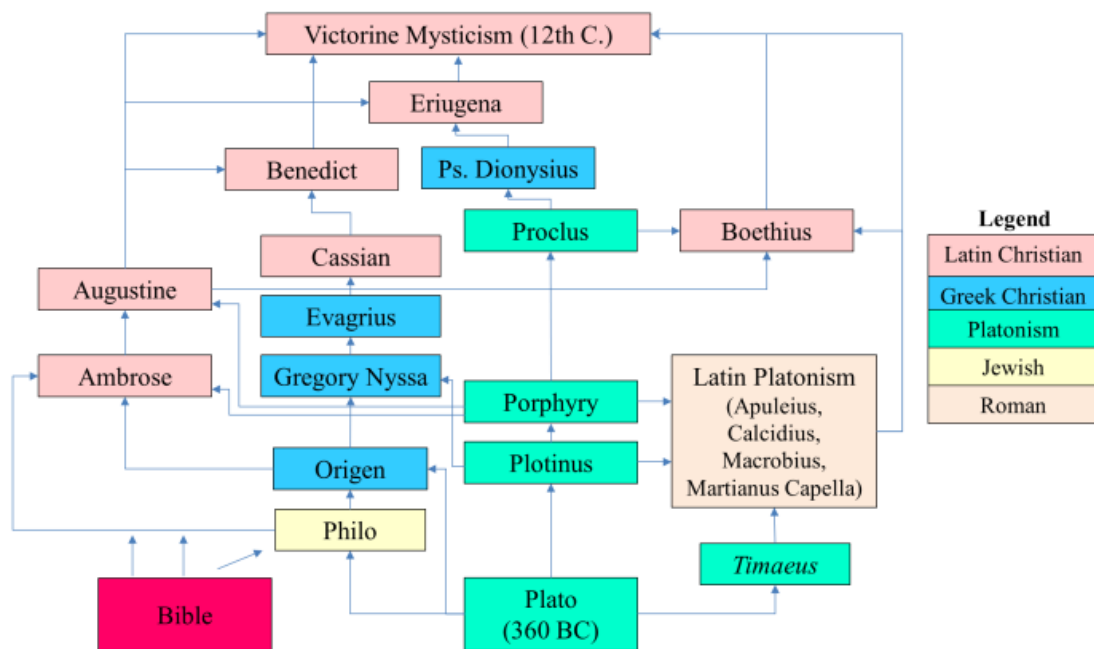


Christian Platonism

Rediscovering Ancient Wisdom

Contemplative Spirituality: From Plato to the Victorine Mystics

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REMARKABLY, the influential 12th century mystics/theologians of the School of Saint-Victor in Paris (most famously, Hugh and Richard of Saint-Victor) developed a sophisticated and fundamentally Platonic system of contemplative spirituality, but without (except for part of the *Timaeus*) direct knowledge of Plato's writings. All was pieced together from St. Augustine, the Benedictine tradition, Pseudo-Dionysius and the Latin Platonic tradition — with exegetical borrowing from Saints Ambrose and Jerome. But uniting everything one senses a high degree of skill and experience with contemplation by the Victorines. The synthesis and systematization, unlike later Scholasticism, is not forced or overly rationalistic, but a harmonious integration of experience and dialectical reasoning.

Not only did the Victorines produce from these multiple strands of influence an original synthesis, but these elements were being synthesized differently by others at the same time (e.g., the School of Chartres):

PERHAPS ONE COULD measure the power of a mind by observing the varied systems of thought which its own intellectual constructions have more or less directly inspired in the course of history. ... That one man's thought should bring forth such varied progeny will seem less paradoxical if one reflects that master-insights never find complete expression in a single conceptual system and consequently they lend themselves readily to further adaptation, even to frank distortion that nonetheless preserves an undeniable kinship with the original.

Plato affords the major instance of this phenomenon, and historians have some difficulty in sorting out the currents of thought traceable to him. These Neoplatonisms that recur century after century comprise a family with little coherence, despite the profound perceptions radically common to them all.

Precisely in the area of Plato's influence, the twelfth century furnished a spectacle of the clearest debt yet with the most tangled lines of descent. (Chenu, p. 49)

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Written by John Uebersax

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