

God Above God:**Neo-Platonism and Apophatic Theology** (*Abstract*)**Sarah W.M. YUEN****Associate Professor of Religion and Culture, Spirituality, Reichelt Chair
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The purpose of this paper is to explore how the Neoplatonic doctrine of emanation provides a philosophical foundation in the development of apophatic theology.

Apophatic theology is a form of mystical theology. It can be referred as a theology of negation, which stresses that God cannot be known in terms of human categories. Neoplatonism exerts great influence on this form of theology. The works of some great Christian writers, e.g. Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius and many others, are undeniably indebted to this system of thought.

Neoplatonism can be alluded to as the emanative interpretation of causality. It is a kind of epistemological conviction. The finite is derived from the infinite through a series of intermediaries. Thus Neoplatonism offers an intellectual emanation scheme for conveying the universe originating from a first principle. Neoplatonists mainly conceive emanation as a metaphor to illustrate the causal process. The nature of this causal process or emanative process is expressed as an unwilled and automatic movement. Moreover, in the process, the One itself is undiminished. Influenced by Plato, Plotinus subdivides Plato's realms of the intelligible into three: the One, Intelligence, and the Soul. In the first tractate of the fifth Ennead, these three hypostases are introduced explicitly and by means of these three principal hypostases, Plotinus provides a synopsis of his view of the structure of reality.

In regard to these three hypostases' relationships, Plotinus uses the emanation metaphor to describe them. The Intelligence proceeds from the One and the Soul proceeds from the Intelligence. Plotinus describes emanation as "the inescapable rule of right." Although the emanating entity proceeds from itself, it itself is undiminished. The entity remains outside of its product and yet it is also present in it. This emanative process is an entirely timeless event and it can be described as a downward and an upward movement. In the process, Plotinus employs the triad terms: remaining, procession and reversion to express the dynamic relationship between spiritual principles arranged in a hierarchy of cause and effect.

Based on this system of thought, Christian thinkers transform this process of potency and act into the dichotomy of Creator and creature. This process not only distinguishes clearly between the relation of God to the created world and the relation of created things among themselves, but also distinguishes between God as a transcendent cause and as an immanent

source of being. As God is transcendent, God is said to be unknowable and ineffable to human modes of perception and expression. Thus apophatic theology lays stress on God who is beyond words and beyond being. Only by way of negation or unknowing, can we attain God.