

**Book Review:**  
*From Plato to Jesus*  
By C. Marvin Pate

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## Introduction

*From Plato to Jesus* authored by C. Marvin Pate begins with a question. This question which forms the basis for the entirety of this work is simply this; “Do theology and philosophy mix?” In an attempt to answer this intriguing question Pate seeks to follow the path of the construct known as the “one and the many.” As Pate chases this construct through the history of thought he ascribes two major categories which form the backbone of his book. These two categories are described by Pate:

Part 1 presents a history of philosophy, while part 2 focuses on Christian doctrine. Part 1 argues that the construct of the one (universals) and the many (particulars) is the driving engine of the history of philosophy. Much of that history reflects an imbalance between the two – the one over the many or, visa verse, the many over the one. But at least three philosophers rooted in the one in the many (Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant), thereby virtually rescuing the very discipline of philosophy itself. Part 2 then argues that in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, the one and the many properly cohere, forming the appropriate basis of all Christian theology thereafter.<sup>1</sup>

Within the first section Pate begins by breaking it down into 5 major periods. These periods form the structure of part 1. The one and the many tour begins in 600 B.C. and progresses to the present day. The five periods which are discussed are; The Pre-Socratic Period, The Classical Period, The Medieval Period, The Modern Period, and The Contemporary Period. The Second major section of the book deals solely with Christian Doctrine and its relationship to the one and the many. Many doctrinal issues of Christianity are herein discussed such as; General and Special Revelation, Anthropology, The Atonement, Ethics, etc... It is therefore the objective of this report to point to and evaluate the foremost points while following the general outline of the aforementioned sections; Part 1 and Part 2.

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<sup>1</sup> C. Marvin Pate, *From Plato to Jesus; What Does Philosophy Have to Do with Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2011), 12.

## **Part 1: From Socrates to Sartre: The History of Philosophy and Christian Theology**

### ***The Pre-Socratic Period to the Classical Period***

The beginning of the debate surrounding the one and the many began with Heraclitus. His ideology which stated that ultimate reality is defined as change eventually rolled into two separate camps; The Milesian and Pythagorean philosophers (the one and the many are related) and the Eleatic philosophers (the one versus the many). Pate sums up the nature of their debate and where this debate was headed: “Thus the Pre-Socratic philosophers debated the relationship between the one and the many in terms of the natural world. Theirs was a scientific concern. With the next period – that of classical – the concern would turn to the subjects of knowledge and ethics; that is, the nature of man and how it relates to the one and the many.”<sup>2</sup>

### ***The Classical Period***

A period of 800 years, specifically 400 B.C. to 400 A.D., witnessed the Classical period of philosophy. The Sophists and the Skeptics had a common bond denied the existence of the one. Therefore, Pate refers to this grouping as the many versus the one. One of the main characters in this ideology was Protagoras who is famous for his statement, “Man is the measure of all things.” In this ideology knowledge is relative. It is defined by the particulars and pay no mind to the universals. According to this way of thinking, there is no universal standard for ethics in the world. Ethics are determined by customs and conventions of society which change from community to community. The Skeptics likewise taught “how to behave with a criterion of truth.” They claim that one should live by probability; that which most likely will lead to peacefulness and happiness is permissible and preferable.

Moving on from the Sophists and the Skeptics one finds Socrates promoting the one behind the many where the soul is the seat of intelligence and character. It is the soul’s desire to

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 20.

know the one behind the many. The way in which the soul can arrive at these universals is through a technique labeled as the Socratic Method. This is a reductionist path of questioning which boils down the issue to the universal essences behind the particulars.

From Socrates we move to the one above the many which was heralded by Plato, Hedonists, and the Neoplatonists. Here, as Plato would state, the one is above the many. The one is given an identity as something completely separate from the many. This became known as Platonic dualism. The world which man experiences is simply shadowy existences of the true forms which are the real world, ideas. Therefore as Pate states; “the forms/ideas are the eternal patterns of everything from which the copies/particulars are made.”<sup>3</sup> The Hedonists which were founded by Epicurus believed everything was made up of random atoms as the product of chance. In this philosophy pleasure is the ultimate goal. Pate suggests, “The one is the random, chanceful nature of existence due to the eternal, aimless motion of the atoms. This is above the many – the various pleasures that drive man, especially the desire for repose. At the end of the day, the hedonist is practical in orientation but self-centered in perspective.”<sup>4</sup>

The next movement in the classical period centers on Aristotle where the one in the many is the focus. Three basic assumptions undergird Aristotle’s teachings; (1) Change is the pervasive reality (2) Change means that substance (the one) expresses itself in the many (the composite of matter and form in everything) and (3) The principle of change – the unmoved mover – is the ultimate actuality behind potentiality that results in change.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Medieval Period**

Within the Medieval period some important developments in the course of philosophy would take place. Two main players rose to the forefront in the age namely, Augustine and

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 33.

Thomas Aquinas. Each one of the thinkers more or less continued a line from a classical period philosopher. Pate elaborates;

Our thesis for this section is straightforward: Augustine, through his combination of Neoplatonism and Christian Theology, reoffered Plato's construct of the one over the many, while Aquinas's integration of Aristotle and Christian theology reoffered Aristotle's construct of the one in the many. And under each respective category falls other well-known Christian thinkers of the medieval period.<sup>6</sup>

Augustine's integration of Platonic thought, the one above/over the many, into his way of thinking manifested in three primary areas; his epistemology, his theology, and his morality.

Under the umbrella of morality this dynamic played out in this fashion. As far as epistemology was concerned Augustine believed that the senses are the instruments where the many/particulars could be perceived and that the mind/soul was able to take these perceptions and determine the universals which lie behind these particulars. Within his theology the overarching idea of God's relationship to his creation describes the one in the many paradigm. Here, God's transcendence (the one) is behind God's immanence in creation (the many). Lastly, the application of love to achieve peace with God was the driving force in his ideology concerning morality.

An important figure in this age was Anselm who also taught the one over the many.

Herein, he developed his ontological argument which Pate briefly explains;

Related to this is Anselm's ontological argument, which asserts that God is "that than which nothing greater can be thought." In other words, if one can think of a perfect being above all beings, then that being/God must exist. Informing Anselm's ontological argument is his epistemological realism – ideas/universals exist outside the mind. Thus Anselm, like Augustine and Plato, taught that the one/universals preside over the many/particulars.<sup>7</sup>

Coming from a different point of view in this period was Thomas Aquinas. Where Augustine more or less aligned himself with Plato, Aquinas in the same way aligns himself with Aristotle. Aquinas like Aristotle would hold to the ideology that the one is in the many. The

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 41.

process of strict logical deduction formed the basis for the thought process which Aquinas utilized that eventually came to be termed the scholastic method. Emanating from this method Aquinas formed proofs for the existence of God which form the basis for solid apologetic approaches in this day. Specifically, he fostered the idea of the proof that focuses on the order of the universe which would under gird the modern day apologetic of the intelligent design movement. To reiterate, Aquinas basically agreed with Aristotle's claim that the one is in the many. It is in the particulars that the human discovers the universals. Universal ideas do not exist separately from the objects perceived by human senses.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Modern Period**

Within this period there are two main sub-sections, The Renaissance Period and the Enlightenment Period. Pate describes their relationship to the one and the many, "The Renaissance Period: the separation of the one and the many in theological discussion in terms of the contrast between faith and reason; and the Enlightenment Period: the separation of the one and the many in philosophical discussions in terms of rationalism, empiricism, and idealism."<sup>9</sup>

In the Renaissance Period the battle centered primarily on the objection that faith and reason were incompatible. Thus the seeds were sowed which cut faith and reason one from another. Herein we see that the one is cut off from the many. Erasmus and Martin Luther were the primary players on the scene in this period. Two clear sides of the coin were formed. On one side we see Erasmus claiming the humans were the end all be all; the birth of humanism. On the other side of the coin we see Luther exalting faith over reason; here faith triumphs over reason. Either way, the one and the many becomes the one from the many where there is no direct relationship at all. This leads to the Enlightenment period with all of its tentacles more or

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 50-51.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 83.

less boiled down to two camps. Pate relates, “It seems to me that rationalism and idealism, along with romanticism, emphasized the one over the many, while empiricism and its step-children – positivism and utilitarianism – preferred the many to the one.”<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant provided a view which would be the “saving grace” for any intimate relationship between the one and the many. His ideology manifested as the one in the many. Here we see Kant furthering the ideology of Aristotle and Aquinas wherein they each take a middle road which lead Pate to his ultimate conclusion which will be discussed later concerning Biblical doctrines.

### **The Contemporary Period**

“The Contemporary period of the history of philosophy,” Pate writes, “runs from about the second half of the nineteenth century to today. And it is more of the same that we witnessed in the modern period: the one versus the many. On the side of the once over the many are the metaphysics of Bergson and Whitehead, the American Romanticism response to the Enlightenment, and the dialectical materialism of Marx. On the side of the many over against the one are American pragmatism, British analytic philosophy, and French existentialism.”<sup>11</sup> This brief synopsis offered by Pate relates enhancement of the ideas founded in the Modern Period and will suffice for the purpose of this exposition. The thread that was established by Aristotle leading to Aquinas and eventually to Kant provides necessary path to Part 2 of Pate’s thesis.

### **Part 2: The Incarnation and the One and the Many**

Having established a clear path through history Pate now in Part 2 seeks to follow the foundation laid by Aristotle, Aquinas, and Kant. Having ruled out the one above the many, the many above the one, the one versus the many, Pate settles firmly on the concept that the one in

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 85.

the many is the most logical integration of philosophy and theology which is expressed uniquely in the God-man, Jesus Christ. The incarnation of Christ forms the big picture which Pate seeks to follow through the basic tenants of Christian doctrine. He sums up; “The big picture that emerges from a work like this is that Jesus Christ is the ground of being, the root of reality, and the only lasting hope for tomorrow. The true way of philosophy therefore is to bow before the God-man, the culmination point on the one and the many – the one who was, is, and is to come!”<sup>12</sup>

Some highlights of this journey through Biblical doctrine and the one in the many include; his discussion of Christology, where the God-Man (the one) manifests in one person (the one) in two natures (the many), his discussion of Theology Proper where proofs for the existence of God come to the forefront, and the chapter on Divine Sovereignty and human responsibility where Pate settles on the Molinist camp which allows for the best integration of the one in the many construct.

### **Conclusion and Comments**

The thread which binds this book together is no doubt a strong cord. Unlike many other works which ebb and flow without a clear purpose and construct, this work step by step follows the thesis of the one and the many from the first word to the last. It is in this way that I find this book to be a strong and understandable work of literature. While in some brief moments Pate seems to be making a “stretch” of sorts in order to have ideologies fit the one and the many construct, his thesis seems to be buttressed by solid logic and historical facts. The overarching idea that the Incarnation of Christ is the basis for all philosophic and theological thought is an interesting contemplation which seems to work well in most of his discussions. In my opinion, there is a distinct need in the Church for more works like this. The integration of philosophy,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 307.



apologetics, and theology is a three-fold opportunity for exploration. This trio of disciplines, I believe, forms the most adequate basis for reaching a society stuck in the mire of post-modern thought. Christianity is a taught religion and we must be prepared on all fronts. Therefore, I would recommend that this work, and others like it, be an arrow in the quiver so that the Church can be the most effective it can be in reaching more and more for the Kingdom good unto His Glory!