Article

Reenvisioning Plotinus' Doctrine of the Triad in Byzantine Christianity as a New Type of Ethics

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Abstract: This article reveals the continuity of Neoplatonic ideas in Greek-Byzantine patristics in the process of elaboration of the triadic dogma by the Church Fathers. Common and distinctive principles of Neoplatonism and Eastern Christianity are deduced from the point of view of the shaping of Christian ethics and the processing of Neoplatonic concepts in patristic texts. In more specific terms, Plotinus' concept of the triad of the One–the Intellect–the Soul is considered, with special attention paid to analysis of the philosopher's ideas of the One as Deity and the Origin of the world. It describes the process of emanation of the Neoplatonic trinity hypostasis and its connection with the material world through the World Soul. In comparison with Neoplatonism, the authors of the article present the molding of the dogma of the Holy Trinity in classical Greek-Byzantine patristics and highlight the new, theological-ethical vision of Plotinus' triad as a form of the interconnection of the three Persons of the Trinity, expressing the absoluteness of interpersonal relations. In terms of philosophical ethics, the authors state that the Church Fathers' understanding of the relationship among the three hypostases of the Holy Trinity serves as a model of perfect moral relationships demonstrating the absolute norms of morality for a human being. Neoplatonism was deprived of such a context in its interpretation of Plotinus' triad. The creative and critical perception of Plotinus' conceptual positions in the works of St. Athanasius is presented. Conclusions are made about the creative, sometimes critical, perception of the ideas of Neoplatonism in the formation of a new type of Christian ethics.

Keywords: Christian ethics; Neoplatonism; Greek-Byzantine patristics; Plotinus' triad; the One; the Holy Trinity; same in being (Homoousion); emanation; Arius and Arianism; Athanasius of Alexandria

1. Introduction: Neoplatonism and Christianity

The peculiarity of early Byzantine Christian culture, its formation as a syncretic system, including and processing diverse sources, is manifested in its perception of some Western philosophical traditions, in particular Neoplatonism. Neoplatonism became an integral part of Eastern patristic and early Byzantine philosophy and determined the formation of Christianity in the late antique and medieval periods.

Neoplatonism—together with Epicureanism and Stoicism—originally at odds with Christian theology, developed into a profound philosophical teaching about being, and the human and divine worlds, during the classical patristic period (Chadwick 1966). In polemical discussions with early Christianity, it was transformed into a coherent worldview system, which had clear signs of religious doctrine. Platonic philosophy and Neoplatonism, which had a great resonance in the intellectual sphere of early Byzantium, harmonized with the conceptual constructions of the Church Fathers in the spirit of the New Testament revelations and helped to develop Christian doctrine theoretically. As Christianity was also being shaped as a synthetic philosophical system, the rejection by early Christianity

of late antique doctrines was gradually replaced by an ideological compromise of ancient Greek thinking and Christian doctrine (Tarnas 1995). Within Neoplatonism itself, there was also a desire for unity with Christian theology. Platonic principles and Neoplatonist positions conditioned the philosophical significance of Christian dogmatics, presenting to Christianity its anthropological ideals.

The ideas of Neoplatonism in Christian monotheism accept new meanings, focusing on their moral and ethical content. It is not accidental that Christian Neoplatonism would emerge personalized by Dionysius the Areopagite, the Cappadocian Fathers, John Chrysostom, and others. Adherents of this particular kind of Neoplatonism had a tangible influence on Western thought of that era. The Nicene and post-Nicene Greek-Byzantine Fathers combined in their writings, to the greatest extent, the ideas of Christianity and Neoplatonist philosophy. They used Neoplatonic concepts and definitions in the Triadological and Christological theological debates spanning from the 4th to the 7th centuries in Byzantium.

Neoplatonism's philosophical traits and its ideological correspondence to emerging Christian theology make them comparable in terms of the two ethical cultures. We may speak of the continuity of Neoplatonic ideas in Eastern Christianity. Yet, we shall emphasize that, in reworking the ideas of the Neoplatonists, the Christian authors introduced a new moral context, thus creating a *new type of ethics*. The Greek-Byzantine Church Fathers changed the essential content of Plotinus' triad, giving it the *ethical form* of the relationship between the three Persons of the Holy Trinity as an expression of the absoluteness of interpersonal relations (Karamanolis 2021). In terms of Christian ethics, we can state that the understanding developed by the Church Fathers of the relationship between the three hypostases of the Holy Trinity is a model of perfect intra-divine relationships, transferable to society and showcasing the absolute norms of morality and virtues. This is a unique type of ethical thinking, emerging from an interpretation of Plotinus' triad.

Let us trace some important ideas of Neoplatonism and Eastern Christian doctrine of the early Byzantine period worked out by Church Fathers.

2. Plotinus' Triad

The early period of Neoplatonism's formation is associated with the work of Plotinus and his doctrine of the triad (the One–the Intellect–the Soul), which correlates with the Christian triadic dogma of the Holy Trinity. The Neoplatonists also reasoned about a Trinitarian God, just as the Eastern Church Fathers would later discuss and refine, in theological discussions with the Western Fathers, the doctrine of a Trinitarian God (the Father–the Son of God–the Holy Spirit).

In the most important point about the *unity of the hypostases*, Plotinus' understanding of God is comparable to the triadic creed of Christianity. In interpreting the essence of Neoplatonic Triadology, G. Lewis emphasized the idea of the *unity* of the three manifestations of the One. "God is one, but at the same time, he exists in three persons. These three distinct hypostases, united in one being, are: the first is the One (not the One Being, not a Being at all, but the One); the second is Intellect, which is identical with being; the third is the universal soul, the cause of all activity and life" (Lewes 1998, p. 196).

However, even with the apparent similarity, the Christian triadic dogma differs from the Neoplatonic triad.

According to Plotinus, the source and origin of everything that exists in the world is a certain supernatural, perfect "Origin or Deity," which he defines as *the One* (the *Unity*). The causal principle " . . . is understood by Plotinus not only as supersensible but also as super-reasonable, indefinable for a reason, and inexpressible for words, ineffable. It is understood . . . as the inseparable unity of positive or perfect goodness" (Solovyov 1995, pp. 5–8). Let us note the One has no personal characteristics, either in its essence or in the threefold manifestations of its being. This is the main difference between the Neoplatonic interpretation of the One and the Church Fathers' understanding of the Trinity, which in its unity demonstrates three Divine Persons in hypostatic form.

The One is not the supreme mind, the absolute spirit, the world will, or the being. Nor is the One the creatures or things created by it. "The One is all things and no one of them; the source of all things is not all things; all things are its possession—running back, so to speak, to it—or, more correctly, not yet so, they will be" (Plotinus 1992, V, 2.1). The being of the One is so specific that it is impossible to attribute to it either positive or negative connotations, "neither essence, nor life, but that which is beyond them" (Filin 2020, p. 114). The One, as the origin, is above all and, in principle, above all kinds of being. The One and Its hypostases are beyond the world; nevertheless, through the Soul, they relate to humankind and impart, in some way, divinity to human nature. In the fifth Ennead, we read: "We have shown the inevitability of certain convictions as to the scheme of things: There exists a Principle which transcends Being; this is The One, whose nature we have sought to establish in so far as such matters lend themselves to proof. Upon The One follows immediately the Principle which is at once Being and the Intellectual-Principle. Third comes the Principle, Soul. Now just as these three exist for the system of Nature, so, we must hold, they exist for ourselves. I am not speaking of the material order- all that is separable- but of what lies beyond the sense realm in the same way as the Primals are beyond all the heavens; I mean the corresponding aspect of man, what Plato calls the Interior Man" (Plotinus 1992, V, 1.10).

Plotinus philosophically conceptualizes the One: it is the supreme principle that connects the parts of complex things and things themselves, and therefore, the One is omnipresent. The One is the source of diversity and the existence of "multiplicity." He writes in the Enneads: "How, then, does Unity give rise to Multiplicity? By its omnipresence: there is nowhere where it is not; it occupies, therefore, all that is; at once, it is manifold—or, rather, it is all things" (Plotinus 1992, III, 9.3). According to Plotinus, a human being must realize and accept the existence of this supreme principle of the One and its absoluteness, its being above the heavenly and earthly worlds. The One is the highest and unattainable level of perfection, beauty, goodness, and virtue. Only by recognizing this can a person penetrate the essence of objects and phenomena. However, since the One is invariable, eternal, and infinite, it is not subject to either sensual or rational knowledge. Knowledge of it is acquired in two ways: negative and positive (here is the beginning of the Neoplatonic ecstatic ascent to the Deity).

The One excludes any duality within itself. It resides in itself. It is self-identical and self-sufficient. Thus, the One is the supreme cause of the second hypostasis—the Intellect—and everything existing in the world, although it is not directly connected with the latter. We emphasize once again that the One, being the first principle of being, is not being itself, as it is not connected and does not correlate with the world. God produces emanation (effluence) from his Unity of the second hypostasis—the Intellect—and, from it, emanates the third hypostasis of being—the World Soul, which is connected with the material world. "And so the First is not a thing among the things contained by the Intellectual-Principle though the source of all. In virtue of this source, things of the later order are essential beings; for from that fact there is determination; each has its form: what has being cannot be envisaged as outside of limit; the nature must be held fast by boundary and fixity; though to the Intellectual Beings this fixity is no more than determination and form, the foundations of their substantial existence" (Plotinus 1992, V, 1.7).

Emanationism is the principle that binds Plotinus' whole system together. Vladimir Solovyov stressed that the understanding of "the One or Absolute Good already contains an idea of the descending order of all that exists" (Solovyov 1995, p. 5). The One of Plotinus does not create (in the Christian sense) but radiates, outflows, *and emanates,* from its perfect essence, all that exists. The Cosmos is the hierarchy of being that proceeds from the absolute One and, through intermediate stages, descends lower and lower to absolute nothingness (matter). The world is thus being created by emanation. However, "Why has the Primal not remained self-gathered so that there be none of this profusion of the manifold which we observe in existence and yet are compelled to trace to that absolute unity?" (Plotinus 1992, V, 1.6). Plotinus answers the question by molding the doctrine of the One and the triad.

The Primal One is so perfect that it cannot help emanating Its overflowing absolute essence. Yet, in doing so, God the One is not mixed and not directly related to matter. Emanation is the effluence of divinity through the *manifestation* of the One. The act of God's emanation is akin to the sun's emission of rays of light, which does not lose the nature of the substantive divine substance. (A similar comparison will be found later, e.g., in the works of Symeon the New Theologian).

In the fifth Ennead, Plotinus describes the process: "Seeking nothing, possessing nothing, lacking nothing, the One is perfect and, in our metaphor, has overflowed, and its exuberance has produced the new: this product has turned again to its begetter and been filled and has become its contemplator and so an Intellectual-Principle. That station towards the one [the fact that something exists in the presence of the One] establishes Being; that vision directed upon the One establishes the Intellectual-Principle; standing towards the One to the end of vision, it is simultaneously Intellectual-Principle and Being" (Plotinus 1992, V, 2.1). The One, like light pouring out, causes the second hypostasis—the Intellect. Thus, the One manifests its existence by employing the Intellect. Plotinus explains the emergence of the Intellect by the category of "birth," which would later become fundamental to the Church Fathers' disclosure of the intra-divine life of the Holy Trinity in the Christian triadic dogma being formed. "The offspring [of the One—*auth. O.C. and D.C.*] is always minor: what then are we to think of the All-Perfect but that it can produce nothing less than the very greatest that is later than itself. The greatest, later than the divine unity, must be the Divine Mind, and it must be the second of all existence, for it is that which sees The One on which alone it leans while the First has no need whatever of it" (Plotinus 1992, V, 1.6). The Intellect is the image of the One, his likeness, and spiritual contemplation. It is above all stages of being in the Universe; the subsequent descending emanations depart from the perfection and "extend" to lower stages. Spirit gives form and definiteness to mental entities, while the One has no form of being. In the second hypostasis, the unity of the Deity is subdivided into the Intellect in the proper sense and the noumenal world, which relates the Spirit to the Soul and, indirectly, to the material world.

Emanation connects Spirit (the Intellect) with the third hypostasis of spiritual being—the World Soul. "This second outflow is a Form or Idea representing the Divine Intellect as the Divine Intellect represented its own prior, The One. This active power sprung from essence [from the Intellectual-Principle considered as Being] is Soul" (Plotinus 1992, V, 2.1). In the process of emanation of the second and third hypostases, there is a similarity in the absence of movement and any change in the One and the Spirit. The soul breaks its integrity and unity by acquiring the motion. It cannot belong entirely to itself, since its main function is to produce all living things and the realization of a connection with the world, including the human world. The third form of the Neoplatonic triad expresses all the animated and is, inseparably and eternally, connected to the Origin (the One). "It takes fulness by looking to its source; but it generates its image by adopting another, a downward, movement. This image of Soul is Sense and Nature, the vegetal principle. Nothing, however, is completely severed from its prior. Thus the human Soul appears to reach away as far down as to the vegetal order" (Plotinus 1992, V, 2.1).

The lowest form is the sensual-cosmic sphere, which in Plotinus' system takes the place of "nothingness." However, after the lapse of time, everything returns to its higher spiritual origin, which gives all things existence—a kind of circular and dialectical process of Cosmos' existence, which is spiritualized and guided by the World Soul. Due to the emanations of the hypostases and to the action of the Soul, which brings goodness and virtue, the life-giving source of life, "there exists, thus, a life, as it were, of huge extension" (Plotinus 1992, V, 2.2), and all the produced and the producing constitute an unbroken continuity.

The Neoplatonic triad, in its manifestations, impersonal hypostases, represents the steps of a dialectical process that consistently conditions the movement from the light of the One to the realm of the sensual, objective world. God, in his emanations (effluence of his hypostases), cannot be in contact with the material world. He opposes it; the world

is the otherness of the Divine Origin or the One. This is where the dialectic is necessary, connecting the two opposite poles[1].

3. The Holy Trinity in Greek-Byzantine Patristics

After Plotinus, eastern patristics of the *classical period* began to take shape in Byzantium, with its roots in the writings of the Apostolic and Apologetic Fathers and elaborating on Triadological (the 4th century) and Christological (the 5th–7th centuries) theological debates on the fundamental dogma of Christianity. The works of the Eastern Church Fathers have a theological and profound philosophical pattern. That is evidenced both by the range of issues and problems discussed in the theological debate and by the Fathers' focus on the works of Plato, the logic of Aristotle, and Neoplatonism. Indeed, the eastern and western Church Fathers were above all committed to the authority of the Scripture and the preceding sacred theological tradition. However, the eastern Fathers used sufficiently rich content from the heritage of Greek thinkers, which allowed them to create their philosophy in Byzantium and subsequently transmit it to the regions of Byzantine influence, in particular to ancient Rus. Thus, Plotinus' doctrine of the triad was perceived and reworked in the discourse of the 4th-century discussion of the dogma of the Holy Trinity, which was consolidated and confirmed at the First Council of Nicaea in 325 as the Nicene Creed.

Let us dwell on some provisions of the Greek-Byzantine Church Fathers of the Nicene period, which will allow us to find some similarities and to see differences in Plotinus' triad doctrine and the dogma of the Holy Trinity.

In early Byzantine patristics, the Triadology was understood in a philosophical-anthropological way, which gave it a more *ethical character* than was inherent in the logic of the Neoplatonist triad's unfolding. The hypostases of the Christian Trinity are not so much subjects of the dialectical process of emanation from the Origin to the world and back to the One (as in Plotinus) as persons expressing intra-divine meanings and manifestations of the unity and equality of the Holy Trinity (Ramelli 2012). The Nicene Creed signified the rejection of the subordination of the three persons (hypostases) of the Trinity, as with the Neoplatonists and the earlier Church Fathers (e.g., Origen). The three persons of the Holy Trinity are equal in their one divine essence (*ousia*, οὐσία), in the eternity of their existence, and in the proportionality of their intra-divine life. The relation of the three persons of the Trinity to the world, both in the universe's creation and in the sending down of the Son of God to the human world, is not a logical movement of categories, but the sphere of the absolute free will of God the Father. The Neoplatonic dialectical process of the movement of hypostases was opposed by patristic thought to the divine act, deed, or miracle. The Son of God was sent down for the salvation of the whole human race—this dominant idea determined individual human relationships to God. In the duality of the movement of God's will (toward man) and man's response to God, there is always an ethical relationship. For this reason, we can affirm that Christian ethics matured simultaneously in Christian Trinitarian disputes and that it differed from ancient ethics because it introduced the foundations of religious doctrine and a new understanding of the *God–man–world* relationship.

The theological Triadological debates conditioned the development of Byzantine culture, which was further oriented to the cult of spirit, spirituality, and ethics and supported the saving ideas of deification (theosis, θέωσις) for all people who took the path of Christianity (Chistyakova 2021, p. 149). This descriptive trait of Byzantine culture was not accidental, because in the polemic regarding the Holy Trinity, not only was the interrelation of the three persons of the Trinity substantiated, but the *moral paradigm* of human life and interpersonal relations was also created. The three persons of the one God are coequal and coeternal, with no subordinating authority or domination of any one hypostasis over another between them. In this way, the ideal model was also written for inter-human relations, which are based on absolute norms and moral values. By the dogma of the Trinity, the Church Fathers affirmed the basic canon of Christianity and highlighted its philosophical significance. The Trinity appeared as if permeated with "humanity," which is also eternally and continuously transmitted to every individual through the Son of God

Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, just as the Neoplatonists' One emanates through its hypostases and is poured into the sensual matter.

The Christian dogma of the Holy Trinity was formed in the 4th century, including the polemics of the eastern Fathers against the heresies of Arius and Arianism, and Sabellius and Sabellianism. The Greek-Byzantine Fathers Athanasius of Alexandria, Cyril of Jerusalem, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, and sufficient others struggled with these trends within Christianity that departed from the orthodoxly accepted. The controversy concerned above all the two fundamental concepts of "consubstantiality" (ὁμοούσιος) and of "essence" (ἐκ οὐσίας). The two philosophical concepts of *Homoousion* and *ousia* (*same in being*, ὁμοούσιον and *being*, οὐσία) were opposed by the Greek-Byzantine Fathers to the views of Arius and Sabellius. Arius, Sabellius, and even Pope Alexander I of Alexandria (the main opponent of Arius in the first stage of the Triadological polemics) were guided by the ancient Church, the ante-Nicene period, in their reasoning about the one God the Father and His supremacy in the Trinity. The hypostatic subordinationism of the Neoplatonists and Origen had a rather strong influence on them. Their understanding of the Holy Trinity gravitated toward the establishment of an intra-divine hierarchy and the supremacy of God the Father. Here, one can see the internal semantic overlap with Plotinus' concept of the One.

Arianism posed to patristics the philosophical and ethical problems of overcoming these ideas and the need for a final elaboration of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. After the First Council of Nicaea, a theological dispute broke out, the main problem of which was the shaping of an adequate categorical apparatus for expressing the unity of the three persons of the Trinity. Vladimir Lossky, analyzing the post-Nicaean theological debate, emphasized the essence of *Homoousion* theology: "The Church expressed by the term "*Homoousion*" the unity of the three Persons, the mysterious identity of the monad and the triad, and the oneness of the identity of the one nature and difference of the three Hypostases" (Lossky 1991, p. 40).

The Archbishop of Alexandria, Athanasius of Alexandria, played an enormous role in creating Triadic Homoousion theology, defending the understanding of the one God and the three hypostases. Athanasius is known as an active proponent of orthodox theology and an opponent of Arianism. By the middle of the 4th century, he was almost the only non-Arian bishop in the east of the Byzantine Empire, and he was expelled from his pulpit four times because he rejected Arian theology.

The name of Athanasius is associated not only with the formation of the triadic dogma, but also with the first systematic doctrine of the Holy Spirit in eastern patristics. Athanasius, as an early Greek Church Father, adhered to the ancient scheme of the doctrine of the unity of the Trinity and had to theologically rebuke "heretics" who denied its oneness and indivisibility. According to Athanasius, it is impossible to conceive of a "single Son-Father," as Sabellius expresses it, or to assert the separate existence of the three persons of the Trinity (Lyman 1993), which would inevitably lead to the idea of polytheism.

Athanasius' theological-philosophical struggle with his opponents defended the fundamental notion of the *consubstantiality* of the Holy Trinity and, consequentially, denied the emanational existence of its hypostases, which was present in Neoplatonism. Here is the main point of divergence between the orthodoxy of patristics and the doctrine of Plotinus and his followers. "Homoousion" (ὁ μοούσιον) and "emanation" (ἀπορροή) are not merely a categorical opposition between the two doctrines; they are the theoretical foundation of the two philosophical and religious movements of the time, from which the Neoplatonists and the Greek-Byzantine Church Fathers drew. Much of the conceptual grounding of these concepts and the fierce polemic around them were the basis of the teachings of Neoplatonism and Christianity (Dillon 1989). The distinction between *consubstantiality* and emanation is central to the understanding of the triad of Plotinus and the Holy Trinity of Christianity.

Athanasius the Great prevented Arian ideas from penetrating the emerging doctrine of Christianity. For St. Athanasius, the "*consubstantiality*" (Homoousion) of the Father and the Son meant more than the similarity (Homoiousian, ὁμοιούσιος) of Arius. The oneness

of the Father and the Son is inseparable and unchangeable because of the essential unity that binds them together. They are indivisible and inseparable. "For neither is the Father the Son, nor the Son the Father. For the Father is Father of the Son, and the Son, Son of the Father. For like as the well is not a river, nor the river a well, but both are one and the same water which is conveyed in a channel from the well to the river, so the Father's deity passes into the Son without flow and without division" (Athanasius of Alexandria 2007b, p. 84, § 2). According to Athanasius, it is impossible to express this identity and equality of the intra-divine life of the Trinity by ideas of similarity and likeness (or by emanation).

By refining and forming the doctrine of the second hypostasis of the Trinity, the Son of God, Athanasius was already laying the foundations of the future Christological doctrine of patristics, which would be discussed by theologians during the 5th–7th centuries. By expressing his ideas about the Son of God in his critique of Arianism, he was paving the way for the doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ. Following Athanasius, the Son of God cannot be a "creature," as the Arians taught. The Son is the Word of the Father, is the birth of essence from essence (Kirabaev et al. 2020, p. 16). All birth occurs from the essence in contrast to the creation, which is created from some matter or from nothing. Here, the created is external, alien. The Son of God is not alien to the Father; he is begotten (not emanating) and originally possesses divine essence, for his being belongs to the necessity of the divine nature. "But we do not regard God the Creator of all, the Son of God, as a creature, or thing made, or as made out of nothing, for He is truly existent from Him who exists, alone existing from Him who alone exists, in as much as the like glory and power was eternally and conjointly begotten of the Father. For 'He that hath seen' the Son 'hath seen the Father (Joh. xiv.9). All things to wit were made through the Son; but He Himself is not a creature" (Athanasius of Alexandria 2007b, p. 84, § 2).

The birth of the Son is a state of intra-divine life, and therefore the identity and inseparability of these two hypostases are predetermined by one divine essence. They express the immortality, the timelessness, the endlessness of existence; the eternity of the Father as the source of all things also means the eternity of the begotten God of the Word. "As then the Father is not a creature, so neither is the Son; and as it is not possible to say of Him 'there was a time when He was not,' nor 'made of nothing,' so it is not proper to say the like of the Son either. But rather, as the Father's attributes are Everlastingness, Immortality, Eternity, and the being no creature, it follows that thus also we must think of the Son" (Athanasius of Alexandria 2007a, p. 89, § 4). To assume a time gap between the existence of the Father and the birth of the Son (as it was with Arius) is to reject the Trinity. For in denying the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son and the eternity of the birth, it is assumed that once there was no Son, and therefore no God the Father (since they are essentially one). Therefore, Athanasius reasoned, it is no longer the Trinity, but the One, and the Arians thus deny the Divine Trinity.

The third hypostasis of the Trinity—the Holy Spirit—has the same unity with the Son as the Son has with the Father. The Spirit is "the Son's own image." God wills and works through the Son and in the Son, and the Son works in the Spirit. "But the Holy Spirit, being that which proceeds from the Father, is ever in the hands of the Father Who sends and of the Son Who conveys Him, by Whose means He filled all things" (Athanasius of Alexandria 2007b, p. 84, § 4).

In the doctrine of the Holy Spirit of Athanasius of Alexandria, we may find similarities between the idea of emanation as an outpouring of holiness and divinity and St. Athanasius' defense of the Holy Spirit's *proceeding* from the Father alone (ἐ κ τοῦ Πατρὸς ἐ κπορευόμενον). Struggling against the heretical understanding of the Holy Spirit as a non-corporeal created being, St. Athanasius affirms the same perfection and power of the Spirit as that inherent in both the Father and the Son. He opposes the view that the Holy Spirit is a creature. This assertion, he believes, is tantamount to dissecting the Trinity and dividing it into Creator and creature (or into two different natures of the Trinity, divine and creaturely). "Therefore, while thinking falsely of the Holy Spirit, they do not think truly even of the Son. For if they thought correctly of the Word, they would think soundly of the

Spirit also, who proceeds from the Father, and, belonging to the Son, is from him given to the disciples and all who believe in him" (Athanasius of Alexandria 1951, pp. 64–65, § 2).

According to St. Athanasius and subsequent Byzantine patristics, the Holy Spirit performs truly divine functions, being the beginning of renewal and sanctification of humankind, the beginning of life. Without the Spirit, it would be impossible to partake in the divine nature of the Creator. Here we trace the comparability of the thought of the Neoplatonists about the World Soul and the teaching of Athanasius of Alexandria (and later of the Greek holy patristic tradition) about the Holy Spirit. Plotinus' World Soul fulfills the same great task of realizing the divinity of the One in the Cosmos. Without the Soul, the integrity of the Neoplatonists' Deity would not have been completed. For the World Soul unites the world and the divine triad, "departing" from matter and proceeding to it in its emanations. The Holy Spirit in St. Athanasius' first systematic exposition also participates in the divinity of the Trinity and reveals itself to humanity. It is impossible to partake of the Father and the Son without the Spirit. Without ceasing to be himself, the Spirit of God, according to Athanasius, becomes, as it were, the spirit of man.

St. Athanasius did not have time to logically complete his dogmatic teaching. However, he laid down the meaning and created the very spirit of Byzantine patristics and eastern Christianity as a whole[2]. He would be followed by his followers, the holy Fathers, who achieved the integrity of Christian doctrine and its consolidation at the Ecumenical Councils. Cyril of Jerusalem, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, John Chrysostom, and many other representatives of Byzantine thought would make their great contribution to the formation of Christian teaching. The theoretical and theological work of Athanasius of Alexandria, his legacy, remains enduring and relevant to modern times.

It was with Athanasius of Alexandria that the development of new ethics and a new moral relationship began in the context of his formation of the triadic Christian dogma. It was his theological and philosophical work that contributed to the creation of the doctrine of Christianity and with it a new type of ethics. The ethics were based not on the principles of impersonal logic, but on the personal, deeply moral foundations of the relationships of the three Persons of the Trinity projected onto the relationships of people and their relationship to the other person and God.

4. Conclusion: Church Fathers' Ethics—From God to the Human Beings

Thus, we can conclude that Neoplatonism and Christianity are theoretically and intrinsically interrelated. Plotinus' triad and the dogma of the Holy Trinity, coined by patristics, are of course different in their content and purpose but are related in their ideological and spiritual motives. In the very struggle against Arianism, Sabellianism, and Apollinarism, the Church Fathers used the categorical apparatus and thought forms of Neoplatonism. In the elaborated means and ways of God-knowing, we also find unity and similarity between Neoplatonism and patristic thinking. Overall, Christian Neoplatonism, as a fusion of the concepts and principles of the teachings of the Neoplatonists and the eastern Church Fathers, played a significant role in the development of patristic thought and the centuries-long formation of the orthodox doctrine of Christianity as a whole. However, the main significance of Neoplatonism and the teachings of the Church Fathers lies in the constructive perception and reworking of Plotinus' ideas in the treatises of the Byzantine Fathers to create a new type of ethical thinking. This new form of ethics at the early stage of the formation of Christianity could be introduced only by the sacred patristic tradition.

Patristics brought profound changes to the philosophical metaphysical elaborations of morality and ethics that had been known since Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and established a new ethics based on the sacred theory, which was linked to the development of Triadology and the God-manhood of Christ.

We speak of Christian ethics, elaborated by the Church Fathers as a unified and coherent doctrine, uniting the diversity of positions and views on the nature of ethics that

exist and will carry on within Christianity (Osborn 1976). Patristics designed that moral foundation, those basic descriptive traits shared by Christian thinkers and parishioners, which are of course identified with the person of Christ. Therefore, in this respect, Christian ethics may be different from Judaism, or from ancient theories of morality, such as those of Plato or Aristotle, although Plato came closest to the concept of the Christian God in his understanding of the Good as such. The influence of Plato, the Neoplatonists, and Aristotle with his golden mean doctrine on Christian thinkers brought a certain metaphysicality to the Church Fathers' conceptions, but nevertheless Christian ethics differs from the preceding ancient doctrines.

For Plato, ethics was linked to an understanding of the absoluteness of goodness. Plato claimed that "goodness" is an absolute characteristic, since goodness does not depend on individual human strivings, inclinations, desires, or opinions. Nor does the concept of goodness depend objectively on the existence of mankind, for "goodness" is eternal and unchanging, but at the same time cognizable and rational. People must and can grasp knowledge of the objective and absolute principles of goodness, where "virtue, or the right conduct of life, is action which flows from knowledge, knowledge of the tripartite soul, the forms, and the Idea of the Good" (Lavine 1984, p. 56). Neoplatonism, which we covered in this article, practically turned these ideas of Plato into religious ideas and thus influenced both Christianity and Islam. Yet there is a great difference in Plato's and the Neoplatonists' understanding of the objectivity and absoluteness of the highest moral principles and the concepts of Christian authors. Plato and his disciples contended that moral principles were superior even to God, and God, therefore, acts in the world according to higher moral norms external to Him.

Of course, this is in direct contrast to the understanding of higher moral principles and the idea of goodness that the Church Fathers were developing. According to Christian ethics, God creates goodness and the highest moral standards and principles. Therefore, in that new ethics, which originated in the teachings of the Church Fathers, we sense the presence of divinity, the holiness that comes from the Persons of the Holy Trinity, from the divinity and humanity of the Incarnate Christ. Christian ethics is defined by the sacred way—from the God-manhood of Christ to the rules and norms for the life and conduct of every individual. Christian ethics is ethics *from God to man*, and therefore it is imbued with a divinity that is to be realized (as the Church Fathers noted) in every person and humanity. The absoluteness of moral norms has as its source the basic dogmatics of Christianity—the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation of God—and is further embedded in the social and individual lives of people. In this way, the ethics of Christianity, as outlined by the patristics, differs from the Platonist and Neoplatonist ideas, where moral norms precede the divine will and actions.

The continuation of these ideas would find expression in Russian religious philosophy, in particular in the teachings of Vladimir Solovyov, Nikolai Berdyaev, and Ivan Ilyin. They pointed out the eternity of the moral problems discussed by the Greek-Byzantine Church Fathers.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, O.V.C. and D.I.C.; Formal analysis, O.V.C.; Investigation, O.V.C. and D.I.C.; Methodology, O.V.C. and D.I.C.; Resources, O.V.C. and D.I.C.; Writing—original draft, O.V.C. and D.I.C.; Writing—review & editing, O.V.C. and D.I.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

1   For further details, ref. section "Dialectic" in Plotinus' The First Ennead (Plotinus 1992).
2   For a more extensive account of Athanasius of Alexandria's contribution to the formation of the Triadic and Christological topics please refer to "Greek Manuscripts (1606). Life of Athanasios of Alexandria" written in Ancient Greek, which is a collection of ancient manuscripts on the Byzantine Church Father. This is a part of initial Manuscripts in St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai.

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