platonism, which by extension means that many common Christian ideas today are rooted in Platonism. When we look closer at the ideas found in later version of Platonism called Neo-Platonism, which greatly influenced St. Augustine, and how they compare to modern Christian ideas that are common in western culture, it becomes incredibly apparent the importance of Platonism’s overall influence on Christianity as a religion.

One large tie between Platonism and modern Christianity has to do with the idea of the holy trinity. The holy trinity, or the Godhead, is a common Christian idea that says that god is made up of three separate parts, The Father, The Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. The confusing part of this idea is that the three are all separate people, and at the same time the exact same God. Jesus was the Son of God, but he was not in any way a Demi-God like Hercules, he was somehow both fully god and fully man. “In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God and the Word was God.” – John 1:1 – English Standard Version (Bible Hub). Even the word Emmanuel, what many called baby Jesus, means ‘God with us.’ If someone asked ‘Is God one person or is he three people?’ the answer would be ‘Yes.’ Although this is rather confusing, it is incredibly intriguing and enticing for the intellectual minds of outsiders; the idea of something being 100% one thing and 100% another at the same time. How does that make sense?

St. Augustine understood this using Neo-Platonism. Neo-Platonism is a religious philosophy founded in the 3rd century by a man named Plotinus. It is an adapted form of Platonism (Neo-Platonists actually called themselves Platonists) that also takes from Hinduism. Like almost all religions and philosophies, it changed over time, just as different forms of Christianity continues to change. It was founded by a man named Plotinus, a Greek philosopher, towards the end of the 3rd century. Plotinus speaks of a Holy deity that existed in the beginning called The One. Plotinus states that this one is good, perfect, beautiful, and the source of everything. That The One emanated from itself effortlessly lesser reflections of itself, the first being rational thought, and continued to divide itself into lesser forms until it eventually forgot what it was. Because of this Neo-Platonists believed that everything in existence, including your soul and everything in the material world, was an emanation of this perfect deity. You are The One. Just a lesser, imperfect form (Moore) (Armstrong, Henry and Schwyzer).

This influence of this connection is undeniable. St. Augustine utilized his knowledge of Neo-Platonism to rationalize this trilogy. Similar to how the One emanated lesser forms of itself, resulting in different entities that were different, yet the same, maybe The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit were all emanations from the Same God, different parts of the same deity. It’s still rather confusing, but far easier to understand if you were a Neo-Platonist philosopher like St. Augustine, one of the most influential leaders of the Christian faith. All of this ties back to the original ideas that were promoted by Plato in the academy centuries before the Christian scriptures were written. Neo-Platonism is very similar to Plato’s original Theory of forms, only it is more transcendent in nature, taking more of a spiritual approach, which makes it very similar to modern Christianity.

Like almost all religions and philosophies, Christianity changed over time, as it continues to change today. One idea found in Christian thought that is common today is the idea that we, as humans, because we are God’s creation, are somehow dying to get back to him. This is an idea that is present among many different sects of Christianity today. It is also an idea that has no basis in the Bible. There is nowhere in the bible that it talks about humans having an innate desire to get back to their creator. In fact, it says just the opposite. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” - Romans 3:23 – New International Version (Bible Hub). The bible does talk about how god can bring joy and satisfaction that can’t be found anywhere else in stories such as the women at the well found in the gospel of John. When the women at the well asked Jesus where she could find the living water that is the gift of God, Jesus answers saying “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life,” – John 4:13-14 – New International Version (Bible Hub). This idea is similar to the idea that we are innately dying to get back to God, but has more to do with God satisfying a need rather than instilling a desire in us for *him*. It’s still the common analogy of ‘the God-shaped whole in our hearts’ that is used by Christians all the time, but is different in nature. So if the bible doesn’t talk about this idea that we have something inside of us that is wanting to get back to God, why is it a common belief? This is because it is a common belief of Neo-Platonism, which has influenced Christianity so much that this thought is common in western culture.

As it was mentioned earlier, Plotinus believed that since you are god, and you’ve just forgotten about it, all you have to do is to forget about everything you know to “rejoin intellect” as he called it and became a part of the one. In Fact, Plotinus’ last words were “Strive to bring back the god in yourselves to the god in all,” (Moore). This is the core foundation for the idea that is present in modern Christianity. This idea was translated over from Neo-Platonism into Christianity along with the idea of the Holy Trinity as well as other similar ideas, such as that the body and the soul are connected even though they are separate and the theory on the origins of evil in a world created by a perfect deity. The only difference is that whereas all of these other ideas have scripture to back them up, the idea that we as humans have something inside of us that is looking for God does not. Once again we see the incredibly profound effect of Platonism and the lineage produced by its themes on modern Christianity.

In Conclusion, after looking closely at how Plato’s Academy helped to change the beliefs of ancient western civilization, Platonisms lasting influence on St. Augustine and Christianity itself through a later version of Platonism called Neo-Platonism, and taking note of all of the parallels and similarities between Christian thought and Platonic thought. We see just how crucial Platonism was to the dispersal, interpretation, and even formation of many modern Christian ideas. This is why I say that without Platonism, Christianity as we know it wouldn’t exist. Plato played such crucial role in so many parts of this still popular religion, whether as a direct influence or as a reference, that to imagine what the religion would look like without his influence is completely bogus. Many people in the Christian faith today *still* consider Plato to be a spiritual guide. There is even an entire webpage on Logos bible’s website (creator of the Logos Bible Mobile App) that is entitled ‘take it from the Church Fathers: you should read Plato’. This website even has quotes from our friend St. Augustine which sing Plato’s praises. So, in light of everything we have learned, I strongly encourage you, whether you are religious or not, to read some of Plato’s works such as *The Republic* or *The Apology of Socrates.* These are thought provoking works that are truly timeless, as they helped form the foundation of our very own society. And if you are Christian then hey, ‘take it from the Church Fathers: you should read Plato’, and learn more about the philosophy that helped shape the world. At the very least it will be interesting.

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