GREEK CULTURE IN THE ROMAN WORLD

Editors
SUSAN E. ALCOCK, Brown University
JAŚ ELSNER, Corpus Christi College, Oxford
SIMON GOLDHILL, University of Cambridge

The Greek culture of the Roman Empire offers a rich field of study. Extraordinary insights can be gained into processes of multicultural contact and exchange, political and ideological conflict, and the creativity of a changing, polyglot empire. During this period, many fundamental elements of Western society were being set in place: from the rise of Christianity, to an influential system of education, to long-lived artistic canons. This series is the first to focus on the response of Greek culture to its Roman imperial setting as a significant phenomenon in its own right. To this end, it will publish original and innovative research in the art, archaeology, epigraphy, history, philosophy, religion, and literature of the empire, with an emphasis on Greek material.

Titles in series:

RETHINKING THE GODS

Philosophical Readings of Religion in the Post-Hellenistic Period

PETER VAN NUFFELEN

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Contents

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

Abbreviations of ancient sources follow S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth (1996), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edn, Oxford. Journal titles follow the list of *L'Année philologique* (www.annee-philologique.com/aph/).

Introduction

This book studies the dominant philosophical reflections on religion and the pantheon in the Post-Hellenistic period. It does not do so from the perspective of the history of religion, as is usual, but attempts to understand these readings as part of the wider tendency of Post-Hellenistic philosophy to open up to external, non-philosophical sources of knowledge and authority. Rather than interpreting philosophical views on religion of this period as the direct result of changes in religious mentality, I propose to study how they fit into the philosophical discourse and how they can be understood in the light of specific characteristics of Post-Hellenistic philosophy. In particular, the book argues that although religion can be termed an external source of knowledge, it is not an independent one: religion is reinterpreted to fit the philosophical position of the interpreter and is allowed to enter the philosophical argument only when domesticated in that way. Focusing on two key themes and their polemical reconfigurations, this book suggests that Post-Hellenistic philosophy can be seen to have a relatively high degree of unity in its ideas on religion, which should not be reduced to a preparation for Neoplatonism. This unity should not be understood in the sense that all philosophers share the same doctrines, but rather that they share the same presuppositions and approaches.

From the end of the second century BC onwards major shifts can be identified in the way that philosophy was practised.[1] Besides showing up certain new doctrinal developments, the following centuries, often labelled the 'Post-Hellenistic period' (first century BC – second century AD), are characterised by a return to classical traditions, seen as authoritative, in particular to Plato and Aristotle.[2] In his epilogue to the *Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy* (1999), M. Frede draws attention to the renewal of Aristotelianism and the collapse of Academic Scepticism after

---

[1] Frede 1999a: 771; Sorabji 2007: 1; Trapp 2007: xi.
[2] For a brief characterisation of the Post-Hellenistic period, and the problems presented by the sources, see Gill 2006: xv–xvi.

Antiochus of Ascalon's (*c.* 130–68/7 BC) break with the Sceptic tradition of his teacher Philo of Larissa and his return to Plato's doctrines as preserved in the Old Academy. This entailed more than a change in doctrine. H. Tarrant has pointed out that in contrast to Philo of Larissa, the last Sceptic scholarch of the Academy (158/7–84/3 BC), for whom the essential feature of a philosophical school was participation in the debating culture and internal intellectual life of that school,[3] Antiochus emphasised doctrinal agreement.[4] He thus needed a venerable source of authority, which he found in the Old Academy, to distinguish between the true doctrine and deviations from it. Notwithstanding the fragmentary nature of the evidence, it is possible to pinpoint a similar tendency in the Stoa. Indeed, the two towering figures of Late Hellenistic Stoicism, Panaetius (*c.* 185–109 BC) and Posidonius (*c.* 135–55 BC), not only are credited with major innovations but also started to look at Plato and Aristotle as authoritative sources of philosophical knowledge – with the latter tendency shaping the former.[5]

Elevating philosophers of the past to a position of doctrinal authority created the need for careful interpretation of their works: if their insights about the cosmos and mankind are better than those of anyone else, a thorough and close reading of their writings is a road to truthful understanding of the world. The Post-Hellenistic period thus sees the publication of editions, for example of the works of Aristotle (by Andronicus of Rhodes), Plato (by Thrasyllus) and Zeno (by Athenodorus), besides commentaries,[6] handbooks and compendia.[7] As suggested by M. Trapp, one 'was expected to defer – on pain of incomprehension and contempt – to an authoritative past history of philosophical endeavour and achievement'.[8] Various tendencies typically associated with Post-Hellenistic philosophy, such as eclecticism and the renewed interest in Pythagoreanism,[9] take on a new significance against this background. The divisions between the schools, obviously, did not disappear in this period and polemic remained an important practice among philosophers, but 'eclecticism' can be understood as a result of the new respect now commanded by ancient authorities

[3] See the words put in his mouth by Cic. *Acad. post.* 2.60.   [4] Tarrant 2007: 323–4.
[5] Tieleman 2003: 284; Gill 2006: 266–90. On Panaetius and Posidonius in general, see Kidd 1988–99; Alesse 1994. As for Epicureanism, it had always been characterised by a strong allegiance to its founder and does not seem to have reviewed its critical stance towards Plato and Aristotle – though this does not exclude doctrinal revision in some areas: see Tsouna 2007 on Philodemus' ethics. In the Post-Hellenistic period, Epicureanism continued to be seen as setting itself apart from the other schools by professing a metaphysics of disorder and a hedonistic ethics.
[6] Sedley 1989 and 1997.   [7] Sorabji 2007: 20–5.   [8] Trapp 2007: 13.
[9] See, e.g., Dillon and Long 1988; Dillon 1996; Donini 2004; Bonazzi, Lévy and Steel 2007; Bonazzi and Helmig 2007.

(even when not of one's own tradition), who could be used to shore up one's own position. Pythagoras had the advantage of great antiquity, and also of Plato's interest in his doctrines and a certain mysteriousness, all of which may have contributed to the great veneration that philosophers of the Roman Empire started to show for him.

In addition to the mainstream of the philosophical tradition, Post-Hellenistic philosophy starts to acknowledge other paths to truth and knowledge opened up by tradition. Not just ancient philosophers but also poets such as Homer and Pherecydes are now increasingly regarded as authorities worthy of respect and philosophical interest.[10] Stoic allegory is an obvious precursor of this tendency, but Platonists also begin to see true wisdom and knowledge in poets. Rather than banishing poets from the ideal state for corrupting the youth,[11] the second-century Platonist Maximus of Tyre addresses an oration on 'Homer the philosopher' (*Oration* 26) to his student audience. Indeed, in his monograph *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy*, G. Boys-Stones shows that ancient wisdom was supposed to reside in the works of these and other poets and that in particular Plato was seen as having recovered that knowledge and expressed it in a more philosophical language.[12] Post-Hellenistic philosophy is thus marked by an opening up not only to authorities within the philosophical tradition, but also to 'external' authorities. Such a process was obviously embedded in cultural traditions: just as Plato had been recognised as a great philosopher in the Hellenistic period, Homer had received philosophical attention before the first centuries AD as well.[13] What seems to be new and ever more visible in the Post-Hellenistic period is the degree of philosophical authority vested in such great figures from the past. It is not an accident of history that the literature and culture of the Post-Hellenistic era is marked by a similar return to 'classical' authorities in style and vocabulary.[14] This connection between the Second Sophistic and Post-Hellenistic philosophy is made tangible in the fact that numerous philosophers doubled as sophists (Plutarch is a case in point, although he would dislike the

[10] On the popularity of these authors in this period, see Lamberton 1986; Edwards 1990b.
[11] Pl. *Resp.* 364b–370a.
[12] Boys-Stones 2001. See also the papers in Boys-Stones 2003b, more narrowly focused on the use of allegory.
[13] Especially from the Stoics, see Long 1992; Goulet 2005; Gourinat 2005. See Gill 2006: xv–xvi, who sets out the difficulties in precisely setting apart the Hellenistic and Post-Hellenistic periods.
[14] See especially Swain 1996; Goldhill 2001; Whitmarsh 2001 and 2005. On the closeness of philosophers and sophists under the empire, see Hahn 1989: 46–54. See also Frede 1999a: 783, who points out that we should see the changes charted above as part of 'a much larger cultural development, the beginning of classicism.'

latter label), whilst sophists, such as Dio Chrysostom, claimed the status of philosopher.

One of these new sources of authority and philosophical knowledge is the subject of the present book, namely religion: I propose to examine how philosophers interpreted traditional religion and appropriated it as a source of authority for their philosophical project in the Post-Hellenistic period. When reading through the philosophical output of this period, two major themes related to religion and the gods come up in numerous variations: religion is seen as created by wise ancients and is thus supposed to contain philosophical knowledge, and the pantheon is described as a perfect hierarchy that provides a model for order on all levels of being, including human society. The primary aim of this book is to chart these themes through their variations, and consequently much of it will be taken up by close readings of individual works or œuvres. It is obvious that both themes are not complete innovations of the Post-Hellenistic period: already Plato could refer to the 'ancient *logos*' of Orphism,[15] and there is a hierarchy in the heavens as created in the *Timaeus*[16] or as described in the Pseudo-Platonic *Epinomis*. My second aim is therefore to show that the two major themes are embedded in a discourse that incorporates numerous traditional elements but reconfigures them in new ways. These reconfigurations can tentatively be traced back to developments at the beginning of the Post-Hellenistic period. In relation to the first theme, philosophers start to emphasise, by contrast with the preceding philosophical tradition, that religion was created *on purpose* in line with philosophical knowledge by ancient sages and lawgivers. Religion thus becomes an extremely valuable source of knowledge. The second theme rests on an increased tendency to view human society as part of a cosmic hierarchy, the structure of which must be replicated in man's political communities. In this view, the pantheon becomes the paradigm of such a hierarchy. The book thus does not aim at a systematic exposition of everything that Post-Hellenistic philosophers have said about religion; I do hope, however, to uncover general characteristics of Post-Hellenistic thinking about religion by concentrating on the themes of ancient wisdom and cosmic hierarchy and to show how such ideas were received in wider literary culture. Aiming at recovering general, often implicit, modes of thinking about religion, the book will discuss both technical treatises of philosophy and works of literature, two categories that are, anyway, not always easy to distinguish in this period.

[15] Pl. *Leg.* 715e.   [16] See, e.g., Pl. *Ti.* 40d–41a.

In both discourses religion is invested with an increased respectability. Besides the fact that they allow the diversity in rituals and deities to be explained as the result of religion's creation by wise ancients, a profound unity is seen to underpin this variety: all the various gods worshipped in these rituals are part of a strict hierarchy that obeys the will of a highest god. But more is happening than a mere re-description of religion: religion can now also be used as a source of authority in philosophical discourse. Claiming to have fully understood the origins and nature of religion, philosophers define good and bad religious behaviour (namely as piety and superstition). But more importantly, religion can also be drawn upon as a source of authority in other areas: philosophers such as Plutarch and Numenius draw on religion to support their metaphysics and others put the pantheon forward as the paradigm of political order.

The process of philosophy's being 'opened up' to external sources of authority should therefore not be seen as a naïve or superficial project: philosophers do not draw on religion in its 'objective' reality (if there is such a thing) but reinterpret it in order to make it malleable. Religion is first philosophically domesticated before it is put forward as uniquely plausible and thus normative. This is a dynamic that underlies the entire turn of Post-Hellenistic philosophy towards other, external sources of authority. The 'classicism' that was noted above reshapes the past by canonising long-deceased authors as 'great' and by seeing in them the norm for contemporary literature; indeed, the authoritative figure of Plato in the first and second centuries AD differs in many ways from the fourth-century Plato. Whereas studies of the Second Sophistic have drawn attention to the dialectic of appropriation and reinterpretation that underpins the canonisation of the past,[17] philosophical scholarship on the Post-Hellenistic period has only recently started to note the opening-up of philosophy and has yet to study its full implications. Drawing on the example of religion, this book hopes to help to clarify this process.

The philosophical appropriation of religion as a source of authority may look largely circular to us. Post-Hellenistic philosophers tend to read their own metaphysics into religion: we shall see that both Platonists and Stoics claim Egyptian religion in support of their own doctrines. Whereas a certain circularity might be an inevitable characteristic of attempts to appropriate the foreign,[18] Post-Hellenistic philosophers put forward two

[17] See the works cited in note 14.
[18] It is the methodological problem that anthropology constantly grapples with: see Geertz 1973. One also wonders to what degree, for example, Heidegger projects his own philosophy on the poems of Hölderlin.

propositions that, to an extent, justify the circularity: it is difficult to grasp the symbolic truths found in religion, and superstition has adulterated these. The difficulty of the undertaking will lead some, such as Plutarch, to admit that not all interpretations are certain (in some cases, even his own) and that other interpretations by other philosophical schools have a kernel of truth; yet he will still contend that his own reading is the best. His 'ecumenical' approach seems to show an awareness of the danger of circularity. Others, including Numenius, explicitly admit that the evidence of religion is only to be accepted when it does not contradict Platonism and they discount all the rest as superstition.[19] To whatever degree philosophers draw rhetorically on religion as a source of knowledge and authority, it remains an additional one, which does not supersede all other sources. The emphasis on superstition, in turn, blurs the line between normative and descriptive readings of religion: because philosophical training is the condition for retrieving the core of truth and identifying superstition so as to eliminate it, Post-Hellenistic readings of religion are not gratuitous *jeux d'esprit*. They pretend to rediscover the true nature of religion and are therefore at least implicitly prescriptive: an interpretation by an untrained individual cannot have the same authority as that of a philosopher.

Post-Hellenistic philosophy does not open up to religion as a new, untrodden territory full of as yet unknown lore: the process is underpinned by the assumption that religion was philosophical from its very origin. The apparent circularity of reading one's own philosophy into religion and the normative value of such readings stem from this. At the same time, because religion is supposed to go back a long time and to reveal the structure of the universe, it has an aura of respectability, which is, as we shall see, strategically exploited in arguments and polemic by Post-Hellenistic philosophers (and Second Sophistic authors in general). In such a context, the process of reinterpretation and reappropriation of poetry, religion and other 'external' sources of knowledge becomes obscured to increase the authority they can provide.

PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION IN THE EARLY ROMAN EMPIRE

As indicated above, most of the material this book is based on, namely philosophical texts or texts written by philosophically educated authors, is generally used by historians of religion to document a rise of interest in religion among philosophers of the first centuries AD, which is then seen

---

[19] See also Dio Chrys. *Or.* 31.144.

as a part of profound changes in religious attitudes and mentality in the Roman Empire. My approach distinguishes itself from such interpretations in trying to understand these texts as part of philosophical discourses, rather than seeing in them reflections of wider changes in religious mentality.[20] In order to explain why I think such a focus on the philosophical discourse must precede any attempt to sketch a wider religious picture, I shall briefly assess the relation between philosophy and religion in this period and, in the next section, the various explanations offered for it.

Any generalisation on the vast and complex subject of the relation between philosophy and religion in Antiquity is hazardous, but philosophy's attitude towards religion in Antiquity can perhaps best be described as hovering between fascination and criticism. Often only one of these poles is stressed: there is a tendency in modern scholarship to construe the relationship as one of hostility or, at best, of critical distance. Impelled by a desire to grasp the true nature of reality rationally, it is argued, philosophers take on traditional cults and customs in order to demythologise them. Even when acknowledging the usefulness and value of religion within society, as Plato does in the *Laws*, so the argument continues, philosophers find religion harbouring untruth in areas such as cosmology, eschatology and morality and they attempt either to complement or to correct it.[21] Yet, in the face of a society that was fundamentally conservative and traditionalist, only a few philosophers, including Antisthenes and Zeno of Citium, seem actually to have taken the radical step of abandoning religion as practised in their *polis*. Most, in fact, acquiesced in traditional rituals and customs. This tendency to criticise religion but abide by its customs has famously been described as 'brain-balkanisation' by Paul Veyne. Such a situation has been found among Roman intellectuals of the Late Republic, whose attitude seems to be summed up in the philosopher Cotta's famous statement in Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*:

I am not a little moved by your authority, Balbus, and by your speech, the peroration of which exorts me to remember that I am Cotta and a pontiff. That means, I believe, that we have to defend the views about the immortal gods that we have inherited from our ancestors, as well as the rites, ceremonies and observances of religion. For my part, I shall always defend them and have always done so, and no speech of a cultured or uncultured man will ever change my view about the

---

[20] For a similar approach but from a literary point of view, see Elm von der Osten 2006; Bendlin 2006; Goldhill 2006a and 2006b, who propose to see the interest in religion as part of the identity discourse of the Second Sophistic.
[21] E.g. Decharme 1904; Jaeger 1947; Merlan 1963; Babut 1974; Attridge 1978; West 1999: 30–40; Edwards 2002: 48–52, 74; Most 2003: 307–10; Martin 2004; Brisson 2007: 42.

worship of the immortal gods from the one I have received from our ancestors. But on the issue of religion, I follow the high priests Tiberius Coruncianus and Publius Scipio and Publius Scaevola, not Zeno or Cleanthes or Chrysippus. (3.5)

Cotta's words have been taken to convey the impression that philosophy and religion are two distinct 'programmes de vérité', to borrow Paul Veyne's phrase.[22] The French scholar, with his love for paradox, suggests that both can only be reconciled by accepting that they are irreconcilable, fundamentally different modes of thought.

Philosophy's attitude towards religion should not, however, be reduced to criticism, possibly combined with fideism based on 'brain-balkanisation'. Traditional religion and cults were also a source of fascination for philosophers. It is fairly easy to point to Plato's regular references to mystery cults as having discovered some truths about the afterlife, an idea that Aristotle seems to express as well.[23] The Derveni Papyrus (c. 340 BC) is another example of a philosophical approach to and interest in religion,[24] and Cleanthes' hymn to Zeus (third century BC) is a remarkable expression of Stoic piety. Moreover, it may be unjustified to interpret Cotta as a typical Roman traditionalist. Indeed, Cicero styles him as an Academic Sceptic who argues against the dogmatic Epicureans and Stoics. Traditionalism was the basic attitude of any adherent of the New Academy: in the absence of firm criteria to decide on the truth of any proposition, sticking to tradition was the most sensible course to take.[25] Cotta's traditionalism is thus also a philosophical position, and a fairly common one, and it may be imprudent to take it as the paradigm of religious mentality in Late Republican Rome. The foregoing examples indeed suggest that criticism is just one face of philosophy's attitude towards religion in Antiquity. That we are sometimes inclined to take it as the dominant tendency in Antiquity may have to do with our modern understanding of philosophy, which is seen as firmly occupying the realm of the rational, whereas religion is understood as venturing beyond it into the irrational.

[22] Veyne 1983. The concept of 'brain-balkanisation' has been used by D. Feeney to characterise the intellectual situation in the Roman Empire (1998: 14–21). A similar, but more cautious, assessment is found in Brunt 1997: 198: 'It seems probable that the theological doubts and contradictions of the philosophic schools had little effect on Roman religious practices, or so far as concerns the mentality of most Romans, on the beliefs associated with them.' For an interpretation of the passage from Cicero on such lines, see Valgiglio 1973.
[23] Pl. Phd. 62b, 69c, 81a, Cra. 413a, Ep. 7.344; Aristotle, Protr. fr. 60. See also Pl. [Ax.] 371d–e.
[24] See now the edition by Kouremenous, Parassoglou and Tsantsanoglou 2006.
[25] This is clear from Minucius Felix, who in Octavius styles the pagan Caecilius as an Academic Sceptic staunchly defending tradition (see esp. 6.1): Fürst 2000: 276. See Schofield 1986 for the influence of Academic Scepticism on Cicero's views on divination in On Divination; Mansfeld 1999: 475–8 for Academic views on religion.

The first two centuries AD offer evidence for both attitudes, namely criticism and interest. In Plutarch's On the Daimonion of Socrates (probably to be dated in the last quarter of the first century AD), for example, one of the characters, Galaxidorus, bursts into a tirade against the kind of philosophy that believes in divination. Such a philosophy goes contrary to the vocation and nature of philosophy itself (πρὸς τὴν ἐπαγγελίαν ἐναντίος):

Having the vocation to teach the whole of the good and the profitable through reason, such a philosophy withdraws from the government of conduct to take refuge with the gods, as if despising reason. Scorning demonstration, supposedly her distinguishing mark, it resorts to divination and visions seen in dreams, in which the least of men is often no less rewarded with success than the greatest. (9.580A)

Such a passage could be read as evidence that philosophy was still strictly patrolling its borders with religion, the empire of the irrational. Significantly, however, Galaxidorus is the character who gets the wrong end of the stick: the rest of the dialogue serves to refute the strict separation he wants to see between philosophy and religion. The other interlocutors indeed defend the existence of Socrates' demon and his divinatory powers against the backdrop of a validation of traditional rites and customs.

The rather positive attitude towards religion as found in Plutarch's On the Daimonion of Socrates can be taken as representative of its author's age. In the early Roman Empire, the balance between criticism and attraction seems to have swung in favour of the latter. Although certain philosophers such as Seneca take a rather dim view of traditional religion,[26] many others start to explore the rituals and wisdom of Graeco-Roman as well as foreign cults, looking at religious traditions as a valuable source for philosophical reflection. Plutarch's religious works, in particular the so-called Delphic dialogues and On Isis and Osiris, immediately come to mind. But he does not stand alone. His contemporary Dio Chrysostom, consistently presenting himself as a philosopher, was happy to speak at the Olympic games and defend traditional artistic representations of the gods as a source of true knowledge about the divine (Or. 12). One of Nero's Stoic teachers, Cornutus, conceived his handbook on the interpretation of the gods as an act of piety.[27] Among second-century authors the interest

[26] Seneca is a fervent adherent of a cosmic religion (Ep. 41, 90) that takes the heavenly bodies as objects of worship, and nature as their temple. His lofty thought does not seem to leave room for a reflection on the truth to be found in the mundane trivialities of traditional religion. He stresses that real truth is only found in philosophy, not in tradition.
[27] Cornutus, Theol. Graec. 35 p. 76.8–16 Lang.

continues. Maximus of Tyre reflects at length on the use of statues and other traditional practices (*Or.* 2), whereas Apuleius was proud of being religious to the point of looking like a magician (*Apol.* 55). Despite their brevity, the fragments of Numenius are eloquent about his fascination for all forms of religion, Graeco-Roman, Jewish and 'oriental'. A memorable scene in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* (early third century) can be taken as expressing the changed attitudes. The philosopher descends into the cave of the oracle of Trophonius, not with the aim of receiving an oracle, but for philosophical discussion. After a lengthy parley with the god, he re-emerges, in possession of a book of philosophy donated by the god.[28] Religion is thus not approached as alien to the philosophical enterprise but rather as highly conducive for the practice of philosophy.

The relation between philosophy and religion in the Roman Empire remains insufficiently characterised when merely understood as an increased fascination for things religious. On a personal level both become intertwined as well. Inscriptions testify to a relatively important number of priests who were also philosophers. Even Epicureans, usually notorious for their dismissal of religion, seem to have assumed sacred functions.[29] Plutarch, priest at Delphi, and Numenius, speculatively linked to the sanctuary of Bel in Apamea,[30] illustrate how even philosophers of repute took on religious offices. At the same time, we notice that philosophical concepts surface in oracles and cult-regulations emanating from traditional religious institutions. The so-called philosophical oracles are certainly the best-known example, but many others could be cited.[31] Already in the second century BC individuals had occasionally approached divinities with questions about the divine world and its structure[32] but questions of a philosophical nature such as 'What is the essence of god?' increasingly occupy priests and faithful alike, from the first century BC onwards. The importance of philosophical credibility for cults can be seen through Lucian's distorting mirror, when he depicts Alexander of Abonuteichus, the creator of a new cult in Paphlagonia, in close connection with Platonists, Stoics and Pythagoreans in the hope of giving a philosophical standing to his oracle.[33]

---

[28] Philostr. *VA* 8.19–20.
[29] See the references in M. Smith 1996; Dillon 2002b: 37–9; Bendlin 2006: 165, 180, 190.
[30] Athanassiadi 1999: 156 and 2006: 88.
[31] For the theological oracles, see Nock 1928; Gasparro 2002: 54–60, 183–4; Busine 2005: 154–225. For other examples see Merkelbach and Stauber 1998: 605–7 (with Frede 2002: 114); Bendlin 2006: 192–3.
[32] Busine 2005: 110–12.   [33] Lucian, *Alex.* 25, with the comments by Gasparro 2002: 192–7.

CHANGES IN RELIGIOUS MENTALITY?

The religious interests of philosophers often take pride of place in histories of religion in the Roman Empire, being adduced as crucial evidence for profound changes in mentality in this period. Foundational is still E. R. Dodds' *Pagans and Christians in an Age of Anxiety* (1965), in which he argues that the political and economic decline of the late second and third centuries AD contributed to the birth of a new religious mentality, which turned away from this world and sought relief in more mystical religious attitudes. In his view, similar tendencies underlie the attitude of philosophers, which betrays a loss of belief in the independent powers of reason to retrieve the truth. Dodds couched his analysis in terms of an innovative, psychological and psychoanalytic framework, but the emphasis on a religious turn to the detriment of reason was quite common in the scholarship of his time.[34] Notwithstanding some critique,[35] this perspective continues to influence contemporary understanding of religion in the Roman Empire. 'Desire for religious illumination' and 'acceptance of divine revelation' are just two ways in which the attitude of philosophers towards religion in this period has recently been characterised.[36] The turn to religion is often explicitly defined as a loss of rationality, leading to the Neoplatonic search for divine illumination and help in religion.[37]

Other scholars have formulated parallel analyses of religious change in the Roman Empire, but with different emphases. In another suggestive essay, Paul Veyne has argued that 'between the age of Cicero and the Antonines, religion stopped being unworthy of a man of culture'.[38] Following G. Boissier (1909), he proposes to call 'new' or 'second paganism' the tendency to fashion the divine world according to intellectually acceptable standards. In line with the work of H. Versnel and H. Pleket, Veyne also stresses that the relationship with the gods started to be conceived of as much more personal and individual than in the past.[39] Like Dodds, then, Veyne sees religion as becoming a much more personal affair, leading to different ways of conceiving of the gods.

The lead of Dodds and Veyne has been followed, albeit in modified ways, in recent scholarship. I single out only two stimulating approaches.

---

[34] See especially the works by Festugière.
[35] For criticism of Dodds see in particular the volume edited by R. C. Smith and Lounibos 1984.
[36] Habermehl 2002: 312–13; Busine 2005: 124–6; Athanassiadi 2006: 76.
[37] Momigliano 1975: 147; Veyne 2001; Brisson 2002: 425; Harris 2003: 31. For a direct link with Neoplatonism, see, e.g., Latzarus 1920: 21; Nock 1933: 120; Lamberton 2001: 56–7.
[38] Veyne 2001: 305; cf. Veyne 2005: 520.   [39] Pleket 1981; Versnel 1981.

In 2005 G. Stroumsa published his essay *La fin du sacrifice*, in which he argues that the religions of the Roman Empire (including Judaism and Christianity) evolved towards a more spiritual concept of sacrifice and towards communities based on shared beliefs, which were rooted in a set of holy texts.[40] Stroumsa implicitly picks up on various elements of Dodds' analysis, in particular the emphasis on spiritualisation and the concomitant turn away from traditional forms of religion. In their volume on pagan monotheism in the Roman Empire, P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede (1999) argue for a widespread currency of hierarchical and syncretistic interpretations of the traditional pantheon, especially from the second century AD onwards.[41] Basing themselves mainly on philosophical works, they argue for a refashioning of the divine world by intellectuals, which then spilled over into wider society. Pagans and Christians, they suggest, fundamentally shared the same ideas about the divine: all were monotheists. Such an interpretation has proved to be not uncontroversial: it has been argued that it privileges a single element (theology, as opposed to ritual practice) to characterise religion in a given period, underestimates differences between Christians and pagans, and projects philosophical opinions onto an entire society.[42]

The critique on Athanassiadi and Frede puts into the open the methodological issue at stake in the above (and many other) attempts to write a history of religion under the empire: how to relate philosophical evidence to wider religious change. The assumption that one can forge a coherent mentality or tendency out of diverse types of source is problematic because one runs the risk of lumping together widely divergent material. In the interpretations sketched above, mentality functions as the main *explanans* for religious change, on the implicit hypothesis that it is legitimate to bring together different kinds of evidence, such as inscriptions and philosophical texts, as testifying to the same mentality. A recent paper, for example, uses the famous confession inscriptions, stemming from a limited geographical region of Asia Minor, to explain certain features of the Greek novel.[43] There are two problems with such an argument. First, the two bodies of evidence stem from such different social and cultural contexts and

---

consequently obey diverging rules that it is hard to see how one can use the one to illuminate the other without further ado. Even if it were possible to locate different kinds of evidence in similar contexts,[44] an inscription and a philosophical treatise still have to be understood in the first place according to their own sets of rules and conventions before they can be seen as reflections of a general mentality.[45] Second, the problem goes deeper than the mere fact that different sources derive from different contexts and are shaped by different conventions. The assumption often seems to be that a religious mentality must express itself at all levels of society at the same time. Evidence from other periods and societies, such as eighteenth-century France, shows, however, that this does not have to be the case.[46] Local cult practice can be out of touch with that in capital cities; rural or lower-class mentality may be strikingly reactionary in comparison with the enlightened ideas of the philosophers. Why should a Lydian peasant think in the same way as the educated reader of, say, *Daphnis and Chloe*? When studying a society such as the Roman Empire, where education and social class were so intrinsically married to each other, and which was geographically so disparate, we should reflect carefully before trying to link two such disparate bodies of evidence.

Wide-ranging interpretations usually privilege a certain type of evidence. Work on pagan monotheism, for example, tends to focus on philosophical texts, because they offer the best support for the idea of widespread monotheism among 'pagans'. Divergent interpretations of the religious evolution of the Roman Empire are often determined by preferences for different types of evidence. The analysis of Roman religion found in the recent handbook *Religions of Rome* conflicts strikingly with that found in Dodds' *Pagans and Christians in an Age of Anxiety* or any of the other works I have referred to: even when not ignoring intellectual attitudes, *Religions of Rome* conveys a picture of religion in the Roman Empire in which traditional rituals were performed in the way they always had been without any reference to profound changes in mentality.[47] This is not just an illustration of the progress of scholarship. The two pictures are based on fundamentally different preferences about what evidence is brought to bear: whilst Dodds chose phenomena that seem to attest to irrational

---

[40] This last element is also emphasised by Athanassiadi 2006, who sees the Chaldaean oracles as later Platonism's holy book.

[41] Italian scholarship especially has done much to categorise the tendencies of syncretism and hierarchisation within Graeco-Roman polytheism: see, e.g., Bianchi 1979; Filoramo 1993: 109–25; Gasparro 2003.

[42] For these points of criticism see, e.g., Wallraff 2003; Edwards 2004 and 2006: 146–61; Fürst 2006b. The debate is revisited in Mitchell and Van Nuffelen 2010a and 2010b.

[43] Waldner 2006.

[44] See Bendlin 2006 for an argument of this type about oracles.

[45] See Elm von der Osten 2006; Goldhill 2006a and 2006b, who stress that religion serves the purpose of constructing Greek identity in texts from the Second Sophistic, which thus are not 'objective' sources.

[46] de Certeau 1975: 145–243. See also Ginzburg 1976: 15–25 for an example from the fifteenth century.

[47] Beard, North and Price 1998. Lane Fox 1986 also stresses the traditional forms of religion, but he allows for some innovations.

attitudes such as dreams and prophecy, *Religions of Rome* is based on a conceptual decision to see ritual as the central denominator of Roman religion.

I do not wish to draw a sceptical conclusion from this overview and deny that a grand synthesis like that of Dodds is desirable or even possible. On the contrary, such histories are necessary to understand what is going on in this period and to identify the issues at stake. But I doubt that we have yet fully explored the difficulties of the material to a sufficient degree to move to that level. This book is thus based on an 'epoche', a suspension of judgement, concerning the wider religious implications of the philosophical texts that it studies. I shall set aside all attempts to explain philosophical interest in religion as a reflection of wider religious trends, and I shall study it as part of the tendency in Post-Hellenistic philosophy to open itself up to 'external' sources of authority. In other words, I shall study these for what they are, philosophy and literature, and not as evidence for religious change. Only in the epilogue shall I return to the consequences that the results of my approach can have for the history of religion in the Roman Empire: I shall argue in particular that it is misleading to characterise Post-Hellenistic interest in religion as a loss of rationalism, as is still often done in sketches of religious change under the Roman Empire. Drawing attention to the multiplicity of perspectives on religion in the Roman Empire, I hope to provide one voice for what, one day, will have to be a polyphonous synthesis.

'ANCIENT WISDOM' AND 'COSMIC HIERARCHY'

This book proposes a different approach: my focus will be on the way in which religion is reinterpreted and used by philosophers in order to lend additional authority and strength to their argument. As a consequence, I am not primarily interested in spelling out specific points of doctrine regarding demons, providence, or the godhead. Such theological and metaphysical issues have been thoroughly treated by others.[48] My interest regards a different and less usual set of questions: how do philosophers justify religion as a source of truth and incorporate it into their philosophical reflection? How is religion used as an external source of authority for philosophy and how does this affect the view philosophers present of it? This book is interested in the often implicit assumptions that underpin the reinterpretations of

---

[48] E.g. Donini 1982, 1988 and 2004; Valgiglio 1988a and 1988b; Gerson 1990; Ferrari 1995; Dillon 1996, 2002a, 2002b and 2004; Frede 1999b and 2002; Brenk 2005; Görgemanns 2005; Opsomer 2005; Bordt 2006; Drozdek 2007; Kritikos 2007.

religion by individual philosophers and situates them in the wider context of the changed discourse of Post-Hellenistic philosophy.

The term 'discourse' is, obviously, derived from the œuvre of M. Foucault.[49] Although this book is not a work of Foucaldian orthodoxy, the notion helps to convey my chosen approach. Simplifying his thought considerably, a Foucaldian discourse analysis can be said to shift attention away from the precise doctrine articulated in a text to the presuppositions that underlie it. Such presuppositions can rarely be fully detected in a single text and they become visible when numerous texts are confronted with one another. Moreover, a Foucaldian discourse is not a static entity: it is reshaped in every individual text, whilst all texts remain connected through it. Thus, this book will focus heavily on individual texts in order to detect the common core of shared presuppositions, but also to show how they deal creatively with these assumptions. In a Foucaldian discourse, new meaning is created through the reconfiguration of traditional elements. Likewise, I argue that Post-Hellenistic approaches to religion incorporate many traditional ideas and concepts, but that these become part of a new framework in which they acquire an altered meaning. In a similar way, the epilogue will suggest that the incorporation in Neoplatonism of numerous ideas about religion that first surface in the Post-Hellenistic period does not mean that it is a natural continuation of the latter. Rather, Neoplatonism has a different understanding of the relationship between religion and philosophy from that of philosophers in the earlier period.

Foucault's aim was to uncover the normative discourses that shape human thought and action; for that purpose he drew mainly on philosophical texts. In *Foucault's Virginity* S. Goldhill has argued that such a perspective needs to be supplemented by other, more literary texts. Because of his focus on the normative discourse on sexuality in the Roman Empire, Foucault failed to see how literature engaged with this normative discourse in a playful and ironic way and how it revealed its complexities: 'What doing philosophy means in later antiquity is not only determined by the normative, philosophical description, but also by these ironic, erotic versions of the relation between philosophy and sexuality.'[50] Following his lead, I shall add additional depth and variety to the make-up of the discourses by drawing on their often ironic transformations in literary works.

Before I set out in more detail the argument of this book, I offer two final warnings. First, while I do hope to have identified two key themes

---

[49] Foucault 1969 and 1971. For an application of Foucault's theory on ancient history, see Veyne 1996: 385–429.
[50] Goldhill 1995: 110.

that come up in interpretations of religion in the philosophy of the early Roman Empire, I do not pretend to have treated exhaustively philosophical approaches to religion. I focus on ideas shared by Platonists and Stoics (and to a lesser extent Peripatetics, but for the scope of this book there is little relevant material from that quarter), the schools that seem to have dominated imperial philosophy. Similar convergence between these schools in the field of ethics has been noticed by, among others, M. Trapp.[51] But this does not imply that the other philosophical schools necessarily shared these assumptions, nor that every single Stoic or Platonist subscribed to them: Seneca, as pointed out above, consistently refuses to see anything of philosophical interest in traditional religion. Given the nature of the evidence, much of this book focuses on Platonic texts. Nevertheless, it shows that Stoicism shared many of the assumptions that underpin the approach to religion found among Platonists; indeed, some of them possibly originated in Late Hellenistic Stoicism. Epicureanism figures mainly as the object of polemic by Stoics and Platonists, who construe it as undermining the basic presuppositions of the two discourses. Epicureanism thus figures in this book not as an independent *persona* but as it was polemically constructed by its opponents.

Second, largely absent in this book as an independent philosophical *persona* is Cicero, who is often the starting point for enquiries about religion in Rome and even the paradigm of Roman religious mentality.[52] The importance of Cicero in shaping the Latin discourse on theology should indeed not be underestimated.[53] It would, however, be misleading to take his works as the only place where such a discourse was formed. Precisely at the moment when Cicero was churning out his philosophical works, under Caesar's dictatorship, Varro was writing up his *Divine Antiquities*, which were, as I shall show, heavily indebted to the idea that religion was created by wise ancients. Although the *Divine Antiquities* is often characterised as a work that defends tradition only for tradition's sake,[54] that idea would actually become a central tenet in the philosophical discourse on religion in the two centuries to come. It is, thus, Varro's approach that prefigures the future rather than Cicero's works, which engage remarkably little with the two discourses on which this book focuses. This is hardly surprising: Cicero wrote his works on religion from the stance of an Academic Sceptic.[55] Even

---

51 Trapp 2007: 69–70, 101, 144, 173–4, 182–3. Note, however, that Gill 2006 argues that in the realm of psychology the major divide runs between, on the one hand, Platonism and Aristotelianism, and, on the other, Stoicism and Epicureanism.

52 E.g. Veyne 2001: 305; Feeney 1998. See also Beard, North and Price 1998: 1.114.

53 Rawson 1985: 299–300; Beard 1986: 46.　　54 Momigliano 1984: 205; Moatti 1997: 181.

55 Schofield 1986.

---

though academic tendencies never fully disappeared in later philosophy, relatively few philosophers in the early Roman Empire identified themselves as Sceptic: the day was now to the 'dogmatists'.

The first part of this book charts the origins and development of the discourse on ancient wisdom. This can be summarised as the assumption that wise men of old, conceived of either as the first men living on earth or as wise lawgivers of a distant past, had a precise, possibly even philosophical, understanding of the cosmos and created religion to incorporate that knowledge. The wise man of old is not an unknown figure in Antiquity.[56] Plato, for example, seems to ascribe some degree of wisdom to the ancient Egyptians, and suppositions about early mankind underpinned many theories in Hellenistic and Post-Hellenistic philosophy.[57] The discourse of ancient wisdom is obviously grafted onto this long-standing history of reference to ancients but distinguishes itself in assuming that the ancients had created religion on purpose to embody their own knowledge of the cosmos in a figured way. The importance of the ancients in Post-Hellenistic philosophy has recently been emphasised by G. Boys-Stones, who argues that Plato's unquestionable authority in Middle Platonism (and Neoplatonism) was justified by the claim that he had recovered the wisdom of the ancients. Although this central claim has been criticised as insufficiently substantiated,[58] a side issue of Boys-Stones' argument is central to my project: the idea of wise men of old often crops up in discussions that argue for the presence of philosophical knowledge in religion.[59]

Contrary to his thesis that ancient wisdom was originally a Stoic theory that was first found in Posidonius and that passed into Platonism only at the end of the first century AD,[60] the first chapter shows that it already informs the *Divine Antiquities* of Varro, an antiquarian work with philosophical aspirations of the 40s BC. The rest of the chapter charts the central tenets of the discourse, in particular the idea that mystery cults are the best place to look for ancient knowledge. Indeed, the discourse on 'ancient wisdom' does not simply assume that religion is a picture book of philosophy, open for all to read. On the contrary, the idea is that the original pure knowledge is profoundly affected by degeneration and superstition. It is thus the task of the philosopher to peel away, as it were, the outer skin of error, in order

---

56 See, e.g., for the Roman period Valerius Maximus 2.pr.1; Galen, *[Introductio sive medicus]* 1.

57 The Epicureans traced the images of the gods back to dreams received by early men: Philodemus, *De piet.* 1.225–31.

58 Tarrant 2002; Mansfeld 2003: 631–3; and Algra 2004: 205–7.

59 See, e.g., Boys-Stones 2001: 111–12.

60 Frede 1994 puts the Platonist accommodation of this 'Stoic' idea even later, at the end of the second century AD.

to track down the original core of philosophical insights. Mystery cults are seen as a particularly good place to start such an exploration, supposedly because their strict rules of membership and the commandment of silence protected them against corruption and superstition.

Chapter 2 shows that the idea of ancient wisdom lies at the heart of Plutarch's interpretation of traditional religion (c. AD 50–120). I argue that a twofold historical dimension in his religious thought has gone largely unnoticed in modern scholarship: on the one hand, the basic assumption that religion is a creation by wise men of the past; on the other, the idea that religion and the knowledge it contains are distorted when transmitted through history. Plutarch's interest in the religious past, as exemplified in the *Greek Questions, Roman Questions* or the *Life of Numa*, is, moreover, an essential part of his philosophy: in order to retrieve the original truths of religion, he has to cut through a dense undergrowth of superstition and historical accretions. This interpretation implies that there is a greater unity in Plutarch's reflections on religion than often assumed: scholarship has detected at once positive and negative views on religion in his various works and has explained these either as a sign that Plutarch changed his opinions over time or as an indication that he was unable to reconcile philosophy and religion. As I show, however, they should rather be understood in the light of the fundamentally ambivalent nature that religion possessed for Plutarch: on the one hand it is a source of philosophical knowledge but, on the other, it is also open to distortion and superstition.

Plutarch's interpretation of religion reveals that one needs a good hermeneutics to retrieve the philosophy that is deposited in religion. This hermeneutics in turn presupposes a proper philosophical training. In such a context it comes as no surprise that each philosopher can project his own philosophy onto religion: each reading will be directed by the presuppositions of the reader. The crucial position of the interpreter becomes even more evident in Numenius, the late second-century forerunner of Plotinus (Chapter 3). He is proud of having rediscovered Plato's true teachings after the latter had wilfully obscured them in his dialogues. Numenius explicitly positions himself as the authoritative interpreter of the master, but he also spells out what is only implicit in Plutarch: that the knowledge contained in the religions and customs of the ancient peoples of the Mediterranean can only be correct to the extent that it conforms to Plato's teachings.[61] Although 'ancient wisdom' opens up an additional source of knowledge and authority for philosophy, the latter remains the yardstick.

Chapter 4 argues that the discourse on 'ancient wisdom' did not merely inform philosophical discussions. Dio Chrysostom playfully uses the idea in his *Borystheniticus* in order to claim great authority for the famous report from the Babylonian Magi that concludes the speech. The second part of the chapter suggests that Apuleius draws on the idea in various works of his. In particular, I propose to read the *Metamorphoses* as exploring the dangers of superstition. Plutarch and other authors drawing on the discourse on 'ancient wisdom', such as the late-second-century author Celsus, regularly warn that one needs philosophical knowledge to interpret religion correctly and to avoid being trapped in superstition. That is precisely what happens to the protagonist of Apuleius' novel. Lucius is cast as a profoundly ignorant individual whose engagement with religion is strictly limited to its outer surface. He never nears the truthful core of religion – with all the funny consequences so graphically depicted in the *Metamorphoses*.

Part II of the book takes its cue from the ubiquity of hierarchical images in philosophical texts of the Post-Hellenistic period. In particular, images of the Roman emperor and his servants and of the Persian Great King and his satraps are used to represent the pantheon. Chapter 5 argues that they show that the pantheon is redesigned as an ideal hierarchy and is then used, in turn, as the paradigm of order for all realms of human life. In dialogue with earlier analyses of these comparisons,[62] I show that this motif must be seen against the background of increased hierarchical thinking in Post-Hellenistic philosophy. Obviously, hierarchical thinking was not new to this period. Plato's theory of the soul, for example, is hierarchical and matched by a hierarchical ideal state in the *Republic*. The Old Academy, and in particular Xenocrates, had tidied up Plato's thought on demons by ranking them between gods and humans.[63] Stoicism was known for putting the gods on a higher plane in the cosmic city than human beings.[64] What sets the Post-Hellenistic period apart, besides the increased emphasis on hierarchy, is that the hierarchy of human society is seen as part of a cosmic hierarchy that channels divine law down to each individual. Ideally then, human society is organised as a strict hierarchy, for which the model is to be found in the divine world. Conversely, the pantheon is described as the most perfect hierarchy, using political images such as that of the Persian King and his satraps and of the Roman emperor and his officials. The germ of such ideas can be detected in Posidonius' reflections on the

Golden Age: against Stoic orthodoxy and possibly under Plato's influence, he explicitly affirms the existence of a natural hierarchy in human society ('it is natural for the better to rule the lesser'),[65] a thesis that may have been justified by projecting the cosmic hierarchy onto the human realm.

Given the fragmentary state of Posidonius' works, it is hard to reach any certain conclusions about his views, but one can definitely see the impact of such new connections and assumptions on the political thought of the early Roman Empire in two ways. First, philosophers start to stress that naturally talented and virtuous individuals can impose order on any political system, even the generally despised democracy. Such individuals are seen as 'natural rulers' who can transfer divine order and hierarchy onto the earth. Second, kings are increasingly described as occupying the highest position in the human hierarchy and an intermediate position in the cosmic one, a position from which they have to relay divine will onto the earth. Such a descriptive account now sits alongside a more traditional stress on the monarch as the embodiment of all virtues. In the field of religion, the projection of an ideal hierarchy onto the pantheon allowed philosophers to make sense of the diversity of religion, in that diverging rites and customs could now be ascribed to different gods, all of whom obeyed the highest god. Soon the hierarchical pantheon is put forward not as a philosophical construct but as the normal, natural way of conceiving of the divine. As such, it becomes a normative notion, used not only to define superstition as the mistaken view that god is a tyrant and not a benevolent monarch but also to argue against philosophical opponents and to justify Roman imperial rule as a hierarchy in the image of the divine.

A comparison used especially often in the early Roman Empire to describe the divine world is that of the Persian Great King and his satraps. In Chapter 6 I argue that this comparison is typical of the classicising habits of the Post-Hellenistic period and, on the basis of its use in Maximus of Tyre (late second century) and Pseudo-Aristotle's *On the World* (first century BC – first century AD), that it was normally used to convey an explicitly positive image of the divine world as the example of order and harmony. This sets the scene for the core of the chapter, which advances a new interpretation of Aristides' famous speech *On Rome* (AD 144). I suggest that Aristides describes Persia precisely as the antithesis of the positive characteristics attributed to it by Maximus and Pseudo-Aristotle and that he transfers these qualities to Rome. Aristides is thus

[65] Sen. *Ep.* 90.4–6 = Posidonius, fr. 284; Cic. *Rep.* 3.38.

proposing a shift of paradigm: not Persia but Rome is the empire that recreates the natural order. The ideological thrust of his argument is clear: Aristides presents the Roman Empire as the guarantee of divine order on earth.

Chapters 7 and 8 provide two case studies of the impact that the increased emphasis on hierarchies has on the thought of two contemporaries: the (mostly) Stoic orator Dio Chrysostom and the Platonist Plutarch. Given their diverging views on the divine (centred on the contrast between immanence and transcendence), one would instinctively assume that Stoics and Platonists configure their hierarchies in fundamentally distinct ways. Yet, although one can indeed distinguish a Stoic and Platonist type of hierarchy, we shall notice that, depending on the argumentative context, each can draw on the hierarchy as conceived by the other school. Chapter 7 on Dio aims to show that in his kingship orations he sees the king as part of the cosmic hierarchy, and that he introduces a descriptive account of kingship as part of the providential hierarchical order of the universe alongside a prescriptive one that emphasises the king's virtues. As a consequence, Dio can suggest that the worship of the gods is a precondition for the human hierarchy to function properly: indeed, as religious worship implies the recognition of the cosmic hierarchy, in which the king is embedded as well, it is a sign that the human hierarchy is being equally respected. Chapter 8 on Plutarch argues that his writings are pervaded by hierarchical thinking, both in politics and religion, and that, when set against the background of the discourse on cosmic hierarchy, its impact can be noticed in works that are usually read as merely developing standard Platonist themes. The chapter also further develops Plutarch's notion of superstition, which Chapter 2 described as an interpretation of religion that disregards the philosophical core hidden in it by the ancients. In this chapter, we shall see that Plutarch also conceptualises superstition as a mistaken understanding of the cosmic hierarchy and in particular the belief that the hierarchy is not benevolent.

Both types of reinterpretation of religion, the one linked with 'ancient wisdom' and the other with 'cosmic hierarchy', are not only based on implicit assumptions about the activity of ancient humanity and the structure of the cosmos but also informed by cultural preferences. Philosophers present their views as universally valid, but, in fact, they are thoroughly embedded in Graeco-Roman society and culture, implicitly seen as superior. Moreover, philosophers rely on the elitist presumption that only they are able to offer a correct reading of religion, by contrast to what ordinary, ignorant people think. Such prejudices surface most clearly in

polemic. The three chapters of Part III explore the polemic waged by and against Epicureans, Jews and Christians in the light of the two discourses as set out in the first two parts. The Epicureans were generally seen by their Stoic and Platonist enemies as falling outside the shared framework of thought: because they preached a metaphysics of disorder and an ethics of hedonism, they were accused of subverting society and religion. Chapter 9 explores the anti-Epicurean polemic by drawing on the œuvre of Lucian (*c.* AD 120–90). In many of his satires Lucian espouses seemingly Epicurean views, but these views correspond strikingly to what was attributed to the Epicureans by their detractors. Lucian therefore does not inform us about what the Epicureans really thought but reflects the polemic waged against them. I argue that it was part of Lucian's satirical strategy to adopt the views that were attributed to the philosophical outsiders of his time, in particular Epicureans and Cynics, in order to be able to subvert commonly held views. Lucian thus does not step outside the two discourses explored in this book but subverts them from within by giving a positive twist to the polemical accusations usually levelled against the Epicureans. Besides a few allusions to ideas about ancient wisdom, Lucian attacks specifically the idea that the divine world functions as an ideal hierarchy and depicts it rather as a realm of disorder.

The Hellenised Jew Philo of Alexandria (*c.* 15 BC – AD 50) strongly rejected the cultural preference for polytheism implied in the discourses on ancient wisdom and natural hierarchy. Nevertheless, as shown in Chapter 10, he argues against this cultural presupposition by adopting the argumentative framework of these very discourses: he defends the superiority of the Bible as the only external source of philosophical truth (against the other religious traditions of the Mediterranean) and argues for a purified divine monarchy in which the subordinate satraps do not require worship (against polytheistic worship of subordinate gods). In the process, he presents Judaism as the only truthful tradition and the only well-ordered society in the Mediterranean.

In its contacts with Graeco-Roman culture, Christianity adopted, as Philo did, many of the arguments for antiquity and hierarchy that were current in that time, although adapted to its own agenda. The integration of Christianity in the discourse of its time can also be detected in the first anti-Christian work, the *True Discourse* by the Platonic philosopher Celsus. Chapter 11 shows how he tries to dismiss Christianity not by excluding it as a thoroughly alien phenomenon, but by including it in the Mediterranean tradition as a superstition: Celsus accepts that Christianity ultimately derives from an ancient tradition, but the transmission of

that ancient wisdom is profoundly marred by superstitious interpretations, owing to the ignorant and boorish people who make up Judaism and Christianity. Apart from misunderstanding ancient wisdom, Celsus also argues that Christian superstition is characterised by a profound misinterpretation of the divine hierarchy. In his depiction of Christianity as a superstition (which is strikingly similar to the way in which Apuleius presents Lucius in the *Metamorphoses*) he reveals many of the elitist and cultural presuppositions that underpin the dominant approaches of religion, especially the superiority of Graeco-Roman philosophy, religion and culture.

Finally, the epilogue marks the return to the question raised earlier in this introduction: how can we integrate the results from this study in a general assessment of religious change in this period? The aim is not to develop a wholly new picture, but rather to point out what the philosophical evidence does and does not say. It is evident that the concept of religion as it emerges in the Post-Hellenistic period anticipates that of Neoplatonism in important respects, in particular regarding the interest in a wide variety of religions and the importance of hierarchy. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between the Post-Hellenistic concept of religion and that of Late Antiquity. The Post-Hellenistic interest in religion is generally interpreted as starting off a tendency towards irrationalism and implying the search for the divine revelation of a superior truth. However, this is largely a projection of Neoplatonic categories onto the earlier period: in Post-Hellenistic philosophy religion is not considered to contain a truth different from or superior to that of philosophy, but to harbour rational philosophical ideas. These are, moreover, not revealed by the gods but must be retrieved by careful philosophical investigation. Besides showing up differences with Neoplatonism, the Post-Hellenistic philosophical concept of religion does not necessarily reflect a general mentality but must first be understood in its philosophical context. Any future general overview of religious changes in the Roman Empire should allow each body of evidence to speak in its own voice. This does not imply that a synthesis is impossible, but any synthesis should bear witness to the variety of the material.

The main focus of this book is on the first two centuries AD, given that the bulk of the evidence is from this period, but, as noted above, most of the developments start in the Late Republic. As argued in the epilogue, although Neoplatonic thought represents a high degree of continuity, it is also markedly different in important respects. I thus leave it aside in this book. In line with the dominant tendency in scholarship, I take the

pseudo-Pythagorean writings to belong to the early Roman Empire, although precisely when is open to discussion: dates range from the late first century BC to the second century AD.[66] At any rate, they fall securely within the chronological scope of this book.

---

[66] Delatte 1942; Burkert 1961 and 1972; Sarri 1979; Moraux 1984: 79–81; Squilloni 1991: 35–60; Centrone 2000: 575; Haake 2003: 122; Murray 2008: 20–1. In defence of the Hellenistic date, see Thesleff 1961: 39 and 1972, followed by Martens 2003: 165–74.

PART I

Ancient wisdom

CHAPTER I

Tracing the origins
Ancients, philosophers and mystery cults

The increased attraction exercised by non-Greek wisdom on philosophers of the Roman Empire has often been remarked upon.[1] Greek philosophy had been fascinated by the East at least from Plato onwards, but the range of foreign peoples that drew interest clearly started to increase in the late Hellenistic and early Imperial period, with philosophers such as Plutarch and Numenius referring to Egyptian and Oriental cults as containing profound knowledge. Usually explained as the result of the expansion of geographical horizons in the wake of Hellenisation and Roman conquest, the phenomenon is clearly also part of the process of the opening up of philosophy to other sources of authority in this period, which I have sketched in the introduction.

The importance of this wider philosophical context has recently been underscored by G. Boys-Stones, who has shown that the interest in 'barbarian wisdom' betrays less a specific respect for all things foreign than an increased authority attributed to antiquity in general, Greek and barbarian. He argues that the Stoic philosopher Posidonius (*c.* 135–55 BC) was the first to attribute specifically philosophical knowledge to the first age of man, and not just a mere unreflective practice of virtue. The only evidence for Posidonius' views in this respect is Seneca's ninetieth letter to Lucilius.[2] Although the letter is difficult to interpret, two elements emerge from it that can be traced in later expositions of ancient wisdom. First, for Posidonius, human culture was created on purpose by lawgivers in line with philosophical thought when the Golden Age came to a close.[3] Sages invented the arts to make life amenable once vice had disrupted the harmony with nature that characterised that age of felicity. Human culture thus has an

---

[1] Dörrie 1972; Momigliano 1975; Potter 1994: 183–212; Frede 1994 and 1997: 229–30; Baltes 1999; Broze, Busine and Inowlocki 2006. For Late Antiquity, see Schott 2005 and 2008.
[2] See the interpretation by Boys-Stones 2001: 18–24, with the modifications proposed in Bees (2005) and Van Hoof and Van Nuffelen (forthcoming).
[3] Sen. *Ep.* 90.6.

ambivalent nature: created by sages it contains philosophical knowledge, but at the same time it marks the end of the Golden Age. Secondly, such sages remain active as benefactors of mankind for a long time after the close of the Golden Age – the last one mentioned by Posidonius (as summarised by Seneca) is Democritus (*Ep.* 90.31–2). This suggests that there may always be sages and philosophers who can adjust culture so as to bring it more in line again with nature and philosophy (both being basically identical in a Stoic perspective). This theory accounts for attempts to find philosophical knowledge in ancient traditions, Greek, Roman, and foreign. Until the late first century AD, G. Boys-Stones suggests, the idea was only adopted by Stoics, most notably by Cornutus, the Stoic teacher of Nero, in his *On the Nature of the Gods*.[4] Shortly afterwards the theory passed into Platonism, where it led to the view that the leading philosophers of the past, such as Pythagoras and Plato, were seen as having rediscovered ancient wisdom and expressed it in rational discourse.

This chapter takes as its starting point Boys-Stones' demonstration of the importance of ideas about the origin of mankind for the practice of philosophy in the Post-Hellenistic period, while proposing a modification of his genealogy of ancient wisdom. The first section argues that the basic characteristics of the theory are already found in the *Divine Antiquities* of Varro, a work to be dated to the early 40s BC. Varro's philosophical outlook is Platonist (albeit with strong Stoic influences), being a pupil of Antiochus of Ascalon (died 69/8 BC), the initiator of the turn towards dogmatism in Platonism. This contradicts the linear development proposed by Boys-Stones, according to which the theory passed from Stoicism to Platonism only in the late first century AD.[5] From my discussion it will emerge that the idea of ancient wisdom was more widespread and shared by Platonists and Stoics alike already before Cornutus.

But this chapter is not just concerned with retracing origins. My reading of Varro's *Divine Antiquities*, a work on Roman religion, shows that the discourse on ancient wisdom was from early on explicitly applied to religion. This is also the case for two other early examples from the first century AD: the *Hieroglyphica* by Chaeremon and Cornutus' *On the Nature of the Gods*. The discussion of these texts will allow us to grasp the major characteristics of the view of religion shaped by the discourse on ancient wisdom. In it, religion is understood as a creation of wise ancients, who possessed profound insight into how the cosmos functioned, but it is

---

[4] Boys-Stones 2001: 49–59.
[5] A similar, late introduction in Platonism was argued by Frede 1994: 5183–203.

not a straightforward source of knowledge. Not only is the language and imagery of religion not rational, most parts of religion are polluted by superstition. Mystery cults, protected by the strict control of initiation, are an important exception to this and they therefore acquire a prominent position in discussions of religion in the Post-Hellenistic period. Religion (and human culture in general) thus stands in an ambivalent relation to the truth: it contains knowledge about the cosmos, but the interpreter needs philosophical training to be able to separate the wheat from the chaff.

VARRO AND ANCIENT WISDOM

Usually depicted as a hard-working but intellectually limited individual, Varro (116–27 BC) is still often seen as interested in the superficial but unable to grasp deeper meanings.[6] His famous *Divine Antiquities* (*Antiquitates rerum divinarum* = *ARD*), which purported to be an inventory of everything that was known in his day about traditional Roman religion, is considered a good example of his untiring curiosity for all things Roman. The neat division of the sixteen books into five blocks of three about priests, sacred places, times, things, and finally gods, preceded by an introductory book, clearly bears the mark of the antiquarian and *collectionneur*.[7] The work is usually interpreted as an attempt to gather all knowledge about traditional Roman religion before it could be swept away by the rapid changes in society and culture in the Late Republic. In this perspective, Varro becomes a conservative who simply wanted to safeguard tradition for tradition's sake: tradition, not truth, was his concern.[8]

There is, however, another, more philosophical side to Varro. On the traditional dating, he started to produce philosophical works after 45 BC,[9] as a response to Cicero's philosophical output. Among those, his *On Philosophy*, which made Greek thinking about the highest good available to the Romans, takes pride of place.[10] But it would be wrong to restrict Varro's interest in philosophy to his later years and to competition with Cicero. Even that masterpiece of tedious encyclopaedism, the *Divine Antiquities*, usually dated to Caesar's dictatorship or even earlier,[11] has a philosophical

---

[6] See the classic statement of Dahlmann 1970, quoted by Tarver 1997: 162.
[7] On Varro's fondness of such divisions, see Tarver 1997: 137–8 and Peglau 2003.
[8] Momigliano 1984: 205; Moatti 1997: 181. See also Beard, North and Price 1998: 1.151; Cardauns 2001: 54.
[9] This is deduced from Cic. *Acad. post.* 1.8 by Wilmanns 1864: 9. See Tarver 1997: 145.
[10] Tarver 1997.
[11] Horsfall 1972: 122; Cardauns 1976: 132–3. An earlier date is preferred by Jocelyn 1982: 164–77, 203–5.

background to it. Indeed, the remaining fragments show that theoretical reflection did open and close the *Divine Antiquities*. Cicero reports Varro as saying that the first book was written for philosophers (*philosophis scribere voluimus*),[12] and the theory of three types of theology (mythical, civic, and philosophical or natural) which is set out there, clearly bears the mark of Greek philosophical thinking.[13]

My main interest here is the last book, which was dedicated to an allegorical reading of twenty 'selected gods' (*di selecti*) and included a justification of such a method. Since the Stoics initiated the fashion, allegory had become the favourite tool for philosophers to make sense of traditional religion. In the last book of the *Divine Antiquities*, Varro selected twenty deities that could be interpreted as symbolising key functions of the philosophical system to which he adhered.[14] Varro felt the need to justify these allegories explicitly. Indeed, allegory presupposes that knowledge, usually philosophical, is hidden in, or translated into, manifestations of human culture (e.g. poetry and religion), from which it can be retrieved. Consequently, that knowledge must have got there in some way. The remaining fragments of Book 16 allow us to sketch the outline of Varro's answer to the question why there is philosophical knowledge to be found in Roman religion. They reveal a philosophical view of religion that is fundamentally identical to the one harboured about culture by Posidonius: for Varro, Roman religion is constructed by sage lawgivers in line with ancient wisdom. Once we have noticed the presence of such ideas in the *Divine Antiquities*, we shall see that the work was not just about the preservation of tradition for its own sake. Maintaining tradition also meant safeguarding the truth in religion.

The Church Father Augustine preserves for us a summary of the introduction to Book 16 of Varro's *Divine Antiquities* (fr. 225). This is how the argument ran in his words:

First of all, Varro commends these [allegorical] interpretations so highly as to say that the men of old invented the images, attributes and adornments of the gods (*ut dicat antiquos simulacra deorum et insignia ornatusque finxisse*) precisely so that, when those who had approached the mysteries of the doctrine (*doctrinae*) had

[12] Cic. *Acad. post.* 1.8.
[13] Of the vast bibliography on this subject, I refer only to Lieberg 1973; Geerlings 1990; Lehmann 1997: 193–225.
[14] Varro's method of allegory, in comparison with Stoic practice, is set out in Van Nuffelen (2010). The identification of the underlying philosophical system is controversial, scholarship being divided between its attribution to Varro's teacher Antiochus of Ascalon (Theiler 1930: 15, 17, 30; Jocelyn 1982: 163; Dillon 1996: 81–90; Lehmann 1997: 142) and other sources or an assumed originality of Varro himself (Dörrie 1987: 472–7; Görler 1990: 127–9). In Van Nuffelen (2010) I suggest that the former is most likely: the ideas present in *ARD* fit very well with the little that we know about Antiochus' philosophy and they can be made to fit with what Cicero ascribes to him in *Acad. post.* 1.24–30: on this last point, see Fladerer 1996.

seen these visible things with their eyes, they might also see with their mind the soul of the world and its parts; that is, the true gods. He also says that those who made the images of the gods in human form seem to have believed that the mortal mind that exists in the human body is very similar to the immortal mind. It is as if vessels were placed to represent the gods: as, for example, a wine-jar might be placed in the temple of Liber, to signify wine, that which is contained being signified by that which contains. Thus, the rational soul was signified by an image which had a human form, because the human form is, so to speak, the vessel in which that nature is wont to be contained that they wish to attribute to God, or to the gods (*ita per simulacrum, quod formam haberet humanam, significari animam rationalem, quod eo velut vase natura ista soleat contineri, cuius naturae deum volunt esse vel deos*).[15]

The question of who had invented cult statues was a contentious issue of old that continued to haunt Greek thought.[16] This fragment explains how Roman cult images, and in particular anthropomorphic ones, came into being. Two points stand out. First, an allegorical reading of cult statues with their attributes is rendered possible by the fact that they have been created by 'the men of old' (*antiqui*).[17] The *antiqui* apparently possessed some form of philosophical knowledge and constructed statues as symbols of metaphysical principles. Secondly, the last sentence of the fragment explicitly vindicates anthropomorphic images. The *antiqui* did not produce such images at random but looked for a similarity between *signifiant* and *signifié*:[18] because the rational soul, being of divine nature, was contained in the human body, the gods, namely the world soul and its parts,[19] could be represented in human form. The upshot of this conscious and careful creation of cult images and their attributes is that an allegorical reading is rendered not only possible, but also quite easy. Indeed, once one has 'approached the mysteries of the doctrine (*doctrina*)', that is, has been taught philosophy, the recognition of philosophical knowledge in cult images becomes a relatively uncomplicated task.[20] Varro clearly counts

[15] August. *De civ. D.* 7.5 p. 280 ll. 8–21 (Dombart) = Varro, *ARD* fr. 225. All translations are slightly adapted from Dyson 1998.
[16] See, e.g., Plut. frs. 158, 190; Clem. Al. *Protr.* 4.46.3, 4.47.2; Max. Tyr. *Or.* 5; Dio Chrys. *Or.* 12; Philostr. *VA* 6.19. It ties in with a traditional critical attitude towards cult images found among philosophers: see already Xenophanes, fr. 21 B15 DK; Heraclitus fr. 22 B5 DK. Cf. Clerc 1915; Lehmann 1997: 184–8.
[17] Varro was primarily concerned it seems with the interpretation of statues and their attributes: fr. 228 = August. *De civ. D.* 7.17 p. 295.22.
[18] A similar argument can be found in e.g. Demetrius Lacon, *P. Herc.* 1055 cols. 14–16; Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 71–6.
[19] Cf. August. *De civ. D.* 7.6 p. 281.31 = Varro, *ARD* fr. 226.
[20] This can be sensed in the surviving allegory of Saturn. In quite a cavalier way, Varro seems to relate all elements of the myth of Saturn, his cult image, attributes and name to the cosmic cycle of insemination: August. *De civ. D.* 7.18–19 = Varro, *ARD* frs. 241–6. For an analysis of Varro's method of allegory, see Van Nuffelen (2010).

himself among the instructed: in the rest of Book 16 he will reveal the precise meaning of each of the twenty selected gods.

In the fragment quoted above, the identity of the *antiqui* remains unclear. One might, at first sight, surmise that they are to be situated at the dawn of humanity, before historical time. The famous fragment 18, however, proves otherwise: 'The ancient Romans worshipped the gods without figurative images (*simulacra*) for over hundred and seventy years.'[21] The *antiqui*, to whom fragment 225 refers as creators of images, can consequently only have lived one hundred and seventy years after the foundation of Rome. Taking the date established by Varro himself (753 BC) as the starting point, figurative cult images were therefore invented at the beginning of the sixth century. This puts their creation squarely in the reign of Tarquinius Priscus (traditionally dated to 616–578 BC), who, according to another fragment, did indeed intervene in Roman religion.

The Penates are the gods through whom we breathe, have a body and possess reason in the soul. They are Jove, middle aether, Juno, the lower air with earth, and the highest part of the aether, Minerva. Tarquinius, son of Demaratus the Corinthian and initiate of the Samothracian mysteries, joined them in one temple and under one roof (*quos Tarquinius Demarati Corinthi filius, Samothraciis religionibus mystice imbutus, uno templo et sub eodem tecto coniunxit*).[22]

The fragment does not actually attribute the creation of anthropomorphic images to Tarquinius,[23] yet, being responsible for the creation of the Capitoline Triad, the highest deities of Rome, it is only natural to assume that he was involved. At least one of the *antiqui* now acquires identity: not an anonymous forefather of the Golden Age, but a Roman king. As the *antiqui* possessed philosophical knowledge, or at least a profound understanding of the cosmos, Tarquinius must have been at least acquainted with this body of knowledge. The fragment hints at the origins of that knowledge: the king was of Greek origin and an initiate of the Samothracian mysteries. The reference to Samothrace is not accidental. On the contrary, the cult occupies a central position in Varro's genealogy of Roman religion. As fragment 206 from Book 15 makes clear, Samothrace is the cult that symbolises the central principles of the cosmos:

Hence also, in the preceding book [i.e. Book 15], Varro similarly interprets the celebrated mysteries of the Samothracians, and promises, almost with religious

---

[21] August. *De civ. D.* 4.31 p. 186 ll. 21–9: *antiquos romanos plus annos centum et septuaginta deos sine simulacro coluisse*; cf. Plut. *Num.* 8 = Varro, *ARD* fr. 18.

[22] Serv. 2.296 = Macrob. *Sat.* 3.4.7 = Varro, *ARD* fr. 205.

[23] That seems to be suggested in Plin. *HN* 35.157, a passage of possible Varronic origin.

fervour, that he will expound in writing things unknown to the local priests and send those to them (*Hinc etiam Samothracum nobilia mysteria in superiore libro sic interpretatur eaque se, quae nec Sais nota sunt, scribendo expositurum eisque missurum quasi religiosissime pollicetur*). For he says that he had discovered in Samothrace, from many indications, that one of the images there signified the heaven, another the earth, and another the forms of things which Plato calls ideas. Varro wishes it to be understood that Jupiter is the heaven, Juno the earth, and Minerva the ideas: heaven being that by which anything is made; earth being that of which it is made; and the ideas being the form according to which it is made.[24]

Combining this fragment with the previous one, we can observe a string of identifications. The images worshipped in Samothrace signify heaven, earth, and Forms. These are the fundamental principles of a Platonist philosophy, going back at least to Polemo (*c.* 350–276/5 BC), the successor of Xenocrates at the head of the Academy: an active and a passive principle and Plato's Forms.[25] Samothrace thus is an ancient cult that preserves philosophical truth. But it is not just one cult among many: the images at Samothrace symbolise the highest principles of the cosmos and are therefore a central cult in the Greek world.[26] For Varro, however, Samothrace is more important as the origin of the highest Roman gods. He identifies the Samothracian deities with the Capitoline triad, Jupiter, Juno and Minerva, who are in turn identical with the Penates, the mysterious but all-important deities of Rome. Appropriately, the fundamental principles of the cosmos are symbolised by the highest gods of Rome.[27] The structure of a philosophical system is mapped onto the pantheon of Rome.

As far as the fragments allow us to judge, Varro did not offer any justification for the presence of philosophical knowledge in the Samothracian mysteries. Their antiquity seems to have sufficed. He is more explicit about the transfer of knowledge from Samothrace to Rome, in which two central figures of Roman antiquity occupy centre stage. Unsurprisingly, the founding father of Rome, Aeneas, provides the original link. Drawing on earlier

---

[24] August. *De civ. D.* 7.28 p. 311 ll. 7–15 = Varro, *ARD* fr. 206. The manuscripts read *nec suis nota sunt*, which Wissowa 1904: 117 emended to *Sais*, the Sai being the priests of Samothrace (Serv. 2.324). Cardauns 1976: 90 follows Wissowa, as I do. My interpretation of the passage is not affected by this point of textual criticism.

[25] Sharples 1995; Sedley 2002: 52. Frede 2005: 217–18 disputes that the doctrine is specific for Polemo.

[26] A central position was often given to Samothrace in the genealogy of Greek cult: Dion. Hal. *Ant.* 1.68.2–4 = Callistratus, *FGrH* 433 F10; Diod. Sic. 5.47–9; Celsus in Origen, *C. Cels.* 1.14.

[27] Elsewhere Jupiter, Juno and Minerva are identified with heaven, earth, and Forms (fr. 206) and middle aether, lower air with earth, and the highest part of the aether (fr. 205). This is not a contradiction, but is based on the fact that Varro identifies metaphysical principles on different levels of being: see Fladerer 1996: 106–9.

Greek and Roman traditions,[28] Varro constructed the following version of the origins of the Penates: Dardanus, the father of the founder of Troy, had brought the Penates from Samothrace to Troy, and later Aeneas carried the Penates from Phrygia to Italy.[29] From its very beginning, then, Rome was literally in possession of philosophical knowledge. The second important figure we can grasp in the fragments of the *Divine Antiquities* is, as we have seen, Tarquinius Priscus. An initiate of Samothrace, he probably acquired there the necessary knowledge that the triad Jupiter, Juno and Minerva were identical to the Samothracian deities and consequently represented the three highest metaphysical principles. The king decided to join them under the same roof, establishing the Capitoline triad as the central cult of Roman public religion.[30]

The fragmentary state of the *Divine Antiquities* does not allow us to probe further details of this narrative, but it can hardly be doubted that Varro did think that Rome had, through its religion, inherited ancient wisdom from Greece and that its rulers had succeeded in further establishing Roman religion in line with philosophy and truth. The main difference with Posidonius lies in the fact that Rome, having been created in historical time, could not pretend to have a direct link with the wisdom of the Golden Age. Varro therefore proposed an indirect connection with ancient wisdom. Yet the parallels with Posidonius are manifest: in Varro's reconstruction of how philosophical knowledge was located in Greek religion and then transferred to Rome by wise kings, we encounter the two basic characteristics of Posidonius' view on culture.

First, just as culture was ambivalent for the latter, a source of truth tainted by change, Varro's concept of religion also has two sides to it. This ambivalence becomes evident in his understanding of 'civic theology', the religion that was practised in Rome and enshrined in its institutions and that was the subject of his investigations in the *Divine Antiquities*. The antiquarian famously distinguished between three types of theology. The mythical one told by poets was brushed aside as full of untrue

[28] Cf. Kleywegt 1972: 4–19; Cole 1984: 100–4 and 1989; Dubourdieu 1989. They stretch back as early as Hellanicus in the fifth century BC (*FGrH* 4 F23) for the Greek link between Samothrace and Troy, and Cassius Hemina in the second century BC for the Roman identification of the Penates and the gods of Samothrace (fr. 7).

[29] Serv. 1.378, 2.325, 3.148; Macrob. *Sat.* 3.4.7. Kleywegt 1972: 5–7 gives all the texts. Dion. Hal. *Ant.* 2.66.5, which offers an account basically identical to Varro's, may stem from the antiquarian. On the relationship between Dionysius and Varro, see Poucet 1989.

[30] An additional link may be his Etruscan origin. A third-century BC author, Dionysius of Myrsilus (*FGrH* 477), quoted by Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Ant.* 1.23.5), pretends that the Etruscans worshipped the Cabiri of Samothrace.

inventions: they want to please the audience, not to tell the truth.[31] The two other theologies, natural and civic, do find grace in his eyes, even though neither of them is unproblematic. The *theologia naturalis*, in principle the best theology and to be found among the philosophers, is deemed too highbrow for most people.[32] Moreover, philosophers usually do not succeed in agreeing,[33] and a non-philosopher would therefore have a hard time finding the truth in the widely diverging opinions of the philosophers. In comparison with natural theology, *theologia civilis*, with its use of anthropomorphic statues, is obviously expressed in a less rational form. Yet one cannot turn back time: a return to the pure *theologia naturalis* is precluded, so we must stick to tradition.[34] This attitude has often been read as embodying Varro's ultimate loyalty to the *theologia civilis* and Roman tradition, and a final depreciation of philosophical theology.[35] But that is too one-sided an interpretation. As seen in the preceding argument, Varro's narrative of the transmission of knowledge from Greece to Rome aimed to show that the *theologia civilis* had been created by wise individuals in accordance with philosophy, namely with *theologia naturalis*. The *antiqui*, among whom Varro ranked the wise kings of early Rome, shaped Roman religion so as to make it correspond with the wisdom found in earlier, particularly Greek, cults. For Varro, civic theology is thus not a collection of aberrations that need to be respected because tradition demands it. It rather stands in a close but ambivalent relationship to philosophical knowledge. On the one hand, in its consisting of anthropomorphic images, traditional Roman religion is markedly distant from the original, natural theology, when worship was pure and unadulterated by anthropomorphism. On the other, having been created by wise kings in line with ancient metaphysical knowledge, civic theology is not full of errors but is rather itself an image of that knowledge. Preservation of Roman religious tradition was thus not just a matter of patriotism: oblivion and desuetude also meant loss of knowledge. It is no surprise then that Varro claimed, in having composed the *Divine Antiquities*, to have performed a task of greater importance than Aeneas, who saved the Penates from Troy's conflagration.[36]

Secondly, in Varro's narrative, the creation of religion in line with ancient metaphysical knowledge is a process that continues in historical time, just

[31] Esp. August. *De civ. D.* 6.5 p. 252 l. 17–p. 253.4 = Varro, *ARD* fr. 7.

[32] August. *De civ. D.* 6.6 p. 257 ll. 2–18 = Varro, *ARD* fr. 11.

[33] August. *De civ. D.* 6.5 p. 253 ll. 10–22 = Varro *ARD* fr. 8.

[34] August. *De civ. D.* 4.32 p. 185 ll. 18–29 = Varro, *ARD* fr. 12.

[35] E.g. Lieberg 1973; Lehmann 1997: 223–4.

[36] August. *De civ. D.* 6.2 p. 248 ll. 6–13 = Varro, *ARD* fr. 2a.

as Posidonius posits the presence of sages after the Golden Age. Apart from Aeneas and Tarquinius Priscus, one can also refer to Numa. Varro accepted his link with the Pythagoreans and may have reported how he ordered the Penates to be deposited in the newly constructed temple of Vesta.[37] As Varro thought the world soul to be of a fiery nature,[38] it is quite fitting that the essential element of fire would be joined to the fundamental principles of the cosmos (god, matter and Forms), as represented by the Penates. More speculatively, the introduction of the Mother of the Gods in 204, a descendant of Samothrace according to Varro,[39] can be interpreted as reconnecting Rome once more with its source of wisdom. The transfer of ancient knowledge to Rome through religion is thus presented by Varro as a continuous process and not restricted to the most remote times of Roman history.

Varro's ideas about ancient wisdom also go beyond what we noticed in Posidonius. Pointed references to other cultures such as the Chaldaeans and the Jews, who still worship the true god in an aniconic way,[40] make clear that Varro saw ancient wisdom as a universal possession. 'Ancient wisdom' is thus not the preserve of the Greeks. This idea also underlies the interpretations of foreign cultures and religions offered by Plutarch and Numenius, as I shall show in later chapters. Another feature that we shall notice time and again is that philosophers tend to read their own doctrines into religion. Indeed, Varro even boasts that he knows better than the priests in Samothrace what their images symbolise (fr. 225).

Varro is the first author in whose work we witness the presence of this idea after Posidonius. Interestingly, especially in the light of its later spread among Platonists in the empire, we encounter it in a largely Platonist framework – Varro's acceptance of the Forms being the prime indicator of that. The state of evidence does not allow us to pinpoint the precise origins of such ideas. Antiochus of Ascalon is a likely but not undisputed candidate for the metaphysical ideas expressed in the *Divine Antiquities*. It is possible but can only be a hypothesis that, in turn, Antiochus borrowed the idea of primitive wisdom from Stoicism and integrated it into his own peculiar blend of Stoicism and Platonism. Indeed, the distinction between the three theologies on which Varro draws at the beginning of the *Divine Antiquities*, has been attributed to either Posidonius or Panaetius.[41] It may therefore be the case that Varro acquired both that idea and that of primitive wisdom

directly from his contemporary Posidonius.[42] Given the general character of the philosophy of Antiochus, who pretended to bypass later, Sceptic alterations to Platonism and reconnect with a more ancient authority, ideas about primitive wisdom would not be out of place, even if they are not a necessary corollary of his return to the Old Academy. Given the state of our evidence, therefore, a genealogy Posidonius – Antiochus – Varro is the most likely hypothesis; the most important conclusion, however, is that ideas about ancient wisdom came into being in the early first century BC and were immediately found among both Stoics and Platonists.

MYSTERY CULTS AND SECRECY

Although for Posidonius all forms of culture seem to be related to ancient wisdom, Varro provides the focus on religion that dominates this mode of thought in the first two centuries AD. But religion itself is not uniform: it consists of public and secret rituals, statues, myths, even buildings. For Varro, one Greek cult stood out for the quality of the ancient knowledge preserved in it: the mystery cult of Samothrace. He may have had personal reasons for this preference: he had visited the island while serving as a legate for Pompey,[43] and from his discussion of the cult statues of the Great Gods we can gather that he had been initiated. Nevertheless, it also indicates a wider tendency in the discourse on ancient wisdom: most authors single out mystery cults as the best place to look for unadulterated ancient knowledge, the precepts of secrecy guaranteeing its quality. The link between secrecy, mystery cults and ancient knowledge becomes clear from another fragment from Varro's *Divine Antiquities*, and the evidence provided by the Neronian philosophers Chaeremon and Cornutus.

In fragment 21 Varro explicitly refers to Greek mystery cults as the place where one can find philosophical knowledge and truth:

Talking about religions (*de religionibus*), [Varro] said himself that there are many truths which it is not useful for the common people to know, and, moreover, that there are many false views which it is expedient that people should take to be true. This, he says, is why the Greeks held their initiations and mysteries in secret and behind closed doors (*et ideo Graecos teletas ac mysteria taciturnitate parietibusque clausisse*).[44]

This is a difficult fragment to interpret and, as such, merits detailed discussion. It introduces a point of view that is largely absent from the

---

[37] Dion. Hal. *Ant.* 2.66.2–5.   [38] Tert. *Ad nat.* 2.219 = Varro, *ARD* fr. 23.   [39] Varro, *Ling.* 6.15.
[40] August. *De civ. D.* 4.9 p. 157 ll. 5–6 = Varro, *ARD* fr. 15; August. *De cons. evang.* 1.22.30 = Varro, *ARD* fr. 16; Lydus, *Mens.* 4.53 = Varro, *ARD* fr. 17.
[41] Pépin 1976: 300–7.

[42] A possible but not very strong argument in support of this idea could be that in fr. 242 Varro distinguishes, just as Posidonius had done (Sen. *Ep.* 96.36), between a stage of agriculture with tilling and one without.
[43] Varro, *De agricultura* 2 pr.6.   [44] August. *De civ. D.* 4.31 p. 186 ll.1–5 = Varro, *ARD* fr. 21.

rest of the *Divine Antiquities*: the truth present in religion is now evaluated
in relation to the common people, shifting Varro's concern from the loca-
tion of truth in religion to the uses of that truth. In contrast to the other
fragments I have discussed so far he now assumes that there is not only
truth in religion but also falsehood.

Because of this new perspective, it is advisable to analyse his thought
step by step. Implicit in the fragment is a double opposition, on the one
hand between elite and populace and, on the other, between mystery cults
and other cults. The elite are assumed to have the capacity to understand a
truth that does not serve the common people. Mystery cults are set off in
turn from all other cults: there is no suggestion that there are lies told in
the former, precisely because they exclude non-initiates.

The two distinctions are linked to one another. The opposition between
populace and elite is not simply a socio-economic one. It is also, and
foremost, one of knowledge: the elite are those who are capable of under-
standing the philosophical truth shown in mystery cults; the populace are
those who are not.[45] Read in conjunction with fragment 225, where it is
said that those 'who had approached the mysteries of the doctrine' can
interpret the images of the gods correctly, the distinction between elite and
populace coincides with that between philosophers and non-philosophers.
The basic assumption of fragment 21, then, is that mystery cults contain
pure (or at least purer) knowledge than other cults, and that this knowl-
edge is the preserve of the intellectual, philosophical elite. The corollary
is that Varro understands initiation as either reserved for those who are
already philosophers or as a process of acquiring the necessary knowl-
edge that allows initiates to interpret all other religious manifestations
correctly.

This leaves the question of the useful lies found in religion. It is often
asserted that Varro considered the entire construct of civic religion a useful
tool in order to dominate the people, whereas philosophy would be the
true religion for the intellectual.[46] In this context, reference is usually made
to fragment 18, where Varro complains that if the Romans had stuck to
aniconic cults, the gods would have been worshipped in a more proper way.
The creators of images brought error and fear to their communities.[47] Fear

---

[45] It is obvious, however, that in ancient society the borders of class and knowledge usually coincided.
[46] Della Corte 1970: 123; Cardauns 1976: 149; Lehmann 1997: 192; Cancik and Cancik-Lindemaier
2001: 43–4. A certain influence of Polybius' assessment of Roman religion as the most superstitious
ever (6.56) is felt here.
[47] August. *De civ. D.* 4.31 p. 186 ll. 21–9 = Varro, *ARD* fr. 18: *quod si adhuc . . . mansisset, castius dii
observarentur . . . qui primi simulacra deorum populis posuerunt, eos civitatibus suis et metum dempsisse
et errorem addidisse.*

---

being linked to superstition in fragment 47, the conclusion seems obvious:
figurative cult images are a source of superstition. But, as other fragments
seem to suggest, the fear and awe aroused by religion could be socially
useful.[48] On such a reading of the evidence, Varro becomes a cynical ratio-
nalist or, at least, a detached philosopher without any religious feeling.[49]

Such an interpretation is problematic. It obviously assumes that a wide
gulf separates religion as a matter of tradition from philosophy as strictly
rational. The concept of ancient wisdom, on which I have been arguing
that Varro depended, on the contrary makes the two ends of the spectrum
coincide. Equally, the idea that civic religion contains lies in order to dom-
inate the people conflicts with Varro's emphasis that it has been created by
people possessing philosophical knowledge. Indeed, throughout the *Divine
Antiquities*, and especially in Book 16, Varro assumes that all elements of
civic religion contain philosophical knowledge. For example, in his allegory
of Saturn, Varro is at pains to read philosophical knowledge into all aspects
of its imagery, ritual and name. Even the human sacrifices made to the god
in Gaul and Carthage symbolise a philosophical proposition, namely that
human seed is better than that of any other living being.[50]

The presence of useful lies in religion can be explained if we understand
that Varro's preference for aniconic worship does not entail a rejection
of civic religion and that for him superstition is not caused by the cult
images as such but by the ignorant interpretation of them by the populace.
Civic religion is an image of truth, but its symbolic nature can cause
misinterpretation. Such misinterpretations, which seem bound to come
around, can be exploited as useful lies by political and religious leaders.

Varro considered civic religion to be a translation of metaphysical prin-
ciples into a set of symbols. These principles had been known to early man,
who according to him worshipped them directly, without any figurative
clothing. From his work *On the People of Rome* (*De gente populi romani*),
which dates the creation of the first cult to after the deluge, we can gather
that indeed all ancient peoples worshipped originally without figurative
images and also that before the deluge there were no images at all.[51] In
ascribing aniconism to the Romans, Varro may have been influenced by
those who thought that the ancient Romans distinguished themselves by
the simple form of their worship.[52] One can easily understand how Varro

---

[48] Serv. 2.512 = Varro, *ARD* fr. 69; Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 27 = Varro, *ARD* Appendix VII d.
[49] Deschamps 1990: 291; Lehmann 1997: 192.
[50] August. *De civ. D.* 7.19 p. 297 ll. 28–31 = Varro, *ARD* fr. 244.
[51] Varro, *De gente populi romani* frs. 9, 13 = August. *De civ. D.* 18.2.
[52] Polyb. 6.56; Posidonius *FGrH* 87 F 59 = fr. 266 Edelstein–Kidd.

as a philosopher would prefer the direct worship of these principles to a more circumstantial way of worship which needed images. If he could do it all over again, he would have no images.[53] But there is another reason for preferring no images or at least no figurative ones: they can give rise to misunderstanding. As stated by fragment 18, error and fear were brought into communities when images were created. My discussion of fragment 225 has made clear that this cannot mean that the images themselves are wrong in the sense that they do not contain philosophical knowledge. The error is rather to be sought in the mind of the uneducated worshipper who misinterprets the images. Indeed, fragment 225 stresses that one needs philosophical training in order to interpret cult images correctly. Varro therefore saw the uneducated, not the image itself, as the source of the error. Thus, if there had not been any images, the chance for misinterpretation and superstition would have been greatly diminished.[54] In that way, Varro can see civic religion at once as an image of truth and consider it only secondary to pure, natural religion as professed by philosophers. This attitude illustrates the ambivalent nature of religion: cult images are created in line with truth, but once they are in existence there is a danger of corruption. In situating the cause of error and superstition not in the image itself but in the mind of the uneducated beholder, Varro is in line with what we shall notice in later chapters for other adherents to the discourse on ancient wisdom.

The 'useful lies' of religion are thus tales and attitudes based upon a superstitious and simplistic interpretation of real events and cultic acts, but directed towards useful purposes by the Roman kings and leaders.[55] In a fragment from a dialogue about the cult of the gods (*Curio on the Worship of the Gods*), Varro argues that the fanciful stories of the king's intercourse with the nymph were actually a popular misinterpretation of his practising hydromancy.[56] This fragment does not imply that Numa circulated these stories and exploited the credulity of the people, although Plutarch's *Life of Numa*, drawing heavily on Varro, does claim that.[57] But the stories

---

[53] August. *De civ. D.* 4.31 p. 185 ll. 18–29 = Varro, *ARD* fr. 12.
[54] This explains Varro's apparent depreciation of cult images in the fragments referred to above. It is a safe bet that Augustine, who is reporting Varro's words, has laid particular emphasis on or even slightly misrepresented Varro's words on the consequences of images.
[55] Already Plato's *Republic* suggests that leaders may have to use lies (389b–c and 459c–460a), and see also Aristotle's comment on myths as useful lies (*Metaph.* Λ 8.1074a–b).
[56] August. *De civ. D.* 7.35 = Varro, *Curio de cultu deorum* fr. iv. See Deschamps 1990: 293.
[57] The example of Numa also shows that the interpretation according to which Varro thought that images were created in order to manipulate the people is not supported by the sources. Numa lived before the creation of figurative images (Plut. *Num.* 8) but was still able to manipulate his subjects.

did make sure that the truths that were revealed to Numa were shielded from the ignorant. Varro seems to have thought that since credulity and superstition were an evil that could not be rooted out, it was better to divert them for socially and morally useful purposes.[58]

Now that we have understood how Varro can ascribe useful lies to public rituals, it also becomes clearer why, in opposition to the latter, mystery cults seem less prone to corruption. The idea seems to be that secrecy and the strict rules of initiation guarantee the unsullied transmission of the knowledge deposited in them by the ancients. Initiation, Varro suggests, is reserved for those intelligent enough to fully understand the metaphysical knowledge contained in mystery cults, so as to avoid the misinterpretations that encroach on public religion. A similar appreciation of secrecy and mystery cults can be found in the works of the two Stoic adherents to the discourse on ancient wisdom of the first century AD, Chaeremon and Cornutus.

Chaeremon, Stoic philosopher and teacher of Nero but also Egyptian priest, makes an odd figure in the history of ancient philosophy.[59] Very little survives of his works, with most fragments deriving from a history of Egypt, which probably must be identified with the *Hieroglyphica*.[60] In the latter, Chaeremon devised an allegorical reading of the hieroglyphs, apparently needed because 'the ancient sacred scribes wanted to conceal the physical interpretation of the gods'.[61] Chaeremon consistently maintains that the ancient Egyptians were wise, and that their wisdom is still passed on by, and embodied in, the Egyptian priests.[62] In the famous fragment 10, he describes the Egyptian priests as philosophers who live separated from all ordinary human contact. On the rare occasions that one can gain access to them, purification is an absolute requisite. Their actions are all symbolic and they contain a hidden truth about the cosmos (ἔνδειξις φυσικοῦ λόγου, κατ' ἀλήθειαν φιλοσοφεῖν). Yet, this truth is not open for all to see. Both the hieroglyphs and the way of living of the priests incarnate the secret character of Egyptian religion. Just as the images which constitute Egyptian writing conceal their true meaning, Egyptian priests are set apart from society. They incarnate the truth rather than disseminate it. This theory of secrecy allows Chaeremon to suggest that he is revealing to the reader the true meaning of Egyptian religion, an otherwise well-kept secret. Being a Stoic philosopher, Chaeremon naturally identifies

---

[58] See August. *De civ. D.* 3.4 p. 101 l. 5 = Varro, *ARD* fr. 20. Cf. Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 23, which may also stem from Varro (cf. *Ling.* 6.47).
[59] Van der Horst 1984: ix–x; Barzanò 1985; Frede 1986: 2075–81.   [60] Frede 1986: 2081.
[61] Chaeremon, fr. 12. See also Testimonium 12.   [62] Chaeremon, fr. 2.

this ancient Egyptian wisdom with Stoic doctrine. As far as one can see, Stoic orthodoxy is not sacrificed to Egyptian tradition: his true interpretation of Egyptian myth is fully in line with traditional Stoic cosmology.[63] Even if Chaeremon was of Egyptian descent, he undoubtedly stood in the Greek tradition. One might expect from Chaeremon a nationalistic argument that would make Egypt the sole source of ancient wisdom but, in fact, he was much more open-minded: ancient wisdom is also attributed to the Chaldaeans, who are older than the Egyptians.[64] Chaeremon even interpreted Greek mystery cults in an allegorical way, as we can judge from a statement by Eusebius of Caesarea: from Chaeremon and Cornutus, Origen learned to interpret the mysteries of the Greeks allegorically and 'he applied it to the Jewish scriptures'.[65]

In constructing Egyptian religion as a locus of ancient knowledge – without making it the exclusive repository of truth – Chaeremon clearly flirts with the discourse on ancient wisdom. It is possible that he constructed Egyptian history as a story of how the originally pure knowledge slowly degenerated, just as Varro rewrote the Roman past. We possess Chaeremon's version of only one episode of Egyptian history: an anti-Jewish travesty of the Exodus story (fr. 1). Moses and Joseph (contemporaries in Chaeremon's account) are chased by Pharaoh Amenophis from Egypt as leaders of the sick and disabled. One side of the argument of this story is evident: it denies the Jews any link with ancient wisdom. The Jews are a band of disabled Egyptians, who were forcibly separated from that source of wisdom, Egypt.[66] But the story is not just anti-Jewish. I have noted above the role that purity plays in the life of the Egyptian priests, as a necessary precondition for preserving the truth. Chaeremon may have used his version of the Exodus story to illustrate how Egypt kept itself pure from debilitating influences. The expulsion of the diseased would then be a historical illustration of the care the Egyptians had for keeping the truth pure and undefiled.[67] Chaeremon thus offers a historical narrative to explain how the ancient knowledge remained pure in the Egyptian tradition, while also stressing the secretive lifestyle of Egyptian priests as a proof that they embody that wisdom in a pure form.

[63] Cf. Chaeremon, fr. 5. This is the general point of Frede 1986.   [64] Chaeremon, fr. 2.
[65] Eus. Hist. eccl. 6.19.8 = Chaeremon, Test. 9, cf. fr. 17D.
[66] Cf. Frede 1986: 2072–3; Boys-Stones 2001: 73–5. Chaeremon's argument against the Jews is rehearsed by Celsus, in Origen, C. Cels. 3.5.
[67] It may be noteworthy that a hierogrammateus interpreted the dream of Amenophis that spurred the expulsion of the Jews. Chaeremon, who was a hierogrammateus himself, may have seen his task as similar to that of this predecessor.

Eusebius of Caesarea named Cornutus alongside Chaeremon as Origen's authorities in allegorical interpretation. Cornutus shares several traits with his fellow Stoic: he also taught Nero and was keenly interested in religion. He has left us a brief *Overview of the Traditions Concerning Greek Theology* (Ἐπιδρομὴ τῶν κατὰ τὴν ἑλληνικὴν θεολογίαν παραδεδομένων), labelled in other codices as *On the Nature of the Gods* (Περὶ τῆς τῶν θεῶν φύσεως).[68] Addressed to a young person, repeatedly called *pais, paidion* or *teknon*, this introductory work teaches how to interpret the traditional gods.[69] Cornutus' aim seems fully in line with traditional Stoic practice: he wants 'to relate what is transmitted by myths about the gods to the elements (*stoicheia*)'.[70] Even though he occasionally refers to rites, iconography and other customs,[71] his work is basically a standard Stoic interpretation of the traditional Greek myths and divine names, using mainly etymology and allegory.[72] Consequently, he seems to rely heavily on Chrysippus but knew Cleanthes' work as well.[73]

At times, however, a broader perspective on religion shines through.[74] Three passages are of specific interest. Chapter 17, a digression detailing some points of method in dealing with myths, looks beyond Greek mythology: 'Many and variegated myths have been created by the ancient Greeks, just as different ones are found among the Magi, others among the Phrygians, and again others among the Egyptians, Celts, Libyans and other peoples.' This passage is not to be understood as deploring the irreducible variety of the traditions: elsewhere Cornutus compares stories about Greek gods with foreign ones such as those of Atargatis, Priapus, Isis and Osiris, and Adonis,[75] and consequently he implies that the account about the

[68] Krafft 1975. For background on the treatise, see the essays in Nesselrath 2009a.
[69] This becomes clear from the structure of the work, which is often underlined by explicit addresses to the young person for whom the work was written: chs. 1–8: creation of the world, cf. p. 1 l. 1 (Lang): ὧ παιδίον; chs. 9–21: Zeus (fire and highest principle); chs. 22–7: Poseidon (water), cf. p. 41 l. 19: ὧ παῖ; chs. 28–31: Demeter and Hestia (earth), cf. p. 52 ll. 4–5: ὧ παῖ; chs. 32–4: Apollo and Artemis (sun and moon), cf. p. 65 l. 1: ὧ τέκνον; ch. 35: Hades (air) and conclusion, cf. p. 76 l. 2: ὧ παῖ. Ch. 17 (cf. p. 28 l. 11: ὧ παῖ) and chs. 25b–27 should be read as digressions. Compare Nock 1931: 998; Hays 1983.
[70] Cornutus, Theol. Graec. 35 p. 75 ll. 18–76 l. 1.
[71] E.g. Cornutus, Theol. Graec. 6 pp. 5 l. 13–6 l. 6; 14 p. 16 l. 14; 16 pp. 23 l. 11–24 l. 5; 21 p. 41 ll. 9–11; 22 p. 42 l. 17; 24 p. 46 ll. 9–13; 28 p. 56 l. 22; 30 p. 57 l. 19; 34 pp. 72 ll. 19–73 l. 5.
[72] On the role of both procedures, see Goulet 2005 and Gourinat 2005: both show that the early Stoics did practise allegory and not only etymology, contrary to what was supposed by Steinmetz 1986 and Long 1992.
[73] Lapidge 1989: 1402–5; Long 1992: 53; Ramelli and Lucchetta 2004: 302. Cornutus distances himself from Cleanthes: Cornutus, Theol. Graec. 31 p. 64 l. 16.
[74] See especially Most 1989: 2020–1; Boys-Stones 2001: 49–59 and 2007.
[75] Cornutus, Theol. Graec. 6 p. 6 ll. 11, 27; p. 50 ll. 15, 28; p. 54 ll. 17–19.

cosmos he finds in Greek mythology can be identified there as well. The statement serves, rather, to introduce the argument that one should not mix up different myths but try to go back to the oldest and purest traditions, which are all truthful in their own right. Nor should one add new things to the myths, something usually done 'by those ignorant of what their true meaning is'.[76] Here Cornutus takes on the poets: the truthful bits in Hesiod are taken over from 'those who are older than him', whereas the poet himself added the more mythical parts: 'In that way most of the ancient theology was lost.'[77] Ancient Greek poets transmit ancient knowledge, but not everything they say is true.[78] Careful interpretation is thus needed, for which the philosophical education is provided by Cornutus.

In line with Stoic tradition, he looks foremost towards poetry, but his interpretation touches on rituals as well. Among those, the mystery cult of Eleusis occupies a special place. In a second important passage, Cornutus attributes the origins of the Eleusinian mysteries to the ancients, who seem to have created them as the setting appropriate for their allegorical mode of expression: 'While doing philosophy they started to perform the mysteries for her, enjoying both the discovery of things useful for life and the festival. They used the festival as a proof that they had stopped fighting each other for the necessities of life, and that they were satiated (μυσιᾶν), that is, were satisfied. Probably the mysteries (τὰ μυστήρια) were named after this . . .'[79]

The two passages quoted so far suffice to show that Cornutus' understanding of religion is fundamentally identical to that found in Varro and Chaeremon, with a shared emphasis on mystery cults as loci of truth and the dangers of superstitious misinterpretation of tradition. Towards the end of the treatise, Cornutus sets out more explicitly the role played by the ancients in shaping religion in line with their correct understanding of the cosmos, using non-philosophical modes of expression: 'And thus, all the rest of what is passed on in myth and seems to be about the gods, my child, you can now relate to the accepted elements, convinced that the ancients were not just anyone, but capable of understanding the nature of the world and prone to philosophise in symbols and riddles about it.'[80] Contrary to what this passage may suggest at first sight, Cornutus' aim was

[76] Cornutus, *Theol. Graec.* 17 p. 28 l. 1.   [77] Cornutus, *Theol. Graec.* 17 p. 31 ll. 12–16.
[78] Cf. Tate 1929: 43. References to the ancients abound: *Theol. Graec.* p. 2 l. 18, p. 4 l. 9, p. 15 l. 8, p. 16 l. 14, p. 17 l. 6, p. 21 l. 13, p. 23 l. 16, p. 26 l. 16, p. 30 l. 8, p. 31 l. 16, p. 35 l. 10, p. 36 l. 7, p. 37 l. 16, p. 50 l. 16, p. 52 l. 7, p. 54 l. 2, p. 63 l. 5, p. 63 l. 13, p. 64 l. 10, p. 75 l. 6, p. 76 l. 3 Lang.
[79] Cornutus, *Theol. Graec.* 28 p. 56 l. 22–57 l. 5.   [80] Cornutus, *Theol. Graec.* 35 p. 75 l. 18–76 l. 5.

not just to teach a correct, philosophical interpretation of the riddles of the ancients. The last sentence of the work shows that he also wants to inspire piety. There he states that he had a double aim: not only to learn how 'to be pious but also [how] not to be superstitious' (εἰς τὸ εὐσεβεῖν ἀλλὰ μὴ εἰς τὸ δεισιδαιμονεῖν).[81] By showing along the way which elements of Greek religion have been invented, Cornutus has not only presented the truth to the young reader but also taught him to avoid untruth. In this way, *About the Nature of the Gods* hopes to inspire piety and fidelity to tradition, just as much as Varro's *Divine Antiquities* does. Cornutus thus ends appropriately with an exhortation to stick to the tradition, and to sacrifice, pray, worship and swear 'according to the suitable measure'.[82]

PHILOSOPHY AND ANCIENT WISDOM

This discussion of the earliest sources for Post-Hellenistic ideas about ancient wisdom has allowed us to grasp its major characteristics. Originating at the beginning of the first century BC and thus coinciding with the rise of a scholastic tradition in philosophy, with its stress on the interpretation of the canonical works of the great philosophers of the past, the discourse on ancient wisdom allows philosophers to open up a parallel route to philosophical knowledge and truth: tradition and in particular religion. Religious customs and rituals, either going back to earliest man or created later by philosophical lawgivers, from the Greek and Roman world but also the neighbouring cultures such as Egypt, contain metaphysical knowledge in a veiled and symbolic form. Careful examination, with the necessary philosophical training, reveals hints and adumbrations of ancient knowledge in them. The piercing mind of a philosopher is needed to rediscover the precise meaning of what is clothed in symbols. He separates wheat from chaff, recent additions from the kernel of truth. This is the ground upon which the proliferation of allegory rests in this period. Allegory is often interpreted as a technique to 'save' myths and religion or to do away with its exuberant and unsettling character.[83] Once embedded in its proper discursive context, however, allegory becomes a method used to retrieve truth, which cannot function without an account of how that

[81] Cornutus, *Theol. Graec.* 35 pp. 12–13. The passage contains the only occurrence of *deisidaimonia* with a negative meaning in the work, clearly designating belief in the untruthful additions to primitive wisdom.
[82] Cornutus, *Theol. Graec.* 35 p. 76 ll. 15–16. Cf. Boys-Stones 2007 for the pedagogical strategy underlying the work.
[83] See the title of Brisson 2004 and also Pépin 1976; Ramelli and Lucchetta 2004.

truth came to be hidden in poetry, art or religion.[84] In the texts studied in this chapter, such an account is provided by the idea of wise ancients who have deposited knowledge in religion.

The discourse on ancient wisdom is therefore less of a philosophical theory in itself than a mode of thinking that underpins an interpretation of religion. It provides the epistemological foundation for a philosophical interpretation of tradition and, conversely, philosophy becomes essentially a retrieval of ancient knowledge through interpretation. As such, the discourse of ancient wisdom can underpin a Stoic reading of religion, as in Chaeremon and Cornutus, but equally well a Platonist one in Varro. Yet all these views on religion have certain basic characteristics in common. The idea of a creation of human culture by individuals in line with metaphysical knowledge (in a Stoic perspective identified with nature) makes culture, and religion in particular, essentially ambivalent. It is at best an image of full, perfect truth: as an image it remains at a distance from what it reflects but nevertheless it is closely related to that truth. Moreover, public religion is beset by superstition, which is interpreted as a lack of understanding and linked with vice. The superstitious are unable to understand the true nature of the gods and of the traditional rituals. However, superstition is not a mere state of mind but a social problem: ordinary people start to misunderstand traditional symbols and then concoct all kinds of strange stories. The attitude of philosophers towards religion therefore combines criticism with conservatism: religion needs to be preserved in its traditional form as it contains truth, but certain elements are superstitious accretions that need to be disregarded.

Only one form of religion consistently stands out as largely escaping superstitious deformation: mystery cults. Initiation seems to have been interpreted as a way of keeping out superstition and ensuring that only people with sufficient knowledge were able to access the core truths.[85] A third-century author, Philostratus, indeed emphasises that initiations and mystical silence keep knowledge secure and safe from deleterious outside effects.[86] It is important to notice here that mystery cults acquire

---

[84] Even though it is often presented as the independent retrieval of truth in tradition, allegory usually links a tradition to a specific philosophy. Unsurprisingly, then, most allegories are piecemeal and do not offer a full interpretation of all aspects of a myth (for Varro, see Van Nuffelen (2010); Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 58.374E; Numenius, fr. 31). Items that did not suit the interpretation could be discounted as superstition: see Dio Chrys. *Or.* 31.144, who is explicit about this, as is Clem. Al. *Strom.* 5.58.6.

[85] Apart from Plutarch, Numenius, Dio Chrysostom and Apuleius, discussed in the following chapters, see for the central role of mystery cults Origen, *C. Cels.* 4.38; Max. Tyr. *Or.* 4.5, 26.2; Philo of Byblos, *FGrH* 790 F 1.26.

[86] Philostr. *VA* 7.14.2.

---

a new quality within the discourse on ancient wisdom. When it comes to references to mystery cults and to the use of mystical vocabulary in the Roman period, current scholarship often seems to entertain only two possibilities: either the philosopher is describing existing cults or he is using the terms in a metaphorical way, especially to describe philosophy itself.[87] Mystery terms in philosophers are then seen as sources either for religious history or for a literary practice.[88] It would, however, be wrong to reduce the role of mystery cults in the discourse on ancient wisdom to either alternative. They are not simply a literary ploy, as the authors surveyed are quite convinced that there is philosophical truth hidden in real mysteries. Nor are these authors simply describing a cult but reinterpreting existing mystery cults as containing philosophical knowledge. They see mystery cults as loci of truth *par excellence*. This does not mean that the traditional comparison of philosophy to a mystery cult is absent in authors who draw on the notion of ancient wisdom. On the contrary, it is, for example, quite prominent in Plutarch.[89] Nor does it imply that these texts offer us no evidence at all for mystery cults. But the fact that we are dealing with philosophical reinterpretations of mystery cults should warn us against naïvely using descriptions of mystery cults by philosophers as unequivocal evidence for their real functioning. They probably teach us more about ideas of ancient wisdom than about real mystery cults.

---

[87] Dörrie 1981: 357–8; Burkert 1987: 67, 80; Humbel 1994: 184; Hirsch-Luipold 2002: 175 n. 51; Brisson 2004: 70; cf. Vernière 1986: 346–52. On the use of mystery terms, see Riedweg 1987: esp. 115, 158–9; Cohen 2004; Kirchner 2005. See already Nock 1933: 113–17 on interpretations of mystery cults as veiling fundamental truth, which he, however, interprets as relating to the soul.

[88] For mystery terms in earlier philosophers, see, e.g., Pl. *Symposium* 209e–210a; Cleanthes, *SVF* I.538; Chrysippus, *SVF* II.1008.

[89] Roskam 2001.

CHAPTER 2

Plutarch of Chaeronea
'History as a basis for a philosophy that has theology as its end'

Plutarch of Chaeronea (*c.* AD 45 – before 125) is a famously versatile author, whose œuvre contains not just biographies of famous Greek and Roman statesmen and technical philosophical treatises, but also sophistic set-pieces and works with practical ethical and political counsel. His works show a constant interest in religion, from the treatise *On Superstition*, usually seen as a writing from his younger years, to the Delphic dialogues written towards the end of his life. A fascination with religion is also borne out by Plutarch's own career, becoming priest of the oracular sanctuary in Delphi.

Modern scholarship has long been puzzled by the paradox that Plutarch seems to present as a rational philosopher profoundly interested in the irrational phenomenon of religion. Apparent inconsistencies detected within his œuvre have been used to argue that Plutarch changed his opinions, drifting from youthful rationalism towards religion, even superstition, at the end of his life.[1] Some scholars still cast Plutarch, especially in his later years, as an esoteric, a philosopher bent on escaping reason through religion.[2] F. Brenk challenged this interpretation in 1977 by pointing to the continuous presence of 'superstitions' in Plutarch, even in works of his youth.[3] The antithesis of a young and an old Plutarch has consequently lost most of its appeal. But because Brenk still considered religion to be opposed to rational philosophy, he seemed to cast the Chaeronean as less of a rationally minded philosopher in general, whereas before this characteristic used to be considered as limited to his late work. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Plutarch is now often seen as grappling throughout his life with conflicting loyalties: those of a philosopher, a scholar and a worshipper.[4]

---

[1] Cf. Latzarus 1920; Soury 1942; Ziegler 1951: 826; Babut 1969; M. Smith 1975. See the overview of scholarship by Brenk 1987: 256–62.

[2] Vernière 1977: 9, 319–26; Babut 1994: 580; Frazier 2005: 136; Veyne 2005: 680. Moreschini 1996, drawing on Brenk 1977, is a critique of such a position.

[3] Brenk 1977: 84. See now also Martin 2004: 93–108. Chlup 2000: 152 n. 42 criticises some of Brenk's assumptions.

[4] Cf. Vernière 1977: 45–50; Veyne 2005: 673.

In recent years, Brenk himself has argued for a much more positive view on the relation between philosophy and religion in Plutarch: he 'did not want religious philosophy to substitute for traditional religion, and in this sense was a pathfinder in uniting religion and ancient philosophy, the synthesis which is so well exemplified by Christianity'.[5] This is indeed the way forward. Underlying most interpretations, and Brenk's own 1977 monograph, is the idea that religion contains knowledge of a different kind from philosophy. Indeed, the term 'divine revelation' is occasionally used to designate what Plutarch sought in religion.[6] Although it has been recognised that Plutarch attributes some kind of truth to religion and rites,[7] scholars see religion consistently as different or even subordinate to philosophy. It is sometimes assumed that religion is for Plutarch knowledge of a lesser kind, whilst full knowledge of the divine can only be reached through philosophy.[8]

This chapter argues that the perceived inconsistencies in Plutarch's œuvre and his apparently conflicting loyalties largely disappear when, apart from taking literary variation into account,[9] we locate his work within the discourse on ancient wisdom and accept that for him religion does not contain knowledge of a different kind from that offered by philosophy: Plutarch interprets the fabric of religion, its cult statues, rituals and myths, as reflections of a primitive wisdom that is different in form but consistent in content with the results of his rational philosophical enquiry. Throughout his work, he is guided by a belief in the truthfulness of tradition. His repeated exhortations to stick to tradition do not only reflect profoundly conservative instincts:[10] tradition is also a source of truth, provided that it is interpreted in a philosophical way.[11] There is no divine revelation in religion, but only symbolically clothed ancient knowledge that in the end is identical to what one finds in Plato. This fundamental attitude can express itself in seemingly contradictory positions: a stress on the value of traditional beliefs[12] and the praise of philosophy as the path to truth;[13] the praise of superstition as a necessary vice for bridling the mob[14] and its dismissal as a sign of degeneration;[15] the critique of myth and the recognition of its

---

[5] Brenk 2005: 41. For a similar appreciation, see Hirsch-Luipold 2005a and 2005b.

[6] Momigliano 1975: 147; Vernière 1977: 15; Brisson 2004: 60–1.

[7] Babut 1994; Moreschini 1996; Bréchet 2003; Frazier 2005.

[8] Ferrari 1995: 19–20, 1996: 370–4 and 2005: 14; Feldmeier 1998 and 2005: 220.

[9] See Chapter 8 note 55 for an example.

[10] Plut. *Consolatio ad uxorem* 10–11.611D–612B, *Amat.* 11.755E.

[11] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 11.355D, 68.378B–D.

[12] Plut. *Amat.* 12–13.755E–756A–B, 18.763B–C. The *Amatorius* is in many ways similar to *De Iside et Osiride*, with an interest in Egypt and tradition.

[13] Plut. *De tranq. anim.* 20.477C–F.   [14] Plut. *De genio* 9–10.579F–580F.   [15] Plut. *De superst.*

value.[16] One encounters these contradictions in Plutarch's work precisely because he at once accepts the essential truthfulness of tradition and fully admits the possibly detrimental influence of superstition on it. These are two sides of a single coin: as we have seen for Posidonius and Varro, culture and religion are ambivalent because they are mere images of truth that may have been contaminated by superstition and degeneration. Plutarch's understanding of religion is thus an original reconfiguration of those ideas.[17]

Detailing this interpretation, this chapter will first analyse two of Plutarch's works on religion, the fragmentary treatise *On the Festival of Images at Plataea* and the famous *On Isis and Osiris*, before studying his ideas about superstition. Allowing for differences in perspective due to the specific aims of each of Plutarch's treatises and due to the rhetorical manipulation of his subject matter, it can be argued that a greater unity underlies Plutarch's views on religion and philosophy than is often thought. I chose as the title for this chapter the aim Plutarch ascribes to one of the characters in the dialogue *On the Obsolescence of Oracles*. Cleombrotus of Sparta travelled around the world with the aim of getting together a 'history as a basis for a philosophy that has theology as its end'.[18] Driving the discussion in the first part of the dialogue (up to chapter 22), Cleombrotus draws upon his wide experience of religious rituals and traditions for his philosophical argument and singles out the mystery cults as the best source of ancient wisdom.[19] I do not wish to claim that Cleombrotus is Plutarch, but his project seems, to a large extent, to have coincided with Plutarch's: philosophy and religious tradition lead to knowledge of the same truth.

ON THE FESTIVAL OF IMAGES AT PLATAEA

On the Festival of Images at Plataea is a lost work of Plutarch, of which a mere two fragments are preserved in the *Preparation for the Gospel* of Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea in the early fourth century.[20] It seems to have offered an interpretation of the ancient Boeotian festival of the Daedala.

---

[16] Plut. *Amat.* 18.761F–762A.
[17] I therefore doubt that Plutarch's interest in ancients is primarily due to his personality and his antiquarian interest, as argued by Bréchet 2003: 550. One wonders, anyway, how strong an *explanans* 'personality' is for somebody known only through texts.
[18] Plut. *De def. or.* 2.410B: συνῆγεν ἱστορίαν οἷον ὕλην φιλοσοφίας θεολογίαν ὥσπερ αὐτὸς ἐκάλει τέλος ἐχούσης.
[19] Plut. *De def. or.* 10.415A–C, 14.417C, 21.421C–D.
[20] Plut. fr. 157 = Eus. *Praep. evang.* 3.1.1–7, fr. 158 = Eus. *Praep. evang.* 3.8.1 It is probable but not certain that this last fragment is drawn from the same work as the first.

The Greater Daedala were held every sixtieth year and involved the burning as a sacrifice of wooden images that were cut from oak trees designated by crows during the Lesser Daedala in the preceding years.[21] To judge from the surviving fragments, Plutarch probably argued that this rather obscure ritual was actually a veiled expression of philosophical knowledge about the cosmos. The first fragment is of the most interest in this respect: it begins by setting out systematically in what parts of tradition such knowledge can be found and then offers an allegorical interpretation of the myth of the Daedala. Both parts raise a number of problems that need to be discussed in some detail. The first chapter of the first fragment runs as follows:

It is evident from the Orphic poems and the Egyptian and Phrygian accounts that ancient natural science (ἡ παλαιὰ φυσιολογία), among both Greeks and barbarians, took the form of an account about nature (λόγος φυσικός) covered in myths, largely hidden by riddles and hints, or of a theology such as is found in mystical theology (μυστηριώδης θεολογία), in which what is spoken is less clear to the masses than what remains unsaid, and what is unsaid raises more suspicion than what is said. But the intention of the ancients appears best in the rites regarding mystery cults and what is symbolically performed during rituals.[22]

This dense passage is not easy to understand, but a few elements are clear from a first reading: the knowledge found in religion is not ethical, but physical and cosmological;[23] ancient knowledge is universal and found among both Greeks and barbarians.

The cosmological knowledge of the ancients (ἡ παλαιὰ φυσιολογία) can be found in three places. The first sentence refers to two of them: *logos physikos* and *mystēriōdēs theologia*. The former is an 'account about nature' expressed in mythology with its 'riddles and hints'. This refers to the allegorisation of myths, widely popular among Stoics and Platonists who tried to read an account of the structure of the cosmos into the traditional stories about the gods. Plutarch probably refers to the Phrygian *logoi* as an illustration of this form of ancient truth, which seem indeed to have offered an allegorical interpretation of myths.[24] The second source for

---

[21] Pausanias 9.3. On this festival, see Iversen 2007.
[22] Ὅτι μὲν οὖν ἡ παλαιὰ φυσιολογία καὶ παρ' Ἕλλησι καὶ βαρβάροις λόγος ἦν φυσικὸς ἐγκεκαλυμμένος μύθοις, τὰ πολλὰ δι' αἰνιγμάτων καὶ ὑπονοιῶν ἐπίκρυφος, καὶ μυστηριώδης θεολογία, τά τε λαλούμενα τῶν σιγωμένων ἀσαφέστερα τοῖς πολλοῖς ἔχουσα καὶ τὰ σιγώμενα τῶν λαλουμένων ὑποπτότερα, κατάδηλόν ἐστιν τοῖς Ὀρφικοῖς ἔπεσι καὶ τοῖς Αἰγυπτιακοῖς καὶ Φρυγίοις λόγοις· μάλιστα δ' οἱ περὶ τὰς τελετὰς ὀργιασμοὶ καὶ τὰ δρώμενα συμβολικῶς ἐν ταῖς ἱερουργίαις τὴν τῶν παλαιῶν ἐμφαίνει διάνοιαν.
[23] The passage appropriately starts with *palaia physiologia* and ends on *tēn tōn palaiōn dianoian*, with *physiologia* clearly meaning a discourse about the cosmos: Plut. *De def. or.* 19.420C, *Adv. Col.* 13.1114C.
[24] See Rives 2005. Plutarch refers two other times to this work: *De Is. et Os.* 29.362B and *De def. or.* 10.415A.

ancient cosmological knowledge, 'mystical theology', is less readily identi-fied. The term suggests in the first place the *hieros logos*, the mythological account explaining the cult's existence and often also the origins of the gods.[25] Plutarch may also have thought of the sacred words that punctu-ate initiation ceremonies, but his own examples seem to point to *hieroi logoi* rather than to sacred formulae. Indeed, both the Orphic poems and the cult of Isis (to which 'Egyptian *logoi*' must refer) presented them-selves as *hieroi logoi*. Even though they had become accessible to all, they tried to keep up the appearance of a mystery cult. The Orphic poems were widely read but included the traditional warning to the profane.[26] Whereas Diodorus of Sicily remarks that the myth of Isis has lost its hidden, mystical status and become common knowledge, and Celsus accuses the Egyptians of selling their mysteries on the market place, in *On Isis and Osiris* Plutarch still treats the myth of Isis as a real *hieros logos*, inaccessible for the uninitiated.[27]

The third source of ancient knowledge is found in the last sentence of the quotation: the ritual acts performed in the mystery cults and rituals with a symbolic character in other cults.[28] The importance Plutarch ascribes to them is remarkable: it is the best source for the knowledge of the ancients (*malista*) and not just an additional one.[29] This preference can be explained by the fact that *On the Festival of Images at Plataea* was concerned with the explanation of a ritual that seemed to have defied interpretation for a long time. Plutarch probably tried to establish that the ritual of the Daedala had been created with symbolic intent and that it thus reflected ancient wisdom. Interestingly, mystery cults are set apart from other rituals: whereas all ritual acts of a mystery cult apparently represent primitive knowledge, only 'the symbolic acts' (*ta drōmena symbolikōs*) of other religious rites do so.[30]

The three basic sources of ancient cosmological knowledge, myth, the *hieroi logoi* of mystery cults, and rituals, recur throughout his œuvre. A

[25] For *hieroi logoi*, see now Henrichs 2003.   [26] *Orphica*, frs. 245–8; Plutarch, fr. 202.
[27] Diod. Sic. 1.21; Origen, *C. Cels.* 1.68. These examples allow us to solve a difficulty in Plutarch's text. Mystery cults are reserved for initiates, who were held by the commandment of mystical silence. Plutarch, however, refers to the masses (*hoi polloi*) who are puzzled by what the *hieroi logoi* contain. But why should they be, as the masses are supposed not to have known about them in the first place? However, as stated, both the Orphic poems and the myth of Isis had become widely accessible and could thus have been read by a wider, non-initiated audience. An alternative solution would be that most initiates were puzzled by the *hieros logos* they heard during initiation, simply because they still lacked the necessary knowledge.
[28] *Hierourgia* is a general term for ritual: e.g. Plut. *De superst.* 13.171C, *Apophthegmata laconica* 26.228E.
[29] Scholarship is mostly interested in Plutarch's first source, allegorical myths; see most recently Hardie 1992; Boys-Stones 2003b; Brisson 2004; Ramelli and Lucchetta 2004.
[30] On Plutarch's use of *symbolon*, see Hirsch-Luipold 2002: 138.

single example can suffice.[31] In *On the Obsolescence of Oracles*, Cleombrotus tries to determine the nature of demons and says: 'In many places there are sacrifices, rites[32] and myths which preserve and maintain here and there (ἐνδιεσπαρμένα) vestiges and symbols (ἴχνη καὶ σύμβολα) [of the nature of the demons]. Regarding the mystery celebrations, where one can find the clearest appearances and occurrences (μεγίστας ἐμφάσεις καὶ διαφάσεις) of the truth about demons, "let my lips be piously sealed", as Herodotus says.'[33] Cleombrotus adds a caution that was lacking in *On the Festival of Images at Plataea*: religion contains traces of truth, but just scattered around. One thus has to judge every trace individually on its merits, but the best places to look are mystery cults.[34]

After the theoretical introduction, the subsequent sections of the frag-ment from *On the Festival of Images at Plataea* look for knowledge hidden in the Daedala. Plutarch first illustrates its presence in rituals by explain-ing why the rites of Hera and Dionysus never mix – so much so that the priestesses of both deities at Athens never meet and that ivy is never introduced into Hera's sacred precincts. The reason for this is that Hera is the goddess of marriage, and it is improper for a bridal pair to be tipsy (2). But, Plutarch adds, such a symbolic content tends rather to be found in stories and myths (τοῦτο δὴ τὸ συμβολικὸν εἶδος ἐν τοῖς λόγοις καὶ τοῖς μύθοις μᾶλλόν ἐστιν, 3). He then briefly summarises what seems to have been the founding myth of the Daedala. Hera hid for a while on Mount Cithaeron and inquisitive intruders were kept away with the pretext that Zeus was dallying there with Leto (3). A literal interpretation is discarded and Plutarch stresses that the myth can be understood in a 'physical and more seemly way' (οἱ δὲ φυσικῶς μᾶλλον καὶ πρεπόντως ὑπολαμβάνοντες τὸν μῦθον, 4). Leto and Hera are to be seen as identical, as Hera symbolises the earth and Leto the night, which simply is the earth's shadow. Their respective children, Apollo and Ares, are also identical: the former is the sun and the latter the most fiery planet, Mars. Both are thus the fiery element (4–5). Finally, the last two chapters provide an alternative aetiological myth for the Daedala of which Plutarch strongly disapproves (ἴσως καὶ τὸν εὐηθέστερον μῦθον εἰπεῖν, 6). The story of that myth, which revolves around a quarrel between Zeus and Hera, is interpreted as an indication of a cosmical disturbance of the fiery and the wet elements, which seems to have happened early in Boeotian history (6–7).

[31] See also Plut. *Quaest. Graec.* 293C–D, *De fac.* 26–27.941A–942F, *De exil.* 17.607C, *Cons. ad ux.* 10.611D, *Quaest. conv.* 4.6.671C–D.
[32] Or initiations: τελεταί.   [33] Plut. *De def. or.* 13–14.417B–C.
[34] The clear preference for mystery cults shows that Plutarch did not put all religious phenomena on equal footing, as seems to be assumed by Chiodi 1991 and Hirsch-Luipold 2002: 175.

This part of fragment 1 of *On the Festival of Images at Plataea* raises two fundamental problems. First, Plutarch's attitude to myth does not seem to square with his initial programmatic statement. After his discussion of the rituals of Hera and Dionysus, he says that a symbolic content is 'rather' or 'more often' (*mallon*) found in myths, whereas the programmatic statement gave preference to rituals. Closer investigation shows, however, that matters are more complicated than a mere change of mind. Indeed, Plutarch is not unequivocally positive about the myth of the Daedala. The *aition* for the rituals of Hera is characterised as 'the nonsense of mythological stories of jealousy'.[35] The second version of the origins of the Daedala is dismissed as 'a more foolish myth'.[36] So even if some myths contain knowledge, others seem to be childish inventions. Indeed, diverging appreciations of myth recur elsewhere in Plutarch's works. That myths are truthful in a sense is brought out by the following quotation from *On the Daimonion of Socrates*, where Simmias says: 'I do not know if it is better to stay silent about the story I heard about the sign of Socrates from Timarchus of Chaeronea, as it is more like a myth or a fiction than a rational argument.' Theocritus replies: 'Not at all, but recount it. For even if the mythical is not very precise, it reaches in some way for the truth too.'[37] Myths are thus truthful but only in a loose manner. A passage from *On the Lateness of Divine Punishment*, however, situates myth even below the probable.[38] These passages suggest that the truthfulness of myths needs to be judged case by case and that a single interpretation may not even exhaust their potential.[39] Whether myth or ritual is considered as the preferred source for ancient knowledge thus depends on the specific context of the argument Plutarch is developing.

Second, the allegorical interpretations are out of line with Plutarch's views on physics elsewhere and seem to be Stoic in origin. Different solutions have been offered: for example, they represent the views of a character in a dialogue, rather than of Plutarch himself,[40] or Plutarch is drawing on a Stoic theory of ancient wisdom and thus uses Stoic allegory.[41] For the former there is no evidence, however, whilst the latter is unlikely given the fact that the concept of 'ancient wisdom' had circulated among Platonists since the first century BC and thus would not represent a Stoic way of

[35] Plut. fr. 157.2: μυθικὰς καὶ φλυαρώδεις ζηλοτυπίας.   [36] Plut. fr. 157.6: τὸν εὐηθέστερον μῦθον.
[37] Plut. *De genio* 21.589F.   [38] Plut. *De sera* 18.561B with Hardie 1992: 4752–4.
[39] On the interpretation of myths in Plutarch, see especially Hardie 1992: 4754; Hirsch-Luipold 2002: 143–4.
[40] Decharme 1898; Ramelli and Lucchetta 2004: 392–4.
[41] Boys-Stones 2001: 108–9. Griffiths 1967: 84–5 and Babut 1969: 379–83 argue that Plutarch depends on the Stoic method of allegory.

thinking for Plutarch. A more likely solution is that Plutarch is offering different interpretations which progressively come closer to the full and correct account. After telling the myth of the Daedala, Plutarch brushes aside any literal interpretations of the myth and moves on to Stoic allegory, which is 'a physical and more seemly way'. The comparative (instead of a superlative) shows that Stoic allegory is a better but not the best interpretation. Indeed, in the last section, the Stoic interpretation of another myth is criticised. As we shall see, Plutarch uses the same technique of a 'hierarchical explanation' in *On Isis and Osiris*, where Stoic allegory is also credited with a degree of correctness but only prepares for Plutarch's own fully correct interpretation.[42] It is likely that Eusebius cut off the fragment before the point where Plutarch offered his own, allegedly fully correct interpretation, a tactic that allows the apologist to polemicise against the Chaeronean for contradicting himself.[43]

ON ISIS AND OSIRIS

On the Festival of Images at Plataea provides a first insight into how Plutarch sees ancient wisdom hidden in religion, but its fragmentary nature unavoidably makes all conclusions tentative. However, *On Isis and Osiris*, arguably Plutarch's most famous work on religion, provides considerable support for the reading advanced in the previous section. Variously read as a historical study of the Isis cult and as a handbook of allegorical interpretation,[44] scholars have grappled with this treatise that seems to stand out in Plutarch's œuvre, both in its subject and its method. Yet I argue here that its aim and method are very similar to what we noticed in *On the Festival of Images at Plataea* and that the cult of Isis is also interpreted as containing ancient wisdom about the cosmos. Plutarch introduces this idea relatively late in the treatise (45), in the middle of his interpretation of the *hieros logos* of the Isis cult. The central part of the treatise with the summary of the myth of Isis in chapters 12–20 and its discussion in chapters 21–67, is encapsulated by two extensive interpretations of Egyptian ritual (3–8 and 68–80). In order to understand the treatise as a whole, we first have to discuss the introduction (1–2), in which Plutarch sets out his theme, and these sections on ritual, before tackling the central section with the interpretation of the *hieros logos*.

The introduction to *On Isis and Osiris* may be misleading. Plutarch stresses the divine nature of intelligence, of which the highest form for

[42] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 32.363D.   [43] Eus. *Praep. evang.* 3.1.7.
[44] For an overview of earlier scholarship, see Hirsch-Luipold 2002: 176–80.

humans is knowledge of the gods, because intelligence is the specific sphere of activity of the gods: 'Therefore, desire of the divine is the longing for truth, especially about the gods.'[45] Intelligence is naturally equated with truth, and an emphasis on truth is detectable throughout the work.[46] One might be tempted to take this fairly traditional Platonist statement[47] as the epigraph for the entire work. In this way, self-deification through philosophy becomes the aim of *On Isis and Osiris* and of Plutarch's religious philosophy in general. Apart from putting forward his Platonist credentials and distinguishing his philosophical approach from a historical one as found in Herodotus and Diodorus of Sicily, however, the identification of knowledge with divinity also smoothly introduces the cult of Isis, a name which Plutarch understands as shorthand for 'knowledge' (2). A fanciful derivation of her name from εἰδέναι ('to know') is quoted in support of this idea and shows that what is revealed in the treatise is Greek thought, rather than strange, unknown lore.[48]

As we have seen, the *hieroi logoi* and the rituals of mystery cults were singled out in *On the Festival of Images at Plataea* as particularly good sources of ancient truth. From the outset Plutarch stresses that both elements are found in the cult of Isis as well and contribute to the acquisition of metaphysical knowledge. Adherence to it leads to an understanding of 'what really exists' (τοῦ ὄντος) and of the highest god (πρῶτος καὶ κύριος καὶ νοητός), as he states in Chapter 2:

[Isis'] name certainly seems to express that knowledge and science belong more to her than to anyone else. For 'Isis' is a Greek name, as is Typhon. He is the enemy of the goddess and deluded because of ignorance and deceit, and he tears apart the *hieros logos* and makes it disappear. The goddess gathers it again, brings it together and hands it over to the initiates. A divine disposition, acquired through a long and wise diet and the abstinence from many foods and from sex, curtails the hedonistic and lustful, and teaches to bear the tough and difficult rites, of which the aim is the knowledge of the highest and intelligible lord, whom the goddess asks to find, as being close to her and with her.[49]

[45] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 2.351E.
[46] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 3.352C, 8–9.354B–C, 11.355C–D, 20.359A, 36.365D, 44.369A, 66–67.377E–F, 68.378B. Casado 1994: 350–1 discusses these passages.
[47] Cf. Alcinous, *Introductio* p. 153.8–9 (Whittaker and Louis); Arius Didymus in Stob. 2.50.6–10; Clem. Al. *Strom.* 5.14.95.1–96.2; Diog. Laert. 3.78.
[48] Plutarch emphasises a few chapters later that Greek mystery cults contain the same knowledge as the cult of Isis: *De Is. et Os.* 25.360F. According to fr. 212, Plutarch believed that Orpheus had transferred the Egyptian mystery cults to Athens. The cult of Isis would then lie at the origins of Greek mystery cults. On Greek and barbarian in *De Is. et Os.*, see Richter 2001, who seems, however, mistaken in thinking that Plutarch systematically denigrates non-Greek cults.
[49] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 2.351E–352A, cf. 7.353D.

This initial description suggests the truthfulness of what is to be found in the cult of Isis: the goddess herself delivers her *hieros logos* to the initiated, who are held by the commandment of mystical silence to shield it from the intrusive ears of the profane; and the rites are 'tough and difficult', suggesting that they are only open to the few. Yet, in *On Isis and Osiris*, Plutarch does not comply with the commandment of silence imposed on initiates but rather goes on to expose in detail the myth of Isis, the rituals practised in Egypt and their various interpretations. Part of the explanation surely is that the myth of Isis was deemed common knowledge, even though it belonged to the mystical core of the Isis cult. Thus, Diodorus of Sicily explains, one should not feel held back by mystical silence.[50] But Plutarch never recognises this fact: on the contrary, throughout *On Isis and Osiris* he keeps the impression alive that he is disclosing otherwise inaccessible knowledge. For example, twice in the first three chapters the concealed nature of the Isis cult is underscored.[51] Also, by dedicating the work to Clea, an initiate of the Dionysiac and Egyptian mysteries, Plutarch pretends to be writing to somebody 'in the know'.[52] For this 'intradiegetical reader' he should not hold back from revealing mystical truths. This literary ploy turns the actual reader of the treatise into an 'overreader',[53] who is allowed to look over Plutarch's shoulder while he and Clea freely discuss the true meaning of the cult of Isis.

Plutarch is too astute a writer not to capitalise on this ambivalence. Precisely in order to keep the illusion alive that a veil is being lifted, he repeatedly draws attention to its existence, by either disclosing an *aporrēton* (something that should not be said) or precisely refusing to do so. The Egyptian priests try to conceal the identification of Osiris with Hades, but Plutarch has no qualms about explaining why these gods do not differ.[54] Nor does he hesitate to reveal to his readers something about the 'secret consecrations' of dogs.[55] Elsewhere, the identical nature of Anubis and Cronus, a secret observed by worshippers, is revealed.[56] But Plutarch is not always that generous. He refrains from fully demonstrating the identity of Osiris and Dionysus, since this might reveal sacred rites.[57] Other rites should not be disclosed either: 'I pass over the cutting of wood, the rending of linen, and pouring of libations, because much mystery-lore is

[50] Diod. Sic. 1.21. Cf. Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 25.360F.
[51] Cf. the passage just quoted and Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 3.352B.
[52] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 35.364E. To stress that author and addressee share a common knowledge, Plutarch refrains in this passage from revealing to the reader something that both he and Clea know.
[53] A term borrowed from Oliensis 1998: 6–7.   [54] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 78.382E–F.
[55] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 73.380D.   [56] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 44.368F.   [57] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 35.364E.

involved.'[58] The game of concealment and disclosure rhetorically enhances the claim of truth put forward in the beginning of the work, by playing on the psychological fact that what is hidden seems more important that what is actually said.[59] The same message is broadcast by the repeated comparison of the Egyptian riddles with those of the Pythagoreans, the most mysterious of all Greek philosophical schools.[60] In the introductory chapters of *On Isis and Osiris* Plutarch thus rhetorically exploits the aura of truthfulness that surrounds mystery cults, with the aim of enhancing the impression of veracity it makes on the reader's mind.

If in his introduction Plutarch seems to accept the divine origin of the Isiac *hieros logos*, it soon becomes clear that the mythical form of the *hieros logos* is not beyond criticism.[61] At the beginning of his summary, Plutarch stresses that he omits its 'utterly useless and superfluous features',[62] a statement that is emphatically repeated at the end of the story: 'leaving aside the most shameful episodes'.[63] Such 'extreme and barbarous views' about the gods as the dismemberment of Horus must be rejected outright. Already in *On the Festival of Images at Plataea* Plutarch was aware of the difficulties involved in interpreting a *hieros logos*. Now the problem is spelled out. Egyptian philosophy 'is largely concealed in myths and stories which possess dim appearances and occurrences of the truth' (μετεῖχε τῆς φιλοσοφίας ἐπικεκρυμμένης τὰ πολλὰ μύθοις καὶ λόγοις ἀμυδρὰς ἐμφάσεις τῆς ἀληθείας καὶ διαφάσεις ἔχουσιν).[64] Truth there is, but one needs skill and knowledge to extract it from its mythological clothing. Myths are no rational discourse (*logoi*), and thus a piecemeal approach is imperative: we must take 'what is useful in each myth according to the principle of likeness (to truth)'.[65] Still, the Isiac *hieros logos* contains much more truth than 'the thin inventions and empty fictions that the poets and writers weave and extend, like spiders creating from themselves unwarranted first offerings';[66] even though the myth of a mystery cult is not free from superstitious additions and not expressed in clear, rational language, it is still preferable to stories crafted by poets.[67]

Notwithstanding the focus on the *hieros logos*, the introduction also emphasises the importance of ritual and is indeed immediately followed by six chapters that interpret Egyptian purification rituals (3–8). Following the passage quoted above, Plutarch interprets the garments of the Isiac priests as intimations of the divine truth, a mysterious truth which has been disclosed to these priests and which they guard within their soul, unspoiled by superstition:

For this reason they call the first of the Muses in Hermoupolis both Isis and Justice, being wise, as I have said, and displaying the divine objects to those who are truly and justly called 'bearers of the sacred vessels' and the 'keepers of the sacred vestments'. These men are the ones who carry the *hieros logos* about the gods cleansed from all superstition and curiosity in their soul, as in a box, and clothe it, giving suggestions about the gods, some dark and shadowy, others clear and bright, just as signs about the divine are given in their dress.[68]

Plutarch then discusses for several chapters the rules of purity governing the behaviour of the priests, before he concludes: 'For nothing irrational or mythical or superstitious, as some pretend, was incorporated in the religious rites (ταῖς ἱερουργίαις), but some have an ethical and useful basis and others are not devoid of historical and physical elegance.'[69] In the preceding chapters the stress was on the moral content embodied in the rituals rather than their physical meaning, but later passages will stress the latter aspect.[70] The importance Plutarch attributes to Egyptian ritual becomes evident when he cuts short a discussion of antiquarian authors who associated Osiris with Dionysus: 'The already mentioned similarities in festivals and sacrifices are stronger proof than these testimonies.'[71] Rather than trusting the shaky advice of Greek authors, Plutarch considers the actual parallels in ritual a much better proof. Ritual is, however, not always a good way to access the knowledge present in religion. Plutarch is clearly aware of the possibility that irrational, fabulous and superstitious elements creep into ritual. Although ritual as a general category is not necessarily truthful, Isiac ritual seems to be free from such accretions. It seems, then, that the division between rituals of mystery cults and ordinary rituals, as developed in *On the Festival of Images at Plataea*, is also operative in *On Isis and Osiris*. The cult of Isis being a mystery cult, both its *legomena* ('what is said') and its *drōmena* ('what is done') are images of divine wisdom. In

[58] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 21.359C.
[59] Plutarch plays this game also in other works: see Van Nuffelen 2007b.
[60] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 10.354E, 75.381F.
[61] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 32.636D actually rejects a literal reading of the Isis myth.
[62] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 12.355D.   [63] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 20.358E.
[64] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 9.354B. The vocabulary is reminiscent of 13–14.417B–C quoted above. Cf. Hardie 1992: 4747.
[65] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 58.374E.   [66] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 20.358E.
[67] See also Plutarch's discussion in *Quomodo adul.*, with Hardie 1992: 4757.

[68] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 3.352B.   [69] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 8.353E, cf. 67.378A.
[70] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 39.366D–F, 52.372B, 63.376C–B, cf. 9.354C, 21.359C.
[71] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 37.365F.

practice, however, the bulk of the interpretation rests on the *hieros logos* and ritual is usually just used as an accessory source.[72]

So far I have focused on the introduction of *On Isis and Osiris* and the sections interpreting the rituals of the Egyptians. From this we can conclude that the treatise shares a common approach to the different sources of truth in religion with *On the Festival of Images at Plataea*. Again the stress is on the mystery cults, both *hieroi logoi* and rituals, as the best source. Other rituals and myths are more difficult to handle, because of untruthful additions. In contrast to *On the Festival of Images at Plataea*, however, *On Isis and Osiris* shows a much greater awareness of the problems encountered when interpreting religion. No form of religion is entirely free from possible accretions and contaminations. Myths told by poets are ridiculous fantasies, and superstitious elements even creep into the *hieroi logoi* and into rituals. Plutarch does not conclude from this that his task is hopeless. On the contrary, philosophy is emphatically put forward as the necessary tool to understand religion. Chapter 11, introducing the summary of the myth, directs the reader: 'Thus, whenever you hear the myths the Egyptians tell about the gods, wanderings and dismemberments and many other such tales, you should remember what has been said and not think that these are said to have happened or been enacted like that.' A literal, historicising reading of myths is completely ruled out. After some examples, Plutarch resumes:

If you hear what is said about the gods like this and accept the myth from the exegetes in a reverent and philosophical way, and if you always perform and maintain the sacred rites, thinking that nothing is more pleasing to the gods than having about the gods a true opinion, not even sacrifices and ritual acts, then you will avoid superstition, which is no less an evil than atheism.[73]

From the outset, philosophy is credited with a double task: the correct interpretation of religion and the sifting out of superstitious additions. Philosophy is thus the prerequisite of truthful worship and the avoidance of superstition. It is no accident that the importance of philosophy is inculcated in Chapter 11, precisely at the moment when Plutarch begins his interpretation of the *hieros logos* and the reader comes to the core of the treatise. The necessity of philosophy is Plutarch's central message.

Not all philosophy hits the mark when interpreting the Isis myth: it is Plutarch's own philosophy that sets the benchmark in *On Isis and Osiris*.

The hierarchy of explanations, which we recognised in *On the Festival of Images at Plataea* through the Eusebian distortions, is now explored at full length. Plutarch reviews several interpretations, progressively spending more time on each of them. Euhemerism is the worst possible explanation and quickly dismissed in two chapters,[74] even though Plutarch admits that it is not totally without support in the material.[75] It reduces the mythical stories to historical narratives, which is wrong in two ways. The inscriptions Euhemerus refers to, supposed to contain the names of the gods as generals and kings, have only been seen by that author and their existence consequently cannot be corroborated. On the other hand, the historical kings are only remembered as kings, not as gods, and the few who did receive divine honours, quickly lost them 'after incurring the charge of vanity and boastfulness together with impiety and lawlessness'.[76] 'Better (βέλτιον) therefore are those who take the stories about Typhon, Osiris and Isis to be the experiences neither of gods nor of men but of great demons.'[77] This 'demonological' approach is more respectable, albeit still unphilosophical, and deserves seven chapters of discussion.[78] Plutarch does not attempt an explicit refutation and simply offers a more philosophical (φιλοσοφώτερόν τι) interpretation.[79] This 'physiological' interpretation takes the myth as an allegory of the cosmos and involves a discussion of mainly Stoic ideas. The increased probability of this mode of thinking is reflected in the thirteen chapters devoted to it and, at the end, Plutarch explicitly recognises some truth in it: 'Hence it is not unreasonable to say that each on his own is wrong but all together speak rightly.'[80]

It is only now, over halfway into the treatise, that Plutarch ventures his own interpretation. Needless to say, it is cast as the most truthful of all. At this point Plutarch spreads all his cards on the table. Not only does he reveal the true interpretation of the Isis myth, which relates it to his own metaphysical dualism,[81] but he also makes explicit the assumption that pervaded the *On Isis and Osiris* from the beginning: that the Isis cult reflects ancient knowledge. By waiting so long before making his ideas about the wisdom of the ancients explicit to the reader, Plutarch stresses the higher status of his own interpretation but also invites the reader to rethink what he has read in the earlier chapters. The passage merits full quotation.

---

[72] See e.g. Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 20.359A.   [73] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 11.355B–D.

[74] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 22–4, cf. 11.355B, 58.374E.   [75] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 22.3589E.
[76] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 24.360C.   [77] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 25.360D.
[78] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 25–31.   [79] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 32.363D.
[80] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 45.369A. Criticism on a related view, which interprets the gods in relation to agriculture, follows later: Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 65–7.
[81] Ferrari 1995; Dillon 1996: 202–4.

Therefore, this ancient opinion (δόξα) has come down from theologians and lawgivers to poets and philosophers, being of unknown origin, but awarded strong and tenacious belief, and spread not in speech alone nor in reports, but also in mystery cults (τελεταῖς)[82] and sacrifices, both of barbarians and Greeks, namely that the universe is not suspended on its own without intellect and reason and guidance, nor that there is one reason which rules and directs it as it were with rudders and curbing reins, but many powers and a mixture of evil and good.[83]

After having completed his own interpretation, Plutarch again affirms the importance of ancient wisdom by emphasising that all nations share the same knowledge, notwithstanding cultural differences.[84]

Just as the sun and the moon and the heaven and earth and the sea are common to all, although they are named differently by all, similarly one reason which rules everything and one providence which oversees it, and the serving powers which are set over all, all receive different honours and appellations from different people, depending on custom. Hallowed symbols are used, some vague and others more limpid, which direct the mind to the divine though this is not without danger. For some, completely led astray, have fallen into superstition, while others fleeing superstition like a marsh, have fallen into atheism as over a precipice. Therefore, in these matters, we should take as a guide above all the understanding provided by philosophy and reflect reverently on each thing that is said and done in the mysteries.[85]

The emphatic position of both passages, opening and closing Plutarch's own interpretation, stresses the importance he attributes to the wisdom of the ancients. Taken together, they offer a relatively clear exposition of how Plutarch saw primitive wisdom present in religion and of its relation to philosophy. One should not be beguiled by Plutarch's use of 'belief' (*doxa*) to designate primitive wisdom: the term is not used in a Platonic way to downgrade its truthful status but to indicate the non-philosophical character of primitive wisdom.[86] Indeed, it is not an articulate and rational discourse, but a truth couched in symbols and myths: theologians describe the deeds of the gods, lawgivers order their state in accordance with the primitive wisdom by instituting, for example, the right kind of rituals, and poets invent narratives that may contain truth but are also there to please.

The chronological precedence of religion over philosophy is noteworthy: according to Plutarch, theologians and lawgivers pass their knowledge on to poets and philosophers.[87] Knowledge of the truth is consequently older in religion than it is in philosophy. This explains the importance that religion has in Plutarch's mind when it comes to approaching the truth. Contrary to poetry, religion goes back to the very earliest stages of mankind and contains the wisdom of the ancients, albeit in a symbolic form. Poetry is hardly older than Homer, well within historical time. Although it is occasionally used as a source of truth in *On Isis and Osiris*,[88] and although Plutarch seems to have interpreted the poem of Hesiod in relation to ancient wisdom,[89] poetry can never reach the level of mystery cults. Philosophy as a rational discourse is younger still and came into being well after Homer. Chronological precedence does not mean a logical one: as the second passage explicitly stresses, philosophy is to be the guide in freeing primitive wisdom from its symbolic guise.[90] The reason for the superiority of philosophy is, firstly, the symbolic form of religion. Plutarch assumes throughout that the ancients knew the basic structure of the cosmos but did not possess the rational discourse of philosophy. Consequently, all symbols, obscure or less so, need rational interpretation.[91] Understanding for contemporary man implies a rational discourse, which only philosophy can offer. Plutarch is convinced that an interpretation uninformed by philosophy will fail to retrieve ancient wisdom from religion. Without it, as we will see confirmed when discussing Plutarch's treatise *On Superstition*, one will fall into one of two evils: atheism or superstition.

Philosophy also makes one perceive the fundamental unity that underlies widely diverging local traditions. As implied by the second passage just quoted, ancient wisdom is the possession of all mankind, Greek and barbarian. Its origins are lost in the mist of time: Plutarch admits that no individual can be named as the first to have propounded it (τὴν ἀρχὴν ἀδέσποτον ἔχουσα).[92] When the different local traditions were formed, each people started to name the gods in their local language and according to their particular custom. But diversity is deceptive.

---

[82] In the context of *De Iside et Osiride*, *teletai* probably does not simply mean 'rites' but must be given the stronger interpretation of 'mystery cults'.

[83] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 45.369B.

[84] Hirsch-Luipold 2002: 185 puts a break at Chapter 48. In my opinion he disregards the fundamental unity of chapters 45–68, which give Plutarch's own interpretation of the cult of Isis.

[85] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 67–68.377F–378A. The rest of the work (67–80) does not add anything substantial to what was said in the preceding chapters. Rather, it is an application of the principles just enunciated: Plutarch hopes to show how rituals should be correctly, i.e. philosophically, interpreted.

[86] *Alēthēs doxa* was also used in a positive sense in Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 11.355D.

[87] Cf. Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 48.370D–F.   [88] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 51.371E (Homer), 57.374C (Hesiod).

[89] Plut. *De Hesiod.* fr. 62 (*archaioi*), frs. 107, 112 (reference to the Isis myth), frs. 57, 62 (reference to Plato, Xenocrates and the lawgiver Lycurgus), fr. 101 (reference to Orpheus), fr. 93 (reference to Pythagoras).

[90] This makes the contention that Plutarch's philosophy was changed through contact with religion (Feldmeier 2005: 220) quite unlikely. There is sufficient evidence for the doctrines expressed in *De Iside et Osiride* elsewhere in Plutarch's work to exclude Isiac influence: Ferrari 1995; Dillon 1996: 199–206 and 2002a). Plutarch is rather reading his own ideas into specific cults.

[91] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 3.352C.   [92] Cf. Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 70.378F.

Throughout *On Isis and Osiris* Plutarch repeatedly stresses the fundamental likeness of all traditions. He painstakingly argues for the identity of Egyptian and Greek gods,[93] points to parallels in Greek and Egyptian traditions,[94] and draws on Zoroaster, the Chaldaeans, and other peoples.[95] The difference between Greek and barbarian is hardly relevant; only the emphasis on philosophy – in its rational form of course a Greek privilege – can be taken as a token of Plutarch's belief in Greek superiority.

Throughout the work, Plutarch supports the dominant position he attributes to philosophy with discreet polemic. The critique on poets has already been noted. Antiquarian writers are dismissed as ignorant bibliophiles, who collect traditions without being able to interpret them.[96] History without a philosophical background will never contribute to the truth. Indeed, Plutarch stands in a long Greek tradition of admiration for Egyptian antiquity and religion, starting at least with Herodotus, with whom he shares the idea that cults spread throughout the Mediterranean and are borrowed by younger peoples from older ones.[97] But his approach is different in at least two important respects: for him Egyptian religion contains philosophical knowledge, and he explains why. His identifications of Greek and Egyptian gods are not based on a presupposed general anthropological common ground, as in Herodotus, but on the fact that they represent universal philosophical principles in their culturally determined particular way. Herodotus explains the similarities in cult between Greek and Egyptian by diffusionism, whereas Plutarch identifies ancient wise men who shared the same knowledge as responsible for the profound identity of both religions.[98]

But Plutarch does not simply defend philosophy in general: although he recognises a degree of truth in other philosophical schools, Plato is the only philosopher whose teachings are seen as fully in accordance with the primitive wisdom.[99] Stoicism, the major competitor on the imperial philosophical market, is criticised for leading to atheism.[100] The suggestion is that Plutarch as a Platonist has alone succeeded in attaining the full truth. Indeed, *On Isis and Osiris* is not just about offering the right interpretation of the cult of Isis: in proving that its *hieros logos* supports his metaphysics, Plutarch uses religion as an external source of authority for his own philosophy.

THE HISTORY OF RELIGION AND SUPERSTITION

On the Festival of Images at Plataea and *On Isis and Osiris* share a similar approach to religion, embedded in the discourse on ancient wisdom, which is set out in fundamentally identical theoretical statements. Nevertheless, they clearly offer different perspectives: the former, an interpretation of a public ritual, tends to emphasise the importance of ritual as a source of truth, whereas *On Isis and Osiris* focuses rather on the mystical *hieros logos*. Plutarch's creative use of ideas on ancient wisdom is exemplified in the way he exploits the apparently truthful status of mystery cults by giving the reader the impression that secret knowledge is being revealed to him. *On Isis and Osiris* also introduces an element that did not surface in the former treatise: ancient wisdom undergoes alterations when it is transmitted through religion and customs. Even though Plutarch never develops a systematic account of the history of religion, his religious thought has a clear historical dimension, which I shall detail now.[101]

History plays a twofold role in Plutarch's view on religion. There is first the axiom of the existence of an ancient wisdom,[102] which is historical to the extent that it posits the existence of wise predecessors in the past. Yet it is clear that the 'ancients' are a philosophical edifice, constructed to support a wider point – in this case that religion is a source of truth. A 'real' historical dimension is added when we come to the transmission of primitive truth through the different cultural traditions. These may have come into being through the fragmentation of an originally single group of ancients,[103] but Plutarch may also have assumed that each tradition discovered the truth separately. The key issue is, however, that religion changes over time within each of them.[104] Even the cult of Isis, put forward as an example of how

[93] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 28.362B, 35.364E, 64.377A, 66.377C.

[94] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 10.354E–F, 25.360E, 27.361C, 35–37.364F–365F, 48.370D–E, 57.374B–C, 69.378D.

[95] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 15.357A–B (Phoenicia), 46.369D (Zoroastrians), 48.370C (Chaldaeans), 69.378D (Peoples of the West, Phrygians, Paphlagonians), 61.375C (Hermeticism).

[96] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 37.365E–F. These techniques are used by Plutarch in other works too: see Van Hoof 2010 for how he claims philosophical authority in his practical/ethical works.

[97] See, e.g., Hdt. 2.104, 2.109, 2.123, 2.177.

[98] See the summary of Herodotus' views in Lloyd 2005 and Asheri, Lloyd and Corcella 2007: 135.

[99] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 56–7, cf. 60.375C, 77.382D. In other works Plutarch puts Plato in the tradition of Socrates and Pythagoras: *De genio* 15–20, cf. Donini 2004: 150.

[100] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 66.377E.

[101] The historical dimension of Plutarch's religious thought is generally absent from works on this topic: e.g. Flacelière 1974; Hani 1976; Brenk 1977; Valgiglio 1988a; Feldmeier 1998; Hirsch-Luipold 2002: 174–224.

[102] Apart from the works surveyed above, the idea is also present in: *De animae procreatione in Timaeo* 33.1030B; *Adv. Col.* 1.1107E; *Quaest. Rom.* 72.281D; Frg. 190; *Num.* 4.

[103] The argument that Isis is in origin a Greek word (Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 2.351F) can be taken to imply this. It would make Greek the language of the ancients.

[104] This element of change is ignored by Hirsch-Luipold 2002: 222–4 (repeated in Hirsch-Luipold 2005b and followed by Graf 2005: 259–62). He posits that Plutarch as a Platonist saw the material

ancient wisdom is well preserved in religion, has deviated in some elements from the original truth. The Isis myth is superstitious in some respects and some rituals and customs disappear over time, like the worship of the dog.[105] Plutarch also admits the possible presence of superstition in ritual in general.[106] Change in religion is thus not an embarrassment passed over in silence but fully integrated in Plutarch's understanding of religion.

Religion can change in two ways, for the better and for the worse. In the former case, rites are added that link up with ancient wisdom and philosophy; in the latter they deviate from the truth and lapse into superstition. The explanation for such changes is the presence or absence of vice, a simple model but one that allows Plutarch to account for historically attested changes in religion. The interest of the historical dimension of Plutarch's religious thought is not that it is profound, but that it is present, indicating at least an attempt to grapple with the transformation of religion over time. Positive changes are due to wise lawgivers, as I shall illustrate with a brief discussion of Plutarch's *Life of Numa*. *On Superstition* will then be our guide for understanding negative changes.

Notwithstanding the doubts expressed by Plutarch regarding their location in time,[107] the pair Lycurgus and Numa are the first truly historical figures of the *Lives*[108] and important lawgivers in their home towns: Lycurgus laid the foundations of Sparta's famous constitution and Numa created the greatest part of Rome's religious institutions. From the outset Numa is cast as a philosopher by nature, possessing all virtues, in particular piety,[109] and even though no certain link can be established with any Greek philosopher, parallels between his acts and the teachings of Pythagoras and Plato show that he acts philosophically.[110] The numerous parallels between his rules and Pythagoras' commandments had induced previous authors to think that Numa was a pupil of this eminent philosopher, but Plutarch admits already in his introduction that this is quite impossible for

chronological reasons.[111] Scholars have surmised that Plutarch nevertheless included the putative Pythagorean allegiance of Numa simply because it provided a good anecdote, as did the equally fictitious meeting between Croesus and Solon in the *Life of Solon*.[112] He may even have wanted to indicate that Roman culture and society depended on Greece, as part of the overall strategy of the *Lives*. But when set against the background of the discourse on ancient wisdom, Numa's 'proto-Pythagoreanism' acquires an additional meaning. According to Plutarch, Numa was either older than Pythagoras, reputedly the first philosopher, or was not acquainted with Greek culture. In either case Numa acts as a philosopher without drawing on technical philosophy. In doing so, he is not alone. Chapter 4 lists Numa among lawgivers such as Zaleucus, Minos, Lycurgus and Zoroaster,[113] the last of whom, significantly, was adduced in *On Isis and Osiris* as a witness to ancient wisdom.[114] Elsewhere, the *Life of Numa* indicates parallels with Greek and Egyptian traditions,[115] which again points to a common source on which all of them draw. The parallels with later philosophy thus have the purpose of showing how Numa had access to ancient wisdom that would later be elaborated in philosophy. This is confirmed by a parallel passage in the *Life of Lycurgus*, who is also pictured as a philosopher *avant la lettre*. His state rested on the same principles as those conceived by later philosophers such as Plato, Diogenes, Zeno and Aristotle.[116] As depicted by Plutarch, Numa looks indeed very much like one of the wise lawgivers of Posidonius' account who created human culture in line with their wisdom: aware of philosophical truth without expressing himself in a rational discourse, Numa spreads peace, harmony and virtue among the people.

According to the theoretical statements of *On Isis and Osiris* and *On the Festival of Images at Plataea*, the ancients possess philosophical knowledge but express it in symbolic religious commandments and teachings. That is precisely what Numa does, as is well illustrated by Chapter 14. It describes how Numa spent most of his time officiating and instructing the priests. Then Plutarch starts to make an inventory of the parallels between his orders and the Pythagorean commandments, one example of which can suffice. On Numa's orders, heralds precede every procession and command the people to stop working, just as the Pythagoreans expect one not to

---

world in general as an image of the divine: 'Die ubiquitäre Verwendung der Bilder bei Plutarch fusst auf einem philosophischen Fundament, nämlich einer platonischen Ontologie, welche die Welt insgesamt als materiales Bild einer intelligiblen Wirklichkeit versteht' (2002: 222). He seems to assume that the Platonic theory of Forms is a sufficient explanation for Plutarch's understanding of the material world as a symbolic representation of the divine. That is not the case, as Ingenkamp 2004: 703 has pointed out already, who also stresses that none of the texts Hirsch-Luipold quotes as supporting him actually do so (*De tranq. anim.* 20.477C–F and *De Is. et Os.* 53.372F). The theory of Forms, which is ontological in scope, does not explain why Plutarch would recognise divine truth in religion, as the latter is essentially a human construction. Hirsch-Luipold appears not to have seen that for Plutarch (and other Platonists of this period) human customs and rituals are only images of the divine through the mediation of history.

[105] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 44.368F.   [106] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 8.353E.   [107] Plut. *Num.* 1, *Lyc.* 1.
[108] Theseus and Romulus are admitted to belong to the realm of myth: Plut. *Thes.* 1.
[109] Plut. *Num.* 3.7, 6.   [110] Plut. *Num.* 8, 11, 14, 20, 22.3–5.

[111] Plut. *Num.* 1.3–7. See Panitschek 1990 and Humm 2004 on this tradition. Humm notes (127) that Plutarch is the author laying most stress on the link between Numa and Pythagoras.
[112] De Blois and Bons 1992: 162; Humm 2004: 127.   [113] Plut. *Num.* 4.11.
[114] In Plut. *De anim. procr.* 1.1012C Zoroaster is said to have taught Pythagoras.
[115] Plut. *Num.* 14.9, 15.3–10.
[116] Plut. *Lyc.* 31.1–4. Lycurgus is also reputed to have travelled widely: *Lyc.* 4.

worship the gods in passing but to do it with full attention. This habit has not totally disappeared in Plutarch's days: before a sacrifice is performed by a magistrate in Rome, somebody still shouts *hoc age* ('attend to this'). Just as many of the Pythagorean commandments had a secret meaning, not all of Numa's were obvious to all: some of them can be only tentatively explained nowadays, Plutarch says, such as the custom of turning around while praying to the gods.

But the picture of Numa is not without blemishes. Even though he may seem to have been able to restore the felicity of early human life, vice was not totally rooted out. Precisely in the field of religion, which established his reputation, Plutarch suggests, he sowed the seeds of superstition: Numa instilled such a respect for the gods that the people became credulous and started to believe any story told about their king – even that of a conversation with Zeus.[117] Numa also assumed that the people did not need to know the deeper meaning of the rituals. He passed on his knowledge to the priests and wrote it down in books, which he had buried with him.[118]

Misinterpretation of religion and naïve belief in stories seem to be anthropological facts. In *On Isis and Osiris* Plutarch diagnosed this illness in common man, who, without the necessary philosophical knowledge, will unavoidably misinterpret religious symbols and become superstitious.[119] The same idea recurs in his little work *On Superstition*,[120] even though this text attempts in the first place a psychological analysis of the superstitious individual: 'Superstition, as the name itself indicates (δεισιδαιμονία), is a deeply emotional opinion and an assumption productive of a fear which completely humbles and crushes a man, because he believes that there are gods, but that they are causes of pain and harm.'[121] Its cause is ignorance about the true nature of the gods.[122] Most scholars adopt Plutarch's apparently psychological perspective in discussing superstition. In doing so, they underrate its institutional aspect, also explicitly addressed by *On Superstition*. Indeed, the work suggests that there are many people around who want to exploit human fear and weakness. As Plutarch puts it at

---

[117] Plut. *Num.* 15. Elsewhere Plutarch shows an awareness of the fact that popular superstition can be exploited by leaders (*De genio* 9.579F, *Sert.* 11, *Eum.* 13), an idea that goes back at least to Critias, fr. B25 DK.
[118] Plut. *Num.* 22.2–9.
[119] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 67.378A. See also *De Is. et Os.* 12.355D, with Babut 1969: 492.
[120] It is usually considered to be a work of his youth (Defradas 1985: 242; Brenk 1977: 14; Lozza 1980: 5), but the evidence for it is not very strong.
[121] Plut. *De superst.* 2.165B.   [122] Plut. *De superst.* 1–2.

the beginning of the treatise, 'conjurors and imposters' advise magical purifications, dipping into the ocean, sitting on the ground, smearing with mud, wallowing in filth, immersions and uncouth prostrations.[123] The superstitious man cannot enjoy traditional rituals, which should be the pleasantest things in life, for he approaches the temples of the gods as if they were the holes of snakes.[124] Instead he indulges in the nonsense of those magicians. But superstition is for Plutarch not solely the domain of marginal figures travelling through the Greek world. Several non-Greek traditions seem to be heavily infected by the disease. The Gauls, Scythians and Carthaginians are explicitly condemned for their human sacrifices.[125] Here superstition is no longer a mere individual psychological condition but has become entrenched in local custom.[126] But at least in one instance, Plutarch stresses that the Greek tradition itself is not free from superstition: some of the stories told about Artemis, in myth and poetry, are detestable and shameful in his eyes.[127]

For Plutarch, the cause of superstition is ignorance. The superstitious person refuses to let his interpretation of religion be guided by those who possess the appropriate knowledge: 'They believe workers in bronze, stone or wax, who make anthropomorphic images of gods, and they have such images produced, set them up and worship them. But they scorn philosophers and statesmen (φιλοσόφων δὲ καὶ πολιτικῶν ἀνδρῶν), who try to show that the solemnity of god is associated with goodness, magnanimity, goodwill and care.'[128] One should not think Plutarch is distancing himself here from all anthropomorphic images.[129] The error is rather that the superstitious man considers such images to be representations of the real nature of the divine and does not recognise their symbolic character.[130] No credence is given to those who know better: philosophers and statesmen. The latter probably include individuals such as Numa,

---

[123] Plut. *De superst.* 3.166A. See also 12.171B.   [124] Plut. *De superst.* 9.169D–E.
[125] Plut. *De superst.* 13.171B–E.
[126] Most of the examples adduced by Plutarch are barbarian (*De superst.* 3.166A, 8.169C, 10.170D, 12–13.171A–D). This may be a strategy to make his reader distance himself from bad practice associated with social or cultural outsiders, as analysed by Van Hoof 2010. This can also explain why atheism is compared favourably with superstition towards the end of the work (*De superst.* 9–14): atheism is a quite unthinkable vice in Greek thought. By ranking superstition even lower, Plutarch makes it even less socially acceptable.
[127] Plut. *De superst.* 10.170A–D.   [128] Plut. *De superst.* 6.167D–E.
[129] Moellering 1963: 165–73; Brenk 1977: 28–48.
[130] This can explain Plutarch's occasional critique on cult images: they have the potential to distract the uneducated from the truth: see Plut. frs. 158, 190, 213. But this critique is not systematic: Plut. *De Hesiod.* fr. 46 supports the existence of images.

who were aware of the true nature of the divine and who could adjust
traditional religion in that sense, but the description also fits Plutarch
himself very well, as a politically involved philosopher. Philosophy and tra-
dition should be taken as guides for a precise and fitting understanding of
religion.

On Superstition thus explores in a different way the same fundamental
problem that haunts religion in *On Isis and Osiris* and the *Life of Numa*.
Religion is the domain *par excellence* of the symbolic. But symbols are
easily misread, especially by uncultivated minds. *On Superstition* appar-
ently assumes that that vice is innate in human nature and the widespread
occurrence of superstition attested elsewhere in Plutarch's work[131] may
be taken to support that. Good laws, enacted by a philosophical law-
giver, may be a buffer for superstition,[132] but untruthful additions to
religion and myth seem unavoidable. At some point, the psychological
vice of some individuals finds support among the uneducated many and
results in an accretion to, or a deviation from, tradition. Precisely how
this happens is never spelled out by Plutarch, who tends to focus more
on the solution, which can only be a philosophically informed reading of
tradition.

The awareness of the eroding effect of superstition on the truthfulness
of religion is an important complement to Plutarch's acceptance of the
existence of ancient wisdom. The latter idea shows that Plutarch was not
looking for divine illumination in religion: there is truth to be found in
religious traditions because it was put there by wise human beings. As such,
religion can be said to have a philosophical core, at least regarding content,
but not in form. Yet religion cannot be translated into philosophy in a
straightforward way, because tradition is not static: its various mutations
tend to obscure or deform the knowledge laid down in it. Although some
forms of religion, in particular mystery cults, are less subject to superstition,
one always needs philosophical knowledge to peel away the layers of super-
stition. Religion is never a pure source of knowledge and, as we have seen in
this chapter, this allows Plutarch to emphasise different aspects of religion,
positive and negative, depending on the context and his aims. This is less
an indication of inconsistency than the result of the profound ambivalence
of his concept of religion – in line with the ambivalence that characterises
religion in the discourse on ancient wisdom. This ambivalence does not

---

[131] See, e.g., Plut. *Non posse* 21.1101D, *De prof. virt.* 2.100F, *De sera* 11.556B, *Quaest. Rom.* 3, 5, 25, 32.
See Erbse 1952; Brenk 1977: 16–64; Pérez Jiménez 1996; Gasparro 2005.
[132] Cf. Plut. *Cons. ad ux.* 10–11.611D–612B.

degrade religion as a source of authority for Plutarch's philosophy: on the
contrary, having peeled away the superstitious additions, one can use the
authentic core as a highly respectable source for one's own philosophy.
Religion is thus domesticated before it is allowed to function as a source of
authority in the philosophical discourse.

Numenius
Philosophy as a hidden mystery

With Numenius, who is to be dated to the second half of the second century AD, we venture even further into the wasteland of fragments than we did when discussing Varro. A mere sixty fragments of his philosophical output have been collected by des Places for his edition.[1] The dearth of material notwithstanding, Numenius is increasingly depicted as a central figure in later Platonism and cast as a source of inspiration for Plotinus and his followers on the one hand,[2] and for early Christian theological speculation, in particular in the Origenist tradition, on the other.[3] My interest here lies not with Numenius' philosophical theories but with the sources he identified for his thought. Although the fragmentary state of Numenius' œuvre renders all conclusions provisional and tentative, he seems to assume two parallel traditions of truth, that of philosophy and that of religion. Wilfully or accidentally, truth has become concealed in both traditions, and Numenius emphasises a thoroughly Platonist training as the precondition for rediscovering it. Although this chapter will necessarily be more speculative than the two preceding, it will provide important confirmation of the main characteristics of ancient wisdom that the preceding chapters have outlined.

In both traditions wise ancients and concealment play a key role, as they did in Varro and Plutarch. The philosophical tradition of truth stretches back to Pythagoras, Socrates and Plato, who, in Numenius' view, all withheld the full truth from the untrained minds of their followers. Numenius can be taken to suggest that the full truth has not been perceived by any philosopher since Plato – that is, before himself. These philosophers are

---

[1] For possible additions to this collection, see Baltes 1975; Syska 1993: 193 n. 59 (Macrob. *Sat.* 1.17.63, 1.17.65).

[2] Plotinus was said to have plagiarised Numenius: Porph. *Plot.* 17–18. Porphyry is heavily dependent upon Numenius, according to Procl. *In Ti.* 1.77.22–3 = Numen. fr. 37 ll. 25–6: cf. Frede 1987; Zambon 2002: 248–50.

[3] On this see Strutwolf 1999: 187–95, 274–5; Somos 2000; Kritikos 2007.

supposed to be in fundamental agreement with the wisdom found in all peoples of venerable age and, more particularly, in their religious traditions. It is likely that Numenius thought mystery cults to be particularly good places to look for that wisdom. Even though Numenius discovers traces of truth in an astonishingly wide range of places, ranging from Greek and Roman myth to the cult of Mithras, the truth is not everywhere preserved in an unadulterated way. Indeed, traditions do not remain static. Things can be added, for example by lawgivers who create religious festivals in accordance with truth. The logical counterpart is that untruthful additions creep in as well. Again, Platonism is needed to gauge the value of religion. Numenius spells out explicitly what is only implicit in Varro and Plutarch: the truth of religion is only to be accepted in as much as it agrees with what philosophy (in this case Plato) teaches. Although both traditions of truth are depicted as running parallel, philosophy provides the yardstick with which to judge religion. Even better: we need Numenius. Both his reading of the history of philosophy and his limitation of the truth of tradition to its agreement with Plato conspire to put Numenius forward as, in his view, the main authority for interpreting both the philosophical and the religious traditions. As such, he seems to put himself on a par with the great figures of the past.

Numenius is usually seen as an important precursor of Neoplatonism and a major source for Plotinus and Porphyry. Whilst this is undoubtedly true, this chapter argues that his mode of thought, with its emphasis on Platonic, Pythagorean, and religious authority, should be seen as a development of ideas that can already be found in earlier Stoic and Platonic philosophy. Numenius thus fits squarely in the Post-Hellenistic period and should be studied not only in the light of later thought.

MASTERS OF CONCEALMENT IN PHILOSOPHY

The single fragment from Numenius' *On the Secret Doctrines of Plato* (Περὶ τῶν παρὰ Πλάτωνι ἀπορρήτων), known, again, from a quotation by Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Preparation for the Gospel* (early fourth century AD), will provide the starting point for the exploration of his views on the philosophical tradition. The Greek *ta aporrēta* makes clear what kind of secrets Numenius is thinking about: it is what should not be said or even what is unlawful to be uttered, just as the secret knowledge of mystery cults is an *aporrēton*. As such, the title suggests that Numenius will now disclose the truth that lies behind the written works of Plato, just as the core of the mysteries is not the procession that everybody can witness but the

secret words and objects revealed to the initiates. The fragment discusses only the *Euthyphro*, and we will never know what further secret doctrines Numenius attributed to Plato. Still, it is explicit enough to follow the train of his thought:

If Plato, having set out to write about the theology of the Athenians, had felt disgusted at it and started to criticise it for containing internal dissent and parents having sex with their children or eating them, and for praising the punishments in revenge for these acts, exercised on their parents by children and by brothers on brothers and other such things; if Plato thus, having taken on such stories, had criticised them in public, he would, it seems to me, have given the Athenians a reason to show themselves evil again and kill him too as they did Socrates. Because he would not have chosen to live rather than to speak the truth, and because he saw that he could safely reconcile living and speaking the truth, he put Euthyphro forward as the personification of the Athenians, a pretentious man and an idiot, who thinks wrongly about the gods as nobody else, and confronted him with Socrates himself in his usual way of acting in which he used to question everybody with whom he was discussing.[4]

Setting aside Plato's apparent respect for the usefulness of traditional religion, Numenius portrays him as unremittingly critical of traditional Athenian theology, be it under the cover of the elenctic dialogue. His interpretation of Plato's attitude recalls that of the Epicureans, who replied to criticism of their 'atheism' with a comparison between Epicurus and Plato. The former was never persecuted by the Athenian mob, as he accepted all the traditional rituals and representations of the gods. Socrates, on the contrary, was put to death for innovation in religion, and Plato hid his true disgust for traditional religion because he feared suffering the same fate as his master.[5] Numenius ascribes as much misguided religious zeal to the Athenians as to the Epicureans, and he accepts that therefore Plato hid his true opinion. However, he explicitly refuses to attribute this to Plato's fear, as the Epicureans did. According to Numenius, Plato devised the genre of the elenctic dialogue in order to reconcile his message and his personal safety. The *Euthyphro* had obviously been read as a theological treatise before,[6] but Numenius may have been the first Platonist to interpret it as

explicitly directed against traditional, Athenian beliefs, in an interpretation destined to become common in later Neoplatonism.[7]

It is likely that Numenius backed up his interpretation of Plato's attitude towards traditional religion with quotations from dialogues. In Eusebius, this fragment is preceded by a quotation from Plato's *Euthyphro* (5e–6c), in which the concept of 'holiness' is discussed and the Church father specifies that Numenius 'clarifies what Plato meant' (διασαφεῖ δὲ τὴν διάνοιαν). Eusebius is known to have used his sources in the passages preceding or following actual quotations,[8] and he often refers to Numenius as a skilled interpreter of Plato[9] – to the point that much of what Eusebius ascribes to Plato in the *Preparation for the Gospel* is actually Numenius' reinterpretation of the great master. It is not impossible, therefore, that Eusebius' quotations of three Platonic passages critical of traditional religion, derived from the *Timaeus, Epinomis* and *Republic*,[10] and preceding the quotation from the *Euthyphro*, were also copied from Numenius' *On the Secret Doctrines of Plato*.

A single fragment does not offer much on which to base an argument, but it does show up some tendencies that we will find confirmed in fragments of other works by Numenius. In the traditional division of Plato's dialogues established by Thrasyllus, the *Euthyphro* was classified as Plato's first work. Numenius' interpretation of it, as a hidden refutation of Athenian religion, implies that Plato, from the outset, chose to conceal his true doctrines, or at least those that would seem offensive to the Athenians. This may imply that his true opinions about the gods were among those hidden doctrines. If this inference is warranted, Numenius probably thought that Plato never explicitly expressed his conception of the divine in full clearness. Additionally, the fact that the very first Platonic dialogue discussed theology may have meant for Numenius that it was among Plato's most important doctrines. *On the Secret Doctrines of Plato* thus suggests that theology was the first and foremost doctrine of Plato. The burden of interpretation may be getting too onerous for this fragment, but, interestingly, fragment 24 largely supports it.

---

[4] Eus. *Praep. evang.* 13.4 = Numen. fr. 23.

[5] Philodemus, *De piet.* 1.702–5, 1.959–60, who refers to *Against the Euthyphro of Plato* by Metrodorus, dated to the first quarter of the third century AD: cf. Kleve 1983; Obbink 1996: 380–3. Joseph. *Ap.* 2.168 claims that all philosophers hid their true ideas about the divine. This is repeated for Plato at 2.224, with Josephus claiming fear for the mob. Lucian, *Philops.* 24 refers to Plato's apparent refusal to tell the truth. Justin. [*Coh. ad Gr.*] 21 and 26 claims that Plato hid his dependency on Moses for fear of suffering the same fate as Socrates.

[6] Cf. Philo, *Quod deterius* 54–6 with Glucker 1993; Plut. *De genio* 10.580D; Diog. Laert. 2.29. Alekniené 2006 detects some traces of the *Euthyphro* in Book 7 of Clement of Alexandria's *Stromateis*.

[7] Cf. in particular Procl. *Theol. Plat.* 5.18, 5.132. See also Justin. [*Coh. ad Gr.*] 20.1, with Pouderon 2003.

[8] Cf. des Places 1975; Smith 1988; Carriker 1996.

[9] Eusebius uses the verbs *hermēneuein* and *diermēneuein* repeatedly when introducing a quotation from Numenius: Eus. *Praep. evang.* 11.17.11 = Numen. fr. 11; Eus. *Praep. evang.* 11.21.7 = Numen. fr. 2. See also Eus. *Praep. evang.* 11.10.1, 11.18.25, 13.13.42, 13.18.17. The verbs imply a faithful exposition of the original doctrine of Plato and not an original interpretation, contrary to what des Places 1973: 53 seems to assume.

[10] Pl. *Ti.* 40d–41a, *Epin.* 980c, *Resp.* 2.377c–383c.

This fragment is quoted, again by Eusebius, from Numenius' work *On the Academics' Dissension from Plato*,[11] which is slightly better known as the Church Father excerpted another four lengthy passages. The current fragment assesses the first successors of Plato. Speusippus, Xenocrates, and Polemo receive a fairly favourable judgement, even though they are accused of shifting their position away from the original Platonic doctrine. Numenius regrets this: as the equal of Pythagoras, Plato should have likewise received worship and fidelity from his successors. Even the Epicureans do better: their school resembles a well-ordered state (πολιτεία) without any sedition. Numenius continues his remarkable comparison of philosophical schools to political regimes by likening the early Stoics to an oligarchy, which prompted endless dissensions by the younger members of the school.[12] The same holds true for the Socratics, who divided into different schools. The reason was that 'while Socrates taught three gods and reflected on them at a pace appropriate for each auditor, his public ignored this and thought that he said all that randomly'.[13] The core of Socrates' thought is not identified with ethics, as most modern scholars would have it, but with physics: Socrates believed there were three gods. As fragments 23 and 24 are the only ones where Socrates is mentioned by Numenius, it seems likely that he considered theology the heart of Socrates' teachings. Numenius himself is best known for his theory of three gods, so it is hardly surprising that he ascribes it to Socrates.[14] Below the first and highest god, the inactive king, he posits a second god, the demiurge of becoming, who, through contact with matter, is divided into an intellect and a real demiurge.[15] Numenius thus projects his own ideas onto Socrates.

According to Numenius, Socrates did not expose his theology in a clear way but pitched his philosophy at the level of his students. The resulting misunderstanding allegedly gave rise to the different Socratic schools, who each ignored the fundamental unity of his thought, and instead chose one particular part of it. Fragment 24 postulates a similar

---

[11] Eus. *Praep. evang.* 14.5 = Numen. fr. 24.

[12] Such political metaphors pop up more often in this period: Dionysius of Alexandria, *De natura* in Eus. *Praep. evang.* 14.25.9–13; Celsus, in Origen, *C. Cels.* 2.12 (comparing Jesus' hold on his followers to a bad general and a leader of a band of robbers). Numenius' metaphor continues in fr. 27 ll. 41–2, where Carneades is compared to a robber. One can see this as a symptom of the widespread tendency, studied in Part II of this book, to express order in political metaphors.

[13] Numen. fr. 24 ll. 51–6.

[14] Procl. *In Ti.* 1.303.27–304.7 = Numen. fr. 21; Procl. *In Ti.* 3.103.28–32 = Numen. fr. 22. Probably mainly on the basis of the second Platonic Letter (312e, 314c), three gods were ascribed by others as well to Plato: Justin, *I Apol.* 60; Athenagoras, *Leg.* 23; Celsus in Origen, *C. Cels.* 6.18.

[15] For Numenius' metaphysics, see Dillon 1996: 366–72 and 2007; Bonazzi 2004; Brenk 2005: 36–7; Opsomer 2005: 71–3; Ferrari 2006: 50; Karamanolis 2006: 140–4.

---

device for Plato, who expressed his thoughts 'in an uncommon way and not openly' (οὔτ' εἰωθότως οὔτε δὴ εἰς τὸ φανερόν), and hid his thoughts 'midway between the clear and the unclear'.[16] The detrimental consequence was that his pupils also started to disagree, and his doctrine has been torn apart as Pentheus was by the Maenads. It is only now, and through his agency, Numenius suggests, that Plato is restored to his Pythagorean purity and shines as an expositor of the same body of doctrines as Socrates and Pythagoras.[17] Even though Numenius admits minor differences between these three luminaries,[18] he defends that all three set out the same truth. In the Platonist framework of Numenius, this inevitably means interpreting Socrates and Pythagoras in the light of Plato.[19]

With Pythagoras as the ultimate predecessor, secrecy is put forward as an essential characteristic of the philosophical tradition of truth. This does not need illustration for Pythagoras, whose riddles were proverbial. Socrates' discourses were directed at the level of his students, and he never clearly exposed his true thoughts. The painful end of his master at the hands of the Athenian mob made Plato choose the elenctic dialogue, with both the figure of Socrates and unclear language as cover. Due to the loose discipline of both Socratics and Platonists truth was lost in transmission, torn apart, and spread over many schools and individuals.[20] The pattern is similar to the one we noticed in Plutarch and Varro, albeit within the strictures of a reading of the history of philosophy. For Numenius, the truth, which is primarily concerned with metaphysics and the gods, is present from early times, as early as Pythagoras, but has never found clear expression. Numenius does not explain the reasons behind the symbolic language of Pythagoras, but practical considerations justify Socrates' and Plato's choice of a veiled way of speaking and writing. Throughout, it is implied that only those with the necessary skills, both philosophically[21] and psychologically (envy and hate are the most common causes for dissension among schools), are able to understand Plato correctly. *On the Academics' Dissension from Plato* does not seem to have treated Middle Platonism, so we cannot know how Numenius saw himself in relation to contemporary Platonists. But

---

[16] Numen. fr. 24 l. 60.

[17] Numen. fr. 24 ll. 19–22. The chain Pythagoras, Socrates and Plato is common among Platonists in this period: see e.g. Apul. *De dog. Plat.* 1.3 with Donini 2004.

[18] Eus. *Praep. evang.* 11.10.9–11 = Numen. fr. 7.

[19] On the centrality of Plato in Numenius, see Frede 1987: 1044–8.

[20] Athanassiadi 2006: 80–90 reads in this passage an opposition between oral and written. But Numenius sees similar problems in both Socrates' oral teachings and Plato's written dialogues: they hide their true doctrines.

[21] Eus. *Praep. evang.* 11.18.22–3 = Numen. fr. 17 states that Plato never discussed the first god because ordinary people completely ignore his existence.

the argument so far suggests that he accorded an important role to himself in retrieving the true unity of Platonic thought. Just as Plutarch and Varro disclose the knowledge hidden in religion, Numenius does so for the secrets of Plato.[22]

'PEOPLE OF RENOWN'

Numenius' reading of the *Euthyphro* opposes traditional Athenian religion to Platonist philosophy. Yet this should not be taken as a general rejection of religion as being inferior to philosophy. Numenius actually recognised another path to the truth, religious tradition, as is illustrated by numerous fragments but set out most explicitly in the first fragment of his *opus magnum*, six books *On the Good*. The title identifies it as an attempt to solve a long-standing problem for Platonists: how do the highest principles indicated in different works of Plato, the Good (in the *Republic*) and the demiurge (in the *Timaeus*), relate to each other?[23] Numenius argues that the Good is the highest god, the first intellect and the demiurge of Being. The second god would be the demiurge of becoming and responsible for the material world. Numenius did not limit himself to strict Platonic exegesis and the first fragment appeals to the authority of numerous traditions and their religions:

With respect to this matter [the problem of god], having supported and sealed it with the testimonies from Plato, we must go back in time and relate it to the teachings of Pythagoras, and then call on peoples of renown, showing their initiations, dogmas and foundations inasmuch as they agree with Plato, and all those the Brahmans, the Jews, the Magi and Egyptians have established.[24]

The passage echoes some of the arguments put forward in fragments 23 and 24 from *On the Academics' Dissension from Plato*. Plato is clearly an authoritative source, but he shares his knowledge with individuals and peoples older than him. Pythagoras is again adduced as the earliest philosopher who seems to have grasped the truth. Numenius now adds a different source of philosophical knowledge: the religion of 'peoples of renown'.

In what is not an exhaustive list, he refers to the Brahmans, Jews, Magi and Egyptians. By the time of Numenius, all of them had acquired a reputation for antiquity and wisdom, and, except for the Brahmans, they have already figured in the above discussion of Plutarch and Varro. 'Initiations, dogmas and foundations' (τὰς τελετὰς καὶ τὰ δόγματα τάς τε ἱδρύσεις) seem to indicate the entire field of religion by referring to mystery cults, religious beliefs and ritual acts related to sacred precincts. There is, however, one important proviso: religious institutions are not all fully truthful, but only 'inasmuch as they agree with Plato'. Numenius here spells out what was often only implied by Plutarch and Varro: the truth of religion is always measured by the philosophy of the interpreter. The fragment also implicitly acknowledges that religion can be contaminated by incorrect, superstitious accretions that deviate from the pure truth. Plato, and through him Pythagoras, is the yardstick by which to measure its truth. Thus, the fragment does not make Plato derive his knowledge from the foreign traditions[25] but rather establishes religion and philosophy as two parallel sources of truth, with the latter in its Platonist form being the measure of truthfulness in the former. As such, Numenius can draw on religion in support of his own metaphysical ideas.

Religious and other traditions occur often in *On the Good* and in other works. Apart from the Brahmans, all of the four peoples mentioned appear again in Numenius' writings. Since many of his fragments stem from Church Fathers, the prominence of the Jews is hardly surprising. Numenius praises the Jews for defining god as incorporeal, seems to have linked Moses and Plato,[26] and he may have called the Jewish God the 'father of the gods' who is unwilling to let any other god share in his cult.[27] Numenius therefore believed that the Jews worshipped the god he calls, in line with Plato, the 'first god', and whom he regarded as incorporeal and the genealogical principle (the *pappos*) of the two other gods (his son and grandson).[28] Jewish worship of the highest god deserves praise, as Plato himself had been aware of the fact that ordinary people are usually unable to grasp the first god.[29] Numenius' positive attitude towards the Jews and Moses

---

[22] See Eus. *Praep. evang.* 11.10.6–8 = Numen. fr. 6, where Numenius claims to reveal the long sought after name (πάλαι ζητούμενον) of the incorporeal (namely substance and being).

[23] Cf. Edwards 1991a; Opsomer 2005; Burnyeat 2006: 149–52.

[24] Eus. *Praep. evang.* 9.7.1 = Numen. fr. 1a: Εἰς δὲ τοῦτο δεήσει εἰπόντα καὶ σημηνάμενον ταῖς μαρτυρίαις ταῖς Πλάτωνος ἀναχωρήσασθαι καὶ συνδήσασθαι τοῖς λόγοις τοὺς Πυθαγόρου, ἐπικαλέσασθαι δὲ τὰ ἔθνη τὰ εὐδοκιμοῦντα, προσφερόμενον αὐτῶν τὰς τελετὰς καὶ τὰ δόγματα τάς τε ἱδρύσεις συντελουμένας Πλάτωνι ὁμολογουμένως, ὁπόσας Βραχμᾶνες καὶ Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ Μάγοι καὶ Αἰγύπτιοι διέθεντο.

[25] Dörrie 1972: 169–70 and Boys-Stones 2001: 116 seem to think that is the case.

[26] Numenius is thought to have written that Plato was Moses speaking Attic (Eus. *Praep. evang.* 11.10.12–14 = Numen. fr. 8), but I agree with Edwards 1990a that there is no proof that Numenius really said this. Eusebius just presents it as a proverbial saying (*logion*). Burnyeat 2006: 139–45 criticises Edwards and argues for the traditional view. On the entire tradition of 'Atticising' Moses, see van Kooten 2006.

[27] Origen, *C. Cels.* 1.15 = Numen. fr. 1b; Origen, *C. Cels.* 4.51 = Numen. fr. 1c; Eus. *Praep. evang.* 9.8.1–2 = Numen. fr. 9; Lydus, *Mens.* 4.53 = Numen. fr. 56.

[28] Procl. *In Ti.* 1.303.27–304.7 = Numen. fr. 21.   [29] Eus. *Praep. evang.* 11.18.22–3 = Numen. fr. 17.

has often drawn the attention of modern scholars, who have speculated about the extent to which his philosophy was influenced by the Bible. But apart from the references to Moses and the Jews as having grasped the fundamental truth, and a reference to Genesis 1.2,[30] there is no evidence that he was influenced by the Bible or Jewish thought.[31] On the contrary, fragment 1b makes quite clear how Numenius referred to the Jews: 'In the first book of *On the Good*, Numenius, enumerating all the people who considered god to be incorporeal, classified among them the Jews.' This confirms the impression left by fragment 1a: the Jews are just one people among many adduced as witnesses of the truth – and again: only to the extent that they conform to Plato. Numenius may have particularly liked the Jews for worshipping the highest god, but to conclude from that a dependency on Judaeo-Christian thought is mistaken. The apparent frequency of his references to the Jews is better explained by the fact that these fragments were selected by Christian authors. Even the odd reference to Genesis should not be taken as proof that Numenius was particularly, and for doctrinal reasons, interested in the Jews. He could adduce the Bible just as easily as he could refer to Mithraism.

The other people mentioned in fragment 1a reappear more sparingly. The Magi figure in Numenius' reference to the Mithras cult. In his *The Cave of the Nymphs*, Porphyry drew on the interpretation of the Mithraic mysteries by Numenius and his companion Cronius.[32] Numenius' interest in Mithraism is confirmed by Proclus.[33] Numenius was also acquainted with the Chaldaean oracles, which purported to contain the wisdom of the Magi.[34] Egypt figures in his works as well,[35] and Numenius seems to have interpreted Sarapis as partaking in the essence of all animals and plants.[36] He may also have referred to Osiris and Typhon.[37]

[30] Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 10 p. 63 ll. 7–24 (Nauck) = Numen. fr. 30. Cf. Van den Berg 2005.
[31] It used to be thought that Numen. fr. 13 contains a reference to the Septuagint: Dodds 1965: 95; Saffrey 1975; Whittaker 1968 and 1978. This is highly improbable: Tarrant 1979; Edwards 1989. Burnyeat 2006: 145–9 argues in favour of the older view. Athanassiadi 2006: 79–80, 91 sees Numenius as passionately interested in the various traditions and as a 'Judeo-Christian sympathiser'.
[32] Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 20–4 pp. 70.25–72.19 = Numen. fr. 31; Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 34 pp. 79.19–80.2 = Numen. fr. 33. Cf. Turcan 1975 and 1993: 101.
[33] Procl. *In R.* 2.128.26–130.14, 2.131.8–14 = Numen. fr. 35 l. 15, interpreted by Beck 2004 and 2006: 129–30 as a reference to Mithraic ritual.
[34] Athanassiadi 1999 and 2006. There is also a reference to Zoroaster in the doubtful fragment 60 = Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 5–6 pp. 59.1–2, 60.1–14. Its authenticity is defended by des Places 1976: 184 n. 1 and Turcan 1975. After referring to Numenius, Macrob. *Sat.* 1.17.65 mentions the Assyrians. It is not excluded that this reference also goes back to Numenius: Syska 1993: 193 n. 59.
[35] In addition to fragment 31, see also Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 10 p. 63.7–24 = Numen. fr. 30.
[36] Origen, *C. Cels.* 5.38 = Numen. fr. 53.
[37] Procl. *In Ti.* 1.76.30–77.23 = Numen. fr. 37 ll. 17–18.

Knowledge of philosophical truths does not seem to have been limited to the four traditions mentioned in fragment 1a. Numenius also draws on Roman[38] and Greek religious customs,[39] as well as on Greek literary[40] and philosophical traditions.[41] Ranging from the myth of Atlantis to the cult of Mithras, Numenius' interests seem to encompass everything that was ancient or religious in his age.[42] Ancient knowledge is, it seems, ubiquitous if one looks carefully enough. A good example of Numenius' way of proceeding is fragment 31, where he discusses the two cosmic gates that allow the descent and ascent of the souls before birth and after death: 'Those two gates are also mentioned by Parmenides in his *Physics*, and by the Romans and the Egyptians.' A discussion of the Roman Saturnalia follows, in which Numenius makes clear that a lawgiver has created this feast as a symbolic enactment of the ascent of the soul: the temporary liberation of the Roman slaves, typical for this festival, symbolises the liberation of the soul by its ascent. Brief references to the Egyptian calendar conclude the fragment. Numenius thus piles tradition on tradition as additional arguments for his own philosophical position.

Fragment 31 also contains a rare clue as to how Numenius may have accounted for the presence of truth in all the different traditions. The extant fragments never explicitly advance the idea of primitive wisdom, but the call on 'peoples of renown' leaves very little doubt about it. It seems obvious to assume that some of the religious institutions may have been directly created by ancient leaders who were aware of the true structure of the cosmos. The reference to the lawgiver who founded the Saturnalia, on the other hand, implies that Numenius did not exclude the creative activity of later leaders of a community either. The presupposition must be that they were philosophically informed and could thus create religious institutions in accordance with their metaphysical insights. In that way, Numenius ascribes a role to lawgivers similar to the one we noticed in Varro and Plutarch.

One last issue remains to be considered. Both Plutarch and Varro thought that primitive wisdom was best preserved in mystery cults, as their secrecy

[38] Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 20–4 pp. 70.25–72.19 = Numen. fr. 31 l. 28.
[39] A series of interpretations of gods is preserved: Macrob. *Sat.* 1.17.65 = Numen. fr. 54 (Apollo); Lydus, *Mens.* 4.80 = Numen. fr. 57 (Hermes, Maia); Lydus, *Mens.* 4.86 = Numen. fr. 58 (Hephaistos); Lydus, *Mens.* 4.80 = Numen. fr. 58 (Nemesis). Numen. fr. 55 = Macrob. *In somn.* 1.2.19 discusses the mystery cult of Eleusis.
[40] Numen. fr. 30–4 (Homer); Numen. fr. 36 (Hesiod, Orpheus, Pherecydes); cf. Edwards 1990b; Procl. *In Ti.* 1.76.30–77.23 = Numen. fr. 37 (the story about Atlantis).
[41] Porph. *De antr. nymph.* 20–4 pp. 70.25–72.19 = Numen. fr. 31 l. 27 (Parmenides); Procl. *In R.* 2.128.26–130.14 = Numen. fr. 35 l.27 (Pythagoras); Numen. fr. 36 (Plato, Pherecydes).
[42] Not to forget his possible links with Gnostic traditions: Edwards 1996.

seemed to guarantee the best conditions of transmission. We have seen that in Numenius' reconstruction of the history of philosophy, secrecy played a central role. Pythagoras, Socrates and Plato all concealed the truth for diverse reasons. Yet, as regards religion, we do not encounter a similar emphasis on mystery cults. There are some references to the cult of Serapis, designated as a mystery cult,[43] and also to the myth of Isis.[44] The Chaldaean oracles may have presented themselves as a mystical text. Is Numenius at odds on this point with the other authors discussed in the previous chapters? I do not think so. There is some evidence that he was particularly interested in mystery cults. Indeed, from Porphyry's *The Cave of the Nymphs*, which drew heavily on Numenius, we can conclude that Numenius offered an interpretation of the Mithraic mysteries, or at least used them in order to buffer his interpretation of Homer.

Even more important is fragment 55, in which the early fifth-century author Macrobius attributes a real interest in mystery cults to Numenius: 'Dreams disclosed to Numenius, who among philosophers was the most interested in mysteries (*curiosiori occultorum*), the wrath of the divinity, because he had made public the ceremonies of Eleusis by interpreting them.'[45] As Macrobius goes on to tell, in a dream the goddesses of Eleusis appeared as whores, accusing Numenius of having prostituted them to each and every one. This suggests that Numenius may have allegorised the mystery cult of Eleusis. As we have seen for Plutarch, an allegory of a mystery cult may imply a partial disclosure of its mystical truths. From Macrobius' statement, Numenius' interest in mystery cults appears greater than any other fragment would allow us to conclude. However, one can point to fragment 1a, which mentions mystery cults (*teletai*) as the first in its list of truthful religious customs.[46] There is no need to press this speculation further. Even though mystery cults are underrepresented in the existing fragments, there are clear indications that Numenius thought highly of them and he may have attributed a role to them not unlike the one they occupy in Plutarch's and Varro's thought.

An interest in mystery cults on Numenius' part squares well with his emphasis on secrecy and concealment in the other path to truth, philosophy. In stressing the tendency of the great philosophical masters not to

express the full truth in writing, which in turn led to later misinterpretations, Numenius extends the ambivalence that characterises religion in the discourse on ancient wisdom to philosophy itself. Just as superstition affects religion, philosophy contains numerous deviations from the original insights of Plato. One needs philosophical insight not just to sift through these but also to understand the symbolic and concealed way in which Pythagoras, Socrates and Plato expressed their views. The implication is that Numenius' own philosophy is the only guide to a correct understanding of Pythagoreanism and Plato's dialogues, as well as of religion. Although he shares fundamental ideas with the authors discussed in earlier chapters, Numenius clearly shapes the discourse on ancient wisdom so as to give himself an unrivalled standing among all philosophers of his age, as the authoritative interpreter of both Plato and religion, the latter being enlisted as an additional source of philosophical knowledge and authority.

---

[43] Origen, *C. Cels.* 5.38 = Numen. fr. 53. It is unclear what is Numenian in the text and what is Origen's interpretation.

[44] Procl. *In Ti.* 1.76.30–77.23 = Numen. fr. 37 ll. 17–18.

[45] Macrob. *In somn.* 1.2.19 = Numen. fr. 55. See Macrob. *Sat.* 1.6.15 (who quotes Verrius Flaccus) for similar dire consequences of revealing mysteries.

[46] Additional evidence for Numenius' interest in mysteries could be found in Origen, *C. Cels.* 4.51 = Numen. fr. 1c, if one emends Ἐποπτι to Ἐπόπτῃ: see Edwards 2002: 52 n. 37.

CHAPTER 4

Dio Chrysostom, Apuleius and the rhetoric of ancient wisdom

The preceding chapters have explored how the discourse of ancient wisdom underpinned a hermeneutics of religion in the Late Republican and Early Imperial periods. Authors as diverse and chronologically distant as Varro, Plutarch and Numenius exploit its potential to provide another source of authority for their philosophy. The notion possibly being of Stoic origin, most of our earliest sources (Posidonius, Chaeremon and Cornutus) for it are indeed Stoic, with the notable exception of Varro. By the end of the first century and definitely in the second, however, the balance has shifted and almost exclusively Platonists seem to draw on the concept, with Plutarch, Numenius and, as we shall see in Chapter 11, Celsus as best examples. Ancient wisdom appears in ever-changing guises, although certain characteristics return, such as the wilful creation of religion by 'ancients' and the consequent ambivalent nature of religion as an image of truth, the role of wise lawgivers in adjusting it in line with truth, and the focus on secrecy and mystery cults.

This chapter argues that the discourse exerted an attraction beyond the sphere of school philosophy. To a certain extent, this is already clear from some of the authors discussed. For example, in contrast to his technical treatises, Plutarch's religious works aimed at a wider audience than specialised philosophers. The idea is also regularly drawn upon by the late second-century 'popular' philosopher Maximus of Tyre, in his orations probably addressed to the educated youth of Rome.[1] Traces of the discourse on ancient wisdom can be detected in other texts as well,[2] but the present chapter limits itself to two outstanding examples of the literary production of the Second Sophistic: the *Borystheniticus* by Dio Chrysostom and Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*. It will show that we acquire new insights into the arguments and themes of these works when reading them as engaging

with the discourse of ancient wisdom. Both authors have a philosophical background, with Dio leaning towards Stoicism and Apuleius favouring Plato, and they illustrate well how thin and permeable the divide between sophists and philosophers was in this period.[3] Yet their treatment of ancient wisdom is literary and ironical rather than philosophical: Dio uses it to shed doubts on the superiority of Greek culture, whereas the *Metamorphoses* can be read as exploring the dark recesses of superstition. As such, both works reveal the attraction of the discourse on ancient wisdom in the Post-Hellenistic period, as well as its rhetorical potential.

DIO'S *BORYSTHENITICUS*

Dio Chrysostom presents us with a fascinating mixture of philosophy and rhetoric. As a central figure of the literary stage at the end of the first century and the beginning of the second century AD, he combines Stoic doctrinal allegiance with sympathy for the Cynic way of life. In the *Discourse Held in Borysthenes* (*Borystheniticus*), we therefore encounter not so much a theoretical acceptance of ancient wisdom as a crafty exploitation of its literary potential.[4] In that speech Dio narrates a visit he made to Olbia (previously known as Borysthenes), on the shores of the Black Sea. The speech can be divided into four parts.[5] The first sets the scene (1–16): outside Olbia, depicted as a city in decline and under constant attack by the barbarian Scythians, Dio meets his friend Callistratus. In typically sophistic manner, Dio questions Homer's standing as superior over all poets. To discuss the issues raised, Dio and Callistratus go to the temple of Zeus inside the city. Then the topic seems to change suddenly. To a gathering audience, Dio now proposes to set out the concept of the city-state (*polis*) (18–23). An elderly member of the audience interrupts him and asks him to discuss the heavenly city: they rarely have cultivated visitors and he himself admires Plato. Dio accedes to the demand and explains the Stoic idea of a heavenly *polis*, stressing that Zeus is its father and king (24–38). The final part relates a myth about Zeus, told by the Magi in their mystery cult, who had it from Zoroaster. In what is basically an exposition of Stoic cosmology, the cosmos is compared to a chariot drawn by four horses, Zeus who is fire, Hera air, Poseidon water and Hestia earth. Their normal orderly behaviour is occasionally disturbed, leading to natural

---

[1] Max. Tyr. *Or.* 4.5, 26.2.

[2] E.g. Strabo 467E; Arist. [*De mundo*] 6.397b; Apollonius of Tyana, *On Sacrifice*, in Porph. *Abst.* 2.35.2; Aristid. *Or.* 1.341, 45.17; Tert. *Adversus Marcionem* 1.13.

[3] For various approaches on this issue, see Swain 1996; Goldhill 2001; Whitmarsh 2001; Trapp 2007.

[4] The date of the oration cannot be established with certainty: see Desideri 1978: 318.

[5] I follow Russell 1992: 20–1. On the speech, see also Desideri 1978: 318–27; Gangloff 2006: 299–305, 352–65; Trapp 2007: 185–90.

disasters such as cataclysmic floods. But after a very long span of time, the fire of the horse of Zeus consumes all, after which a new cosmos is born (39–50). This is an obvious allusion to the Stoic doctrine of *ekpyrōsis*, the periodical conflagration of the universe and its subsequent rebirth. This last section, arguing that Greek poets have little insight into the cosmos, picks up the issue of the authority of poetry that was broached at the start.

It is the last part with its myth that interests us here. One might be tempted to explain the entire story as an intertextual and sophistic game, for example by taking the reference to the Magi as Platonic influence from the *Alcibiades* or the Pseudo-Platonic *Axiochus*.[6] Indeed, the myth is evidently a calque on the one told in Plato's *Phaedrus*.[7] But there is more to the myth than a game of literary allusion, as the Platonic reference does not explain the role played by the Magi and their mystery cults. I do not wish to suggest that Dio is revealing unknown facts about Mithraic mysteries, an idea defended by F. Cumont and not entirely dead yet.[8] Rather, Dio is exploiting a central idea of the discourse on primitive wisdom, namely that mystery cults are ideal places to look for philosophical knowledge.

Indeed, in the run-up to the myth, Dio explicitly claims to be revealing a *hieros logos*:

Another admirable myth is sung in the secret rites by wise men (*magi*), who praise this god as the supreme and original driver of the most perfect team. For the team of Helios, they say, is younger compared with that one, though visible to all because its course is run in full view. Therefore, they say, the team of Helios has enjoyed a reputation with all mankind, beginning, in effect, with the poets, who every time they describe risings and settings all expound in the same way the yoking of the horses and Helios himself mounting his chariot. But the mighty and supreme team of Zeus has never been praised as it deserves by any of the poets of our land, either by Homer or Hesiod; and yet Zoroaster and the Magi, who learned it from him, sing of it.[9]

Dio pretends to be revealing truthful, but normally inaccessible, knowledge. It is inaccessible because it is hidden in a mystery cult, but also because Homer and Hesiod, the educators of the Greeks and the main sources for traditional Stoic allegory, ignore the precise role and activity of the chariot led by Zeus. But it can be found in the mysteries of the Magi, designated as *aporrēta*. A chapter later, the Magi are described as especially apt for the truth. They are 'the best endowed by nature for the truth and capable of understanding god – persons whom the Persians call

---

6 Pl. *Alc.* 1.121e–122a, [*Ax.*] 371a–372b.   7 Trapp 1990: 148–55; Nesselrath 2003; Billault 2005.
8 Cumont 1938; Waegeman 1994: 309–11.   9 Dio Chrys. *Or.* 36.39–40.

"Magi", who understand how to serve the divine power, not sorcerers, as the Greeks ignorantly use the word'.[10] In linking mystery cults and truth, Dio exploits the psychological appeal of a claim to reveal the truth: what is hidden seems to be more truthful than what is open for all to see. It is a trope common in the literature of this period: revealing a mystery cult or having been initiated into one implies knowing the truth. I have already noted this in respect to Plutarch's *On Isis and Osiris*, but further examples can be adduced. Lucian's treatise *On the Syrian Goddess*, for example, repeatedly pretends to be revealing a *hieros logos*, underscoring in that way the truthfulness of what he is telling.[11] Again, at the beginning of his allegorical interpretation of Homer, Heraclitus (first century AD?) says that he has been initiated and thus knows the truth. Towards the end he uses mystical vocabulary to describe Homer's wisdom, and some of his quite odd references to initiation early in the work can only be understood if mystery cults are a cipher for truth.[12]

Dio's *Borystheniticus* thus exploits the status that mystery cults had acquired in the discourse on ancient wisdom by framing the myth of the Magi as a piece of ancient lore preserved in the *hieros logos* of the Zoroastrian mysteries. The identification of mystery cults as a locus of philosophical truth also underlies the chapters leading up to the myth of the chariot (33–5). There Dio contrasts the limited knowledge of Greek poets with the full truth as preserved by the Magi. He admits that the poets are not 'entirely failing to understand the holy words (*hieroi logoi*)': some snippets of truths about the cosmos can be found in their poems. But the use of the term *hieroi logoi* then introduces a lengthy comparison of the poets to people standing outside the doors during mystery ceremonies. This image serves to explain that the poets did not have a complete grasp of the truth: 'They have not been properly initiated according to the custom and law of the initiates, nor do they know anything clear, as is said, about the truth concerning the universe.' Poets are thus excluded from a full grasp of the truth. Nevertheless, 'it is likely enough that people moving around near some initiatory ceremony, by the entrance, should to this extent be aware of something inside, when a mystic cry has been uttered, or a fire is seen above the building'. Dio thus admits that Homer and Hesiod may have had flashes of divine inspiration, but these were

---

10 Dio Chrys. *Or.* 36.41.
11 Lucian, *Syr. D.* 2, 4, 11, 15, 26: cf. Lightfoot 2003: 179. One notes that Alexander of Abonuteichus also pretends to reveal the true nature of the divine in his mystery cult (Lucian, *Alex.* 43).
12 Heraclitus 3.3, 6.4, 53.1, 64.3, 76.1. I do not think it is very helpful to explain Heraclitus' references to mystery cults with Neoplatonic parallels, as do Russell and Konstan 2005: xii, xxiv.

clearly not sufficient to elevate them to the level of full truth. Later poets are represented in an even less flattering way, when Dio compares them to the uninitiated addressing the uninitiated, even when they pretend to introduce people to the truths about the gods. Dio's overtly negative tone should not deceive us though: in thinking that Homer and Hesiod have a partial grasp of the truth, he sees their relation to ancient wisdom in a way similar to that we noticed for Cornutus. The negative assessment of the Greek tradition is rather caused by the contrast with the depiction of the Magi as fully knowledgeable about the truth.

The end of Dio's *Borystheniticus* thus alludes to the discourse of primitive wisdom: a barbarian mystery cult, going back to the most ancient traditions, has preserved the truth about the cosmos, albeit in a symbolic form. In fact, this is the only time in Dio's corpus that all the major elements of the discourse on primitive wisdom are put on stage to such an explicit degree. Elsewhere, there are some references to the usefulness of myths and to the truth about the cosmos known by ancients such as Orpheus and Linus.[13] Once, the knowledge of the truth is ascribed to a priest at Onuphis.[14] Taking these and other passages together,[15] it is clear that Dio was familiar with the discourse on ancient wisdom as an account of how knowledge was handed down through religion.

Yet, as was most fully shown by D. Russell in his commentary, irony is palpable in this passage from the *Borystheniticus*.[16] First of all, Dio quite clearly made up the entire setting: he borrows the mode of the *hieros logos* to pass on what is standard Stoic doctrine, and the myth itself is calqued on the one told by Plato in the *Phaedrus*. But there is more. Leading up to the myth, Dio strongly inflates the expectations of his readers by his depiction of it as a *hieros logos*: they are expecting to hear unknown truths. At the end of the myth and the speech, however, the suspense is totally deflated: 'And if the form of the myth has turned out to be utterly lofty and as if vanishing from sight, as experts in bird lore say that the bird that goes too high and hides itself in the clouds invalidates the augury, it is not me who is to blame, but rather the demand of the people from Borysthenes, as they bade me to speak that day.'[17] The comparison with augural practice suggests that the myth may have said nothing at all: maybe it was all too highbrow and ethereal. This procedure, of introducing a myth with a

strong pretension of truth from which the author distances himself at the end, is not unknown in the literature of this period.[18] Another sign of irony is the negative judgement on Homer and Hesiod, who did not manage to move beyond the level of what is visible to all. Since they are traditionally considered to be the great educators of the Greek people, the Greeks must therefore be equally ignorant, whereas the truth is to be sought among the barbarians. This is a remarkable stance for somebody who is representing Greek culture in an outpost of Hellenism, where the inhabitants hardly know any Greek any more and beg him to discuss Plato and Greek poetry.[19] Dio's message seems to go straight against the expectations of his Olbian audience who so highly regard Greek culture, and as such it questions assumptions about Greek superiority that the Greek readers outside Olbia, at whom this speech is obviously aimed, may have had. The suggestion seems to be that barbarians are wiser than Greeks. But even this seemingly negative attitude towards Greek culture is not the last word. At the end of the speech one realises that the myth, presented as barbarian wisdom lost to the Greeks, is actually Stoicism in a Platonic dress: it dresses up the Stoic doctrine of *ekpyrōsis* in the myth of the *Phaedrus*. Barbarian wisdom is, then, in reality Greek. The speech thus questions categories of Greekness in ways typical for the debates of the Second Sophistic.[20]

A modern reader might be tempted to understand the ambiguous status of the myth in the *Borystheniticus* as a subliminal recognition of the weakness of the entire discourse about primitive wisdom. This may be the case. None of the authors surveyed has made an effort really to understand the traditions he adduces in support of his own philosophical position: even though philosophers pretend that they detect ancient truth in foreign religion, they actually read the propositions of their own schools into it. On such an interpretation, Dio is laying bare the hidden structure of the discourse, which rehabilitates foreign cultures as a source of authority for Greek philosophy, not dissimilar to the way in which some of the production of the Second Sophistic questions categories of Greekness and lays bare its constructed nature.[21] There exists, however, a different reading, which must not be in contradiction with the previous one. The very fact that Dio chose the trope of primitive wisdom to get his message across, even with its ironical tone, illustrates the appeal the discourse had. No reader could mistake the fact that Dio was making the myth up, but everyone would

---

[13] Dio Chrys. *Or.* 5.3, 1.57.   [14] Dio Chrys. *Or.* 11.37–43. Dio refers to Hdt. 2.111–20.

[15] Some traces of the idea can be found in the *Olympic Oration* (12): 10–12, 28, 40, 47.

[16] Russell 1992 *passim*.

[17] Dio Chrys. *Or.* 36.61. Note the Platonic colouring of this demand to speak in comparison with the *Phaedrus*.

[18] An obvious example is the myth told near the end of Plut. *De fac.* 26–30, which pretends to reveal mystery lore. But at the end it is represented as just a myth with little truth.

[19] Dio Chrys. *Or.* 36.9.   [20] On this, see most recently Goldhill 2001 and Whitmarsh 2001.

[21] Whitmarsh 2001.

understand that the orator wanted to stress the truthful character of what he was saying by drawing on the discourse about ancient wisdom. Dio is thus exploiting its rhetorical potential, the power of which we already noted in Plutarch's *On Isis and Osiris*. The question whether he adhered to the substance of the discourse or not, is therefore secondary to the fact that he perceived the rhetorical potential of the format.

APULEIUS' METAMORPHOSES

Another case where literary sophistry sheds doubt on philosophical sincerity is that of Apuleius (*c.* AD 125–80). Questions about the historical setting of the *Apology*, Apuleius' courtroom defence against accusations of magic, have receded in favour of an emphasis on its literary nature as a subtle piece of self-presentation.[22] In the last decades, scholarship has also tended to move away from readings that understand the *Metamorphoses* as a serious account of religion and an attempt to reconcile the cult of Isis with Platonism;[23] instead the irony in the *Metamorphoses* is emphasised and the novel read as a satire 'on religious mania and youthful gullibility'.[24] Such interpretations create an interesting contrast within Apuleius' œuvre: he was not just the author of the *Apology* and the *Metamorphoses*, literary fireworks that lay bare his dashing sophistic talent, but also of writings with a primarily philosophical content, such as *On Plato* and *On Socrates' Demon*. These philosophical works indicate a wider interest beyond narrative, entertainment and irony. If we take the *Metamorphoses* and the *Apology* to be only literary works of sophistry, Apuleius appears to be a true sophist who changed his garb according to the audience he targeted. His philosophical output then either stands alongside this literary œuvre or has to be interpreted as another mode of sophistic display.[25] Yet entertainment and education do not mutually exclude each other, as many of the Second Sophistic authors discussed in this and the previous chapters illustrate. Whilst fully accepting the literary nature of the *Apology* and the *Metamorphoses*, I wish to suggest here that we can see these works engage with the philosophical ideas about ancient wisdom that we have explored so far and

---

[22] Harrison 2000; Hammerstaedt 2002, with further references. Its historicity is discussed by Riemer 2006.

[23] For various views in that direction, see, e.g., Merkelbach 1962; Wlosok 1969; Griffiths 1975; Walsh 1981; Fick-Michel 1991. For a recent restatement of such a view, see Kenney 2003; Frangoulidis 2008, with the review by Kirchenko 2009. Shumate 1996: 11–12 and Harrison 2000: 236–7 offer overviews of the different positions taken.

[24] Harrison 2000: 248. In this sense, see also Van Mal-Maeder 1997. The decisive impetus for such readings was provided by Winkler 1985.

[25] Harrison 2000 interprets them on those lines.

---

understand them as exploiting the ambivalent nature of religion. Although none of Apuleius' works explicitly subscribes to the idea that religion was created by the ancients, numerous parallels suggest that Apuleius was aware of the discourse. In particular, the *Apology* exploits the idea that religion and philosophy converge in the same truths, whereas the *Metamorphoses* can be read as describing religion as heavily tainted by superstitious and untruthful accretions and is, as such, a satire on unphilosophical interpretations of religion. The following discussion will thus interpret both works in the light of the ideas discussed earlier in this book. As such, this section focuses on one particular aspect and cannot pretend to exhaust the meaning of these works.[26] As has often been noted, the *Metamorphoses* especially is so rich a narrative that it resists all definitive interpretations. But my discussion hopes to show that, at least in this particular respect, Apuleius engages creatively and wittily with the ideas of his own time.

The *Apology* is Apuleius' defence against an accusation of magic, brought against him as part of a quarrel about an inheritance. His line of defence is that he has a deep interest in religion because he is a philosopher. Precisely because religion and philosophy converge on the same truth, the sophist can defend his seemingly awkward interest in religion as driven by philosophical preoccupations: the philosopher is the pathfinder of truth and he looks for all traces of truth, not just in philosophy. Philosophy and religion are thus similar undertakings for Apuleius. Indeed, at one point he exclaims that a philosopher 'knows himself to be the haruspex of all animals, the priest of all the gods' (*philosopho . . . qui se sciat omnium animalium haruspicem, omnium deum sacerdotem*, 41). He himself has a wide interest in religion because he wants to learn the truth: 'But I, as I have said, have learned numerous sacred things, many rites and various ceremonies, because of my service to the gods and my will to know the truth' (*at ego, ut dixi, multiiuga sacra et plurimos ritus et varias cerimonias studio veri et officio erga deos didici*, 55). This does not mean that all elements of religion are to be simply accepted: with reference to Plato's *Laws*, Apuleius dismisses the use of cult statues other than those in wood.[27] Religion must thus be checked by philosophy.[28]

---

[26] It might be worth reviewing some of the Platonic themes highlighted in the scholarship cited in note 23 of this chapter.

[27] Apul. *Apol.* 65; Pl. *Leg.* 955e.

[28] I would therefore be more cautious than those scholars who attribute to Apuleius a restless interest in the supernatural and divine: cf. Graf 1997: 210; Habermehl 2002: 300, 312–13. This is in line with older interpretations of Apuleius as an extremely pious man, as is supposedly exemplified in the *Metamorphoses*: e.g. Nock 1933: 138. But it is clear that in the *Apology* religion is checked by philosophy, as it was in the works of Numenius.

This assessment of religion as a source of knowledge that must be tested against philosophy is identical to that we noticed for the discourse on ancient wisdom. There are further parallels that suggest Apuleius' acquaintance with the idea. In chapter 27 Apuleius puts himself in the tradition of wise men of old.[29] There he says that philosophers are usually divided into two classes: the atheists such as Anaxagoras, the atomists and Epicurus, on the one hand, and those that are deemed Magi because they have too great an interest in the divine and are therefore superstitious, on the other hand.[30] The latter category is made up of people such as Epimenides, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Ostanes, Empedocles, Socrates and Plato. Apuleius congratulates himself on being in such good company. This ironical argument – few people would take these illustrious philosophers to be superstitious – allows Apuleius to associate his Platonist philosophy with wise men of old and with religion. In his *Florida* 15 similar links are made. There Pythagoras is said to have been initiated in the Egyptian mysteries, and the Chaldaeans, Brahmans and Zoroaster are all associated with the sage from Samos. The same piece makes Pherecydes, Anaximander and Epimenides teachers of Pythagoras. Of Plato himself it is said that he 'strongly Pythagorised' (*pythagorissat in plurimis*).[31] Here Plato is more explicitly connected with both legendary wise men and the wisdom of foreign cultures.

Another striking parallel with ancient wisdom is Apuleius' description of his Platonism in terms of a mystery cult. At the beginning of the speech, for example, he opposes the informed initiates to the ignorant profane (*mitto enim dicere alta illa et divina platonica, rarissimo cuique piorum ignara, ceterum omnibus profanis incognita*, 12). Repeatedly, he refrains from stating something because of the commandment of mystical silence.[32] An important instance is to be found towards the end of the speech, when he refuses to reveal the name of his highest god (*quid sit deus meus, taceo*, 64): the truth is to remain a secret reserved for the initiates. We noticed such a play with concealment in Plutarch, and it can also be found, for example, in another sophistical philosopher, Maximus of Tyre.[33] By applying mystical silence in an equal degree to religion and philosophy – Apuleius will not reveal the nature of the objects that he has received after his initiations

nor the name of the divine king[34] – he suggests that initiation in a cultic mystery and initiation in philosophy are almost identical and that both converge on the same truth. As many adherents of ancient wisdom do, Apuleius exploits mystical silence to boost his own prestige: the highest truth is concealed and cannot be revealed in a courtroom.

A few decades ago it would have been comparatively easy to make a case for Apuleius' engagement with ideas about ancient wisdom in the *Metamorphoses*: especially the last book, where Lucius is saved by Isis, regains his human appearance and is initiated in her mystery cult, could be taken to suggest that there is profound knowledge hidden in mystery cults. Indeed, an Isiac substructure, coupled with Platonic references to the ascent of the soul, has been detected in the entire novel.[35] On such a reading, the wisdom revealed in Book 11 shows the preceding ten books and their playfulness in a new light.[36] Winkler's compelling aporetic reading of the last book, where Lucius can be interpreted by the reader as both honestly redeemed by Isis and a dupe of crooked sectarians,[37] has shown such readings to be too straightforward. Whereas some would like not to see more than an ironical undertone in the novel and salvage some true religious meaning,[38] S. J. Harrison has pushed this interpretation to its logical conclusion and forcefully argued that the entire work is meant as a satire:[39] Lucius, the anti-hero of the novel, ends as a third-rate priest of the Isis cult in Rome, worried by numerous inspired dreams while lots of money is being extorted from him.

It is impossible to take up the entire debate here nor can I discuss the *Metamorphoses* in the depth they deserve. My aim is more limited: I wish to argue that, even when read as a satire on religious mania, the *Metamorphoses* can be shown to interact with the discourse on ancient wisdom. I wish in particular to highlight one element that has not received due attention but is particularly important in relation to my theme: the ironical distortion of mystery cults in the novel.[40]

The theme is introduced during the first major turning point of the novel: Lucius' transformation into an ass. This happens after he has pressed the maid Photis to disclose what was going on in the house of the witch where he was staying. They break into her room and Photis tries an ointment on him, which has the disastrous effect of making Lucius lose his human form. The entire scene is implicitly likened to a mystery cult. Photis

[29] See also Apul. *De deo Soc.* 22.
[30] For the same opposition between atheism as too little religion and superstition as too much, see Apul. *De deo Soc.* 3.
[31] In *De dog. Plat.* 186, Apuleius writes that Plato had studied the 'rites of the prophets' (*ritus prophetarum*).
[32] Apul. *Apol.* 12, 13, 55, 56, 64, 80.   [33] Max. Tyr. *Or.* 4.5, 26.1.

[34] Apul. *Apol.* 55, 64.   [35] See the works referred to in note 23.
[36] Cf. Sandy 1978; Krabbe 1989: 105–11; Finkelpearl 1998: 184–217.   [37] Winkler 1985: 215–23.
[38] Shumate 1996; Habermehl 2002: 309–10.   [39] Harrison 2000: 210–59; see also Murgatroyd 2004.
[40] See the remarks by Krabbe 1989: 85–6.

asks Lucius to close the door so that no word escapes to the profane (*Patere, inquit, oro, prius fores cubiculi diligenter obcludam, ne sermonis elapsi profana petulantia committam grande flagitium*, 3.15.1). The commandment to close the doors to the profane is common in mystery cults and is encountered also, for example, in the Orphic poems which were styled as mystery cults.[41] Photis says she will reveal the arcane secrets of her mistress (*arcana dominae meae revelare secreta*, 3.15.3). Both words, *arcana* and *secreta*, are used to designate mystery cults. But Photis insists that Lucius, 'initiated in more than one cult', should respect the commandment of mystical silence (*sacris pluribus initiatus profecto nosti sanctam silentii fidem*, 3.15.4). Then Photis reveals the secret that only she knows: her mistress is a witch, who knows how to make the infernal gods obey, to disturb the course of the stars, to force divine powers and to enslave the elements (*iam scies erae meae secreta, quibus obaudiunt manes, turbantur sidera, coguntur numina, serviunt elementa*, 3.15.7). More, subtle allusions to mystery cults can be detected in this passage: the witch uses her charms to entrap handsome boys, an example of which is told by Photis. One of the traditional interpretations of the *hieros logos* of mystery cults was that it was about the *pathē* of the gods;[42] in this parody of a mystery cult, it is a story of love potions – love being the prime example of a *pathos*. Equally, when Lucius and Photis try out a potion, it naturally backfires: Lucius turns into an ass and not into an eagle. Neither Photis nor Lucius was fully initiated into the secrets of witchcraft; their failure is hardly a surprise. Revelation of mysteries was traditionally thought to be punished by the gods, as illustrated by Numenius' horrendous dream, so Lucius roams around as an ass for a while.

Elements of this story are mirrored in the last book, where Lucius is delivered by Isis and then initiated into her cult.[43] When this is read in contrast with the Photis episode, Apuleius seems to suggest that Lucius' troubles started with an 'evil' mystery cult, but that he will now be liberated by a real one. Yet various elements seem to bridge the gap that should lie between the evil mystery of the witch and the good one of Isis. Lucius regains his human form after having eaten from the rose garland held by a priest. The public immediately praises Isis for this (11.13). Whereas it is true that Isis had foretold in dreams what would happen, the roses are actually the simple antidote for Lucius' magic spell, which was already prescribed

[41] *Orphica*, frs. 245–8.   [42] Cf. Clem. Al. *Protr.* 4.
[43] One can also argue that they are foreshadowed in the story about Aristomenes in Book 1: in a closed room Aristomenes witnesses how the witch Meroe kills her former lover Socrates. In an ironic reversal of the mystical commandment that all doors should be closed to the profane, the doorkeeper of the inn where all of this has happened refuses to let Aristomenes out (1.12–16). In the passage light and darkness also play an important role, as they did in the mystery cult of Eleusis.

by Photis. Isis at least seems to have knowledge of magic. The implicit association of Isis with magic recurs in the prayer Lucius addresses to her after his initiation. Among other things, he says that time, the stars and the elements, as well as other divine beings, obey her (*tibi respondunt sidera, redeunt tempora, gaudent numina, serviunt elementa*, 11.25.3). It is hard not to notice the verbal echoes with the powers of the witch. Admittedly, the sentence forms part of a traditional eulogy,[44] and one can argue that it is the witch who has usurped divine powers. But Isis herself is linked in other ways to disreputable characters of the earlier books. The money Lucius has to pay for his initiations into the cult of Isis recalls the uncanny description of the vagabond priests of the Syrian Goddess in Books 8 and 9, who all extort money from credulous peasants. Moreover, in her capacity as a *panthea*, Isis is also identical with that same Syrian Goddess.[45] It would probably go too far to argue from these parallels that Isis belongs to the underworld of Greek religion and magic, but Apuleius' characterisation of her adds a clear ironical tinge to Lucius' liberation.

Moreover, Lucius does not seem to have learnt much in relation to mystery cults. His indiscretion about a mystery cult (the spying on the witch) got him into trouble in the first place, and at the end he commits a similar error. He interrupts his description of the initiation rite by addressing the reader, who may be anxious to know what happened. 'I would say it, if there was permission to say; you would hear it, if there was permission to hear' (*dicerem, si dicere liceret, cognosceres, si liceret audire*, 11.23.5). Apuleius overemphasises mystical silence by turning it into a double commandment: the initiate cannot say anything about it but the audience is not allowed to listen either. Immediately afterwards Lucius retracts and gives in to the anxiety of his readers: 'But listen and believe what is true' (*igitur audi, sed crede, quae vera sunt*). There follows what looks like a summary of the infernal journey he experienced during his initiation. The transgression of mystical silence is then hushed up by transferring the guilt to the reader: 'See, I have told you what, although heard, you should ignore' (*Ecce tibi retuli, quae, quamvis audita, ignores tamen necesse est*, 11.23.7) – as if that would be possible. The reader is now caught up in (involuntarily) spying on a mystery cult. Disrespect of mystery cults thus opens and closes Lucius' odyssey. This time he is not punished, unless we consider his entrapment in the cult of Isis as such.[46]

[44] Cf. Griffiths 1975: 320–5.   [45] Compare Apul. *Met.* 8.25 and 11.5.
[46] Incidently, this reading sheds doubt on the reality of Lucius' description of his experience as an initiate, a key text in scholarly reconstructions of this ritual (see Griffiths 1975: 296–301; Turcan 1989: 119). On my reading, Apuleius shapes it as the account of a gullible individual, who may well be mistaken.

The end of the *Metamorphoses* clearly relieves Lucius' mind of uncertainties on religion and the cult of Isis in particular, but it perpetuates those in the mind of the reader. Lucius' odyssey begins and ends with a mystery cult. Whereas the first is a sham of witchcraft, the second is a true mystery cult. But Apuleius sows doubt as to the honesty and religious character of the latter too. Although mystery cults and their imagery play an important role in the *Metamorphoses*,[47] they do not seem to be a locus of truth. On the contrary, they seem rather to be ploys to entrap people. Lucius is initiated thrice in the same cult! This conclusion for the *Metamorphoses* generates a puzzling contrast with the *Apology*, where Apuleius gives a more positive account of mystery cults. In the latter, religion is closely related to philosophical truth, suggesting that Apuleius is indebted to ideas about ancient wisdom, whereas in his novel he separates them and religion is at first sight a phenomenon of deceit.

Different interpretative strategies can be brought to bear on this paradox. One could, for example, argue that each work is to be read separately and that we should not be looking for a unity of purpose in Apuleius, except in the field of sophistic entertainment. Yet it is also possible to draw the *Metamorphoses* into the discourse on ancient wisdom. It has regularly been noticed by Apuleian scholars that Lucius is depicted as a superstitious individual, much as Plutarch describes that character.[48] Expanding on such readings of the novel, I wish to suggest that the contradiction with the *Apology* can be discounted if one reads the *Metamorphoses* as a narrative that explores (among other themes) the dangers of superstition. We have seen that superstition is an individual vice, due to lack of knowledge and moral depravity. In the eyes of a philosopher such as Plutarch (and also Celsus, as we shall see in Chapter 11), superstition is essentially a misinterpretation of religion by the uneducated. Religion can be corrupted by the action of the superstitious or of the charlatans that exploit the fears of such individuals, but it is not religion itself that causes it.

We can read the *Metamorphoses* as a satire, making the specific point that religion is fraught with superstition and constantly misinterpreted by the uneducated.[49] The novel seems to offer a completely opposite picture of religion from the one that has emerged among the authors who adhere to ideas about ancient wisdom. Throughout the work, one notes a tendency

---

[47] Cf., e.g., Apul. *Met.* 5.9, 5.11, 6.2, 6.19. The fundamental work still is Merkelbach 1962. See also Fauth 1998.
[48] See especially Winkler 1985: 238–42; Keulen 2003: 123–30, who makes an inventory of the parallels between Plutarch's superstitious man and Lucius, with further details in his 2007 commentary.
[49] The first pages of the novel clearly depict Lucius as an uneducated, lower-class individual (1.1–5).

to associate religion either with charlatans or with magic.[50] Whereas in the *Apology* Apuleius tried to link religion and philosophy in order to rebut the accusation of magic, in the novel the priest of Isis who addresses Lucius after his return to his normal state, explicitly dissociates learning (*doctrina*) from religion (11.15.1). Apparently, knowledge is of no use in the cult of Isis – contrary to what many philosophers of that period think. In the novel, submission to the goddess is the only road to salvation and liberty. The cult of Isis is, then, a cult for the superstitious: they are unable to recognise the true knowledge enshrined in religion and, owing to a misunderstanding of who the gods really are and how they act, they look for a cult or a pseudo-cult to relieve their worries and pains. The cult of Isis as depicted by Apuleius promises individual salvation from the tribulations of fortune without offering any deeper knowledge on how the divine world really works: on this reading, the *Metamorphoses* becomes a graphic depiction of the dangers of superstition that can infest religion. Lucius is the example of the superstitious, the cult of Isis the exploitation of his fears. The satirical use of mystery cults that I have charted above would also find an explanation. Just as the entire novel plays up the dangerous and untruthful side of religion, mystery cults are now depicted not as loci of truth but of untruth, in a reversal of the position they hold in the discourse on ancient wisdom: even they are not safe from the superstitious.

At the end of her study of the *Metamorphoses*, Nancy Shumate notices that the work seems to be at once an 'invocation and a critique of religious experience'.[51] Indeed, this paradoxical nature of the work has often been commented upon.[52] On a reading of the novel as primarily a work of irony, this paradox is explained by arguing that Apuleius invokes religion so as to be able to criticise it.[53] Although I do not wish to deny the thick layer of irony that covers the *Metamorphoses*, the interpretation advanced above suggests that the work is more than a piece of sophistic irony: it uses literary dazzle and play to focus on the dangers of superstition when it takes hold of an uneducated and unphilosophical mind.[54] In that way, the *Metamorphoses* can be read as a satiric and playful warning of how not to approach religion. The figure of Lucius as a simple man is thus essential for

---

[50] Keulen 2003: 123.   [51] Shumate 1996: 327.
[52] See, e.g., Winkler 1985: 187; May 2006: 307–28, who reads the end of the work as 'comedy-tragedy'.
[53] Harrison 2000: 248.
[54] Scholars who focus on the literary aspects of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* tend to emphasise the satirical and entertaining nature of the novel: e.g. Van Mal-Maeder 1997; Harrison 2000: 248–2; Keulen 2003: 130. I would suggest that Apuleius' satire can also be read as having a moral aim in that he shows how not to approach religion – as such it is *spoudogeloion* (cf. Schlam 1992). At any rate, the line between satirising for entertainment and satire for instruction may be very hard to draw.

the novel, not just as the character that drives the plot but also because we, as readers, see how his naïve, misunderstanding eyes distort religion with the unhappy consequences we all know. Conversely, the ambivalence of Isis in the last book, being a figure of salvation and exploitation, indicates at once the potential and the dangers of religion. Religion, Apuleius suggests, is both a resource and a liability, depending on who is involved. We can even go one step further. The aporetic reading of the last book by Winkler, implying that it depends on the reader to chose between the alternatives of a redeemed or a duped Lucius, may suggest an additional level of ambivalence: it also depends on us as readers and our own education and intellect whether we are capable of distinguishing between superstition and wisdom in religion.

Even though I have taken S. J. Harrison's emphasis on irony and satire as my starting point, this interpretation of the role of religion in the *Metamorphoses* holds even if one chooses to see the last book and the cult of Isis in a positive light: in that case, at the end of the novel Lucius would be cured of the superstition that bedevilled his earlier dealings with religion. Whatever one's stance on this issue, the interpretation proposed here has the advantage of reconciling the different attitudes towards religion one notices in Apuleius' œuvre. He can be said to explore in his various works the different sides of the phenomenon of religion, of which the ambiguous relation to the truth was widely acknowledged in this period: in his courtroom speech, he stresses the convergence of philosophy and religion, whereas the *Metamorphoses* rather focuses on the negative impact that superstition has on one's perception of religion. Whilst the *Apology* shows awareness of the discourse on ancient wisdom and draws on religion as a source of authority, the *Metamorphoses* can be interpreted as an ironic but nonetheless serious warning of the dangers of superstition, as it was defined within that discourse. Apuleius' corpus thus can be interpreted as revealing the ambivalent position that religion had in this period: it was a source of truth, but never an undistorted one. Precisely because of this ambivalence, one should never approach it without philosophical guidance, as shown in the *Metamorphoses*.

PART II

Cosmic hierarchy

Towards the pantheon as the paradigm of order

The hierarchical outlook that many philosophical representations of the divine tend to assume in the Post-Hellenistic period has repeatedly been remarked upon. The representation of the highest god as a king is of course traditional and can be traced at least to Hesiod,[1] but a wide array of texts from between about 100 BC and AD 200 start to depict the pantheon in its entirety as consisting of a single leader who commands a number of subordinate servants by means of a tight hierarchy. To do so, Post-Hellenistic philosophers draw on numerous traditional comparisons to express this hierarchical relationship between a highest god and his subordinates, such as the relation between a general and his army, the *koryphaios* and the chorus, and the shepherd and his flock. Other figures to whom the highest god is likened are the householder, father, and ship's captain.[2] Two images stand out, however, because they first occur in this period and do so relatively frequently: the Roman emperor and his bureaucrats[3] on the one hand, and the Great King and his satraps on the other.[4]

---

[1] Hes. *Theog.* 881–92.

[2] E.g. Onatas, pp. 139.20–140.5; Archytas, p. 11.17–19; Diotogenus, p. 72.16; Ecphantus, p. 82.5 (all Thesleff); Platonicus incertus, in Stob. 1.1.28 (with Dillon 2002c); *Corp. Herm.* 16.10, 16.17–19; Philo, *De vita Mosis* 1.62, *De Iosepho* 2–3, 33, 54, 67; Dio Chrys. *Or.* 12.22, 56.3; Aristid. *Or.* 45.22; Epictetus, *Diss.* 1.14.15–17, 3.24.34–6; M. Aur. *Med.* 7.7; Max. Tyr. *Or.* 4.9, 10.9, 13.4; Numen. fr. 18. See also the scholion on Stat. *Theb.* 4.501, referred to by Norden 1913: 114. The main source for such images was probably Plato: see the string of comparisons discussed in Pl. *Leg.* 10.905e–907d.

[3] Tert. *Adversus Praxean* 3, *Apol.* 24.3–4; Min. Fel. *Oct.* 33.1; Apul. *De mundo* 24.343–7; Aristid. *Or.* 26.88–9, 26.103, 26.108–9; Celsus in Origen, *C. Cels.* 8.35–6; Pseudo-Clement, *Sermones* 10.14–17, *Recognitiones* 5.19. See also the pagan inscription edited by Petzl 1994: no. 5 ll. 22–6 and discussed by Chaniotis 2004: 27–9, which seems to describe a council of gods as the Roman senate. A fourth-century example is Firm. Mat. *Mathesis* 5.pr.; Macarius Magnes, *Apocriticus* 4.20–1 may derive from Porphyry (second half of the third century AD).

[4] Philo, *De decalogo* 61; Plut. *De Stoicorum repugnantiis* 37.1051D; Celsus in Origen, *C. Cels.* 8.35–6; Aristid. *Hymnus in Iovem* 1.18; Lucian, *Luct.* 6–7; Charito 5.4.5–6; Max. Tyr. *Or.* 4.9, 11.12; Arist. [*De mundo*] 6.398a. This image is discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

Such images have been analysed in three major ways. First, they have been explained as attempts to reconcile an increased stress on divine transcendence in philosophy of this period and the widespread idea that god does intervene in some way in the sublunary world. By its very structure, the hierarchy links our human world to the ineffable, invisible and unreachable highest god through a chain of lesser divine beings.[5] Alternatively, as has been suggested mainly by scholars interested in the history of religion, such hierarchies were one of the ways in which philosophers succeeded in reconciling the traditional pantheon and its bewildering variety of gods with the monistic demands of philosophy: by giving each god a place in the hierarchy, the unity of divine will and action is vouchsafed. In doing so, philosophers are said to have responded to a wider religious tendency to emphasise the divine as hierarchically organised.[6] Others still have noticed the clear political content of depictions of gods as the Roman emperor or the Persian Great King and propose to consider them as ideological justifications of the dominant imperial power.[7]

All these three interpretations provide essential contexts in which to understand the rise of hierarchical descriptions of the divine world in the Roman Empire. Yet taken individually, none of them is entirely satisfactory. There is indeed an increased stress on divine transcendence in Platonism, which can for the first time be clearly grasped in the fragments of Eudorus of Alexandria (late first century BC). Under the influence of Pythagoreanism,[8] Eudorus posited the One as a principle above the Monad and the Dyad and identified it with Zeus.[9] Such an utterly transcendent principle demanded entities that ensured the link with the world and a divine hierarchy would be the logical consequence – one of the possible legacies of Eudorus to Middle Platonism.[10] Pythagorean influence on

[5] E.g. Donini 1988; Ferrari 1995, 1996 and 2005.
[6] Nilsson 1963; Bianchi 1979; Filoramo 1993: 111; Athanassiadi 1999: 181; Athanassiadi and Frede 1999b: 7; Cerutti 2003; Gasparro 2003. Pleket 1981 and Veyne 2001 point to similar tendencies in documentary sources.
[7] K. W. Müller 1991: 31; Filoramo 1993: 115–19; Graf 1997: 226; Martin 2004: 226–43. Such an approach is usually classified as political theology, a field marked out by E. Peterson in *Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem* (1935), drawing on a concept coined by C. Schmitt (1922). Whereas the latter argues that many of the political concepts of modern Europe are transpositions of metaphysical and theological ideas, Peterson is mainly interested in seeing how ideas about divine monarchy had been assimilated in Christianity and – so his thesis runs – were finally found incompatible with Nicaean Trinitarian dogma. In the end, Trinitarian Christianity was immune to the temptation of a political theology. The important differences between Schmitt and Peterson are brought out by Schmitt 1970. Ehrhardt 1959–69 is a wide-ranging survey of 'political metaphysics'.
[8] Bonazzi 2002 also suggests influence of Aristotelianism.
[9] Eudorus, fr. 1 = Simpl. *In Phys.* p. 181.7 (Diels).
[10] Dillon 1996: 126–33. In Chapter 10 I suggest that Eudorus may have been among the first to use the comparison of the Persian King and his satraps.

Middle Platonism cannot, however, be the sole factor. As we shall see later in this chapter and in the following ones, hierarchical conceptions and related comparisons are also found among Stoics,[11] for whom the divine was immanent rather than transcendent. Admittedly, the Stoics will rather envisage a hierarchy encompassing both gods and humans, without an extensive divine hierarchy, and comparisons with the Persian King and his satraps will only be found among Platonists and Aristotelians. Nevertheless, the presence of hierarchical thinking among Stoics as well shows that its increased popularity cannot be solely a function of Aristotelian influence on Platonism.

Regarding the second explanation, one has to concur that hierarchies were indeed a convenient way of bringing the traditional pantheon in line with philosophical demands for monism: the variety of traditional rites could then be explained as pitched at different gods or demons, each of whom obeyed the highest god. Worshipping the traditional gods thus meant worshipping the highest god of philosophy as well.[12] This interpretation sets out one of the functions of hierarchical images of the divine world but seems to assume that hierarchy was the normal solution because it was part of a wider change in religious mentality. But hierarchies were not the only possible way of reconciling traditional variety and philosophical monism. In a little-noticed but fascinating passage of his second philosophical oration, Maximus of Tyre (end of second century AD) argues against those who ascribed different regions to different gods: 'all the gods share one law and way of life and manner, without division and conflict. They all rule, all are of the same age, all are saviours, all the time living together with equal honour and equal right of speech. Their nature is one, although their names are many.'[13] A comparison sums up his point: even though we humans divide the sea into the Aegean, Ionian, and so forth, it remains a single element (5).[14] Maximus here offers a 'horizontal' alternative to the 'vertical' solution of the hierarchy. Hierarchies were therefore not the sole philosophical justification possible for religious diversity nor the sole one adopted, and the preference for hierarchy in Post-Hellenistic philosophy thus begs explanation. Part of that must be the philosophical tradition:

[11] See especially the reference to Epictetus in note 2 above and the evidence from Dio Chrysostom in Chapter 7.
[12] The classic statement is Celsus in Origen, *C. Cels.* 7.68.
[13] Max. Tyr. *Or.* 2.5: θεοῖς πᾶσιν εἷς νόμος καὶ βίος καὶ τρόπος, οὐ διῃρημένος οὐδὲ στασιωτικός. ἄρχοντες πάντες, ἡλικιῶται πάντες, σωτῆρες πάντες, ἰσοτιμίᾳ καὶ ἰσηγορίᾳ συνόντες τὸν πάντα χρόνον. ὧν μία ἡ φύσις, πολλὰ δὲ τὰ ὀνόματα.
[14] For this comparison, see also Plot. 4.3.9.38; August. *Conf.* 7.7; and also Plut. *De fort. Rom.* 9.321C–D, where the comparison does not apply to the gods.

already in Plato's late works, especially in the (probably pseudonymous) *Epinomis*, scholars have noticed a tendency towards identifying the gods with different stars and heavenly bodies (the so-called 'astral' or 'cosmic' religion of older scholarship).[15] As these occupied different levels in the heavens, this unavoidably shaped the divine world in some hierarchical form. Equally, Xenocrates, the immediate successor of Plato at the head of the Academy (396–315 BC), was apparently the first to systematise Plato's demonology into a clear hierarchy of gods, demons and men.[16] But again, philosophical tradition in itself seems insufficient to explain the popularity of such hierarchical images particularly in the Post-Hellenistic period.

Finally, it is a phenomenon often noticed in various societies that the divine tends to be modelled on political structures, but precisely how this comes about is rarely fleshed out, with the projection of existing political structures onto the divine often simply being seen as a natural tendency.[17] But the evidence sets a particular challenge to such an interpretation. Whereas it is obvious that the likening of the gods to the Roman emperor and his bureaucrats can only happen in the context of the Roman Empire, the popularity of the Persian Great King and his satraps in this period is less easily explained. Philosophic tradition is commonly advanced as a solution, by assuming that the comparison is a mere illustration of Platonic kingship ideas (namely that the earthly king was an image of god), and as such can be traced back to the Hellenistic period.[18] This interpretation is insufficient for two reasons.[19] First, although the modelling of the heavenly king on a human counterpart clearly has political implications, all the authors who use the image of the Great King in the Post-Hellenistic period try to make a point primarily about the structure of the pantheon as a whole, not about the relation between the Persian King and the highest god: they use the comparison to visualise the hierarchical structure of the divine world, not to illustrate kingship theory. Secondly, neither Plato nor Hellenistic political theory provides a good context for the origins of the identification of the pantheon with the Persian Great King and his satraps. It is indeed true that Plato occasionally uses the Persian King as an example of a powerful monarch, but the comparison is not always positive, nor does

Plato liken the divine world to the King *and his satraps*.[20] A Hellenistic context is even more unlikely: it is hard to see how the Persian King could be an example of might and power after Alexander's victory over Persia. The Persian King is now rather a tyrant and a symbol of weakness – an evolution one can already detect in Aristotle's *Politics*.[21] Indeed, although the identification of god with the Persian Great King is older, it is striking that the use of the image of the Persian King with his satraps to represent the divine world surfaces for the first time in Post-Hellenistic philosophy. The fragmentary state of Hellenistic philosophy cannot eliminate uncertainty on this point, but it does not seem to occur in Plato and Aristotle. And whereas the highest god continues to be called the Great King after AD 200, the designation of his subordinates as satraps becomes far less popular than in the early Roman Empire, with Plotinus as the only example.[22] As I see it, literary classicism, as exemplified *par excellence* in the Second Sophistic, is the humus on which this particular image could flower. Dio's kingship orations illustrate, for example, how he attempted to couch his ideas about kingship in the words and atmosphere of Classical Greece: contemporary ideas about kingship are put in the mouth of Socrates or Diogenes, who then naturally refer to the Persian King, who was, indeed, in hindsight the dominating monarch of the Classical period.[23] In the early empire, 'satrap' is widely used, especially to designate the rich and the powerful,[24] and quite often the Roman emperor is compared to the Great King and his governors to satraps.[25] This is the context in which the image of the pantheon as the Great King and his satraps could spread. When taking the Second Sophistic turn to the classics of the past as the proper cultural setting

---

[15] See especially Festugière 1944–54, vol. I; Boyancé 1956; Nilsson 1963.

[16] Cf. Dillon 1996: 24–33 and 2003.

[17] See Veyne 2001: 307–10 for remarks about the danger of reducing religion to a function of sociology.

[18] Peterson 1935: 54; Dvornik 1966: 1.273; Moraux 1984: 65; Markschies 1991: 397–418; K. W. Müller 1991: 43; Umemoto 1991: 241–2.

[19] See already the critique by Ehrhardt 1959–69: 1.215 n. 3.

[20] E.g. Pl. *Grg.* 470e, *Alc.* 121c–122a, *Chrm.* 158a, *Euthydemus* 274a, *Lysias* 209d, [*Ax.*] 371a–372b. *Leg.* 693d and *Resp.* 553c are clearly negative.

[21] Arist. *Pol.* 3.9.3 1285a, 5.8.14–15 1311b, 5.9.2 1313a.

[22] Plot. 5.5.3 uses the comparison to describe the rise of the soul through the divine hierarchy, but, as analysed in the epilogue, the meaning he attributes to it is quite different from what we see in the centuries preceding him. In the late Byzantine period, Pletho uses again the comparison of the pantheon and the Great King (*Leg.* 1.5.8–27 and 3.43.46–80).

[23] Xenophon, a model of style, may have been a particularly strong influence. His *Cyropaedia* may have been a major influence: 8.1.14 describes how Cyrus imposed a military hierarchical structure on civil administration (see also *Oec.* 4.9). Cic. *Fam.* 1.1.23 testifies that the work was read as a political treatise. See also Cic. *Rep.* 1.43, where Cyrus is called wise but contrasted with his empire that was not well governed. Another source of inspiration seems to have been Hdt. 1.98–9, a passage which may have influenced the image as it appears in Maximus and Pseudo-Aristotle.

[24] E.g. Dio Chrys. *Or.* 7.66, 33.14; Plut. *De tranq. anim.* 1.470B, *De se ipsum* 22.547D; Lucian, *Nigr.* 20. See in general Mason 1970 on this phenomenon.

[25] Dio Chrys. *Or.* 2.75, 32.32, 33.14; Plut. *De capienda ex inimicis utilitate* 10.92C; Lucian, *Toxaris* 17, *Apol.* 11, *Nigr.* 20; Philostr. *VA* 1.22. Cf. also the more traditional comparison of gods and the magistrates of a city: Dio Chrys. *Or.* 12.22, Aristid. *Or.* 43.29. For its Stoic origins, see Plut. *Comm. not.* 34.1076F.

for that image, it also becomes understandable why the image surfaces only in Greek texts, whereas Latin authors have a tendency to take the Roman emperor and his servants as a model: Greek is *the* language of the Second Sophistic.

We thus cannot reduce the representation of the pantheon as the Persian King and his satraps to a mere illustration of Platonic kingship theory, directly derived from the master's works: the image clearly belongs to a specific environment. This also implies that we are not dealing with a straightforward projection of existing political structures onto the divine: this projection is, at the very least, mediated through a particular cultural context. But this still leaves unanswered the question why we encounter in this period an emphasis on hierarchy: if the aim of such comparisons is to provide ideological support for the Roman emperor, we would not need the emphasis on subordinate satraps and servants that we notice in the sources.

This survey of existing analyses thus ends in an *aporia*. Apart from their inherent problems, each of the explanations seems to point in a different direction: some impute the rise of hierarchical images to the development of philosophical doctrine, whereas others rather see in them a symptom of external influence on philosophy, be it from religious or political changes. They can even seem mutually exclusive: if one sees such images as the result of the emphasis on transcendence, how does one explain their apparent political content? Such an *aporia* can be overcome. In the second part of this book I wish to propose a reading of the evidence that incorporates the important insights of all three explanations discussed above, by seeing these hierarchical images as the most visual part of an underlying discourse that reinterprets the pantheon (and, by extension, the cosmos) as the 'ideal hierarchy', which is, as I shall show, typical for Post-Hellenistic Platonism and Stoicism.[26]

Its core is that the cosmos is increasingly seen as made up of natural hierarchies, natural in the sense that they are an essential part of the structure of the world when it is in perfect order. Disorder is characterised by the absence of leadership imposed through hierarchy. From a purely doctrinal point of view, such ideas are not entirely new. In his *Republic* Plato famously develops an explicitly hierarchical ideal state that is mirrored in the structure of the well-ordered soul, and his demiurge in the *Timaeus* is explicitly engaged in creating order in the world by giving everything

---

[26] On the basis of Pseudo-Aristotle's *De mundo*, one could include the Peripatos as well, but further evidence for that school is lacking.

its due place.[27] As we have seen, Xenocrates is known for having an order of demons between gods and men. Early Stoicism envisaged a cosmic hierarchy of gods and men, according to which the gods serve as rulers and men as subjects.[28] What seems to distinguish the Post-Hellenistic period, apart from an apparently stronger emphasis on hierarchical conceptions, is an increased emphasis on what has been termed a 'cosmic perspective'. This implies two, related points. M. Schofield has pointed out that 'in the discussions of the leading Stoics of the early Roman Empire – Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius – the claims of citizenship of the universe come to dwarf those of existing societies in which we find ourselves: the cosmic perspective increasingly overshadows the vantage point of ordinary life'.[29] Something similar can be said for Platonism: human society is increasingly seen as the continuation of a cosmic kingdom that stretches from heaven to earth.[30] Human society is now absorbed in a cosmic perspective. But more is going on than an extension of the perspective to include the cosmos. In a discussion of justifications for kingship in the Roman Empire, M. Trapp has remarked that 'theories of the structure of the cosmos, and of the natural grounds for the absolute and relative status of human beings and divinities within it, can give a special clarity to the philosopher's version of the king's relation to the divine'.[31] One can formulate this more explicitly: what makes the Post-Hellenistic period stand out is that the hierarchical cosmos, and in particular the pantheon, starts to function as a paradigm of order for the other realms of being, especially human society.

The assumption that all parts of the cosmos, including human society, are ordered through hierarchies impacts in particular on two realms of human activity: politics and religion. I shall argue that an important shift in emphasis in political thought of this period can be explained in the light of this cosmic perspective. Ideal kingship is, in this period, often fitted into a hierarchical view of society and the cosmos: on the one hand, the king is seen as commanding a tightly controlled hierarchy of subordinates who execute his will in his kingdom; on the other, he is part of a cosmic hierarchy and supposed to relay divine law down his chain of command.

---

[27] God was obviously seen as the cause of order in the world. This is, e.g., explicitly spelled out in Theophr. *Metaphysica* 14.14–17.

[28] Arius Didymus in Eus. *Praep. evang.* 15.15.3–5. On this text, see Vogt 2008: 90–8.

[29] Schofield 2000: 453. One can argue that Zenon's ideal city of reason, incorporating gods and sages, is already a cosmic city (see, e.g., Scholz 1998: 343), but its membership is restricted to sages. Moreover, Zeno's city is explicitly not hierarchical, contrary to what one finds, e.g., in Epict. *Diss.* 1.12.18–23.

[30] See, e.g., Plut. *De exil.* 6.601A–B, *De fort. Rom.* 2.316E–317C; Max. Tyr. *Or.* 11.12; Apul. *De mundo* 1–2 (cf. Arist. [*De mundo*] 1–2).

[31] Trapp 2007: 175. On p. 173 he comments on 'the extent to which all political theorizing in this period is regarded as subordinate and answerable to higher structures and principles'.

In doing so, the king brings human society in line with natural and cosmic order.[32] Hierarchy also provides order in religion. By proposing that the pantheon is actually a perfectly ordered hierarchy, philosophers succeed at once in offering a more acceptable interpretation of the pantheon and in explaining the numerous different rituals as offered to different gods who in the end all obey one highest god.[33] Indeed, the traditional Homeric pantheon is characterised by dispute and subordination, not to forget the bewildering variety of rites and rituals. As traditional hallmarks of untruth, diversity and variety need to be explained away in order to make religion acceptable as a source of philosophical knowledge.

It is in this context that the two most striking parallels of the pantheon, namely with the Persian King and his satraps and the Roman emperor and his officials, acquire particular significance. Idealising both empires as perfect examples of a hierarchical state, these comparisons describe the divine world as a perfectly ordered political hierarchy. As such, they present the divine world as a paradigm of political order which can be used to justify the Roman Empire.[34] But they also become normative in discussions about religion: philosophers will use these images as if they sum up the only possible view of the divine world, in order to refute a mistaken understanding of god.[35]

My interpretation thus incorporates crucial elements of each of the three explanations surveyed at the beginning of this chapter. The discourse on cosmic hierarchy is obviously shaped by important elements of the philosophical tradition (such as the Platonic emphasis on the mediating role of demons and the creation of a hierarchical world as found in the *Timaeus*), but it reconfigures them with an emphasis on the cosmic perspective. Following the first interpretation, I accept that hierarchical thinking is most prominent in Platonism but hope to show that it can also be detected in Stoic writings. In line with the second explanation, the hierarchical interpretation of the pantheon indeed allows philosophers to impose order and unity on traditional religion, but this should not be reduced to a mere reflection of wider religious tendencies: it also obeys a logic internal to the philosophical discourse. Finally, the normative role of political comparisons of the pantheon goes beyond the sphere of politics, to include that of religion. Moreover, the process is much more complex

[32] See in particular the evidence for Dio and Plutarch in Chapters 7 and 8.
[33] See, e.g., Apul. *De deo Soc.* 5–6; Max. Tyr. *Or.* 2 and 11.
[34] E.g. Min. Fel. *Oct.* 33.1; Aristid. *Or.* 26.
[35] E.g. Philo, *De decal.* 61; Plut. *De Stoic. repug.* 37.1051D; Tert. *Apol.* 24.3–4; Celsus in Origen, *C. Cels.* 8.35–6; Max. Tyr. *Or.* 4.9, 11.12. All these passages are discussed in the following chapters.

than often assumed. The Roman Empire is not justified as it stands: an idealised version of it is projected onto the cosmos, and that idealisation is then held up as the paradigm for the existing empire. There is thus a double projection taking place: first the projection of an idealised political structure onto the divine, which is then projected back onto the real political structure. We shall see that this opens the way for an ideological justification of the Roman Empire as being a perfect image of the divine world. As such, the hierarchical images of the Great King and his satraps and the Roman emperor and his officials, and the discourse of which they are the most visible expression, allow us to perceive the close links established between ontology, politics and theology in Post-Hellenistic philosophy.

We can now see how the spread of hierarchical images of the pantheon fits into the wider tendency of Post-Hellenistic philosophy to open up to religion as a source of authority. Such images do more than merely visualise the pantheon as a hierarchy: they identify it as the paradigm of order. Based on the assumption that truthful knowledge was hidden in religion by wise ancients, the discourse on ancient wisdom could argue that religion was an image of truth and thus an external source of authority for philosophy. In a similar way, the assumption that the pantheon represents the ideal hierarchy allows philosophers to use it as the model for order in other realms of human life as well.

POSIDONIUS AND THE NATURAL HIERARCHY

Post-Hellenistic philosophy thus stands out for an intensification and reconfiguration of earlier ideas on hierarchy. Given the fragmentary nature of the sources for philosophy of the first century BC, it is easier to detect the presence of such views in later philosophy and literature than to trace its origins. In parallel with the discourse on ancient wisdom, however, one can tentatively argue for Posidonius as the first to establish some of the connections that we find later.

One of the fundamental implications of the discourse on cosmic hierarchy is that a natural hierarchy exists in human society, which is only perfectly ordered when a hierarchy in line with nature is established. This idea surfaces in Seneca's summary of Posidonius' views on the Golden Age, when the inferior are said to submit to the best and most virtuous. Strikingly, this submission is declared fully in line with nature: 'For it is natural for the lesser to submit to the better' (*Naturae est enim potioribus deteriora*

summittere, 4).[36] This natural order was obviously good: the wise leaders embodied the law for their subjects and had unlimited power (*quantum vult potest*, 4). But contrary to later examples of monarchy, their power was not abused, precisely because it was exercised by sages who only did what was morally right. Seneca sums this up in a maxim that is hard to translate: 'reigning was a service, not a kingdom (or a rule)' (*officium erat imperare, non regnum*, 5). The distinction is clearly meant to convey a difference between just and unjust rule.[37] Thus, in the Golden Age, moral perfection, wisdom, law and political leadership are combined in one person, in a political construction in line with natural order and law. During the degeneration of the original period of bliss, however, these identifications start to unravel. Monarchy becomes tyranny, implying that domination is now based on violence. As the wise stop ruling the people, positive law – laws decreed by human lawgivers – becomes necessary and the natural identification of the leader with law is disrupted. It needs no elaboration that the Golden Age represents Posidonius' ideal, which represents how things should be and to which our world should aspire: it suffices to note that, in line with philosophical tradition since Plato, he identifies the perfect ruler with the philosopher. Contrary to Plato's description of an ideal state in the *Republic*, which is presented as a thought-construct, Posidonius' Golden Age purports to be at once a description of how things once were and how they should be now. His ideal society does not belong to the realm of speculation but is located in reality – albeit in a distant past.

Posidonius' description of the Golden Age clearly diverges from previous Stoic political theory. Early Stoics stressed that human beings could only follow divine law (or universal reason) by becoming wise themselves, that is, by internalising divine law.[38] Consequently, in Zeno's ideal state, where all followed the law, there seems not to have been any need for magistrates or institutions.[39] For Posidonius, on the contrary, a community becomes reasonable once its leaders are wise, which implies that for the subjects divine law, as embodied in their leaders, cannot but be external. Contrary to the early Stoic ideal city, the community of reason made up of gods and sages, Posidonius envisages an ideal human society which is perfectly ordered and in line with divine law through the natural submission of the lesser to their leaders. Given the fact that Posidonius is said to have had a marked interest in Plato, an explanation for this deviation from Stoic orthodoxy could be Platonic influence: in the *Laws*, the Athenian affirms indeed that the lesser should obey his superior,[40] and the ideal state of the *Republic* subordinates all to philosopher-kings.[41] It is also possible that Posidonius projected the early Stoic cosmic hierarchy of gods and men, according to which the gods are rulers and men subjects,[42] onto mankind to justify the hierarchy in human society, as many later philosophers would do.

It is just a small step from affirming the existence of natural inequality in the Golden Age to identifying natural rulers in the contemporary world. Such a leap may have been made by Posidonius himself: some fragments of his history seem to suggest that barbarians and slaves are naturally inferior.[43] Whereas universal reason and law had served the early Stoics to defend the notion of a communion of sages and a principled equality of man, they now justify the existing order, including slavery, as in line with natural law.

A change in the concept of divine law underlies this modification of Stoic thought. As shown by M. Schofield, the original Stoic cosmic city was defined as the community of the wise who obeyed reason and divine law and thus became citizens in a city of which the supreme reasonable beings, the gods, were also part. This concept of the cosmic city, defined by the membership of wise men, gave way to a more spatial concept of the cosmic city, which was identified with the cosmos and thus encompassed all rational beings, not just the wise. In such a conception, natural law,

---

[36] Echoed by Seneca in another letter: *Ep.* 65.24: *serviant ergo deteriora melioribus*.

[37] Besides the difficulties in distinguishing *regnum* from *imperare*, Seneca is, moreover, not consistent in his vocabulary: in the next paragraph (6) he asserts that there were *regna* in the Golden Age. As we shall see in Chapter 6, Aristides (*Or.* 26.23) will, on similar lines, distinguish between sovereignty (ἀρχή) and dominance (δεσπόζειν).

[38] Vogt 2008: 16, 216.   [39] Diog. Laert. 7.32–4.

[40] Pl. *Leg.* 3.690b. See also the description of the guardians in *Resp.* 6.484a–487a. The latter text, however, emphasises the need for education of the guardians (489d).

[41] Such a close interaction with Platonism foreshadows the intellectual conditions of the Post-Hellenistic period, characterised by the adoption of Platonic elements in Stoicism, such as hierarchical thinking (cf. Schofield 1991: 84; Gill 2000: 606; Trapp 2007: 173, 185–90), and the incorporation of Stoic ideas in Platonism, such as the concept of natural and divine law (Dillon 1996: 80–1).

[42] Arius Didymus in Eus. *Praep. evang.* 15.15.3–5, with Vogt 2008: 90–8.

[43] R. Müller 1993: 47. Posidonius may have been preceded by Panaetius (*c.* 185–109 BC). Laelius' speech in Book 3 of Cicero's *On the Republic* defends Roman imperialism by developing an argument about different natural forms of ruling. First, the principle is affirmed that by nature the better rule the weaker to the latter's advantage, as, for example, god rules man or the mind the body (37). But such a rule can take two forms. One possibility is that mind rules the body as kings, commanders, magistrates, senators and popular assemblies govern their subjects, or as a father rules his children. This form of rule implies a community where each takes on his natural position (38). In another possibility, mind 'rules over lust as a master rules his slaves, restraining it and breaking its power' (38). In this case, it is better for the slave to be ruled, so as to be forced to act for the good. Laelius' ideas are usually ascribed to Panaetius (Ehrhardt 1959–69: 1.197; Erskine 1990: 194–200; Garnsey 1996: 145–50), but Posidonius (R. Müller 1993: 49), Antisthenes (C. W. Müller 1995), and Antiochus of Ascalon (Horsley 1978; Girardet 1995; Vander Waerdt 2003) have been put forward too – not to forget claims of Cicero's originality (Ferrary 1995: 67–8).

which is supposed to govern the cosmic city, cannot be restricted to the wise: all people are supposed to obey it.[44] Such an extension of natural law and the cosmic city to the existing cosmos makes it easier to identify existing structures with those wanted by divine reason.

If my reconstruction of Posidonius' ideas is correct, he provides an important, early attestation of ideas that will play an important role in later Post-Hellenistic thinking. Overturning early Stoic thought, he accepts the existence of a natural order that submits the weaker to the more able – to be understood in the first place in moral terms: some individuals are by nature more virtuous, more rational and thus natural leaders. For him these leaders embody divine law and translate it (at least after the Golden Age) into positive law. The central features of this account of human society will continue to return in other authors, both Platonist and Stoic: the idea of a natural hierarchy in human society that continues or reflects the cosmic order; a hierarchy as the necessary condition for a stable and ordered society; the stress on divine law as embodied in the ruler, who fulfils a cosmic role in passing it down to his subjects; and the use of the parallel with the divine world to justify a hierarchical view of society. As indicated above, none of these ideas is, strictly speaking, entirely new: the Post-Hellenistic period is rather characterised by the extent to which hierarchies are now identified on all levels of being and especially by the fact that human society is seen as part of a cosmic hierarchy.

'NATURAL RULERS'

By taking the heavens and the idealised pantheon as the paradigm of political order on earth, the discourse on cosmic hierarchy has a double dimension. As we have seen for Posidonius, it has clear political consequences in emphasising natural hierarchies in human society. At the same time, it rearranges the pantheon into a strict hierarchy, and as such also shapes the way religion was looked upon. The impact of the discourse in these two areas will be explored in further detail here.

Political thought of the Post-Hellenistic period is rarely deemed original and seems only interesting to the extent that it attempts to legitimise Roman rule and the emperor in trite categories and rehashed arguments.[45]

44 Schofield 1991: 103. Cf. Scholz 1998; Obbink 1999; Vander Waerdt 2003. This view is criticised by Mitsis 2003.

45 This is reflected in a lack of modern interest. There is nothing on political philosophy in the survey by Sharples and Sorabji 2007: cf. the introduction by Sorabji 2007. Rowe and Schofield 2000 dedicate two-thirds of their volume to the Classical period. An important exception is Trapp 2007: 169, who starts his discussion by asking whether there was any innovation in this field under the Roman Empire (and answers with a qualified yes).

I do not wish to claim great individual innovation for this period, but I would like to draw attention to two important shifts of emphasis: the idea of 'natural leaders' and the description of kingship as part of a cosmic structure. Neither of these perspectives is the explicit object of philosophical theory in the Post-Hellenistic period, but I shall show that both informed discussions of political ideas, and that they must be understood as the result of the increased emphasis on natural hierarchies in this period.

In the light of the profound grip of tradition on political reflection, it is unsurprising that the theory of the three constitutions (monarchy, aristocracy and democracy) still seems to dominate discussions in the Post-Hellenistic period.[46] Nevertheless, when looking more closely, one notices a relative devaluation of the importance of the constitution in the sense that philosophers emphasise that an individual who is gifted with the qualities to be a ruler will be able to impose his will on whatever society and constitution he happens to find himself in. Already in Plato one notices the idea that some individuals are naturally more gifted to rule,[47] and both Plato and Aristotle had extensively reflected on the virtues of the rulers.[48] Nevertheless, such reflections on individual qualities remain embedded in discussions of the correct structure of the state.[49] What seems to distinguish Post-Hellenistic thought is the emphasis on natural rulers who can transcend the limitations set by any given constitution. This can be understood against the background of what we noticed in Posidonius: in assuming that the better will rule the lesser, emphasis is shifted from the correct constitutional framework to the individual ruler. Indeed, Miriam Griffin has drawn attention to the irrelevance of constitutional form to Seneca's conception of the ideal ruler as found in *On Clemency*.[50] As put by Dio Chrysostom: just as a good choir leader makes the entire chorus sing in tune, a wise leader can make the entire city wise.[51] The existence of such 'natural rulers' is accepted in several of Plutarch's political writings, such as *On Monarchy, Democracy and Oligarchy* and *Political Precepts*,[52] and by other authors who are studied in later chapters. Maximus of Tyre puts forward Athens under Pericles as the example of a stable, well-ordered state, not for its being a democracy, but for Pericles' personality.[53] The patriarch Joseph is propounded by Philo of Alexandria as the paradigm of

46 E.g. Alcinous, *Intr.* 34; Apul. *De dog. Plat.* 2; Archytas, pp. 33–6 (Thesleff). See Trapp 2007: 170–1.
47 Pl. *Leg.* 3.690b.   48 Pl. *Leg.* 4.711b–e; Arist. *Pol.* 3.11.12 1288a.
49 Classical political philosophy focuses heavily on the issue of the ideal constitution, as is well illustrated by Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics*. As is well known, Aristotle linked the various constitutions to the character of different people: *Pol.* 4.2 1289a–b.
50 Griffin 2000: 536–8. See also Sen. *Clem.* 1.4.1–3, which sees the role of the emperor as similar to that of god: if he disappears, chaos will descend on earth.
51 Dio Chrys. *Or.* 36.21.   52 See Chapter 8.   53 Max. Tyr. *Or.* 27.6; see Chapter 6.

a natural ruler: even in prison he was immediately accepted as the leader of the inmates.[54]

The idea of a natural ruler is also projected back onto Plato himself. In contrast to the *Republic*, seen as the blueprint of an abstract, ideal state, the second-century Platonists Apuleius and Alcinous reinterpret the scope of Plato's *Laws* as setting out how a ruler can reshape an existing society. According to them, the *Laws* is about how the ruler can create a good city out of the one in which he happens to be born.[55] This view on the differences between the *Republic* and the *Laws* was dismissed by M. Trapp as having 'more to do with harmonizing apparent discrepancies in Plato than with propounding a revealing account of constitutions in themselves'.[56] Yet one can understand this attitude as an example of how the reading of Plato was reshaped by the idea of natural leadership, as the *Laws* came to be seen as the text providing Platonic authority for the idea.

KINGSHIP: VIRTUE AND HIERARCHY

Philosophers under the Roman Empire had inherited a preference for monarchy as the ideal constitution from the Hellenistic period, but it was not accounted for in the same way as in the past. Hellenistic kingship theory focused on the fundamental importance of virtue and self-rule as the basis of the monarch's rule. As summarised by O. Murray in a recent paper, 'Hellenistic views of kingship were based on ideas common since the fourth century, that the justification of monarchic rule lay essentially in the virtues of the monarch.'[57] The Post-Hellenistic period starts to describe kingship as part of a cosmic hierarchy, a model that functions alongside the traditional 'virtue-based' justification of kingship. This new understanding emphasises the position the ruler occupies in the universal hierarchy that relays divine will and law. A king is thus a king because of the crucial position he occupies in the cosmic hierarchy. Such a descriptive account of kingship is normally coupled with a traditional, prescriptive one that emphasises the need for royal virtues. Normally the two do not exist separately: the emphasis on the king as part of a cosmic hierarchy does

[54] Philo, *Joseph.* 85–7; see Chapter 10.
[55] Apul. *De dog. Plat.* 259: *In hac non suo nomine de statu et de commodis civitatis requirens originis eius principia et fundamenta disponit, sed eo tendit quemadmodum civilis gubernator, eiusmodi locum conventusque multitudinum nactus, iuxta naturam praesentium rerum et convenarum debeat facere civitatem plenam bonarum legarum et morum bonorum*; Alcinous, *Intr.* 34.
[56] Trapp 2007: 170.
[57] Murray 2008: 21. See also Dvornik 1966; Schofield 1999: 742–4; Haake 2003. The focus on virtue is evident, e.g., in Pl. *Leg.* 4.711a.

not dispense with virtue, because virtue may have given him his elevated position in the first place. Yet theoretically it is possible that the descriptive and prescriptive points of view stop coinciding. To put it starkly: according to the former, one can be a king without being virtuous (a king may occupy a position in the hierarchy but stop following divine will because of moral imperfection); the latter view allows for the possibility that not all virtuous individuals end up as kings (virtue is the common aspiration of man, and thus not restricted to those that actually occupy the position of king). The descriptive account emphasises the providential order of the cosmos and human society, whereas the prescriptive one focuses on individual characteristics. Post-Hellenistic philosophers are aware of the fact that a unilateral emphasis on the position of the king in the divine hierarchy may become a justification of tyranny, as it could be interpreted as stating that a king is good only because he occupies a position in the cosmic scheme of things. As a consequence, they try to reconcile the descriptive and prescriptive accounts so as to ensure a theoretical check on tyranny. As my discussion of Aristides' *On Rome*, Dio's kingship orations, and Plutarch in the next chapters will show, this implicit tension can be seen as the defining feature of most accounts of kingship of the Post-Hellenistic period.[58] Here I wish to show that this tension is key to understanding the notion of the king as being 'law embodied' or 'living law' (*nomos empsychos*).

The concept of *nomos empsychos* is rarely considered to be characteristic of the Post-Hellenistic period. Scholars have tended to trace the formula back to the Hellenistic period,[59] and have detected key influence from Persian kingship theory[60] and Plato.[61] Although the concept is obviously influenced by previous thought, such an interpretation is too reductive and based on the projection onto the Hellenistic period of Post-Hellenistic ideas. Indeed, the extensive reconstruction of 'Hellenistic kingship theory' by R. Goodenough was based on the hypothesis that the Pseudo-Pythagorean writings were Hellenistic in date. Most scholars, however, now date these works in the Post-Hellenistic period.[62] Goodenough's entire concept of

[58] Such a view on the position of the king can be detected in some of the Pseudo-Pythagorean writings, in which law is indeed closely linked to both gods and the king. See Archytas, p. 35.27–30; Diotogenus, pp. 72.19–23, 75.10–16; Ecphantus, p. 82.5; Ocellus, pp. 124–5; Zaleucus, p. 226.25–6; Euryphames, p. 86.8–14 (Thesleff). Cf. Squilloni 1990; Centrone 2000: 570–2.
Although Epictetus does not talk explicitly about kingship, his insistence on the role each of us has been allocated in the cosmic hierarchy by god (e.g. *Diss.* 1.12.15–23, 1.14.15–17, 2.10.3–12, 3.24.36, with Long 2002: 234–6) can be understood as a bottom-up perspective of the cosmic hierarchy of which the king would be the human apex.
[59] Goodenough 1928; Dvornik 1966; Martens 2003: 31–66.   [60] Steinweiter 1946; Brague 2007: 25.
[61] Aalders 1969; Ramelli 2006.   [62] See Introduction note 66.

'Hellenistic kingship theory' has thus come under attack, most recently and most forcefully by M. Haake, who has shown that kingship theory in the Hellenistic period was far less theoretical and systematic than Goodenough thought, and much more focused on practical advice. He argues that much of what Goodenough saw as simply copied from the Hellenistic period must be taken to reflect Post-Hellenistic preoccupations.[63] It is therefore significant, and not merely an accident of survival, that the formula of *nomos empsychos* itself surfaces for the first time in Pseudo-Archytas, dated after 50 BC,[64] and becomes very popular later on.[65]

Just as it would be incorrect to see *nomos empsychos* as a Hellenistic category, the notion cannot be reduced to a new term for an aggregate of Platonic ideas.[66] Indeed, although I do not wish to deny that Plato's demand that positive law be grounded on reason[67] may provide the distant origin of the concept, it must be stressed that the term itself is absent in Plato. This should not cause surprise, given that we encounter in his works neither the notion of divine law as permeating all levels of being nor the identification of god and law. Both elements, as we shall see immediately, underpin the notion of *nomos empsychos* and were widely shared in the Post-Hellenistic period – probably having been adopted from Stoicism into Platonism.

Another misconception of the notion of *nomos empsychos* still influences modern appreciations, namely that its identification of law and king is a licence for absolutism. This argument has been used to attribute the concept to the Hellenistic period, when kingship started to dominate the Greek world.[68] Such a reading interprets *nomos empsychos* as stating that the king is the source of all law and, as such, exempt from obeying the laws. It puts the concept in absolute opposition at once to positive law, which would be superseded by the king as living law,[69] and to divine

law, as the latter by definition sets a higher source of law above the king.[70] Already philosophers of the Roman Empire argued against this misconception. Fully aware of the fact that tyrants could style themselves as *nomos empsychos* to justify their unjust empires, philosophers stressed the normative content of the notion:[71] being *nomos empsychos* does not turn the king simply into the source of positive law but sets a specific demand on the king. The concept implies that he has to take divine law as a guide when ruling, so as to spread divine order and law on earth. The philosophical argument against tyrannical abuse of the notion of *nomos empsychos* is well brought out by the famous debate between Callisthenes and Anaxarchus at the court of Alexander the Great, as found in both Plutarch and Arrian. Against the flatterer Anaxarchus, who argues that Alexander qua king can do whatever he wants to, Callisthenes defends the position, clearly deemed better by both authors, that a king is bound by divine law.[72] Thus, when a philosopher describes a king as *nomos empsychos*, he assigns to him the position of relaying divine will on earth. That means that he has to transcend positive law and correct it if it contravenes divine law, but, at the same time, it implies a subjection to divine law and justice, as the ruler has to fully identify with it.[73] Thus, the notion of *nomos empsychos* is explicitly normative: it does not say that every ruler is divine law, but that he *has* to conform his will to divine law. Failure to do so turns a ruler into a tyrant.

Rather than being a mere trope inherited from the philosophical tradition (but obviously influenced by it), the rise of the notion of *nomos empsychos* is the result of the structural position the king occupies in the cosmic hierarchy. A king described as *nomos empsychos* is part of a cosmic hierarchy that passes down divine law and ensures that divine providence reaches all men. For Post-Hellenistic philosophers, *nomos empsychos* indicates the role the king plays in passing on divine law and thus creating order in society. For Musonius Rufus, for example, being a living law means explicitly that the king creates order and ends disorder.[74] He stresses that the king enacts his benevolence and preservation (*sōtēria*) through his hierarchy of servants and officials.[75] We shall encounter similar views in Plutarch and Dio in the next chapters. But *nomos empsychos* does not merely describe the position a king has in the cosmic hierarchy, as only the

[63] Haake 2003. See also Murray 2008 and already Delatte 1942: 286–7. Martens 2003: 165–74 attempts to resuscitate some of Goodenough's ideas.

[64] Szlezák 1972: 13–26; cf. Ramelli 2006: 48–89. Martens 2003: 35–7 still dates Pseudo-Archytas to the Hellenistic period, but he ignores Szlezák.

[65] See the passages discussed below. It remains popular in Late Antiquity: Iambl. *Ep. to Arete* in Stob. 4.5.77; Them. *Or.* 5.64B, 19.228A.

[66] This is the tendency of Ramelli 2006: see Van Nuffelen 2007a.

[67] The key passages are Pl. *Leg.* 713b and *Ep.* 7.354e.

[68] Isoc. *Or.* 1.36, who identifies the *tropos* of the king as law for his subjects, is often seen as a precursor of such ideas: Aalders 1969: 317.

[69] See Martens 2003: 65, who argues that according to the concept of 'law embodied', written (i.e. positive) law is fully replaced by the king as living law. As far as I can see, no text bears this out: obviously, being *nomos empsychos* makes the king the source of positive law but does not do away with it. Martens' idea seems to be based on a misunderstanding of the Greek of Pseudo-Archytas, in Stob. 4.1 p. 135.20–1 (Hense) (cf. Martens 2003: 36).

[70] This is argued by Brague 2007: 25.

[71] Philo, *Leg.* 199, cf. *Mos.* 2.4, 12–13, 17–19; Plut. *Ad principem ineruditem* 4.781B, 6.782C; Epict. *Diss.* 1.12.10; Dio Chrys. *Or.* 3.44; Sext. Emp. *Math.* 2.38.

[72] Plut. *Alex.* 52; Arr. *Anab.* 4.9.7.

[73] This is very clear in Philo, *Mos.* 2.4; Diotogenus in Stob. p. 263 ll. 15–20 (Hense).

[74] Muson. fr. 8. For similar ideas expressed differently, see Epict. *Diss.* 2.14.13.

[75] Cf. Dio Chrys. *Or.* 32.26; Max. Tyr. *Or.* 27.6, 38.6.

good king can truly be called so: a king cannot pass on divine law without internalising it and becoming fully virtuous. The concept of 'law embodied' thus reconciles the descriptive and prescriptive accounts of kingship and it is the normative emphasis on virtue that provides a check on possible tyrannical abuse of the notion. Most Post-Hellenistic authors strive to reconcile both views of kingship, knowing well that a purely descriptive understanding without a prescriptive dimension is a proxy for tyranny,[76] but, as we shall see in the following chapters, the presence of both elements allows them to emphasise the aspect that suits their arguments most in their expositions of kingship.

Only the ideal king thus legislates fully in line with divine law and is truly a *nomos empsychos*. Philosophers were acutely aware of the fact that such an ideal kingship rarely became real. They therefore tended to locate it in the distant past, as did Posidonius. In his view, the rulers of the Golden Age embodied divine law: their actions and pronouncements were in line with the cosmic precepts – as such, one can argue, they were *nomoi empsychoi*. The identification of divine law and kingship breaks down once degeneration sets in: wise lawgivers have to set positive laws so as to ensure the order of the community once the sages have stopped governing society. Positive law thus was originally close to divine law: it is the translation of divine reason into a human law code. But once law is written down it is also open to corruption, much in the same way as religion becomes subject to superstition and misinterpretation once image worship is introduced. Thus, whereas the ruler and divine law are ideally identical, in reality there may be important discrepancies. Only in the Golden Age did kingship, divine law and virtue perfectly coincide; afterwards there was no guarantee that actual rulers would be ideal ones. Projecting the ideal political state onto the Golden Age was not the only possibility open to Post-Hellenistic philosophers to visualise the perfect outlook of government. Another popular option was to project the ideal rule onto the pantheon. It is to that projection that we now turn.

THE PANTHEON AS THE IDEAL HIERARCHY

We noticed above that one strand in scholarship emphasises how a hierarchical conception of the divine allowed philosophers to justify traditional

religion. Indeed, in a Middle-Platonist perspective, a divine hierarchy was the condition of all religion. In the long rhetorical opening sequence of *On Socrates' Demon*, Apuleius allows his audience to object to his initial distinction between humans and the gods who are not soiled by contact with the earth. 'Whom shall I pray to? Whom shall I make a vow to? Whom shall I sacrifice to?' (5). A distant god, so it seems, makes religion impossible. Apuleius' reply hardly surprises. With reference to Plato's *Symposium* (202e–203a), he understands the demons as mediators: they channel prayers up and pass divine messages down. They are the messengers in a two-way communication system: prayer and divination (6).[77] The depiction of the pantheon as a strict hierarchy also provides a rationale for the great variety in rites, seen as related to individual subordinate deities.[78]

Stoics such as Dio Chrysostom and Epictetus integrate gods and men in a single, universal hierarchy, which turns worship into an expression of honour due to a superior. Indeed, sacrifice and other forms of worship of the gods were, in line with Greek tradition, routinely identified with honours (τιμαί, τίμια). Just as one should honour one's superiors in human society, the gods are worthy of the honours we pay them.[79] Moreover, Stoic monism ensures that all gods are ultimately seen as parts of universal reason, and as such, honouring one particular god implies worshipping all of them. Thus, in both Platonism and Stoicism, hierarchical conceptions help to resolve the apparent conflict between the plurality of religion and the unity of philosophy: in the end all worship centres on the highest god through his subordinates.[80]

The explicitly political images used for comparison with the pantheon, such as the Persian Great King, the Roman emperor, and their respective subordinates, are not, however, sufficiently explained by seeing them merely as attempts to ascribe coherence and unity to traditional religion: they indicate a much more profound link between religion and political hierarchies, which is the projection of the ideal hierarchy onto the divine world. Just as 'ancient wisdom' projects a certain understanding of history onto religion and then starts to use religion as a source of knowledge, the discourse on cosmic hierarchy first reshapes the traditional pantheon into a perfect hierarchy, drawing imagery from human political life, and then starts to use that reordered pantheon as a paradigm for society. The

---

[76] An exception can be found in the Neo-Pythagorean Ecphantus, who describes the king as fashioned by god in his image: Ecphantus, pp. 79.1–80.7 (Thesleff). This seems to suggest that every king is by definition virtuous because he has been shaped by god. Such a theory does not provide a check on tyrannical behaviour, as it presupposes that a king is by definition virtuous: in Ecphantus the prescriptive account is subordinated to the descriptive one.

[77] See also Max. Tyr. *Or.* 13.4; Alcinous 15.   [78] Cf. Apul. *De deo Soc.* 14; Min. Fel. *Oct.* 27.

[79] E.g. Dio Chrys. *Or.* 2.72, 3.51–4, 31.10–16; Epict. *Diss.* 1.4.28–32, 1.16.15. See also Aristid. *Or.* 45.7–10; Max. Tyr. *Or.* 2.2, 27.6, 39.5; Lucian, *Jupiter confutatus* 7, *Prometheus* 17; Celsus, in Origen, *C. Cels.* 8.67. There are some perceptive remarks in Nock 1930: 263.

[80] This is explicitly affirmed by Celsus, in Origen, *C. Cels.* 8.2.

pantheon, once reordered as an ideal hierarchy, sets the norm for the rest of the cosmos and, in particular, human society.[81]

This has clear political consequences. The use of the real to characterise the ideal easily leads to an assimilation of the real to the ideal. This is precisely what happens in Aristides' famous oration *On Rome*, which describes the Roman Empire as a realisation on earth of the ideal divine rule (see Chapter 6).[82] But the hierarchical images are also put forward as the only correct understanding of the pantheon. This becomes most clear in Platonist texts. The representation of the pantheon as the Persian Great King and his satraps is drawn upon as authoritative by Philo, Plutarch and Celsus while polemicising against rival conceptions of the divine.[83] Christians such as Tertullian, in turn, dissect the modelling of god on the Roman emperor to make it accommodate Trinitarian theology.[84] Indeed, it is noteworthy that the representation of the divine as the Persian Great King and his satraps or as the Roman emperor and his servants often surfaces in a polemical context. Its perceived authority can settle a debate, for instance Plutarch's dispute with Chrysippus or Philo's with Graeco-Roman culture.[85] But this also means that such comparisons provide the focus for those who disagree with the Graeco-Roman pantheon: precisely because they are so often used for depicting the true structure of the pantheon, they are specifically targeted by Jews and Christians who twist the images to monotheistic use. A specific example of this in the works of Philo of Alexandria will be discussed in Chapter 10.

We encounter here a configuration already familiar from the discourse on ancient wisdom. Each philosopher claimed ancient origins for his own doctrinal position, without questioning the assumption that there is such a thing as ancient wisdom. Equally, in the discourse on cosmic hierarchy many philosophers agree that the pantheon is the paradigm of order and that this is best summed up in the image of the Persian Great King and his satraps or the Roman emperor and his officials. That preconception

is never questioned. What philosophers argue about is what such images precisely imply, often stressing that *only they* have fully understood them. Just as the claim to have rediscovered ancient wisdom in religion could be used to strengthen one's own standing in the philosophical discourse, as we have seen most clearly for Numenius, the pretence of having fully understood the hierarchical nature of the divine, and what it implies for politics and religion, can be used in polemic against other philosophers. This state of affairs also implies that each author will creatively interpret the comparisons to make them fit his own philosophical position.

The next three chapters will further detail the way in which individual philosophers adopt and creatively transform central tenets of the discourse on cosmic hierarchy. In the next chapter I focus on one particularly interesting comparison, that of the Persian King and his satraps, in its philosophical use by Maximus of Tyre and the treatise *On the World* and its ideological exploitation by Aristides in his oration *On Rome*. Chapters 7 and 8 study this complex of ideas for Dio Chrysostom and Plutarch, two authors who can be shown to have much in common despite their different philosophical allegiances.

---

[81] The assumption that the heavens provide the paradigm for order on earth, has the result that one can argue from the existence of hierarchy and kingship on earth and in nature that there must be kingship in heaven: what exists on a lower level, should exist on a higher level as well. This is an argument developed by Minucius Felix in his *Octavius* (first half of the third century) (18.5–7) to argue for a single god: just as order is provided by one king among the bees, there must be a single divine ruler.

[82] Although quite distinct in ideological terms, something similar happens in Philo's identification of Moses and Mosaic Law with the reflection of an ideal, divine rule. As a consequence Graeco-Roman society is derided as inherently disordered: see Chapter 10.

[83] Philo, *De decal.* 61: cf. Chapter 10; Plut. *De Stoic. repug.* 37.1051D, with further discussion in Chapter 8; Celsus, in Origen, *C. Cels.* 8.34–5: see Chapter 11.

[84] Tert. *Adv. Prax.* 3.   [85] See Chapters 8 and 10.

in themes and ideas), but Aristides' implicit comparison of Rome to the perfect, ideal empire as found in the heavens adds an important dimension to our understanding of the text.

The theme of the oration is empire and government; Aristides basically argues that Rome is the best empire ever.[6] This theme is developed in the two halves of the oration. After the proem (1–5) and a brief outline of Rome's geography (6–13), the first half of the speech compares Rome favourably with the Persians, Alexander's empire, Sparta, Athens and Thebes (14–57), the bulk of which is taken up by the comparison with Persia (15–39).[7] The second half praises Rome's policy, both civil and military (58–91), and ends with a eulogy of Rome's mixed constitution. The speech concludes by exalting the peace that resulted from Rome's rule (92–109). Even in the second part numerous comparisons are used to exalt Rome above the states discussed in the first half of the oration. As noticed by L. Pernot, the set of comparisons that make up the first part of the oration form the 'fil directeur' of the entire oration.[8] Understanding the oration thus presupposes grasping the meaning of the comparisons. They are usually understood as they present themselves, namely as historical comparisons, and Aristides consequently as indebted to earlier historical reflection on Rome's rise, in particular Polybius and his analysis of Rome's imperialism.[9] Aristides' speech can thus be seen as an extensive rehearsal of the rhetorical *topos* of *translatio imperii*, namely that the rule of the world transferred from Persia to Alexander and then to Rome.[10] Although earlier views on Rome's history surely provide significant background, this explanation remains unsatisfactory: for reflecting a historical approach the comparisons are surprisingly poor in specific historical detail and rich in gross distortions. The usual exaggeration (*auxēsis*) of a panegyric surely plays a role but cannot explain everything: especially the very negative image of the Persian Empire is hard to match in any historical account that Aristides' contemporaries would have known. Whereas history provides the setting for the oration, Aristides clearly oversteps the boundaries of what is historically plausible.[11] This suggests that more is going on. It may therefore be worth while to ask what the comparisons would mean in the mind of the contemporary

---

CHAPTER 6

The Great King of Persia and his satraps
Ideal and ideology

Aelius Aristides' eulogy *On Rome* (*Oration* 26), delivered in AD 144 at the imperial court,[1] is one of the most famous orations in his corpus, and one of the great texts illustrating Greek attitudes towards Rome during the second century AD. It is often read as a political analysis of Rome and flattery of Roman rule,[2] but recently S. Swain has argued that, when read in conjunction with other speeches, one does not notice any 'unequivocal sign of deep loyalty'.[3] Scholars adopting this line of interpretation usually take a rather dim view of attempts to detect philosophical ideas in the speech. A major argument in the latter direction was put forward by J. H. Oliver, who argued in 1953 that Aristides was strongly influenced by Plato and that he portrayed the Romans as equivalent to the Platonic demiurge. He considered *On Rome* to be a cosmological hymn, picturing it as an image of the eternal cosmos. Others have pursued the same line, while at the same time toning down what is seen as Oliver's one-sided interpretation.[4] In my opinion, these scholars are correct in detecting the presence of cosmological ideas in *On Rome* and linking these to opinions about the ideal state, although I am less convinced that it is correct to do so by making an inventory of Platonic references and ideas.[5] I wish rather to argue that one important theme of this oration is Aristides' desire to depict Rome as the empire that reproduces natural order on earth. This does not mean that it is wrong to analyse the speech from a historical or a literary point of view (like all great examples of Second Sophistic rhetoric, it is rich

---

[1] Pernot 1997: 163–77. Behr 1981–6: II.373 argues for AD 155. Klein 1981b proposes AD 143, following Oliver 1953.

[2] Bleicken 1966; Boulanger 1968: 357; Klein 1981a; Buraselis 1998; Quet 2001.

[3] Swain 1989a: 274–84, 283. For a similar argument, see Veyne 1999; Pernot 2008.

[4] Ratti 1971: 357; Forte 1972: 407; Vannier 1976; Pernot 1993: II.751; Stertz 1994: 1250, 1262–6. Such attempts were criticised by Klein 1981a: 171–2 and Swain 1989a: 275 n. 82. Moreschini 2007 situates Aristides in the context of second-century Platonism.

[5] Oliver's inventory of Platonic parallels is rather far-fetched and does not carry conviction: Oliver 1953: 874–8.

[6] Klein 1981a: 129; Pernot 1997: 29.

[7] See the analyses of its structure by Oliver 1953: 878–9; Klein 1981a: 113–14; Pernot 1997: 22.

[8] Pernot 1997: 28.

[9] Most explicitly argued by Fontanella 2008: but see also Pernot 1997.

[10] For this topos, see Pernot 1993: II.749 and 1997: 33–4.

[11] I thus disagree with Pernot 1997: 28: 'Ce rôle prêté aux comparaisons provient d'une tradition de réflexion sur la puissance romaine, attestée, en particulier, dans les ouvrages historiques. C'est une idée d'histoire et d'analyse politique plutôt qu'un topos de rhéteur.'

audience of Aristides. This entails substituting the diachronic perspective of traditional scholarship on the oration *On Rome* with a synchronic one: rather than asking which rhetorical or historical models Aristides is following, I wish to ask how the comparisons would resonate among the listeners and readers of the oration.

When read from this perspective, Aristides' *On Rome* becomes a fascinating source for understanding how one could creatively develop the images of hierarchy that are characteristic of the Post-Hellenistic period. Indeed, as noted at the beginning of the previous chapter, the two most important comparisons used to describe the hierarchical order of the pantheon were that of the Persian Great King with his satraps and the Roman emperor with his officials. I shall argue that both comparisons are brilliantly exploited by Aristides. One of his tactics in the speech is first to compare Rome, explicitly and implicitly, favourably with Persia, before suggesting that it is an image of divine rule in heaven. In the next pages I argue that we cannot understand these comparisons properly without realising that Aristides is not comparing Rome to the historical empire of Persia: he describes the Persian Empire in negative terms that are the exact opposites of the positive ones used when the image of the Persian King and his satraps serves to depict the pantheon as the ideal hierarchy. He then transfers these positive characteristics to Rome. In doing so, Aristides depicts the Roman Empire as the perfect reflection of the ideal hierarchy that exists in heaven, which is underscored by comparisons of Rome to the heavenly kingdom. The speech depicts the Roman Empire by drawing on categories normally used to describe the divine world, and should therefore not be read as a reasonable assessment of its functioning in Aristides' day: it is an attempt to style the Roman Empire into the perfect state.

As my perspective is synchronic, I first have to establish that the image of the Great King and his satraps was used in that time to sum up the hierarchical and well-ordered nature of the divine world and that certain positive characteristics are usually attached to it. I shall, therefore, first analyse two extensive parallels between divine rule and the Great King, roughly contemporary with Aristides, as found in Maximus of Tyre and Pseudo-Aristotle's *On the World*. We shall see that both understand the image in substantially the same positive way. Especially in Maximus, the image seems to sum up all the major characteristics ascribed to the discourse on cosmic hierarchy in Chapter 5. Both Maximus and Pseudo-Aristotle revel in *topoi*, but this preliminary discussion is necessary to understand how Aristides transfers to Rome the positive characteristics associated in both authors with the Great King as an image of the divine.

Without a grasp of the traditional *topoi* associated with the comparison, we shall not be able to see how Aristides subtly plays with his readers' expectations. They will also help us to understand the malleable nature of that image: the Persian Great King can be made to fit Platonist and Aristotelian conceptions of the divine, thus illustrating that it is rather a cipher for the perfect hierarchy than the translation of a specific philosophical position. This preliminary discussion in the first two sections of this chapter will help us to understand that Aristides' comparisons are at once historical and highly symbolic, and that precisely this combination allows him to lift Rome, as it were, out of history:[12] while all other empires are depicted as very imperfect images of the divine order and, as it were, stuck in human time, Rome represents the perfect image of the divine kingdom on earth.

MAXIMUS OF TYRE

Of Maximus of Tyre, the 'philosophical orator' active in the second half of the second century AD,[13] forty-one relatively short pieces have come down to us, expounding mainly ethical themes. Targeting a public of upper-class young Romans who wanted to brush up their philosophical knowledge,[14] Maximus normally eschews technical vocabulary in favour of stylistic embellishments and rhetorical commonplaces. Although clearly a Platonist,[15] he presents himself as a representative of philosophy in general (see 1.10): differences between philosophical schools are not emphasised and hardly even identified. Only Epicureanism falls outside the *consensus omnium*. We can assume that he selected topics that would attract a well-educated but not technically schooled audience, and a number of his orations address religious and theological themes. In these speeches the problem of how to reconcile the philosophical idea of the unity of the godhead with the apparent diversity of the divine world and religious customs figures prominently. Several images and rhetorical tricks are deployed to overcome this difficulty.

The eleventh oration, about Plato's conception of god, tackles the problem head on. A long reflection upon the difficulty of the subject (1–6), caused by the diversity of opinion, introduces an exposition of Middle-Platonic theology (7–12). The first half of the oration starts by admitting universal disagreement about god. This is, Maximus concedes, quite normal with regard to demons whose powers and nature are obscure. The

[12] Cf. Pernot 1997: 34, who suggests that for Aristides Rome represents the 'end of history'.
[13] Trapp 1997: xi–xii.   [14] Max. Tyr. *Or.* 1.7–8; cf. Trapp 1997: xx.
[15] Some would call him an eclectic for apparent Stoic influences, but see Trapp 1997: xxvi–xxviii.

problem with god is the opposite: for a power so evident and grand it becomes difficult to provide a proper description that is acceptable to all[16] and even Plato does not carry universal conviction with his account of god (1). A first encounter with Plato's works puts one off and may yield little insight, but help can be found in our own conceptions of the divine (2–3). This makes the problem potentially even worse, as mankind seems to have an endless variety of opinions about, and representations of, the divine. But, as Maximus argues in a highly rhetorical vein, this is incorrect. First of all, the images created by artists or the speculations of philosophers are not true representations of god (3). Secondly, all people basically agree about god: 'If you would call an assembly of these artists and order them all together to state in a single decree what they think about god, do you think that the painter would say this, another thing the sculptor and the poet and the philosopher still another? Certainly not! And nor would, by Zeus, the Scythian, the Greek, the Persian or the Hyperborean' (4).[17] This universal agreement about god is contrasted with universal disagreement in all other matters:

The notions of law and justice are borne this way and that, torn apart and dismembered. One people (γένος) does not agree with another at all, nor city with city, nor household with household, nor man with man, not even an individual with himself . . . In such conflict and strife and disagreement, there is one custom and one account (λόγος) on which the entire world agrees, namely that there is one god who is king and father of all and that many gods, the children of god, rule with that god (θεὸς εἷς πάντων βασιλεὺς καὶ πατήρ, καὶ θεοὶ πολλοί, θεοῦ παῖδες, συνάρχοντες θεῷ, 5).

As often in Maximus, rhetoric has got the better of reason. It is clear that he argues, just as the Stoics would do,[18] that a single common notion underlies the multifarious representations and ideas about the divine. But the contrast between the common notion about god and the diversity in law and justice is disingenuous: just as the diverse representations of the divine do not exclude the existence of a common notion, one can argue that the diversity of human laws does not entail the absence of a single universal idea of justice – and indeed Maximus reasons in that way elsewhere.[19] It

---

[16] I take this to be the line of reasoning in the first chapter, which moves rather incongruously from demons to god.

[17] *Or.* 2 makes a similar point but stresses the irremediable diversity of human representations of the divine rather than the common notion underlying them.

[18] See, e.g., Cic. *Nat. D.* 2.5; Plut. *Comm. not.* 31. A similar argument can be found, however, in Pl. *Leg.* 885e–886a.

[19] Max. Tyr. *Or.* 6.5: he stresses the injustice of human laws, but towards the end he assumes that good human laws are in accordance with the divine law.

---

also needs no explanation that his universal notion of god is quite specific: it is a hierarchy with a single god at its top. This is, as we have seen, not only the usual Middle-Platonic way of viewing the pantheon in this period, but also an image that a Stoic such as Dio could draw on in his kingship orations, as the next chapter shows.[20] As such, few members of Maximus' audience would find fault with his claim that this is the way to understand god.

The second half of the speech tries to introduce his audience to the correct conception of the divine. His account is shaped by the opposition between intellect and perception (7). At the end of Chapter 8, god is established as the supreme intellect, and the uselessness of the senses for grasping him is then stressed (9). Only the soul can perceive him after having ascended the divine hierarchy, but Maximus imagines this only as possible after it has been separated from the body at death (10–11). Indeed, the senses obstruct the intellect and are likened to a lawless democracy, where the voice of law is silenced by noise and tumult (10). It is only by stripping away layers of images produced by the senses that one will be able to grasp god as the supreme intelligence, transcendent and incorporeal (11). But most people have too weak an intellect to reach that stage. A concession must consequently be made to the senses: images and comparisons with human life are allowed for pedagogic purposes. Maximus concludes his speech with a long comparison that is worth quoting in full:

I wish to show you what I have said in a clearer image (σαφεστέρη εἰκών). Imagine a great empire and a strong kingdom, where all bow willingly for one soul, that of the best and most respected of kings. The frontier of the empire is not the Halys or Hellespont or Lake Maeotis or the shores of the Ocean, but the heaven and the earth, the one above, the other below, heaven like a wall drawn in an impregnable circle, covering all that is in it, the earth as a garrison and prison of sinful bodies. The Great King himself sits immobile like the law, giving out to those who obey him the security that he possesses (βασιλέα δὲ αὐτὸν δὴ τὸν μέγαν ἀτρεμοῦντα ὥσπερ νόμον, παρέχοντα τοῖς πειθομένοις σωτηρίαν ὑπάρχουσαν ἐν αὐτῷ). And sharing in the power are many visible deities and many invisible ones, the first gathered around the doors themselves, like the ushers and the relatives of the king, sharing his table and food, while the others are subordinate to these and some even lower than the latter. You witness a hierarchy and order of power descending from god to the earth (διαδοχὴν ὁρᾷς καὶ τάξιν ἀρχῆς καταβαίνουσαν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ μέχρι γῆς, 12).[21]

---

[20] See also Galen, as interpreted by Frede 2002: 92.

[21] A similar comparison with the Persian Great King informs Max. Tyr. *Or.* 4.9.

The image is usually read as Maximus presents it: as a figurative way of expressing philosophical doctrine. We are indeed obviously dealing with a Middle-Platonic conception: god directs the cosmos through a tight hierarchy of subordinate beings, a close circle of servants and relatives, and then more distant collaborators. One might surmise that the closest circle is that of the heavens, the visible gods, whereas the other steps on the ladder are made up of demons. An early oration on demons indeed sketches a similar image of the divine world, where god sits immobile and maintains the ordered hierarchy of the heavens, whilst demons serve him (8.8).[22] The gap between the first god, who is beyond intellectual grasp and, possibly under Aristotelian influence, is seen as uninvolved in the world, is bridged by a hierarchy of lesser divine beings who obey his command.[23] Thus, the theology that underpins the comparison is not really original.

It would be a mistake, however, to halt our investigation here and consider it simply a traditional image, indebted to a tradition of describing the highest god as king that hearkens back to Homer:[24] the context in which the image is used and some of its elements establish connections that cannot be reduced to the use of mere traditional philosophical *topoi*. When exploring these connections, we shall see that the modelling of the divine world on the Great King and his satraps tends to sum up the hierarchical view of the cosmos and society that was explored in Chapter 5.

The whole of *Oration* 11 is implicitly driven by the pair 'order and disorder', which surfaces in numerous guises. Maximus starts with a reference to popular disagreement about the nature of demons, before dismissing the diverse conjectures that painters, poets, sculptors and philosophers make about what Zeus really looks like (1–3). Human disagreement is opposed to the unity of truth. Universal discord about law and justice is then contrasted with general agreement about the notion of god (4–5): if everything else separates human beings, god still unites them. In the second part of the speech, the disorder of the senses, compared to an unruly democracy, is contrasted with the single purpose of the soul: viewing god (10). Significantly, another oration likens the tripartite soul to a well-ordered monarchy (*Oration* 27.6). At the end of *Oration* 11 the initial diversity of opinions about the demons is picked up again and transcended in the

[22] Similar ideas are also found in *Or.* 9.1 and 16.6. These and other links between *Or.* 8, 9 and 11 suggest that they originally formed a single sequence: Trapp 1997: 96 n. 10.

[23] Cf. Alcinous, *Intr.* 10. On Middle-Platonic theology, see, e.g., Dillon 1996: *passim*; Donini 1988 and 2004; Opsomer 2005.

[24] Cf. Peterson 1935: 54; Markschies 1991: 397–418; K. W. Müller 1991.

image of the Great King. Even though the offspring of god are 'many and varied', they all find their place in the strict hierarchy leading down from the Great King. The contrasts human/divine, custom/truth, earth/heaven, senses/soul can thus be read as permutations of the fundamental oppositions diversity/unity and disorder/order. The image of the Great King transcends these antagonisms, by showing that the multitude of demons, human opinions or customs does not abolish the fundamental order that underlies the world: it visualises the order of the divine world and of the cosmos, while at the same time acknowledging the variety of divine beings experienced by humans. The hierarchy links heaven and earth and leads human custom and diversity up to divine unity. As such, the image implies the idea that a universal order underlies both heaven and earth, the former having achieved it, the latter aspiring to it.[25]

This universal order is guaranteed by divine law. In Maximus' representation of god as the Great King, the latter was said to be 'immobile like the law.' Immobility is a normal quality of the supreme god,[26] but the addition of 'like the law' clearly attempts to link god and law. For Maximus, law is identical to divine providence. Although he only once explicitly identifies divine law with providence (5.4–5), the identification is implied elsewhere.[27] In designating fate and providence as divine law, Maximus is in line with normal Middle-Platonist usage.[28] But god is not simply law: being identical to the Good, he cannot but be justice (θέμις καὶ δίκη, 35.2). This turns the cosmos, as structured by divine law, into a just, providential order.

The providential order of the cosmos should ideally be transferred to earth, even though mankind often fails. *Oration* 11 gives a rather unfavourable depiction of democracy, where the voice of law cannot be heard. *Oration* 6 follows the same pattern, by contrasting the changing and unjust laws of classical Athens to the law of the Intellect, legislated by god. That is the only true law (6.5). This may give the impression that human laws and divine law are two separate entities. But even when human law usually falls short of the ideal, it still has the same function as divine law: to maintain order. *Oration* 9, for example, contrasts the liberation of the soul from the body with the transition 'from a barbarian country to that of the Greeks, and from a lawless, tyrannical and strife-torn city to a law-abiding and monarchical and peaceful city...' (9.6). Not only do human and divine law have the same purpose: ideally they are identical. A

[25] For other comparisons that express the same idea, see Max. Tyr. *Or.* 13.3–4, 39.2.

[26] Alcinous, *Intr.* 10 p. 164.23 (Whittaker and Louis).   [27] Max. Tyr. *Or.* 13.4 and 39.2.

[28] Alcinous, *Intr.* 26 p. 179.3. Cf. Apul. *De dog. Plat.* 233; Plut. [*De fato*] 3.569A–570B.

benign king rules in accordance with divine law, as *Oration* 16 makes clear: 'The happy city is ruled by a king, with all its parts, in accordance with divine law, yielding to the one able and born to rule' (16.4). When law does not live up to the divine example, order breaks down and the unity of society disintegrates. The continuation of the passage makes it clear that aristocracy is inferior to monarchy, but still better than democracy, which is said to be 'the rule of the mob' and 'cacaphonous mass rule' (16.4). Political variety and disagreement are thus similar to the various conflicting opinions about the gods: they express mankind's failure to order its affairs in line with divine law.

Unsurprisingly, such a conception results in monarchy's being put forward as the best constitution, as we have noticed in the examples cited. The evident nature of this preference, given the general tendency of ancient political philosophy (in particular Platonism) and the imperial context in which Maximus works, may obscure the few nuances he adds to this picture. Indeed, Maximus does not rule out other constitutions as long as they preserve order by acting in accordance with divine law. *Oration* 27 is illuminating on this point. There Maximus characterises the defective state of the soul by comparing it to 'mob rule' as experienced by Athens:

When Pericles is departed, and Aristides has fled, Socrates put to death, Nicias compelled to go, when Cleon desires Sphacteria, Thrasyllus Ionia, Alcibiades Sicily, and others still other parts of sea and earth, and when the lazy, disordered, mercenary crowd, bending to every wind, shares these desires, these desires necessarily spawn slavery, suffering and tyranny, and all such things one hates to mention. (27.6)[29]

When passions invade public life, Maximus suggests, order breaks down. States that are dominated by virtuous individuals, who manage to impose harmony on the various constituent elements, can, however, preserve or restore that order. Interestingly, Periclean Athens is put forward as a well-ordered *polis*: only after Pericles' death and the disappearance of other virtuous leading politicians, Athens slips towards mob rule, tyranny and disorder.[30] Athenian democracy is temporarily an example of order, as long as it is directed by the virtuous Pericles who as a 'natural ruler' manages to impose his will on the unruly mob. Maximus' primary concern in judging constitutions thus lies with order rather than monarchy. In line with tradition, the latter is taken to be the best constitution, but not to

the exclusion of all others: the criterion for all is whether they manage to create order or not.[31] Yet *Oration* 27 not only illustrates Maximus' primordial concern with order but also makes clear what the essence of order is. Arguing against people who think that reason commands the body directly, Maximus puts forward the view that the non-rational parts of the soul are essential intermediaries. He uses the simile of a military chain of command, running down from the general to the archers, through a whole host of intermediaries (7). This image of the hierarchy of the soul is essentially identical to that used for explaining how the divine world is structured and how the human one ideally should be. Hierarchy guarantees order.

It is against this background that we must understand the hierarchical image of the Persian King quoted above. It is not simply a visualisation of Middle-Platonic theology but provides a template for order on all levels of existence: heaven, earth, politics and psychology. In the various comparisons used by Maximus we always encounter a twin principle of order, namely hierarchy and law: a hierarchy of satraps and divine law, a military hierarchy and its chain of command, an army and its watchword, the hierarchy in the soul and the command of reason.[32] It is fairly easy to detect in the quoted passages Platonic echoes, either going straight back to dialogues themselves or to the Platonic tradition: hierarchy in soul and state, the chain of demons linking man and god, the preference for monarchy.[33] Echoes of other traditions can be noticed as well, especially Stoicism with its stress on law. Although Maximus' orations are, then, up to a certain level a mere catalogue of trite ideas, they show at least how the Stoic notion of law was integrated into Platonist ideas about monarchy and demonology. But they also reveal a thought based on the notion of order, in which connections are established between ontology, politics and theology – connections which are to be found throughout the first two centuries AD as part of the discourse on cosmic hierarchy. In arguing that all order is ultimately in line with divine order, order becomes the natural state of things, not in the sense that everything is already structured according to divine law, but in the sense that that is the way it *should* be: cosmic order is a normative category, rooted in an assumption about the ontological state of things.

---

[29] Cf. Max. Tyr. *Or.* 37.2, which defines happiness as obedience to law.
[30] Similar ideas can be found, e.g., in Plut. *Ad princ. iner.* 2.780B–C; Lucian, *Imagines* 17; Aristid. *Or.* 1.387, 3.136–7; Philostr. *VA* 5.35.

[31] See Max. Tyr. *Or.* 27.7.   [32] Max. Tyr. *Or.* 11.12, 13.3–4, 27.7, 39.2.
[33] E.g. Max. Tyr. *Or.* 11.12: Pl. *Plt.* 194a, 297a; Max. Tyr. *Or.* 13.4: Pl. *Prt.* 344d, *Leg.* 905e–906a; Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.9, 1.7.1–3, *Oec.* 4.9; Max. Tyr. *Or.* 27.6: Pl. *Resp.* 555b; Max. Tyr. *Or.* 39.2: Xen. *Oec.* 3–10. Trapp 1997 lists the allusions in his notes.

Political images are commonly used by Maximus as a way of expressing these ideas. They were perhaps very easy to grasp for his audience, but at the same time they transfer conceptions of cosmic order into the realm of politics. Most importantly, such imagery embeds politics in a natural order which is conceived of as normative: by using various political images such as that of the general or the king to exemplify the ideal order, they acquire the aura of ideal institutions. This does not necessarily imply that the existing political structure is by default conceived of as the ideal one: a general may still be a bad general. But even when virtue is needed to fulfil one's role correctly, the emphasis is on structure rather than on virtue. Maximus' political philosophy is one of structure and order, rather than one of virtue and wisdom. This tendency may explain why the traditional idea of *mimēsis* of divine virtues or of the divine king is hardly present in Maximus.[34] Indeed, he rather stresses monarchy as part of a natural order, which is to be maintained by obedience to law and hierarchy. Significantly, in *Oration* 37.2, divine virtue and happiness are obtained through obedience to law:[35] law and hierarchy condition virtue, rather than the other way around.[36]

The image of the Great King not only sums up ideas about order in politics but also brings order to religion. We have seen that in *Oration* 11 the comparison was embedded in a reflection on the diversity of opinions about the gods, and also on the number of the gods.[37] That variety is ordered, in the first place, by reconciling philosophical monism with popular conceptions about the pantheon as found in Homer and Hesiod. The gods are not individuals at war with each other or with mankind: they are satraps who all obey the command that comes from on high. There is a single highest god who commands the hierarchy and imposes order. Unsurprisingly, Maximus focuses mainly on Zeus, who is identified with the highest god.[38] But he rarely engages in an effort to explain how, say, Apollo relates to the supreme god.[39] The main exception is *Oration* 26.7–8,

not by accident on 'Homer the philosopher', which tries to detect precise theological ideas in the Homeric poems.[40] It would be unproductive to try to distil from these scattered remarks what the Homeric gods are and which position each occupies in the hierarchy. Rather than offering precise solutions for problems of Homeric allegory, the modelling of the divine world on the Persian King and his satraps conveys a broad impression of how the divine world really works, as a hierarchy of order.[41]

This detour through Maximus' orations has been necessary to see that the link with the Great King is not a mere literary flourish but that its constituent elements, such as the emphasis on law, hierarchy, political order and immediate obeisance of subordinates to the leader, sum up a wide range of assumptions about cosmic, political and religious order that have been explored in Chapter 5. This does not make Maximus an original and innovative philosopher: rather, the way he brings together elements from the philosophical tradition reflects connections widely established in Post-Hellenistic philosophy. Of interest here is the condensation of these ideas in the image of the Great King, which provides essential background for Aristides' praise of Rome through the degradation of Persia. Before we return to Aristides, I want to peruse briefly another philosophical work that uses the image of the Great King, in which we encounter the same characteristics in a different form and doctrinal framework.

PSEUDO-ARISTOTLE, *ON THE WORLD*

The short treatise *On the World* passes itself off as an original work of Aristotle, addressed to Alexander, supposedly the Macedonian king. Whilst a few scholars defend its authenticity,[42] their case has become increasingly unlikely in the face of recent new arguments:[43] general opinion now holds that it is a spurious work to be dated in the first century BC or AD,[44] with a preference for the later date. A clear attempt to shore up a Peripatetic view of the cosmos, it is also heavily indebted to Platonism and Stoicism, even though the work polemicises against the latter.[45] This 'eclectic' nature

---

[34] There is a hint at this idea in *Or.* 15.6, but the view there proposed is refuted in *Or.* 16.

[35] Compare with *Or.* 5.3, where Maximus rejects the utility of prayer because god does not change his plans. At the centre of his argument stands the idea of obedience to divine law, which cannot be changed through prayer.

[36] Maximus seems also to assume that each one of us has received his place in the great order (*Or.* 5.3, where the general (god) refuses to let a baggage-handler take the position of a hoplite). This idea can be paralleled in Epictetus (*Diss.* 3.24.10–12, 4.1.106).

[37] Max. Tyr. *Or.* 11.12, where Maximus argues against Hesiod (*Op.* 252–3) that the gods are countless. In *Or.* 9.8 he quotes the same passage approvingly.

[38] Max. Tyr. *Or.* 4.9, 8.8, 10.10, 15.6, 16.6, 25.7, 26.7, 35.1–2, 38.1, 38.7, 41.2.

[39] He sometimes seems to reduce the traditional gods to demons: Max. Tyr. *Or.* 8.5, 9.7.

[40] Max. Tyr. *Or.* 4.8 applies Stoic allegory to the gods, with a result that does not seem reconcilable with that of *Or.* 26.

[41] Maximus also never gives a precise account of how demons fit into the divine hierarchy: see *Or.* 8 and 9. This can be compared with what we have seen for Plutarch, where there remain considerable open questions about his demonology.

[42] Bos 1977, 1991 and 2003; Bos and Reale 1995.

[43] Mansfeld 1991 and 1992; Onnasch 1996; Schenkeveld 1991; J. P. Martín 1998.

[44] E.g. Capelle 1905; Festugière 1944–54: IV.479; Donini 1982: 215; Moraux 1984: 5–8; Runia 2002: 305. Cf. Kraye 1990 for earlier debates.

[45] Cf. Strohm 1952; Moraux 1984: 5–82; Mansfeld 1992.

already indicates that the work belongs in the context of late Hellenistic or imperial philosophy, when the various schools drew on each other's concepts and ideas.[46] Apuleius translated the work into Latin,[47] and I shall adduce his version from time to time. The confrontation of the two versions may shed light on how a Post-Hellenistic Platonist would read a work with Peripatetic leanings.

The treatise is fundamentally a reflection on the wonderful order of the world. Parallel to *Oration* 11 of Maximus, the letter of dedication to Alexander starts with a reflection on the variety of human opinion, which is contrasted with the philosophical contemplation of the entire cosmos. The treatise properly starts with a double definition of cosmos. On the one hand, it is the system of heaven, earth and the elements composing them; on the other, it is the order of things, preserved by and through god. In the latter understanding, it is a providential order, as the divine cares for the world. Apuleius speaks in this context of 'the good care of the gods' (*deorum recta custodia*) (1.289). This double meaning defines the structure of the work.[48] Chapters 2 to 4 give an account of heaven, the elements, geography of the earth, meteorology and seismology, before Chapter 5 raises again the issue of order in the universe: how come that, composed of opposite principles such as dry and wet, the universe has not perished long ago?[49] The answer is simple: just as a city (*polis*) achieves unity notwithstanding the diversity of poor and rich, young and old, and weak and strong, nature creates harmony out of opposites. Each is attributed an equal share (ὁμολογία): equality is the preserver of concord, and concord preserves the cosmos (5.396B–397A). After having explicitly stressed that beauty (*kosmos* or *mundus*) is the result of order and arrangement, the author spends the rest of the chapter on lengthy praise of the providential order of the world. The idea that a city is composed of different, often conflicting elements is not new and can be found in Plato or Aristotle,[50] but it is distinctively prominent in the literature of this period and often expressed in terms similar to those of Pseudo-Aristotle.[51]

But harmony and equality do not suffice as an explanation for the presence of order and unity in the cosmos. Harmony is preserved by ἡ τῶν ὅλων συνεκτικὴ αἰτία: 'the cause that holds everything together' – a term with a clear Stoic flavour.[52] As Apuleius explains (25.341), this is the *rector mundi*, god. Although his powers (δυνάμεις) have been recognised by the people of old, argues Pseudo-Aristotle, they have wrongly thought that he involves himself in the world and carries out all the tasks himself. In fact, he sits in the highest place in the cosmos and his power is felt most by the bodies closest to him and hence down the cosmic hierarchy. In the same way, generals do not concern themselves with the bedding of their soldiers. In order to make his point more clearly, the author of *On the World* then introduces a long parallel with the Persian Great King:

The pomp of Cambyses, Xerxes and Darius was magnificently adorned to the heights of solemnity and dignity. Indeed, the king himself, as is said, held court in Susa or Ecbatana, invisible to all, in a splendid palace within an enclosure glittering with gold, electrum and ivory. Numerous towers and gates, at a distance of many stades, were fortified by brazen doors and high walls. Outside these the elite and notables were set in order, some as bodyguards and servants of the king himself, some as guards of each enclosure, called gate-keepers and listeners, so that the king himself, called master (δεσπότης) and god, could see everything and hear everything. Besides these, others were appointed as treasurers of revenue, generals of war and hunt, and receivers of gifts. Others were each responsible for the remaining tasks, as they were necessary. The whole empire of Asia, limited by the Hellespont in the West and the Indus in the East, was divided into nations among generals, satraps and kings, slaves (δοῦλοι) of the Great King, with couriers, scouts, messengers and overseers of beacon-towers. Such was the order, and particularly that of the beacon-towers that could be set on fire in succession from the far end of the empire to Susa and Ecbatana, that the king was informed on the same day of all attempts at change in Asia (6.398A).[53]

Obviously, the ruler of the world is infinitely greater than the Persian Great King, but he is comparably omnipotent, omniscient and in command of his hierarchy. The image gives an idea of what god is like in his actions, but it hardly defines his essence, which Pseudo-Aristotle does not seem to be interested in.[54] Further comparisons, for example, with the way

---

46 The idea of eclecticism in later philosophy is discussed in Dillon and Long 1988.
47 It has been disputed that Apuleius really is the translator, but his authorship is now accepted: cf. Beaujeu 1973: ix–xxix.
48 For a slightly different analysis of the structure, cf. Moraux 1984: 11, 13.
49 Arist. [*De mundo*] 5.396a, cf. Apul. *De mundo* 20.333.
50 Arguments for harmony can be found in Pl. *Phd.* 86a–b, 93–4, *Ti.* 30a–32c; Arist. *Pol.* 2.2 261a, 3.4 1277a, 4.4 1291b *De an.* 1.4 407b. Cf. Moraux 1984: 24–7.
51 Cf. Plut. *Rom.* 35.2–3, *Phoc.* 2.5; Dio Chrys. *Or.* 32.26–9, 32.74, 32.87, 34.21–3; Max. Tyr. *Or.* 16.4; Diotogenus, p. 72.19–23; Ocellus, pp. 124.18–125.7; Ecphantus, pp. 81.21–82.3 (Thesleff).

52 Moraux 1984: 38 n. 124 points out that Antiochus of Ascalon seems to have attributed such an identification of god and the cause that holds everything together to the Early Academy (Cic. *Acad. post.* 2.24–9).
53 In his version, Apuleius uses vocabulary of Roman imperial institutions: 24.343–7, see also 35.366–8, with the comments by Harrison 2000: 193–4. Pseudo-Aristotle seems to have drawn inspiration from Herodotus (1.98); cf. Regen 1972: 206–14.
54 Runia 2002: 305–8 has argued that we should see [*De mundo*] as a representative of Hellenistic theology rather than of imperial theology. He locates the difference between them in the fact that the

that machines or puppets operate, make clear how the comparison is to be understood: a single moving instance sets an entire system in motion (6.398B). The author of *On the World* now heaps comparison on comparison: god is like the *koryphaios* who leads his chorus in harmony, the supreme commander of an army who signals his will through a trumpeter, the keystone in the vault of a building, the helmsman in a ship, a charioteer in his chariot, the lawgiver in a city. A final depiction of the immovable god as law concludes the chapter. God remains immovable while directing everything,

truly like the law of the city, immovably established in the souls of those who obey it, directs everything in the city. Because they obey the law, magistrates go to the town-hall, judges to the appropriate courts, councillors and members of the assembly to their respective meeting. And one man walks to the prytaneum to be fed, another to the courts to defend himself, a third to prison to die. (6.400B)

In the same way god is the law of the greater city, the cosmos. Whereas Maximus incorporated the notion of immobile law into his image of the Great King, *On the World* likens god separately to the Persian King and to law. Both comparisons have a similar function in explaining how god acts on the world: not by direct intervention but by decreeing rules and by acting through a hierarchy. Just as in Maximus, these comparisons imply that god must be one. *On the World* stands out among philosophical literature of this period through its emphatic affirmation of the unity of god: 'Though he is one, he has many names, according to the many effects he produces' (εἷς δὲ ὢν πολυώνυμός ἐστι, κατονομαζόμενος τοῖς πάθεσι πᾶσιν ἅπερ αὐτὸς νεοχμοῖ, 7.401A). This may seem like an attempt to reduce all traditional gods to the single supreme god, but the author only reviews traditional epithets for Zeus and copies a doxology for the king of the gods from an Orphic poem (fr. 21a). No other gods, except Cronus as Zeus's father, are mentioned. Like Maximus, Pseudo-Aristotle focuses entirely on the traditional supreme god. Again, no attempt is made to give the Homeric gods a place in the hierarchy.[55] The treatise ends with a

quotation from Plato's *Laws* (715e–716a), according to which Justice always follows Zeus and divine law – a quotation also found amongst Platonists to explain how god exacts justice.[56]

The parallels between Maximus and Pseudo-Aristotle do not need rehearsing. Embedded in a discussion of the order of the universe, comparisons with law and the Persian King communicate how that order is preserved, while at the same time divine dignity is maintained through the absence of direct involvement in matter – god is immobile and distant. Pseudo-Aristotle has clearly drawn on much material from various sources, but some of it fits oddly within his overall framework. In line with his Peripatetic orientation, the author stresses causality, even though god seems to have become reduced to a giant efficient cause rather than a final cause, as Aristotle would have it. One gets the impression that the author advocates a mechanistic reading of the universe, whereby chains of causes starting with god explain everything that happens. The one-sided emphasis on law and causality towards the end of the treatise may explain why it concludes with the passage from Plato's *Laws*. The last chapter hardly leaves room for the notion of divine justice and punishment for wrongdoing: in an almost deterministic account, it becomes difficult to fit that idea in. Given his earlier commitment to a providential order, the author may have felt obliged to have recourse to Plato's authority to redress the balance, even though it is unclear how divine justice fits into his world-view.

The same problem affects the image of the Great King. The hierarchy which is traced from the king to the world is taken by Pseudo-Aristotle to exemplify a causal relationship: god acts on the highest bodies and they act on the lower ones and so down to the earth. The treatise never accepts that the king's officials are to be seen as intermediary divine beings: nothing is said about demons or visible gods.[57] Clearly Pseudo-Aristotle wanted to safeguard the singularity and absolute transcendence of his god. Apuleius, on the other hand, quite naturally introduces the idea of a divine hierarchy into his translation, adding, for example, that we receive god's help 'through him and others' (*per se et per alios*, 25.344).[58] It is obvious that the comparison of the Great King more naturally supports a reading

---

former proclaims certainty about god's essence, whereas the latter is more aware of epistemological limitations. Not only is the general point problematic, as on his own account imperial Stoics remained certain about the divine essence (and one might add the Epicureans as well), but his argument for [*De mundo*] is entirely *e silentio*. Pseudo-Aristotle indeed does not say that we cannot know the essence of god, but neither does he say what his essence is. The series of images make clear what god could be like, but even they cannot be taken as philosophical statements about divine essence. It must be noted that Peterson 1935: 19 argued the opposite from Runia on similar grounds – which illustrates that the material can be interpreted in both ways.

[55] The only exceptions are the traditional appellations of fate and necessity (*Anankē, Heimarmenē, Peprōmenē, Moira* and *Nemesis*), which the author identifies with Zeus and proceeds to reinterpret

[56] as expressions for causality. There are close parallels with earlier Stoic interpretations: see, e.g., Plut. *De Stoic. repug.* 47.1056C. Casevitz and Babut 2004: 359 n. 599 review other sources. Moraux 1984: 53–6 supposes that Pseudo-Aristotle is merely copying a Stoic source.

[56] See, e.g., Plut. *De exil.* 6.601B and *Adv. Col.* 30.1124D–1125A. Significantly, Plato imputes this view on Justice to 'an ancient tradition': it may explain its popularity, as it backed up contemporary views on divine law and justice with a double authority: Plato and the ancient tradition.

[57] Contrary to what is assumed by, e.g., Karamanolis 2006: 108 n. 75.

[58] Cf. Apul. *De mundo* 25.343, 27.351.

in which the satraps are seen as intermediary beings who serve the highest god, rather than the causal model proposed by Pseudo-Aristotle, in which they are simply pieces of a machine set in motion by a causal chain.[59]

The important point is, however, that the image could be used by both Platonists and Peripatetics alike, just as Maximus also could use the image of a machine put into motion to explain god's action on the world. Even though they may have had a specific doctrinal origin, such images clearly were not tied to a school and could be used to defend a variety of philosophical positions. Alluding to Genette's concept of 'architext', defined as everything that links a text in an explicit or implicit way to other texts and as such can be taken to define a literary genre,[60] one could say that the image of the Great King and his satraps functions as an 'archimage': each philosopher reconfigures the comparison to suit his needs (albeit rather unsuccessfully in the case of *On the World*), but these various uses still share a number of fundamental characteristics that seem to point to a significance that transcends the precise doctrinal context in which the comparison is used and that is inherent in the image itself. In both Maximus and Pseudo-Aristotle, the image of the Great King and his satraps symbolises how ideal cosmic and political order is brought about through a perfect hierarchy, which is guided by law and justice.

AELIUS ARISTIDES AND THE 'ARCHIMAGE' OF THE GREAT KING

The 'archimage' of the Persian King and his satraps informs Aristides' description of the Persian Empire, but in a negative way: the orator wants to show that the Persian King did not live up to this ideal depiction. Aristides' concern is not historical accuracy: his aim is to transfer the ideal characteristics of cosmic order from the Persian Empire to its Roman counterpart. Indeed, towards the end of his speech, the orator suggests that Rome is an image of the ideal, divine empire. By using the tortuous term 'archimage', I wish to emphasise that Aristides is by no means supposed to depend directly on Maximus or *On the World*, which is in any case excluded for chronological reasons in the case of the former. The suggestion is rather that Aristides' originality lies in subverting the usual positive content given to the well-known image of the Persian King in order to elevate Rome.[61]

The precise antithesis between the positive characteristics of the 'archimage' and the negative qualities Aristides ascribes to the Persians will show that this is indeed one of the *leitmotifs* of *On Rome*.

Although Aristides has chosen numerous points of reference for Rome, the dynamic of the speech is driven by two comparisons. The comparison with the Persian Empire is an explicit part of the speech (15–39),[62] but it is announced before the section actually starts (5), and Aristides often refers back to it later (79, 85–6, 95). The Greek city-states are points of reference in chapters 40–57, but that section is not only shorter but also, as we shall see, determined by the issues raised in the juxtaposition of Persia and Rome. The comparison with Persia serves as a negative foil to Rome. When the contrast with Persia dissipates towards the end, it is replaced by a more positive likening to Zeus's empire (6, 32, 88–9, 103, 108–9), which is made explicit twice (88–9, 103). The divine world is explicitly taken as a model in the peroration (103–9). The effect of this double, negative and positive, comparison is to dissociate Persia from the divine empire, and depict Rome as an image of the realm of the gods: Rome is represented as an ordered state that takes over world rule from a disordered one, thus coming closer to the natural order as represented in Zeus's kingdom. By setting Rome against and above the stock example of a good empire, Aristides greatly aggrandises its status.

The Persian Great King is from the outset belittled. Whereas the Romans rule the entire world, the Persians only ruled a small portion (10, 16).[63] But stress is rather put on the internal organisation of the Persian Empire, which is beset by instability. According to Aristides, the Persian king merely ruled by grace of subjects who only recognised his authority as it suited them (τῶν συγχωρησόντων βασιλεύειν δεόμενος, 17). He never had a firm hold on his territory and was obliged to travel around his empire in order to be recognised by his subjects. The Persian Kings were 'travelling kings' (μετανάσται βασιλεῖς, 18), who did not even care for their subjects as herdsmen do (cf. 22). 'By the law of nature' this state of affairs implies insurrections, wars, conflicts and dispute, turning the Persian Empire into the paradigm of a disordered state. The reason for this was, Aristides says, that the Persians did not know how to rule, for they ignored the difference between sovereignty (ἀρχή) and dominance (δεσπόζειν: 23, cf. 51).[64] And,

---

[59] It is therefore unlikely that Pseudo-Aristotle drew the comparison from a Peripatetic source, as is proposed by Peterson 1935: 25 and by those who consider [*De mundo*] an original work of Aristotle. A Platonic source is considered plausible by some scholars: cf. Moraux 1984: 47, 67–8; Markschies 1991: 413–15.

[60] Genette 1979.

[61] Aristides himself uses the Persian Empire elsewhere as a positive point of comparison: *Or.* 23.46.

[62] Alexander's empire and the kingdoms of the diadochs are depicted as a mere continuation of the Persian Empire (24–7).

[63] Contrary to the vastness of their empire according to Maximus and Pseudo-Aristotle.

[64] The same is said by Posidonius, but in a positive sense: during the Golden Age *officium erat imperare, non regnum* (Sen. *Ep.* 90.5).

when badly ruled, it is impossible for subjects to be good subjects. The same characteristics, though exacerbated, surface in Alexander's empire. The successor of the Persians, he inherited all their woes: he acquired a kingdom, but never ruled (24), of which the absence of laws is a clear sign (26). When his kingdom fell apart after his death, an even worse situation came into being, with his successors acting as 'satraps without a king' (σατράπαι ἔρημοι βασιλέως, 27), and always on the move.

It is impossible to find parallels for this bleak description of the Persian Empire, and surely not in earlier historical sources. In fact, this account of the Persian King is carefully crafted to contradict the main characteristics of the image of the Great King as we found it in Maximus and Pseudo-Aristotle.[65] The Persian Empire is not a real hierarchy, as the king only rules by grace of his subjects and is unable to control his satraps. The idea that it is bad for a king to depend on the recognition by his subjects may seem odd in a Roman context: Roman political practice was based on the acceptance of the emperor by various 'interest groups'.[66] The point of reference in Aristides' speech is not real Roman practice, however, but the highest god, as depicted in the 'archimage', who is indeed not dependent on his subordinates. Equally, the odd reference to the king travelling around his empire to impose his rule, which is impossible to find in any historical account of the Persian Empire, can only be understood as the mirror image of the king as an immobile incarnation of law, whose power passes through the hierarchy and the rule of law. Indeed, in the 'archimage' god does not busy himself with the pettiness of running daily affairs and stays put at the top of the hierarchy. The absence of law, as stressed in the case of Alexander and his successors, implies a lack of unity in the empire, resulting in plurality, dissension and war. Importantly, Aristides stresses that it is by the law of nature that such an empire results in disorder: therefore, the Persian Empire was not in tune with the natural order of things – contrary to the 'archimage' that emphasised how divine law was channelled down the well-obeying hierarchy and that visualised order and unity. Rather than describing historical facts, then, Aristides is interested in manipulating the 'archimage' to prove his point. One can even argue that Aristides explicitly alludes to the fact that his depiction of the Persian King is inspired by the one used for the pantheon: in chapter 21, he states that the Persian King ruled 'by curse' and not 'by prayer' (ἐκ κατάρας, οὐ κατ' εὐχήν). The explicit religious language of this Platonic allusion to the second *Alcibiades*

[65] Aristides is aware of the fact that the Persian King and his satraps were used as a comparison for the divine: in *Or.* 43.18, the subordinate gods are called prefects or satraps.

[66] For the idea of *Akzeptanz* by the subjects as central to Roman imperial practice, see Flaig 1992.

(143A) may be a hint by Aristides that he is using a comparison normally adopted for the pantheon.

That Aristides is covertly referring to the 'archimage' and not to historical reality, becomes even more evident in the extremely laudatory description of Rome that is put side by side with the negative depiction of the Persian Empire. Again, this can only be properly understood when read as a positive calque of an image of which Persia was the negative. Aristides starts by emphasising that the Roman Empire is bigger than Persia and encompasses the entire world. Moreover, it is under a single rule: 'In this way, the entire world says the same thing, in greater harmony than a chorus, praying that this sovereignty may last forever' (οὕτως ἅπασα ἡ οἰκουμένη χοροῦ ἀκριβέστερον ἓν φθέγγεται συνευχομένη μένειν τὸν ἅπαντα χρόνον τήνδε τὴν ἀρχῆν, 29). The emperor is obviously the leader (κορυφαῖος) of the chorus. In explicit contrast with the Persian Empire and the kingdoms of Alexanders' successors, Aristides emphasises that there are no fighting satraps in the empire. The orator continues by stressing the unity of mankind under Roman rule: no differences between tribes or between land and island are found under Roman rule. This mirrors the emphasis found in the 'archimage' on the all-encompassing rule of the Great King. All the people are ruled by governors (ἄρχοντες), who in turn are ruled by the 'great governor' (μέγας ἄρχων, 31).[67] The pun is hard to translate, but the term is not accidental: *archē* was precisely what the Persian King lacked (see also 36 and 58). Real *archē* implies a perfectly working hierarchy, as the next section makes clear. Like the highest god, the emperor is omniscient and in full control of his hierarchy: 'they think that he knows better what they (the governors) do than they themselves, and they fear and respect him more than someone would his master when the latter is present and giving orders' (32). Nobody acts without having received an order. The contrast with the Persian King is clear: the Roman emperor can rule from a distance and does not have to be present in person. Indeed, the emperor does not need to travel: 'For he governs the whole world by dispatching letters whilst he remains in the centre of the empire' (33). In a significant hyperbole Aristides even claims that the letters arrive immediately after having been written. Sitting at the top of a perfect hierarchy, the emperor is immobile, having immediate communication down, as has the highest god in the depictions by Maximus and pseudo-Aristotle. The hierarchy is benevolent and takes care of its subjects (36).[68] Aristides also emphasises at

[67] Aristides describes the emperor as μέγας ἄρχων καὶ τὰ πάντα πρυτανεύων (31). For these terms, see Plut. *De exil.* 6.601A–B.

[68] Compare the vocabulary found in Max. Tyr. *Or.* 11.12.

length that the Roman Empire is a hierarchy of justice. In Greek cities and their democracies, there is no possibility of appeal beyond the city: one has to abide by the decision. In Rome, there is always the possibility of appeal to the 'great judge', who impersonates justice (38). The point is not that the resources of a city-state are limited, contrary to the possibilities of an empire; the suggestion is rather that the emperor is justice embodied.[69] A verse from Hesiod, originally applied to Zeus, comes to help: '"For easily he makes one strong and easily he crushes the strong", this great judge and governor, however justice guides him, like a breeze blowing on a ship, which does not, indeed, favour and escort the rich man more and the poor man less, but equally assists him to whomever it may come' (39). This emphasis on justice mirrors the one found in the image of the Great Persian King in Maximus and *On the World*: the divine hierarchy is indeed one of justice.

In my opinion, it would be naïve to try to explain this description of the Roman state and bureaucracy solely as based on historical facts, even when there are obvious points of contact.[70] Antoninus Pius is, for example, known not to have left Italy during his rule. This could then explain the stress on the immobility of the ruler. Yet such a historical reading misses the thrust of the speech. Indeed, it is striking how chapters 28–39, in which Aristides contrasts Rome explicitly with Persia, discuss exactly the same topics as those found in Maximus and *On the World*: the extension and unity of the empire, the perfectly controlled hierarchy with an immobile emperor at the top, law and justice that pervade the hierarchy, the benevolent nature of the hierarchy. For Aristides, Persia and Alexander's empire are the absolute negation of these characteristics, whereas they are most perfectly found in Rome. Indeed, the fact that Aristides ends that section by applying a verse from Hesiod, which originally described Zeus, to the emperor, hints at what will become explicit later on: Rome's rule is calqued on the ideal image of divine hierarchy.

The comparison between Persia and Rome is followed by a discussion of the Greek city-states (40–57). Its main role is to emphasise Persia as the only point of reference for Rome. From the outset, the Greek states are said to be too small to be real *comparanda* (40) and obviously poorer than Persia (41). Only in one respect could the Greeks be a match: but even in wisdom the Romans surpass them (41). The rest of the section shows how the Greeks fail to impose real hegemony and empire: lack of leadership, the constant struggle for supremacy between Athens, Sparta and Thebes, and numerous revolts allow Aristides to conclude that there did not exist 'an orderly system of imperial rule' in Greece (57). The section thus has the function of reinforcing the argument that only Persia can be a point of comparison when it comes to empire building – which is the theme of the oration. That the role of this section is to highlight Persia as the only possible comparison is brought out by the fact that there is no consecutive section explicitly comparing Rome to the Greek states, parallel to the comparison between Persia and Rome in chapters 28–39. The Greek states simply are not worth comparing.[71]

The first part of the speech leads to the conclusion that Rome is fit to have an empire and knows how to govern. It has created 'a democracy common to the entire world' (καθέστηκε κοινὴ τῆς γῆς δημοκρατία ὑφ' ἑνὶ τῷ ἀρίστῳ ἄρχοντι καὶ κοσμητῇ, 60).[72] It imbues a sense of unity and harmony in the empire (e.g. by assuring that both the rich and poor get their due), thereby preserving peace. No disputes, conflicts or disorder trouble the empire, because it is well governed. No wars are being waged

---

[69] This becomes explicit in chapter 105: 'One could say that justice and law are truly whatever he decides.'

[70] See, e.g., Klein 1981b: 136–60, who interprets the oration in this sense and also sees Aristides intervene in a debate about Rome's foreign policy. See also the works referred to in note 2 of this chapter.

[71] I follow Oliver 1953: 878–9 for the structure of the oration. Klein 1981b: 113 and Pernot 1997: 22 have a different analysis, constructing chs. 58–71 as a comparison of Rome with Athens and Sparta. That would, however, do away with the clear and traditional juxtaposition of a section on civil achievements (58–71) and one on military success (71–89). The opening statement of 58 clearly refers back to all previous states: 'However, that which has formerly escaped all mankind, one might say, has been reserved for you alone to discover and fulfil' (i.e. empire). There is, moreover, little comparison with Athens and Sparta in 58–71.

[72] This remarkable use of the term 'democracy' to designate the Roman Empire is puzzling, but Aristides is not unique. Philo of Alexandria, for example, calls the ideal constitution 'democracy' (Philo, *Quod deus sit immutabilis* 176, *De specialibus legibus* 4.237). Both Plutarch and Philostratus say that a state in which a single man rules for the common benefit of all is a democracy (Plut. *An seni resp. ger.* 783D; Philostr. *VA* 5.35.4). Various explanations have been proposed, including that the Greek denomination for *res publica* was *dēmokratia* (Goodenough 1967: 87–9), that Aristides, as an author of the Second Sophistic, looked back to the *polis*-democracy represented by Demosthenes (Stertz 1994: 1253), or that 'democracy' in this period often means the regular rotation of high office among the elite (Trapp 2007: 172). Attention has also been drawn to Plato's *Menexenus* 238b–239a, where a state based on equality is called a democracy by some, even if it is ruled by a king (Langstadt 1937; Goodenough 1967: 87; Centrone 2000: 564). Plausible as these explanations are, it still remains unclear why this understanding of democracy became popular precisely in this period. One explanation may be that both Philo's divine empire and Aristides' Rome are very much concerned with establishing internal harmony, thanks to which each individual is done justice and receives his fair share. Even though intuition suggests otherwise, the hierarchy gives each individual the position that belongs to him and his fair share in all the benefits of the gods or the empire. The idea of equality and getting a fair share is, at least in Aristotle, associated with democracy (Arist. *Pol.* 6.1317b), a connection that can explain why we see hierarchical political constitutions described as democracies: they may not have the form of the traditional democracy, but they perform its function.

in the empire (65–70). This leads to the section on military policy (72–89), which ends with praise of the perfect hierarchy in the army, which is then explicitly compared to Zeus's empire:

It comes to me to quote this Homeric phrase, after changing the end a bit: 'Such indeed is Olympian Zeus's empire within.' For when one man is in charge of so many, and his servants and delegates are far inferior to him but far superior to those over whom they have charge, and when they accomplish everything without disturbance and upheaval, and when there is no envy and all everywhere is full of justice and respect and the fruit of virtue does not escape anyone, how does this verse not carry the day? (89)

The casual introduction to the verse ('it comes to me...') should not conceal the central importance of this statement. Although the comparison apparently relates only to the empire's military power, the passage makes explicit what was prepared by the comparison with Persia: it is the first open confession that the hierarchical structure of the Roman Empire is, at a lower level, that of the divine world. Indeed, the comparison again draws on key elements of the 'archimage': the single command as source of order, a strict hierarchy with swift communication and direct obeisance, a hierarchy of law and justice.

Law and order create peace, and Aristides appropriately dedicates the last part before the peroration to this (92–106). Rome's practice of imposing universal and morally correct laws upon the entire world is compared to the imposition of order by the gods after the rule of the Titans: 'considering the state of affairs before you and under you, how would one not say that before your rule everything was disturbed, topsy-turvy and running wild, but when you took over, the upheavals and insurrection ended, and order in all this and clear light in life and state entered, laws appeared plainly and the altars of the gods received credence' (103). All the gods join in the support Zeus shows for the Roman Empire (104–5). Indeed, justice returns to earth (106). The comparison points to the fundamental, one might say ontological, role Rome plays: as a perfect hierarchy, it guarantees order, just as the divine hierarchy guarantees order in nature and the world.[73] Therefore, Rome's rule acquires a cosmic standing: Rome is like Zeus's empire precisely because it is in accordance with the natural order of things. Indeed, in chapter 91, Aristides calls the Romans 'natural rulers', who have imposed unvarying law and order on mankind.

I do not want to dispute that Aristides used historical facts or Platonic references to flesh out this portrait of Rome, but what drives the speech is

[73] Cf. Méthy 1991 for remarks related to this aspect of the speech.

a transfer of the quality of ideal empire (in image of the divine one) from Persia to Rome. It is obvious that Aristides depicts the Roman Empire in a fundamentally similar way to how the texts discussed earlier describe the Persian King. Rome (and thus also the divine realm) is depicted as a hierarchy, with one individual, who is the embodiment of law and justice, at its top. This individual is immobile and omniscient. The hierarchy he controls creates unity out of diversity, order out of disorder, concord out of strife through the rule of law.[74] Local diversity in customs, habits and laws is brought under one rule of universal law. In the process, Roman law is at least implicitly identified with divine law, justice, and virtue.[75] The rule of Rome consequently represents the natural order of things. The idea that Rome is a hierarchy might lead one to think that the empire is characterised by profound inequality, but the contrary is actually claimed by Aristides. The slave–master relation is said to be typical of the Persian Empire but denied for Rome,[76] where all men are equal. This suggests that for Aristides the hierarchy integrates all inhabitants of Rome in a single framework and by doing so makes them all equal. Just as a hierarchy creates unity in the pantheon, so it does in the Roman Empire.

Aristides' transferral of the status of ideal empire from Persia to Rome is obviously not an innocent literary or philosophical argument. By suggesting that Rome really is the ideal empire, Rome's existence becomes part of the ideal structure of the cosmos. As such, the Roman Empire is eternal (108). Aristides was clearly aware of a logical problem that this construction entails: how can an empire that came into being at a certain point in time represent the natural order of things? One implicit strategy is simply to disregard history: it has often been noticed that *On Rome* does not address the history of Rome, neither its origins nor its conquests. Constructed by some as a sign of disaffection with Roman rule,[77] it is rather the result of Aristides' desire to represent Rome as the best empire possible: Rome is depicted as virtually beyond human history. A second, more explicit, strategy is also operative: Aristides subtly introduces a theory of history.

[74] One finds the same elements, but less prominently, in Aristid. *Or.* 23, *On Concord*: chs. 34–40, 62, 76–8.

[75] Law and justice are commonly associated with Zeus, to the point that Zeus even fades behind the law; cf. Aristid. *Or.* 24.42.

[76] Aristid. *Or.* 23.23, 23.36, 23.80, 23.91.

[77] Pernot 2008: 189. The argument for a certain degree of disaffection with Rome is not very strong and in the case of Pernot based on the a priori assumption that the conquered will have some resentment towards their conquerors (176). Whilst it is obvious that the identification of Hellenism with culture is very strong in the Second Sophistic (see the essays in Goldhill 2001 and Whitmarsh 2001), this does not preclude genuine enthusiasm for the Roman Empire, undoubtedly enhanced by the prospect of material and social gain. After all, Aristides was a Roman citizen.

Mankind's history is sketched as one of progress, rather than of decline. In chapter 106 Aristides refutes Hesiod, who situated the Golden Age at the beginning of time. Rather, he argues, the Golden Age has come into being only recently with the advent of Rome and its discovery of the art of ruling, contrary to the Persians who did not distinguish between ruling and dominating. Just as Aristides brings the ideal state down from heaven to earth, he draws the Golden Age into the present. Rather than situating the ideal state in a distant past (as Posidonius did) or in the remote heavens (in line with most authors using the image of the Persian Great King), Aristides decisively locates it in the Roman Empire of his age. In suggesting that the ideal has fulfilled itself in the current political system, Aristides' ideological twist exploits the dangerous potential of comparisons that describe the ideal in terms of the real.

CHAPTER 7

Dio Chrysostom
Virtue and structure in the kingship orations

As we have seen in Chapter 4, Dio Chrysostom's corpus consists of speeches addressed to popular but educated audiences in Greek cities across the Roman Empire. Given their highly performative nature, these speeches do not aim at the meticulous exposition of philosophical positions.[1] This chapter consequently has a limited aim and argues that we can notice the impact of the descriptive account of kingship, as set out in Chapter 5, in two of Dio's kingship orations. The kingship orations have recently been subjected to detailed analyses. Moles' close study of the speeches and their philosophical argument has shown that Dio uses praise not so much to describe reality as to shape the ideological discourse justifying the rule of the emperor Trajan – although Dio on occasion combines this with covert criticism.[2] S. Swain has drawn attention to the fact that Dio's praise of Rome seems tempered by a belief that the world is in decline. By focusing rather on the literary set-up of the speeches, T. Whitmarsh has, in turn, suggested that Dio actually took a much more subversive stance towards Roman rule.[3] All these scholars agree, however, in seeing Dio's argument as focusing on the virtues and good character of the true king, qualities acquired through an imitation of the supreme king, Zeus. It is certainly true that this is what the orator explicitly pretends to be doing, but, developing a suggestion by M. Trapp,[4] I wish to show in the following pages that Dio situates the ideal king in a cosmic hierarchy. Indeed, some passages can only be properly understood when that perspective is taken into account. His account of kingship thus incorporates descriptive and prescriptive elements, exemplifying what I have argued is a general tendency of

[1] One has to notice Moles' argument (1990) that Dio consistently attempts to put forward a cynic *paideia* in contrast to the traditional Greek and Roman *paideia*. Milazzo 2007 stresses Dio's presentation of himself as a guide in politics and ethics.
[2] See especially Moles 1983 on *Or.* 4.
[3] Moles 1990 and 2003; Swain 1996: 192–206; Whitmarsh 2001: 244–87 and 2005: 60–3. Gangloff 2006: 256–73 briefly discusses *Or.* 1, 2 and 4 from the point of view of the use of myths.
[4] Trapp 2007: 181, who notices the 'cosmic standing of kingship' as one of the themes of the speeches.

Post-Hellenistic thought. Two of the orations, numbers 1 and 3, the first and the last to be written by Dio,[5] are the most relevant to my argument.

THE THIRD KINGSHIP ORATION

At first sight, *Oration* 3,[6] allegedly addressed to the emperor Trajan, seems eminently concerned with kingly virtue. Indeed, Dio opens the speech with a question Socrates was once asked, whether he considered the Persian King a happy man. Socrates characteristically dodges the question: he can only answer it with full knowledge of the king's character, because happiness does not depend upon one's wealth or station. The question seems to set the tone for the rest of the speech in suggesting that true kingship, of which the Persian King clearly is not an example,[7] has less to do with power and position than with character and virtue. Yet this avowed purpose is from the very start undercut by considerations of a different nature. In the introductory part, Dio describes Trajan as a judge who is more just than judges selected by lot, a king gentler than the magistrates of a city, and a general more courageous than rank and file soldiers (5). One can read this as a summary of kingly values such as justice, equity and courage but, at the same time, such images indicate the superior position the emperor occupies in a hierarchy. And indeed, at one point Dio mentions explicitly that not only his virtues but also his position make Trajan happy: 'I affirm that you are clearly a blessed man, possessing the greatest authority (δύναμις) after the gods' (3). Later Dio emphasises that Trajan owes his position to the gods (8).

I wish to argue here that the entire speech can be read as hovering between these two points of view and should not be reduced to a mere exposition of kingly virtues. Three passages are key in this respect: first, chapters 42–50, setting out how the emperor relates to law; second, chapters 50–4, which take the 'king of all' as the paradigm of the earthly king; and third, chapters 86–118, the famous section on friendship. In each of these three passages, we can see how Dio's description of the monarch is influenced by considerations about the position the emperor occupies in the cosmic hierarchy.

[5] Moles 1990: 361.

[6] It was argued by von Arnim 1898: 414–35 that the speech was a composite, put together by an editor. That position is not accepted today and the text is now read as a unity. For analyses of its structure, see Brancacci 1992: 3317–19; Konstan 1997: 133–6.

[7] In his kingship orations, Dio usually uses the Persian King as a negative example: see Dio Chrys. *Or.* 1.1–4, 2.35, 2.51, 3.30, 3.36, 3.118, 3.133–8, 4.16, 4.45–9, 4.66–70, 4.113. See also *Or.* 6, 14.22–3, 62.5. There are some exceptions to this negative view: *Or.* 2.77, 56.4.

The account of Socrates' opinions (29–41), set out after a digression on flattery (12–24), keeps the focus closely on virtues. But as soon as Dio broaches the opinion of 'those coming after him' (42–50) – a formula that skilfully erases all differences between the various philosophical schools – he swings to a more theoretical discussion of sovereignty (ἀρχή) and kingship (βασιλεία). At first sight, Dio clearly distinguishes between them: sovereignty is the 'lawful government (διοίκησις) of men and providence (πρόνοια) for men according to law', whilst kingship is a sovereignty that does not have to account for its actions (ἀνυπεύθυνος) and in which the law is the king's will (ὁ δὲ νόμος βασιλέως δόγμα). Both are set in contrast with tyranny, which is an arbitrary and lawless rule (43–4) – an example of disorder, as are other degenerate constitutions (48, cf. 75). These definitions suggest that whereas sovereignty complies with law, a king is the law. However, that contrast is blurred elsewhere in the speech: an earlier passage, for example, does not discriminate between sovereignty and kingship (25–8). Moreover, while in Chapter 10 Dio states that the king is above the law, he later expects him to respect it (39). So what is the relationship of the king to the law?

Dio can be best understood as depicting the king as *nomos empsychos* without explicitly using that notion: ideally at least, human laws are in accordance with divine law, and the king should follow divine reason and law, thus decreeing positive law that flows from divine reason. That this reading is correct becomes clear in chapter 50, where Dio points to examples of kingship in nature, for example in beehives[8] and herds. But, he continues, the best example is the government of the universe 'under the first and best god'. This concatenation implies that one law governs all: just as the same hierarchical structure can be found at various levels of being, the same law must govern the bestial, human, and divine kings. We thus encounter in Dio the same assumption that underlies the notion of the king as *nomos empsychos*: in true kingship, the commandments of the king are identical to divine law. Positive and divine law become, in other words, indistinguishable. This is implied in the formula ὁ δὲ νόμος βασιλέως δόγμα. Usually translated as 'the king's will is law', it rather implies that the king's will must conform to (divine) law, as is also expressed in the concept of *nomos empsychos*. This law is obviously also identical to justice (45, cf. 10). Precisely the ideal identification of divine and positive law ensures that this formula is not a proxy for absolutism, at least on a philosophical level: a king who does not conform his will to that of the

[8] The same example is used in Dio Chrys. *Or.* 4.62.

gods is not a true king but a tyrant. Thus, depending on his point of view, Dio can say that the king is above (positive) law or subordinate to (divine) law. In reality, this difference is important, but in the ideal picture that Dio develops, the two are identified with each other.[9]

Chapter 50 concludes with a reference to the universe and its king as the example of all kingship. The next four chapters not only develop the idea of the 'king of all' as a paradigm for the earthly king but also set the worship of the gods in parallel with the respect brought to the king.[10] This culminates in a remarkable passage: a true ruler will 'in the first place worship the divine, not merely professing but also really believing that the gods exist, to the end that he too may have worthy governors under him' (ἵνα δὴ καὶ αὐτὸς ἔχη τοὺς κατ' ἀξίαν ἄρχοντες, 51.)[11] This seems logically fallacious: how does a belief in the gods help in any way to ensure that one has decent governors beneath one? At a basic level, Dio seems to assume that religion is the keystone of virtue. But this hardly explains the specific reference to the governors. One can give a more profound meaning to this passage if one accepts that belief in the gods implies for Dio a recognition of the true structure of the divine world, with a single first god at the top and a series of lesser deities and demons below him. Governors stand in the same relation to the king as the lesser deities stand to that supreme god. A clear awareness of one's station in the cosmic hierarchy helps one to perform one's task properly, and not to usurp, for example, tasks that properly belong to the highest king. If belief in the gods entails a recognition of the hierarchical structure of the cosmos and the importance of obedience to divine law, the same awareness should pervade one's activities in the human realm, because that shares in the hierarchical structure of the cosmos. This interpretation finds support in further parallels drawn by Dio between the position of the king and that of the supreme god. For example, the king exercises benevolent providence over his subjects, just as the gods do for him

(52: ἡγεῖται δὲ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἀνθρώποις συμφέρειν τὴν αὐτοῦ πρόνοιαν οὕτως ὡς αὐτῷ τὴν ἐκείνων ἀρχήν). Innocent though this seems, the formulation implies that the king is part of a cosmic hierarchy that passes the divine will and providence down to the lesser beings, a conception that we shall also encounter in Plutarch in the next chapter.[12]

This identification, or at least parallelism, of worship of the gods and honour brought to human rulers is a prominent theme in Dio's Rhodian oration, probably to be dated under Trajan,[13] where he interprets religious worship as the act of honouring one's superior, just as man honours his human benefactors.[14] Honour is the natural response to the hierarchy in the universe: the attitude of subjects to their king is paralleled,[15] and even identified, with that of their king and themselves towards the gods. The continuation of traditional religious practice is thus construed by Dio as essential for keeping up the cosmic order.[16]

The analysis of the previous two passages (42–50 and 51–4) has shown that Dio situates the king in a cosmic hierarchy and depicts religious worship, understood as an acknowledgement of this divine hierarchy, as an important precondition for respecting the human hierarchy as well. From what are essentially considerations about the structure of the world, Dio shifts in the next chapters to one of his hobby-horses: being king is hard labour and toil (56–85, cf. 122–38). The section also includes a long argument that by nature the better rules the less able (62–81) – a familiar argument in this period and one we have found already in Posidonius. This runs over in an extensive plea for the need the king has of friends. Such an emphasis on friendship is rare in the eulogistic tradition and one may want to explain this with reference to Hellenistic kingship and its *philoi*, or, more plausibly, Roman ideals about the *civilis princeps*.[17] Indeed, Trajan, the possible addressee of this speech, was reputed (at least in the words of his panegyrists) to live up to that ideal.[18] A. Milazzo has also stressed

---

[9] A good illustration of how Dio's view on law changes depending on the context is provided by a pair of sophistic display pieces, *Or.* 75 and 76. The first is an encomium of law; the second praises custom. At first sight, Dio contradicts himself outright: he first makes law a source of order, justice and virtue, only to associate it in the next speech with tyranny. In *Or.* 76 kingship follows custom, whereas law is the characteristic of tyranny. A detail sums up the apparent conflict: the first speech praises law for safeguarding the inviolate character of the herald (75.9); the second one attributes it to custom (76.5). But the difference is one of perspective: both positive law and custom can be related to divine law, the former as laid down by wise lawgivers who had insight into divine law and the latter as 'natural' rules that are shared by all mankind. In an ideal world, such as Posidonius' Golden Age or the world of the gods, there should exist a perfect match between divine law, human law, and kingship. But in our imperfect world both positive law and custom are only approximations of that ideal, at best.

[10] Cf. Dio Chrys. *Or.* 31.57–8.

[11] Cf. Dio Chrys. *Or.* 3.54, where it is said that the belief in demons is also useful for the king himself.

[12] One can ascribe a similar position to Marcus Aurelius (*Med.* 5.30, 6.36) and Epictetus (*Diss.* 1.14.15–17, 2.10.3–4, 3.24.31): cf. Long 2002: 205. It is obvious that Stoics, with their more monist and less hierarchical concept of the divine would be more inclined to stress a human than a divine hierarchy.

[13] Sidebottom 1992: 414, 419; Swain 1996: 428–9. On the speech, see also Lemarchand 1926: 54–85; Jones 1978: 26–34; Veyne 1999: 541–53.

[14] Dio Chrys. *Or.* 31.5–6, 31.10–16.

[15] Dio may be relying here on earlier Stoic thought: a similar parallelism between secular and divine honours seems to have been advanced by Zeno of Citium: Mansfeld 1999: 457.

[16] The speech emphasises that a change of exemplary traditional ways is potentially destructive, threatening to destroy the fabric of well-ordered city life: see Dio Chrys. *Or.* 31: chs. 23–5, 43–4, 73–80, 90–9, 116, 124, 141–5, 152–3, 159, 165.

[17] The section 86–118 on friendship is discussed by Konstan 1997 and Milazzo 2007: 51–107. Konstan (140) suggests that the section was spurred by 'something in the spirit of Trajan's reign'.

[18] See Plin. *Pan.* 85. The classic paper on this topic remains Wallace-Hadrill 1982.

Dio's self-interest: he may be presenting himself as one of the friends who counsel the emperor.[19] But another argumentative strategy can be taken to underlie this passage: Dio may also be covertly comparing the king to the highest god. Several indications support this reading. Indeed, Dio ascribes the same role to the king's friends as other authors to the subservient gods in the divine hierarchy:[20] his friends are his eyes, ears, tongue and hands all over his empire. Through them, he can see everything that happens,[21] hear messages from everywhere,[22] pass on commandments and act at various places at the same time. The result is that 'nothing anywhere is devoid of his providence' (105–7). Just as the lesser deities obey the will of the highest god unflinchingly, friendship is 'identity of wish and intention'.[23] Even though the comparison of royal friends to the king's eyes and ears is of Aristotelian origin,[24] this parallel with the way in which the structure of the pantheon is often described in the Post-Hellenistic period remains noteworthy. It is possible that Dio chose the comparison of imperial servants to friends, rather than paralleling imperial officials with lesser deities, because it has a less hierarchical tone. Apart from the political motives he may have had for this,[25] it suited better the Stoic conception of the divine, which was less hierarchical than that of the Platonists and considered the gods to be all parts of the same universal reason. That Stoicism may have played a role is confirmed by Dio's nod in this context to the Stoic doctrine of the community of gods and sages by stating that the king tries to make the gods his friends (115). Even though there remains a distinction between Zeus and all the other gods in this view, their relationship is characterised rather as one of friendship than of clear subordination.[26] Dio's apparently more 'egalitarian' description in the section on friendship cannot conceal, however, the clearly hierarchical view of the cosmos and kingship that he develops in the speech.

[19] Milazzo 2007: 62–107.
[20] See Arist. [De mundo] 6.398a; Max. Tyr. Or. 11.12; Aristid. Or. 26.32–3 (see Chapter 8).
[21] Cf. Dio Chrys. Or. 62.1.   [22] Cf. Dio Chrys. Or. 57.2.
[23] Dio Chrys. Or. 4.42. One notes an echo of Chrysippus, SVF III.716–26.   [24] Arist. Pol. 3.11.9.
[25] Milazzo 2007: 106–7.
[26] There may be a logical problem here. The Stoic god is famously a 'lonely' god, not in need of others or friends. Being pure reason he does not need company, just as, ultimately, the Stoic sage does not (cf. Sen. Ep. 9.16–17; Epict. Diss. 3.13.4–5. See already Arist. Eth. Nic. 1158b–1159a). This was a traditional point of attack for the detractors of Stoicism (cf. Cic. Hortensius, fr. 47 = Lactant. Div. inst. 1.7.4; Plut. An seni resp. ger. 18.793D). By making the king dependent on his friends, either Dio has to accept him as being not fully wise and virtuous, contrary to what he assumes throughout the discourse; or, if he accepts that the king is modelled on Zeus, he seems to imply that Zeus needs friends as well, which contradicts a central Stoic tenet. But Dio probably was not really bothered by these niceties of Stoic doctrine.

Although Dio's third kingship oration is, on the surface, mainly about the definition of the true king by his virtues, it seems, thus, that a concept of cosmic hierarchy also informs the speech. Dio draws a parallel between the divine hierarchy of gods and demons, on the one hand, and the human one led by the emperor, on the other. The latter occupies a position like that of the highest god and he relays divine law to his subjects by making his decrees conform to universal reason. Dio thus not only draws on the prescriptive account of kingship as the embodiment of virtue but also sees kingship as part of the providential order of the universe. As I have argued above, the presence of both a descriptive and a prescriptive account – or rather the presence of descriptive and prescriptive elements in a single account of kingship – is characteristic for Post-Hellenistic thought about kingship. The emphasis on a universal hierarchy implies that in this period kingship is not just thought of in terms of imitation of divine virtue. This more traditional idea, which ultimately goes back to Plato's philosopher-kings, is now embedded in a discourse that links hierarchy, law and justice and discovers these on all levels of the cosmos.

FIRST KINGSHIP ORATION

After my discussion of the third kingship oration, I can be brief on the first, which adds considerations about cosmic structure to what at first sight seems to be a rather traditional description of the ideal king (χρηστὸς βασιλεύς, 11) with stress on character and virtue (4–8). Many of the themes already encountered in the third oration are present in this one as well: the king must worship the gods; he cares for all men like a herdsman or a shepherd; he toils for the good of all; he is a good soldier and the object of universal praise. After this description of the earthly king in the first part of the speech (15–36), Dio turns to the 'greatest and first king and ruler', whom all the mortals must imitate – not only in character but also in the way they order human affairs (37). Immediately, justice is defined as the essential characteristic of Zeus, with reference to Homer who names Minos, the famous just lawgiver from Crete, as the companion of Zeus (Odyssey 19.179). A long discussion of various epithets of Zeus, as indicators of his many qualities, follows (39–41). Dio then turns to 'the government of the world' (ὑπὲρ τῶν ὅλων τῆς διοικήσεως, 42). He argues that the world is guided by good fortune, providence and a just sovereignty, and that we must stand by it:

In line with the shared nature of the cosmos and us, we are ordered (κεκοσμημέ-νους) under a single custom and law and take part in the same state (πολιτείας).

The one who respects and protects it and does not act against it, is law-abiding (νόμιμος), pious and orderly (κόσμιος); the one who disturbs it as far as is in his power, violates and ignores it, is lawless and disorderly (ἄνομος καὶ ἄκοσμος), be he a private citizen or a magistrate (ἄρχων) in rank. (43)

The Stoic idea that the world is a single state and ruled by a single law is here explicitly couched in terms of order and disorder and presented as a structure that one has to accept: everybody must comply with the cosmic order as it is translated on earth. The passage also implies that we all have had a position assigned in the cosmic hierarchy.

This is not only true for the subjects of the state, but also for the ruler. Just as the king stands at the top of the human hierarchy, and is obeyed by his subordinates, he must obey the orders from the gods. This parallelism is brought out in a long comparison:

Among generals and commanders of armies, cities and provinces, he who most closely imitates your character [the emperor's] and shows himself similar to your habits as much as it seems possible would be by far your dearest companion and friend, and someone who becomes opposite and dissimilar would justly receive criticism and disgrace and, being rapidly removed from his office as well, would give way to men better qualified to govern. In a similar way, because kings, I think, derive their power and guardianship from Zeus, the king who, keeping his eyes on Zeus, orders and governs his people with justice and equity in accordance with the laws and ordinances of Zeus enjoys a happy lot and a fortunate end. But he who goes astray and dishonours him who entrusted and gave him this gift receives no other reward from his great authority and power than merely this: that he has shown himself to all his contemporaries and to posterity to be a wicked and undisciplined man. (44–6)

This passage again recalls that the human hierarchy below the emperor is just another form of the one that the kings constitute in relation to God. Such hierarchies are presented as natural, as is shown by the fact that Dio uses the lower hierarchical relationship as an example to illustrate how the higher one works. In doing so, Dio inverts the usual vector of the comparison. All hierarchical relationships being part of the same natural order, this may be counterintuitive but not illogical.

The comparison between generals and kings is, however, asymmetrical in one important point: bad generals quickly lose their position, but tyrants only incur universal censure. This seems to contradict the idea so forcefully defended in the fourth kingship oration – that a true king can only be the one who possesses the full breadth of virtues.[27] Here, on the contrary,

[27] Dio Chrys. *Or.* 4.74–6.

kingship seems to be a position in a universal hierarchy that waits to be filled – and can be occupied by a less virtuous individual as well.[28] This is another instance where the tension between a descriptive perspective on kingship and a prescriptive one betrays itself in Dio's œuvre. In this passage from the first kingship oration, Dio aims at portraying the universe as naturally ruled by a king. With monarchy not simply being the best constitution but part of the make-up of the cosmos, kingship is not only the result of virtue: it also is part of the order of things.

Such a conception of kingship is explicitly argued for in Dio's brief discussion of the Stoic doctrine of the city in the *Borystheniticus*.[29] After a classic statement of the kinship of gods and men, Dio very quickly moves to a defence of monarchy as the natural constitution. Interestingly, this is backed up by a reference to the traditional worship of Zeus as king: the prayers to such a god presuppose (and thus prove for Dio) that the universe is governed by a monarchy. Again, we notice that Dio uses traditional religion as a justification of the hierarchical structure of the cosmos. This representation has been analysed as an attempt to marry Stoicism, with its emphasis on the cosmic state, and Platonism, with its preference for monarchy,[30] and both influences are indeed tangible in the passage. But as I hope to have shown, it is also part of a wider tendency in this period to imagine the world in hierarchical terms.

The asymmetry between subordinate generals and the king indicates the essential difference in their position: whereas generals are dependent on the king, he owes his position to the gods. In this respect it is important to notice that the Rhodian oration suggests that the gods are worshipped by us human beings because they are better than us, and in particular benevolent and just.[31] The impossibility of any injustice on their side ensures that worship will never end. If the gods were tyrants, people might refrain from worshipping. But no god is a tyrant, and thus worship will never stop. The same does not hold for kings: although Dio argues in the first kingship oration that the true king is just and follows divine law,[32] actual kings can turn into tyrants and forget their duties towards mankind and the gods. But there is little mankind can do about this, as the passage quoted above suggests, apart from witholding the honour and worship that is normally due to the superior levels of the cosmic hierarchy. Tyranny,

[28] Such a conception can be paralleled in Epict. *Diss.* 3.24.10–12, 4.1.106.
[29] Dio Chrys. *Or.* 36.29–38.
[30] Schofield 1991: 84; Gill 2000: 606; Trapp 2007: 173, 185–90. See Gangloff 2006: 337–42 for an analysis which stresses the idea of *imitatio dei* in Dio.
[31] Dio Chrys. *Or.* 31.12–16, 31.37, 31.57–8, 31.73–83, 31.87–100.   [32] Dio Chrys. *Or.* 1.74–8.

therefore, occurs where the descriptive understanding of kingship (kings as part of a hierarchy) is not balanced by the prescriptive account (the king as embodiment of virtue): the hierarchy is still intact but it is filled up with immoral individuals. Such a bifurcation can only exist in human society after the Golden Age, and not among the gods.

Notwithstanding their apparent focus on virtue, Dio's kingship orations are thus also informed by the descriptive account of kingship, which situates the king in a cosmic hierarchy. The precise form this hierarchy takes seems to depend on the context in which Dio deploys his argument. In *Oration* 3 he entertains the idea of a hierarchy of a highest god and subservient demons, as he wants to suggest the governors stand in the same relation to the king as demons do to the highest god. In *Oration* 1, the emperor seems rather to be the top of a human hierarchy set in place by the gods. In both cases the hierarchy is closely associated with law, justice, providence and, significantly, order.[33] Whereas the latter concept is often found among Stoics of the Imperial age,[34] the hierarchy of gods and demons is rather of a Platonist nature. In the same way as the Platonist Plutarch draws on Stoic views when they suit his argument, Dio creatively adopts the various hierarchical concepts that are available to him. Apart from indicating argumentative ingenuity (rather than doctrinal instability), this habit underscores the general importance of hierarchical thinking in this period. The hierarchies found in the kingship orations have in the first place a political content, which, however, spills over into religion. Whatever form the hierarchy takes, Dio emphasises that a subordinate position implies that one should honour one's superior. Religious worship is thus structurally the same as political obedience. But they are related even more closely: religious worship is seen as a recognition of the hierarchical structure of the cosmos and, thus, also as an affirmation of the position of the emperor, who is part of that hierarchy. Hence, Dio can affirm that proper worship of gods and demons assures that the king has a well-working hierarchy of servants beneath him. Such an entanglement of arguments about politics and religion in the kingship orations can be seen as reflecting the way in which the discourse on cosmic hierarchy integrates politics and religion. Because politics and religion are so closely related in the discourse, the proper observance of religion can easily become a sign of respect for the political hierarchy. As we shall see in the last chapter of this book, such an argument was developed by Celsus against the Christians.

[33] For the latter, see also Dio Chrys. *Or.* 40.35–41.
[34] This is very clear in Marcus Aurelius: *Med.* 5.30, 6.36, 6.42–3, 7.55, 8.19, 9.23.

CHAPTER 8

Plutarch
A benevolent hierarchy of gods and men

In Chapter 5 I have set out how in the Post-Hellenistic period the hierarchical cosmos starts to function as a paradigm of order among Stoics and Platonists, and how this impacts on their understanding of both politics and religion. In Chapter 7 I have given details of this for Dio Chrysostom, the stoicising orator; the present chapter focuses on Plutarch of Chaeronea, whose vast corpus allows us to illustrate and specify the argument put forward earlier. Indeed, scholars such as J. Dillon and F. Ferrari have noted that hierarchies are essential for Plutarch to dispel disorder.[1] In his philosophy this is linked to a specific metaphysical tenet: contrary to most of his contemporaries, who see matter as something amorphous and negative on which god acted to give it shape, he posits the existence of an irrational and material world soul, which is responsible for initial disorder but also for later disturbances in the cosmos.[2] Plutarch's *On the Generation of the Soul in the Timaeus*, where this view is set out most explicitly, significantly ends on the comment that the gods are needed to maintain harmony and order in the cosmos:[3] without the check of a hierarchy of gods and demons on the irrational world soul, the world would fall into anarchy.

This chapter argues that, although Plutarch's metaphysical position is peculiar to him and part of his original reinterpretation of Plato, we should also understand it against the background of the ideas about hierarchy as set out earlier. In line with the discourse on cosmic hierarchy, the action of the gods is exercised through a hierarchy, the importance of which is not limited to metaphysics. It has not been sufficiently noted before, indeed, that Plutarch applies the idea to politics as well: apart from

[1] Dillon 1996: 200–8; Ferrari 1995.
[2] Plut. *De anim. procr.* 4.1014B. See also Plut. *Quaest. conv.* 1.2 618B, 615F, *Quaest. Plat.* 1003A–B, *De Is. et Os.* 46.369E, 52.372E. Plutarch's idea of an irrational world soul also allows him to argue that the gods are not responsible for evil: earthquakes, for example, occur because of the irrationality immanently present in the cosmos: cf. Plut. *De anim. procr.* 4.1013E.
[3] Plut. *De anim. procr.* 33.1030B. See also *De anim. procr.* 28.1026E–1027 (with reference to Pl. *Plt.* 269C), *De fac.* 12.926E–927A, *De sera* 5.550D, *Quaest. conv.* 8.1.720B.

accepting the existence of 'natural rulers', he can be shown to embed the ruler in a cosmic hierarchy. The idea of a cosmic and divine hierarchy also shapes Plutarch's concept of religion. As is well known, Plutarch accepted a hierarchy of demons, as did all Middle Platonists. This obviously allowed him to impose order on the traditional Homeric pantheon, by interpreting the various traditional gods as part of a hierarchy that obeys the highest god. Importantly, however, this hierarchical conception of the divine has a normative value, which surfaces most clearly in Plutarch's understanding of superstition. Complementing my discussion of superstition in Chapter 2, where I set out that for Plutarch superstition is a mistaken understanding of religion due to a lack of philosophical knowledge, I argue here that superstition also implies a failure to understand the hierarchical nature of the pantheon and, in particular, its benevolent nature: the superstitious man thinks that god is a tyrant and not a king. This suggests that the only correct way of understanding the pantheon is to see it as a benevolent hierarchy, which becomes even more explicit in the way Plutarch deploys the parallel of the pantheon with the Persian King and his satraps in his polemic against the Stoics in *On Stoic Self-contradictions*. By putting forward the hierarchically reordered pantheon as the only natural way of understanding religion, Plutarch succeeds in depicting the Stoics as ignorant and superstitious.

METAPHYSICAL AND POLITICAL ORDER

That Plutarch's ideas on cosmological order, as expressed in his commentary on the *Timaeus*, are not restricted to the metaphysical level is evidenced by his transfer of Timaean images of order and disorder into politics. Two examples may suffice. First, in the *Life of Numa*, Plutarch describes how the king creates order in the Roman body of citizens. The city of Rome used to be divided into two tribes, which 'refused to become united or to blot out their diversities and differences' (17.1). Clashes and riots (στάσις) were the unavoidable consequence.[4] Numa decided to carve up the city into many more classes, based on occupation and from these he succeeded in creating a harmonious mix (17.3). The picture strikingly reminds one of the activity of the demiurge in Plato's *Timaeus*, engaged in bringing together different elements in a harmonious unity.[5] This idea, that the statesman should create order and unity out of pre-existing diversity, in

---

[4] Plut. *Num.* 6.1, cf. 8.1 and 20.7.   [5] Cf. Pl. *Ti.* 28b–32b.

line with divine cosmic activity, can be found in many other writings of Plutarch[6] and of his contemporaries.[7]

Second, *On the Fortune of the Romans*, a probably unfinished work of Plutarch's arguing that fortune and virtue collaborated in the rise of Rome, opens with a grand double comparison between cosmic and political order and disorder (2.316E–317C). First, Plutarch compares the welding together of virtue and fortune to the activity of Plato's demiurge, who joins opposite elements such as fire and water in a harmonious whole.[8] Then he parallels the order established by Rome in the previously drifting world with the way that atoms coalesce by chance until the earth is strong enough to impose order on the whirling atomic bubble. Both comparisons establish a firm link between cosmic and earthly order, but the second comparison strangely undercuts the first. By likening the joining of virtue and fortune to the result of demiurgic activity, Plutarch implies that Rome's expansion was meant to be by divine will. But the atomist and Epicurean second comparison flatly contradicts any divine implication in the rise of Rome: it is all a matter of chance.[9] One can entertain several possibilities. As suggested by P. Veyne, Plutarch may have consciously chosen the Epicurean idea of chance to indicate what he thought to be the main cause of the rise of Rome: fortune.[10] On such a reading, Plutarch can be seen as engaged in the favourite sophistic pastime of subtly challenging the expectations raised earlier in the mind of his readers. Most of the subsequent treatise (5–13) indeed deals with fortune, although this can also be explained by its possibly unfinished state. Another reading would be that the comparison with the *Timaeus* is designed to symbolise virtue, whereas the Epicurean one exemplifies fortune. Each comparison would then simply point to one of the factors involved in Rome's rise. Yet, on that reading, the comparison of Rome with Epicurean mechanism still begs explanation, for the Epicurean metaphysics of disorder is normally abhorred by Plutarch.[11] So why would

---

[6] Plut. *Comp. Lyc. et Num.* 2.5, *Rom.* 35.2–3, *Phoc.* 2.5, 29.4, 32–4, *Arat.* 14.1, *De sera* 15.559A, *Ad princ. iner.* 780B. Another level where order is to be imposed is in the soul (cf. *Num.* 8.1, see also Diotogenus, p. 266.10–2 (Thesleff), Max. Tyr. *Or.* 27.6), but this is of less interest here.

[7] See the following instances of political and cosmic ordering: Max. Tyr. *Or.* 16.4; Plut. [*De fato*] 573E; Aristid. *Or.* 28.62, 28.76–7, 26.39, 26.103; Sen. *Vit. beata* 26; Atticus, fr. 8 = Eus. *Praep. evang.* 15.12.1–4; Cornutus, *Theol. graec.* pp. 17.11–16, 97.17–98.5 (Lang).

[8] Pl. *Ti.* 28b, 31b–32b.

[9] See Swain 1989b: 505 for other interpretational problems in this work.

[10] Veyne 2005: 646. This contrasts with Jones' reading of the work, who sees it as rhetorical praise of Rome (1971: 67–9). In order to substantiate Veyne's reading further, one would need to re-evaluate the concept of *tyche* in this treatise (see Swain 1989b: 505–6; Dillon 1997) and its relation to Plutarch's wider ideas on the providential role of Rome (Swain 1989a).

[11] E.g. Plut. *De sera* 1.548E, *Adv. Col.* 30.1124D. For a similar horror at Epicurean disorder, see Epict. *Diss.* 2.20.

he use it in relation to Rome if his intention was to compliment the ruling power? However one wishes to answer that question, for my purpose it suffices to see that for Plutarch the cosmos and the world of politics are subject to similar processes of order and disorder.

That for Plutarch the cosmos and politics are subject to the same principles of order is not only suggested by such parallelisms but also supported by the integration of human rulers in a cosmic hierarchy that stretches down from god to man. This view has not yet been noticed as part of Plutarch's political thought, but it is clearly present in the short treatise *To an Uneducated Ruler*. The work is usually read as an example of Plutarch's rather superficial development of the stock Platonist theme that the ruler should be a philosopher and incorporate virtue.[12] Such a reductive reading of the subject of the treatise does not sufficiently acknowledge that its main theme is actually law and its relation to the ruler: Plutarch argues that the ruler has to embody divine law, communicate the divine law to the earth and make sure that divine benefits reach mankind. Such arguments, as we have seen, presuppose that the ruler is integrated in a cosmic hierarchy. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the last chapters of *To an Uneducated Ruler* focus on the layout of the divine world: chapters 4 and 5 discuss the structure of the divine, the former by explaining precisely how Zeus relates to justice and law, the latter by explaining how god relates to the world. Because the ruler is part of a cosmic hierarchy that channels down divine will, an understanding of his role hinges on a correct grasp of god's nature and his action in the world. The treatise thus does not mingle political and cosmic considerations in an incongruous way: considerations about political structures rest on cosmological ideas.

The treatise opens with a reference to Plato, supposedly asked to compose a set of laws for the Cyrenaeans; then, after two introductory chapters on the need of philosophy for a ruler, Plutarch returns to the theme adumbrated at the very beginning and asks: 'Who, then, rules the ruler?' (3.780C). The answer is straightforward (and backed up with a famous quote from Pindar):[13] the law rules the ruler and it must be *empsychos*, an inner voice. One can see in this not more than the unoriginal idea that the ruler should imitate the divine and become his image on earth.[14] Yet, as I have argued in Chapter 5, the notion of *nomos empsychos* presupposes the idea of the

---

[12] Aalders 1982; Barigazzi 1982; Tirelli 2005; Ramelli 2006: 103–7. For Plutarch's alleged superficiality in political thought, see Dillon 1996: 198.

[13] Pindar, fr. 169.

[14] For such an interpretation, see Cuvigny 1984: 30–1; Swain 1989a: 295. For similar ideas in Plutarch, see, e.g., *Septem sapientium convivium* 12.152B; *Them.* 28–9.

ruler as part of a cosmic hierarchy. And indeed, that presupposition is made explicit when Plutarch describes how all rulers serve god in his beneficence towards man (τοὺς ἄρχοντας ὑπηρετεῖν θεῷ πρὸς ἀνθρώπων ἐπιμέλειαν καὶ σωτηρίαν, 3.780D).[15] As has been pointed out by I. Ramelli, Plutarch's description of rulers as servants of god recalls a passage from Plato's *Laws* (713B), where demons are described as servants of Cronus.[16] This should not necessarily be taken to mean that the ruler is demonic, but it implies at least that he holds a subordinate position in the cosmic hierarchy, just as the demons do. When Plutarch argues that the ruler becomes an image of 'god who orders all' (3.780F), because royal law, justice and sovereignty guarantee that the divine gifts of seeds, good climate and sunshine can be enjoyed,[17] he is therefore not just suggesting that virtue alone turns the ruler into an image of god: the ruler should perform such beneficial actions precisely because he occupies a position in the cosmic hierarchy.

I pointed out in Chapter 5 that in Post-Hellenistic philosophy a descriptive account of kingship is usually integrated with a prescriptive one, and that this coexistence generates tensions in the interpretations philosophers offer of the role of the ruler. This tension may explain a remarkable passage of *To an Uneducated Ruler* that immediately follows the one where the ruler is described as part of the cosmic hierarchy, in which Plutarch seems to liken the ruler to a divine being by arguing that qualities such as *eunomia* and justice define the divine. And, Plutarch explicitly adds, virtue, not eternity, makes up the true god (3.781A). The argument seems startling: indestructibility is the discriminating quality of the divine which Plutarch vigorously defends against the Stoic denial of this in *On Stoic Self-contradictions*.[18] Why, then, would he have recourse to the Stoic-sounding argument that virtue is the cipher of divinity in *To an Uneducated Ruler*? One could argue that Plutarch is simply attempting to accommodate the widespread idea of the divinity of the ruler, as found in emperor worship. Yet Plutarch usually had a rather negative idea of ruler worship,[19] and, moreover, the treatise *To an Uneducated Ruler* not only focuses on the emperor as ruler but also addresses the position of subordinate governors. Plutarch's sudden Stoicising mood can better be explained as an attempt

---

[15] Cf. Plut. *Num.* 6.2. Many of the traits put forward in *Ad princ. iner.* are ascribed to Numa (cf. *Num.* 5.8, 20.4–7).

[16] Ramelli 2006: 105. Interestingly, in the same passage, Plutarch mentions that the sun and moon are images of the divine (3.780F). As the moon was usually the place where demons stayed (*De def. or.* 416D), this may be another subtle hint at the parallelism of, on the one hand, the ruler as image of the divine and, on the other, the demons, who dwell on the moon.

[17] On this passage, see in particular Hirsch-Luipold 2002: 169–70.

[18] Plut. *De Stoic. repug.* 38.1051F.   [19] Scott 1929.

to reconcile the descriptive account of kingship with the prescriptive one. Indeed, by incorporating, as we have seen, rulers into the cosmic hierarchy, Plutarch runs the risk that a ruler is a ruler merely because of his position in the hierarchy without being totally virtuous. That leaves open the possibility that an evil individual becomes king and interrupts the cosmic chain of command by substituting his own bad laws for divine law. To ensure that the chain does not break, then, the ruler has to be truly virtuous and incorporate divine law; he consequently acquires divine qualities. Thus, in order to emphasise that the ruler is a necessary part of the hierarchy that brings divine benefits to all mankind and to ensure that this position cannot be usurped by tyrants, Plutarch likens the ruler to the divine part of the hierarchy. Because humans, when still in their bodies, can die and cannot be divine (at least on a traditional Platonist reading), Plutarch has to draw for this on the Stoic argument that virtue defines divinity, not immortality. As is well known, Plutarch is not averse to drawing on arguments from various corners to shore up his own position.[20] This interpretation, that Plutarch draws the ruler into the divine part of the hierarchy to ensure that, at least theoretically, he always fulfils a positive role in god's care for humanity, is also supported by the discreet parallel, noted above, between the ruler and demons in the hierarchy. Both can be set in parallel precisely because they perform a similar function in the divine hierarchy.

Plutarch may have sensed that some of his readers would frown at this Stoicising argument. This may explain why Chapter 5 of *To an Uneducated Ruler* explicitly criticises Stoicism for mingling god with matter, an idea that subjects the divine to change and impurity. Indeed, change is undesirable for god, as much as it is for law.[21] Paradoxically, change and impurity in the divine commandments were precisely the problem that Plutarch had tried to solve in the third chapter by having recourse to a Stoic argument. The explicit polemic against Stoicism in the later chapter may therefore have the function of detracting attention from the earlier recourse to a Stoic argument.

The parallelism between god and ruler as developed in *To an Uneducated Ruler* seems to suggest that monarchy is for Plutarch the preferred way in which metaphysical order is transferred to human society. His preference for monarchy does not, indeed, need arguing for, but it is represented in a rather one-dimensional way in recent scholarship,[22] which tends to read

---

[20] See the Stoicising argument in *De exil.* 6.601A–B, with Babut 1969: 170 and Opsomer 2002: 286–9.
[21] Cf. Plut. *Quaest. conv.* 9.14.745D.
[22] Dillon 1996: 198; Aalders and de Blois 1992: 3390–94; Trapp 2007: 172–3.

Plutarch's political treatises only from that perspective. Yet as noted above, *To an Uneducated Ruler* seems at least implicitly to have a wider scope and to incorporate also subordinate governors.[23] Another brief political treatise by Plutarch, *On Monarchy, Democracy and Oligarchy* (*De unius dominatione in republica*), is, for example, read by its latest editor as a brief fragment of a treatise that defends monarchy.[24] Its conclusion, however, explicitly suggests otherwise. The treatise ends on a comparison of the politician to a musician who can play various instruments harmoniously:

In the same way the real statesman can handle well the Lycurgian oligarchy in Lacedaemonia, adapting to himself the men who have power and honour equal with his, gently forcing them to do his will. He will get on well with democracy with its many sounds and strings by sometimes relaxing the strings of government and on other occasions tightening them, loosening his grip at the right time and clinging on to them strongly at other times, knowing how to go against and resist the people. (4.827A–B)

But obviously, Plutarch adds, if he were given the choice, he would choose monarchy. It would be mistaken to interpret this statement as merely acquiescing with reality, as if when one happens to be born in a democracy, one has to cope with it. On the contrary, Plutarch assumes that the real statesman, having the natural ability to rule, can establish his rule in all constitutions and become the principle of order in any city: it is not the form of a constitution that defines its order or disorder, but the presence or absence of a single individual creating political and social order in line with cosmic order. Significantly, Plutarch points out in Chapter 2 of *On Monarchy* that *politeia* does not have to mean (good) constitution: it can also designate the statecraft of individuals like Pericles (2.826D), again widening the scope of his argument to include the capacity of natural rulers to order any given political system. I have shown in Chapter 6 that Maximus of Tyre (late second century AD) attributes such a role to Pericles as well and it comes as no surprise that Plutarch does the same in his *Life* of the Athenian statesman.[25] In Plutarch's description, Pericles acts in precisely the way the real statesman should in the passage from *On Monarchy* quoted above: occasionally he convinces the people through oratory, but on other occasions he tightens the reins and forces the Athenians to obey his will.

---

[23] Another example is *Precepts of Statecraft*, a treatise giving practical advice to the elite involved in ruling the cities: see Duff 1999: 291–301.
[24] Caiazza 1993: 72.
[25] See also *De unius* 4.781D, where Epaminondas and Cato are given as examples of good politicians. In the *Life of Phocion*, Phocion is depicted as a real statesman, responsible for order in a democracy (29.4, 32–4).

Importantly, Plutarch underlines that he holds the inherent disorders of a democracy in check (15, 39). Although not a king, he adds, such a ruler is correctly likened to god (39.2) – just as the king is in *To an Uneducated Ruler*.[26]

DEMONS: TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP INTERPRETATIONS

In situating the ruler in a cosmic hierarchy and accepting the idea of natural rulers, Plutarch's political thought can thus be shown to develop key ideas of the discourse on cosmic hierarchy. Hierarchical thinking is obviously not restricted to politics but strongly impacts on how Plutarch thinks about religion as well. In this section I shall discuss his understanding of the hierarchy of the supreme god and his subservient demons; the next section is dedicated to superstition as a misinterpretation of the divine hierarchy.

The acceptance of a hierarchy of demons expresses Plutarch's allegiance to a traditional Platonist view. As in the writings of his fellow Middle Platonists,[27] these demons receive their position from the highest god.[28] They have a cosmic role, as their hierarchy assures the coherence of the cosmos: without them heaven and earth would be disconnected, the space between them being empty.[29] Plutarch's demonology is not as clear as one would wish and scholarship has in particular been puzzled by the fact that he seems to reject the existence of evil demons in some writings, whereas elsewhere he apparently accepts it.[30] Older scholarship used this fact to argue for an evolution from the young Plutarch's rationalist views and consequent rejection of evil demons to his later religious mood when he accepted their existence under the influence of popular religion.[31] I wish to suggest here that this paradox does not reflect two different theoretical positions but rather two diverging ways of interpreting the divine hierarchy of demons, which are deployed by Plutarch depending on the argumentative context. Indeed, such a hierarchy of gods and demons can be read top-down or bottom-up.

In line with most contemporary philosophers,[32] Plutarch reconciles the hierarchy man–demons–gods with the idea of a cycle to which human souls

[26] In *Prae. ger. reip.* 17.813D–E, Plutarch also compares contemporary politicians to Pericles.
[27] Cf. Apul. *De dog. Plat.* 204; Alcinous, *Intr.* 10, 15; Max. Tyr. *Or.* 8.7; Calcidius 131–2.
[28] Plut. *Consolatio ad Apollonium* 19.112A–B.
[29] Cf. Plut. *De def. or.* 13.416E–F, *De Is. et Os.* 67.378A (δυνάμεων ὑπουργῶν).
[30] On Plutarch's demonology, see Brenk 1977: 85–144, 131; 1987: 275–94; 1994 and 1998; Vernière 1977 and 1989; Dillon 1996: 216–24; Martin 2004: 93–108.
[31] Brenk 1977: 9–16 surveys the debate. Martin 2004: 107–8 tries to resuscitate the older view.
[32] E.g. Max. Tyr. *Or.* 9.6; Apul. *De deo Soc.* 152; Calcidius 132–5; Numen. frs. 30–3.

are submitted. Originally of divine origin, souls are cast into bodies. In the process, they lose their full rationality and become subject to passions. They strive to liberate themselves from matter, but it takes a long cycle of rebirth before a soul becomes fully rational again. Only a life fully lived in virtue allows one to ascend permanently to the level of the divine. For the souls, being a demon is therefore a transient stage towards full divinity. Traditional examples of this are Heracles and Dionysus, who, in the *Life of Pelopidas* (16.5–8), are said to have become demons because of their virtue.[33] The hierarchy of god and demons is thus one of diminishing rationality: god, at the top, is clearly fully rational, but the demons at the bottom are on their way to becoming fully rational again.

Such a vision allows for two different readings. On the one hand, one can stress that, although the bottom of the hierarchy is less rational than the top, all individuals in it obey the commandments of the god who dominates the top of the pyramid. Such a view is implied in the modelling of the divine hierarchy on, for example, the Persian King, in which indeed the strict line of commandment is stressed.[34] A similar idea comes up in a defence of divination towards the end of *On the Daimonion of Socrates*,[35] where again a parallel is made with the command structure of a kingdom and an army: 'for as kings and generals make their intention known to outsiders with beacons and proclamations and trumpets, whereas to their trusted intimates they state it themselves, so the divine reaches out directly to but a few, and rarely, but to the great majority it gives signs, on which the art called divination is based (24.593C–D)'.[36] The entire hierarchy obeys the will of a single commander, but he communicates with its different levels in various ways. Such a top-down understanding of the hierarchy emphasises its unified character, in that every part of it is depicted as obeying the commandments by the highest god.

But a bottom-up reading is possible as well. The decrease of rationality down the hierarchy entails the heightened possibility of passionate, vicious and even evil behaviour by the lower orders. Plutarch clearly envisaged irrational behaviour by souls that had not yet been fully liberated from the vices of their bodies. Instead of continuing their ascent, souls that

[33] Cf. Plut. *De genio* 21–3, *De E* 12.390E, *De def. or.* 10.415B–C, *De fac.* 30.944E, *Rom.* 28. On the question whether demons are for Plutarch a mere transient stage on the way to the divine or distinct beings, see Brenk 1977: 93–9; Dillon 1996: 223–4.
[34] See Plut. *De Stoic. repug.* 37.1051D, discussed at the end of this chapter.
[35] An overview of various interpretations of this work is offered by Barigazzi 1994 and the papers in Nesselrath 2009b.
[36] Demons, embedded in the divine hierarchy, were often adduced by Platonists to explain divination and oracles: Alcinous, *Intr.* 15; Apul. *De deo Soc.* 6.

disobey the divine commandments are punished with a return into a body on earth.[37] This should not be taken to mean that these wicked souls are evil beyond repair. Even though some characters in Plutarch's dialogues discuss the existence of essentially evil demons, usually with a reference to Xenocrates, who seems to have entertained such ideas,[38] Plutarch himself does not seem to accept their existence or, at least, he studiously avoids supporting such an opinion in a clear and undisputable way. In *On the Obsolescence of Oracles*, Cleombrotus gives a quite elaborate description of the immoral rites in which evil demons take pleasure (14.417C–F), and *On Isis and Osiris* (26.361B) also postulates such beings. But in both cases, Plutarch distances himself from such theories: whereas the passage in *On Isis and Osiris* occupies a lower level in the hierarchical explanation offered there[39] and thus cannot be entirely correct in Plutarch's eyes, F. Brenk has observed that in *On the Obsolescence of Oracles* the ensuing speech of Lamprias corrects Cleombrotus' assertions.[40] Thus, although Plutarch did not accept the existence of essentially evil demons, he envisaged that the bottom of the hierarchy could be far less rational than its top.

Such different readings of the divine hierarchy are strategically deployed in different argumentative contexts. Plutarch employs the top-down interpretation when he (or one of the characters in his dialogues) wishes to emphasise the unflinching obedience of demons to the will of the highest god. For example, in the passage from *On the Daimonion of Socrates* quoted above, divination is justified on the grounds that it consists of the signs sent down the hierarchy by god. The parallel with the obedience of a soldier to his general is used to stress that the transmission of these signs is not marred by evil and irrational demons at the bottom of the hierarchy and that, therefore, divination is possible. Elsewhere, other elements of traditional religion are salvaged by ascribing them to demons, who are said to be in charge of mysteries,[41] to operate oracles,[42] or to be the subjects of worship in rituals.[43] Even if most of these ideas are rarely pursued in any detail and merely offered as beliefs, suggestions or hypotheses, they

---

[37] Plut. *De def. or.* 13.417B, *De genio* 27.591C–592D, *De fac.* 30.944D.
[38] The passages are discussed by Dillon 1996: 27.
[39] This feature seems not to have been noticed by Martin 2004: 107, who takes this passage to represent Plutarch's opinion.
[40] Brenk 1977: 111–12. On pp. 145–64 he argues that Plutarch distances himself from such ideas in the *Lives* as well.
[41] Plut. *De fac.* 30.944C–D.
[42] Plut. *De fac.* 30.944C–D. Plut. *De Pyth. Or.* 24.406B–D likens the divine will, as expressed in oracles, to the way laws speak to cities and kings to their people.
[43] Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 26.361B–C, *De fac.* 30.944C–D, *De def. or.* 13–14.417C.

square very well with the general outlook of Plutarch's opinions: by making demons involved in rituals, god is not directly in contact with matter; yet, by embedding the demons in a strict hierarchy, god is still worshipped, albeit indirectly through intermediaries. Moreover, the variety of demons can be used to explain the extensive diversity of rituals.[44] In this way the divine hierarchy reduces the philosophical scandal of the multitude of rites: the various cults are directed to subordinate beings, who are part of a strict hierarchy. Worshipping an unknown local god thus implies worshipping the highest god as well.

The bottom-up view is less frequent and appears to explain features of traditional religion that seem less acceptable to a philosophically minded audience. Cleombrotus, for example, argues in *On the Obsolescence of Oracles* that myths are stories about demons (10.414F–415B), an argument probably prompted by the fact that the gods are often depicted in myths as indulging their passions, a behaviour unacceptable for the divine but admissible for the lower level of demons. A passage from *On the Face in the Moon* even seems implicitly to offer an explanation for why divination and other rituals may go wrong: demons who intervene in religion, driven by their own passions and not by obedience to god, are punished and reincarnate in human bodies (30.944D). This presupposes that irrational demons can distort or interrupt the communication up and down the chain of cosmic hierarchy. Even without the existence of essentially evil demons, the bottom-up view explicitly leaves room for deviation from god's will, a view that Plutarch in other contexts wishes to play down by taking the top-down perspective.[45]

SUPERSTITION: GOD IS NOT A TYRANT

When understood as theoretical positions, the top-down and bottom-up readings of the hierarchy may seem contradictory, as the former emphasises the full obedience of all levels to the highest god, whereas the latter allows for disobedience. This contradiction is only apparent. The two readings can be viewed as different interpretations of the same hierarchy, which were deployed in different argumentative contexts. Yet they do not seem to have equal weight for Plutarch, who usually espouses the top-down perspective because it allows him to emphasise the benevolent activity of the

---

[44] Plut. *De def. or.* 13–14.417C. For similar views, see Apul. *De deo Soc.* 14; Min. Fel. *Oct.* 27.
[45] See especially Plut. *De Stoic. repug.* 37.1051D, discussed in the last section of this chapter.

divine hierarchy for mankind.[46] A contrary belief was widespread among his contemporaries, namely that the gods are not always well disposed towards mankind, a view for which they found support in traditional myths and in the literary tradition, in particular poetry. Although Plutarch accepts that there are nuggets of truth in Homer and Hesiod,[47] he emphasises that these authors should be read with caution. Whereas he sometimes explains poetic falsehoods by the didactic aims the poets may have had,[48] on other occasions Plutarch is more radical: in a fragment of his lost commentary on Hesiod[49] he deletes eight lines from Hesiod because they seem to undermine divine providence and thus cannot be ascribed to the poet himself.[50]

Plutarch's critical attitude towards poetry is set out in greater detail in *On How a Young Man Should Read Poetry*.[51] The work aims at instilling in young people (and, one may suppose, in more mature readers as well) a critical stance towards poetry. As poetry provides pleasure, it can easily serve to introduce philosophical ideas, but it also readily corrupts the hearer precisely because of the delight it inspires. One should therefore approach poetry with philosophical certainties in mind[52] and with a critical attitude: 'Many the lies the poets tell' (2.16A). Some are intentional inventions for dramatic reasons, others wrongful beliefs. Especially the latter relate to the gods: fear of the gods is instilled in the readers of poetry because the poets believed that the gods punish, decide everything, and are not benevolent (2.16F–17F). There is no need for us to examine all the advice Plutarch gives on how to identify either wrongful beliefs or poetic characterisations. It suffices to note that his prime concern is the correct interpretation of the way in which the poets depict the gods (cf. 6.23A). The poets simply reveal a less-developed philosophical insight into the world and, for this reason, their statements should not be accepted at face value. For example, Plutarch notices that the poets tend to designate with the name Zeus not only the god himself, but also Fortune and Fate (6.23D–24C). But, he argues, Fate, which is also responsible for evil, obviously cannot be identical to Zeus, who lavishes good things on man: Fortune and Fate were abusively called Zeus because humankind attributed everything that transcends its power to the divine. Plutarch's argument clearly aims at lifting the suspicion that the gods could be responsible for evil. But he is not entirely negative on poetry. He also argues that one should try to acquire a proper understanding of how the poetic discourse functions. Hesiod and Homer do contain worthy insights, useful for education and philosophy (14.35F), but these can only be retrieved with a proper understanding of the literary tools and tricks of poets. Cleanthes and Chrysippus, for example, are derided for forcing verses to fit their own theories (11.31E),[53] without having a proper understanding of how the poets work. Again, as noticed in the above discussion of Plutarch's views on ancient wisdom, the emphasis is on philosophy, which should be used to purify traditional views on religion.

This critical attitude towards poetry is closely similar to Plutarch's approach to religion: in both instances he accepts that underneath religious symbolism and poetic invention some truths are to be found, and that one needs a correct insight into how religion and poetry are created and function in order to grasp those truths. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Plutarch explicitly compares them in *On How a Young Man Should Read Poetry*: 'One should not fearfully, or as grasped by superstition (δεισιδαιμονία) in a temple, shudder at everything, and bow down, but should rather acquire the habit of saying frankly "wrong" and "improper" no less than "right" and "proper"' (8.26B). The critical stance, informed by philosophy, that should characterise one's attitude towards religion must be transferred to poetry, in order to save it from being degraded to mere myth and untruth and in order to make it useful for philosophical purposes (14.36D–E).[54] Plutarch's critical reading of poetry thus has the aim not only of selecting the elements that support his philosophical argument, but also of assuring that it remains, just like religion, philosophically relevant and a source of philosophical knowledge.[55]

---

[46] Plutarch often associates the supreme god with providence, law and justice: e.g. Plut. *De lat. viv.* 4.1129B, *Conv. sept. sap.* 18.161F, *Alex.* 52. See Pérez Jiménez 2005: who focuses, however, only on *dikaiosunē*, not *dikē*.

[47] See, e.g. Plut. *De sera* 4.550A, which quotes approvingly Pindar, fr. 57.

[48] Plut. *Ad princ. iner.* 4.781C, quoting Hes., *Op.* 256–7.

[49] Plut. frs. 25–112. It must be noted, however, that many of these fragments are only tentatively attributed to Plutarch.

[50] Plut. frs. 38. The deleted lines are Hes. *Op.* 267–73. In *De Hesiod.* Plutarch strongly insists on divine justice and providence: cf. frs. 33–4, 38–9, 46.

[51] On this work, see Schenkeveld 1982; Valgiglio 1991; Zadorojnyi 2002.

[52] Plut. *Quomodo adul.* 1.14E–15B, 8.25E.

[53] More positive judgements on Stoic allegory are found in Plut. *Quomodo adul.* 12.33C and 13.34B.

[54] Cf. a similar attitude in Apul. *De deo Soc.* 10–12.

[55] One consequence of this critical distance regarding the traditional pantheon as expressed in poetry is that Plutarch is capable of identifying different traditional gods as the highest one, depending on the argumentative context. Because the pantheon is mediated through tradition, the philosopher is not bound by it but can develop his own interpretation of it. Usually and in line with traditional conceptions it is Zeus, with his consorts justice and providence: see, e.g., *De def. or.* 30.426C–D, *Quaest. conv.* 9.14 743F, *De fac.* 13.927A, *De anim. procr.* 1026B, with the comments by Latzarus 1920: 95–6. In the Delphic dialogues, Apollo seems to occupy the highest position (*De E* 21.393D–E, *De def. or.* 42.433D–E), but elsewhere Osiris, Eros and even Dionysus can be depicted as the highest god (*Amat.*, *De Is. et Os.*, and *De E* 9.388F–389C). Literary context, rather than variety in Plutarch's thought, is the determining factor here: in *De Is. et Os.* Osiris is the

As made clear by the passage from *On How a Young Man Should Read Poetry* just quoted, the danger of misunderstanding poets and tradition is of lapsing into superstition. In Chapter 2 I discussed Plutarch's *On Superstition* in the context of his views on ancient wisdom and argued that superstitions are deviations from traditional religion, caused by ignorance of its philosophical core. Here, I want to draw attention to another major line of argument in Plutarch's *On Superstition*, which understands superstition as a mistaken conception of the divine hierarchy. Superstition, defined early on in the work as a fear of the gods who cause harm and injury (2.165B), is repeatedly linked to the wrong image of god as a tyrant.[56] Instead of accepting that the gods are benevolent and shower us with wealth, peace, concord and other good things, the superstitious person worships the gods in the way he would behave towards a tyrant: in his heart he hates and fears them but outwardly he adopts a positive expression (11.170E). This does not imply a wholesale rejection of the image of the divine as a hierarchy on the part of the superstitious, as is done by the atheist who claims that the world is fundamentally disordered and that human affairs are being turned topsy-turvy. The superstitious man, on the contrary, attributes everything that befalls him to the gods: the cause of misfortune is not human action, fortune or *kairos*, but god, who constantly punishes us (7.168A–B). The superstitious individual thus accepts that the world is ruled by a hierarchy that stretches down to him, but he fails to see that it is a benevolent and just one. In parallel to his arguments in *On How a Young Man Should Read Poetry* and *On Hesiod*, Plutarch points in *On Superstition* to the poets as a possible source for such wrong conceptions of the divine, as well as to popular beliefs.[57] In contrast, philosophers and statesmen show that the majesty of god is characterised by 'goodness, magnanimity, kindliness and solicitude' (6.167E), but they usually do not gain credence among the superstitious. Superstition is, thus, a misconception of the divine world: rather than a kingly hierarchy directed by justice and law, the superstitious person sees it as an arbitrary tyranny which endlessly punishes its subjects.

highest god, in the *Erotikos* Eros (cf. Görgemanns 2005: 183–6; Brenk 1994: 10 and 1998). Dionysus is usually presented as the highest god in an indirect way, through a series of identifications. This may betray the ultimate conviction that all gods are identical or aspects of a single divinity, rather than a clear will to make Dionysus the highest god (see in particular *De Is. et Os.* 33.364A–365F and *The E of Delphi* 9.388F–389C: with Brenk 1998: 24–5; Teodorsson 2001; Gasparro 2002: 143).

[56] Plut. *De superst.* 4.166D, 6.167D, 11.170E, 13.171D; cf. also *De sera* 10.555A. Lozza 1996 and Bowden 2008 tend to reduce superstition to a psychological defect: but superstition is, as I argue, also a fundamentally wrong conception of the divine as evil and tyrannical.

[57] Plut. *De superst.* 6.167E, 10.170A–B. For parallels see Max. Tyr. *Or.* 2; Calcidius 128.

This interpretation allows us to revisit, once more, one of the apparent contradictions detected between *On Superstition* and other dialogues, namely the criticism of superstitious belief in punishment after death found in *On Superstition* (4.166F–167A) and the lengthy defence of such punishments in *On the Lateness of Divine Punishment*.[58] Yet again it is important to realise that the two treatises have a different scope but defend similar positions. In *On Superstition* Plutarch argues that the superstitious man fails to recognise that the gods act for the good and in the interest of justice, as good kings do. The idea that *only* punishments await us in the afterlife is superstitious because it ignores the fact that punishments are only for the wicked and are meted out on the basis of justice. The superstitious person, thinking that we are randomly punished by the gods in the same way as a tyrant treats his subjects and that death is by definition followed by punishment, fails to see the justice of the gods, whereas divine justice is precisely the central idea in the argument of *On the Lateness of Divine Punishment*. In this treatise, punishments after death are part of the providential order of the cosmos that assures that the wicked, not everybody, will eventually be punished. Once again, apparent changes in Plutarch's thought reflect differences in emphasis of a single position, rather than a change in view.

THE PERSIAN GREAT KING AND ANTI-STOIC POLEMIC

Underlying Plutarch's critique on superstition is the idea that the only correct way of understanding the divine is to accept that it is a benevolent hierarchy with a good king at the top. This understanding of the divine hierarchy, assumed to be the only valid one, is exploited by Plutarch in his polemic against Stoicism, where he draws on one of the key comparisons that are regularly used in the Post-Hellenistic period to visualise the cosmic hierarchy, namely that of the Persian King and his satraps. Plutarch's *On Stoic Self-contradictions* is part of his philosophical polemic against Stoicism. Of uncertain date, but considered to be a work of his early years,[59] it aims to show that the Stoics are guilty of that supreme philosophical vice, inconsistency.[60] Even though the structure of the treatise is driven by association rather than by a clear topical division, we can identify several sections within the work.[61] The one I will focus on starts with chapter 30

[58] See Brenk 1977: 9–15 for an overview. On *De sera*, see now Scholten 2009.

[59] Casevitz and Babut 2004: 15–18.

[60] The Stoics prided themselves on their consistency: see, e.g., Cic. *Fin.* 3.74; Diog. Laert. 7.40. Cf. Plut. *Comm. not.* 10.1062E–1063C.

[61] I follow Cherniss 1976: 396.

and runs to chapter 40. In the first part (30–7) Plutarch touches upon the role of the gods in relation to man and divine providence in general; the second part (38–40) discusses the nature of the gods.

Seemingly adopting the stance of an Academic Sceptic,[62] Plutarch stresses more than once that he does not want to prove the Stoics wrong but merely to show up their contradictions.[63] His selection of Stoic contradictions is, however, unmistakably driven by his own Platonist concerns. A (more or less) coherent line of argument can thus be detected in chapters 30–7, which aims at challenging the Stoic concept of fate and countering it with the Platonist view.[64] In chapters 30 and 31 Plutarch argues that the Stoic idea of a class of 'preferred indifferents' is responsible for important contradictions in their theory. Whereas on some occasions this class of 'preferred indifferents' is likened to the good, and thus worthy of pursuit, elsewhere the Stoics argue that reason cares for the good only, to the exclusion of even these 'preferred indifferents'. According to Plutarch, this impugns not only human virtue but also divine providence, for virtuous people will look stupid when busying themselves with these 'indifferents' and the gods will look ridiculous when bestowing them on mankind as they do.

The argument about the nature of divine providence is further elaborated from different angles in the next five chapters (32–6), in which Plutarch consistently asserts that the gods benefit mankind and are not responsible for evil.[65] Two of Plutarch's arguments in this section are particularly relevant for my purpose, in that they reveal his attempt to associate the Stoics with superstition and his emphasis on the benevolent nature of the divine. First, in chapter 32, he points to the contradiction between, on the one hand, Chrysippus' endorsement of traditional epithets of Zeus as *Sōtēr* (saviour) and *Genetōr* (sire) and of his qualities as father of justice, order and peace (*dikē, eunomia, eirēnē*), and, on the other, his contention that god allows war to depopulate the earth when it has become overcrowded.[66] Whereas traditional religion had made Zeus venerable and philanthropic, Plutarch fumes, Chrysippus turns him into a tyrant, by

---

[62] Although Plutarch assumes the pose of an Academic Sceptic (cf. Cherniss 1976: 370; Opsomer 1998: 186), his polemic against Stoicism is at least implicitly dogmatic in that it stresses the divergence of Stoicism from Platonism: cf. Boys-Stones 1997. For Academic influences in Middle Platonism, see Tarrant 1985 and Opsomer 1998.

[63] Plut. *De Stoic. repug.* 1.1033A, 32.1049B, 36.1051B.

[64] Chapters 38–40 discuss the nature of the divine, with Plutarch arguing against Chrysippus that immortality is an essential quality of the divine, apart from ascribing felicity and perfection to the gods.

[65] See also Plut. *Comm. not.* 34.1076C–F.

[66] As similar argument is developed in Plut. *Comm. not.* 32.1075E–F.

---

likening the king of the gods to individuals such as Deiotarus I, king of Galatia during the Late Republic, who murdered his own offspring except his desired successor. In the light of Plutarch's argument in *On Superstition* that the view of Zeus as a tyrant is superstitious, this passage seems to associate Chrysippus with that vice.

Second, chapter 34 discusses explicitly the concept of providence. Because the Stoics tend to compound divine reason, fate, providence, law and justice,[67] Plutarch argues, they make the gods responsible for everything that happens on earth, even for evil. Evil, and even illegal, events happen in accordance with divine law, if one were to follow the Stoics. This contradiction is elaborated in the next two chapters. Plutarch can find much to agree with in Chrysippus: he also accepts a close link between providence, law and justice, and he is happy to notice that the Stoic endorses the idea that the wicked are punished by the gods (34.1050E).[68] His criticism, however, remains that their concept of providence is too strong and too extensive and does not leave sufficient room for true divine justice and philanthropy. When providence is also fate, Plutarch maintains, the benevolent care of god for man becomes impossible.[69]

With chapter 37 Plutarch moves his discussion onto a higher plane and argues that the contradictions and errors of the Stoics stem from a mistaken understanding of the nature and structure of the divine. Again he makes his point by drawing on Chrysippean passages. At some point, the Stoic thinker was faced with the difficulty of reconciling occasional suffering by good people with his fundamental conviction that the world is good, being in accordance with divine reason. Chrysippus wonders if he has to explain this fact either by the usual neglect that one sees happening in a large household or by the fact that lower demons take care of matters in which we humans seem to notice divine disregard. But, Chrysippus speculates, necessity (ἀνάγκη) may also be involved. Plutarch brushes

---

[67] Cf. Plut. *De Stoic. repug.* 9.1035B, where Chrysippus links Zeus, Destiny, Providence to the idea that a single power keeps the world together; 15.1041A–B for the Stoic identification of law and justice; 45.1055D criticises the idea that the order of the world could be an accidental result.

[68] Cf. Plut. *De Stoic. repug.* 15.1040A–B on the positive effect that the fear of divine punishment may have.

[69] Precisely how Fate and Providence were to be articulated was, however, not very clear for Plutarch. He identifies providence with the divine cause of Pl. *Ti.* 30b, 44c (cf. Pl. *Phd.* 99c and Plut. fr. 195, see also Plut. *Quaest. conv.* 9.5). But how it relates to Fate (*heimarmenē*) is unclear. In *Quomodo adul.* 6.23D–F Zeus is identified with *tychē* and *heimarmenē* (cf. *De anim. procr.* 27.1026B, where god is linked with necessity), but *De fac.* 13.927A and *De def. or.* 47.435F oppose such ideas in a polemic against the Stoics. Aristotle, on the contrary, was criticised by Plutarch for limiting providence too much: *De def. or.* 30.426D–E. The material is discussed by Babut 1969: 453–65; Brenk 1977: 145–83; Swain 1989a; Dillon 1996: 209–11; Karamanolis 2006: 106–9.

aside the first option by pointing out that the execution of Socrates and other philosophers can hardly qualify as ordinary neglect. To refute the second, he likens Zeus to the Persian Great King who commands his satraps:[70] 'How can this not be an accusation of god, as if he were a king (καθάπερ βασιλέως) who entrusts a command to evil and capricious satraps and generals and pays no attention to how the most virtuous men are neglected and abused by them?' Plutarch clearly assumes that the hierarchy of a king and his satraps is normally benevolent and that satraps obey the orders of the king. Chrysippus is accused of perverting that ideal hierarchy by assuming that its lower ranks do not always obey the commandments from on high. The third option is rejected on the following grounds: 'Moreover, if necessity underlies events to a large measure, then god is not in control of all things nor is everything governed according to his reason' (37.1051D). One must note that Chrysippus' suggestion that demons are less perfect than god himself and can thus be responsible for human suffering is not unlike the bottom-up reading that Plutarch offers regarding the hierarchy of gods and demons.[71] But in his polemic with the Stoics Plutarch is not ready to concede that god may not be entirely in control of his hierarchy or that anything escapes his all-watching eye.[72] For the same reason, he cannot accept that necessity would be to blame, as it would impugn divine command. On the contrary, Plutarch's comparison emphasises that the Persian King is an ideal king who is always in full command of his hierarchy. It covers up possible doctrinal problems, such as the existence of the evil demons or the precise role of providence, in order to assert very forcefully that god is benevolent, providential and in full command. Chrysippus' speculation about independent-minded demons introduced to solve a philosophical problem is thus brushed aside by a comparison that explicitly avoids addressing such problems. It suffices, however, to give the reader the impression that Chrysippus has a wrong idea about the structure and functioning of the divine world – its correct counterpart being embodied in the image of the Great King.

In arguing that Chrysippus has not understood how the divine hierarchy works, Plutarch again associates him with superstition. This association recurs in chapter 38, where Plutarch takes issue with Chrysippus' argument that man has a preconception of the gods as good. Even though he equally

---

[70] Plutarch uses this comparison on occasion again. In the *Life of Themistocles* 27, the Persian King is described as 'the image of the god who is the preserver of the universe'.

[71] For Stoic demonology, see Casevitz and Babut 2004: 299 with further references.

[72] A god not in control of his hierarchy is as unacceptable as the Epicurean idea that providence does not exist: cf. Plut. *De Stoic. repug.* 19.1043B.

defends the idea that the gods are good, Plutarch doubts that it is a general preconception: 'But it is likely that not all conceive of the gods as benevolent. Look indeed at what the Jews and Syrians think about the gods, look at how the writings of the poets are full of superstition' (38.1051E). The Jews and Syrians are indeed adduced as examples of superstition in the tract on that subject.[73] Chrysippus' belief in the truthfulness of tradition is too naïve for Plutarch, because he sees religion as too various and too tainted by superstition to be a straightforward source for mankind's ideas about the divine.[74]

In *On Stoic Self-contradictions*, Plutarch is evidently doing more than just playing up the contradictions of his opponents. As will be clear, the entire section 30–40 should be read as a defence of the Platonist notion of a beneficent divine providence, which ensures the order of the world but is not responsible for evil. The way in which Plutarch structures the section, starting with a detailed point of Stoic ethics (30–1), then moving to a discussion of Stoic providence (32–7), which gradually focuses more on the structure and nature of the divine (38–40), makes clear that a good understanding of providence hinges on a correct conception of the divine. This implies both an understanding of how the divine functions through a tightly controlled hierarchy and a full grasp of its essential qualities, which is further elaborated in chapters 38–40. As a consummate polemicist, Plutarch opposes detailed difficulties in the theories of his opponents with a wholesale affirmation of his own position, for example by using the image of the Great King and his satraps to ridicule Chrysippus' views, whilst at the same time suggesting that the Stoic misunderstanding of that hierarchy is superstitious. Plutarch's suggestion that Stoicism is superstitious shows well the normative value acquired by the benevolent hierarchy of gods and men: philosophers as well as ordinary men could be indicted on the same charge of having misunderstood the hierarchical nature of the cosmos. Plutarch would argue that his position is borne out by the evidence from poetry and traditional religion. Yet as we have noticed before, Plutarch's critical attitude towards poetry and religion, which assumes the presence of some truths in a symbolic or poetic guise, gives him much freedom to select the elements that suit his own position. Thus, although religion and poetry can be presented by Plutarch as independent sources for his philosophy, they are actually profoundly domesticated.

---

[73] Plut. *De superst.* 166A, 169C, 170D.

[74] Cf. Plut. *Comm. not.* 31.1074E–1075D (where it is pointed out that some people do not recognise the existence of the gods), *Non posse* 1101C.

Lucian, Epicureanism and strategies of satire

The two discourses as reconstructed in Parts I and II of this book rely heavily on tacit, or at least rarely articulated, presuppositions, such as the primacy of antiquity and the necessity of hierarchy. Moreover, although they present themselves as uniquely plausible, they are also intricately caught up in cultural assumptions, such as polytheism and the superiority of Greek philosophy, and in political convictions, for example the preference for kingship and the justification of empire. It is only in polemical confrontations with 'outsiders' that such assumptions are more explicitly brought out. Each of the next three chapters focuses on texts that represent one of three such 'outsiders', namely Epicureans, Jews and Christians. Whilst they discuss groups that were 'outsiders' for very different reasons and to very different degrees, a common theme underlies all of them: the power of polemic in reshaping discourses and in testing their limits. Most of the evidence for this book has been drawn from Stoics and Platonists, with a lesser input by the Peripatos. Although the Epicureans were an established school, they were seen by the others as challenging the basic tenets of philosophy and endangering the ordered cosmos and society. More specifically, in relation to the theme of this book, I shall argue below that the Epicureans were not inclined to find truth in all forms of religion, which puts them outside the consensus of Stoics and Platonists. Seen from the perspective of the discourses on ancient wisdom and cosmic hierarchy, the Epicureans ranked as 'outsiders', and it is as such that they are included in the third part of this book. Jews and Christians, on the contrary, shared many of the basic presuppositions of Stoics and Platonists but they remained cultural and religious outsiders: neither group was ever integrated into Roman culture without a keen awareness of their unique history, beliefs and customs. Both turned the arguments borrowed from Graeco-Roman philosophy against its representatives to argue for the superiority of their own culture and religion. The following three chapters

explore, from different angles, the polemics between, on the one hand, Platonists and Stoics, and, on the other, the Epicureans, Jews and Christians. Taken together, they illustrate the culturally embedded nature of the two discourses this book has discussed, as well as the creative force of polemic in uncovering their preconceptions. In the next chapter, I shall argue that the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (early first century AD) subtly turns the discourses on ancient wisdom and cosmic hierarchy against the Graeco-Roman culture in which they originated. Because he borrows the formal framework of the discourses but not their cultural prejudices, Philo's polemic clearly reveals the prejudicial preferences for polytheism and Graeco-Roman culture and philosophy present in them. Chapter 11 sets out how the late second-century Platonist philosopher Celsus applies to Christianity the concept of superstition as it has emerged in this book. Apart from offering a better understanding of Celsus' arguments against Christianity by situating them in the discourse of his time, this interpretation also draws attention to the unarticulated presuppositions that drive his polemic.

This chapter shows how Lucian (*c.* AD 125–80) uses the polemical stereotype of Epicureanism created by its Stoic and Platonist enemies to subvert the boastful claims to truth and authority of these two philosophical schools, while at the same time shedding doubts about the veracity of Epicureanism as well. His satire is thus playfully parasitic on the polemic waged against the Epicureans. Sources for Post-Hellenistic Epicureanism are rather limited. We do have relatively abundant evidence for the first century BC with Philodemus and Lucretius, but for the first two centuries AD, we possess only the famous inscription of Diogenes of Oenoanda as first-hand source. However, Epicureans figure heavily in the vast corpus of Lucian's works and often have the upper hand in his satires. In *Alexander the False Prophet*, the narrator even presents himself as an Epicurean and it has occasionally been deduced from this that Lucian was himself an Epicurean, or at least highly sympathetically disposed towards that school.[1] If that were the case, Lucian would be a good source for imperial Epicureanism. Yet against such attempts to deduce facts about the real Lucian from his works, scholars have rightly stressed that the play with different *personae* is actually essential for his satires:[2] Lucian the author does not

[1] See Caster 1937; Gasparro 2002: 151. Jones 1986: 39–43 describes Lucian as a 'sympathizer' with Epicureans and Cynics. On p. 147 he rather tends to leave the question of Lucian's true convictions open. Nesselrath 1998 suggests that Lucian sympathises with the Cynics.

[2] Branham 1989; Elsner 2001; Whitmarsh 2001: 294.

allow his reader to pin him down. Drawing on such approaches, I shall argue that it is part of Lucian's satirical strategy to side with outsiders such as the Epicureans. Indeed, in the light of the generally marginal position the Epicureans occupied in a public discourse dominated by Platonism and Stoicism, such a perspective allowed him to undermine assumptions widely held on the authority of these schools. At the same time, this does not mean that Lucian gives an undistorted, let alone a flattering image of Epicureanism. His apparently favourable attitude towards Epicureanism does not imply that his representation of it is not equally skewed: Lucian actually rehearses the Epicurean stereotypes as circulated by their enemies but gives a positive value to them. Lucian the satirist capitalises precisely on stereotypes and clichés.

Once this aspect of Lucian is appreciated, he becomes an interesting source for exploring the polemic waged against the Epicureans by the dominating Stoic and Platonic discourses on religion that I have reconstructed in the previous chapters. As I hope to show in this chapter, various Lucianic tracts set out to undermine the assumptions that underpin the discourses on ancient wisdom and natural hierarchy. The angle from which he chooses to mount his attack is often Epicurean (and, on other occasions, Cynic) but, typically for Lucian's satire, it is actually never really presented as the better alternative. Thus, rather than offering us a vantage point from outside the two discourses explored in the first two parts of this book, Lucian satirically exploits the critiques formulated by these discourses against outsiders such as the Epicureans to question the discourses themselves. He writes from within the discourse, turning its anti-Epicurean polemic against itself.

This chapter first sets this interpretation of Lucian's Epicureanism as a satirical pose against the background of anti-Epicurean polemic found in this period, before analysing two of his works, *Alexander the False Prophet* and *Icaromenippus*, as paradigms of his satirical strategy. Rather than offering respectively Epicurean and Cynic interpretations of religion, both texts exploit these philosophies to question widely held beliefs, while at the same time subtly shedding doubt on the views of these outsiders. In the end, Lucian remains uncommitted to any philosophical view. I shall also suggest that in *Alexander the False Prophet* he engages with the high status that mystery cults had acquired in the discourse on ancient wisdom. The final section explores Lucian's questioning of the second discourse on hierarchy. I shall show that he often draws on Epicureanism and its metaphysics of

disorder to question the perfect order that the discourse on cosmic hierarchy projects on the human and divine worlds, yet again without offering any alternative understanding of the world.

EPICUREAN ATHEISM

Although the Platonist and Stoic philosophers discussed in the previous chapters direct a fair share of polemic against each other, they tend to treat Epicureanism with common contempt: Epicureanism is depicted as the absolute counterpoint to what they stand for. In *Letter* 90, Seneca explicitly denies that Epicureanism, described as 'the philosophy that situates the citizen outside his homeland and the gods outside the world and that abandons virtue to pleasure',[3] formed part of the wisdom of the ancients. It represents rather, he seems to suggest, a later degeneration of mankind. As shown by M. Griffin, part of the pedagogic strategy that underlies the letters as a whole is the initial representation of Lucilius as interested in Epicureanism, an interest which he progressively abandons as Seneca introduces him to Stoicism.[4]

The triple definition of Epicureanism by Seneca as a philosophy that imperils social cohesion, belief in the gods and ethics, posits it as the very antithesis to philosophies that, as we have seen, closely link divine providence, socio-political and divine order, and respect for religious tradition. The stark dichotomy between Epicureanism and other philosophies was put succinctly by Marcus Aurelius: it is either atoms or providence.[5] The contrast is also explicitly made by Dio Chrysostom in his *Olympicus* (dated to 101 or 105).[6] In that speech, Dio celebrates the greatness of Zeus and, speaking in front of Phidias' statue of the supreme god, he justifies sculpture as a source of knowledge of the divine. After a *prolalia* (1–16) and an introduction (16–26), he offers proof of the fact that all men have an innate idea of the gods and in particular of the ruler of the universe (27–37). Only the execrable Epicureans refuse to recognise this self-evident truth:

These men despise all things divine, and have set up the image of one single female demon, depraved and unholy (μίαν ἱδρυσάμενοι δαίμονα πονηρὰν καὶ ἀνόσιον), representing a lavish luxury and ease and uncontrolled wantonness, to which they gave the name of Pleasure (Hēdonē) – truly a womanish divinity. They honour and worship her with tinkling cymbals and pipes playing in the dark – a celebration which nobody would take issue with if their cleverness went only as

[3] Sen. *Ep.* 90.35: *non de ea philosophia loquor, quae civem extra patriam posuit, extra mundum deos, quae virtutem donavit voluptati.*
[4] Griffin 2007: 90–6.   [5] M. Aur. *Med.* 4.3, 4.27, 6.24.   [6] Russell 1992: 16.

far as singing and they did not attempt to take our gods from us and exile them, driving them from this whole world, which is their city and realm, out of this ordered universe to alien regions, as unfortunate human beings are banished to some deserted islands. (36–7)[7]

Dio is caricaturing what was perceived as the Epicurean relegation of the gods to the spaces between the different existing worlds, where they live perfectly happy lives.[8] In this way, he laments, they deprive us of the gods for which they substitute a single divinity, Pleasure.[9] The suggestion is that the Epicureans do away with all the traditional gods and replace them with a single divine being, whose cult Dio associates with that of Isis and Cybele, notorious for their dissolute way of living.[10] He has in fact linked two traditional anti-Epicurean polemical targets, their concept of pleasure and the passive felicity they attribute to the gods. In line with traditional criticism of the Epicureans, he depicts them as being inimical to the traditional gods, and thus atheists.[11]

A less well-known but equally interesting polemic against Epicurean atheism is Aelian's fragmentary *On Providence* (died after AD 222). In what seems to have been a collection of anecdotes illustrating divine providential action, Aelian often targets the Epicureans for rejecting religion, providence and the values of society. He describes, for example, how a torch-bearer of the Eleusinian mysteries became so bewitched by Epicurean doctrine[12] that he sneaked into the *megaron* in order to see the mysteries that were reserved for the hierophant. A long terminal illness was his punishment (frs. 10a–11). Other fragments contain stories following the same pattern: Epicureans want to discover what is going on in mysteries, from which they are excluded as atheists (fr. 46b–c), but in the end they have to recognise the

[7] For the interpretation of the text, see the comments by Russell 1992 *ad loc.*
[8] For this (mistaken) view of Epicurean theology, see Cic. *Nat. D.* 1.18; Lucr. 5.146–55; Atticus, fr. 3.11. Epicurus seems to have conceived of the gods as concepts or series of images: see Mansfeld 1999: 456.
[9] Compare Dio Chrys. *Or.* 4.101. An interesting later echo of this idea is to be found in the Church Father Eusebius of Caesarea (*Praep. evang.* 7.2.4), who describes paganism as a cult of Hedone.
[10] Cf. Russell 1992: 187. I have taken δαίμων to have the connotation of a subordinate divine being, but in a classicising manner it can also be taken to mean 'divinity'.
[11] Obbink 1989. A similar link between atheism and rejection of the traditional gods surfaces in the accusations of atheism brought against early Christianity. See, e.g., Epistle to the Ephesians 2.12; Justin, *I Apol.* 6.1; Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.23.1; Arn. *Adv. nat.* 1.29. For recent bibliography on Christian atheism, see Walsh 1991; Beatrice 2004.
  Bergjan 2001 interestingly suggests that Origen describes the Platonist Celsus as an Epicurean in *C. Cels.* as part of a polemical strategy: Origen thus was aware of the negative characteristics associated with Epicureanism.
[12] In line with Dio, who makes female Pleasure the Epicurean main deity, Aelian calls Epicurean doctrine 'a female wisdom' (θήλειαν σοφίαν): frs. 10g, 42a l. 36.

power of the gods (fr. 92).[13] The lack of respect for mystery cults acquires additional meaning against the background of the important position they occupy in the discourse on ancient wisdom: containing the purest form of ancient wisdom, they obviously have to be shielded from the prying Epicureans.

The polemic against the Epicureans tends to suggest that they spurn social, religious and political life. This clearly is a distortion of the facts. The inscription set up by Diogenes in Oenoanda in the second century AD, in a publicly accessible space, suggests at least that he was a respected citizen,[14] and inscriptions show that Epicureans seem to have assumed sacred functions.[15] Moreover, the polemic against Epicureanism overshadows the fact that it actually shared many characteristics with the views discussed in previous chapters. Indeed, Epicurean authors such as Lucretius and Philodemus also ascribed a pure knowledge of the gods to early man, who received a correct *prolēpsis* of the gods in his dreams. Later, degeneration set in and people started to attribute passions to the gods.[16] And, what is more, to rebut accusations of atheism, Philodemus (*c.* 110–40 BC) stressed that Epicurus had profound respect for traditional religion and particularly for mystery cults because they shaped a sense of community.[17] At the same time, he could affirm against the 'monotheistic' Stoics that he and his fellow Epicureans 'accept the existence of not only the Greek gods but many others as well'[18] and, as such, showed more, not less, respect for tradition.

Notwithstanding such parallels with the Stoic and Platonist views set out in earlier chapters, Epicurean theology was in its core unreceptive to the idea that any truth was hidden in religion. It was originally developed in opposition to the beliefs of the 'many', who had to be liberated from fear of the gods.[19] The Epicureans usually dismissed the traditional stories about the gods as found in Homer and Hesiod and never attempted to give them a positive place in their thought, as did the Stoics and Platonists. Nor did they develop a positive explanation for how religious institutions,

---

[13] It is not certain that these fragments derive from *On Providence*, but the thematic links with fr. 10 suggest that they do.

[14] Clay 1989 and 2007: 20–7.

[15] See the references in M. Smith 1996; Dillon 2002b: 37–9; Bendlin 2006: 165, 180, 190. For an overview of Epicureanism from the Late Republic onwards, see the papers in Erler 2000.

[16] Lucr. 5.1161–2104; Philodemus, *De piet.* 1.225–31, 1.1160–210. Obbink 1996: 6 and 2002: 217; Kany-Turpin 2007.

[17] Philodemus, *De piet.* 1.560.

[18] *P. Herc.* 1428 col. x ll. 25–9: ἡμῶν οὐ μόνον ὅσους φασιν οἱ Πανέλληνες ἀλλὰ καὶ πλείονας εἶναι λεγόντων. Cf. Henrichs 1974: 21; Obbink 2001.

[19] Obbink 1996: 14. Cf. Lucr. 1.80–101.

such as oracles, came into existence: they consistently rejected them as impostures.[20] It was not just the idea of liberation from religious fear that made it hard for Epicureans to develop a positive interpretation of religion. Whereas they reject traditional religion for shackling mankind through fear, their thinking about the gods was, paradoxically, too intimately connected with traditional Greek depictions of the divine to open itself up to other cultures and religions as happened in the discourse on ancient wisdom. Epicurus famously argued that the anthropomorphic images of the gods as found in the Greek tradition represent the true shape of the gods. This made it hard for Epicureans to see any truth in the different ways that foreign traditions visualised the gods. Such strict adherence to anthropomorphism did not offer the same interpretative leeway as the allegories adopted by, say, Plutarch, who could salvage Egyptian animal cults. Epicureans, on the contrary, dismissed the Magi and Egyptians even more rapidly than Homer and Hesiod.[21] But for its adversaries the problem with Epicureanism was not just its views on religion. As we have seen, the correct understanding of the gods was for Stoics and Platonists intrinsically linked to a correct view of the cosmic hierarchy and man's position in it. The Epicurean espousal of a metaphysics of disorder was seen as questioning the very basis of a stable and well-ordered society. As such, Epicureanism was easily depicted as the antithesis of what Stoics and Platonists believed to be true and as falling outside the intellectual consensus.

EXPLOITING STEREOTYPES FOR SATIRE: *ALEXANDER THE FALSE PROPHET* AND *ICAROMENIPPUS*

The distance separating the Epicureans from other philosophers in relation to religion in this period is brought out with characteristic panache in Lucian's portrait of Alexander of Abonuteichus; yet, as we shall see, this is only the case on the surface of the text: Lucian subtly questions the claims for the truth made by both sides in the debate.

In what purports to be a biography, Lucian describes how the crook Alexander set out to make money by concocting an oracle of the snake-god Glycon in Paphlagonia, which became a regional and even empire-wide attraction. Lucian stages himself as a slightly pedantic narrator, worried about the impact such an unworthy subject may have on his reputation; yet he also appears to be very well informed and even pretends to have

---

[20] Diogenes of Oenoanda, frs. 23, 53–4; *P. Oxy.* 215 col. I, ll. 4–11. Cf. Bendlin 2006: 161–4.

[21] Cic. *Nat. D.* 1.43. See also Epicurus, *Ep. Men.* 124.

visited the sanctuary. Although some scholars have read the work as a source of historical facts, even trying to date Lucian's visit in AD 161/2,[22] the sophistry and irony that permeate this piece have been laid bare by B. Branham and D. Elm von der Osten.[23] I am not concerned here with the wider implications of this work for the history of religion, nor does the satire really inform us in particular about the specific ideas held by either Epicureans or Platonists and Stoics: the treatise is of interest here because of the way Lucian, through the staging of himself as an Epicurean narrator, succeeds in depicting the Epicureans, who are normally situated outside the contemporary mainstream in terms of ideas about religion, as the only defenders of the truth about religion.

The praise for Epicureanism that at face value characterises *Alexander the False Prophet*, can be understood at first sight as a gratification of the dedicatee, Celsus, who probably was an Epicurean philosopher.[24] Yet, there is more to it. The espousal of an apparently Epicurean perspective gives Lucian an excellent vantage point to explore some of the intellectual fault-lines of his age: in a reversal of the rejection of Epicureanism by Stoics and Platonists, the narrator of *Alexander the False Prophet* presents himself as an Epicurean, a doctrine which he consistently associates with truth and common sense in the text,[25] whereas Stoics and Platonists are described as credulous and naïve, and intellectually on the same level as the country bumpkins of Paphlagonia. Indeed, the Epicureans are the greatest enemies of the imposter Alexander, whereas the other philosophers side with him:

In general, his war against Epicurus was without truce and treaty, as was natural enough. Against whom else would a charlatan, who loved fairy tales but hated truth, more fittingly make war than Epicurus, who had grasped the nature of things and alone understood the truth about them? He had the followers of Plato, Chrysippus and Pythagoras as friends and lived in profound peace with them. (25)

Platonists, Stoics and Pythagoreans are presented as having few problems in siding with a quack. At first sight, this may mean no more than that these philosophers were easily deceived by someone who pretended to

[22] Most recently Victor 1997; Gasparro 2002; Robiano 2003. For the date, see Flinterman 1997.
[23] Branham 1984; Elm von der Osten 2006. Both stress that the work is a parody of biography (cf. the comparison with Arrian in the preface) and that the narrator Lucian is not to be confused with the author Lucian.
[24] He was certainly not the author of the anti-Christian *True Discourse*, as used to be thought: see Bergjian 2001.
[25] Lucian, *Alex.* 1, 17, 25, 38, 43–7, 61.

be Pythagoras *redivivus*.[26] When looking beyond Lucian's satire to the discourse on ancient wisdom, however, it is also clear that the friends of Alexander are precisely the philosophers who adopted the discourses on ancient wisdom and natural hierarchy, whereas his enemies, the Epicureans, are those who were seen by Stoics and Platonists as undermining that discourse. In contrast to the texts discussed earlier in this book, however, Lucian's satirical reversal depicts the Stoics and Platonists as credulous and naïve.

The narrator's satirical revelation of the mystery cult created by Alexander also gives a positive twist to the anti-Epicurean polemic we noticed above in Dio and Aelian, where Epicureans are depicted as hostile to mystery cults and attempting to disclose their truths. Once the fame of Glycon had reached the entire Roman Empire (36–7), Alexander created a mystery cult (38–40), where, significantly, access was refused to the Epicureans. The precise contents of these mysteries are of little interest here; yet it is noteworthy that the narrator reveals the sacred drama performed in the mystery cult to his audience. This is not merely a deliberate infringement of the commandment of mystical silence, which, one can expect, must have been associated with the cult: it is also an effective attack on any claims Alexander could lay to revealing the truth in his mystery: the sacred drama is presented as ridiculous and impudent. In the light of anti-Epicurean polemic, this is precisely what one would expect an Epicurean to do: it is, in a way, a positive calque of the image of the prying Epicurean that we noticed in Aelian.

The narrator thus offers his readers a positive reversal of the traditional anti-Epicurean polemic, which allows him to characterise the religious mainstream of the early Imperial period as one of infantile credulity. A close reading of the texts suggests, however, that Lucian does not just present Epicureanism as a better alternative. On the contrary, a series of indications subvert the positive image of the narrator and the Epicureans that the text offers on its surface. In the first place, it is important to realise that the narrator depicts the Epicureans in a stereotypical way, albeit given a positive spin, informed by anti-Epicurean polemic. On various occasions the reader is reminded of this polemic. In chapter 38, for example, Alexander forbids access to the mysteries to 'atheists, Christians and Epicureans'. This rehearses a polemical association noted earlier in this chapter and was definitely not the company in which Epicureans wanted to find themselves. Also, after Alexander's death, the narrator shows his relief by almost starting

[26] Lucian, *Alex.* 40. Cf. Victor 1997: 41–50 for further links with Pythagoreanism.

to believe in providence, but, so as not to seem to abandon Epicurean doctrine, he hastens to add that it was mere accident (60). His confidence in Epicurean doctrine thus does not seem as firm as it should be. Moreover, although posing as an Epicurean, the narrator himself hardly lives up to the ideal of tranquillity (*ataraxia*) professed by that school: the narrative is driven by spite and hate, which culminates in Lucian sinking his teeth into the hands of Alexander (55).[27] In the face of such elements, it becomes hard to read the *Alexander* as a straightforward defence of Epicurean truth against the errors of all the others. Rather, Lucian satirises contemporary interest in religion by espousing an Epicureanism that is basically the polemical image painted by its enemies. At the same time, the narrator's presentation of his own Epicureanism is such that it effectively undercuts the trustworthiness of his critique on Alexander – in a typically Lucianic way.

Such a questioning of the surface message of the text can be witnessed on another level as well. As shown by T. Schirren, Lucian often satirically transforms the stereotypes and clichés of what this scholar calls the 'philosophos bios',[28] that is, the depiction of the ideal philosophical life by the various philosophical schools.[29] In order to do so, Lucian could draw on a long tradition of polemic between the various philosophical schools. This polemic usually took issue not only with doctrine but also with lifestyle and focused on proving the gap between an alleged lifestyle of virtue and asceticism and the true behaviour marked by vice and lasciviousness.[30] And indeed, Alexander is depicted as a false philosopher. One particular detail singles him out as a would-be philosopher from the start of the treatise: his beard is thin and his head is almost bald (4). Such a physiognomy conflicts with the reincarnation of Pythagoras that Alexander wanted to be (cf. 40): a philosopher should have a rich beard and opulent hair.[31] Pythagoras in particular was known for his full hair.[32] Alexander would therefore wear a wig all his life (59). Thus, Lucian is not only drawing on anti-Epicurean polemic in *Alexander the False Prophet*, but also, more generally, on polemic between philosophical schools about their respective aspirations to represent the real philosophical life.[33] He consequently depicts Alexander not merely as a religious charlatan but also as a would-be philosopher,[34] and, in particular, as shown by B. Branham, as the negative image of Epicurus.[35] Alexander is, indeed, depicted as the harbinger of lies and deception, in contrast to Epicurus, who claimed to liberate mankind from the fear of religion by revealing the truth to them.

The absolute contrast between Alexander and Epicurus is, however, subverted once one realises that Epicurus himself was also the object of intensive polemic, fragments of which are preserved by Diogenes Laertius.[36] Reading through that polemic, one notices that some of the accusations brought against Alexander by the narrator were also uttered against Epicurus himself, such as lasciviousness,[37] interest in magic,[38] and flattering of rulers.[39] Alexander is remarkably similar to Epicurus in another aspect as well. Epicureanism was known for its unflinching fidelity to the master,[40] who was worshipped as divine by the school. Alexander demands the same of his followers.[41] Just as Lucian subtly indicates to his readers that Epicureanism is not really an alternative to the naïve Stoics and Platonists, then, he also provides hints that undercut an apparently clear contrast between Alexander and Epicurus by covertly transferring polemical accusations brought against the latter to the former.

Lucian's *Alexander the False Prophet* is a superbly crafted masterpiece that constantly undermines its own apparent message. On the surface, the text takes a determinate stance in favour of Epicureanism, but it soon becomes clear that the Epicureanism presented in it is the distorted version created by anti-Epicurean polemic. With subtle hints, Lucian invites his readers, who one can assume were familiar with polemic against Epicureans, to discover that the difference between that school and its enemies was not as great as his own narrative suggests at first sight. As a result, it becomes impossible to define the viewpoint of the author: whereas he seems to satirise contemporary ideas about religion from an alternative, secure standpoint, he simultaneously undermines that position too by subtly suggesting how weak it is.

---

27 Branham 1984: 159 n. 24 connects this to the bite as the 'sign of a poet of blame' evidenced, e.g., in Pind. *Pyth.* 2.53.
28 Schirren 2005: 138–67.
29 This is most obvious in Lucian's *Nigrinus, Demonax* and the *Philosophers' Auction*.
30 Lucian explicitly refers to polemic against Pythagoras in *Alex.* 4.
31 Dio Chrys. *Or.* 72.1–3; Plin. *Ep.* 1.10.5–7; Philostr. *VA* 7.34.
32 See Lucian, *Vit. auct.* 2. On philosophers and hair, see Hahn 1989: 33–45.
33 For further details, see Schirren 2005: 163–6.

34 This is also indicated from the start: in chapter 4, Lucian says that Alexander is worse than the most horrendous accusations ever brought against Pythagoras. Here the narrator provides a clue to his reader as to how to read his work.
35 Branham 1984.   36 Diog. Laert. 10.1–9.   37 Lucian, *Alex.* 5, 40; Diog. Laert. 10.4, 10.6.
38 Lucian, *Alex.* 5; Diog. Laert. 10.4.   39 Lucian, *Alex.* 27, 33–7; Diog. Laert. 10.4.
40 See the remark by Numen. fr. 24.34–6.
41 It is suggestive, but may be accidental, that both men died at almost the same age: Alexander was nearly seventy (Lucian, *Alex.* 59) and Epicurus seventy-two when he passed away (Diog. Laert. 10.15).

The same technique is applied by Lucian in another work with an explicitly religious content, the *Icaromenippus*. Although the perspective is Cynic rather than Epicurean, it is worth briefly running through this dialogue to see how Lucian again subtly undercuts what seems to be the main message of the work. In this mock Platonic dialogue, traditionally but by no means securely dated to 161,[42] Lucian depicts the Cynic philosopher Menippus, just after his return from heaven, in conversation with a friend. Copying Daedalus' trick, Menippus had fastened an eagle's and a vulture's wing onto his shoulders before setting off towards the gods' dwelling to enquire about their true nature.

Throughout the dialogue, Menippus behaves as one would expect from a Cynic: dismissive and scornful of conventional values and opinions. His journey, however, was prompted by more traditional considerations: uncertainty about publicly sanctioned civic aspirations such as wealth and politics, which in the end are 'ridiculous, vile and uncertain' (γελοῖα καὶ ταπεινὰ καὶ ἀβέβαια, 4), drove him to the study of the universe. Unsettled by the strange phenomena he perceived, Menippus started his quest with the philosophers, 'because I thought they would certainly be able to tell the full truth' (ᾤμην γὰρ ἐκείνους πᾶσάν γε ἔχειν ἂν εἰπεῖν τὴν ἀλήθειαν, 4). Lucian here plays on the traditional self-image of the philosophers who saw themselves as students of truth in opposition to the vain hustle and bustle of the world.[43]

Menippus is soon disappointed by the hair-splitting technicalities of philosophy and the disagreement between the different schools. They are not of one opinion about the universe, he complains, and even less so about the gods:

About the gods then, what should one even say? For one group, god was a number, while others swore by geese and dogs and plane trees. And some chased away all the rest of the gods and assigned the governance of everything to one only, so that it made me a little disgusted to hear of such a scarcity of gods. Others, again, lavishly declared them to be many and drew a distinction between them, calling one a first god and ascribing to others second and third rank in divinity. Furthermore, some thought that the divine was without body and form, while others understood it as body. Then too they did not all think that the gods exercise providence in our affairs; there were some who relieved them of every bit of responsibility as we are accustomed to relieve old men of public duties. Indeed, the part that they give them to play is just like that of extras in comedy. A few went beyond all this and did not even believe that any gods at all were in charge, but left the world to wag on unruled and ungoverned. (9)

[42] Bompaire 2003: 193–4.　　[43] Hahn 1989: 54–60; Hadot 1995: 265, 346.

After the initial allusions to Pythagoras and Socrates, Menippus surveys different topics and schools in this passage: the number of gods (opposing Stoic 'monotheism' to a Platonist hierarchy), their nature (again juxtaposing Platonism and Stoicism), the role of providence (with the Epicureans denying any divine involvement). The list rises from rather innocent speculation on god as a number to the complete denial of divine involvement in the world. The utter disagreement amongst philosophers convinces Menippus that no truth about these matters is to be found on earth and he decides to embark upon a heavenly journey.

A few test flights later, Menippus sets out. From a great height he has a splendid view over the depraved and disordered life on earth, which he compares to a theatre where many choruses gather, and in which each singer 'abandons harmony and sings a tune of his own' (τὴν συνῳδίαν ἀφέντα ἴδιον ᾄδειν μέλος), in competition with his neighbour and without any regard for general harmony (17).[44] Menippus now turns his wings to the heavens. After a brief conversation with the moon, who complains about the indiscreet enquiries of the philosophers, he arrives in heaven and is introduced to the assembly of the gods. After Zeus has overcome his initial disgruntlement about the intruder, he takes him along on a tour of his duties. As becomes a king, Zeus has to listen to petitions, but also to take care of oracles, oaths, sacrifices and the weather. The day of labour ends with a royal banquet, where Menippus even manages to taste ambrosia and nectar.

The following morning, Zeus calls an assembly of all the gods, during which he gives free reign to his anger about the philosophers, prompted by Menippus' report about their idle pretensions to the truth: 'They divide themselves into schools and invent various labyrinths of arguments' (οὗτοι τοίνυν εἰς συστήματα διαιρεθέντες καὶ διαφόρους λόγων λαβυρίνθους ἐπινοήσαντες, 29). 'They look with scorn on all mankind and they tell absurd stories about the gods' (ἀνθρώπων μὲν ἁπάντων καταφρονοῦσιν, περὶ θεῶν δὲ ἀλλόκοτα διεξέρχονται, 30). The more useless they are in society, the more noise they make. Zeus's final rant is directed against the gods' greatest foes, the Epicureans:

Those who call themselves Epicureans really are insolent and attack us beyond all measure, saying that the gods do not take care of human affairs or keep an eye on what is happening. So it is time you realised that if they are ever able to persuade the world, you will go very hungry. For who would still sacrifice to you (the gods) if he was not expecting to get something for it? (32)

[44] The theme of looking onto the world from on high may well be borrowed from Pl. *Phd.* 109e, *Phdr.* 247d. For other Platonic allusions, see Anderson 1976: 29, 53. It is a fairly common idea: see Philo, *De spec. leg.* 3.1–6.

The assembly decides to destroy all the philosophers, a measure post-poned by a year out of respect for the sacred truce. As for Menippus, his wings are taken away to prevent his return to the heavens and he is carried down by Hermes to the Cerameicus.

Although the *Icaromenippus*, clearly dependent on Aristophanes,[45] has been ranked among Lucian's 'superficial entertainment',[46] the satirist is actually undermining any fixed views on the relationship between phi-losophy and religion. Initially, the dialogue seems to defend traditional religion against philosophy, which is depicted as an immoral discipline. Although all philosophers claim the truth (5, 10, 31), their disagreement and turpitude prove otherwise. Menippus, staged as an ordinary, rather naïve man, reacts with disquiet to philosophical attacks on the traditional conception of the divine. The argument that there is only one god, for example, 'made me a little disgusted to hear of such a scarcity of gods' (9). And, indeed, throughout his stay among the gods, they tend to live up to their traditional, popular Homeric image. Zeus is the king of the gods, listening through holes to prayers and oaths, paying attention to ora-cles and omens, and directing the winds (25–6). The kingly nature of this occupation is made clear by an oblique reference to Herodotus' story about the Persian King who opened and shut five holes providing five cities with water.[47] During the banquet Menippus receives his bread from Demeter, wine from Dionysus, meat from Heracles, perfume from Aphrodite and sprats from Poseidon, while Ganymedes dispenses the divine liquids of nectar and ambrosia (27). True caricatures, the gods are reduced to a single characteristic. The dialogue climaxes in a wholesale condemnation of the philosophers. Because they destroy traditional ideas about the gods and imperil their livelihood, they are to be eradicated. Philosophy and tradi-tional religion, Lucian suggests, are mutually exclusive[48] and, in this case, the latter is depicted as having the upper hand.

The explicit condemnation of philosophy improves at first sight the credentials of traditional religion. But Lucian sows serious doubts as to its own degree of truth. Zeus asks Menippus about what happens on earth, for example to the price of wheat, or what happened to the men who robbed his temple in Dodona (24). Clearly he is neither omniscient nor able to punish the blasphemous; rather, he is as petty as any Greek farmer.

Moreover, Zeus himself raises the issue of religious change. He used to be the major god everywhere, he complains, but the human 'craze for novelty' (τὸ δὲ φιλόκαινον αὐτῶν, 24) now prefers more recent gods, including Apollo (!), Asclepius, Bendis, and Anubis. His own altars are left empty and cold. Similar concerns haunt Menippus' mind during a sleepless night after the banquet. Why has Apollo not yet grown a beard after all this time (28)?[49] The gods seem to be in need of man and his sacrifice (32), but dependency surely is not very godlike. Even if the questioning of traditional religion and the suggestion of its decline are less explicit than the condemnation of the philosophers, Lucian's hints suffice, however, to convey to the reader the feeling that traditional religion is hardly a worthy substitute for philosophy. The truth about the gods is not to be found there either.

The dialogue thus ends in an *aporia*: while philosophy is discredited as a source for the truth about the gods, sufficient doubts are raised about religion for it to be discarded as well. This paradox can be seen as the central theme of Lucian's *Icaromenippus*: the inanity of the conflicting truth claims of philosophy and religion. Both pretend to possess the truth about the gods, but neither really does. A few satirical reversals, typical for Lucian, stress the centrality of this theme for the dialogue. At least in a Platonic framework, the philosopher is usually the one whose soul ascends the cosmic hierarchy via the moon to the stars, reversing the road the soul takes when born in a body.[50] Here it is a Cynic 'anti-philosopher' who goes bodily past the moon to the heavens in order to refute the philosophers. Menippus' faith in the gods has an ironical tinge, as Cynics were some of the most vociferous critics of traditional religion in this period (e.g. Oenomaus).[51] Zeus's behaviour provides another illustration. For all his hostility towards philosophers, Zeus himself occasionally behaves like one. When faced with conflicting demands from mortals, he 'suspended judgement for a while and thought it over, like (the Sceptic) Pyrrho' (ὥσπερ ὁ Πύρρων ἐπεῖχεν καὶ διεσκέπτετο, 25). Both examples suggest that for Lucian philosophy and religion may be more like each other in their weaknesses and vices than they care to admit.

Both *Alexander the False Prophet* and *Icaromenippus* are thus satiri-cal explorations of the relation between religion and philosophy and attack some widely held views by selecting the perspective of oppo-nents, such as the Epicureans and the Cynics. Although both works seem,

[45] Cf. Ar. *Nub.* 225–239, with Billault 2006.
[46] A judgement by Anderson 1976: 1. For such assessments of the *Icaromenippus*, see Helm 1906: 111; Caster 1937: 382–4; Hall 1981: 206. For a more subtle reading, see Jones 1986: 43–5.
[47] Hdt. 3.117. The parallel was noted by Anderson 1980.
[48] This is also the topic of other works of Lucian, e.g. *Zeus Rants* and *Zeus Catechised*.

[49] A familiar topos: see Cic. *Nat. D.* 1.83; Joseph. *Ap.* 2.242.
[50] E.g. Plut. *De fac.* 27–30 942D–945D.   [51] On this figure, see Hammerstaedt 1988 and 1990.

on the surface, to claim truth for one position (Epicureanism vs. other philosophical schools; traditional religion vs. philosophy), subtle hints actually blur such clear messages. The Epicureanism of the narrator of the *Alexander* is basically that of anti-Epicurean polemic and Alexander himself is in some aspects disquietingly similar to what some have accused Epicurus of. In the *Icaromenippus*, religion is shown to be as contradictory and confusing as is philosophy. For the satirist Lucian, Epicureanism and Cynicism are strategies, not intimately held beliefs.

A DISORDERED WORLD

I have suggested above that some elements in the *Alexander* can be understood as subtly engaging with the role that mystery cults played in ideas about ancient wisdom. More explicit and forceful, however, is Lucian's attacking of the idea that the cosmos is ordered and directed by a divine hierarchy. In doing so, Lucian often adopts an Epicurean perspective – at least as it was seen by its enemies: a philosophy of chaos and disorder.

Lucian clearly is aware of the hierarchical images used by his contemporaries to describe the divine world. In the opening chapters of *Double Indictment*, Zeus describes himself and his actions very much on the lines of what we found in the authors surveyed in the previous chapters: he is the monarch and father of all, who has to oversee the work of the other gods who administer part of his sovereignty (ἀρχή); he has to look at everything (comparing himself to Argus) and be in various places at the same time. Lucian has Zeus liken himself to the captain of a ship, who can never doze off and must always be watchful. At the same time, he has to administer justice (2–3). In this case, the dramatic setting of the piece, which consists of a series of judgements by the gods, makes it opportune for Lucian as a narrator to side with general opinion. In *On Funerals* (6–7) he seems to allude to various comparisons of the divine used by other authors, for example that with the Great King and his satraps, when he describes how the superstitious imagine the underworld: ruled by Pluto and Persephone, with a series of prefects, satraps and judges beneath them and a large group of lower servants, it is a place of eternal punishment.[52] The underlying message comes close to that of Plutarch: superstition constitutes a wrong conception of the divine world.

[52] There might be another allusion in Lucian, *Ver. hist.* 2.33–4.

Yet usually Lucian's depiction of divine behaviour sounds more like a caricature of Homeric divine behaviour, as we saw in the *Icaromenippus*, where the gods are unruly, vacuous and inclined to disputes. Such depictions are used with great effect to counteract the orderly, hierarchic images of the divine that were prevalent in his time. One example can suffice here.[53] *Zeus Rants* depicts at length divine anguish during a debate between the Epicurean Damis and the Stoic Timocles, in which the former is getting the upper hand. The dialogue picks up one of Lucian's usual topics in relation to religion: do the gods exercise providence?[54] But the piece is not simply a foil for a philosophical discussion: Lucian's description of the gods seems framed to tackle the idea of a divine hierarchy in two ways. First, he depicts the gods as unruly, quarrelsome individuals by casting their discussion as one in the Athenian assembly – famous as the example of a democracy run out of hand. Secondly, Lucian challenges the idea of a divine hierarchy by questioning the images used to visualise that hierarchy.

Although Zeus is assumed to be king, he behaves like the uncertain leader of the Athenian assembly.[55] He is heavily dependent on his counsellor Hermes, who has him call an assembly (5). References to Athenian institutions abound: the gods gather in the Pnyx (11), Zeus imitates a speech by Demosthenes (14–15), and issues of procedure are raised (26). The link with Athens is strengthened by the fact that the dialogue is a parody of tragedy. This is explicit in the opening chapters with the parody of Euripides, but there is also a messenger suddenly interrupting the proceedings (33). The assembly is depicted as unruly, insulting and not inclined to serve the common good (19–33). Tension rises when Zeus orders Hermes to seat all gods according to 'material and workmanship' (7), not according to their merit or antiquity. This upsets the traditional gods: all the upstarts such as Mithras, Bendis, Anubis or Attis will sit at the front as they have statues of gold, whereas the traditional Greek gods have to make do with bronze and are seated at the back (8). Quarrels arise and in the end all sit down in disorder (12). The divine world is thus described as the model of a disordered constitution: the Athenian democracy. Lucian can be read as

[53] One example that I will not discuss in detail is Lucian's *Prom.*, in which Zeus is depicted as a tyrant (2–4, 8–9), and in which Prometheus argues that the order of the world is due to man's intervention, making it not divine but human. *Zeus Catechised*, *The Assembly of the Gods*, as well as *Icaromenippus* are other examples.

[54] *Zeus Catechised* discusses this in great detail.

[55] Cf. *The Assembly of the Gods* for such a depiction.

questioning the idea that the pantheon is an ideal monarchy, ruled by a king and his subordinates.[56] There does not seem to be a natural order of the gods, and the attempt to introduce one utterly fails.

It is also possible to read into this passage a more profound reflection on the status of images. Lucian identifies the gods with their material representation: the gods appear in heaven in the form and material their statues depict. The entire passage eschews the word 'image' (εἰκών). Precisely by apparently obliterating the fact that the images of the gods are mere images and identifying statues with the real form of the gods, Lucian may be alluding to the fact that ultimately, all our depictions of the gods are merely images[57] – also the image of the Persian King that turns the gods into a well-ordered hierarchy.[58]

The reflection on the use of images for the divine is resumed at the end of the dialogue. A messenger interrupts the pointless discussions of the gods, who are clearly unable to act, and announces that the debate between Damis and Timocles has begun again. All gods bow down to listen. Against Timocles' contention that the world is ruled by divine providence, Damis develops a metaphysics of disorder: everything goes by chance (εἰκῆ, 36). Timocles' attempts to base the belief in the gods in the order of nature, Homer, Euripides and generally shared opinion are unremittingly countered by Damis, who in particular points out that human custom is characterised by disorder and disagreement (ταραχή, 42). Exasperated, Timocles turns to the image of the captain and his vessel to argue that the universe cannot be without a ruler. Damis counters by saying that the vessel is actually in great disorder: the ship is in poor condition, the crew assigned the wrong tasks, and the wicked passengers receive the highest honours by the captain.[59] Had there been a captain, Damis argues, he would have reinstated a proper hierarchy:

56 It has been noticed by Jones 1986: 39–40 that in *Zeus Rants* Lucian represents the gods in the manner that the critics of Epicureanism ascribed to them. This is equally true for the *Icaromenippus*. For an overview of how Lucian describes non-Greek gods, see Spickermann 2009.

57 This opinion is widespread in this period: cf. Max. Tyr. *Or.* 2. In *On Sacrifices*, Lucian 'explains' human cults by the fact that they reflect the way the gods actually live (temples as houses; statues in human form, etc.). With the reader knowing that that supposition is wrong (the gods do not have a human form nor do they live like human beings), such an explanation actually suggests that religion itself is specious.

58 This can be compared with what J. Elsner has noticed for Lucian's *On the Syrian Goddess* (2001: 153): 'The *On the Syrian Goddess* is a narrative obsessed with the issue of identity and yet so careful to avoid naming its writer.'

59 Lucian is probably alluding to Pl. *Resp.* 488d–489d, but the image of the ship is an old one: see already *Alc.* 46a.

But if a captain were in command and oversaw and directed everything, first of all he would not ignore who were the good and who the bad men aboard. Then, he would have given each man his due according to his worth, giving the best places beside himself on deck to the better men, and the lower places to the worse individuals. He would have made some men share his table and advise him and for the crew, an eager man would be appointed to command forward or in the sides, or at any rate over all the rest, while a timid or careless man would get beaten over the head five times a days with a rope. (49)

Damis accepts that a hierarchy would ensure order, but it entirely depends on the captain. In the absence of one, there is no order. In contrast to the Stoic idea of a universal order in which each man is assigned his position, the Epicurean espouses a metaphysics of disorder: there is no order in nature, politics and human customs. A cosmic hierarchy being the principle of order, universal disorder proves that no such hierarchy is in place. Lucian effectively deconstructs the image by redescribing it: there is no captain as tradition holds, but it is a ship in a lamentable condition.

Zeus Rants should not be taken as an accurate description of Stoic and Epicurean doctrines. It is evident that Lucian depicts the Epicureans as their enemies saw them: they profess a metaphysics of disorder which leads straight to atheism and social disorder. *Zeus Rants* is rather a critical and satirical reflection on the *images* used to argue for the existence of order; the argument is negative and aporetic rather than positive and pro-Epicurean. Lucian can be read as questioning the contemporary use of images, by first suggesting that statues are identical to the gods (which very few people would believe) and then by providing a 'counter-image' of the traditional comparison of the god as a captain. In both cases, questions are raised about the truthful status of these images: are the gods really (like) their statues? Is the image of the captain a correct representation of the highest god? The deceptive impression of order implied in such images is attacked. Throughout, Lucian suggests that order is not so easily found in the universe. It is no accident that the gods are depicted as a democracy in a work that appears to profess an Epicurean stress on disorder: democracy was indeed usually seen as a disordered constitution, and at least one author described the Epicurean sect as a democracy in order to stress its unruly character.[60] Moreover, the assumption we found in Dio and others, that the divine hierarchy is benevolent and favours virtue, is explicitly depicted as untrue. On Damis' ship, there is a complete mismatch between virtue

60 Dionysius of Alexandria, *On Nature* = Eus. *Praep. evang.* 14.25.9–13. This contrasts with Numen. fr. 24.34–6, who describes the Epicureans as a true *politeia*, one of mind and in total agreement.

and hierarchy: the lesser rule the better, and nobody performs the task he would be best at.

Zeus Rants ends with the reassurance of Zeus by Hermes that there are just a few like Damis, and that almost everybody does believe in the gods and the order they represent. Just as in the other treatises discussed in this chapter, Lucian does not want to proclaim the victory of Epicureanism but rather to satirise the dominant contemporary views without offering a firm alternative. What has been noted by T. Whitmarsh for Lucian's attitudes towards Greek and Roman culture, thus also applies for his dealings with religious topics: 'His works offer no securely authoritative moral position, only a recurrently frustrated process of challenge and counter-challenge.'[61] Lucian breaks down traditional ideas and images but does not propose alternative ones. He may seem to espouse Epicureanism, but his Epicureanism is actually what Stoic and Platonic polemic has made of it, and thus a satirical pose. Lucian is consequently not a crusader against the two discourses set out in the first two parts of this book. Rather, he is writing from within the discourses and capitalising on their polemic and images – and as such he is an interesting source for their popularity. Indeed, for Lucian's satires to achieve their maximum effect with his readers, they must have been aware of the traditional, polemical depiction of the Epicureans, the clichés about their spying on mystery cults and the hierarchical images used by Stoics and Platonists to represent cosmic order.

If we take Lucian to write from within the discourses, he may be less subversive than he appears at first sight. It is attractive to read his religious satires as holding out alternative images and accounts to the dominant discourse, and thus questioning the established order. But satire does not have to be subversive, and an opposite reading is possible as well. Some readers might enjoy the satires precisely because the outsiders are depicted in the distorted way they know from polemic and because these outsiders defend, in the eyes of such readers, improbable images for the divine world. This audience would find comfort in Lucian's tendency to undermine his own apparent Epicurean or Cynic point of view and see it as a confirmation that in the end there is no valuable alternative for the dominant discourse. On such a reading, Lucian is not undermining the discourse from within, but actually providing additional support for it. The open-ended and aporetic nature of many of the tracts discussed in this chapter does not allow a

[61] Whitmarsh 2001: 294.

final judgement in this respect; as we noticed before, Lucian himself is not taking a position. His satires can mean many things for many readers. Yet it is not unlikely that they achieved, albeit not necessarily intended, a confirmation of dominant opinion and ideas in the mind of many readers.

Philo of Alexandria
Challenging Graeco-Roman culture

Philo, the Hellenised Jew from Alexandria (*c.* 20 BC – AD 50), illustrates well the tendency of Post-Hellenistic philosophy, noted in the introduction, to draw on external sources of authority. The bulk of his writings are commentaries on biblical books that attempt to reconcile them with his generally Platonist philosophical allegiance.[1] Philo's unique position and the frictions and tensions in his own work are determined by the fact that his chosen source of authority falls outside the shared cultural heritage of the Graeco-Roman world. Although Judaism had been in intensive contact with the Greek and then Roman world for centuries, it was perceived, and considered itself, as standing outside the framework of Graeco-Roman culture or, at least, as being profoundly unique. Philo thus limps on two legs, Greek philosophy and the Jewish Bible, and can be found doing violence to both.

Philo is also of importance for the reconstruction of the two discourses I have analysed so far, for two reasons. His work was produced in the gap of roughly a century between the philosophical output of the Late Republic (Varro and Cicero), which informs us on the philosophical changes possibly brought about by Posidonius, and the fairly copious works by Plutarch and others from the end of the first century AD onwards, in which we find a much more developed form of some of the ideas adumbrated by these earlier philosophers. In showing clear awareness of the two discourses discussed in this book, Philo provides important evidence that the changes of Late Hellenistic philosophy did not go unnoticed for over a century before they surfaced in philosophical works of the late first century AD. Their disappearance from our sight is rather due to lack of evidence for the philosophical production between, roughly, Cicero and Cornutus. But chronology is not the only reason for Philo's importance: because of his

strong allegiance to the Jewish tradition, he also offers a critical view on the themes that, as I have argued, were central in philosophical readings of religion in the early Roman Empire. Indeed, the discourses about ancient wisdom and ideal hierarchy essentially locate truth in Graeco-Roman religious tradition and in polytheism. In the case of the former, the assumption is that traditional religions of the Mediterranean (Greek, Roman, Egyptian and others) were created by wise ancients and thus full of reflections of philosophical knowledge. Regarding the latter, once the divine kingdom is reordered in a strict hierarchy, polytheism is salvaged: the hierarchy of a highest god and lower gods and demons is not an accidental representation of the divine world but the paradigm of political and cosmological order. Both ideas were repugnant to Philo as a Jew: he refuses to give primacy to any other tradition over Judaism and he explicitly attacks polytheism as a force of disorder. At the same time, however, Philo does not abandon the mode of thought of his contemporaries:[2] he propounds Moses as the source of wisdom and philosophical knowledge and, also, he sees Mosaic Law and its monotheism as setting out what the natural order really is. Studying three interlocking topics, namely Philo's view of mystery cults, his polemical use of the likening of the divine to the Persian Great King and his satraps, and his depiction of the patriarch Joseph as the embodiment of the natural ruler, this chapter shows how Philo accepts the argumentative framework of the two discourses studied earlier but rejects their cultural presuppositions.

MYSTERY CULTS AND TRUTH

It is hardly surprising that Philo, writing from a Jewish perspective with an emphasis on the truthfulness of the Bible, is dismissive of Graeco-Roman religion and thus also of mystery cults. This attitude is occasionally tempered by his great debt to Greek philosophy: although usually critical of Greek myths, he can find some justification for philosophical myths.[3] In some instances Philo may have tolerated Stoic allegories of Greek religion, but only as subordinate arguments.[4] Nevertheless, his attitude is mainly one of rejection. His hostility is obviously explained by the biblical interdiction of idolatry,[5] but Philo's critique of mystery cults acquires an additional

---

[1] Mansfeld 1988; Runia 1993; Dillon 1996: 114–83. Philo's doctrinal position is hard to pin down precisely, given his eclectic tendency, but Platonism is surely the dominating tradition in his works: a recent overview of Philo's position in the history of philosophy is offered by Runia 2007.

[2] Cf. Boys-Stones 2001: 90–5; Runia 2007: 493.
[3] Méasson 1980; Runia 1986: 412–16; Niehoff 1998.
[4] Philo, *De opificio mundi* 133, *De providentia* 2.40–1, *Leg.* 98–113, with the argument of Boys-Stones 2001: 92–5.
[5] Cf. Simon 1976; Umemoto 1994; Niehoff 1998; Birnbaum 2001.

dimension when set against the background of the discourse on ancient wisdom and, in particular, the role mystery cults play in it as places where philosophical knowledge can be accessed. Indeed, Philo borrows the argumentative framework of ancient wisdom but empties it of all preference for Graeco-Roman culture. This has the paradoxical result that Philo preserves the metaphorical description of philosophy as a mystery cult but uses this metaphor to reject real mystery cults as loci of truth. Another, remarkable consequence is that Philo uses ancient wisdom to argue for Judaism as the exclusive source of truth, whereas among Graeco-Roman philosophers the discourse opened up philosophy to different religious traditions.

Philo's paradoxical attitude towards mystery cults can be sensed very well in an important passage from *On the Special Laws*, a discussion of the Mosaic Law detailing the Decalogue. Book I treats the first two commandments and is therefore concerned with religious legislation. Towards the end of it, Philo points out that Moses forbade all mystery cults: 'From the sacred legislation he excluded initiation cults and mysteries and all such pedantry and buffoonery. For he did not want those who were raised in the perfect commonwealth to neglect the truth, while celebrating secret rites and holding on to mystic inventions, and pursue things which belong to night and darkness, discarding what is worthy of seeing the light of day.'[6] In a highly rhetorical vein, Philo continues to associate mysteries with darkness and immorality. If they are virtuous, why do initiates keep their meetings in hidden places and in separation from the rest of mankind? But, Philo continues, all know that mysteries often exclude the virtuous and admit robbers, pirates and whores: money, not virtue, opens the doors of the sanctuaries. Mystery cults therefore do not belong in a proper society: 'Let all such persons, then, be banished from the confines of any state or constitution in which morality and truth are honoured for their own sakes.'[7] Taking on one of the key ideas of ancient wisdom, Philo insists that no truth is found in mystery cults. They are not places where 'those who are in the know' gather, and where ancient wisdom is preserved in symbols, nor do they lead to philosophical knowledge. In contrast to the supposed moral depravity of mystery cults, Philo exhorts his readers to follow the example of nature, which does not conceal anything but exhibits stars and planets for enjoyment as well as to incite us to seek the truth. He is alluding here to the widespread depiction of the world as a grand mystery, as is found, for example, in Dio Chrysostom and Plutarch.[8] Philo thus suggests

---

[6] Philo, *De specialibus legibus* 1.319.   [7] Philo, *De spec. leg.* 1.323. See Riedweg 1987: 99–103.
[8] E.g. Dio Chrys. *Or.* 12.34; Plut. *De tranq. anim.* 20.477D.

that one should be looking at the real mystery, namely nature, and not the false mysteries of Greek religion.

In this passage from *On the Special Laws* we encounter in close proximity the two ways in which Philo can refer to mystery cults in his œuvre, as set out by C. Riedweg. Philo regularly uses the vocabulary of mystery cults in a metaphorical way, to compare philosophy, and even the Bible, to an initiation, or, as in this case, to describe nature as the ultimate mystery.[9] But such a metaphorical use of mystery cults does not imply that Philo looks favourably upon real mystery cults, which are straightforwardly rejected. Riedweg rightly notices that the former tendency is conditioned by a long-standing philosophical tradition, initiated by Plato, to employ the vocabulary of mystery cults in philosophy. But in the philosophical tradition, literary use of mystical terminology was usually backed up by an acceptance of religious mystery cults. Philo, on the contrary, accepts the metaphorical use but rejects real mystery cults. In the passage discussed above, this has the paradoxical effect that Philo can play the one against the other: he obliquely uses the metaphor of nature as the true mystery cult to refute existing religious cults.[10]

To Riedweg, Philo's use of mystery cults, positive and negative at the same time, seems hard to explain.[11] As I see it, however, this apparent contradiction can be understood as the outcome of Philo's assimilation of the argumentative framework of ancient wisdom coupled with his rejection of the prejudice towards Graeco-Roman culture implied by the discourse. Indeed, Philo's mode of argument is clearly indebted to ideas about ancient wisdom. His philosophy is based on the idea that knowledge about the cosmos and ethical principles is fully preserved in the Hebrew tradition. The patriarchs, living before Moses, lived perfect lives, in line with nature and without the need for a written law, much as Posidonius' ancients did. Just as in the discourse on ancient wisdom the creation of religion, with all its symbolism, renders philosophical training necessary, Philo underscores that, once Moses set down the eternal principles in writing in the Decalogue and the Bible, philosophical interpretation of that law became imperative.[12]

---

[9] E.g. Philo, *De Cherubim* 42, 48, *De somniis* 1.164–5, 1.191, *De gigantibus* 54, 57, *Legum allegoria* 3.100, *De fuga* 85, *De sacrificiis Abelis et Caini* 60, *De Abrahamo* 122, *De vita Mosis* 1.62. Cf. Riedweg 1987: 108–16.
[10] It is a road that later Christian authors, including Clement of Alexandria, will take as well: Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2, 9, 13, 92. His ideas about myth are also close to those of Philo: cf. Vanderheijden 2005.
[11] Riedweg 1987: 115: 'Philons mysterienterminologie auf einem gemeinsamen Nenner zu bringen ist kaum möglich.' Cohen 2004 focuses on possible links between New Testament views on mystery cults and Philo.
[12] Philo, *De decalogo* 1, *Abrah.* 1–16, *Opif. mundi* 1–2.

Philo rarely makes the explicit argument that Judaism is actually the oldest tradition in the Mediterranean,[13] but he is definitely convinced that it is the only one that fully preserves true knowledge. Philo's project, interpreting the sacred texts of his tradition in order to retrieve philosophical knowledge, is thus basically identical to that of his contemporaries who adhere to ancient wisdom.

Nevertheless, Philo cannot be reduced to another illustration of ancient wisdom: his writings are fundamentally determined by the defence of Judaism as the only source of truth. This is evidenced in purposeful attacks on some of the cultural presuppositions of the discourse on ancient wisdom. As we have noticed above, Philo is aware that his contemporaries locate philosophical truth in mystery cults, but he rejects this outright. Taking issue with another central element of ancient wisdom, he depicts Moses as a lawgiver superior to all others. The preface to *On the Creation* makes the point in the following way:

Of the other lawgivers, some codified without adornment and nakedly what was deemed just among their people, whereas others baffled the masses by dressing up the meaning with pomp, hiding in that way the truth under mythical inventions. Moses, however, disdained both, the one for being unreflecting, easy and unphilosophical, the other as false and full of cheating, and he affixed the most beautiful and respectable introduction to his laws.[14]

That introduction is the story of the creation of the world, aiming to show that the law is in harmony with the world and vice versa. Moses has the same role as the Graeco-Roman lawgivers celebrated by, say, Plutarch and Numenius: laying down philosophical knowledge in culture and religion. Yet for Philo, Moses is the only one who has truly done so: other lawgivers have simply said what should be done and not done, without philosophical knowledge.[15] Or even worse: they have created myths that block access to the truth.

In general, Philo's Jewish exclusiveness leads to a wholesale projection of the category of superstition onto Graeco-Roman culture and its belittlement for the Jewish tradition. We saw above that the discourse on ancient wisdom implied an ambivalent concept of religion, in that it was a source of truth but also subject to superstition. There is little suggestion in Philo that his own religious tradition is ambivalent, except for an occasional comment that the anthropomorphic language of the Bible is directed towards

[13] That could be implied in *Life of Moses* 1–5. Half a century later, Flavius Josephus would make this point very forcefully in his *Against Apion*.
[14] Philo, *Opif. mundi* 1.   [15] This is set out in greater detail in the *Life of Moses*, esp. 2.1–10.

the masses. But even that is not put down by him to superstition but rather explained as a pedagogical strategy.[16] Normally, indeed, superstition is seen as external to Judaism and ascribed to Greek religion.[17] Whereas the two discourses discussed in this book see both superstition and truth as part of any religious tradition, Philo opposes them and claims the latter for Judaism while imputing the former to Graeco-Roman religion. This illustrates well the polemical intention of Philo's writings: he borrows from his contemporaries the discourse of ancient wisdom but he reconfigures it so that it can be turned against them. This results in the paradox we noticed in *On the Special Laws* 1.319–21: the metaphorical use of mystery cults, acceptable as part of the discourse, refutes real mystery cults, to be rejected as part of Graeco-Roman religion. As such, the paradox only shows the degree to which Philo remained indebted to the culture he wanted to dismiss.

THE GREAT KING OF PERSIA AND HIS SATRAPS

Philo's method of battling Graeco-Roman culture with its own arguments can be noticed as well with regard to the discourse on cosmic hierarchy. In his commentary on the Ten Commandments (*On the Decalogue*), Philo uses the idea of a cosmic hierarchy not with the aim of salvaging the Greek pantheon but of showing that Greek culture is intrinsically disordered, in both religious and political terms. In doing so, Philo shows clear parallels with the discourse as it is deployed by later Greek and Roman authors: divine hierarchy is represented as guaranteeing order in heaven as well as on earth and exercising a providential rule of law and justice, which should be applied to the human world as well. Because God and his divine hierarchy are seen as a principle of order, the political concept of monarchy acquires an ontological status: it is the natural order of things. Peterson and others have argued that we should understand these connections as reflections of the impact of Jewish theocracy: because for the Jews only God is the true monarch, Philo has attributed a political content to the Platonic act of creation as depicted in Plato's *Timaeus* (30a). The Platonic creator-god becomes a monarch of order.[18] It is obvious that Jewish tradition may

[16] Philo, *Quod deus sit immutabilis* 54–69, *De somn.* 1.234–7.
[17] Cf., e.g., Philo, *De spec. leg.* 1.21, 1.28, *De decal.* 1–20, *De gigan.* 58–9.
[18] Peterson 1935: 22–9; Centrone 2000: 563–4. Peterson argues that, whereas the image of the Great King in Arist. [*De mundo*] results from an interest in how *archē* (god) and *dynamis* (his subordinates) can be articulated, Philo addresses a 'theologico-political' problem: how to justify the monarchic rule of God? I would rather argue that the basic concern of [*De mundo*] and Maximus is identical

have influenced Philo's argument, but it is important to notice that, as shown above, we encounter all of these connections between ontology, theology and politics, as well as the argumentative framework, in other Post-Hellenistic philosophers. As other scholars have already argued,[19] it is more likely that Philo shared these with his contemporaries rather than invented them. What distinguishes Philo from his contemporaries is not his argumentative framework but the polemical purpose for which he uses it: showing that Judaism is the only well-ordered tradition in the Mediterranean.

Like so many of Philo's works, *On the Decalogue* is driven by a polemical substructure.[20] On the surface, Philo's exposition of the Ten Commandments is part of a grand scheme to explain divine law: whereas other works set out how the patriarchs, such as Abraham and Joseph, embody divine and natural law,[21] *On the Decalogue* discusses written law as set out by Moses. Written law is an image (εἰκών) of the divine ordinances and directed at a less philosophically trained audience, unable to grasp divine truth directly.[22] Philo considers Mosaic Law to be superior to that of the Greeks: being in accordance with nature, it is universal and philosophical; Graeco-Roman law is particular and dictated by custom.[23] The rhetorical distinction between custom and philosophical truth provides the bedrock for a sustained critique of Graeco-Roman religion. Philo attacks Graeco-Roman laws head on, precisely because they fail to connect to the true divine law. To this end he stresses the plurality of Graeco-Roman legislation, taken to be a clear sign of untruth. Unsurprisingly, the plurality of legal codes is immediately linked to polytheism.

Philo opens his work by raising an issue which immediately discloses its polemical nature: why did Moses promulgate his laws in the desert and not in the cities? The question is not as odd as it seems: the ancient Mediterranean was a city-based society, into which Judaism, defined by a faith and a set of laws rather than by a place of origin, did not always

---

to that of Philo: how to solve the problem of plurality and how to explain the existence of order. Umemoto 1991: 226 is mistaken in thinking that the idea of a divine hierarchy stems from Philo's Jewish monotheism.

[19] See Moraux 1984: 81–2; Calabi 2004.

[20] *De decal.* falls into four parts. Chapters 1–49 discuss some preliminaries, 50–153 the ten commandments, split in two sets of five laws (50–120 and 121–53). A synopsis of the special laws follows (154–75) and the treatise concludes with a brief argument about the absence of punishments.

[21] νόμοι ἔμψυχοι: *Abrah.* 5; νόμους ἀγράφους: *De decal.* 1.

[22] Philo, *Abrah.* 3, 16, 275; *Mos.* 1.162, 2.4–5; *Opif. mundi* 1. On law in Philo, see Martens 1994 and 2003: 83–101 (overestimating Philo's originality); Najman 1999.

[23] This contrast is explicitly made in *Opif. mundi* 1.

---

neatly fit.[24] Moses' choice to legislate outside cities thus locates Judaism outside that tradition; or, from Philo's point of view, situates the Greeks and Romans outside the truth. Philo entertains various possibilities. The simple historical answer that the Jews were wandering around the desert at that time will not do. Philo gives a more fundamental cause: the city is a place of vice, untruth and irreligion (3). Indeed, citizens honour as divine what is not. They have sculpted and painted idols, built shrines, temples and altars. But polytheism[25] is not simply a mistaken belief, it is the root of all evil: 'As different gods were honoured by different people, a disagreement arose regarding the best one, and from this followed a difference of opinion regarding all the rest. Considering this in the first place, he decided to legislate outside the cities' (9). Polytheism, then, is the source of disunity, disagreement and ultimately anarchy, and it is a form of worship intimately linked to city life. By dwelling in the desert, Philo concludes, the Jews cleansed their souls from the evil associations of city life (10–13).[26] This interpretation of the Exodus seems to mirror the one proposed by Chaeremon, the contemporary Greek philosopher from Alexandria, whom we met in the first chapter. Whereas Chaeremon stressed that Egypt was cleansed by the expulsion of the Jews, Philo has Moses separate the Jews from Egyptian life in order for them to be purified. Although it is not impossible that each knew the other's works – they were both actively involved on opposite sides in the conflict between Jews and non-Jews in Alexandria (AD 38)[27] – it is equally possible that Philo is simply replying to a commonly held anti-Jewish version of the Exodus. At any rate, a later attack in his *On the Decalogue* on Egyptian animal worship, salvaged by Chaeremon and other philosophers including Plutarch, may be another testimony (76–81) to this Alexandrian animosity. A final explanation for Moses' decision to legislate outside the cities continues the onslaught: it is better first to have laws and then to found a city (14). Philo undoubtedly has Graeco-Roman traditions on lawgivers in mind, for example Numa and Lycurgus, who were usually depicted as ordering a pre-existing city, rather than founding a new one. Such a practice implies not only compromises with existing customs, but also, more importantly, that each city has its own set of laws. Moses' laws, on the contrary, are universal and find application in all the Jewish settlements.

---

[24] On Philo's views on cities, see Runia 2000.

[25] The term is not anachronistic: *De decal.* 65 talks about *polytheos doxa*.

[26] A similar argument will come up in Origen's reply to Celsus: in contrast to Graeco-Roman cities, Christian churches are well ordered (Origen, *C. Cels.* 3.30).

[27] Cf. Philo, *Leg.*; Chaeremon, *Test.* 5.

Philo's argument aims to contrast Graeco-Roman pluralism, in laws, cities and religion, with Jewish unity in all these domains. Plurality is obviously an evil, a sign of untruth. Philo's monotheism and the Jewish sense of representing a separate tradition no doubt contribute to the starkness of the contrast he draws. Nevertheless, this should not obscure the fact that Philo is fundamentally tackling the same problem as Maximus of Tyre and Pseudo-Aristotle: the plurality of human customs and how to reconcile it with the monistic demands of philosophy.

Such parallels with the discourse on cosmic hierarchy become even more evident when Philo discusses the first commandment:

The first summarises the laws on God's monarchical rule. These state that there is one cause of the world, one leader and king, who guides the chariot and rules everything providentially. He has expelled from the purest part of being, namely heaven, oligarchy and mob rule (ὀλιγαρχίαν ἢ ὀχλοκρατίαν), these treacherous forms of government, which originate among the most evil of men through disorder and greediness (ἐξ ἀταξίας καὶ πλεονεξίας). (155)

This passage adds a political dimension to the opposition between divine, Jewish law and human Graeco-Roman culture. Order rules in heaven, guaranteed by divine kingship; mankind is riven by disorder and vice, and consequently subject to lesser forms of political organisation. Just as in *On the World*, a single cause, identified with the divine monarch, determines the order of the cosmos and expels polytheism and political disorder from the heavens. The connection made between single cause, God, order, and kingship contributes to making monarchy the natural order of things: only human vice, entailing disorder, is responsible for the existence of the lesser constitutions. It is not accidental that Philo chooses to mention only the two degenerate forms (oligarchy and ochlocracy) of the two other traditional constitutions (aristocracy and democracy). His point is precisely that outside monarchy only disorder exists.[28] Divine hierarchy consequently has an ontological status: as a principle of order, its presence is required on all levels of being so that order can exist.[29] Otherwise the cosmos or human society lapses into chaos and anarchy.

Just as Philo has a tendency to starkly oppose Jewish order and Graeco-Roman disorder, he tends to emphasise the gap between the ideal heavenly

---

[28] I do not think we need to postulate that Philo's dislike of *ochlokratia* was inspired by his experiences in Alexandria, as is done by Umemoto 1991: 221.
    A similar line of argument can be found in Joseph. *Ap.* 2.151–250. He equally contrasts Graeco-Roman lawgivers and Moses, attributing a lack of order and a variety of laws to the former. Jewish society is represented as unified, under one law and one set of customs (179). A hierarchy of priests rules the Jews and administer justice (185–7). It is also linked to a critique of Greek polytheism (239–49).

[29] Philo, *De spec. leg.* 4.186, *De somn.* 2.289.

---

constitution and those that he sees in existence around him. For him, no human constitution truly lives up to the ideal.[30] Contrary to 'pagan' Post-Hellenistic philosophers, who could use divine monarchy to justify the position of the Roman emperor, Philo restricts true monarchy to the divine realm and the Jewish tradition. Indeed, although the Roman Empire of his age was also a (unacknowledged) monarchy, he never used the term *basileus* to designate the ruling emperor throughout his voluminous writings.[31] The denial that a well-ordered constitution exists among his contemporaries further adds to his polemic against Graeco-Roman society as one of disorder and vice.

Philo's strategy of adopting the argumentative framework of Graeco-Roman philosophers but deploying it to argue for Jewish superiority and exclusivism must be familiar by now. His final illustration is that of the divine world as the Persian Great King and his satraps, which, as we have seen, became particularly popular in the Post-Hellenistic period. The image occurs twice in *On the Decalogue*.[32] Towards the end of the treatise, Philo compares justice to a servant and lieutenant of God. But in order not to ascribe evil to God, such servants are also compared to generals who wage war, whereas God is like the Great King responsible for the peace and well-being of his empire (177–8). Just as in *On the World* and Maximus, Philo seems to depict his God as a lofty, distant law, who lays down general principles but leaves daily affairs to his subordinates.[33] Although not explicitly doing so, Philo comes quite close to ascribing immobility to God.[34]

Of more interest for grasping Philo's polemical strategy when using the image of the Great King and his satraps is a passage much earlier in *On the Decalogue*. After some introductory matters, Philo comes to the first commandment (worship the one God), which is immediately interpreted as 'the monarchical principle by which the world is governed' (περὶ

---

[30] Philo, *Ioseph.* 29–31, *De prov.* 2.15, *Mos.* 2.100, *Leg. alleg.* 3.79, 4.165–9, *De somn.* 2.289–96.

[31] Umemoto 1991: 225.

[32] Philo often designates God with the titles 'Great King' or 'King of Kings': *Opif. mundi* 71; *De spec. leg.* 1.13, 1.18; *De agricultura* 50–2. See also *Quaestiones in Genesin* 4.76, where the title 'King of Kings' is applied to the sage, and *Opif. mundi* 56, which calls the sun 'Great King'. The explicit likening of the divine to the Great King and his satraps is much rarer. I only know of the instance in *De decal*.

[33] For the association of God and law, see Philo, *Opif. mundi* 171, *De fuga* 10, *De agric.* 50–2, *De spec. leg.* 4.169, *Ioseph.* 48 (*dikē* as *paredros* of God), *Mos.* 2.4–5. Philo's cosmopolitanism is based on the existence of a universal law: *Opif. mundi* 142–4; *Abrah.* 61. It is tempting to reduce this stress on law to Stoic influence (Umemoto 1991: 255), but we have seen that the idea was much more widespread, also among Platonists, who could point to, e.g., Pl. *Resp.* 291c–303b.

[34] It is implied in *Opif. mundi* 17–18, where the image of constructing a city represents the different levels of divine activity: see Runia 1989 and 2002: 294–5. See also *De spec. leg.* 1.66, where the cosmos is likened to a temple.

μοναρχίας, ᾗ μοναρχεῖται ὁ κόσμος, 51). The stress on monarchy must be seen in connection with the critique on polytheism that immediately follows. Most people worship parts of the world or lower beings instead of 'the highest and most respected, the begetter, the ruler of the great city, the commander of the invincible army, the pilot who constantly steers all things providentially' (53). The string of comparisons is familiar from Maximus and Pseudo-Aristotle.[35] Disregarding the highest God is, Philo argues, like worshipping the satrap and not the Great King:

Just as one who attributes the honours of the Great King to subordinate satraps would seem to be pleasing the slaves of the master not only very light-heartedly but also very dangerously, in the same way, someone who rewards the maker in the same way as the created, surely is the most senseless and unjust person of all, giving like to unlike, not with the aim of honouring the inferior but demeaning the superior. (61)

In the extant Post-Hellenistic philosophical production, this is the first occurrence of the image of the Great King and his satraps. Yet the context makes it unlikely that Philo invented the image, as it has the clear polemical intention of disputing the veracity of Graeco-Roman polytheism.[36] This argument is best understood in the light of Philo's polemical technique observed earlier in the context of his interpretation of mystery cults: he adopts an image used by 'pagan' philosophers and then succeeds in giving it a new meaning through his Jewish perspective.

Philo accepts the validity of the image to describe the divine world: it is a hierarchy of divine beings with a single God at the top.[37] But the polemical purpose is clear: whereas in Post-Hellenistic philosophy the comparison is normally used to visualise the correct understanding of the pantheon, Philo uses it to question the validity of the way in which his Graeco-Roman counterparts conceive of the pantheon.[38] Whereas he does not deny that

---

[35] See Philo, *De decal.* 60 and *Leg. alleg.* 3.79 for other lists of comparisons.

[36] Philo plays a central role in Peterson's account (1935), as he considered the integration of Graeco-Roman ideas about divine kingship into Jewish monotheistic thought to be a capital development in the history of 'political theology'. My perspective is different: I take Philo to be turning the image of the Great King against the tradition from which he borrowed it and see it more in the context of an argument for monotheism than an argument for divine kingship – the latter being universally accepted. Philo's general strategy of using the arguments of his adversaries against themselves suggests that he borrowed the image of the Great King and his satraps from one of his 'pagan' predecessors, even though, in the whole of extant Post-Hellenistic philosophy, it occurs for the first time in his writings. I shall suggest that Eudorus, an Alexandrian philosopher of the end of the first century BC, is a possible candidate.

[37] Cf. Philo, *Opif. mundi* 17–18, *De spec. leg.* 1.13–17, 1.66, *Quis rerum divinarum heres* 301 for different images used to express that idea.

[38] It was a common technique in philosophical discussions to turn images used by one's adversaries against them. See, e.g., Plut. *De stoic. repug.* 37.1051C–D. On other occasions, philosophers indicate

---

the celestial bodies are higher beings that one could call gods, alongside the highest God (*On the Decalogue* 64),[39] they remain creatures and thus distant from the highest God. Consequently, only the single, highest and true God must be worshipped. Pagan philosophers, Philo argues, seem to assume that it does not matter which divine being is being worshipped on what level. But this is equivalent to giving the satraps the due of the Great King and effacing the hierarchy. The restriction of worship to the highest God, central to Jewish and Christian monotheism, thus subverts the image of the Great King as understood by Graeco-Roman philosophers. Philo criticises the Greeks for not recognising the true meaning of the image: it is a pyramid leading up to a single highest God. Whereas authors more intent on accommodating the plurality of gods emphasise the essential role of each of them in the hierarchy, Philo, as a monotheist, shifts attention to the top of the pyramid. His criticism points to an implicit difficulty for Post-Hellenistic philosophers: the idea of a hierarchy accommodates the plurality of gods, but it is hard to find support for the idea of a hierarchy in real cult practice, which instead seems chaotic and diverse. Here we are acutely made aware of the fact that the image of the Great King does not solve the problem of plurality of cult: it transcends it.

Philo may have found the comparison in the works of Eudorus of Alexandria (late first century BC), who posited the One as a principle above the Monad and the Dyad and identified it with Zeus.[40] Such an utterly transcendent principle demanded principles or entities that ensured that the link with the world and a divine hierarchy would be the logical consequence. Later philosophers used the image of the Great King precisely to make such a hierarchical interpretation of the divine world clear to their readers, so there is a possibility that Eudorus did so as well. Philo of Alexandria is often supposed to have been influenced by Eudorus,[41] and it is thus possible that the latter used the image or at least had the concept of a hierarchy of divine beings.[42] Evidence for Eudorus is, however, so scarce that such a guess cannot be further substantiated.

In purely philosophical terms, Philo's position is only subtly different from that of much of Graeco-Roman philosophy of the period. He accepts

---

that their opponents are using an imperfect image that does not convey all the notions they would like it to carry; cf. Plut. *De tranq. anim.* 20.477C–F; Dio Chrys. *Or.* 36.29–30.

[39] Cf. Philo, *De spec. leg.* 13–17. Elsewhere, Philo seems to accept the existence of demons, which serve the highest God (*De somn.* 1.135–41, with a reference to Hes. *Op.* 122–3).

[40] Eudorus, fr. 1 = Simpl. *In Phys.* p. 181.7 (Diels). Cf. Dillon 1996: 126–33; Runia 2002: 309.

[41] The evidence is, however, far from conclusive: cf. Runia 1986: 495–9.

[42] A similar argument regarding the Eudorian origin of another image used by Philo (that of the tested coined) is developed by Kohnke 1968–9.

that there is a hierarchy of divine beings, but only the apex of it is truly God and thus deserves worship and honour. He consequently stresses the monarchical aspect of divine rule: the most important thing is divine kingship, not the subordinate servants. This relatively minor distinction is, however, caught up in a wider polemic that associates polytheism with disorder and monotheism with true monarchy and order. Because of his Jewish identity, Philo divides the world into two camps: plurality and disorder are Graeco-Roman; true monarchy, law and order are Jewish. Because he can situate himself outside Graeco-Roman culture, he can easily compound polytheism, disorder, vice and city, and contrast this with the true God, law, order, and virtue. Contrary to Graeco-Roman philosophers, who assign not only truth to their own tradition but also superstition and vice, Philo refuses to situate error and disorder in the biblical tradition. A rather black and white opposition of Graeco-Roman culture and Judaism is the consequence.[43]

JOSEPH AS A NATURAL LEADER

The foregoing discussion may seem to suggest that because Philo emphasises divine monarchy as the absolute, ideal constitution, he favours monarchy in all circumstances. A brief analysis of *On Joseph* can show that this is not always the case: in line with the discourse on cosmic hierarchy, Philo depicts Joseph as a natural ruler who can impose order within other constitutions such as democracy.[44] But we shall notice again that the Jewish tradition is identified as the only place where such a natural ruler is revealed to mankind.

The work, basically a retelling of the story of the patriarch as found in Genesis interspersed with allegorical interpretations, is a reflection on the role of the politician (*politikos*). Early on, the fundamentally lower status of human politics in relation to the true state of the cosmos is made explicit through an etymology of the name Joseph. According to Philo, it means 'addition of a lord' (κυρίου προσθήκη), meaning that an earthly constitution (ἡ κατὰ δήμους πολιτεία) is 'an addition to nature which is invested with authority over all' (28). Whereas the cosmos is a *megalopolis*,

---

[43] The exception are the few individual 'pagan' philosophers who follow the law of nature. But Philo implies that they distance themselves from their own culture: Philo, *De spec. leg.* 2.45.

[44] Classical analyses are Goodenough 1967: 46–94; Gruen 1999. Goodenough's thesis, that the treatise faithfully incorporates Hellenistic ideas of kingship, should be approached with caution, just like his idea that Joseph is the image of the ideal Roman prefect. Hellenistic kingship theory is a figment of early twentieth-century scholarship, compounding Hellenistic and Roman ideas (cf. Haake 2003). Moreover, Goodenough fails to see that the treatise is not just about monarchy. I do not notice any practical advice in the work, as he does.

with a single constitution and directed by a single law, human society is characterised by a variety of cities, constitutions and laws (29–30). The opposition between an ordered heaven and disordered earth, which must be familiar by now from other works of Philo discussed above and which matches that of virtue and vice, recurs throughout the treatise (especially 132–8, 143–5).[45]

Joseph is a natural ruler. When purchased by Potiphar, his master quickly appoints him housekeeper: 'It seemed as if his buyer made him steward of his household but in practice and in truth it was done by nature, having in mind for him the rulership over cities and a nation and a great country' (38). Equally, when thrown into prison, Joseph soon rules over all the prisoners and establishes order in that pool of vice and disorder (85–7). This is usually read as reflecting the idea that one who possesses all the virtues naturally accedes to power.[46] At the same time, the fact also implies that a single rule leads to order. Indeed, the treatise emphasises elsewhere that a correct structure (mirrored on the hierarchical one of the universe) is essential for order in human society: towards the end of the treatise, Philo highlights that Joseph had introduced a hierarchical order of precedence in Egyptian society, based on age and inspired by the Hebrew model (204). Hierarchy and Judaism are in this way closely associated and depicted as the natural order of things – in a normative sense. Joseph shapes human society to the image of the divine (as the Jewish one already and essentially is for Philo) and consequently makes it as it should be.

Philo seems to envisage two ways in which hierarchy can be translated into human politics. The most obvious one is that of kingship. When the pharaoh appoints Joseph as viceroy, Philo stresses that in truth the Jew was actually performing the duties of a king: the pharaoh reserved for himself sovereignty (ἀρχή), but Joseph received rulership (ἡγεμονία) (119). It is possible that Philo calqued the relation between the pharaoh and Joseph on that between God and his ruling powers. In *On Abraham* 120–1 Philo depicts two senior powers of God: the creative, called God (θεός), and the ruling one, called Lord (κύριος).[47] Both support the actions of the true divine king, or even represent him. In the same way Joseph represents the active involvement of regal power in affairs of the kingdom: he travels to all cities of the country and appoints subordinates (157–8). Whereas the supreme God himself remains immobile and does not mix with the affairs of state, the lower powers of the hierarchy care for the running of the empire.

---

[45] This is elaborated by Troiani 2004.   [46] Goodenough 1967: 50.

[47] See Dillon 1996: 161–4 for the wider context of this idea.

This interesting depiction of Joseph links in with the discourse on cosmic hierarchy in various ways. Philo may have wanted to emphasise divine transcendence, just as he did at the end of *On the Decalogue* by attributing an important role to justice in waging war and punishing individuals. In that way, one could see in the depiction of Joseph and his relation to the pharaoh and his subordinates an attempt to explain how divine rule works through a hierarchy.[48] But one can read a more explicitly political message in Joseph's position. The parallels with Aristides' depiction of the Roman Empire, as set out in Chapter 6, are striking: Joseph is the link between the highest king and his subordinates and assures the spread of royal benefits over the empire. As such, the characteristics of the ideal empire are projected by Philo onto a Jewish patriarch.

This regal-cosmic function of Joseph is not the only line of interpretation followed by Philo. The eunuch who originally bought Joseph is allegorised as the vicious mob (ὄχλος), which wants statesmen to obey it (58–9). Here the context is clearly rather democratic. While allegorising the fact that Joseph rides in the second chariot, the first one being reserved for the king, Philo states that the 'statesman (*politikos*) takes second place after the king' because he is greater than a private person in power but less than a king. The explanation is that the people are his king and he must serve that king 'with pure and guileless good faith' (148–9). Here the statesman is again seen in relation to the people and obeying them. This democratic context is not what one would expect from a treatise that seems, at first sight, to discuss the ideal king. This paradox can be clarified if we take Joseph to be not the ideal king, but a 'natural ruler', as set out in Chapter 5, who imposes order on whatever constitution he finds himself in. Indeed, the creation of order in a disordered society is the role of the statesman. Although usually associated with the king in Philo,[49] a gifted and strong individual such as Joseph can perform that role within lesser constitutions as well, such as democracy. Thus, in the two passages cited, Philo is reflecting on this more fundamental role of the statesman, who has to act in the environment he encounters and introduce order.

On Joseph complements and nuances what we have noticed in *On the Decalogue*. Because polemic against Graeco-Roman culture is largely absent

from the former, Philo does not draw a strong opposition between divine monarchy and other forms of constitution. He now accepts, as do many other Post-Hellenistic philosophers, that a natural ruler can create temporary order in an imperfect constitution. But, implicitly, polemic remains at the heart of the argument: Philo finds the fullest expression of the idea of a natural ruler in a biblical book and thus relegates Graeco-Roman culture to a second, more derivative position.

This silent affirmation that the truth is embodied in the Jewish tradition, is key to the understanding of Philo's arguments. He inscribes himself fully in the contemporary philosophical discourse, as we have noticed in his dependence on the discourses on ancient wisdom and cosmic hierarchy. However, as a Jew he cannot but notice all too well the cultural assumptions that they entail. In turning the image of the Great King and his satraps against 'pagan' philosophers, Philo accepts the formal framework of the discourse on natural hierarchy, namely the idea of strict divine hierarchy as summed up in that image, but he refuses the underlying polytheism. His attitude towards ancient wisdom is the same: he defends the importance of antiquity but refuses to acknowledge a sufficient degree of antiquity in non-Jewish culture. His polemic is consequently not directed against the central tenets of his adversaries (antiquity and hierarchy) but rather the culturally specific phenomena in which they see these manifested, such as mystery cults and polytheism. It is precisely Philo's sustained polemic against Graeco-Roman culture with the arguments from the two discourses that shows the degree to which these were embedded in the cultural prejudices of 'pagan' philosophers: he could not simply adopt the formal framework of the discourses but had to sever their ties with Graeco-Roman culture and religion. Thus Philo can be seen as accepting much of the form of contemporary argument while rejecting most of its culturally determined content.

In polemically adopting the discourse of his contemporaries, however, Philo may have changed something more fundamental. Whereas the 'pagan' Post-Hellenistic philosophers had an inclusive attitude towards the various religions of the Mediterranean, finding nuggets of truth in all of them, Philo uses the discourse on ancient wisdom to argue for Jewish exclusivism. In the process, Judaism is presented as a pure tradition, free of superstition, a position that clearly contrasts with the self-critical attitude of Graeco-Roman philosophers, who ascribed not just truth but also superstition to their own traditions. We can push this argument one step further. If, as D. T. Runia has recently emphasised, the oddities and eclecticism of Philo's philosophy are to be explained by the fact that he saw the Bible as

---

[48] Another reading could be that the biblical story did not allow Philo to turn Joseph into the king of Egypt, so he had to reconcile Joseph's essence as the natural ruler with the fact that there still was a king above him. The only solution was to strip the pharaoh of his powers and transfer them to Joseph. Even so, the essential point for my argument remains that Joseph rules through a hierarchy.

[49] Philo, *Leg. alleg.* 3.79, *Abrah.* 74, *Mos.* 1.66, *De spec. leg.* 4.187, *Quaest. in Exod.* 2.42. Cf. Goodenough 1967: 94.

the highest source of knowledge and Greek philosophy mainly as auxiliary in expounding its wisdom,[50] Philo can be seen as tipping the balance between philosophy and religion in favour of the latter. For his Graeco-Roman counterparts, religion was an important source of authority for their philosophies, but in the end a secondary one: as we have seen in Plutarch and Numenius, each philosopher took his own philosophy as the yardstick by which to judge the knowledge that religion was supposed to contain. Philo, on the contrary, may have looked for philosophical doctrines that could lend a universal character to the Jewish tradition. Not just Graeco-Roman philosophers were caught up in cultural prejudice.

[50] Runia 2007.

CHAPTER 11

Celsus and Christian superstition

Christianity did not arise in a vacuum: its doctrine and its way of arguing developed in close engagement with the surrounding Graeco-Roman culture and its Jewish roots. When the pagan Platonist Celsus set out to criticise Christianity in his *True Discourse* (*Alēthēs logos*) at the end of the second century,[1] he encountered a religion that justified itself in terms very similar to how he and his fellow philosophers approached Graeco-Roman religion, especially regarding the two themes to which this book has drawn attention: antiquity as a source of wisdom and the view of the cosmos as a well-structured hierarchy. Both were used by Christians to justify their own beliefs and acquire authority for it, but at the same time pagan authors would draw on them to exclude Christianity from the community of reason formed by Graeco-Roman culture.

Christians were only too well aware of the fact that their religion was relatively young. They could not present their own religion as ancient by itself and thus argued for the high antiquity of Hebrew culture, of which Christianity was supposed to represent not a breakaway sect but a renewal of the original tradition.[2] In a polemical countermove that we have already encountered in Philo of Alexandria, Graeco-Roman philosophical tradition was made dependent on Moses.[3] The importance of such arguments for Christian culture cannot be overestimated: it spurred, for example, Christian interest in chronicle writing, which could be used to prove that Hebrew culture was older and therefore superior to its Graeco-Roman counterpart. Also, G. Boys-Stones has argued that the Christian definition

---

[1] The work was probably written under Marcus Aurelius, with a date between 177 and 180 commonly advanced: Pichler 1980: 97; Frede 1994: 5190; Lona 2005: 54–7. For a recent attempt at identification of Celsus, see Goranson 2007. An overview of modern research on Celsus' *True Discoure* can be found in Lona 2005: 57–69.
  I use the term 'pagan' here for want of a better alternative for 'non-Christian'.

[2] See, e.g., Tatianus, *Ad Gr.* 40; Justin, *I Apol.* 59–60; Tertul. *Apol.* 47. This motif is fully explored by Pilhofer 1990.

[3] Gager 1972; Ridings 1995.

of 'orthodoxy' can be understood as a reply to pagan criticism that Christianity could not represent the truth because it was so divided. This forced Christian authors and apologists to isolate 'heresies' as deviations from the authoritative tradition and contrast them with orthodoxy – in much the same way as Numenius argued that his own form of Platonism was the original and thus the authoritative one.[4] Such arguments acquired their most elaborate form in the fourth century, when Eusebius of Caesarea contrasted the original Hebrews who possessed truth and wisdom to the later Jews who had degenerated and lost that truth. He presented Christianity essentially as a return to that original Hebrew doctrine.[5] Unsurprisingly, he also set Christian chronicle writing on an entirely new footing.

Christians not only inserted themselves in the contemporary discourse on antiquity but also shared ideas about hierarchy with their Graeco-Roman environment. The apologists Tertullian (c. AD 160–220)[6] and Minucius Felix (end of second–beginning of third century AD)[7] were clearly aware of the various comparisons, especially with the emperor and his officials, being used by pagans for the divine world, and so is the so-called *Recognitiones*, an early Christian novel attributed to Clement.[8] But Christians also borrowed these comparisons for their own argument. Both Clement of Alexandria (c. AD 150–215)[9] and Origen (c. AD 180–254),[10] for example, describe the relation between God and his angels in terms that recall those used by their pagan contemporaries to articulate the various positions in the divine hierarchy.[11] Indeed, it has often been remarked that, as far as the conception of the divine is concerned, there is little difference between Celsus and Origen.[12]

It is occasionally assumed that Christians developed such arguments about antiquity and divine hierarchy in response to criticism, such as that of Celsus, in order to justify themselves in the eyes of their pagan

---

contemporaries.[13] Such a 'reactive' view on the relationship of Christianity with its cultural surroundings probably underestimates how profoundly it was embedded in Graeco-Roman culture from very early onwards. For example, many of the assumptions about 'ancient wisdom' and 'natural hierarchy' can already be detected in the *Apologies* of Justin Martyr (c. AD 100–65), who wrote before Celsus and was, significantly, a pagan convert to Christianity.[14] In turn, the third-century Church Father Origen restated Christianity's claims to antiquity and to a correct understanding of the divine hierarchy in his refutation of Celsus' *True Discourse*, the famous *Against Celsus* that has preserved Celsus' treatise for use. Thus, embedded in Graeco-Roman education and culture, Christianity naturally adopted the categories of thought and mode of reasoning of its contemporaries.[15]

In order to understand the thrust of Celsus' attack on Christianity, it is important to see how much Christianity shared in ideas and discourse with its environment. Celsus' *True Discourse* is often analysed as a rejection of Christianity on doctrinal grounds, in that the Platonist philosopher found, among other things, the incarnation and corporeal resurrection impossible to accept.[16] These are indeed ideas that Celsus despises, but the summary of accusations against Christianity he gives at the beginning of his treatise suggests that his major difficulties with Christianity are not doctrinal. Rather, Christians are accused of forming secret, illegal societies, defending a doctrine of barbarian origin, pretending to teach a new kind of ethics, not worshipping the gods, practising magic, hiding their teachings and misleading the simple-minded.[17] The focus thus seems to be more on what Christianity pretended to be than what it actually preached. Another indication that there is more to Celsus' critique of Christianity than doctrinal differences is that his arguments more than once seem arbitrary. In 4.50–1, for example, Celsus rejects allegories of

---

[4] Boys-Stones 2001: 154.   [5] Eusebius' views on Judaism are analysed in Ulrich 1999.

[6] Tertul. *Adv. Prax.* 3, *Apol.* 24.3–4.   [7] Min. Fel. *Oct.* 33.1.

[8] Pseudo-Clement, *Sermones* 10.14–17, *Recognitiones* 5.19: *Sicut enim unus est Caesar et habet se multos iudices, verbi gratia praefectos, consules, tribunos et ceteras potestates, simili arbitramur modo, cum unus sit maior omnium deus*. Their present form is fourth-century but much of it is likely to go back to one of the earlier redactions.

[9] Clem. Al. *Strom.* 7.2–3.

[10] Origen, *De principiis* 1.8, where he describes the hierarchy of angels down to human souls. Like pagan demons, the angels are distinguished by various degrees of virtue, and they obey the divine commandments. God is seen as reason, wisdom and justice (8.3). This depiction is obviously heavily indebted to contemporary demonology. See also Origen, *C. Cels.* 8.35–6, where he describes angels as 'true satraps' and stresses that they are 'subordinate governors'.

[11] Cf. Theoph. *Ad Autol.* 1.5, where he argues that the divine king is seen through his law and forces, as is the earthly king.

[12] Miura-Stange 1926: 113–17; Dörrie 1967; Fédou 1989: 288–91; Frede 1997; Fürst 2006a and 2007.

[13] Boys-Stones 2001: 152. There has been a tendency in patristic scholarship to see the early apologies as implicit replies to Celsus: see especially Vermander 1972; Droge 1989: 72–81. But this is rather unlikely, as argued by Hauck 1985/6.

[14] Regarding 'ancient wisdom', see Justin, *I Apol.* 23, 32, 54, 59–60, *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 69–70; for the hierarchy in the pantheon, see Justin, *I Apol.* 6, 14, 17, *II Apol.* 5, 12. Carl Andresen's famous (and now rejected) hypothesis (1955) that Celsus replied in detail to Justin shows how close the two traditions were in many respects: on his reading, Celsus is insisting on these ideas because he found them claimed by Justin. For a critique of Andresen, see Burke 1985.

[15] This may have happened as early as St Paul, who in the Epistle to the Romans (1.19–25) argues that Roman religion was originally aniconic and monotheistic. For the Graeco-Roman context of such an argument, see van Kooten 2007.

[16] Andresen 1955; Fédou 1989: 99–115; Frede 1997: 230–1, who also emphasises that Celsus sees Christianity as standing outside the Hellenic tradition; Martin 2004: 140–59; Lona 2005.

[17] Origen, *C. Cels.* 1.1–8.

biblical texts, but accepts them for Greek myths. Christianity may share ideas and methods with Graeco-Roman culture, but there is something profoundly wrong with what it does with them.

What is fundamentally wrong with Christianity, according to Celsus, is that it is a superstition. Throughout my discussion of the two themes that make up the basis of this book, a notion of superstition has emerged that sees it as an ignorant misunderstanding of the ancient, philosophical core of religion and of the true nature of the divine hierarchy. Such ignorance was identified with lack of philosophical training, lower-class behaviour and vice. The following pages explore how Celsus describes Christianity as a superstition along the same lines as we noticed for the two discourses of ancient wisdom and cosmic hierarchy.[18] Before I detail these, attention must be drawn to an important consequence of Celsus' depiction of Christianity as a superstition. As we have seen, superstition is an almost natural phenomenon: because mankind is inherently imperfect, not to say prone to vice, superstition is bound to creep in on religion. As a superstition, therefore, Christianity is a cancer, but nonetheless part of the religious body of the Mediterranean. Celsus thus excludes Christianity from being a truthful and good religion and tradition, but he includes it firmly in his world-view, albeit as a deviation.[19] Christianity is not fundamentally different from some other despised religious groups within the empire, such as the Corybantes, or from other 'atheistic' people such as the Scythians, Libyan Nomads and Seres.[20] In particular, Celsus does not argue that Christianity is in no way connected to 'ancient wisdom': he occasionally accepts that there is a dim semblance of truth and ancient wisdom in Christianity, although profoundly distorted by ignorance and vice – a distortion that characterises Christianity as a superstition and assimilates it to an underclass phenomenon characterised by rudeness, magic and political revolt. As such it is excluded from civilisation and banished to the underbelly of society.[21] Only philosophy, practised by a cultured elite educated in the tradition of a truly ancient people, has a perfect insight into

religion and the nature of the divine. And Celsus clearly thought that it was the philosopher's task to warn against the dangers of superstitions such as Christianity.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE 'LEAGUE OF NATIONS'

It may seem as if Celsus' task was an easy one: Christianity was a new phenomenon and sufficiently alien in its assumptions about, say, incarnation. It could not be hard to brush it aside. Celsus' dislike for Christianity was indeed such that he was never short of argument, but his task was less straightforward than one may think. The reason for this difficulty was the fact that Christians and pagans argued for their antiquity in ways that were not profoundly different. We have noticed, for example, that Varro rewrote Roman prehistory to establish connections between Roman religion and the venerable antiquity of Greece. Rival claims for antiquity abounded in the Post-Hellenistic period. The second-century historian Philo of Byblus, for example, argued for Phoenician antiquity against both Jews and Greeks.[22] Moreover, Judaism, the mother religion of Christianity, was not universally despised. Some philosophers actually had a rather positive view of Judaism: Celsus' contemporary Numenius singled out Judaism as one of the few traditions that actually worshipped the highest god.[23] Although Numenius is silent on Christianity, this probably would have entailed a much more positive attitude towards the Christians, who claimed to worship the same God as the Jews. This variety of opinions and arguments about who was most ancient means that there was no generally accepted hierarchy of ancient people which could function as an objective yardstick. Moreover, Christianity used exactly the same kind of argument as did Varro and Philo, arguing for transfers of knowledge through various mythical and historical links. Celsus thus had to downgrade a people who adopted the same kind of arguments, in a context in which such arguments were used by all and sundry. Celsus therefore could not merely argue that Christianity was young: he also needed to point out that its links with the ancients were profoundly marred. This explains the apparently incongruous coexistence in his argument of the claims that Christianity is not ancient and that all its customs and beliefs are actually derived from Graeco-Roman culture but misinterpreted. The point is not just that Christianity

---

[18] Most analyses of Celsus do not accord any role to the idea of 'superstition' in his description of Christianity (see, e.g., Andresen 1955; Pichler 1980; Fédou 1989). An exception is Martin 2004: 140–59, who proposes that Celsus sees Christianity as a superstition, but his definition of superstition as a mistaken understanding of the nature of intermediary divine beings (demons) is, at best, only part of the notion of superstition as it has emerged in this book.

[19] Lona 2005: 22.   [20] Origen, *C. Cels.* 7.62.

[21] Frede 1994: 5212 and 1997: 219–20, 237–8 seems to suggest that Celsus' exclusion of Christianity is triggered by Christian exclusivism and its perceived animosity towards 'Hellenism'. Celsus indeed accuses the Christians of setting themselves apart (8.2), but it is important to balance this by his inclusion of Christianity into Hellenism as a superstition.

[22] Philo of Byblos, *FGrH* 790 F1.20–6. See Troiano 1974; Baumgarten 1981; Edwards 1991b.

[23] Origen, *C. Cels.* 1.15 = Numen. fr. 1b.

is too young to be truthful, but that it is a superstitious misinterpretation of the little of truth that has been passed down to it.[24]

Celsus therefore had to establish a hierarchy of nations into which Christianity could be fitted. In 1.14 he enumerates the most wise and ancient people, who have held the same doctrine from its origin. In this first league belong the Egyptians, Assyrians, Indians, Persians, Odrysians,[25] Hyberboreans[26] and the inhabitants from Samothrace and Eleusis – not by accident are these Greek ancients related to the leading mystery cults of the Greek world. In reply to this, Origen comments that Celsus condemns the Jews as totally 'insane' and without any link to ancient wisdom (1.14). This statement is actually misleading:[27] in 1.16 we get the second league, to which the Jews do belong, alongside Homer's Galactophagi, the Druids from Gaul and the Getai. These are still ancient and wise up to a certain point, but it is implied by Celsus' treatment of the Jews that they stand at a distance from the original truth: the cosmology of the Bible is a misunderstanding of the original Greek myths.[28] This second league thus derives its wisdom from the first and it is clear that in that process some distortion has occurred. Elsewhere, Celsus establishes various other lists of ancient peoples[29] and wise individuals,[30] which seem to supplement the preceding lists. The one in 6.80 is particularly relevant, as he here complicates his own hierarchy even more by describing the Chaldaeans, Magi and Egyptians as 'most inspired' (ἐνθεώτατα ἔθνη), in contrast to the Indians and the Persians, who are merely 'inspired' (ἔνθεον ἔθνος). This suggests that even the first league is subdivided: some peoples have a higher degree of wisdom than others.

A strong anti-Jewish tradition had argued long ago for the derivative nature of Jewish culture. We have already encountered Chaeremon, but the clearest proof is Josephus' refutation of such ideas in his *Against Apion.* Although Celsus' view of Judaism is hardly flattering, the relatively low position of the Jews serves mainly to show how low Christianity stands as

a breakaway sect from Judaism.[31] The long discourse by a Jew against the Christians, reported by Origen in Book 2 of *Against Celsus*, serves to make this point. This allows Celsus to characterise Christian (pre-)history as one of revolt (*stasis*): while the Jews were Egyptians who revolted against Egyptian traditions, the Christians were Jews who rebelled against the Jews – a bent for rebellion that continues in contemporary Christianity, divided as it is into numerous heresies.[32] Significantly, Celsus characterises the Christian movement as 'rebellion against the community' (τὸ στασιάζειν πρὸς τὸ κοινόν, 3.15). *Koinon* is a term with clear political implications, indicating a political community, and at the end of the work Celsus suggests that this Christian tendency may endanger the Roman Empire.[33]

This seemingly universalist view, which locates ancient wisdom in different respectable nations, is crossed by the traditional opposition between Greek and barbarian.[34] From the outset, Celsus accuses Christianity of having barbarian origins. This is qualified by saying that the barbarians are capable of discovering knowledge, but that the Greeks are best 'in adapting the inventions by the barbarians to the practice of virtue'.[35] The suggestion seems to be that the Greeks have a superior knowledge that allows them to identify the truth in other traditions. Indeed, elsewhere Celsus indicates that for him, just as for Numenius, Platonism is the ultimate yardstick of truth.[36] Unsurprisingly, Jews and Christians lack that knowledge and are therefore accused of having misunderstood Greek myths. Celsus often contends that the better and clearer version of what they pretend is to be found in Greek culture.[37] Ancient wisdom is thus supposed to have been most perfectly summed up in Greek culture. When claiming that Christianity misunderstood Greek myths, Celsus seems to assume a direct dependence of Christians on Greek culture, which conflicts with the stated dependence of Judaism on Egyptian traditions, which are said by him to have acquired wisdom independently from Greece.[38] Thus, in this respect, Celsus' polemic is not entirely consistent. Rather than with a coherent view, we are dealing with two superimposed and not well-coordinated

[24] Stroumsa 1998: 86–7 seems to think that Celsus denies any link between Judaism and Christianity and 'ancient wisdom'.

[25] Celsus stands alone among the authors studied in this book to cite the Thracian Odrysians as one of the most wise people, but this can be explained by Orpheus' extraction from that region.

[26] Added in *C. Cels.* 1.16.   [27] And has mislead, among others, Stroumsa 1998: 86–7.

[28] Origen, *C. Cels.* 1.19.

[29] In Origen, *C. Cels.* 4.36 Celsus also lists the Athenians, Arcadians and Phrygians among the best nations.

[30] Origen, *C. Cels.* 4.36, 6.3, 6.41, 7.28, 7.41. They include all traditional names, such as Hesiod, Pherecydes, Homer and Zoroaster.

[31] In his reply to Celsus, Origen will consequently rehabilitate the Jews: de Lange 1976: 64–6; Feldman 1990; Perrone 2003.

[32] Origen, *C. Cels.* 3.5–14, 5.41, 5.61, 6.49.   [33] Origen, *C. Cels.* 8.64–6.

[34] Fédou 1989: 213 tends to emphasise Celsus' negative view of 'les traditions barbares'. That is only part of the story; Celsus also admits that many barbarian traditions hold ancient wisdom.

[35] Origen, *C. Cels.* 1.2.   [36] Origen, *C. Cels.* 4.65, 7.58.

[37] Origen, *C. Cels.* 3.22–34, 4.36–45, 7.53.

[38] But Celsus has some unkind things to say about the Egyptians as well: Origen, *C. Cels.* 3.17. Some truth is recognised in Egyptian culture immediately after that: 3.18–19.

polemical strategies: one that aligns Christians with barbarians and one that emphasises Christianity's weak and derivative links with ancient wisdom.

IGNORANCE AND VICE

The derivative nature of Christianity does not, in itself, turn Christianity into a superstition: for Varro, Roman religion was derived from Greece but not less truthful. In the case of Christianity, however, each stage of the transmission is said to be marred by misunderstanding. Christianity could have been salvaged were it not such a profoundly a-philosophical, vicious, underclass phenomenon.

At the beginning of the *True Discourse*, Celsus accuses Christianity of hiding its doctrine (κρύφιον τὸ δόγμα, 1.7). We have often seen in this book that mystery cults were viewed in the discourse on ancient wisdom as loci of truth, an attitude to which Celsus subscribes elsewhere.[39] Why, then, is Christianity attacked for harbouring a secret doctrine? For Celsus, Christianity is an interloper that is parasitic on the forms of Graeco-Roman culture but lacks its sound doctrine.[40] These characteristics, of course, are the hallmark of superstition. Indeed, the critique for hiding unsound doctrine is immediately illustrated by a comparison of Christians with

those people who irrationally believe the begging priests of Cybele and soothsayers, Mithraists and followers of Sabazius, and who believe in whatever one may encounter, such as apparitions of Hecate or some other demon or demons. For just as these evil men often exploit the idiocy of the simple to manipulate them in whatever way they like, so does it happen among Christians.[41]

Origen spells out the supposition underlying Celsus' argument: 'belief' is what guides the masses, whereas 'reason' is the realm of philosophy. Here, we come to the nub of Celsus' argument. He does not attempt to exclude Christianity from the 'league of nations': Christianity is strange but not alien. Rather, it is a consequence of the inexorable superstition that is generated when the uncultured and the boorish approach religion without sufficient philosophical training. Celsus does not exclude the possibility that there is some truth in the cults of Cybele and Mithras – on the contrary, later on he explicitly affirms it.[42] But the truth there may be in these cults is hidden under a baneful heap of superstition, which is exploited

---

[39] Origen, *C. Cels.* 3.50, 3.59, 3.19, 4.10, 5.22, 6.22, 6.80, 6.42, 7.41, 7.28, 7.42. Origen is aware of the tendency of philosophers to find philosophical truths in mystery cults: Origen, *C. Cels.* 4.38.
[40] Origen, *C. Cels.* 1.3, 1.7–8, 4.11, 4.21.   [41] Origen, *C. Cels.* 1.9.   [42] Origen, *C. Cels.* 5.22.

---

by charlatans. For Celsus, then, the opposition between Christianity and Graeco-Roman culture is homologous with the gap between mass and elite, stupidity and philosophy, superstition and true understanding of religion, falsehood and truth.

We have seen in Plutarch's discussion of superstition and in Apuleius' graphic depiction of it in the *Metamorphoses* that superstition is the result of vice, intentional and unintentional: the ignorant misinterpret or fail to understand the philosophical core hidden in religion, or worse, their levity of mind is exploited by mischievous individuals. Celsus convicts Christianity on both accounts: 'Forging misinterpretations (παρακούσματα) of the ancient doctrine (παλαῖος λόγος), the Christians teach and play music for the people, like those humming around Corybantes.'[43]

Such sham religions, Celsus contends, are like the Egyptian religion: impressive on the outside with its temples and ceremonies, but ridiculous from the inside, where one has to worship a monkey or a cat.[44] This idea of a respectable outside and a ridiculous inside also comes up in another accusation: Celsus likens the Christians to those who sell their mysteries in public: they will never approach wise men, but once they spot a group of slaves, adolescents or idiots, they close in on them. Rather than demanding purity and intelligence, the Christians accept thieves, robbers and murderers as initiates.[45] The accusation is a serious one: we have seen that mystery cults were considered the best repositories of knowledge because of the demands of moral purity set on the initiates. Christianity totally perverts this in Celsus' eyes: there is no truth in their mystery cults, and moreover, they initiate all and sundry, and by preference the morally and intellectually retarded.

Christians are accused of spurning culture, wisdom and intelligence:[46] they are compared to lower-class people who tell their wives and children anything that crosses their mind once the teachers and wise have disappeared.[47] Such wanton talkativeness is contrasted with the true philosophical attitude, illustrated by a reference to Plato's *Seventh Letter*, in which the philosopher clearly says that he wrote for a limited audience.[48] Indeed, Celsus claims, one does not reveal the final truth to the uninstructed.[49] Christianity is also repeatedly accused of practising

---

[43] Origen, *C. Cels.* 3.16.   [44] Origen, *C. Cels.* 3.17.
[45] Origen, *C. Cels.* 3.50, 3.59. Philo, *De spec. leg.* 1.323 accuses pagan mystery cults of initiating robbers and murderers. Epict. *Diss.* 3.21.13 links revealing mysteries to a lack of knowledge, just as Celsus does.
[46] Origen, *C. Cels.* 3.44, 3.49.   [47] Origen, *C. Cels.* 3.55.
[48] Origen, *C. Cels.* 6.8; Pl. *Ep.* 7.341d.   [49] Origen, *C. Cels.* 6.13.

magic, which is explicitly associated with lower-class individuals and a lack of philosophical training.[50] Celsus even likens the Hebrew prophets to wandering magicians.[51] Significantly, he claims that magic is only effective when targeted at the uneducated, not when aimed against philosophers, as they live a virtuous life.[52] This clearly illustrates the gap that lies between philosophers, including Celsus himself, and the uneducated lower class, infected by superstition and magic and therefore receptive to Christianity.

Celsus thus situates the Christians among the individuals who populate Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*: magicians, charlatans who use sham mystery cults to exploit the simple, talkative individuals who reveal the secrets of mystery cults, robbers and murderers.[53] As shown by K. Pichler, Celsus is highly indebted to the polemical clichés of his age[54] but, as the preceding pages have argued, his rhetoric has the specific target of likening Christianity to a superstition.

THE COSMIC HIERARCHY

Christianity's superstitious ignorance is also reflected in its misconception of the divine hierarchy. Celsus admits that some Christians did recognise the highest god – in contrast to the Jews – albeit because they have misinterpreted Plato.[55] At another point, however, the Christians are explicitly accused of mistaking their God for the highest god.[56] And in other respects Christianity goes horribly wrong as well: Christians refuse to accept the subordinate divine status of the heavenly bodies,[57] think that their God is unique rather than one of many national gods who obey the highest god,[58] and refuse to worship the lower gods and demons. Refusal to worship demons is described by Celsus as illogical: it means refusing to see that everything that exists in the universe, from angels through heroes to demons, is subject to 'the law that comes from the greatest god'.[59]

---

[50] Origen, *C. Cels.* 1.7, 6.39, 6.42, 7.9, 7.36. Apuleius argued in his *Apol.* that what may seem to be magic to the uneducated is actually religion and philosophy for the educated.

[51] Origen, *C. Cels.* 7.9.   [52] Origen, *C. Cels.* 6.41.

[53] This explains why Celsus' attitude towards mystery cults may seem 'ambiguous' (as analysed by Fédou 1989: 343–65, esp. 345–6, a better analysis than Lona 2005: 50): he accepts them as loci of truth but they can be full of superstition.

[54] Pichler 1980: 142.   [55] Origen, *C. Cels.* 6.18–19, with reference to Pl. *Ep.* 2.312e–313a.

[56] Origen, *C. Cels.* 15.   [57] Origen, *C. Cels.* 5.6.

[58] Origen, *C. Cels.* 5.25. Tertul. *Apol.* 24.3–4 turns this argument against the obligation to worship 'Roman gods': all gods are actually local and provincial, so one should be free to worship whichever god one likes.

[59] Origen, *C. Cels.* 7.68. On Celsus' demonology, see Puiggali 1987; Fédou 1989: 264–81; Martin 2004: 140–59.

Moreover, Christians also fail to see that the divine hierarchy is benevolent and just. For Celsus, the Christian God is a superstitious construct: just like a tyrant, he punishes indiscriminately.[60]

The polemical context in which Celsus directs these arguments against the Christians leads to a considerable hardening of his position in comparison with other philosophers studied in this book. Drawing on the parallel of the divine with the Great King and his satraps and with Roman emperor and his officials, Celsus suggests that, just as Persian satraps and Roman procurators will punish those who show a lack of deference, demons, who occupy a similar position in the divine hierarchy, will come to haunt those who do not pay due honours to them. This develops into an argument for the effectiveness of the gods: whereas demons punish the impious in Celsus' hierarchy, the lack of intervention on the part of the Christian God shows that he is either weak or non-existent.[61] In doing so, Celsus' divine hierarchy becomes far less benevolent than, for example, that of Plutarch: man is under obligation to worship at the risk of punishment. It is possible to understand this hardening of Celsus' position as the result of a cultural prejudice against monotheism and the assumed normality of polytheism: because for Celsus the worship of many divine beings is the normal state of things, it is hard for him to conceive that an attitude that spurns these gods should go unpunished.[62]

Origen counters this by rehabilitating the idea of a benevolent hierarchy and emphasising that satraps and governors are there to do good to their subjects rather than to punish them. Thus the subordinate beings in the Christian divine hierarchy, namely angels, are good as well; if they do harm, they are actually bad demons and not part of the hierarchy.[63] Moreover, these good satraps are not dependent on honour or worship to do their good deeds: they are good by nature. This also removes the obligation to pay worship to any of these lower beings: bad demons are bad and do not deserve worship; good angels are good because they represent God's benevolence. One should thus worship only the highest, Christian God.[64]

Towards the end of the work, Celsus' argument about the understanding of the hierarchy acquires a clear political edge: the Christian refusal to worship other gods besides their own regional God causes havoc (στάσις)

---

[60] Origen, *C. Cels.* 5.14.   [61] Origen, *C. Cels.* 8.34.

[62] See Celsus' argument that living a normal life implies that one has to worship the various gods who are responsible for the various aspects of it: Origen, *C. Cels.* 8.55. For similar abhorrence of 'monotheism' see Plut. *Comm. not.* 31.1075A–B; Apul. *Met.* 9.14; Lucian, *Syr. D.* 39.

[63] Origen, *C. Cels.* 8.35–6

[64] Origen, *C. Cels.* 8.3–5. In the fourth century, Cyril of Jerusalem adopts a reasoning and imagery similar to that of Celsus to argue that one has to worship the Son: *Catecheses* 10.1.

in the divine kingdom. Apart from reflecting Christianity's insurrectional tendency here on earth, this causes political troubles, directly and indirectly. A direct threat is the spread of such an attitude, which would mean the end of proper worship and of divine support for the empire.[65] But the Christians are an indirect danger as well. Celsus affirms that all the kings and emperors have received their position on earth 'not without a demonic force' (οὐδὲ τούτους ἄνευ δαιμονίας ἰσχύος τῶν τῇδε ἠξιωμένους, 8.63). Within the discourse on cosmic hierarchy, this locates the ruler in an intermediary position between god and his demons, on the one hand, and human society, on the other.[66] Worship and honour should be paid by the lowest rank to all above, that is by man to both the ruler and the gods. Just as one thanks the gods for their benefits, Celsus argues, one offers honour to the emperor or swears an oath by him: 'The emperor has been given all that is on earth, and whatever you receive in life, you get from him.'[67] The refusal to pay due honours to the emperor or to the gods thus implies the rejection of the cosmic hierarchy that guarantees peace and stability on earth. In such a context, Celsus cannot but interpret Christian monotheism and its refusal to participate in the imperial cult as an intellectual, religious and political insurrection. We have already encountered such a close link between religious worship and political order in Dio's kingship orations, and in Chapter 6 we noticed the political implications of the idea of a cosmic hierarchy in Aristides' depiction of Rome as the perfect reproduction of divine order and hierarchy on earth. Celsus' attitude is not dissimilar: for him the Roman emperor is an essential part of the way the cosmos is structured. Traditional worship thus guarantees order in the universe and society, whereas religious innovation and the refusal to worship the gods and to pay homage to the emperor entail a rejection of that order. The spread of Christianity thus saps world order at its very roots.

Celsus' insistence on the essential value of traditional worship for the maintenance of cosmic order should not lead to his attitude towards religion being described as radically 'relativistic' and 'traditionalist'.[68] Scholars have made such an assessment on the basis of his observation that 'there is nothing wrong if each nation observes its own laws of worship'.[69] Yet such a statement must be qualified in two ways. First, Celsus does not think that

---

[65] Origen, *C. Cels.* 8.69.
[66] Origen, *C. Cels.* 7.68. In 6.42 Celsus links the creation of demons and the cosmic hierarchy to the initial ordering of matter.
[67] Celsus in Origen, *C. Cels.* 8.67.
[68] As is done by Andresen 1955: 70; Fédou 1989: 496–9; Stroumsa 1998: 89 and 1999: 44–56; Lona 2005: 49.
[69] Origen, *C. Cels.* 5.34.

---

all traditions are equal: Jewish and Christian traditions are rejected because they fundamentally misinterpret ancient wisdom. Some traditions, especially those that can be reconciled with Platonism, are better than others. Secondly, Celsus' 'relativism' relates to the form each local religion takes, but not to its content. Although Egyptian religion is profoundly different from Greek religion, for example, because it was created by a different set of ancients in a different place, they both ultimately harbour the same truth and worship the same divine hierarchy. Another misleading modern label for Celsus is 'conservative'. It is probably meant to convey the idea of instinctive adherence to traditional norms, which is then contrasted with Christianity's innovation.[70] Although Celsus indeed wants to preserve traditions, such a label would apply to almost all Graeco-Roman intellectuals, not just from this period: respect for tradition was an essential part of ancient culture.

All such labels distort Celsus' thought because they project modern categories and value judgements onto him and fail to situate him in the contemporary discourses. All adherents of ancient wisdom locate knowledge in various traditions, but this is not a relativistic attitude because philosophy is put forward as the yardstick against which to measure these religions. In their original form, all religions are assumed to agree on the same truths, which each philosopher goes on to identify with his own doctrines. Varro, Plutarch and the others insist on the maintenance of traditional worship, be it Roman, Greek or Egyptian, not because they are conservatives by instinct, but because they believe that the rituals and myths of each religion contain philosophical knowledge. Although they reject innovation in principle because it is likely to distort that knowledge, philosophers do not hesitate to reject traditional interpretations of myths and rites in order to come to what they think is the ancient core of a cult. Indeed, as we have seen again in Celsus, they harbour a very strong concept of superstition that allows them to reject all elements of a traditional religion that do not align with their interpretation. But this does not change the fundamental attitude of respect for all ancient traditions.

Labels such as 'relativistic' and 'conservative' are usually introduced to establish a contrast between Celsus' conservatism and Christianity's revolutionary attitude. But such an opposition is misleading and entails the espousal of a Christian perspective. Christianity surely was revolutionary towards Graeco-Roman religion in rejecting the latter's religious traditions, but it was no less conservative than its pagan counterpart when it came to

---

[70] Wilken 1984; Stroumsa 1998: 83 and 1999: 45.

its own tradition, for example in its respect for the Bible as the foundational document for the community. Fundamentally, Celsus and the Christians battle with the same arguments: they each affirm the antiquity and truth of their respective traditions and accuse the other of having a superstitious understanding of the divine. Not different argumentative strategies but cultural prejudices account for the important differences one notices between them. Because of its exclusivism and monotheism, Christianity is unable to admit much truth in any other tradition than its own, whereas Celsus sees traces of truth spread in many more cultures and religions. Celsus is, in turn, unable to understand monotheism and interprets it therefore as a deliberate rejection of the cosmic hierarchy. These prejudices ensured that no real dialogue ensued, notwithstanding the similarity of many of the arguments that were exchanged: both sides in the debate were convinced that they were saving the world from an abominable superstition.

Epilogue

This book started out from the perspective of the history of philosophy, taking as its point of departure the tendency of Post-Hellenistic philosophy to open itself up to external sources of authority and knowledge. This 'opening up' must be qualified, however, in an important sense: religion is reinterpreted with the aim of conveying authority to one's own philosophical position. Although philosophers from different doctrinal allegiances draw on the discourse of ancient wisdom or use hierarchical images such as that of the Great King, they can still argue for widely diverging positions on the basis of it: Plutarch found in Egyptian mythology his own peculiar kind of Platonist metaphysics, whereas for Chaeremon it was pure Stoicism. The image of the Great King visualises in *On the World* an Aristotelian conception of the divine, but in Maximus of Tyre it is advanced to prove a resolutely Platonist one. Religion is thus an external source of knowledge, but not an independent one: it is domesticated by philosophical interpretation before being allowed to enter the argument.

In opening up to religion, Post-Hellenistic philosophy develops a hermeneutics of tradition that allows it to integrate religion into the philosophical argument. The importance attached to religion as a source of truth is evidenced in the tendency to rank it higher than poetry, as we noted for example in Plutarch and in Dio Chrysostom's *Borystheniticus*. The recent appeal of S. Goldhill to give religion its due place in the study of the literature of the Imperial period is therefore more than welcome:[1] the focus in scholarship on literary culture or technical philosophical arguments may miss much of what this period was about.

This study has analysed philosophical readings of religion in the Post-Hellenistic period strictly within the context of the philosophical discourse and has suspended the question of how such interpretations relate to wider changes in religion. I do not wish to suggest that a sole focus on

[1] Goldhill 2006a and 2006b.

philosophical texts represents the only road towards a better understanding of religious changes in the Roman Empire. I would then be writing history from a philosopher's perspective, in which wider changes in mentality are popular permutations of changes in philosophical thought.[2] As I have made clear in the introduction, my focus on the philosophical and intellectual discourse is inspired by methodological considerations: the evidence is too fragmentary and too diverse to allow easy access to early imperial religious mentality.

What I do hope to have shown, however, is that Post-Hellenistic philosophy can be studied as a unity regarding its ideas about religion. This unity should not be taken in a reductive sense, that is, that all philosophers held precisely the same doctrines. Rather, the majority broadly share the same presuppositions and approaches to religion. My argument that the period between about 100 BC and AD 200 can be seen as having a distinct identity as far as its interpretation of religion is concerned conflicts with the usual starting point for changes in religious mentality, which is situated in the second half of the second century AD.[3] Yet in my opinion, Plutarch does not differ in a fundamental way from Apuleius, and, as I have argued, many of the presuppositions of the latter can already be found in Varro or Chaeremon. I do not wish to contend that my results from the philosophical material should be projected onto the religious history of the empire in general. Rather, given the fact that different bodies of evidence may derive from different social contexts, there is no reason to assume that changes in religious ideas found in philosophical texts necessarily coincide with those noticed, for example, in epigraphy.[4] A future synthesis cannot have the aim of reconstructing a supposedly unified mentality: rather it will be a polyphonous work, which integrates the multiple voices that emanate from the various types of source and which also allows dissonants to be heard.

But such voices are not solely the result of the type of source and the social and intellectual milieu associated with it: obviously, one has also to entertain the possibility of change over time. This epilogue argues that, although the Post-Hellenistic concept of religion anticipates Neoplatonist thought in many respects, it should not be assimilated to it. Indeed, a widespread interpretation tends to think that religion had become in the early Roman

[2] An elegant example and defence of such an approach is Taylor 1989.
[3] Dodds 1965; Veyne 2001: 305; Athanassiadi and Frede 1999b. Stroumsa 2005 is less explicit, but most of his material seems to be from after AD 150.
[4] See, e.g., Pleket 1981; Versnel 1990; Belayche 2006a, 2006b and 2010; Chaniotis 2010; Mitchell 1999 and 2010.

Empire a source of divine illumination and otherwise unattainable knowledge for philosophers. Such a view projects Neoplatonic tendencies onto the Post-Hellenistic period or, to put it another way, sees the early Roman Empire as the first stage of a continuous process of 'spiritualisation' that culminates in Neoplatonism. Yet in my view, notwithstanding important continuity, Neoplatonism has a markedly different way of conceptualising the relation between philosophy and religion.

THE POST-HELLENISTIC CONCEPT OF RELIGION

In the foregoing pages, a concept[5] of religion has emerged that can be summed up in the phrase 'image of truth'. Religion is in the first place an image of *truth*: a close relationship is established between religion and philosophical knowledge. The discourse on the wisdom of the ancients locates knowledge about the cosmos in the various manifestations of religion, whereas the discourse on cosmic hierarchy puts forward the pantheon as the paradigm of a perfect hierarchy that should be imitated by the individual and society. At the same time, religion is seen as a mere *image* of truth, that is, as thoroughly human and imperfect. The ancients are assumed to have created religious rites and customs which may have been pure in origin but which were soon corrupted by superstition. Poets have obscured the true providential and benevolent nature of the gods by ignoring the divine hierarchy. As different nations harbour ancient knowledge, religion can take on many different guises. For most philosophers of the early Roman Empire, religion is thus profoundly human in its form, as a dismayed Origen discovered when reading Celsus: 'According to him the divine would be sacred not by nature but by some convention.'[6] For the authors studied in this book, religion is thus fundamentally ambivalent: it contains truth but not in a pure form. An elaborate effort of interpretation is needed, which is to be guided by philosophical acumen and insight. Religion and philosophical truth are consequently not simply equated. They are closely related: it is, for example, never pretended that religion contains a different

[5] By 'concept' of religion I mean an implicit concept, not an explicit one. There is very little abstract reflection on the notion of religion in Antiquity (with a few exceptions such as Cic. *Nat. D.* 1.117) and the term *religio* itself is very slippery (see Rüpke 2007 for a recent overview and also Ando 2008). Moreover, in Greek there is no specific term denoting religion. The most usual terms, *ta patria* and *eusebeia*, shift the focus to tradition and personal piety. Religion is thus what is embedded in tradition and custom. By 'implicit concept' I understand a modern reconstruction based on the material surveyed in this book. See Mora 1995 and 1999, who attempts to offer some general insights in 'religionswissenschaftliches Denken' of Antiquity.
[6] Origen, *C. Cels.* 5.27. See similar remarks by Augustine on Varro: August. *De civ. D.* 6.4.

kind of knowledge than the one found in philosophy. On the contrary, the ancients were full of philosophical insights before they created religion. In that respect philosophy and religion stand on equal footing. But one cannot access the truth in religion without proper philosophical training and without full awareness of the hermeneutical difficulties involved: the truth in religion is not there for all to see.

The Post-Hellenistic understanding of religion shows up characteristics that can be found in Neoplatonism and Late Antiquity as well. It has been argued that the emergence of a unified, authoritative discourse on religion was a typically late antique phenomenon.[7] In this view, the pluralism of the early imperial religious landscape seems to rule out any normative concept of religion. Indeed, scholarship on ancient religion has stressed the irreducible diversity of religions in the Roman Empire and argues that pluralism, not unlike that of a marketplace, essentially characterises the Roman Empire.[8] A unified concept of religion is often seen as the result of the rise of Christianity, which imposed a false unity on Graeco-Roman religions by condemning them as 'paganism'.[9] This polemical redefinition of Graeco-Roman religion as 'bad religion' is then said to have spurred a reflection on the nature of religion in late antique paganism. Notwithstanding such arguments, which do point to an important dialectic in late antique religious thought, already the Post-Hellenistic concept of religion can be shown to be unified and normative.

Although the term 'pluralism' may describe accurately the numerous and diverse cults available in the Roman Empire, one should not project this irreducible pluralism onto the philosophical and intellectual concept of religion. The discourse on ancient wisdom presupposes that all people share the same fundamental truths: the form of the various religions may differ considerably, but their content is universal. Plutarch finds evidence for his metaphysics in the cult of Isis as well as in the festival of the Daedala, and Maximus of Tyre claims that all people accept the idea of

---

[7] See Asad 1993: 37; Schott 2008. Rives 2007: 37–42 suggests that 'philosophy becomes the centre of a new, more integrated conception of religion' in the Roman Empire. He sees this process illustrated in particular by Judaism and Christianity. This would suggest that such an 'integrated concept of religion' comes more to the fore in Late Antiquity, when Christianity becomes the dominating religion. As this book has shown, he is undoubtedly correct in pointing to philosophy as a place of intense reflection on religion and its nature, but his picture needs correction in that such reflection was also high on the agenda of Post-Hellenistic 'pagan' thought. Rather than being exceptions, Christianity and Judaism are part of a shared culture.

[8] Cf. North 1992; Beard, North and Price 1998; Feeney 1998: 23–5; Price 1999.

[9] Beard, North and Price 1998: 312; Frankfurter 1998: 33; Leppin 2004: 62. For the argument that the Christian understanding of 'paganism' actually incorporates important elements of earlier philosophical thought on religion, see Van Nuffelen 2011.

---

a divine hierarchy (*Oration* 11). At least for philosophers, pluralism is not irreducible: the same truth is shared by all respectable religions, traditions and ancient people. Significantly, Plato, as the archetype of the philosopher, is in this period imagined to have travelled around the Mediterranean and received instruction from the Egyptians, the Indians and the Magi.[10] This fantasy implies that all traditions have grains of truth which need to be fully explored. Philosophers thus stress the unity in diversity of religion rather than its irreducible pluralism.

The Post-Hellenistic concept of religion is also highly authoritative.[11] As we have seen, throughout the two discourses studied in this book, a notion of superstition has emerged that defines it as an ignorant, vicious and mistaken interpretation of the philosophical core of religion and the hierarchical nature of the pantheon. This notion allows philosophers to distinguish clearly between good and bad religious behaviour. But both discourses set the norm also in other respects. 'Ancient wisdom' is in itself a normative concept in identifying truthfulness with antiquity. Not all people of the Mediterranean were ancient, and we have seen how Varro used antiquity as a criterion by which to establish the credentials of Rome, and Celsus to discredit Christianity. New religions that could not claim an aura of antiquity were hardly looked upon favourably. Even though tradition might be corrupt to a great degree, it was still better than superstitious innovation. Regarding the discourse on cosmic hierarchy, the link made there between religion and politics gave it a clearly normative edge. It was easily used to justify the rule of the emperor by turning the empire into the natural order and to depict religious outsiders as endangering at one and the same time divine and political order.

Thus, it seems incorrect to suggest that there was no unified, authoritative understanding of religion before Late Antiquity. Rather, the concept elaborated in Late Antiquity builds to a large extent on Post-Hellenistic thought. Indeed, both the idea of ancient wisdom and that of divine hierarchy were not unknown to Neoplatonists.[12] Plotinus, for example, considered his doctrines to be ancient, stretching back to the period before Plato.[13] Neoplatonist philosophers also accepted that religion can contain knowledge: in his biography of the fifth-century Neoplatonist Proclus,

---

[10] E.g. Apul. *De dog. Plat.* 186–7.

[11] Boys-Stones 2001: 151–75 links the idea of ancient wisdom to the development of the normative notion of 'heresy' among the Christians.

[12] Edwards 2000: xxxi n. 79; Boys-Stones 2001: 147–8; Zambon 2002: 248–50.

[13] Plot. 5.1.8.9–14. Cf. 2.9.10.12–14, 3.5.8.17–23, 6.19.25–41.

Marinus underlines that 'he observed with the proper rituals the significant holidays of every people and the ancestral rites of each' (19) and that he knew the theologies of Greeks and barbarians (22).[14] Equally, the idea of a divine hierarchy continues to flourish in later Antiquity[15] and if one branch of ancient philosophy revels in the idea, it is Neoplatonism, which attempted to map the various traditional gods onto the various degrees of being. Proclus' *Platonic Theology* is the most elaborate example of this.

BEYOND THE POST-HELLENISTIC DISCOURSE ON RELIGION

Notwithstanding such clear indications of continuity, I cannot subscribe to the view that sees early imperial attitudes to religion as essentially foreshadowing later ones – a sort of *praeparatio neoplatonica*. Indeed, an influential tendency in scholarship takes the proliferation of works on oracles and divination as its starting point for considering attitudes towards the divine in the early empire. In the light of later developments, notably the importance that Porphyry and other Neoplatonist philosophers ascribe to oracles as a source of divine knowledge, it is then often assumed that earlier philosophers also looked for divine revelation in mystery cults and religion.[16] The intellectual climate of the empire is consequently characterised as veering towards mysticism and divine revelation, a process which climaxed in the third and fourth centuries.[17] Many of the authors discussed above have been situated in this evolution, including Plutarch, Numenius, Maximus of Tyre, Celsus and Apuleius.[18] This evidently conflicts with my analysis of their attitude towards religion: on my reading of the texts, no Post-Hellenistic philosopher pretends that religion reveals knowledge of a kind different from philosophy. Rather, it is seen as a human construct that one needs to approach with a philosophically trained mind in order to extract knowledge from it.

[14] Brisson 2004: 87–90.

[15] E.g. *Pan. Lat.* 9(12) 2.5; Symmachus, *Relat.* 3.8; Oros. *Hist.* 6.1.2–3; August. *Ep.* 16 and 234; SHA, *Heliog.* 7.4.

[16] Momigliano 1975: 147; Brisson 2002: 425; Busine 2005: 116–26, Athanassiadi 2006. This is often linked to a general tendency towards irrationality: Nock 1933: 107–20; Dodds 1965; Veyne 2001; Harris 2003: 31. For a different perspective, see Edwards 2002: 73–4, who opposes Christian revelation and Platonist deduction and reasoning.

[17] For such views, see, e.g., Dodds 1951: 287 and 1965: 53–7; Gasparro 2002: 55–60; Busine 2005: 124–5. See also Saffrey 1996, who supposes a Jewish and Christian influence on the process. For a sober assessment of the role of prophecy in imperial society, see Potter 1994.

[18] This is done by, e.g., Nock 1928: 167–8; Vernière 1977: 15; Brisson 2004: 60–1; Athanassiadi 1999; Habermehl 2002.

The former approach is therefore problematic for two reasons. First, it relies implicitly on the modern opposition between philosophy and religion, seeing the former as characterised by truth and the latter by fidelity to tradition and even by irrationality. On such an understanding it becomes hard to make philosophical sense of the interest in religion we see in the early empire. But contrary to what is sometimes assumed, early imperial interest in religion does not signify a loss of rationality but is, in fact, embedded in a discourse that explains the rationality of religion. A philosopher can draw on religion without forsaking rationalism, because tradition is assumed to contain philosophical knowledge. In the end, traditional religion is not a different kind of knowledge from philosophy itself. Thus, our modern opposition of religion as the realm of the irrational to philosophy as the cult of the rational will lead us astray when attempting to interpret Post-Hellenistic thought on religion.

My main objection, however, is that analyses emphasising a desire for divine illumination in the Post-Hellenistic interest in religion have a tendency to project Neoplatonist categories back onto earlier thought.[19] It is unmistakably true that many elements of the discourse on ancient wisdom recur in Neoplatonism, but one should be aware of the fact that they are part of a different intellectual configuration. Three key elements distinguish Neoplatonist thought about religion from Post-Hellenistic philosophy: Neoplatonism emphasises a divine presence in religion, which helps the soul ascend to the One; it locates all traditional deities in the metaphysical hierarchy; and it presents itself as a religion that transcends all local religions. The following argument for important differences in these three respects is thus a corrective to the prevalent view that mainly emphasises continuity and subordinates Post-Hellenistic religious thought to Neoplatonism.

The main concern of Neoplatonism was with the purification of the soul, so as to make it return to its divine source. Plotinus stressed the central role of philosophy and reflection in the process and did not consider traditional religion very propitious for that aim. According to L. P. Gerson, for Plotinus 'religion is what leads to virtue', and this did not mean the usual civic religion.[20] The second generation of Neoplatonists already had

[19] One of the usual arguments for dating developments witnessed in Neoplatonism earlier is that the Chaldaean oracles probably originated in the second half of the second century. It must be underlined, however, that, notwithstanding Athanassiadi 1999 and 2006: 31–70, their origins remain obscure and the work is only used by Neoplatonists. Thus, even if they originate in the second century AD, I consequently doubt they can be used to reconstruct the theological *koinē* of that period.

[20] Gerson 1994: 203. See also Finamore 1999; A. Smith 2004: 78.

a much more positive view of traditional religion, cementing an alliance between traditional religion and philosophy.[21] Porphyry follows Plotinus to a certain extent by interiorising traditional ritual practice such as sacrifice and contesting the validity of theurgy in his *Letter to Anebo*.[22] He does, however, see oracles as containing important knowledge, revealed by the gods,[23] for helping one's soul to ascend. Iamblichus, in turn, defends the usefulness of ritual acts and theurgy, if performed properly, as they can, according to him, call a divine presence to the statue and the worshipper and thus help to purify the latter's soul.[24] In his wake, theurgy would become a common element of later Neoplatonism.[25] Religion and in particular ritual practice thus become tools to help one's soul ascend.[26]

Neoplatonist thought even goes a step further and asserts that, in order to perform that function, religion itself is ordered by divine laws. In his *On Egyptian Mysteries*, Iamblichus claims that there is a cult law that predates humanity (5.20) and, according to him and Porphyry, the gods themselves reveal how to perform a rite correctly.[27] It is quite evident that in such a configuration, religion is indeed a place where the divine reveals itself and that it can even be of divine origin.[28] Here an important contrast can be established with Post-Hellenistic thought. In the fourth century the emperor Julian argues that the differences in customs and laws between various peoples are to be explained by the fact that all nations have distinct national gods: in his view, rites take their form from the gods, not from human culture. Although Celsus shares with Julian the idea that each nation worships a particular god, he emphasises, on the contrary, the human origin of the diversity of cult which is brought about by differences in culture.[29] This difference is part of a wider contrast between Neoplatonism and Post-Hellenistic readings of religion. Post-Hellenistic philosophers emphasise the human character of religion, with its customs and rituals created by earlier men to express their philosophical insights: religion and rites were

---

human attempts to approach the divine. For Neoplatonists, in contrast, they have become divine help for the ascent of the soul.

The contrast between Post-Hellenistic and Neoplatonist views on religion also becomes clear in the way each tries to relate the traditional pantheon to the divine hierarchy. We have noticed that no Post-Hellenistic philosopher attempts to give each Homeric god a definite place in the divine hierarchy. Various authors ascribe the position of highest god to different gods. Often a single author, such as Plutarch or Aristides, attributes that honour to one god in one text and to another one on another occasion. Apart from what was noted for Plutarch in Chapter 8, one can also refer to Numenius, who interprets Apollo as the 'one', while praising the Jews for having discovered the first god.[30] It is not impossible that he identifies his three gods, which he calls grandfather, son and grandchild, with Cronus, Zeus and Ares,[31] which would yield Cronus as the supreme god. Celsus, in turn, explicitly states that it does not matter much how one wishes to refer to the highest god.[32] This betrays the view that the form religion assumes is not divinely ordained, but the result of human culture and history. Neoplatonism, on the contrary, tries to map religion onto its metaphysics.[33] In his *Letter to Anebo*, Porphyry argues that one should classify the different gods according to the different types of bodies, and his *Philosophy from Oracles* links types of sacrifice to various ranks of divinity.[34] Similar ideas are professed by Iamblichus as well in his *On Egyptian Mysteries*.[35] Such efforts would culminate in Proclus' *Platonic Theology*, an elaborate system which unites religion and metaphysics and assigns each Homeric god a well-defined place in the hierarchy of being. Because of its acute awareness of the human nature of religion,[36] Post-Hellenistic philosophy never attempted such a systematic integration of religion in philosophy.

Neoplatonist emphasis on the divine nature of religion does not imply that religion is seen as a higher form of knowledge than philosophy. Indeed,

---

[21] Edwards 2000: xli and 2006: 111–26, 136; Brisson 2002; A. Smith 2004: 77–89.

[22] See Toulouse 2001, with a discussion of Porphyry's *Philosophy from Oracles*.

[23] Porph. *Phil. ex orac.* fr. 303.   [24] Cf. Proclus, *Theol. Plat.* 1.25.

[25] Athanassiadi 1993; Finamore 1999. See also Sheppard 1982; Van Liefferinge 1999; O'Meara 2005: 116.

[26] The emphasis on the ascent of the soul is obvious in the way that Plotinus uses the image of the Persian King and his satraps in *Enneads* 5.5.3. For him, it sketches the road the soul has to take to find its original bliss: when watching a procession of the Great King, one first sees the lower officials and then those higher in rank until suddenly the King himself appears. This mirrors the way upward for the soul. The comparison now clearly has a different function from the one it had in Post-Hellenistic philosophy.

[27] Porph. *Phil. ex orac.* fr. 339; Iambl. *Myst.* 2.   [28] Brisson 2002: 421–5.

[29] Julian. *Adversus Christianos* 137E–143B; Origen, *C. Cels.* 5.34.

[30] Numen. frs. 17, 54.

[31] This depends on whether one is willing to reconcile Procl. *In Ti.* 1.303.27–304.7 = Numen. fr. 21 with Porphyry's *De antr. nymph.* pp. 70.25–72.19 (Nauck) = Numen. fr. 31, where the ascent of the soul is described through a series of zodiac signs. This identification finds a parallel in Harpocration, a contemporary of Numenius: Procl. *In Ti.* 1.304.22–305.6.

[32] Celsus, in Origen, *C. Cels.* 1.24.   [33] Brisson 2004: 90–100.

[34] Porph. *Letter to Anebo* in Iambl. *Myst.* 1.8, *Phil. ex orac.* frs. 309, 315. On these texts, see Busine 2005: 256–79.

[35] Iambl. *Myst.* 5.10–20.

[36] This does not mean that Post-Hellenistic philosophers reject the possibility of direct communication between god and man through oracles and dreams. But they emphasise that even such communication is always profoundly mediated through human culture: Plutarch's discussion of the decline of verse oracles in *On the Pythian Oracles no Longer Spoken in Verse* is telling in this respect.

the third difference between Post-Hellenistic philosophy and Neoplaton-
ism is that the relation between philosophy and religion is calibrated dif-
ferently in these two periods. Whereas the Post-Hellenistic discourse on
ancient wisdom puts (at least theoretically) religion and philosophy on
a par, in that they contain the same knowledge, albeit expressed differ-
ently, Neoplatonism self-consciously transcends local religions by posit-
ing itself as the supreme religion. Philosophy is now thought to contain
truth to a higher and fuller degree than religion. Porphyry, for example,
accepts that all the different religions contain a grain of wisdom, but only
philosophy has it in full possession.[37] In an important passage from *On
Abstinence*, he depicts the philosopher as a higher kind of priest than the
priests of the lesser gods and more elevated than those serving traditional
deities:

So it is obvious that the philosopher and priest of the god who rules everything
(ὁ φιλόσοφος καὶ θεοῦ τοῦ ἐπὶ πᾶσιν ἱερεύς) abstains from all animate food
and that he aims at approaching the god, one to one, with his own power, and
without the disturbance of any following and that he is pious, having fully explored
the necessities of nature. For the true philosopher is an explorer of many things,
understanding signs and the facts of nature, intelligent and orderly and moderate,
protecting himself in all respects. Just as a priest of one of the particular gods has
experience in the setting up of statues for this god, and in the mysteries, initiations,
purifications and such rites, so the priest of the god who rules everything has
experience in setting up his cult statues and in purifications and all the other rites
through which he is linked to the god (Καὶ ὥσπερ ὅ τινος τῶν κατὰ μέρος θεῶν
ἱερεὺς ἔμπειρος τῆς ἱδρύσεως τῶν ἀγαλμάτων αὐτοῦ τῶν τε ὀργιασμῶν καὶ
τελετῶν καθάρσεων τε καὶ τῶν ὁμοίων, οὕτως ὁ τοῦ ἐπὶ πᾶσι θεοῦ ἱερεὺς
ἔμπειρος τῆς αὐτοῦ ἀγαλματοποιίας καθάρσεών τε καὶ τῶν ἄλλων δι' ὧν
συνάπτεται τῷ θεῷ).[38]

Neoplatonism thus presents itself as a religion transcending all reli-
gions. By elevating himself above all particular expressions of religion,
Porphyry breaks the fragile balance struck by the discourse on ancient wis-
dom between religion and philosophy: Neoplatonist philosophy openly
reclaims for itself the position of the fullest source of truth. The attitude of
philosophers consequently becomes less deferential than the one observed
in early imperial authors. Philostratus' Apollonius corrects rites,[39] as does

[37] A. Smith 2004: 79–83; Schott 2005: 299–300. Compare Athanassiadi 1993: 124 on Iamblichus.
[38] Porph. *Abst.* 2.49. Bouffartigue and Patillon 1979: 114 read τῶν ἀγαλμάτων αὐτοῦ (of the philoso-
pher himself). Clark 2000: 159 prefers αὐτοῦ (statue of this god). I follow her, as it is the most
logical meaning of the text.
[39] Philostr. *VA* 5.25.

Proclus;[40] Plutarch, on the contrary, attempts to interpret them correctly
and expresses his ignorance when he fails to find a good solution. The
difference is not merely semantic: the position of philosophers of the later
Roman Empire towards religion is now more forceful and interventionist.

Thus, although Neoplatonism clearly adopts parts of the Post-Hellenistic
readings of religion, the two should not be thought identical and actually
show up manifest differences. In the Post-Hellenistic period a sensitivity for
the human make-up of religion is combined with a modesty that accepts
the same degree of truth in religion as in philosophy – even though it is
clear that each philosopher projects his own doctrine onto the religions he
interprets and thus instrumentalises religion rather than truly opens up for
it. Neoplatonism, on the contrary, emphasises the divine laws that shape
ritual practice and sees actual religions as subordinate to the discipline that
guarantees full truth and returns one's soul to the One: philosophy. The
transition from Middle Platonism to Neoplatonism is therefore not seam-
less but accompanied by a reconfiguration of the relations between religion
and philosophy. Although Neoplatonism incorporates many elements of
earlier thought, they are now set in a new relation to each other – thus
effectively shaping a new discourse.

[40] Marinus, *Vita Procli* 15.