DYNAMICS OF MONOTHEISM IN LATE ANTIQUITY

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p. v *For the past fifty years, war and violence, preached, too often fought, and performed in the name of the single God, have been our constant companions. In this long, dark vale, I have been lucky to walk with Sarah at my side. This book*

p. vi *is dedicated to our grandchildren, Yotam, Yaïr, Amir, Shani, Noga, Elul, and Tuviyah. May they know happier times!* ↵

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Preface 🔓

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> Der Dualismus, die Antithese, das ist das bewegende, das leidenschaftliche, das dialektische, das geistreiche Prinzip. Die Welt feindlich gespalten sehen, das ist Geist. Aller Monismus ist langweilig. Solet Aristoteles quaerere pugnam.
>
> Thomas Mann, *Der Zauberberg*, Ch. VI, Noch jemand (512, Fischer paperback ed.)

Many years ago, I chaired a panel at a conference in Jerusalem in which two speakers dealt with Zoroastrianism. The first, President of the Parsi community in Mumbai, proudly proclaimed the dualist character of his religion. The second speaker, the Zoroastrian High Priest, from the same community, declared that he knew to whom he was offering prayers and rituals, and this was the one and single God. This experience encapsulates my impression, which has only grown over time, that the classical categories we use for the taxonomy of religions are often inadequate and, on occasion, may even mislead.

This book is a sequel of sorts to *The End of Sacrifice*, published in 2005. The metonymic title of that book referred to the radical transformations of major religious rituals in the Mediterranean and Near East throughout the long late antique period, from the emergence of Christianity to that of Islam. In the current work, I analyze transformational mechanisms of religious cosmologies—or "theologies"—in the same period. Abrahamic monotheism, in its Christian as well as its Islamic garb, succeeded in replacing competing polytheistic and dualist systems. A better understanding of the mechanisms at work may shed new light on various anthropological, social, and political implications of monotheism, and point to the elements of a future generative grammar of religion.

How should one write the history of religions? The historian is an anthropologist whose native informants are all dead. To recover the past and tell its stories is a tricky business. Religions are always too close or too distant to achieve a simple balance between sympathetic understanding and critical rigor. It is also as anthropologists

that we should study theological thought patterns, which always reflect human agency. As in the work of the anthropologist, ↳ a sense of wonder lies at the heart of the historian's labor. It is my hope that I succeed in sharing some of this amazement with my readers.

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CHAPTER

Introduction: A Religious Revolution 🔓

Guy G Stroumsa

Abstract

The Introduction discusses the status of the interaction between forms of monotheism, dualism, and polytheism in the ancient world, as well as the principal approaches of these concepts in contemporary scholarship. The Introduction also insists on the fact that these various theological structures of religion never come pure, and that historical forms of religion often show clear signs of mixture between monotheism, dualism, and polytheism. The core implications of Abrahamic forms of monotheism are briefly analyzed, and some of the core paradoxes and antinomies of monotheism are highlighted, while the main elements of interaction between the major religious traditions are identified. The Introduction, moreover, asks how religions evolve, discusses religious change, both explicit and implicit, the main elements of religious innovation, and what constitutes religious and cultural revolution.

Keywords: Abrahamic monotheism, implicit and explicit change, religious innovation, religious and cultural revolution, dualism, polytheism

Subject: History of Religion, Comparative Religion, Theology, Religious Issues and Debates, Philosophy of Religion

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Why Monotheism?

Although the idea of monotheism has been with us for a very long time, the term itself is a relative newcomer. Its first English appearance was in 1660, in Henry More's *Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness*; it did not gain currency in English before 1750, and entered German, French, and Italian even later.[1] The term's usage peaked during the last decade of the nineteenth century[2]—the heyday of the British Empire, when Victorian writers were drawn to the flamboyance of Indian polytheistic traditions.

"Why monotheism?" The question can be asked from upstream (why one god rather than many?) or from downstream (why one god rather than none?). According to a widespread scholarly view, best exemplified by David Hume in his *Natural History of Religion* (1757), the number of gods has been declining in human history, in a steady process of simplification and rationalization.[3] If so, then one god gets very close to no god at all. Indeed, Josephus testifies that in the first century BCE the Jews were called godless, *atheoi*, by Apollonius of Molon.

The historical process of simplification can be seen as one of rationalization, recalling Max Weber's "disenchantment of the world" (*Entzauberung der Welt*). Rationalization refers to the continuous simplification of the system of the universe, and hence the continuously shrinking number of divine powers in charge of it. In this paradigm, religious evolution takes place through revolution. In the ancient world, the pharaoh Akhnaton, prophet Zarathustra, and ↳ king Nabonidus tried, each in his own way, to insist upon a simplification of the heavenly world: only one god was the true one, or the only one worthy of worship. However, although Egyptologists often present Akhnaton's religious revolution in monotheistic terms, it has also been characterized as "cosmotheism," while the devotion to Sin, the moon god, by Nabonidus, was arguably closer to henotheism than monotheism.[4] We will return to these concepts later in the book.

Monotheism comes in many shapes and colors, and it is almost never pure or absolute. Like all religious systems, it is unstable, given to endless flux and sometimes to radical transformation. Today, when we speak of "Abrahamic religions," we are referring to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as to various kindred religions, such as those practiced by the Samaritans or the Ahmadis. Late antique Abrahamic monotheism was either universalist—Christianity and Islam—or particularist—Judaism. For Christians as well as for Muslims, the same religious truth is to be shared by all humanity—all individuals and all peoples. Jews, on the other hand, have always maintained the paradox of a universal God and a chosen people. Early on, the God of Israel entered into a contractual relationship with his people, Abraham's true offspring, who were transformed by the covenant into a priestly nation and a saintly people. While their national God soon became universal, the Jews insisted on preserving their particular national identity.

In scholarly literature, references to the "Abrahamic religions" often implicitly suggest that the concept does not apply before the seventh century. In fact, however, by the middle of the second century Christians had positioned themselves as the true inheritors of Abraham—replacing the Jews, who they said had abandoned his path. The Christians also claimed that they alone understood the biblical promises to which the Jews remained blind. This is clearly stated, for instance, in the writings of Justin Martyr.[5] In a sense, the *Auseinandersetzung* between Jews and Christians throughout late antiquity is the story of the polemics between them regarding who are the true sons of Abraham. The argument between Jews and Christians is presented directly in Jewish and (mainly) Christian polemical texts, and reflected in other literary ↳ genres (Jewish and Christian liturgical poetry, for instance), as well as in oral exegetical traditions such as Midrash among the Jews, and in a number of Christian traditions, often in Syriac. Christian collective and religious memory is here conflated with the Jewish collective memory. The Qur'an itself has been well known since the early nineteenth century, and, as further shown in contemporary research, reflects these exegetical and polemical traditions.

Although the Qur'an exhibits a polytheistic background in Arabia, recent research has found evidence of a significant monotheist presence in the western Arabian peninsula, from Hedjaz to Yemen, way beyond the reach of Jewish and Christian communities. The precise nature of this monotheism, which has been dated to the late fourth century, is unknown. However, it appears to have had what one could call a Jewish "flavor."[6] Hence, when we speak, as is becoming increasingly fashionable, of the Qur'an as a "late antique text," we ought to remember that it is a very specific kind of late antiquity that is referred to here: that of Abrahamic religions, not that of Hellenic paideia.[7] Both Gerald Hawting and Patricia Crone have argued that the *mushrikūn* of the Qur'an (lit. "those who associate" [another divine figure with the One God]) were monotheists, as has long been claimed.[8] Indeed, *shirk* seems to lie at the very heart of monotheism.

In *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity*, I argued that when looking at late ancient religious traditions from the point of view of Islam, one might speak of a *praeparatio coranica*, just as Eusebius could approach the Greek philosophical tradition as a *praeparatio evangelica*.[9] With the Qur'an, religious memory was broadened so that yet another possible heir of Abraham appeared on the historical scene. Some of the most striking personalities of late ancient religiosity deal with the person (asceticism) or with the cosmos (eschatology), rather than with the divine. These characters, found in most religious communities in the late ancient Near East, reappear, barely changed, in the Qur'an.

Since the Renaissance, and following the celebrated humanist Guillaume Budé, historians and philologists have studied the passage from paganism to monotheism.[10] Focusing on the Christianization of the Roman Empire, these (mainly) Christian scholars, over the centuries, have tended to use emic (insider) tools in their analysis. In particular, the modern concept of religion, as is now often noted, was fashioned by Christians and reflects their perceptions.[11] Recently, there have been a number of attempts to claim that the concept of religion does not apply to ancient societies.[12] While none of these efforts is convincing, it is important to remember that the ancient world did conceptualize religion differently than did later, Christianized societies.

The past decades have seen a growing recognition of the crucial importance of the religious dimensions of late antique history. In this period, various forms of paganism and monotheism competed for prominence amidst striking religious diversity.[13] Scholars are coming to a sharper appreciation of the leading role played by religious communities,[14] and a clearer understanding has been reached of the patterns through which these communities developed their own individual identity. This was achieved mainly through polemics, which took place on two levels: religious authorities battled dissenting voices (branded as "heretics") on the interpretation of the core religious message within the community, and they struggled with competing religious identities.

At the same time, a new approach to social history has transformed the field usually called Church (or Ecclesiastical) History, a field in which the relationship between Christians and members of other religious communities had previously played only a minor role. Integrating the origins of Islam and rabbinic Judaism, in particular, in the history of Christianity has shifted the traditional ↳ paradigm, in which interreligious dimensions of ecclesiastical history tended to be overlooked.

However, the newly recognized status of religion in social history has had less fortunate consequences as well. Namely, it has undermined scholarly interest in the doctrinal dimensions of late antique religion. With the new focus on religious communal identities, which often leaves aside complex dynamics of the late antique religious scene, the theological dimensions of religious ideas have lost some of their scholarly luster.[15] The dynamics of religion involve internal transformations of beliefs and practices, as well as a continuous reshuffling of relationships within and between religious communities. These dynamics have impacted the *Nachleben* of various polytheistic conceptions, the outcropping of dualist heresies within Christianity or on its margins, from Gnosticism to Manichaeism, the growth and development of rabbinic Judaism and of Sasanian Zoroastrianism, and eventually the emergence of Islam.

In his work *The Paradox of Monotheism*, Henry Corbin (1903–78), scholar of Islamic philosophy, Ismaili gnosis, and Shi'ite Sufism, identified various antinomies embedded within Abrahamic monotheism.[16] For Corbin, these antinomies are related to the impossibility of thinking about the One without invoking the Multiple. He believed that the difficulty in worshipping God directly almost inevitably results in the divine unity being split up by worshipers into a multiplicity of divine beings, such as angels, who can serve as intermediaries between humans and the One God. Corbin referred to this as the "paradox of monotheism."[17] There is indeed a paradox inherent to monotheism that concerns its inclination to split the divine, transcendent unity.[18] This split can take many forms within dualism and Trinitarianism. Angelology, other divine hierarchies, and anthropomorphism are also related to this paradox.

Discussing diverse texts that deal with mystical language or angels, Corbin argues that monotheism contains a polytheistic core. In this regard, Protestant scholars have long seen the profusion of angels and saints in Catholic Christianity as reflecting pagan tendencies. A similar case has been argued concerning the mythopoetic, unbridled creation of hypostatic emanations and divine sefirot in medieval Kabbala.[19]

Corbin explains such paradoxes by pointing to timeless antinomies located at the very heart of the divine. For the historian, however, there is nothing timeless in religious systems. As I hope to show, the complexity of religious conceptions in the Roman Empire should be understood from a historical perspective, as religious systems and attitudes evolve in diachrony. In the long term, religious structures are unstable. Because the boundaries between monotheism, dualism, and polytheism are fluid, monotheisms and polytheisms require comparative study. Of particular interest are cultural contexts where various religious systems coexist and intersect, and the identification of periods of transformation and cultural and religious change, or mutation. Liminal spaces hold particular promise for this kind of comparative approach. Such inquiry may call for a new direction. Rather than studying the interface among polytheists, monotheists, and dualists, it may be useful to identify the admixtures of these categories: monotheism within polytheism (or vice versa), dualism within monotheism (or vice versa), and more.

This book employs the traditional vocabulary of religious taxonomy, despite the fact that this vocabulary fails to fully capture the *Sitz im Leben* of the various religious communities.[20] In fact, mounting evidence indicates that elements of our traditional categories are in what can be called a state of mixture.[21] Attitudes often associated with polytheism may reflect monotheistic or dualistic conceptions, while self-proclaimed monotheists often espouse views that have a polytheistic or dualistic imprint. Indeed, it can be said that dualist thought patterns represent a monotheism stretched to its radical conclusions.

As I shall argue in this book, late antique Jewish, Christian, Gnostic, and pagan forms of monotheism were always tinged with a dualist hue. This dualist tension is inherent to biblical monotheism because—unlike pagan monotheism—it insists on the ethical aspect of God, and seeks to offer a theodicy: *Unde malum?* (Whence Evil?).

Similarly, in both Manichaeism and Sasanian Zoroastrianism, the doctrine of dualism was never absolute. Regarding the latter, the Zurvanian heresy represents a clear attempt to move from a dualist to a monist worldview.[22] Notably, the pagan conversion to Christianity was not driven by the desire to confess God's unity. Rather, as cogently argued by Gillian Clark, the failure of pagan monotheism lay in its being both overly exclusive (its teachings were accessible to few) *and* overly inclusive (it did not prohibit the cult of the gods).[23]

In Praise of Polytheism

Unlike the term "monotheism," the term "polytheism" does appear in antiquity. According to Philo of Alexandria, who coined the term *polytheismos* in the first century of our era, polytheistic beliefs, which reject the Jewish idea of a single God, ultimately lead to atheism. The word *paganus* (lit. rural), a term of opprobrium, was introduced by Christians to denote those who practiced the traditional religion in a Roman Empire undergoing Christianization. Used by "outsiders," polytheism is a term of etic significance (i.e., from the observer's viewpoint). No one self-identified as polytheistic (or, for that matter, as pagan) in the ancient world.[24] We will return to this topic later in the book.

In parallel to the spread of the idea of Abrahamic monotheism as an epistemic category, recent decades have seen an acceptance of the notion that polytheistic systems in the ancient Mediterranean world shared various features, and hence are worthy of comparative study.[25] Accordingly, polytheisms ↳ are perceived as representing a field, deemed as worthy of scholarly interest as that of monotheisms. This intellectual configuration tends to come with a preference for polytheistic over monotheistic systems.

In his book *Comparing the Incomparable*, the historian of Greek religion Marcel Detienne explores the field of polytheisms.[26] His discussion highlights systems of representation characterized by the multiplicity and diversity of divine powers, which serve as the framework for the symbolic function in many ancient and traditional societies. According to Detienne, studying such systems would enable an inventory of models of relationship between the religious and the political, even in societies as distinct as contemporary India and ancient Greece.

In Praise of Polytheism, a spirited book written by the classicist Maurizio Bettini, issues a similar call to rediscover the diversity of polytheistic religions in the ancient world.[27] Like Detienne, Bettini underscores the implicit monotheistic assumptions, particularly Christian ones, in the study of antiquity. He argues that polytheistic systems are sometimes portrayed by modern scholars as successfully avoiding the inherent dangers of monotheisms, such as ethnocentrism and cultural closure. Such an attitude may reflect a scholar's personal dislike of Christianity (and other monotheistic systems) and/or a sense that the monotheistic model stifles the free expression of cultural imagination. This latter attitude among scholars is heir to a long tradition, begun during the Renaissance, which prioritizes the cultural heritages of ancient Greece and Rome. Since Nietzsche, this intellectual posture also includes the religious aspects of classical society, which constitute an alternative to the Christian tradition.

One representative of such a mindset is the philosopher Odo Marquard, who praises polytheism and its cosmology, and argues for the primacy of "polymyth" over the "monomyth" of the Christian tradition.[28]

Marquard's preference for cultural complexity is certainly laudable. However, he is mistaken in ↳ deeming the monotheistic "monomyth" incapable of transformation. In fact, as we shall see, complex hermeneutical systems have rendered the monomyth a polymyth.

Proponents of polytheism espouse an attitude that dates back to radical Enlightenment deists who, along with Voltaire, called for "crushing the infamous" ("Écrasez l'infâme!"), meaning the Church. For these thinkers, polytheisms offer a more tolerant vision of religion than that which has been historically offered by monotheisms.

Today, the traditional Christian framing of the relationship between "pagan" religions and monotheism is being questioned. In his studies, Detienne refers to the "structures of polytheistic systems." Inherited from Claude Lévi-Strauss, the concept of structure allows for the comparison of vastly different societies across time and space and the search for "common structures" in their behavioral patterns.

In his work, Detienne seeks to compare various rituals and myths within what he refers to as the "field of polytheisms." This field is defined by the richness of polytheistic pantheons compared to the single God of monotheisms. The idea of classifying religions according to the number of their gods derives from Judaism and Christianity. Gnostic and Manichaean dualisms, for example, represent variants of monotheism in which the principle of evil has been transformed into a quasi-divine figure.

Detienne's stance again shows that the traditional epistemology of religions relies on a fundamentally binary mindset. Philo, for instance, counterposed the concepts of polytheism and monotheism. Dualism—which presupposes monotheism, as it seeks to resolve the antinomy regarding the question of evil and its origin, reflects a similar binary pattern. For classicists enamored of polytheism, the emergence of monotheism represents a religious mutation, *in malam partem*. This approach counters the traditional Jewish and Christian argument that idolatry emerged from the degeneration of an ur-monotheism.

Abrahamic Monotheisms and Their Implications

Scholars have long debated the origins of monotheism. Did Israelite monotheism emerge at one fell swoop from Near Eastern polytheism, as presented in the biblical text, or was it rather the final stage of an evolutionary process? Today, biblical scholars and historians of the ancient Near East increasingly question the revolutionary birth of monotheism.[29]

Modern research on the "Abrahamic monotheisms" began in earnest in the late nineteenth century. This period saw the development of the historical and comparative study of religion as a new discipline, at the crossroads of theology and the humanities. Since then, various theories regarding the origin of monotheism have been proposed. According to the Scottish polymath Andrew Lang, even some of the most "primitive" tribes believed in a high god, the "All Father."[30] In the early twentieth century, Lang's theory was defended and developed by the Austrian anthropologist and Catholic priest Wilhelm Schmidt, who spoke of *Urmonotheismus* in his monumental work *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee*, and by the Italian historian of religion Raffaele Pettazzoni.[31] This approach, which rejected the paradigm of an evolution of religious ideas towards monotheism, represented a return to what is traditionally considered to be the Pauline perspective. According to Paul, knowledge of the one God was present in the earliest stages of humankind. Polytheism, in this view, is a degeneration of monotheism: "and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles."[32]

A more widely accepted model, however, posits that it is through henotheism that ancient Israel moved from polytheism to monotheism. The traces of this trajectory, from the earliest biblical texts to the Second Isaiah, show a combination of evolution and revolution.[33] Scholarship has focused on the formation of the Hebrew Bible and the religious history of ancient Israel, on the early development of Christianity in the Roman Empire,[34] and on the emergence of Islam at the very end of late antiquity. For the French Semitist Ernest ↳ Renan (1823–92), monotheism was the single most significant contribution of the Semites to humankind.[35] From India to Europe, according to Renan, the Aryan peoples lived in countries where the lushness of nature (mountains, rivers, forests) nurtured creative imagination in all fields, from literature, arts, and sciences to politics. The minds and sensitivities of the Semites, on the other hand, suffered from the poverty of their natural habitat. Only one idea could be born in the desert, that of the one, solitary God.[36] For Renan, "Le désert est monothéiste."[37] The great inventors of monotheism were the Israelite prophets. They were also the predecessors of Jesus, whom Renan calls "a man so great that one might even call him God" (a sentence which cost him the chair at the Collège de France to which he had just been elected). Islam, for Renan the last great religious invention of humankind, was also for him the weakest, as it represented the least attractive kind of monotheistic religion imaginable.[38] The spiritual poverty of Islam explained for Renan the failure of Islamic societies to accept the challenges of modern science.[39] Renan's bleak vision of Islamic monotheism reflects his view, and that of his Christian colleagues, that there had been a steady progression in the refinement of religious ideas from ancient Israel to Christ. From Jesus to Muhammad, however, there could only be regression. For these scholars, the apparent purity of Islamic monotheism pointed to its lack of sophistication.

How Religions Evolve

Religions are conservative systems of thought and behavior. Nonetheless, like all social institutions, they constantly evolve, and one could speak of *religio mutans*.[40] Aiming to better understand the mechanisms of evolution ↳ and transformation in religious traditions, recent scholarship has sought to identify patterns of religious innovation. One remarkable approach is that of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who characterized mythical thought as inherently transformational—although, of course, Lévi-Strauss's remarks apply only to a world in which history (which he calls "cold") almost totally ignores change. Myth, in his view, is constituted by a series of variants.[41] Like Lévi-Strauss, Philippe Descola also studied the transformation of myths, focusing on variants. Here, I suggest applying a similar strategy to religions, approaching each tradition as a set of variants. Instead of mythologoumena, it is theologoumena that we will tackle. With the introduction of the time dimension, it is the rules according to which religions are transformed, rather than their morphology, that hold particular interest for the historian. Through textual hermeneutics, the meaning of scriptures continuously changes and, with it, religion itself. Yet transformational patterns pertain to more than written texts. In ancient societies, religious stories and beliefs were, for the most part, transmitted orally. The various oral versions of a scriptural story function like the variants of a myth in non-literate societies.

Philippe Borgeaud's model of the "theological triangle" invests historical reality with further complexity. According to Borgeaud, in Hellenistic times the Egyptian religion, Greek religion, and Judaism constituted such a triangle.[42] The three sides of this triangle represented the broad frame within which exchanges and permutations happened between ideas and practices in the eastern Mediterranean. Borgeaud's model may facilitate the conceptualization of religious dynamics in other contexts as well. In the Roman context, "paganism," Judaism, and Christianity have traditionally been triangulated, with Christianity, Islam, and Judaism constituting the major theological triangle in medieval times. However, studies on religious interaction have tended to address only two of the three triangulated elements at a time. Borgeaud's model extends the inquiry to all three elements.

Scholars have conceptualized Christianity as a Judaism adapted to the Romans (or to the Greco-Romans), while Islam has been seen as a Judaism ↳ adapted to the Arabs.[43] I suggest that the "Abrahamic" family can be perceived as a kind of meta-religion. Drawing on Noam Chomsky's conceptualizations in the field of linguistics, we might say that the Abrahamic family represents a "deep structure" of religion, while its various members, such as Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, are characterized by their "surface structure."[44] Within the deep structure, one observes a continuous circulation of theological ideas, scriptural interpretations, and ritual patterns, as well as an unceasing flow of stories, kaleidoscopic in expression.[45]

This maintenance of key elements and transformation of patterns creates "midrashic worlds," namely, hermeneutic interpretations of core stories and texts.[46] Such a process typifies the web of religious and ethnic communities in the culturally complex and connected world of late antiquity—hybrid societies in which oral and written texts functioned in dialectical interface.[47] Those intertwined midrashic worlds shaped and reshaped cultural and religious memory, transforming what Marquard has called the monotheistic "monomyth" into an infinite "polymyth." Within the Abrahamic family, the midrashic hermeneutical principle is active both within each of the individual traditions and across them.

From an epistemological perspective, as we seek to uncover mechanisms of religious change in the long late antiquity—from the beginnings of Christianity to the emergence of Islam—we might consider yet another "triangle," comprised of polytheism, dualism, and monotheism. The shifts of balance between these three elements are what generate the main transformations of religious ideas, and religious innovation.[48]

The long late antiquity saw myriad encounters—often polemical, at times brutal—among polytheistic, dualistic, and monotheistic systems. This period witnessed the birth and growth of Christianity from its Jewish cradle, and its eventual victory over pagan religions in the Roman Empire. Moreover, it is within this mélange

of religious ideas that Islam was born and first thrived, competing with Judaism and Christianity as the true heir of Abraham.[49] No wonder, then, that the dynamics among these religious trends have often been characterized as competitive in nature. It is worth mentioning that the traditional taxonomy, which focuses on the number of gods in different religions, has much to recommend it. And yet, this taxonomy tends to miss certain key elements. As it is always embedded in the whole of human experience, religion encompasses more than the nature of the divine world. It also resolutely engages with cosmology (in particular with cosmogony and eschatology, and also with the natural world) and with anthropology (the nature of the relationship between soul and body, as well as major aspects of social life such as ethics and politics).

Implicit and Explicit Change

Anthropologists have proposed many interesting models of religious dynamics. Max Weber, for example, focused on routine and charisma in religion. Following Nietzsche, Ruth Benedict discussed what she referred to as "Apollonian" (restraint-based) versus "Dionysian" (excess-based) principles at work in society. Ernest Gellner explored the divide between urban, literate societies and image-based tribal ones, whereas Jack Goody's studies examine literate versus non-literate societies. In a particularly intriguing suggestion, Harvey Whitehouse proposed a cognitive theory of religious transmission and identified two distinct modes of religiosity. The first is the "doctrinal" mode, characterized by "high frequency" and "low intensity," which relies upon the semantic, implicit memory of authoritative teachings. The second mode, "imagistic," is characterized by "low frequency" and "high intensity." The imagistic mode is the more ancient of the two and reflects more intense experiences in exclusive communities. In Whitehouse's view, the origins of these modes of religiosity are to be found in the upper paleolithic period.[50] Of course, ↳ anthropologists tend to deal with individual, and frequently isolated, societies. The mechanisms of religious change in a vast, and vastly connected, world offer a very different set of challenges, demanding as great a focus on theological ideas as on rituals.[51]

Another insight on religious dynamics may be gleaned from the insight of the psychologist Daniel Kahneman, who has proposed two distinct modes of thinking: fast and slow.[52] While these modes work in different ways, they function in synergy. The mechanisms of change in religious systems parallel Kahneman's thinking modes. Generally, religions evolve—that is, they change slowly, via intricate hermeneutical systems. Such systems aim to produce change while claiming that they are not changing anything at all. They produce what we may call implicit religious change.

Sometimes, however, religions undergo fast change. This explicit religious change is often accompanied by a new core text, or scripture. This type of transformation, revolutionary in nature, tends to involve a renewal of the religious community. The parallel and complementary operation of these two kinds of change, slow and fast, avoids the trap of binary explanatory models. The transformation of religion in the period under discussion, late antiquity, occurred in the intersection between slow and fast change patterns.

The term "Christianization" encapsulates the most dramatic aspect of religious change in the Roman Empire.[53] The radical change of the status of religion in society provides a broader framework for describing the core transformation of religion in late antiquity.[54] Such change was also related to the newly achieved status of religious communities and webs of communities.[55] More than language or ethnicity, as had been the case in earlier times, these communities embodied the core locus of identity. In that respect, the *umma* of nascent Islam represents the apex of the late antique religious community. It is often noted that late antiquity is characterized by new scriptures, from the ↳ New Testament to the Qur'an. However, the same period also saw the followers of two old religions, Jews and Zoroastrians, turn away from the writing mode, once so prominent in their traditions, and embrace orality as a preferred mode of transmission.[56]

Like evolution versus revolution, or implicit versus explicit change, the interplay between oral and written tradition further exemplifies the hybrid character of late antique societies and religions.[57] In light of this

hybridity, religious conceptions of the divinity should be understood not in terms of polarities but, rather, along a broad spectrum. This fundamental hybridity helps to explain the structure of the divine world, as found, for example, in pagan monotheism, Christian Trinitarianism, or Jewish angelology.

In our quest to better understand theological shifts, we might also deploy the concept of episteme as articulated by Michel Foucault. For Foucault, an episteme represents the implicit or unconscious orderly structures that underlie the production of scientific knowledge.[58] Foucault was interested in deciphering what he called "epistemic shifts," namely, the mechanisms that drove the transformations of discourse, in particular in what he perceived as the sharp passage from one world of discourse to another. Focusing on radical epistemic shifts, he left aside the interface between inner and outer elements in the dynamics of historical transformations. (Foucauldian epistemic shifts concern explicit thought patterns, in contrast to Thomas Kuhn's "paradigm shifts," which concern implicit ones.) Foucault forgot, however, that even when an epistemic shift appears to be sudden, it—like all historical events—is always overdetermined. Such shifts are the fruit of a maturation process that prepares the ground for even the most radical revolution.

Religious Innovation

As noted, like all facets of society, religions evolve. When that evolution picks up speed and religious beliefs
and/or rituals start to change more rapidly, ↳ religious innovation occurs.[59] This often takes place at the interface of two traditions of thought or practice. Innovation involves the deep reinterpretation of elements internal to the system, together with additional elements coming from outside, which act as a ferment, as it were, permitting the inner transformation of a religious system.

Many scholars have noted that the birth and early development of Christianity, Manichaeism, or Islam do not correspond, even roughly, with Karl Jaspers's Axial Age (*Achsenzeit*).[60] Jaspers was interested in individuals rather than in religious movements or social groups, and it remains striking that Jesus, Mani, and Muhammad are not on the axial list of leading figures. For the cultures of the Near East and Mediterranean, the long late antiquity was a period of dramatic religious transformation. Indeed, it has been considered a "sequel and counterpoint to the Axial Age."[61]

In *The End of Sacrifice*, I suggested that one could approach the long late antiquity as a new "axial age."[62] My claim was that, while both political and social transformations in that period had been well studied, those pertaining to religion in the Mediterranean and the Near East awaited close analysis. I proposed to identify four of these transformations: a "new care of the self," the rise of the religions of the Book, the end of blood sacrifices, and the shift from civic to communitarian religion.

From Jesus to Muhammad, religious movements in the Mediterranean and the Near East (alongside Christians one should mention, at least, Zoroastrians, Jews, and dualists such as Gnostics, Manichaeans, or Mandeans) insisted on the redaction and preservation of holy books. These books formed the core of the various religious systems. They were often sung during the ritual and learned by rote; they were commented upon and sometimes translated. This ↳ new role of books transformed religious systems, ushering in new
configurations from the old building blocks. These new religious configurations, formed in late antiquity— Eastern and Western Christendom, as well as Caliphate Islam—would last through the Middle Ages.

No religion exists without a community, and no community can survive without communication between its members. This is true both at the synchronic level, between present members, and at the diachronic level, between present members and their ancestors. In the latter sense, communication across generations within a given religious community is a particular kind of cultural memory.[63]

In the scholarship, the late antique religious revolution is often seen as the victory of Christianity over paganism, or of monotheism over polytheism. However, like other revolutions, the one that occurred in late antiquity needs to be understood in the *longue durée*, as François Furet has shown regarding the French Revolution.[64] Although a late antique religious revolution definitely occurred, recent studies have shown that the unity of the divine may not be as clearly singularizing in Christianity (or even Judaism) as previously thought. Many "pagan" intellectuals were adepts of a monotheism that owed nothing to that of their Christian enemies. In that sense, at least, Christianity seems to be more the consequence than the cause of the religious revolution of late antiquity. One of the main aspects of this revolution was predicated upon the deep transformation of religion from what was essentially a set of rituals to a body of special knowledge that was meant to be imparted to all members of the community (and usually only to them, hence creating a kind of esotericism) or to a net of communities—often, a diaspora.[65]

Like religions themselves, religious worldviews circulate in many different ways. In the search for an explanation for religious change and innovation in late antiquity, two central themes recur. The first is the role played by sacred, canonized texts, and their hermeneutics and translations, in religious innovation.[66] The main

p. 19   impact of sacred texts and the "secondary," hermeneutical ↳ literature built around them in antiquity takes place within a religious community (broadly defined) all across its diaspora. In late antiquity, texts migrated to the center of religious life. Generally, this center, which is often expressed primarily through ritual, is also present in domains such as religious education, theology, commentaries, homiletics, polemics, spirit, spiritual life, and mystical experience.

The second central theme is the transfer of knowledge between different communities, in a world in which religious diasporas interact. We might say that it is through "contagion," to borrow a term from epidemiology, that religious change occurs.[67] New methods of circulation and communication across large regions of Asia also enabled the transmission of religious knowledge between East and West, fostering religious innovation. Innovation is often a result of contact among religious practices, conceptions, and master narratives. With travel, both written texts and oral stories circulated.

Religious *innovation*, which stems from a process either inherent to a community or exterior to it, seems to have taken place simultaneously in a number of late ancient religious worldviews.[68] The growth of the urban environment may have had an impact on this convergent evolution.[69] The urban environment fosters religious pluralism and the *koinos bios* between the different emigrant communities, and religious change (as well as conversion) always entails a kind of mimetics between them. I suggest that religious communication may be at the root of religious innovation occurring across societies and religious groups.

Cultural Revolution

The epistemic shift observable in the long late antiquity is a double one, reflected in both religious and cultural transformation. This double shift permitted the intersocietal transmission of religious and cultural trends and ideas, crossing the East–West divide on the eastern *limes* of the Roman Empire. Means of communication underwent a number of important changes. Since the days of the *res publica,* the rise in written communication helped to transform the ↳ Roman world.[70] Ritual, preaching, education, and polemics were all used to enhance

p. 20   the transmission of religion, both within a given religious community and between different religious communities.

Like religion, literary culture too was radically transformed in late antiquity. This transformation is reflected in the dramatic increase in the use of codices as a medium for texts. The codex facilitated the circulation and study of written texts, allowing unprecedented cross-referencing from page to page and chapter to chapter. Moreover, codices, which used the two sides of a page for writing, were much cheaper to produce than scrolls, and hence enabled a democratization of the written word. These codices had dramatic implications for

religious texts, and for scriptures in particular. In this way, the parallel development of religious and other cultural transformations reflects a dialectical process between them.

However, although the production of codices eased the circulation of texts, the texts did not circulate by themselves. Men (and sometimes women) carried them along on their journeys. Together with the codices, they also carried stories. In the case of religious scriptures, these stories functioned as commentaries, their oral nature imparting a supple quality. We might describe the stories' evolution as a kind of "midrashic" development, akin to the methodology used by the rabbis of antiquity to embroider the biblical text, mixing hermeneutical traditions, folklore, and legend.[71]

The translation of sacred scriptures, a way to overcome linguistic boundaries, became common during the first centuries of the common era. The various Targums rendered the biblical text comprehensible to Aramaic-speaking Jews. Not long after Christianity was established as an independent religion, the New Testament was translated into the languages of various Christian communities, first of all Latin, Syriac, and Armenian, while the Manichaean texts were translated from the original Aramaic, soon after Mani's apostolate, to Pahlavi, Coptic, Syriac, Greek, and later to other Iranian languages, such as Parthian, as well as to Uigur and Chinese.[72] At the same time, the existence of various *linguae francae* facilitated the transmission of religions across borders.

Alongside the victory of monotheism, late antiquity saw the emergence of sacred scriptures in a number of religions, from the canonization of the Mishnah and the New Testament to that of the Qur'an. The Canadian historian of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith thus spoke of the "Scriptural movement" in the late antique Near East and eastern Mediterranean.[73] A useful concept in understanding religious mutations in our period is that of canonization. But canonization is only part of what we might call the "scriptural universe." We also witness the birth and growth of world religions, such as Christianity, Manichaeism (the first religion to define itself as a world religion from its inception), and Islam. Also noticeable is a new care of the self, and a fresh attitude toward the body, mainly expressed in asceticism.[74] The importance of eschatology is another key element in understanding the late ancient path, up to Islam. The birth and growth of new empires form the political context of the birth of world religions.

It is often assumed that religious evolution follows a path towards complexity: as societies grow increasingly complex with time, so do religious worldviews and rituals. However, this is not necessarily the case. In late antiquity, for example, one observes a dramatic simplification of religious conceptions, not only within the divine realm but also in society. There is now only one God, and the many heavenly beings all remain under His authority. Against the one God stands His one main enemy, Satan, together with his hosts. Similarly, there is one single Orthodox Church, alongside numerous heresies. The social role and status of the Christian Church in the Roman world is relatively simple. Yet the existence, from the very beginnings of Christianity, of multiple understandings of Jesus Christ's nature, most of them rejected as "heresies," soon brought with it the development of an increasingly complex theology. Similarly, even Manichaeism, a radically dualistic system, should be seen as a particular twist on an essentially monotheistic worldview.

As we have seen in this brief introduction, the trajectories of monotheism in late antiquity raise intriguing questions. This book does not set out to tackle ↳ this challenge *en tout*. Instead, I propose a different tack: to take the reader on strategic forays into the dynamics of monotheism.

Focusing on a few key figures, Chapters 1 and 2 discuss characteristics of the philosophers' God in relationship with that of the Christians. Chapters 3 and 4 survey prominent forms of religious dualism, as well as their bearing on the nature of the divine. Finally, Chapters 5, 6, and 7 discuss implications of monotheistic theologies on the collective and on the individual. The Conclusion delineates a number of important implications of Abrahamic monotheistic patterns.

Notes

Footnotes

1   I quote here Michael Frede, "The Case for Pagan Monotheism in Greek and Graeco-Roman Antiquity," in *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire*, ed. Stephen Mitchell and Peter van Nuffelen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 53–81, at 59–60.

2   Thanks to Google's Ngram.

3   In the same work, Hume also proposes a more interesting theory, according to which the history of religion reflects the permanent oscillation between polytheism and monotheism. See Ernest Gellner, "A Pendulum Swing Theory of Islam," *Annales Marocaines de Sociologie* 5 (1968): 5–14.

4   The term "cosmotheism" refers to the idea that the cosmos as a whole is divine. Friedrich Schelling is usually considered to have coined the term "henotheism" to describe the worship of a single god without necessarily denying the existence of other gods. In fact, Schelling refers to "relative monotheism" as *Eingötterei*, while "henotheism" was coined by Max Müller (who had been a student of the late Schelling), mainly referring to it in the context of his studies on Indian religions. See André Laks, "Polythéisme, flexibilité, rationalisation. Notes sur une lecture estivale," n. 22, forthcoming in a Festschrift for Pierre Judet de la Combe. I thank Professor Laks for having sent me his text ahead of publication. The concept retains heuristic relevance today.

5   See in particular Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*.

6   See, for instance, Iwona Gadja, "Quel monothéisme en Arabie du sud ancienne?" in *Juifs et chrétiens en Arabie aux Ve et VIe siècles: regards croisés sur les sources*, ed. Joëlle Beaucamp, Françoise Briquel-Chatonnet, and Christian Julien Robin (Paris: Association des amis du Centre d'histoire et de civilisation de Byzance, 2010), 107–20.

7   See Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike: Ein europäischer Zugang* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2010).

8   G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: from Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); P. Crone, "The Religion of the Qur'ānic Pagans: God and the Lesser Deities," *Arabica* 57 (2010): 151–200.

9   See G. G. Stroumsa, *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

10 G. Budé, *De transitu hellenismi ad christianismum libri tres* (1535).

11 See, for instance, Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

12 See, for instance, Carlin A. Barton and Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016). A more promising approach is developed in Stanley K. Stowers, *History and the Study of Religion: The Ancient Mediterranean as a Test Case* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

13 For a detailed overview, see, for instance, David M. Gwynn and Susanne Bangert et al., eds., *Religious Diversity in Late Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). See further Francesco Massa and Maureen Attali, eds., *Shared Religious Sites in Late Antiquity: Negotiating Cultural and Ritual Identities in the Eastern Roman Empire* (Basel: Schwabe, 2023).

14 This recognition is largely due to the pioneering work of Peter Brown. In his *Journeys of the Mind: A Life in History* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023), Brown presents a personal yet thorough account of the growing interest in the religious aspects of late antique history. See G. G. Stroumsa, "The Making of a Stylite Scholar," *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 27 (2023): 333–5, as well as a number of other discussions of the book and Brown's rejoinder, ibid., 335–70. On religious communities, see G. Fowden, "Religious Communities," in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, ed. G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 82–106.

15 On the concept of religious dynamics, see Christoph Bochinger, ed., *Dynamics of Religion: Past and Present* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), as well as P. Slater, *The Dynamics of Religion: Meaning and Change in Religious Traditions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978). See further Menahem Kister, "Some Early Jewish and Christian Exegetical Problems and the Dynamics of Monotheism," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 37 (2006): 548–93. From a theoretical perspective, the dynamics of religion in human societies have been studied by Jonathan H. Turner, Alexandra Maryanski, Anders Klostergaard Petersen, and Armin W. Geertz, *The Emergence and Evolution of Religion by Means of Natural Selection* (London, New York: Routledge, 2018); see esp. ch. 10: "Marxian Selection: The Dynamics of Religious Conflict," 225–42.

16 H. Corbin, *Le paradoxe du monothéisme* (Paris: L'Herne, 1981). The Russian Orthodox theologian Pavel Florensky (1882–1937) had already developed a theory of religious antinomies.

17 See Corbin, *Le paradoxe du monothéisme*, 181: "Le monothéisme est impossible sans l'angélologie." To Corbin's idea of inner tension within monotheism, one may compare Ernest Gellner's "pendulum theory" between monotheistic and polytheistic proclivities in Islamic societies. See Gellner, "A Pendulum Swing Theory of Islam" (n. 3 above).

18 Corbin's paradox of monotheism differs from Averroes's "omnipotence paradox" of God. The latter concerns the existence
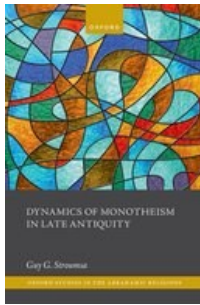
of evil in a world created and ruled by a good God.

19   Already in antiquity, Jewish monotheism was not pure. See, for instance, Paula Fredriksen, "Philo, Herod, Paul, and the Many Gods of Ancient Jewish 'Monotheism,'" *Harvard Theological Review* 115 (2022): 23–45.

20   On the apparently simple idea of monotheism, see M. Cook, *Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 5. On monotheism in general, with an excellent bibliography, see Bernhard Lang, "Monotheismus," in *Handbuch religionsgeschichtlicher Grundbegriffe*, IV, ed. Hubert Cancik et al. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1998), 143–65. On Zoroastrianism, see, for instance, Prods Oktor Skjaervø, "Zarathustra: An Evolutionary Monotheist?" in *Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism*, ed. Beate Pongratz-Leisten (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 317–50.

21   Cf. Richard Payne, *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

22   On Sasanian dualism, see in particular Shaul Shaked, *Dualism in Transformation: Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran* (London: SOAS, 1994). See already Shaked, "Some Notes on Ahreman, the Evil Spirit, and his Creation," in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem on his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. E. E. Urbach, R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, and C. Wirszubski (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 227–34.

23   See G. Clark, "Augustine's Varro and Pagan Monotheism," in *Monotheism between Pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity*, ed. Peter van Nuffelen and Stephen Mitchell (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 181–201, at 201. Cf. Damascius, *The Philosophical History*, text, transl., notes by Polymnia Athanassiadi (Athens: Apameia, 1999), 236–7. See also Chapter 1, n. 4, below.

24   Under medieval Islam, however, there were those, such as the Sabeans, who were said to perceive themselves as pagans. See, for instance, Shlomo Pines's introduction to his translation of Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1974), lvii–cxxxiv.

25   As examples of recent research, see, for instance, Laurent Bricault and Corinne Bonnet, eds., *Panthée: Religious Transformations in the Graeco-Roman Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), and Corinne Bonnet et al., eds., *Naming and Mapping the Gods in the Ancient Mediterranean: Spaces, Mobilities, Imaginaries* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2024).

26   M. Detienne, *Comparing the Incomparable* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); French original: *Comparer l'incomparable* (Paris: Seuil, 2000). On Detienne, see G. G. Stroumsa, "Comparer à travers champs? Polythéismes et monothéismes," *Asdiwal* 14 (2019): 65–71.

27   M. Bettini, *In Praise of Polytheism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023; original Italian edition: *Elogio del politeismo: Quello que possiamo imparare dalle religioni antiche* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014).

28   See O. Marquard, "Lob des Polytheismus," in *Philosophie und Mythos: Ein Kolloquium*, ed. Hans Poser (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979), 40–58. Cf. Polymnia Athanassiadi, *Vers la pensée unique: La montée de l'intolérance dans l'Antiquité tardive* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2010), who speaks of the passage from "polydoxie" to "monodoxie" in the Christian empire, especially in Justinian's time.

29   See Pongratz-Leisten, *Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism.* One may add that a similarly gradual process is now the norm in contemporary studies of late antique Christianization processes. See also Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), as well as Thomas Römer, "Le problème du monothéisme biblique," *Revue Biblique* 124 (2017): 12–25. For a more recent study, see, for instance, Christian Frevel, *History of Ancient Israel* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023). For a historiographical study, see Gregor Ahn, "'Monotheismus'—'Polytheismus': Grenzen und Möglichkeiten einer Klassifikation von Gotttesvorstellungen," in *Alter Orient und Altes Testament*, ed. Manfried Dietrich and Oswald Loretz (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1993), 1–24.

30   See in particular A. Lang, *Myth, Ritual and Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, 1887).

31   W. Schmidt, *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee: Eine historisch-kritische und positive Studie* (12 vols.) (Münster: Aschendorff, 1926–55); R. Pettazzoni, *Dio: Formazione e sviluppo del monoteismo nella storia delle religioni; vol. 1: L'essere celeste nelle credenze dei popoli primitivi* (Rome: Athenaeum, 1922)

32   Rom. 1:23; cf. similar views in Islamic historiography.

33   On biblical monotheism, see, for instance, Fritz Stolz, *Einführung in den biblischen Monotheismus* (Darmstadt: Wisssenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996). Henotheism (or monolatry) may be more adequate to describe the prevalent thinking permeating the Hebrew Bible. Cf. Christophe Lemardelé, "Hénotheisme, polythéisme, monothéisme. Dialogue d'histoire des religions anciennes," *Revista del Instituto de Historia Antigua Oriental* 21 (2020): 127–40.

34   See, for instance, Loren T. Stuckenbruck and Wendy E. S. North, eds., *Early Jewish and Christian Monotheism* (London, New York: Clark, 2004), with a select bibliography on pp. 235–42.

35   See G. G. Stroumsa, *The Idea of Semitic Monotheism: The Rise and Fall of a Scholarly Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

36   Throughout his career, Renan expressed such ideas in a number of places. See, for instance, his Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France (1862), "De la part des peuples sémitiques dans l'histoire de la civilisation."

37   See Maurice Olender, *Les langues du paradis. Aryens et Sémites: un couple providentiel* (Paris: Gallimard, Le Seuil, 1989),

77–82, esp. 81.

38   Renan, "Mahomet et les origines de l'islamisme," in his *Études d'histoire religieuse* (1857; repr.) (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 168–220.

39   See E. Renan, *L'islamisme et la science* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1883).

40   Similarly, Christoph Auffarth refers to *religio migrans*; see C. Auffarth, "*Religio Migrans*: Die orientalishen Religionen im Kontext antiker Religion: ein theoretisches Modell," *Mediterranea* 4 (2007): 1–31. The intense contemporary debate on the legitimacy and heuristic value of "religion" as a concept remains beyond the scope of this work. But see, for example, Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), with discussion of the scholarly literature.

41   In his own words: "la pensée mythique est par essence transformatrice." In this Lévi-Strauss opposes E. E. Evans-Prichard (*Rethinking Anthropology*, 7), for whom myth is a collection of variables. On this, see Philippe Descola, "Anthropologie de la nature," *Annuaire du Collège de France 2018–2019* (Paris: Collège de France, 2020), 603–16. Descola argues for a "transformational comparatism," which focuses on "non-variants" and the "systematics of differences." On the comparative method, Descola quotes Lévi-Strauss: "Ce n'est pas la comparaison qui fonde la généralisation, mais le contraire."; cf. C. Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris: Plon, 1958), 28.

42   See P. Borgeaud, *Aux origines de l'histoire des religions* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), 83–7.

43   See, for instance, Dominique Desjeux, *Le marché des dieux: Comment naissent les innovations religieuses; du judaïsme au christianisme* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2022). Julius Wellhausen, of course, inaugurated the modern scholarly vision of Islam as a Judaism for Arabs.

44   See Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1957).

45   For the scholarly use of this metaphor, see Sarah Stroumsa, *Das Kaleidoskop der Convivencia: Denktraditionen des Mittelalters im Austausch zwischen Islam, Judentum und Christentum* (Freiburg: Herder, 2023).

46   For the idea of "midrashic" milieu, see John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). Wansbrough argued convincingly that it is in such a "midrashic milieu that Islam was born." Cf. Gerald R. Hawting, "John Wansbrough, Islam, and Monotheism," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 9 (1997): 23–38.

47   See, for instance, Michael Scott, *Ancient Worlds: An Epic History of East and West* (London: Hutchinson, 2016), Part III: "Religious Change in a Connected World," where Scott deals with religious innovation. See also "Religious Innovation: An Introductory Essay," in *Innovation in Religious Traditions*, ed. Michael Williams et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1992). On religious innovation, see further Rodney Stark and Liam Sims Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), where two stages of innovation are distinguished: invention of new ideas and their social acceptance (156).

48   See, for instance, Richard Gordon et al., eds., *Beyond Priesthood: Religious Entrepreneurs and Innovations in the Roman Empire* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017). More generally, see A. Houtman et al., eds., *Empsychoi logoi: Religious Innovations in Antiquity: Studies in Honour of Pieter van der Horst* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

49   See, for instance, Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike: Ein europäischer Zugang* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2010).

50   See Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2004); see in particular ch. 4, 63–85. For a criticism of Whitehouse's theory, see Scott Atran, *In Gods we Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

51   See, for instance, O. Hekster et al., eds., *Ritual Dynamics and Religious Change in the Roman Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

52   D. Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (London: Allen Lane, 2011).

53   See, for instance, Hervé Inglebert, Sylvain Destephen, and Bruno Dumézil, eds., *Le problème de la christianisation du monde antique* (Paris: Picard, 2010).

54   See, for instance, Jason BeDuhn, "Mani and the Crystallization of the Concept of Religion in Third-Century Iran," in *Mani at the Court of the Persian Kings*, ed. J. BeDuhn (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 247–75.

55   See, for instance, Anna Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire: The Spread of New Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); the book's main topic is the discussion of the sudden appearance of new ideas and their diffusion.

56   See G. G. Stroumsa, *The Scriptural Universe of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); see in particular Introduction, 1–9.

57   In *The Emergence and Evolution of Religion* (n. 15 above) Turner and his colleagues discuss revolution as a distinct type of adaptation to specific selection pressures.

58   See M. Foucault, *L'ordre du discours* (1971), in M. Foucault, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015), II, 243, where he sets what he calls discourse in opposition to doctrines. It may be more precise to speak of implicit and explicit structures of discourse rather than unconscious and conscious ones. While theology represents an explicit form of discourse, the overall cosmology of a religious system represents an implicit form of religious system. Implicit forms of discourse reflect second-order thinking.

59   On the concept of religious innovation, see, for instance, Dominique Desjeux, *Le marché des dieux: Comment naissent les innovations religieuses. Du judaïsme au christianisme* (n. 43 above).

60   On Jaspers and the idea of the Axial Age, see Robert N. Bellah and Hans Joas, eds., *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). See further Eckhart Otto, "Jenseits der Achsenzeit: Das Achsenzeit-Theorem im Ausgang und mit Blick auf Max Webers Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen," *Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte* 25 (2019): 55–92. See further Stephen K. Sanderson, *Religious Evolution and the Axial Age: From Shamans to Priests to Prophets* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), as well as Jan Assmann, *Achsenzeit: Eine Archäologie der Moderne* (Munich: Beck, 2018), which studies the origins of the concept of "axial age" since the Enlightenment.

61   See Arnason, Eisenstadt, and Wittrock, "Introduction: Late Antiquity as a Sequel and Counterpoint to the Axial Age," in *Axial Civilizations and World History* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 287–93.

62   See *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009), 108–9. The book, which stemmed from four lectures held at the Collège de France in 2004, was originally published in French: *La fin du sacrifice: les mutations religieuses de l'antiquité tardive* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2005). On the idea of a (very) long late antiquity, see Garth Fowden, *Before and After Muhammad: The Frist Millennium Refocused* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013). For Fowden, late antiquity ends even later, in Avicenna's time.

63   On religious memory, see Stroumsa, *The Scriptural Universe of Ancient Christianity*, 29–39.

64   Which, Furet argues, lasted for more than a century. See F. Furet, *La Révolution (1770–1880)* (Paris: Hachette, 1991).

65   For a discussion of communication in a diasporic context, see Sophia Menache, "The Pre-History of Communication," Introduction to her edited volume, *Communication in the Jewish Diaspora: The Pre-Modern World* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 1–12. This method has been fruitfully applied to the study of the Greek colonies in the Mediterranean by Irad Malkin. See, for instance, his *A Small Greek World: Networks in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

66   See, for instance, Greg Woolf, "Empires, Diasporas and the Emergence of Religions," in *Christianity in the Second Century: Themes and Developments*, ed. J. Carlton Paget and J. Lieu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 25–38.

67   See in particular Dan Sperber, *La contagion des idées: théorie naturaliste de la culture* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1996).

68   Ibid. On the religious innovation of early Christianity, see Dominique Desjeux, *Le marché des dieux: Comment naissent les innovations religieuses; du judaïsme au christianisme* (n. 43 above).

69   On this point, see, for instance, Martin Christ et al., "Entangling Urban and Religious History: A New Methodology," *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 25 (2023): 1–72.

70   This fact was recently demonstrated anew by Claudia Moatti; see her "Translation, Migration and Communication in the Roman Empire: Three Aspects of Movement in History," *Classical Antiquity* 25 (2006): 109–40, esp. 135. In the following paragraphs, I draw from my "Axial Religion in the Late Antique Scriptural Galaxy," in G. G. Stroumsa, *The Crucible of Late Antique Religion: Selected Essays* (STAC) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 206–23.

71   On books and religion in our context, see, for instance, Duncan MacRae, *Legible Religion: Books, Gods, and Rituals in Roman Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), as well as Ann Starr Kreps, *The Crucified Book: Sacred Writing in the Age of Valentinus* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2022), and Rebecca Scharbach Wollenberg, *The Closed Book: How the Rabbis Taught the Jews (not) to Read the Bible* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

72   Only Mani's *Shapuragan* seems to have been written in Pahlavi.

73   W. C. Smith, *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). Note, however, that late antiquity also witnessed a striking return to orality, in particular among Jews and Zoroastrians.

74   See in particular Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). Cf. my review in *History of Religions* 30 (1990): 100–2. Cf. Michel Foucault, *Les aveux de la chair* (*Histoire de la sexualité*, 4: Paris: Gallimard, 2018). The draft of this last book dates from Foucault's final years (he died in 1984). It stands to reason that Brown and Foucault discussed these topics in their numerous conversations in Berkeley in the 1970s. On monastic asceticism and its impact on the person, see two important studies: Inbar Graiver, *Asceticism of the Mind: Forms of Attention and Transformation in Late Antique Monasticism* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2018), and Frabrizio Vecoli, *Le doute du moine: Aux origines du discernement spirituel* (Leuven: Peeters, 2024).

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CHAPTER

1   Origen, Plotinus, and *Unio Mystica* 🔓

Guy G Stroumsa

Abstract

In the last generation, scholarship has made some major progress in our recognition of the fact that the argument about the nature of God in the Roman Empire cannot simply be understood in the traditional terms of pagans versus Christians. Through the prism of a comparison between the philosopher Plotinus and the Christian theologian Origen, two leading thinkers from the first half of the third century, this chapter seeks to reflect on the idea of man's union with the One (or *henosis*, for Plotinus), or with God (*unio mystica*, for Origen). For both, this union represents the very core of mystical experience and the highest human achievement. Yet, Plotinus's conception of the divine One reflects an inclusive form of monotheism, highly different from the exclusive monotheism of the Christian Origen.

Keywords: Origen, Plotinus, henosis, unio mystica, inclusive and exclusive monotheism

Subject: History of Religion, Comparative Religion, Theology, Religious Issues and Debates, Philosophy of Religion

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Inclusive Monotheism?

According to Aristotle (*de Anima* 411a 7–8), Thales of Miletus maintained that everything was "full of gods"—an expression later echoed by Cicero. Yet, over the following centuries, monotheism became the "politically correct religious idiom."[1] Scholarship has traditionally linked this transformation to the Christianization process. In the past two decades, however, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of monotheistic trends among Hellenic thinkers in the Roman Empire.[2]

The tendency to mark the supremacy of one god above others, as ruler of the world, represents a remarkable phenomenon in the Roman Empire. Referred to traditionally as "henotheism" or, more recently, as "pagan

monotheism," this tendency entailed devotion to one god, who alone was the object of prayers and rituals—although the possibility of other gods was not denied. Henk Versnel proposes to apply the notion of

hemotheism to such phenomena within the Greek polytheistic system.[3] Niketas Siniologlou, who prefers the term henotheism over that of inclusive monotheism, argues that the inclusive character ↳ of pagan henotheism was its Achilles heel, given the aggressivity of Christian exclusivist monotheism.[4]

The scholarly debate on pagan and Christian forms of monotheism in the Roman Empire, which has been ongoing in the last decades, has enriched our understanding of intellectual and religious processes in the first centuries. It has also permitted us to question longstanding schematic oppositions between polytheists and monotheists in the empire. In this debate, pagans are opposed to Christians. This makes sense, as at stake are shared forms of discourse, which were based, for both Hellenic and Christian authors, on Greek philosophical traditions.

According to Michael Frede, philosophers, especially Platonists, "were monotheists precisely in the sense that the Christians were." In his view, the real bone of contention between them and Christian theologians was the divinity of Jesus.[5] By contrast, Mark Edwards considers calling philosophers monotheists an abuse of language.[6] While philosophers may have been henotheists, he argues, monotheism *stricto sensu*, in the context of the Mediterranean and Near East, is only meaningful when applied to Jews and Christians, as it entails conceptions of creation, history, and eschatology, which were unknown to the Greek philosophers.

This chapter approaches the problem of pagan versus Christian monotheism through the examination of an understudied topic: the idea of the union of the person (or of the soul) with God. Thought to form the core of mysticism, in Christianity as well as in other religious traditions, this idea was shared by Platonic philosophers. In doing so, we will bear in mind Stephen Mitchell's warning that to focus on "the bald triumph" of monotheism may occlude other, more pressing problems.[7]

Beyond the aggressive character of their theological exclusivism, the Christians succeeded in integrating worship with theology, something that pagans rarely attempted, and in which they never succeeded.[8] These

two ↳ characteristics of Christianity partly explain its eventual victory in the empire. The debate among contemporary scholars has revealed the breadth of perceptions, on the part of those who were neither Jews nor Christians, of the idea of a supreme divinity.

Remarkably, as noted by the great seventeenth-century scholar Justus Scaliger, after the first century CE Jews virtually ceased participation in the intellectual discourse taking place in Greek. However, while the Jews no longer used Greek to express their ideas, Jewish patterns of religious thought continued to anchor Christian theology. Jews also remained a significant presence, active in what can be called the marketplace of religions in the empire. Hence, the rivalry between pagans and Christians can only be understood by taking into account the Jewish element. This is no simple task, as the discourse in Hebrew and Aramaic sources is very different from that found in the Greek philosophical tradition. However, it may function as a kind of corrective, facilitating an understanding of the imbrication of ideas between the various communities.

Pagan and Abrahamic Forms of Monotheism

Although pagans and Christians differed from each other in important ways, the two groups shared many traits. These include patterns of behavior in the same society (a kind of *koinos bios*), as well as religious and philosophical ideas. The personal search for truth was an important intellectual and spiritual goal regardless of religious identity, as shown, for instance, in the second century by the similar paths of the philosopher Lucian of Samosata (c.120–80) and Justin Martyr (c.100–65). Late antique religion was an intercultural system in which a dynamic process permitted the transformation of religious conceptualization and practice.[9]

Greek literature from the Roman world preserves many literary references to *Hypsistos Theos* (the Highest God). Moreover, various exclamatory lapidary inscriptions like *Eis Theos!* (One God!) have survived. Since the days of Erik Peterson (1890–1960), these expressions have been studied as indicative of a move towards monotheism—

or at least towards henotheism.[10] Whether they ↳ stem from Jewish, Christian, or pagan milieus and whether this move reflected a Jewish or a Christian impact remains an open question.[11] In the present context, it is important to mention that such pagan inclination to monotheism was a far cry from Christian or Jewish monotheism. What it does show is the conflation of Greek and Israelite forms of monotheism in the Roman Empire.

In a passage in *Metamorphoses*, or *The Golden Ass* (*Asinus aureus*) as Augustine called it, the Numidian author Apuleius of Madaura (c.124–70) describes Lucius's vision of Fortuna, namely, Isis. The goddess speaks of the many forms under which she appears to humans, while emphasizing her divine unity. She is described as:

> mother of all Nature and mistress of the elements, first-born of the ages and greatest of powers divine, queen of the dead, and queen of the immortals, all gods and goddesses in a single form . . . whose sole divinity is worshipped in differing forms, with varying rites, under many names, by all the world.[12]

The inclination reflected by Apuleius towards the unity of the supreme divinity is nowhere more clearly apparent than among the Platonic philosophers. In their opinion, the pyramid of beings culminated in the One, the supreme god. Such an attitude is reflected even in the writings of Emperor Julian (d.363), that powerful defender of Hellenic polytheism. In his pamphlet against the Christians, Julian writes:

> I wish to show that the Jews agree with the Gentiles (*tois ethnesin*), except that they believe in only one God. That is indeed peculiar to them and strange to us, since all the rest we have in a manner in common with them—temples, sanctuaries, altars, purifications, and certain precepts. For as to these we differ from one another either not at all or in trivial matters.[13]

Julian rejected the Christian God of his youth and sought to return to Hellenic tradition. He never succeeded, however, in becoming a real polytheist, and his arguments against the "Galileans" reveal him to have

remained, at heart, a monotheist. What he objects to in the God of Moses is his character: he is ↳ jealous (*baskanos*).[14] He is, moreover, "a particular (*merikon*) god," while the Hellenes know to "recognize the God of the All" (*ton tōn holōn theon*).[15] God does not need revelation in order for humans to recognize him, since "the human race possesses its knowledge of God by nature and not from teaching," a fact proved "by the universal yearning for the divine that is in all humans."[16]

In Julian's remarkable testimony, we see an insistence that the taxonomy of religions should be based on rituals rather than beliefs. He notes that Jewish ritual (at least, sacrifice, which had largely disappeared since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem) was not fundamentally different from the rituals of Hellenic polytheism. Thus, Jews were mainly distinguished from Hellenes by the fact that they had only one god— although not a universal one. It hence seemed heuristically useful to compare Jewish and Greek rituals.

When comparing animal sacrifices among Jews and Greeks, Julian was following an established tradition. In Book II of his work *On Abstinence*, which is a treatise on sacrifices, Porphyry preserves lengthy excerpts from Theophrastus's *On Piety*, or *Peri Eusebeias*. Theophrastus, who was Aristotle's successor at the Lyceum, describes the Jews as a race of philosophers among the Syrians (similar to the Brahmins among the Indians). According to him, the Jews were the first to perform animal sacrifices. They did so, but not out of appetite, and the way they carried out these animal sacrifices, almost furtively, reflects their embarrassment about this shameful act ("so that He who sees all is not a witness to this terrible act").[17]

Furthermore, they fast during the days in between sacrifices, and, during this time, being a race of philosophers, they engage in discussions about divine matters. At night, they devote themselves to contemplating the stars, observing them, and addressing God through their prayers.[18]

In the passage above, identity was more defined by behavior than by belief. This is true even though his version of Jewish sacrificial rituals is wildly inaccurate. Additionally, this is true even in times of religious polemics. Augustine, for instance, like Julian, held that forms of worship, rather than theological conceptions, should be the main criterion of religious identity.[19] A polemical mindset, however, tends to sharpen differences and blur similarities. Hence, as Maijastina Kahlos reminds us, in their debates with pagans Christians usually emphasized the many gods of their opponents, refuted the monotheism of others, and reclaimed it solely for themselves, in what she calls the "Christian project of building rhetorical boundaries between 'us' and 'them.'"[20]

Proclus (412–85), the leader of the Platonic academy in Athens and a prominent Neoplatonic philosopher, was a vocal advocate of polytheism. But even for him, as he writes in his *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, "all forms of religions and sects accept the existence of the very first cause, and all men call it a helping god," while not all recognize the existence of lower gods, as "The One shows itself more clearly than plurality."[21]

Furthermore, as Proclus states in his *Elements of Theology*, the One is identical to the Divine:

> And conversely, if a henad be self-complete it is a god. For qua henad it is most closely and especially akin to the One, and qua self-complete, to the Good; participating in both these respects in the distinctive character of godhead, it is a god.[22]

Pagans, then, were not always the polytheists decried by their Christian opponents. Moreover, Christians often appeared to others to believe in more than one god. Such an accusation would become common in Jewish and Muslim anti-Christian polemics. I refer here not to the Trinity, which was not universally upheld among Christians before the fourth century, but to the hierarchy of two divine beings, God the Father and Jesus Christ.

In this vein, let us look at a passage from Origen's *Dialogue with Heraclides*, a work written in the 240s that presents a dialogue between two Christian bishops. Note the polytheistic flavor:

> **Origen said:** I beg you, Father Heraclides: there is a God who is all-powerful, uncreated, the supreme God who made all things. Do you agree?
> **Heraclides said:** I agree; this is what I too believe.
> **Origen said:** Christ Jesus existing in the form of God, and distinct from the God in the form of whom he existed, was God before his incarnation, yes or no?
> **Heraclides said:** He was God before.
> **Origen said:** Was he God before His incarnation, yes or no?
> **Heraclides said:** Yes.
> **Origen said:** Another God [*heteros theos*] than the God in whose form He Himself was?
> **Heraclides said:** Of course, different from another one, and as He was in the form of the Creator of all.
> **Origen said:** Isn't it true, then, that there was a God, Son of God, who is the single Son of God, the first born of all creation, and that we have no trouble in saying both that there are two Gods [*duo theous*], and that there is one God?. . .
> **Origen said:** You do not seem to have answered my question. Explain yourself better, as perhaps I have not understood well. Is the Father God?
> **Heraclides said:** Indeed.
> **Origen said:** Is the Son distinct from the Father?
> **Heraclides said:** Of course. How could one be at once father and son?
> **Origen said:** While being distinct from the Father, is the Son, too, God?

> **Heraclides said:** He too is God.
> **Origen said:** And the unity that is being established is that of two Gods?
> **Heraclides said:** Yes.
> **Origen said:** Do we profess two Gods [*homologoumen duo theous*]?
> **Heraclides said:** Yes. The power [*dunamis*] is one.[23]

This dialogue may be the best proof text in all of patristic literature that Christological doctrines, even before Trinitarianism, have polytheistic propensities. The passage further reflects the sophisticated way in which third-century Christian intellectuals grappled with their theology.

Similarly, the fourth-century philosopher Marius Victorinus, who converted to Christianity, emphasizes in his tractate on Christology that, in their theology, the Christians stand between the pagans and the Jews. The pagans ↳ believe in many gods, while the Jews have only one God. The Christians claim, against the pagans, that they believe in one God, and against the Jews that they believe in two divine personae, the Father and the Son—without, however, denying monotheism.[24] Arnobius (d.330), another writer from Numidia, mentions in his work *Against the Pagans* that the Scriptures also refer to of a plurality of gods.[25] In some cases, he notes, the term is used in a metaphorical way.

Finally, let us consider Olympiodorus (c.495–570), the last pagan philosopher in Alexandria. In his *Commentary of the Gorgias*, Olympiodorus offers the following definition of monotheism: "the first cause is one, namely God; for there cannot be many first causes. Indeed, the first does not even have a name." In discussing this text, Athanassiadi and Frede note that Olympiodorus does not differ here from contemporary Christian theologians, in the age of Justinian.[26] This small florilegium serves to contextualize the famous discussion of Origen and Plotinus on the union with the One, which took place within the shared discourse of pagan and Christian authors on conceptions of divinity. We now turn to that discussion.

Plotinus on *Henosis*

The Plotinian union with the One provides the intellectual background for the Christian conceptions of *henosis* and of *theōsis* (divinization), in particular as expressed in the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus, whose author was probably a Greek monk in late fifth-century Palestine. This corpus would constitute the backbone of the Christian mystical tradition throughout the Middle Ages, and beyond.[27] Although the term *henosis* itself can be found already in Ignatius of Antioch, in the second century, and in Gregory of Nyssa, in the fourth century, it is only with the Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite that it came to mean the mystical union of the soul with God.[28] Similarly, it is in the Pseudo-Dionysian ↳ writings that we find the first formal definition of *theōsis*, which refers to attaining the likeness of God and reaching union with him, so far as is possible.[29] Within this trend of Christian mysticism, which is cataphatic, God can be defined through positive statements. By contrast, *henosis* is apophatic and insists that we can approach the divine only through stating what *cannot* be said about the perfect God.[30]

The Plotinian perception of the union of the soul with God, however, soon crossed the boundaries of Christianity. Within medieval Islam, as within medieval Judaism, various trends of mystical thought reflect the influence of Plotinus, a fact well known to scholars of Sufism and Kabbala.[31] In characterizing Plotinus as the "father of Western mysticism," John Rist was referring mainly to the Christian sphere, but his remark also applies to mystical trends in Judaism and Islam.[32] Plotinus represents a major turning point in intellectual and religious history for the spiritual traditions that issued from the monotheistic religions.

However, the idea that Plotinus's conception of the *unio mystica* represents a *sui generis* conception is puzzling, and scholars have sought to identify its antecedents. Adam Afterman argues that Philo, who stands at the interface between the Platonic tradition and early Jewish conceptions, laid the path to Plotinus's conception of

mystical union.[33] Afterman focuses on the idea of "cleaving to God" (*devekut* in Hebrew, from the root *d.w.q.*; see Gen. 2:24 and Deut. 30:20 and 10:20, and its various translations in the Septuagint and in Philo's works, in particular *De Posteritate Caini*, 12). Calling attention to Philo in the context of the history of spirituality in the monotheistic context points to a crucial element in the integration of Hellenic and Hebrew thought patterns in the Abrahamic traditions. Afterman's argument as to a possible Philonic origin of the idea of *unio mystica* is interesting and does much to moderate the far-fetched suggestions made long ago by Erwin Goodenough on Philo's mysticism.[34] Notably, however, for Philo, divine transcendence ↳ permits human striving towards the deity, but not the complete immersion of the former into the latter.[35]

In his *Life of Plotinus* (who lived c.204–c.270), Porphyry writes that his master "strove towards the divine, which he loved with all his soul." Plotinus, Porphyry tells us, following Plato's teaching in the *Symposium*, often "raised himself in the thought to the First and Transcendent God (*ton proton kai epekeina theon*), a formless (*mēte morphē*) God throned above intellect and all the intelligible." In a famous passage of this text, Porphyry writes:

> To Plotinus "the goal ever near was shown": for his end and goal was to be united to, to approach the God who is over all things (*to enōthēnai kai pelasai tōi epi pasi theōi*). Four times while I was with him he attained that goal, in an unspeakable actuality and not in potency only.[36]

For Porphyry, then, to approach God is to be united with him. Porphyry adds that he himself succeeded once in being united (*enōthēnai*) with God.[37] A number of passages in the *Enneads* also refer to the ascending path of the intellect (*nous*) to God, up to the vision of the latter and, eventually, its union (*henosis*) with the One, as well as the enthusiasm (in the original, etymological meaning of the term: divine inspiration) which led to this union, and the deep peace and immobility that accompanies it. A *locus classicus* reads:

> This is the life of gods and of the godlike and blessed among men, liberation from the alien that besets us here, a life taking no pleasure in the things of the earth, a flight of the alone to the Alone (*phugē monou pros monon*).[38]

The experience, Plotinus tells us, entails an abandonment of the self. It represents a specific mode of vision, as described in the beginning of *Enneads* IV. 8:

> Often I have woken up out of the body to myself and have entered into myself, going out from all other things; I have seen a beauty wonderfully great.[39]

Many of the elements in this spiritual ascent to the divine can be traced back to Plato, in particular to the *Symposium*, the *Theaetetus*, and the *Phaedros*.[40] However, Plotinus was the first to incorporate these disparate elements into a single intellectual construct. In an important study, Alexander J. Mazur sought to identify the passages in the *Enneads* that deal with the *unio mystica*.[41] The "Mystical Union with the One" (which Mazur abbreviates to MUO), or *henosis*, is reached at the end of a process which includes ascension of the *nous*, the highest part of the individual, and its contemplation of the One. Eventually, the philosopher (or mystic) and the One are united in loving union. Plotinus, Mazur argues, was the first author in classical antiquity to refer to the "mystical union" of the whole person, or of the soul, with the divine. Mazur goes on note that, in early third-century Alexandria, the young Plotinus and heavily Platonizing "Sethian" Gnostics lived in the same intellectual milieu. He concludes that there was likely a Gnostic influence on the fashioning of Plotinus's ideas about the union with the One. It appears, then, that the role of Plotinus on religious thought is as great as his influence on the history of philosophy.[42]

Mazur thus challenges the prevailing view according to which Plotinus is the originator of the idea of the *unio mystica*. He does so by showing the existence of significant isomorphisms between Plotinus's union with the One and themes recurrent in various texts discovered in Coptic translation at Nag Hammadi, and belonging to

what is (misleadingly) referred to as Sethian ↳ Gnosticism.[43] As I have argued elsewhere, this mythological transformation of Seth points to Jewish texts and traditions.[44]

Origen and *Unio Mystica*

What Mazur does not discuss, however, is the question of the origin of such Gnostic views. Origen (c.184–c.253), who moved to Caesarea from his native Alexandria, may offer a crucial clue for answering this question. Lorenzo Perrone, who has contributed more than anyone to our current understanding of Origen, in particular thanks to his masterful edition of the newly discovered *Homilies on Psalms* and to his meticulous studies on these homilies, has published a study of Origen's conception of divinization according to these new texts.[45]

Origen's *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, which have survived only in Jerome's Latin translation, played a formative role in the fashioning of Christian mysticism throughout the Middle Ages and beyond.[46] This text forms the basis of later Christian mystical literature in the West. The relevant passage reads:

> God is my witness that I have often perceived the Bridegroom drawing near me and being most intensely present with me (*Saepe, Deus testis est, sponsum* ↳ *mihi aduentare conspexi et mecum esse quam plurimum*); then suddenly He has withdrawn and I could not find Him, though I sought to do so. I long, therefore, for Him to come again, and sometimes He does so. Then, when He has appeared and I lay hold of Him, He slips away once more; and, when He has so slipped away, my search for Him begins anew.[47]

The personal experience described here by Origen, which recalls that of Plotinus in *Enneads* IV.8, is a rare depiction of mystical encounter in patristic literature, as noted by Dom Rousseau in his translation.[48] Although it does not explicitly refer to a union (*henosis*) with God, a striking parallel is offered in the passage in Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* (23), quoted above. While Origen's Bridegroom is not Plotinus's god, the word *pelasai* also means to approach a woman, highlighting the parallelism between the two passages.[49] Origen and Porphyry seem to be referring to the same mystical experience.

Origen was born about twenty years before Plotinus and died almost twenty years before him. They studied in the same Platonist milieu in Alexandria, in which various Gnostics (those we call Sethian) thrived in the late second century, as Mazur has shown. If the Christian Origen and the Gnostic "Sethian" texts reflect a similar perception of the mystical meeting, or union, with God, the question of the origins of the idea of mystical union requires rephrasing. Whence did Origen and the Gnostics develop their conception of the mystical union with God?

Origen, it should be recalled, is also our very first witness to the role of the *Song of Songs* in Jewish mysticism. In the prologue to his Commentary on the *Song of Songs*, Origen claims that, according to the rabbis, this last text, which is endowed with an esoteric meaning, should be read only by mature persons (*nisi quis ad aetatem perfectam maturamque pervenit*). The same is true of the first chapters of Genesis, which deal with the creation of the world, as well as the first and last chapters of Ezekiel, which discuss, respectively, the divine Chariot and the Temple. I have discussed Origen's esotericism elsewhere.[50] ↳ Here, let us simply note Origen's familiarity with rabbinic hermeneutics. It was in Caesarea that he encountered Jewish biblical exegesis.

One of Origen's most important testimonies about Jewish esoteric hermeneutics of the biblical texts is extant in the Greek original, but only as copied in the *Philocalia*.[51] In this text, whose literary power evokes Kafka's *Vor dem Gesetz*, Origen starts by noting (2. 1–2) that the Scriptures are locked and sealed.[52] They are full of enigmas, parables, obscure sayings. He then repeats (2. 3) a "beautiful tradition" which he received "from the Hebrew," a mysterious figure who may have been a Jewish Christian from Alexandria, and who appears a number of times in Origen's writings.[53] According to this man, it is precisely their lack of clarity which shows that the Scriptures

are divinely inspired. They are like a series of locked doors. A key is placed at each door, to no avail. The doors remain shut tight. The interpreter's role is to find, for each door, the right key. The Scriptures' interpretive principle is scattered among them.

For Origen—as with the patristic tradition in its entirety—contemporary Jews, inheritors of the Pharisees, are unable to understand their own Scriptures. They no longer know which key opens which door in the scriptural mansion. But for him, too, true Christianity is identical to secret Judaism (a secret tradition better conserved in Christianity than among the rabbis): it is akin to using the correct key for each door. Hence, the Hebrew esoteric traditions are equivalent to the spiritual interpretation of the Church, or more precisely, of true Christianity.[54]

Like Plotinus and the "Sethian" (i.e., Platonic) Gnostics, Origen too speaks of an experience of intimacy with God. The idea of the *unio mystica* was present, it seems, before Plotinus, both among the Gnostics and for Origen. Moreover, Origen is aware of the esoteric and mystical tradition among the Jews, and of the status of

p. 37   the *Song of Songs* within this tradition. Thus, the Jewish esoteric ↳ and mystical tradition may also have known of the *unio mystica*. Note that there is no claim of ultimate origin being made here. Rather, I am suggesting that when dealing with sources, or with concepts and trends, we end up with a whirlpool of ideas, each in endless transformation.[55] Going beyond the notion of ideas from different traditions blending into a syncretistic melting pot, the image of the whirlpool of ideas highlights the dynamic transformation of these concepts.[56]

In this chapter, we have briefly followed some entangled manifestations of Hellenic, Jewish, and Christian conceptions of the soul's union with God. Since Newton, mathematicians and physicists have been preoccupied with the "Three-body problem," for which no general, analytic solution exists. A problem that can be solved with ease when two bodies are in play becomes unsolvable as soon as a third body enters the game. Traditional *Quellenforschung* is predicated upon the assumption of a single, linear trajectory of ideas, which may be followed back through time, as it were. Disappointment in this sort of search for ultimate origins has kindled a recent trend in scholarship toward a synchronic approach. In the process, however, this trend has jettisoned diachrony—a regrettable outcome. Like history itself, the history of ideas remains overdetermined: as Borges claimed, we are at once, and perforce, both Greeks and Jews.

Pagan monotheism eventually failed, but there was in late antiquity more than one possible trajectory for the intellectual search of the divine. Marinus of Neapolis (ancient Shechem and modern Nablus, in Samaria) was the successor of Proclus as the head of the Athenian Academy. His disciple Damascius reports that "born a Samaritan, Marinus renounced their creed [*doxan*] (which is anyway a deviation [*kainotomian*] from Abraham's religion [*thrēskeias*]) and embraced Hellenism." As we shall see in the next chapter, this text presents Abraham

p. 38   as a hero well beyond Jewish and Christian communities. ↳

Notes
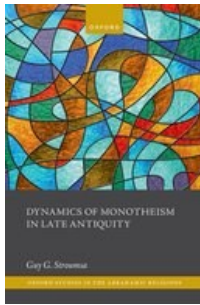
Footnotes

1   See Keith Hopkins, *A World Full of Gods: The Strange Triumph of Christianity* (New York: Plume, 2001 [1999]). We owe this expression to Polymnia Athanassiadi, "From Man to God, or the Mutation of a Culture (300 BC–AD 762)," Introduction to Anastasia Dranaki et al., eds., *Heaven and Earth: Art of Byzantium from the Greek Collections, National Gallery of Art*, 2 vols. (Athens: Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports, 2013).

2   See in particular three important collections of studies: Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede, eds., *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999); Stephen Mitchell and Peter van Nuffelen, eds., *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), and Mitchell and van Nuffelen, eds., *Monotheism between Pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity* (Leuven: Peeters, 2010). Giovanni Filoramo was an early

voice in this debate; see his "Il monoteismo tardo-antico," in G. Filoramo, *Figure del sacro: Saggi di storia religiosa* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1993), 109–25. See further Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, *Dio unico, pluralità e monarchia divina: esperienze religiose e teologie nel mondo tardo-antico* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2010).

3   H. Versnel, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion I. Ter Unus. Isis, Dionysos, Herms: Three Studies in Henotheism* (Leiden: Brill, 1990). On the applicability of "henotheism" among Platonists in the Roman Empire, see Pierre Caye, "Hénothéisme ou monothéisme? Le néoplatonisme, critique du théologico-politique," in *Monothéismes et politique: modernité, sécularisation, émancipation*, ed. Anoush Ganjipour (Paris: CNRS, 2022), 75–87. According to Caye, the soteriological dimension is important for Neoplatonists and monotheists alike.

4   See N. Sinologlou, "From Philosophic Monotheism to Imperial Henotheism: Esoteric and Popular Religion in Late Antique Platonism," in *Monotheism between Pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity* (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 127–48. Cf. above Gillian Clark, "Introduction," n. 23. For the use of "henotheism," see further Anna Furlan, "Strategies of Conversion in a Jewish-Orphic *Hieros Logos*: A Cognitive Approach," in *Religious and Philosophical Conversion in the Ancient Mediterranean Traditions*, ed. Athanasios Despotis and Hermut Löhr (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 119–44.

5   M. Frede, "Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy in Later Antiquity," 67, in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, ed. Frede and Athanassiadi.

6   M. Edwards, "Pagan and Christian Monotheism in the age of Constantine," in *Approaching Late Antiquity: The Transformation from Early to Late Empire*, ed. Simon Swaine and M. Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 211–34.

7   S. Mitchell, "The Debate about Pagan Monotheism," 2.

8   Mitchell and van Nuffelen, eds., Introduction, in One God.

9   Cf. Beate Pongratz-Leisten, in her Introduction to *Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 38.

10 Erik Peterson, *Heis Theos: Epigraphische, formgeschichtliche und religionsgeschichtlich Untersuchungen zur antiken "Ein-Gott"-Akklamation* was first published in 1926. A new, updated text (as Volume 8 of Peterson's *Ausgewählte Schriften*) was edited by Christoph Markschies (Würzburg: Echter, 2012).

11 See, for instance, S. Mitchell, "Further Thoughts on the Cult of Theos Hypsistos," in *One God*, ed. Mitchell and van Nuffelen. 167–208.

12 Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, XI. 5. I: "rerum naturae parens, elementorum omnium domina, saeculorum progenies initialis, summa numinum, regina manium, prima caelitum, deorum dearumque facies uniformis . . . suius numen unicum multiformi specie, ritu vario, nominee multiiugo totus venerator orbis."

13 *Contra Galileos*, 306B, 406–7 LCL.

14 *C. Gal.* 93 C, 326–7 LCL; translation emended.

15 Ibid. 148 C, 358–9 LCL, translation emended.

16 Ibid., 52 B, 320–1 LCL.

17 Porphyry, *De Abstinentia,* II. 26. Text in Porphyre, *De l'abstinence*, Jean Bouffartigue and Michel Patillon, eds., trans., Vol. II (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1979), 92–3.

18 Porphyry, *De Abstinentia*, II. 26.3.

19 Augustine, *De Civ. Dei*, 10.1, quoted by Alfons Fürst, "Monotheism between cult and politics: the themes of the ancient debate between pagan and Christian monotheism," in *One God*, ed. Mitchell and van Nuffelen, 85.

20 M. Kahlos, "Refuting and Reclaiming Monotheism: Monotheism in the Debate between 'Pagans' and Christians in 380–430," in *Monotheism between Pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity*, ed. Mitchell and van Nuffelen, 167–79.

21 *In Tim.* III; Diels 153, 6–15, Festugière IV, 195.

22 *Elementa Theologiae* 114. *Kai empalin, ei estin autotelēs henas, theos esti*. I quote E. R. Dodds's translation, in his edition of Proclus, *The Elements of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963 [1933]), 101.

23 Jean Scherer, ed., trans., *Entretien d'Origène Dialogue avec Héraclide* (Sources Chrétiennes, 67) (Paris: Cerf, 1967), I.20–II.20; pp. 54–9. See G. G. Stroumsa, *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 13–14, where I quote and discuss this text.As Sarah Stroumsa has pointed out to me, a strikingly similar dialogue, up to its wording, is found in a polemics on Christology by the first Jewish thinker of the Arabic Middle Ages, in the eighth century. See Dawūd ibn Marwān al-Muqammaṣ, *Twenty Chapters*, ed. and trans. Sarah Stroumsa (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2016), ch. 10, 224–6.

24 "Graeci, quos Hellenas vel paganos vocant, multos deos dicunt. Iudaei vel Hebraei unum, nos, quia posterior veritas et gratia est, adversum paganos unum deum dicimus, adversum Iudaeos patrem et filium. Ita dicentes duos, patrem et filium, sed unum tamen deum." This is the first paragraph of his *De homoousio recipiendo*. I use the text of Paul Henry and Pierre Hadot, eds. and trans., Marius Victorinus, *Traités théologiques sur la Trinité* (SC; Paris: Cerf, 1960).

25 Arnobius, *Ad Nationes*, 6.3

26 See Athanassiadi and Frede, eds., *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Introduction, 10–11. The quoted text is from

Olympiodorus, *In Gorg.*, ed. Westerink, 32.

27   On the particularly broad and longstanding impact of this corpus, see, for instance, Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang, eds., *Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

28   See in particular Ysabel de Andia, *Henosis: L'union à Dieu chez Denys l'Aéropagite* (Leiden: Brill, 1996). For Gregory of Nyssa, *henosis* points to the union of the human and divine natures in Christ. For an authoritative summary of *unio mystica* in Christian mysticism, see Bernard McGinn, "*Unio mystica-* Mystical Union," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 200–10.

29   See Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1.

30   See, for instance, Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena* (Louvain: Peters, Eerdmans, 1995).

31   See Moshe Idel and Bernard McGill, eds., *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: an Ecumenical Dialogue* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

32   John Rist, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), ch. 16, 213–30.

33   A. Afterman, "From Philo to Plotinus: The Emergence of Mystical Union," *Journal of Religion* 93 (2013): 177–96.

34   See E. R. Goodenough, *By Light, Light: The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1935). According to Goodenough, Philo proposed a reinterpretation of Hermetic mysticism and similar trends belonging to what John Dillon called the "Platonic underworld" in Hellenistic thought.

35   This seems to be the majority opinion among Philo scholars. In her *Philo of Alexandria: An Intellectual Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), Maren Niehoff dedicates a few pages to "Mystical Intertextuality" (181–5). Yet, here too, Philo clearly falls short of conceiving a full-fledged *unio mystica*.

36   *Life of Plotinus*, 23. I quote the translation of A. H. Armstrong in vol. I of Plotinus's *Enneads* in the Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press and Heinemann, 1978), 70–1.

37   Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 23, 68–71 Armstrong (LCL).

38   *Enneads* VI. 9. 11.

39   *Enneads* IV.8.1, 396–7 Armstrong (LCL).

40   It is with good reason that Andrew Louth's *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981) opens with three chapters on, respectively, Plato, Philo, and Plotinus, before dealing with Origen. See further Kevin Corrigan, "Solitary Mysticism in Plotinus, Proclus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Pseudo-Dionysius," *Journal of Religion* 76 (1996): 28–42.

41   A. J. Mazur, *The Platonizing Sethian Background of Plotinus's Mysticism* (NHMS, 89) (Leiden: Brill, 2020). See in particular Appendix A, 274–92. Cf. my review in *Asdiwal* 16 (2021): 180–2. On *Enn*. VI.9.114–25, see the discussion in Mazur, *Platonizing Sethian Background*, 281. On the complex question of the relationship between Plotinus and the Gnostics (on which see in particular *Enneads* II.9 and *Vita Plotini* 16), see Francis Lacroix and Jean-Marc Narbonne, "Plotinus and the Gnostics," in *The Gnostic World*, ed. Garry W. Trompf, Gunner B. Mikkelsen, and Jay Johnston (London: Routledge, 2019), 208–16, as well as Sebastian Gertz, *Plotinus, Enneads II.9: Against the Gnostics* (Las Vegas: Parmenides, 2017).

42   On the historical impact of *Enneads* IV.8.1, 396–7, in Christian and Islamic literature, see Cristina D'Ancona, ed., Plotino, *La discesa dell'anima nei coorpi (Enn. IV.8[6]), Plotiniana Arabica* (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2003), 65–111. Much has been written about possible Indian influences on Plotinus's religious conceptions, and in particular on his mysticism. To date, such claims remain speculative. For perspectives on the impact of India on Western thought, see Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), esp. 2–23. The anthropological experience encapsulated in the Western idea of *unio mystica* finds a parallel in developments in other intellectual and religious traditions. Such parallels do not bear directly on the argument developed here.

43   Misleadingly, because the leading role played by the mythical figure of Seth, Adam's son, in early stages of the formation of Gnostic mythology has almost totally disappeared from those later, Platonized strata of Gnostic thought. Little remains in those Platonic Gnostic texts that may be identified as Sethian. Whether or not a Sethian movement existed in ancient Gnosticism is moot. But it is clear that texts discovered at Nag Hammadi (as well as various traditions carried in Christian heresiographies) reflect the significance of the biblical Seth, Adam's son, in early Gnostic thought, and his transformation into a heavenly savior in Gnostic mythology. The neglect of this paradox in contemporary scholarship is surprising. For an authoritative presentation of Sethian Gnosticism, see John D. Turner, "Sethian Gnostic Speculation," in *The Gnostic World*, ed. Gary W. Trompf, Gunner B. Mikkelsen, and Jay Johnston (London: Routledge, 2019), 147–55.

44   The perception of the sons of the pure seed of Seth as opposed to those of the evil seed of Cain was first what may be called a Jewish obsession. See Guy G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology* (Nag Hammadi Studies 24) (Leiden: Brill, 1984).

45   L. Perrone, "'Et l'homme tout entier devient dieu': la déification selon Origène à la lumière des nouvelles *Homélies sur les Psaumes*," in *Exégèse, révélation et formation des dogmes dans l'antiquité tardive*, ed. Alain Le Boulluec, Luciana Gabriela Soares Santoprete, and Andrei Timotin (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 2020), 214–40. Perrone points out that, in

Origen's *Commentary on Psalms*, the first instance of divinization is that of Jesus (216). See further L. Perrone, "Origen Reading the Psalms: The Challenge of a Christian Interpretation," in *Scriptures, Sacred Traditions, and Strategies of Religious Subversion*, ed. M. Blidstein, S. Ruzer, and D. Stökl Ben Ezra (STAC 112) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 131–48. Parts of this chapter were published in A. Cacciari, E. B. Fiori, D. Tripaldi, and A. Villani (eds.), *From Jerusalem to Alexandria (and Beyond): Essays in Honor of Lorenzo Perrone* (Berlin, New York: Peter Lang, 2025), 555–61.

46   For a striking example of patristic mystical interpretation of the Song, see Gregory of Nyssa's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*.

47   I quote the translation of R. P. Lawson, in Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies* (New York: Newman Press, 1956), 280. For the text, I follow Origène, *Homélies sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, Intr., trad., notes Dom Olivier Rousseau, OSB (Sources Chrétiennes 37 bis) (Paris: Cerf, 1966), 94–6. See in particular 95, n. 2.

48   Origen refers here to Song 8:5.

49   I owe this remark to Isidoros Katsos.

50   See Guy G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Numen Book Series 70) (Leiden: Brill, 2005 [2nd ed.]), ch. 7, "Clement, Origen and Jewish Esoteric Traditions," 109–31. It should be noted that the earliest sustained Jewish commentary on the *Song of Songs* is the fifth-century Palestinian Midrash on this text.

51   I use the edition and translation of Marguerite Harl, Origène, *Philocalie, 1-20 Sur les Écritures* (Sources Chrétiennes 302) (Paris: Cerf, 1983), 2. 1–3, (On Psalm 1) 240–5.

52   In Kafka's short parable *Before the Law*, originally published in 1915 and later integrated into *The Trial*, a man stands before the door of the law, unable to enter because he is blocked by the guardian. At the very end of this man's life, the guardian closes the door, telling the man that it had been made for him alone.

53   On this polymorphic figure, see Gilles Dorival and Ron Naiweld, "Les interlocuteurs hébreux et juifs d'Origène à Alexandire et à Césarée," in *Caesarea Maritima e la scuola origeniana: multiculturalità, forme di competizione culturale e identità Cristiana*, ed. Osvalda Andrei (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2013), 121–38. See further Alfons Fürst, "Judentum, Judenchristentum und Antijudaismus in den neu entdeckten Psalmenhomilien des Origenes," *Adamantius* 20 (2014): 257–87. On the multiple aspects of Origen's relationship with Judaism and his contacts with Jews, see N. R. M. De Lange, *Origen and the Jews: Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations in Third-Century Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

54   On Origen's conception of biblical hermeneutics, one may still profit much from de Lubac, *Histoire et esprit: l'intelligence de l'Écriture d'après Origène* (Oeuvres complètes XVI) (Paris: Cerf, 2002 [1950]).

55   On the idea of a whirlpool of ideas, see Sarah Stroumsa, *Andalus and Sefarad: On Philosophy and its History in Islamic Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 11, as well as Sarah Stroumsa, "The Whirlpool at Work: Divine Attributes in a Polemical Milieu," in *Towards a Theory of Cultural Brokerage in the Pre-Modern Islamic World, 600–1660*, ed. Uriel Simonsohn and Luke Yarbrough (forthcoming).

56   For such an understanding of a potpourri of ideas, see Dylan M. Burns, *Apocalypse of the Alien God: Platonism and the Exile of Sethian Gnosticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 158 (conclusion of ch. 7: "Between Judaism, Christianity and Neoplatonism").

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CHAPTER

2 Henotheizing Pagans and Abraham's Religion 🔓

Guy G Stroumsa

Abstract

Chapter 2 maps the seduction of monotheism in the Greco-Roman world, in particular among philosophers. It may, however, be more accurate to speak of "henotheism." Henotheists worship only one god, without denying the existence of other ones. The sect of the Hypsistarians represents such a trend, at the borderlines of Judaism and Christianity. The chapter calls attention to the status of Abraham as a culture hero of sorts, in broad circles, far beyond the Jewish and Christian communities. Among the Platonists, in particular, as shown by Emperor Julian and Marinus of Neapolis, there was a deep interest in what was considered to have been Abraham's religion. It is there that one should look for the origins of the Qur'anic concept of *ḥanīf*.

Keywords: henotheism, Hypsistarians, Emperor Julian, Marinus of Neapolis, ḥanīf

Subject: History of Religion, Comparative Religion, Theology, Religious Issues and Debates, Philosophy of Religion

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Henotheism

The previous chapter discussed the seductive power of monotheism among several philosophers in the Roman Empire. Some twenty-five years ago, the publication of a volume of essays ushered in a lively scholarly debate about pagan monotheism in late antiquity—an oxymoron coined, of course, *pour épater les bourgeois*.[1] Indeed, a number of pagan Greek texts and inscriptions from the Roman Empire address themselves to one (supreme) god. Whether the label monotheism should be applied to this phenomenon remains an open question. Angelos Chaniotis rejects the use of this label to describe the search for the almighty god in the polytheistic culture of the Roman East, a culture in which gods had only limited powers. As an alternative, he offers the term "megatheism."[2] Objecting to Stephen Mitchell, who discusses the use of the adjective *hypsistos* ("highest") to describe the divinity at the intersection between Judaizing, pagan, and Christian milieus, hence representing theological conceptions close to both polytheism and monotheism, Nicole Belayche argues that it was common for the epithet *hypsistos* to be applied to a divinity in the pagan world, and that that usage did not imply a monotheistic worldview.[3]

In his response to Belayche, Mitchell clarified his argument.[4] For him, Judaizers who followed the cult of Hypsistos professed a modified form of monotheism, which he qualified as "inclusive," whereas the monotheisms of Jews and Christians were "exclusive" in character. Like Chaniotis, Mark Edwards rejects the use of the term monotheism to characterize the religious behavior or beliefs of people who were neither Jews nor Christians.[5] For Edwards, the construct "pagan monotheism" is nonsensical, as any monotheism must remain, by definition, exclusivist. As mentioned in the Introduction, the term "paganism" as an "etic" Christian coinage did not reflect the "emic" identity of any insider.

Leaving aside the Mitchell–Belayche debate, I suggest a different approach to the question of fluid relations between various forms of monotheism and polytheism in late antiquity. This approach centers on the Qur'anic term *ḥanīf*.

Early Christianity adopted the Jewish conception of a monotheistic religion in conflict with the surrounding polytheism, and the Roman persecutions further highlighted the opposition between the two theological systems. The polarity between monotheism and polytheism was thus ingrained in the *cultura christiana* from late antiquity. This polarity, which would permeate Western religious and intellectual history, is an integral part of our intellectual heritage. As such, it makes it difficult to conceive of a divine world beyond a binary understanding of the historical interface between polytheism and monotheism.

A similar situation can be observed, *mutatis mutandis*, regarding the terms monotheism and dualism. While the various Gnostic systems of the second century and Manichaeism in the third century were fiercely contested by the patristic heresiologists, it was primarily because they presented (at least in the eyes of their opponents) a dualistic view of the world, especially of the divine world.[6]

The terms dualism, monotheism, and polytheism are ideal types (in the Weberian sense of *Idealtypen*) for the historian of religions, conceptual tools that facilitate the classification and organization of religious phenomena in their abundance. One should add that it is a question not only of the number of gods but also, perhaps even more, of the complex relationship between the divine and the human worlds. In both monotheistic and polytheistic systems, quality counts more than quantity. It is important, however, that these types not be confused with the phenomena themselves. In the Roman Empire. as everywhere else, religious facts are best understood as a continuum of tendencies, ranging from monotheism to dualism and vice versa. More than polarity, the idea of such a continuum does justice to the fluidity of religious conceptions and identities in the *longue durée*.

The polyvalence of *hypsistos* ("the highest" or "the supreme") reflects, in my view, the existence, in the Roman Empire, of a continuum of theological conceptions, representing a gradient between monotheistic and

polytheistic tendencies. To illustrate what we might call "henotheizing paganism" among philosophers, we might consider Proclus's remark: "There is, therefore, one single god and many gods" (*theos oun heis kai theoi polloi*).[7]

Abraham in the Roman Empire

In her above-mentioned article, Belayche discusses the Greek translation of "El Elyon" in the Septuagint. Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of the Most High God (*theos hypsistos*), blesses Abraham (still called Abram) in the name of the Most High God, the creator of heaven and earth (Gen. 14:22). According to the biblical text (Gen. 12:4), Abraham is a blessing for "all the families of the earth." These two verses combined suggest that, even in the ancient Near East, the figure of Abraham might have resonated beyond Israel.[8]

Several New Testament verses echo Abraham's role in world history, from his position among the ancestors of Jesus (Matt. 1:17) to his perception by Paul as the hero of true faith, offered to all peoples (Gal. 3:6−9, drawing

from Gen. ↳ 12:4; see also Rom. 4:16: Abraham is the father of us all, not just the Hebrews). The Pauline conception of Abraham is, of course, the origin of the patriarch's image in early Christian literature. Thus, Abraham is situated at the very heart of the controversy between Jews and Christians throughout the first centuries of our era, and at least until the advent of Islam. The Qur'an, rejecting Jewish and Christian conceptions, further complicates matters by essentially monopolizing Abraham/Ibrahim, claiming that his true religion (i.e., Islam) was misunderstood and betrayed by both Jews and Christians, but later rediscovered and reclaimed by Muhammad.[9]

In the Roman Empire, however, the figure of Abraham seems to have played a role beyond Jewish and Christian circles. The Chaldean origins of Abraham must have alluded in broad cultural circles to the theurgical and scientific knowledge traditionally attributed to the ancient Chaldeans, portraying him as a sort of civilizing hero. Furthermore, thanks to Abraham's fame, his name was imbued with magical powers. For instance, Origen (c.185−c.253) mentions in his "Against Celsus" (I.22) people who invoke the "God of Abraham" in their incantations to demons, without even knowing who Abraham was.[10] According to the *Historia Augusta* (29.2), the emperor Alexander Severus (208−35) possessed a statue of Abraham alongside statues of Orpheus and Apollonius of Tyana. Moses, the ethnic prophet of the Jews, was conspicuously absent from his gallery—a fact which emphasizes the more universal character of Abraham.[11] Although this late source (composed towards the end of the fourth century) is not reliable as a historical document, it does reflect a broader desire to claim Abraham's legacy.

In addition to the relationship between Abraham and Melchizedek, the account of the appearance to Abraham

of the three men at the oak of Mamre ↳ (Gen. 18:1−15) resonated widely in antiquity, extending far beyond the Jewish and Christian communities. The oldest testimony that has reached us regarding the cult of Mamre comes from the Bordeaux Pilgrim, dating to 332. Describing the journey from Jerusalem to Hebron, the Pilgrim writes:

> From there to the Terebinth: eight miles. Abraham lived there and dug a well under the terebinth. He conversed with angels there and partook of food (Gen. 18:1−8). A basilica of remarkable beauty was built there at Constantine's command.[12]

The most explicit testimony, however, indicating recognition of Abraham beyond Jews and Christians, comes from Sozomen (c.400−50). In his *Ecclesiastical History* (II.4), Sozomen provides a detailed description of the panegyric of Abraham at Mamre, near Hebron, where an annual fair was held where not only Jews and Christians could gather but also "Palestinians, Phoenicians, and Arabs who had come from afar." Like Jews and Christians, pagans also celebrated the visitation of the three angels to Abraham (Gen. 18:1–15), invoking the angels through wine libations and the sacrifice of an ox, a goat, a sheep, or a rooster. Appalled by the idea of

such religious promiscuity between Christians and pagans, Constantine demanded that the bishops of Palestine prohibit the faithful from participating in this panegyric, and he constructed a church at the site.[13] Arieh Kofsky concludes his study of the Mamre cult by suggesting the existence of a sacred territory of Abraham around Hebron, until around the middle of the fifth century.[14] The text of Sozomen reveals the fame that the figure of Abraham had acquired in the fourth century CE.[15] One can note ↳ here a certain fluidity of the cult devoted to Abraham. This involves both theological concepts and rituals that cross the borders of official religious identities. The cult of Abraham was carried out by all participants in the panegyric, according to the tradition or custom of each community.

Even before Sozomen, Eusebius of Caesarea had emphasized the universal significance of the religion of Abraham (and the other patriarchs), a religion that dates back to before the birth of Judaism via Moses. For Eusebius, the advent of Jesus Christ represents the renewal of Abraham's religion, the "friend of God."[16] Eusebius's conception accords with the Qur'anic view by which Islam is identical to the religion of Ibrahim, also referred to as the "friend of God."[17]

Julian and Marinus on Abraham

The emperor Julian emblematizes the remarkable fluidity of theological concepts in this period. In a passage from his treatise "Against the Galileans," Julian expresses his respect for the God of Abraham:

> However, I call the gods to witness that I am one of those who avoid participating in the Jewish festivals while worshiping the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The latter, who were Chaldeans, members of a sacred race practicing theurgy, learned circumcision when they were guests in Egypt. They would worship a God who has shown kindness to me as well as to those who worshiped him in the manner of Abraham, a very great and powerful God (*megas te ōn panu kai dunatos*), but who has no connection with you [the Galileans]. For you do not imitate Abraham, since you do not erect sacred platforms for this God, do not build altars, and do not honor him with sacrifices like him. Just as indeed we [do], Abraham offered sacrifices on all occasions, unceasingly (*ethue men gar ho Abraam, hōsper kai hēmeis aei kai sunechōs*), and used divination based on the observation of shooting stars.[18]

Several points are noteworthy in this passage: first, Julian is keen to clarify that his veneration of the God of Abraham does not indicate any inclination toward Judaism, nor does it reflect a monotheistic stance, since he acknowledges multiple gods. In an important article that paves a new direction for research on the origins of the Qur'anic concept of the "religion of Abraham," Michel Tardieu speaks of "Julian's henotheism" and his "Abrahamic profession of faith."[19] Regarding Julian, however, the term henotheism is problematic, as his veneration of Abraham does not replace his worship of other gods. In his case, it might be more correct to speak of "henotheizing paganism."

Moreover, the power of the God of Abraham, Julian writes, comes from his Chaldean origins and thus from an ancient tradition of barbarian wisdom, according to which Chaldea was the first homeland of science. This God (who belongs to the Jews, since the "Chaldean" patriarchs, having learned circumcision in Egypt, can only be the patriarchs of Israel) is benevolent toward Julian, as well as to all those who venerate him "in the manner of Abraham."[20] This implies that the God of the Jews (who is also Abraham's God) is also venerated by Gentiles who practice the worship of Abraham's religion. As for the Galileans, they are incapable of practicing the worship of the God of Abraham, who, unlike the Christian God, requires sacrifices. The offering of sacrifices is indeed, for Julian, the true common denominator of traditional religions—essentially all religions except Christianity:

> [T]he Jews agree with all nations except that they recognize only one god. This belief belongs to them alone and is foreign to us, while the rest is, in a way, common to us: temples, sacred enclosures, altars, purifications, as well as various precepts in which we do not differ from each other, or only slightly.[21]

Christians, by contrast, have abandoned the practice of blood sacrifice, replacing it with the Eucharist, which they certainly conceive of as a (spiritual) sacrifice but one that does not resemble other known sacrificial rituals. As we saw in Chapter 1, Julian's phenomenology is notable in that forms of ritual, rather than the number of gods, govern the taxonomy of religions. In contrast to the God that Moses instructed the Jews to revere, rejecting all others, the God of Abraham is a universal god who does not exclude other gods of various nations. Thus, Julian can venerate him without renouncing the Hellenic tradition.[22] It appears that Julian is pioneering a sustained reflection on the problem of the diversity of nations.[23] The idea of a universal religion is key to understanding the polemic between Christian and pagan intellectuals. The latter sought to assert a universalist vision as a counterpoint to that of the Christians. Porphyry thus conceives the idea of universal salvation, which he develops in *De philosophia ex oraculis*, as a response to Christian ecumenical soteriology.[24]

Marinus, born in 440, became the successor (*diadochos*) to his teacher Proclus as head of the Academy in Athens. We learn about Marinus from Photius, who reproduces in his *Bibliotheca* an epitome of the lost text of the *Life of Isidore*, written by his student Damascius. According to this epitome, Marinus, born in Flavia Neapolis (now Nablus) in Palestine, had forsaken the faith of his Samaritan ancestors, "converting" to Hellenism, which he saw as carrying on the religious heritage of Abraham. In the Roman colony of Neapolis, Marinus likely received a good Greek education. Photius writes:

> Marinus, the successor to Proclus, was born in Neapolis in Palestine, a city near the mountain called Argarizos [i.e., Har Gerizim, Hebrew for "Mount Gerizim"]. The unbelieving writer [i.e., Damascius] adds that there is a very holy temple of Zeus Hypsistos there, to which Abraham, the patriarch of the
> ancient Hebrews, had dedicated himself, as Marinus himself said. ↳ Born a Samaritan, he separated from the belief (*doxan*) of these people, on the grounds that it had deviated from the religion (*thrēskeias*) of Abraham to become an innovation (*kainotomian*), and embraced Hellenism (*ta de hellēnōn*).[25]

According to the Samaritan tradition, the sacrifice (or, more accurately, the binding) of Isaac, *akedat Yitzhak*, took place on Mount Gerizim, which Samaritans consider the locus of the Temple, rather than Mount Moriah in Jerusalem, in accordance with the Jewish tradition. Thus, the Bordeaux Pilgrim noted in his account of Neapolis: "This is where Mount Gerizim is. The Samaritans say that this is where Abraham offered his sacrifice."[26]

Another tradition linking Abraham to Mount Gerizim comes from the first-century BCE historian Alexander Polyhistor. In his *Peri Ioudaiōn*, a work now lost but of which Eusebius of Caesarea preserves a fragment, Alexander Polyhistor writes that Abraham had been a guest at the temple of the city called Argarizin, a name signifying "Mount of the Most High (*Hypsistos*)," where he received offerings from Melchizedek, the king of that place and the "priest of God."[27]

Belayche rejects Marinus's identification of this temple on Mount Gerizim as being dedicated to Zeus Hypsistos. For her, there is no doubt that Marinus is referring to a temple of Zeus Olympios.[28] It is plausible that Marinus abandoned the Samaritan beliefs and religious practices in which he had been raised.[29] The question remains about the beliefs and practices to which he ↳ "converted," or rather what he subsequently accepted. As we have seen, in the fourth century, for a Hellenic intellectual like Julian, the religion of Abraham was more universal than the Mosaic Judaism it predated.

For Marinus, moreover, Abraham was also a local hero, since, according to the Samaritan tradition, it was on Mount Gerizim that he had intended to sacrifice his son. According to Marinus's testimony, the Samaritans had

gradually moved away from the religion of Abraham toward Hellenism (*ta tōn hēllenōn*). Marinus thus echoes Julian, stating that the Samaritans, initially faithful to the true religion of Abraham, had drifted, in a process typical of heretical innovation (i.e., away from tradition, representing eternal truth). *Mutatis mutandis*, Neoplatonic, "Abrahamizing" philosophers could have perceived the Jews as they perceived the Samaritans—as having gradually abandoned the true religion of Abraham.

In his *Life of Proclus*, Marinus tells us that, according to his teacher, "the philosopher must not practice the worship of a single city or sparsely populated country, but must be the in-common priest (*hierophantēn*) of the entire world."[30] As noted by Mark Edwards, this theme is well known in the Greek philosophical tradition since the time of Diogenes, the founder of Cynicism.[31] Here too we witness the demand among Platonist philosophers to adopt a universal religious stance, as already proclaimed by Porphyry.

Ḥanīf

The meaning and origins of the Arabic word *ḥanīf* are the topic of a longstanding scholarly debate.[32] The word first appears in the Qur'an, where it is linked to Abraham in eight out of ten verses where it occurs in the singular form. The following are a few examples: "Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but he was a *ḥanīf muslim*";[33] and "They say, 'Be Jews or Christians ↳ [so] you will be guided.' Say, 'Rather, [we follow] the religion of Abraham, the *ḥanīf*, and he was not of the polytheists.'"[34]

In Arabic, the term *ḥanīf* is essentially positive. It is applied to Abraham, the first monotheist and, according to Islam, the first Muslim, as well as those who followed his religion before the coming of the Prophet Muhammad.[35] Notably, however, the Semitic root of the Arabic word (*ḥ.n.p.*) is the same as that of the Syriac word *ḥanpā*, which, in Syriac texts (all Christian, of course), always means pagan.[36] Similarly, in biblical Hebrew, *ḥanef* carries a negative connotation, as in Job 15:34 and 17:8.[37] Various theories have been proposed to explain this curious reversal of the term's value.

Michel Tardieu argues that this reversal is related to the Christian identification of some Hellenic philosophers, such as Julian and Marinus, as *ḥanpē*. Indeed, it seems, as Tardieu suggests, that Marinus's testimony sheds new light on the issue.[38] Christian writers perceived Hellenism (*hellēnismos*) as identical to polytheism, and the Hellenic identity of Platonic philosophers marks them as quintessentially pagan: in Christian Greek, *hellēnos* refers to a polytheist, a pagan. The identification of these philosophers with the religion of Abraham, which they view as a religion corrupted by Jews and Christians, ↳ makes this religion (as they conceive it) fall into the despised domain of paganism (*ḥanputhā*).

It thus seems possible that the reverence shown by such wise individuals to the God of Abraham might have allowed, among the pre-Islamic Arabs, the semantic inversion of the root *ḥ.n.p.*: this root, hitherto always derogatory, now became a laudatory term as it referred to the original worship rendered by Abraham, the first *ḥanīf*, to the one God. This worship was distorted by both Jews and Christians but was preserved by certain sages accused by Christians of being pagans—*ḥunafā*.

Abraham's Religion and the Hypsistarians

The religion of Abraham seems to designate two distinct phenomena. On the one hand, the cult in Mamre described by Sozomen typifies popular religion. In a manner similar to magic, popular religion crosses political, linguistic, and cultural borders, as well as the boundaries established by rising orthodoxies, in particular among Christians and Jews. It offers an inclusive and universal conception of religious identity. On the other hand, one can detect among some Neoplatonic philosophers an interest in the figure of Abraham, identified as the patriarch of all believers in a supreme God of humanity. These philosophers also seem to have been attracted to the worship of this supreme god, which they believed reflects the original form of true religion, later distorted by Jews and Christians (as well as Samaritans).

We remain ignorant of the precise form that the religion of Abraham took among these philosophers. However, it is significant that this religion, as conceived by such individuals, included animal sacrifices—rituals that had disappeared among Jews and Christians, although not among Samaritans, who offer an animal Passover sacrifice to this day. Abraham, we might say, introduced the idea that the sacrificial nature of divine worship could be expressed through the sacrifices of traditional religions.

Was Abraham's popularity among some non-Christianized populations in the Near East a necessary condition for the formation of an Abrahamic religion among pagan intellectuals? We just don't know. Philo testifies to the significance of the biblical figure of Abraham in philosophical circles during the Hellenistic period. According to Philo, Abraham was indeed the ethnic Hebrew patriarch, even though his birthplace had been Chaldea. In fact, Philo emphasizes at the beginning of his treatise *On the Migration of Abraham* that the land (and thus

Chaldea) symbolizes the body, and that one must leave it, as ↳ Abraham did, to lead a life of the spirit.[39] It is therefore possible that the attention paid to Abraham by various philosophers acted as a catalyst for broader interest in the patriarch, reflecting a need for the expansion of monotheism beyond Jewish and Christian identity. The linkage between the image of Abraham among philosophers and his presence in popular cults thus remains relevant.

Yet this linkage, made possible by Sozomen's crucial testimony, is not mentioned by Tardieu. Tardieu rightly identifies the origins of the Qur'anic concept of *ḥanīf* in the philosophers' conception of Abraham, especially in the case of Marinus. In my view, however, he goes too far in identifying "the religion of Abraham" with pagan or Hellenic philosophy. As Tardieu notes, recent epigraphical studies by Christian Robin and colleagues have transformed our understanding of the religious landscape of pre-Islamic Arabia. These studies show that a form of monotheism with varying degrees of Jewish influence had developed among Arabian tribes even before the end of the fourth century.[40] Moreover, the significant presence of the figure of Abraham in pre-Islamic Arabian epigraphy, both in the Negev and in Arabia, could be explained as a reflection of Abraham's importance among various populations in the Near East.[41] This epigraphic evidence confirms the testimony of Sozomen, who had also noted the existence of Judaizing Ishmaelites in his time.[42] For these Arabs, those whom ecclesiastical writers referred to as "pagans" (*ḥanef*) were perceived as wise individuals practicing Abraham's most ancient and authentic form of monotheistic worship, including animal sacrifice.

The various cultic traditions that, throughout late antiquity, claimed to be faithful to the religion of Abraham did not identify him exclusively, or even primarily, as "Chaldean." Even among Neoplatonic philosophers, Abraham's Chaldean origin was not, or not necessarily, interpreted as being in opposition to his Jewish dimension, and the sacrificial practices of Jews were seen as faithful to the religion of Abraham.

On this swift journey, we have attempted to trace the elusive religion of Abraham from Mamre to Arabia, passing through Mount Moriah and Mount Gerizim, uncovering the palimpsestic shifts of its narrative. Let us now return to *hypsistos* and its polysemy, between polytheism and monotheism. Who were the devotees of this supreme God, the Hypsistarians, who were neither Jews, nor Christians, nor pagans?

The name "Hypsistarian" appears relatively late, around 374, when the movement was already in decline, in an oration by Gregory of Nazianzus, whose father had belonged to the sect before his conversion to Christianity.[43] Stephen Mitchell, among others, argues that their religion was monotheistic, at least "in essence and in spirit."[44] According to Glen Bowersock, however, the Hypsistarians were not a homogeneous movement; there were those with Jewish leanings, and others with more pagan inclinations.[45] Anna Collar suggests identifying the Hypsistarians, especially those who observed the Sabbath and dietary laws but did not practice circumcision, with the "God-fearers" or *theosebeis*. These were individuals from various ethnic and social backgrounds who were drawn to Jewish monotheism but did not convert to Judaism (thereby avoiding the *fiscus judaicus* tax).[46] According to Collar, whose work focuses on inscriptions in the Roman Empire, particularly in Asia Minor, their cult was popular in the second and third centuries.[47]

I conclude this chapter by revisiting the notion of a continuum of religious attitudes between paganism and monotheism. While there is no evidence of the existence of a sacrificial cult dedicated to Abraham or a religious community centered around the figure of Abraham in the Hellenistic era, such a cult, and such an identity, remain plausible. Moreover, the existence of such a community, perhaps known as the "religion of Abraham" in the Roman Empire, is plausible across the Near East, from Palestine to the western Arabian peninsula.

I have sought to address two pivotal issues in the history of religions during our period—the identity of the Hypsistarians and the origins of the Qur'anic concept of *ḥanīf*. While these issues have been dealt with
independently, I have ↳ suggested their linkage through the legacy of Abraham's figure. An Abrahamic identity appears to have been shared in distinct circles, among various Judaizing groups as well as among some Neoplatonic philosophers. The fluidity of this identity allowed for dynamic shifts between categories such as monotheism and polytheism, ultimately leading to the emergence of Islam.

In the long run, even an open, universalistic version of Jewish monotheism could not pose a serious threat to Christianity. Nevertheless, such a version managed to survive in the margins alongside major religious identities, eventually offering a significant alternative to both Judaism and Christianity in seventh-century
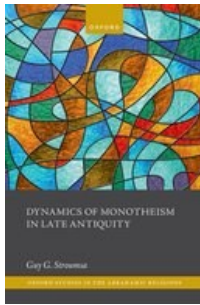Arabia. ↳

Notes

Footnotes

1   M. Frede and P. Athanassiadi, eds., *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999). See further the two collections of studies edited by Stephen Mitchell and Peter van Nuffelen, *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), and *Monotheism between Pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity* (Leuven, Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2010). For a presentation of the debate, see S. Mitchell and P. van Nuffelen: "Introduction: the debate about pagan monotheism," in *One God*, ed. Mitchell and Nuffelen, 1–15. Cf. Chapter 1, n. 2 above. A French version of this chapter was published in Jaime Alvar Ezquerra, Beatriz Pañeda Murcia, and Francesco Massa, eds., "Oh My Gods! Where Are You? Polytheism along Nicole Belayche's Path," ARYS 22 (2024), 335–54.

2   A. Chaniotis, "Megatheism: The Search for the Almighty God and the Competition of Cults," in *One God*, ed. Mitchell and van Nuffelen, 112–40.

3   S. Mitchell, "The Cult of Theos Hypsistos between Pagans, Jews, and Christians," in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, ed. Frede and Athanassiadi, 81–148; N. Belayche, "*Hypsistos*. Une voie de l'exaltation des dieux dans le polythéisme gréco-romain," *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 7 (2005): 34–55. The article exists also in English translation as "*Hypsistos*: A Way of Exalting the Gods in Graeco-Roman Polytheism," in *The Religious History of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. A. North and S. R. F. Price (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 139–74. As Belayche notes (n. 9, p. 35), Eduard Schürer's foundational paper for the debate dates from 1897. See further N. Belayche, "Henotheism, a 'Consistent' Category of Polytheism," in *Coping with Versnel: A Roundtable on Religion and Magic in Honour of the Eightieth Birthday of Henk S. Versnel*, ed. Kim Beerden and Frits Naerebout (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2023), 255–80.

4   S. Mitchell, "Further Thoughts on the Cult of Theos Hypsistos," in *One God*, ed. Mitchell and van Nuffelen, 167–208.

5   Mark Edwards, "Pagan and Christian Monotheism in the Age of Constantine," in *Approaching Late Antiquity: The Transformation from Early to Late Empire*, ed. Simon Swain and M. Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 211–34.

6   See Chapter 3 below. For some reflections on the ambivalent status of monotheism in late antiquity, see G. G. Stroumsa, *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 9–20.

7   Proclus, *Platonic Theology*, II.3; 14, in Proclus, *Théologie platonicienne*, ed. and trans. H. D. Saffrey and L. G. Westerink (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1978). On the limited heuristic pertinence of the opposition between monotheism and polytheism in contemporary scholarship, cf. G. G. Stroumsa, "Comparer à travers champs? Polythéismes et monothéismes," *Asdiwal* 14 (2019): 65–71.

8   On the reception of Abraham in Jewish and Christian ancient literatures, see Martin Goodman, George H. van Kooten, and Jacques T. A. G. M. van Ruiten, eds., *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives on Kinship with Abraham* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). Abraham is, of course, a key figure in Jewish apocryphal literature, for instance in the *Book of Jubilees*, and important text of the second century BCE which was prominent in Qumran.

9   The approach of the Qur'an and of the Islamic tradition is summed up by Ignaz Goldziher in his *Vorlesungen über den Islam* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925 [2nd ed.]): "Er [*sc.* Muhammad] will nun als Wiederhersteller der verderbten und verfälschten Religion Abrahams gelten. Was er verkündigt, wird mit abrahamischen Überlieferungen durchweben; den Gotttesdienst, den er einrichtet, habe bereits Abraham begründet, nur sei er im Laufe der Zeit verdorben und in heidnische Richtung getreten. Nun will er des einen Gottes im Sinne des Abraham wiederherstellen, wie er überhaupt genommen sei, um für echt zu erklären (muṣaddiḳ), was Gott in früheren Offenbarungen kundgetan hatte." I owe this reference to Michel Tardieu, "*Religion d'Abraham*. Un concept précoranique," in S. H. Aufrère, ed., *Alexandrie la Divine: sagesses barbares. Échanges et réappropriations dans l'espace culturel gréco-romain* (Geneva: La Baconnière, 2016), 419–60, here 423. I should like to thank Michel Tardieu for kindly sending me his text, as well as for his friendship over half a century. In his article, Tardieu develops a theme he had already studied in his lectures on the history of late antique syncretistic phenomena at the Collège de France. See his "*Le concept de religion abrahamique*," Résumé du cours, Histoire des syncrétismes de la fin de l'Antiquité, *Annuaire du Collège de France* (Paris, 2006), 435–40.

10   See Peter van den Horst, "Did the Gentiles know who Abraham was?" in *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites*, ed. Goodman, van Kooten, and van Ruiten, 61–75.

11   See G. G. Stroumsa, "From Abraham's Religion to the Abrahamic Religions," *Historia Religionum* 3 (2011): 11–22.

12   "The Therebinth" refers to Mamre, now Ḥāram Ramet el-Ḥalīl, north of the center of Hebron. I quote according to Pierre Maraval, *Récits des premiers pèlerins chrétiens au Proche-Orient (Ive-VIIe siècle)* (Paris: Cerf, 2002), 35.

13   Sozomen, *H.E.* II.4.8. I quote according to Sozomène, *Histoire Écclesiastique*, ed. J. Bidez and A.-J. Festugière, trans. B. Grillet and G. Sabbah (Sources Chrétiennes 306; Paris: Cerf, 1983), 244–9.

14   A. Kofsky, "Mamre: A Case of a Regional Cult?" in *Sharing the Sacred: Religious Contacts and Conflicts in the Holy Land (1ˢᵗ–5th cent. C.E)*, ed. A. Kofsky and G. G. Stroumsa (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi, 1998), 19–30. Cf. N. Belayche, *Iudaea-Palaestina: The Pagan Cults in Roman Palestine (Second to Forth Century)* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 96–104. Cf. Elizabeth Key Fowden, "Sharing Holy Places," *Common Knowledge* 8 (2002): 124–46, where the author shows that sharing the holy places reflects a dynamic process rather than a static condition. About Mamre, see further Marie-Odile Boulnois, "Mambré: Du chêne de la vision au lieu de pèlerinage," in *Origeniana Duodecima*, ed. Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony et al. (Leuven: Peeters, 2019), 41–73.

15   On the ancient perception of Abraham as the ancestor of the Arabs, see Fergus Millar, "Hagar, Ishmael, Josephus, and the Origins of Islam," in his *The Greek World, the Jews, and the East* (Chapel Hill: University of California Press, 2006), 351–77, as well as Martin Goodman, "Memory and its Uses in Judaism and Christianity in the Roman Empire: The Portrayal of Abraham," in *Historical and Religious Memory in the Ancient World*, ed. Beate Dignas and R. R. R. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 69–82.

16   "*ho theophilēs Abraham*"; Eusebius, *Evangelical Demonstration* I. 5. 2; text: I. A. Heikel, ed., Eusebius, *Werke, Band VI* (GCS 23; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013 [1913]), 20, ll. 23–7. Actually, Book I of the *Demonstratio Evangelica* argues the temporal priority of Christianity, Abraham's universal religion, over Judaism, Moses's religion, valid only for the Jews in Palestine. Eusebius picks up this conception of Christianity as a return to the true religion of Abraham and of the first generations of humankind. See, for instance, *HE* I. IV. 6–14. On Jewish elements in *Demonstratio Evangelica*, see A. Kofsky, *Eusebius of Caesarea against Paganism* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 89–99.

17   See Qur'an 3:67 (Abraham called "*muslim*") as well as 4:125 (Abraham called ḥalīl Allah ("friend of God"). I plan to come back elsewhere to this remarkable parallel and to its implications for the origins of Abraham's religion as identical with Islam.

18   Julian, *Against the Galileans*, Fragments 86–7, 190–3; cf. Fragment 88. I quote according to *Julien l'Empereur, Contre les Galiléens*, ed. and trans. Angelo Giavatto and Robert Muller (Paris: Vrin, 2018), 194–7. See Jean Bouffartigue, *L'Empereur*

Julien et la culture de son temps (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1992), 395–7, who underlines Julian's sympathy for the Jews in this text (ibid., 395), even if he recognizes their ethnic inferiority vis-à-vis the Hellenes. This inferiority explains the aberration of some of their beliefs, in particular their monotheism (ibid., 296).

19   See already Tardieu, "*Le concept de religion abrahamique,*" esp. 438–9.

20   As noted by Bouffartigue (*L'Empereur Julien et la culture de son temps*, 382), the Hebrews are related to the Chaldeans. For Tardieu, who rejects this identification, Platonic philosophers perceive Abraham as the type of the "wise barbarian," the model of the wise Chaldean, testifying to an Eastern *philosophia perennis* unrelated to Israel ("Religion d'Abraham," 431–3). Tardieu's argument fails to convince me. He qualifies (439, n. 51) as far-fetched interpretations of the famous fragment of Theophrastus, as preserved by Porphyry (*de Abstinentia* 2. 26, 1–4), according to which the Jews are a people of philosophers. I think, rather, that the traditional interpretation is correct.

21   Julian, *Against the Galileans*, Fragment 72 (= *c. Galil.* 306 B); Giavatto and Muller, intr., trans., *Julien l'Empereur, Contre les Galiléens,* 168–9. On the centrality of sacrifices in Julian's thought, see N. Belayche, "Partager la table des dieux. L'empereur Julien et les sacrifices," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 218 (2001): 457–86.

22   According to Julian, Abraham belonged to the Chaldean sacred race, practicing "theurgy" [*genous hierou kai theourgikou*]. Similarly, Julian notes that the Jews lack a liberal education, which could have permitted them to develop a sophisticated hermeneutics of their religious tradition (L'Empereur Julien, *Œuvres Complètes*, Tome I, deuxième partie, *Lettres et fragments*, ed. and trans. Joseph Bidez [Paris: Belles Lettres, 1924], 163–4). At least, unlike the Christians, the Jews have remained faithful to this tradition (see also Letter 134). Unlike the Greeks, the Jews take their own religious doctrines seriously, up to martyrdom, while the former often show a lack of interest in religion. See Julian's Letter 20 to the High-Priest Theodoros, 453 C–D. See Bidez, L'Empereur Julien, *Œuvres Complètes*.

23   Bouffartigue, *L'Empereur Julien et la culture de son temps*, 382.

24   See Michael Bland Simmons, *Universal Salvation in Late Antiquity: Porphyry of Tyre and the Pagan–Christian Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), in particular ch. 7. Cf. Aaron P. Johnson, *Religion and Identity in Porphyry of Tyre: The Limits of Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

25   Damascius, *Life of Isidoros* (*Epitoma Photiana*), fragment 141, p. 196, 1–7. Clemens Zintzen, ed., *Damascii Vitae Isidori Reliquiae* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1967). On Marinus and his background, see, for instance, Polymnia Athaniassiadi, "Christians and Others: The Conversion Ethos of Late Antiquity," in *Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam, and Beyond*, ed. Arietta Papaconstantinou, Neil McLynn, and Daniel L. Schwartz (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 23–47, esp. 33–9.

26   See Maraval, *Récits des premiers pèlerins chrétiens au Proche-Orient*, 29. Interestingly, Pieter van der Horst describes this text as a "confused and suspect piece of information [which] does not teach us anything about pagan knowledge of Abraham." See P. van der Horst, "Did the Gentiles Know who Abraham Was?," in *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites*, ed. Goodman, van Kooten, and van Ruiten, 61–75, here 74.

27   Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* IX. 17 (419a). Cf. the remarkable two Delian inscriptions referring to the Israelites (*Israeleitai*) from Delos who make offerings on the sacred Mount Garizim (*Argarizein*). Other early inscriptions from the Delos synagogue, dating from the second or first century BCE, mention *Theos Hypsistos*. See David Noy, Alexander Panayov, and Hanswulf Bloedhorn, eds., *Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis, I: Eastern Europe* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 211–33. My thanks to Youval Rotman for calling my attention to these inscriptions.

28   N. Belayche, *Iudaea Palaestina*, 199–209. On this temple, built by Hadrian, see Menahem Mor, *The Second Jewish Revolt* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 376. Cf. Tardieu, "*Religion d'Abraham*," 435, n. 40. It would seem that the old Samaritan temple was located elsewhere, on the summit of Gerizim, as argued by the archaeologist Yitzhak Magen, who excavated on the site.

29   On Marinus, see Menahem Luz, "Marinus' Abrahamic Notions of the Soul and the One," in *Proclus and His Legacy*, ed. Danielle Layne and David D. Burton (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), 145–58. Cf. Mark Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints: The Lives of Plotinus and Proclus by their Students* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 55–7.

30   Marinus, *Vita Procli*, 19.47–8; ed. Boissonade (Paris: 1850).

31   Diogenes Laertius 6.63. M. Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints*, 88. M. Luz, "Marinus' Abrahamic notions of the Soul and One," claims that Marinus's conception of divine ineffability reflects his Samaritan education. To my mind, the Platonic tradition seems a more plausible source.

32   I cannot offer here a thorough discussion of the topic, or even provide a summary of modern scholarship. For a brief presentation of the *status quaestionis*, see G. W. Bowersock, *The Crucible of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 42–7. Like other scholars, Bowersock expresses the wish for a joint study of *ḥanīf* and *sabiʾ*. Cf. Aziz al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and His People*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 258–364. See further Jacob Olidort, "Portraying Early Islam as the *milla* of Abraham—A Look at the *tafsīr* Evidence," in *The Late Antique World of Early Islam: Muslims among Christians and Jews in the East Mediterranean*, ed. Robert G. Hoyland (Berlin: Gerlach, 2021 [2015]), 313–37.

33   Qur'an 3:67 (Fakhry's trans., modified). On this term, see Nicolai Sinai, *Key Terms of the Qur'an: A Critical Dictionary* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023), 236–44, as well as Mohsen Goudarzi, "Unearthing Abraham's Altar:

The Cultic Dimensions of *dīn*, *islām*, and *ḥanīf* in the Qur'an," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 82 (2023): 77 ff.

34 Qur'an 2:135. For a short analysis of the term in its Qur'anic context, see Geneviève Gobillot, "*ḥanîf,*" in Mohammad Ali Amir Moezzi, ed., *Dictionnaire du Coran* (Paris: Laffont, 2007), 381–4. Jacques Berque follows the Islamic tradition, understanding *ḥanīf* as "original believer"; see his note on Qur'an 2:135 in *Le Coran, Essai de traduction* par Jacques Berque (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995 [1990]), 43.

35 On the beginnings of monotheism in late antique Arabia, see Holger Zellentin, "The Rise of Monotheism in Arabia," in *A Companion to Religion in Late Antiquity*, ed. Josef Lössl and Nicholas J. Baker-Brian (Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 156–80. Cf. Iwona Gajda, "Quel monothéisme en Arabie du Sud ancienne?" in Joëlle Beaucamp, Françoise Briquel-Chatonnet, and Christian Julien Robin, eds., *Juifs et chrétiens en Arabie aux Ve et VIe siècles: Regards croisés sur les sources* (Paris: Association des amis du Centre d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance, 2010), 107–20. On the birth of Islam in the framework of the monotheistic movement, see Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and His People*.

36 For a rich discussion of Arabic *ḥanef* and of Syriac *ḥanef*, see François de Blois, "*Naṣrānī* (*Nazoraios*) and *ḥanīf* (*ethnikos*): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam," *Bulletin of SOAS* 65 (2002): 1–30, especially 16–25.

37 See, for instance, Shlomo Pines, "*Jahiliyya* and '*Ilm*," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13 (1990): 175–94, reprinted in Sh. Pines, *Studies in the History of Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Sarah Stroumsa (= S. Pines, *Collected Works III*; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1996), 139–94. Pines rejects the etymology of *ḥanīf* from Syriac, preferring to see the term's origin in the Hebrew *ḥanef*, a word representing the Judeo-Christian heretics, or *minim*, in rabbinic literature (see, for instance, *Genesis Rabbah* 25, cited by Pines, 192, n. 36). Christian Julien Robin, who speaks of a "Raḥmānist" hypothesis, suggests searching for the origin of *ḥanīf* in the Islamo-Arabic tradition in the Jewish presence in pre-Islamic Arabia. See C. J. Robin, "Judaism in Pre-Islamic Arabia," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, Vol. V, ed. Philip I. Lieberman, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 294–331, esp. 318.

38 Puzzlingly, Marinus is not mentioned in Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), although the Samaritans play a key role in the authors' theory on Islamic origins.

39 *De Abrahamo*, 1–2. On this text, see Maren R. Niehoff and Reinhard Feldmeier, eds., *Abrahams Aufbruch: Philon von Alexandria, De migratione Abrahami* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017).

40 See in particular Christian Julien Robin, "Quel judaïsme en Arabie?" in *Le judaïsme de l'Arabie antique*, ed. C. J. Robin (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 15–295, as well as the other contributions to the volume. Epigraphic discoveries in eastern Arabia, dating from the fourth century on, point to a version of monotheism close to Judaism. Robin proposes (172) to identify this form of monotheism as "judéo-monothéisme." He also refers to the existence in pre-Islamic Arabia of what he calls "paganisme hénothéisant/judaïsant."

41 On the Negev inscriptions, see Yehuda Nevo and Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2003). On the many mentions of Abraham in those inscriptions, as well as in the Nessana papyri, see Nevo and Koren, *Crossroads to Islam*, 189, where the authors refer to the "Abrahamic" religion of the Negev Arabs as a form of monotheism permitting them to express their own identity. See further Rachel Stroumsa, *People and Identities in Nessana* (PhD diss.: Duke University, 2008).

42 Sozomen, *H.E.* VI. 38.

43 Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* XVIII. 5. His cousin, Gregory of Nyssa, refers to the *Hypsistianoi* (*contra Eunomium*, II).

44 Mitchell, "Further Thoughts on the Cult of Theos Hypsistos," 698.

45 G. W. Bowersock, "The Highest God, with Particular Reference to North Pontus," *Hyperboreus* 8 (2002): 853–63. On the inscriptions to *Theos Hypsistos* around the Black Sea, where there is no trace of Jewish presence, see Yulia Ustinova, *The Supreme Gods of the Bosphoran Kingdom: Celestial Aphrodite and the Most High God* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

46 For the broad framework within which to understand the God-fearers, see Martin Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

47 See A. Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), ch. 5: "*Theos Hypsistos*: God-Fearers."

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CHAPTER

3 Varieties of Dualism 🔓

Guy G Stroumsa

Abstract

Monotheism and dualism are major variants of one another. The problem of evil, in particular, may permit the belief in an evil god confronting the good god throughout history, since the creation of the world. This chapter follows the development of the various dualist theologies, starting with Mazdeism, and the deep Iranian influences on Judaism in the Hellenistic period. The Gnostic dualist myths are then reviewed, as well as Marcion's opposition between the God of the Old Testament and the Father of Jesus Christ. Finally, the nature of Manichaean dualism is analyzed. The chapter concludes with the paradox of dualism, which is in a sense similar to the paradox of monotheism: it is not a stable structure and has a tendency to morph into either a Trinitarian or a monotheist structure.

Keywords: Mazdeism, two powers in heaven, mesotēs, Marcion, Mani, the stranger god

Subject: History of Religion, Comparative Religion, Theology, Religious Issues and Debates, Philosophy of Religion

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Mazdean Dualism

It was the great Oxford orientalist Thomas Hyde (1636–1703), Bodley's Librarian, Laudian Professor of Arabic, and Regius Professor of Hebrew, who coined the term *dualismus* to describe the Mazdean religious system. In his *Historia veterum Persarum eorumque Magorum* (1700), Hyde argued that Zarathustra's original doctrine had been the monotheistic religion of Abraham. The emergence of dualism, for Hyde, reflected the degeneration of original monotheism (similar to the old Jewish view of idolatry, as expressed in Paul's Epistle to the Romans [1:18–23]). The term dualism was thus launched on its successful career.

Pierre Bayle, in the second edition of his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1702), used the term to characterize the Manichaean system. A generation later, Bayle's ideas were developed by Isaac de Beausobre, the first serious modern scholar of Manichaeism, in his epoch-making history of Mani's religion.[1] One of Beausobre's striking intuitions was to search for the *Vorgeschichte* of Manichaeism among early Christian sectarians, and for the ultimate roots of Mani's system in the apocryphal writings of the Hebrew Bible.[2] During those same years, in Tübingen, Ferdinand Christian Baur published an important book on Manichaeism. This text, however, devoted scant attention to Jewish literary documents.[3]

Soon afterwards, Christian Wolff introduced the concept of dualism to the philosophical domain, in reference to Descartes's opposition between two kinds of substance, matter and mind, *res extensa* and *res cogitans*.[4] Of

p. 56 course, the long history of philosophical dualism (though not of the term itself) starts, ↳ before Plato, with the pre-Socratics. In this chapter, I will deal with religious dualism rather than with philosophical dualism.[5] While the roots of the latter clearly lie in Greece, Iran is considered the main locus of the former.

A claim can be made that the study of religious dualism is antiquarian in nature. Yet, for the distinguished Iranist Walter Bruno Henning, who fled Nazi Germany to England, the existence of the devil was quite palpable. He argued that the emergence of Zoroastrian dualism was the natural response to the scandal of evil and to the lack of explanation for its existence in all monotheistic systems. The relationship between monotheism and dualism does appear natural and direct, much more so than that between either polytheism and dualism, or polytheism and monotheism. Is it possible, after all, that religious dualism and monotheism are but the two sides of the same coin, or that one represents a slight, if significant, modification of the other?[6]

A discussion of monotheism and dualism risks freezing into Weberian "ideal types" concepts which are better understood as fluid elements on a spectrum. Moreover, this spectrum continuously evolves. Scholarly categories, etic by definition, do not always reflect emic self-understanding. Dualists, it would seem, are not always, perhaps even not usually, consciously so.

While this chapter focuses on expressions of religious dualism in late antiquity, any study of dualism in the history of religions should probably start with Iran. The dualist character of Mazdeism (like that of Manichaeism) is essentially ethical rather than ontological. While Ohrmazd, the good principle, created the material world (*gētīg*), the realm of Ahreman, the evil principle, has no *gētīg*, and therefore cannot be said to fully exist. Thus, evil has no ontological existence, although it can seize creatures of *gētīg* and usurp their material nature. In such an ethical type of dualist religion, the good principle possesses, with its *gētig*, an inherent advantage, and it must eventually win its battle against the evil principle. As Shaul Shaked put the matter, "the balance is heavily tipped,"[7] adding that a religion based on ethical dualism cannot maintain a symmetry of two powers.[8]

p. 57 The lack of symmetry between the two realms is highlighted by the existence of a third principle. In the Avestan texts, Ahura Mazda stands above Spenta Mainyu, the "Bounteous Spirit," which, in turn, is set against Angra Mainyu, the "Evil Spirit." It was only in the Sasanian period, from the third to the seventh century, that this divine "triangle" would be transformed into a more rigid dualism.[9] In the Pahlavi books (written down after the Islamic conquest, but preserving earlier conceptions), the two powers or principles are subordinate neither to each other nor to a third power.[10] Such a schema may shed light on a crux in Plutarch's *Isis and Osiris*, where Mithra is described as being a mediator (*mesitēs*) between Ohrmazd and Ahreman.[11]

This Trinitarian–like understanding of Mazdeism shows that two dimensions coexist in its dualism, which is at once "horizontal" (Ohrmazd vs. Ahreman) and "vertical" (Ahura Mazda above the two opposing powers). These insights on the nature of Mazdean dualism are confirmed, and their epistemic value broadened, when one looks at other dualist patterns of religious thought in the late ancient Near East. In what follows, I shall discuss a few cases of dualism in Jewish, Gnostic, Marcionite, and Manichaean traditions, seeking to show how these forms interplay, and how they echo those identified by Shaked in the Iranian tradition.

A few preliminary remarks are in order. First, a synoptic approach to late ancient dualism remains a desideratum. While each of the dualist religious movements has received significant scholarly attention, the global study of dualist trends is often done in the *très longue durée*, without focusing on late antiquity. The trajectory of religious dualist movements in the history of Christianity, from the Gnostics and the Manichaeans through the Paulicians and the Bogomils in the East to the Cathars in the medieval West, has been told, sometimes elegantly and often convincingly, by historians who see a continuous—albeit concealed—dualist thread running through Christian history. While this approach is valuable, it may have blurred the core of late antique dualism.[12]

Regarding the origins of religious dualism, scholars have offered two main approaches. While religious dualism refers mainly to the duality of divinities, dualism also encompasses cosmological and anthropological dualism. The first option, then, emphasizes duality in the divine world; the second focuses on duality within the cosmos and man. One may thus emphasize either theological dualism or its consequences on the cosmos and human nature. Other approaches have argued that dualism appears in history as a kind of intermediary station between polytheism and monotheism. Religious dualism is often studied by philologists who work on literary documents. Taking a different direction, Ugo Bianchi, a leading representative of the Italian school of religious studies, studied ethnological material from Siberia and North America. He found dualistic patterns of thought similar to those of Gnostic dualism in the lower divine figure of a "trickster" demiurge, adversarial to the supreme god.[13]

The structure of dualism, like that of monotheism, is neither clear-cut nor stable. A dualistic theology typically requires a third element, which functions as an intermediary between the good principle and the evil one. It is only through this intermediary that transformations of monotheism into dualism (and vice versa) can be fully understood.

Discussing historical forms of religious dualism is to present an alternative history of monotheism. Even those scholars who do not perceive dualism as reflecting a revolt against monotheism recognize in it a radically modified form of monotheism.[14] The centuries from the birth of Christianity to that of Islam can be viewed as a grand victory march of monotheism, sealing the fate of the ancient world's polytheist systems. The same period also offered fertile ground for a series of dualist movements. There was a direct connection between the two phenomena, each representing, so to speak, the negative of the other. In ↳ their revolt against the God of Israel, Marcion, Basilides, and Mani, as well as the Jewish heretic Ḥiwi al–Balkhi, all sought a higher, better God, while the ninth-century Zoroastrian theologian Mardān-Farrox offered in his *Škand Gumānīg Wizār*, a polemical work against Jews, Christians, and Manichaeans, what may be the most elaborate dualist argument against monotheism we have.[15]

Two Powers in Heaven

In Isaiah 45:7 we read: "I form light and create darkness; I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things." This verse, which insists on the monotheistic character of Israel's religion, is arguably the first testimony of the sustained impact of Iranian dualism on the religion of Israel, which started in the Achaemenid Empire. Such impact, which never succeeded in nullifying the idea of God's ultimate power, continued until the end of the Sasanian period. Although the impact of Iranian dualism on Judaism was first felt when the Iranian Empire extended to Palestine (as well as the rest of the Near East), its final chapter reflected the importance of Jewish communities in late antique Mesopotamia, which was then under Sasanian rule. For Shaked, who identified a number of significant isomorphisms between Mazdeism and Judaism, it is "not likely that so many similarities could have been formed in parallel independently."[16]

The modern scholarly study of dualist trends in Judaism was launched toward the end of the nineteenth century by Göttingen theologians of the so-called *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,* who sought to study biblical

texts in their broader religious contexts.[17] Wilhelm Bousset, a leading figure of that school, viewed early Christian Gnosticism as a dualist movement, which he considered to have been an essentially "Oriental" phenomenon, of Iranian origin. In the discussion of Jewish dualism in his *Die Religion des Judentums*, however, ↳ Bousset did not elaborate on a possible Iranian (or, in his terms, Persian) influence. It is mainly in the third, revised edition of this book that the impact of Iranian dualism on Hellenistic Judaism is fully discussed.[18] Bousset writes that while for Iran the "*religionsgeschichtliche* Problem" is monism (as highlighted by the status of Zurvan in later mythological texts), for Judaism it is dualism, which comes from the impact of Iranian religion.[19] In order to assess how dualist trends played out in the Rabbinic and Talmudic periods, we need to take a brief look at some earlier texts.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered at Qumran in the late 1940s, were redacted in the Hellenistic period. These texts never give up on monotheism and always project a sense of God's supremacy. Nonetheless, some of them are clearly dualistic in their theology, especially in their description of two spirits, good and evil, and of the battle between the "sons of light" and the "sons of darkness," competing throughout history until the final, eschatological war between them. Such dualist ideas bring to mind similarities with Iranian dualism, but the dearth of clearly dated evidence complicates arguments about possible influences. Notwithstanding such difficulties, intensive work on the Qumran texts in the last two generations has allowed us to build a reasonable case for the Iranian origin of the dualistic patterns in the Dead Sea Scrolls. However, as argued by Shaked and recently reaffirmed by Albert de Jong, the argument remains essentially structural. When compared to Iranian dualism, Qumran dualist ideas show less consistency within the overall theology, which may reflect a foreign origin rather than an internal development. The Qumran texts represent the crucible of the dualist movements in the early Christian centuries, on both sides of the border between the Roman and the Sasanian Empires.[20] Specifically, the esoteric knowledge (*da'at*) found in some Qumran texts may point to a phenomenon akin to the esoteric and salvific *gnōsis* in early Christian Gnostic texts.

The idea of a duality of divine powers is inscribed in the first chapters of the book of Genesis, with the appearance of two divine *personae*, Elohim and ↳ Yahwe (the Tetragrammaton, or *Adonai*, "the Lord," as he is usually called by Jews), rendered respectively *theos* and *kyrios* in the Septuagint. Jewish traditions speculated on this duality of the divine names as early as the Hellenistic period. For Philo, who reflects these traditions, *kyrios* represents the divine power of justice, while *theos* represents the divine power of goodness. In the later rabbinic tradition, these two powers are inverted, with Elohim connoting the attribute of justice (*middat ha-din*), and "the Lord" connoting the attribute of mercy (*middat ha-raḥamim*).[21] In our context, it is significant that a certain duality, reflected in the two opposite dimensions of (the single) God, is recognized in late antique rabbinic literature. Particularly meaningful is the similarity between two divine attributes, love and justice, and the two main divine figures in contemporaneous dualist Christian trends. For the early rabbis, the two divine attributes are on the same level, resulting in a horizontal dualism. While the topic is beyond the scope of the current discussion, I will at least mention biblical and Jewish traditions of ethical dualism, according to which man must choose between two ways of good and evil, or that of life and that of death, and their Christian avatars, from the teaching of the Two Ways in the early *Didachē* to Lactantius in the fourth century.[22]

Starting with the figure of the "Son of Man" in the book of Daniel, a vertical dualism appears in Judaism, up to rabbinic literature. In Daniel 7:13, the prophet sees a heavenly figure "like a man" (*ke-bar enash*) approaching "The Ancient of Days." Daniel's "Son of Man," a second divine figure, beneath God himself and close to Him, is well known from Apocryphal literature and from the New Testament. He also appears in later literature in various avatars, as an angel or as Metatron, the divine figure next to the divine throne, and has been the topic of innumerable studies, which often focus on the rabbinic formula of "two powers in heaven" (*shtei rashuyyot ba-shammaym*), a linchpin of heresy for the early rabbis.[23] As argued by Larry Hurtado, such a binary shape of the divine is at the root of Jesus as Lord in Paul's thought, according to I Corinthians 8:6: "yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all ↳ things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist."[24]

The eminent German Judaist Peter Schäfer has proposed to speak here of a "vertical" dualism, different from the "horizontal" dualism that opposes a good to an evil power. To my mind, such a neat categorization is difficult, as attested forms of dualism in late antiquity tend to retain both vertical and horizontal elements. The existence of a hierarchy of two divine figures does not explain the origin of evil, for which a *tertium quid*, or third power, is postulated, opposed to both divine figures but more correctly seen as akin to the lower one. Schäfer has offered a fresh survey of these avatars of what he calls "binitarian speculations in Judaism," from Daniel, through Qumran, the book of Enoch, and Philo's *Logos*, up to the Talmud.[25] Elements of these binitarian thought patterns, such as the Son of Man or the Logos, were adopted by nascent Christianity. For Schäfer, this binitarian tradition, which represents a hierarchical, or vertical, dualism, is distinct from the horizontal varieties of theological dualism found in the early Christian Gnostic movements. Focusing exclusively on Jewish texts, Schäfer omits that the vertical dimension is not limited to Judaism. Julian, for instance, accepts as self-evident the idea of a vertical dualism. As he puts it, under the national god of every people one finds "an angel, a demon, a hero, and a peculiar order of spirits which obey and work for the higher powers."[26] He is probably articulating a broadly accepted belief, certainly among Platonists.

Noting the high profile attributed to the lower divine figure in the Babylonian Talmud (in contrast to the Palestinian Talmud),[27] Schäfer suggests that in Roman Palestine the presence of Christianity was so overwhelming that the rabbis preferred to play down any idea of duality in the divine world. In Babylonia, by contrast, where Christianity had a lower-key presence, the early rabbis did not feel the need to self-censor their dualist views. This suggestion is puzzling. In the period under discussion, Babylonia was part of the Sasanian Empire. It is difficult to believe that Babylonian Jews could ignore the most ↳ fundamental elements of Mazdean theology. Indeed, we now know, thanks in part to the famous magic bowls, of the overwhelming importance in late antique Babylonia of what one may call a "religious *koinē*" crossing all official religious boundaries.[28] Moreover, it is surprising that Schäfer's book makes no mention of Iran, Mazdeism, or Zoroastrianism, while Marcion is mentioned only once, and the whole discussion of Jewish binitarianism focuses on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

The Gnostic *Mesotēs*

Modern scholars often use the umbrella term "Gnosticism" when referring to various heresies of early Christianity.[29] In past decades, the heuristic value of this term has been questioned by scholars for whom the differences between the various sects and doctrines seem stronger than the similarities between them.[30] However, until we come up with a better term to describe the isomorphism between the various doctrines as related by the patristic heresiographies and as reflected in the primary texts themselves—mainly those found in Coptic translation, discovered at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in the late 1940s—it seems legitimate to continue using it. In my view, the simultaneous discoveries at Qumran and at Nag Hammadi merit comprehensive comparative study, focusing on the ways in which these major textual finds transformed our understanding of the cradle of Christianity.

The term "Gnosticism," from the Greek word *gnōsis* [knowledge], denotes an esoteric knowledge endowed with a soteriological character. This knowledge enables the Gnostic to escape the material world, created by a lower god. The contrast between the lower demiurge and the higher god immediately marks this movement as dualist. In the nineteenth century, Protestant theologians applying a critical eye to the Scriptures and the orthodox understanding of religious history were sympathetic to movements rejected as heretical by the Church Fathers, and which they dubbed "early Catholicism." As noted, ↳ in the 1890s Wilhelm Bousset and his Göttingen colleagues sought to highlight the so-called "Oriental" character and the Iranian origins of Gnosticism. According to Bousset, Gnosticism's "basic feature is a sharp dualism and a radical pessimism toward this lower, natural world."[31] By contrast, the towering German theologian Adolf von Harnack insisted that Gnosticism represented the "radical Hellenization" (*die acute Hellenisierung*) of Christianity.[32] Notably,

however, both Bousset and Harnack played down the fact that, as a syncretistic phenomenon, Gnosticism had multiple roots. Moreover, neither scholar mentioned that alongside the cultural influences and counter-influences in Iran and Greece, those coming from the religious tradition of Israel should have been seriously taken into account, as the early Gnostic myths seek to offer an inverted vision of biblical cosmogony, anthropogony, and the early history of humankind.[33]

Our knowledge of Gnosticism has mostly come through the patristic heresiologists, from Irenaeus of Lyon in the second century to Epiphanius of Salamis in the fourth. These writers were more interested in fighting the hydra of heresy than in presenting its features accurately. It is only with the discovery and publication of the Nag Hammadi library that this knowledge would be based on primary sources. While Gnosticism has long been seen in scholarship as a dualistic religion, recent research has cast doubt on this representation. Simone Pétrement, who authored a synthetic study of Gnosticism, argued that Gnostics were, in the main, monists, although she spoke of a "dualist sentiment" as a defining feature of the Gnostic attitude.[34]

This "dualist sentiment" emphasizes the abyss between the true and supreme God, who is wholly good, and the lower demiurge, who enslaved Adam and made a covenant with Noah (as in the *Apocalypse of Adam*). According to Epiphanius, the demiurge, or chief archon, called Sabaoth, Yaldabaoth, or ↳ Sammael,[35] is identified with the God of the Jews, the Lawgiver, and the father of Satan in the system of the Archontics.[36] A strong anti-Jewish tendency is present in many Gnostic texts and traditions. According to the early second-century Basilides (considered the first Christian philosopher), Jesus was sent to destroy the god of the Jews.[37]

In the mythology of another Gnostic text, the *Apocryphon of John*, the demiurge also created the "counterfeit spirit" (*antimimon pneuma*), a Satanic figure similar to "the Adversary," or *antikeimenon* in the *Epistle to Flora* (discussed below). This Satanic figure seeks to imitate the good God—just as the devil does, according to the Church Fathers. Although the supreme God, or Father as he is called in some Valentinian texts such as the *Gospel of Truth* and the *Gospel of Philip*, remains invisible, beyond human grasp, he may be approached through his Son, who emanated from him and bears his name. A dualist sentiment, however, does not necessarily point to a dualist doctrine. In the late second century, Irenaeus stated that "almost all heretics" claim the existence of a single God, although they transform Him through their perverse doctrine.[38] Following Elaine Pagels, for whom Valentinus's thought exhibited a "modified" monotheism, some scholars argue that dualism cannot be considered a defining quality of Gnostic thought.[39] This approach is consistent with the above-mentioned testimony of Irenaeus, for whom heretics (i.e., those we now call Gnostics) claim a single God. Karen King, in particular, highlights the "fluidity and imprecision with which the term 'dualism' is used."[40]

A more satisfying approach calls attention to the presentation of the supreme God in a number of Gnostic texts and traditions as a "Stranger God." In Gnostic parlance, the term "stranger" refers to the transcendent character of the supreme God, who remains not only unknown but also unknowable. Henri-Charles Puech has offered a remarkable phenomenological analysis of this character of the supreme God, who remains in all Gnostic texts at once different from and higher than the lower demiurge, the Jewish God.[41]

Below, I present an excerpt from a text from the first half of the second century, the *Epistle to Flora*, attributed to Ptolemy, a disciple of Valentinus.[42] This text, which is presented as the exposition of the doctrine to a "fellow traveler," exhibits the modified monotheism typical of Gnostic works:

> [S]ince the division of the law (that is, God's own law) was established neither by the perfect God, as we have taught, nor surely by the devil—which it would be wrong to say—then the establisher of this division of the law is distinct from them. And he is the demiurge and maker of the universe and of the things within it. Since he is different from the essences of the other two and is in a state intermediate between them, he would rightfully be described by the term intermediateness (*mesotēs*).
>
> And if the perfect god is good according to his nature—as indeed he is, for our savior showed that "one only" is there who is good," namely his father whom he manifested—and if furthermore the law

> belonging to the nature of the adversary is both evil and wicked and is stamped in the mold of injustice, then a being that is in a state intermediate between these and is neither good, nor evil or unjust, might well be properly called just (*dikaios*) of the justice that is his.[43]

In its description of the structure of the divine world, this passage represents a major trend of Christian Gnosticism. Ptolemy wrote around the mid-second century, but Valentinian communities remained active in the East throughout late antiquity. The material nature of the devil in this text differs from that of Ahreman in the Sasanian period, an entity with no *gētīg*, or material existence. The triadic structure set out in the *Epistle to Flora*, however, resembles that of Mazdean traditions, with the principle of justice standing between the good and the evil principles. It may be considered as a modification of either dualism or monotheism.

The Stranger God

Marcion's heresy was seen by the Church Fathers as a perilous threat. As Marcion's main work, the *Antitheses*, has not survived, we have to rely on these same figures for our discussion about the text. According to Irenaeus, Marcion's predecessor was "a certain Cerdo," a follower of Simon Magus, the first Christian heresiarch. For this Cerdo, there were two gods. The god of the Law and the Prophets, whom it is possible to know, is just, while the good god, the father of Jesus Christ, remains unknowable.[44] For Cerdo's successor Marcion, the righteous of the Old Testament, those who obeyed the creator of the universe, or *cosmocrator*, were doomed, while Cain, the Sodomites, the Egyptians, and assorted others were saved by the Savior during his descent to Hell.[45]

Harnack, who authored an epoch-making book on Marcion (subtitled "The Gospel of the Stranger God"), had much sympathy for his protagonist. In his presentation, Marcion was a radical Paulinian who sought, perhaps too early, to do what even Luther, fifteen centuries later, did not dare to envisage—namely, to fashion a Christianity freed from the chains of the Old Testament.[46] According to Harnack, Marcionite scripturalism followed the logical implications of Pauline doctrine, while Gnostic thought, and Gnostic mythology in particular, was influenced by Greek (pagan) thought. It was on the ground of ditheism that Marcion and the Gnostics met.[47] Marcion's inverted reading of the Hebrew Bible, and especially of Genesis, indeed indicates a Gnostic *mythopoiesis*. It took an entire century for Harnack's thesis of Marcion's interpretation of original Christianity to be laid to rest.[48]

The above-mentioned Valentinian Ptolemy was a contemporary of Marcion in mid-second century Rome, and his *Epistle to Flora* may represent the very first reference to Marcion's dualism:

> For some say that this law has been ordained by God the father; while others (*heteroi*), following the opposite course, stoutly contend that it has been established by the adversary, the pernicious devil, saying that he is "the father and maker of the universe."[49]

It is worth emphasizing that Marcionism lasted throughout late antiquity. In the fourth century, Ephrem of Nisibis considers the Marcionites to be as dangerous as the Manichaeans.[50] Even in the late tenth century, Ibn al-Nadīm mentions, in his *Fihrist*, the presence of Marcionite villages in Central Asia, between the Caspian Sea and the Oxus.[51]

Two main questions relate to Marcion's so-called ditheism. The first is whether Marcion postulated two or, rather, three gods. The second question concerns the origins of this dualism. Writing around 155, Justin Martyr writes that Marcion denied the god who made this universe, professing another one, greater than the demiurge.[52] Tertullian's *Adversus Marcionem*, a refutation of the heresiarch written at the turn of the third century, remains our most important source on Marcion and his doctrine. In response to the question of the relationship between Marcion's two gods, Tertullian makes it clear that these two gods are unequal:

> For all that, we were aware that Marcion sets up unequal gods, the one a judge, fierce and warlike, the other mild and peaceable, solely kind and supremely good.[53]

p. 69   Marcion's two gods, then, are of different ranks, the good god superior to the warlike one. According to Irenaeus, these two gods are "separated from each other by an infinite distance."[54] In such a structure, referred to above as "vertical" dualism, where the higher god is called a "stranger" (*nukrayā* in Ephrem's testimony) to the world which he has not created, and the lower god is a judge, one may expect to find a third divine figure who acts as an intermediary between the first two.[55] In Ptolemy's *Epistle to Flora*, the demiurgic judge was the intermediary between the good god and the evil one. The Church Fathers do indeed speak of a third god. For Tertullian, this third, intermediary god is space itself: "Meanwhile you can count for me three gods of Marcion, the maker, the space, and the material."[56]

The testimonies about Marcion's third god reflect a certain inconsistency. According to some of these reports, space is conceived as the intermediary between the deity and matter. According to others, space is the strange, supreme, and unknowable god, while the creator is the intermediary between the good god and the evil one. Reference was made above to Puech's study of the idea of a stranger god in Gnostic thought.

According to Hippolytus, it is Prepo, a follower of Marcion, who introduced the third, mediating principle, while the structure of Marcion's own dualism seems to have been more radical than that of Valentinus and Ptolemy.[57] For them, the demiurge, while not the highest god, was not identified with the evil principle. It is worth noting that even in the later Platonic tradition, the demiurge as second god may sometimes be considered as good. In the second century, for instance, the Hellenic philosopher Numenius of Apamea, who seems to have been rather close to the Gnostics, calls the demiurge *agathos* or good.[58] In Marcion's case, the perception of the demiurge as evil resulted from the total rejection of the Hebrew Bible.

p. 70   As to the origins of Marcion's dualism, the historian of religions Geo Widengren notes that, like Bardaisan, and of course Mani, Marcion, in his ↳ native Sinope on the southern shores of the Black Sea, "grew up in a strongly Iranicized atmosphere. Marcion was born inside the boundaries of the old Iranian kingdom of Pontus."[59] Similarly, the Iranist François de Blois argues that the Marcionite picture of the lower world is typical of Iranian dualism, and concludes: "Marcionism can be described as a combination of a Zoroastrian-type dualism with an antinomian interpretation of Pauline Christianity."[60] As Marcionite communities survived for centuries in the East, it is of course also possible that such tendencies to Iranian dualism became even stronger with time, but here we are in the realm of speculation. In any case, the points of affinity between the teachings of Marcion and those of Mani may explain the fact that many in the Marcionite Church, whose Encratism, like that of the Manichaeans, prohibited marriage, appear to have joined the Manichaean communities.[61]

The King and the Swine

Manichaeism, which was probably the first consciously universal religion, is often considered the most radical expression of religious dualism.[62] According to Puech, it was this unadulterated dualism that distinguished Manichaeism from other Gnostic systems.[63] Indeed, Franz Cumont spoke of Manichaean "ditheism."[64] Yet, even in this profoundly dualistic system, there is an asymmetry between the principles of good and evil, the King of Light and the King of Darkness.[65]

p. 71   Moreover, in the Manichaean myth, the adversary of the King of Darkness is not the King of Light but his emanation, the First Man. Similarly to other dualistic systems discussed here, Manichaean dualism is at once vertical and horizontal, and the First Man functions as an intermediary between the two opposite principles. This figure, however, belongs to one of the two conflicting sides. What makes Manichaean dualism so extreme is the conjunction, the exact superposition of two kinds of dualism. The former, which one may call "Platonic,"

opposes spirit to matter as two irreducible principles, while in the latter, exemplified in Mazdeism, it is goodness and evil that are in conflict. This second type of dualism, again, is ethical in its essence.

The *Cologne Mani Codex* (*CMC*) discovered and published in the 1970s, is the smallest codex we have from antiquity. It represents the Greek text of a spiritual biography of the Prophet of Light, Mani, probably dating to the third century (the original might have been written in Syriac).[66] This key text has transformed our knowledge of the earliest stages of Mani's religion, as it describes his youth in an Elchasaite community of Jewish-Christian Baptists. Although Mani's origins were previously known through Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*, who referred to the "Mughtasilah," or Baptists, we now have a detailed description of the young Mani's *Sitz im Leben* in third-century Mesopotamia. The *CMC* indicates that Mani's dualism stems from the kind of "social" dualism known in Qumran, opposing the Sons of Light to the Sons of Darkness.[67] As we saw above, the dualism of the Dead Sea Scrolls appears to have been construed through an Iranian pattern. In presenting his doctrine to the

Mazdean leaders at the Sasanian court, Mani emphasized the dualist character of his doctrine ↳ and invented a full-fledged mythology which highlighted the parallelism between the two conflicting realms.[68]

It is significant that Mani, after leaving the Elchasaite community, retains the term "god" only for the good principle. In an important passage of the *Kephalaia*, a major theological text which has come to us in a Coptic translation, a Nazorean (i.e., probably an Elchasaite) asks Mani: "Your god, he to whom you pray and in whom you believe, is he good or evil?" Mani answers: "He is a judge, my god . . . he is a judge of those souls which listen to the demon and do evil."[69]

By referring to his god as a judge, Mani distinguished himself from other dualists, such as Gnostics and Marcionites, who reserved the term for the intermediate god. Mani, however, agrees with them that God's role as judge is to punish the wrongdoers. Similarly, in the *Contra Faustum*, Augustine's great anti-Manichaean polemical work, the Manichaean teacher Faustus says that there is only one God, the good God, adding that while Manichaeans do believe in two principles, the evil principle is matter (*hyle*), or the devil, whereas the term God is reserved for the good principle. According to Faustus, then, Manichaeans believe in one single God, not in two gods.[70]

This lack of balance between the two principles is also expressed in a Syriac text quoted by the sixth-century Severus, patriarch of Antioch. The text, which may have been authored by Mani himself, tells how members of the tree of death in the kingdom of darkness saw the splendid sight of light, much superior to their own, and decided to conspire against it. If they were so dazzled by the sight of light, it is because they had never before known anything of the divinity (*elohutā*).[71] In another sixth-century testimony, John the Grammarian's *Disputato cum manichaeo*, the Manichaean says: "We know that God is the supreme being, that he is good and

made of light, and ↳ that he is almighty. Evil, too, has no beginning, but it is much lower than God."[72]

These testimonies confirm that, for the Manichaeans too, there is a clear lack of balance between the two principles, and on all accounts the good principle is superior to the evil one. Moreover, it turns out that Mani's dualism can coexist with a monotheistic self-perception. This strange state of affairs can probably be traced to Mani's Jewish-Christian background.

In his study of Iranian and Christian forms of dualism in late antiquity, de Blois concludes that Iran is the remote, rather than the direct, source of Mani's dualism. I agree with this assessment, with a coda. As Mani developed his thought while in contact with the Mazdean authorities, it is to be expected that he was more directly influenced by Iranian dualist thought than by other Christian dualist systems.

Ludwig Koenen has identified a lack of consistency in Manichaean dualism, which he attributes to Mani's mythical pattern of thought.[73] According to Koenen, mythology allowed Mani the flexibility to limit dualism whenever the religious context called for compromise. Koenen's suggestion points to an important dimension of mythical thinking. However, it does not account for a similar imbalance between the two principles found in other late antique dualist trends.

The Paradox of Dualism

Our brief review of dualist religious movements of late antiquity should not belie the *Nachleben* of some of these trends. At the end of our period, the birth and dramatic growth of Islam, certainly the most rigorous form of Abrahamic monotheism, would also see a number of heretical movements. In her final, magisterial book, Patricia Crone limns the religious landscapes in Iranian lands, which often reflect dualist thought patterns echoing those from the period which has occupied us here.[74]

Dualism, indeed, is an etic term, used by outsiders, such as historians of religion. Insiders, however, tend to claim that it is in one single God that they believe: monotheism is an emic term. Regarding the ethical dualism of Zarathustra, Henning argued that it was based on a pre-existing monotheism. He further claimed that dualist revolt was ingrained in the very idea of monotheism.

Our discussion points to a puzzling fact, which I propose to call the "paradox of dualism": dualist phenomena tend to transform themselves into odd, radicalized versions of monotheism. Indeed, the paradox of dualism is the flip side of Corbin's paradox of monotheism: in both cases, the tendency of one to morph into the other seems irrepressible.[75] Any monotheism is a potential dualism, and vice versa. Moreover, and intriguingly, both monotheism and dualism display, at least in those movements of late antiquity discussed here, a Trinitarian structure.

Notes

Footnotes

1   *Histoire critique de Manichée et du manichéisme, Vols. I and II* (Amsterdam, 1734–9). Another version of this chapter was read on 27 October 2022 at the Shaul Shaked Memorial Symposium at the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Jerusalem.

2   On Hyde and de Beausobre, see G. G. Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 101–23.

3   F. C. Baur, *Das manichäische Religionssystem nach den Quellen untersucht und entwickelt* (Tübingen: Osiander, 1831).

4   C. Wolff, *Psychologia rationalis: methodo scientifica pertractata* (Frankfurt: Renger, 1734), 39.

5   Such a simplistic formulation sidesteps the question of the obvious relationship between religious and philosophical dualism in late antiquity; on which see, for instance, Fabienne Jourdan, ed., *Dualisme: Doctrines religieuses et philosophiques*, *Chôra*, numéro hors série (2015), in particular F. Jourdan and Anna Vasiliu, "Introduction," 7–17, with a discussion of the idea of cosmic dualism.

6   S. Shaked, "Zoroastrian Polemics against Jews in the Sasanian and Early Islamic Period," in *Irano-Judaica II*, ed. S. Shaked and A. Netzer (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1990), 85–104.

7   S. Shaked, "Some Notes on Ahreman, the Evil spirit, and His Creation," in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to G. G. Scholem*, ed. E. E. Urbach, R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, and C. H. Wirszubsky (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 227–54, here 233.

8   S. Shaked, *Dualism in Transformation*: Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran (London: SOAS, 1994), 22.

9   Shaked, "Some Notes on Ahreman," 234.

10 S. Shaked, "Mihr the Judge," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 2 (1980): 1–31, here 17.

11 In this article, Shaked discusses the semantics of *mayānǰīg* (arbiter, go-between, umpire, judge), its equivalent in Middle Persian. He identifies three different types of a third principle in late Iranian religion. Either the third principle is the middle region, neutral or inactive between the two realms, or it refers to the otiose supreme God, origin of the two antagonists (as Zurvan is). Finally, it can be, like Mihr (i.e., Mithra), a judge or mediator, the embodiment of justice; Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride* 369 E; see J. G. Griffiths, *Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1970), 190, 474. For Plutarch, theological dualism is universal: "The great majority and the wisest of men hold this opinion: they believe that there are two gods, rivals as it were, the one the Artificer (*dēmiourgos*) of good and the other of evil" (*De Iside et Osiride* 369 E [46]; Griffiths, *Plutarch*, 110–11).

12   See, for instance, Ioan P. Culiano, *Les gnoses dualistes d'Occident* (Paris: Payot, 1987), and Yuri Stoyanov, *The Other God: Dualist Religions from Antiquity to the Cathar Heresy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). In the Roman world, belief in intermediaries between the human and the divine worlds, whether called demons, angels, or spirits, was quite universal, crossing all religious boundaries.

13   See, for instance, Ugo Bianchi, *Il dualismo religioso: saggio storico ed etnologico* (Rome: "L'erma" di Bretschneider, 1958).

14   See, for instance, Philippe Gignoux, "Monotheism or polytheism in the Gathic revelation?" in *Irano-Judaica IV*, ed. S. Shaked and A. Netzer (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1999), 65–70, as well as P. O. Skjaervø, "Zoroastrian Dualism," in *Light against Darkness: Dualism in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and the Contemporary World*, ed. A. Lange et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), This volume (72 ff.) also includes various other important studies of ancient dualism, in Judaism, Gnosticism, and Manichaeism. For a polemical response to this article, see Almut Hintze, "Monotheism the Zoroastrian Way," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 24 (2014): 225–49, where Hintze seeks to present the traditional view of the clerics. I should like to thank Samra Azarnouche for calling my attention to this last item, as well as for her various other remarks on the draft of this chapter. See already J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *Ormazd et Ahriman: l'aventure dualiste dans l'antiquité* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1953).

15   On this important text, see Pierre Jean de Menasce, OP, *Une apologétique mazdéenne du IXe siècle: Škand-Gumānīk Vicār, La solution décisive des doutes* (Fribourg: Librairie de l'Université, 1945). On Zoroastrian polemical literature see further Flavia Ruani and Mihaela Timuş, eds., *Quand les dualistes polémiquaient: zoroastriens et manichéens* (Leuven: Peeters, 2020).

16   S. Shaked, "Iranian Influence on Judaism: First Century BCE to Second Century CE," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism, I*, ed. W. D. Davies and L. Finkelstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 308–25, here 324.

17   On the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, see, for instance, Anders Klostergaaard Petersen, "Franz Gumont aand the History of Religions School," in *The Christian Mystery: Early Christianity and the Ancient Mystery Cults in the Work of Franz Cumont*, ed. Annelies Lannoy and Danny Praet (Potsdam: Steiner Verlag, 2023), 141–72.

18   The third edition of Bousset's *Die Religion des Judentums im Zeitalter des Neuen Testaments* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1903), renamed *Die Religion des Judentums im späthellenistischen Zeitalter* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1926), was edited by Hugo Gressmann.

19   Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums im späthellenistischen Zeitalter*, 480.

20   See S. Shaked, "Qumran and Iran: Further Considerations," *Israel Oriental Studies* 2 (1972): 433–46, as well as A. de Jong, "Iranian Connections in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. T. H. Lim and J. J. Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 479–500. See further S. Shaked, "Qumran: Some Iranian Connections," in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield*, ed. Z. Zevit, M. Sokoloff, and S. Gitin (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 265–9; Miryam T. Brand, "Iranian Influence at Qumran: Texts and Beliefs," in *Iran, Israel, and the Jews: Symbiosis and Conflict from the Achaemenids to the Islamic Republic*, ed. A. Koller and D. Tsadik (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2019), 24–45.

21   See A. Marmorstein, "Philo and the Names of God," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 22 (1932): 295–306, as well as N. A. Dahl and Alan F. Segal, "Philo and the Rabbis on the Names of God," *Jewish Studies Journal* 9 (1978): 1–28. The inversion of the attributes may be due to the fact that Yahweh, for readers of the Septuagint, was *Ho Kyrios* (the Lord), a term more often associated with justice than with goodness. My thanks to Menahem Kister for pointing that out to me.

22   See, for instance, Christiane Ingremeau, Introduction, texte critique, traduction, notes et index, Lactance, *Institutions divines, Livre VI* (Sources Chrétiennes 509) (Paris: Cerf, 2007), notes complémentaires 1 ("Les deux voies") and 2 "Le dualisme au Livre VI"), 383–7.

23   See Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1977). On Metatron, see further G. G. Stroumsa, "Form(s) of God: Some Notes on Metatron and Christ," *Harvard Theological Review* 76 (1983): 269–88.

24   Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

25   P. Schäfer, *Two Gods in Heaven: Jewish Concepts of God in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020); originally published as *Zwei Götter im Himmel, Gottesvorstellungen in der jüdischen Antike* (Munich: Beck, 2017).

26   See Julian, *Against the Galileans*, 143 A–B, in *The Works of Emperor Julian*, trans. W. C. Wright, vol. III (LCL) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990 [1923]), 354–5. Note also that Julian considers Helios to be the intermediary between the single god, the One of the intelligible universe, and the other intelligent gods, and exerting his conciliatory mediation under various forms. Julian, *On Helios King*, 18 (141 d).

27   As Schäfer put it, "It is conspicuous that binitarian ideas are concentrated in Babylonian Judaism"; *Two Gods in Heaven*, 137.

28   On those magic bowls, see, for instance, Joseph Naveh, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1987 [2nd ed.]), and James Nathan Ford, *Aramaic Incantation Bowls in Museum Collections*
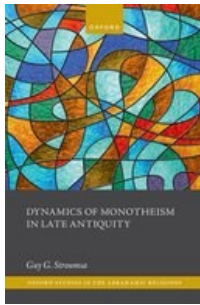
(Leiden: Brill, 2020).

29 See Morton Smith, "The History of the Term *gnostikos*," in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, I, ed. B. Layton (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 796–807.

30 See in particular Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism:" An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). As such disclaimers correctly note, the evidence of most Gnostic texts does not warrant seeing them as embodying a full-fledged dualist belief in two thoroughly conflicting gods. What they ignore, however, is that a similar theological structure, which does not amount to a radical dualism, seems to be also attested elsewhere.

31 See W. Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970 [original German ed. 1913]), 245 and 245–54, and, of course, W. Bousset, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1907).

32 A. Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* I (Freiburg: Mohr, 1886), 163, n. 1.

33 See, for instance, the approaches of Hans Leisegang, *Gnosis* (Leipzig: Kroener, 1924), and of Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon, 1958). There is no entry for "dualism" in the index of either of these books. In the words of J. Duchesne-Guillemin: "Le dualisme gnostique semble la synthèse originale de tendances nées en diverses patries. Il paraît devoir à la Grèce l'opposition entre l'esprit et la matière, que ne connaissait pas l'Iran et que ne connaîtra pas le mazdéisme. En revanche, la philosophie grecque ne comportait pas le genre d'opposition, la symétrie absolue (ou presque) qui caractérise la religion d'Ormazd et d'Ahriman" (*Ormazd et Ahriman*, 107).

34 S. Pétrement, *Le dualisme chez Platon, les gnostiques et les manichéens* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1947). On the question of Gnostic dualism, see further S. Pétrement, *Le Dieu séparé: les origines du christianisme* (Paris: Cerf, 1984), ch. V, 245–57.

35 In the *Hypostasis of the Archons*, Samael is called "the blind god." See Layton's translation in B. Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), 65–76.

36 Epiphanius, *Panarion* 40; in Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 191–8.

37 Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I. 24. 2 (A. Rousseau and L. Doutreleau, SJ, eds., Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*, I [Sources Chrétiennes 264] [Paris: Cerf. 1979], 324).

38 "Omnes enim fere quotquot sunt haereses deum quidem unum dicunt, sed per sententiam malam immutant"; *Adv. Haer*, I. 22.1 (Rousseau and Doutreleau, 310).

39 E. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979); on which see G. G. Stroumsa, "The Gnostic Temptation," *Numen* 27 (1980): 278–86. On King and Brakke, see the following note.

40 K. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 192–201; D. Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

41 H.-C. Puech, *En quête de la gnose* I (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 207–13.

42 The Greek original text of Ptolemy's *Epistle to Flora* is preserved in Epiphanius, *Panarion* 33. 3–8 (translation in Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 306–16). See also the edition and French translation of Gilles Quispel, Ptolémée, *Lettre à Flora* (Sources Chrétiennes 24bis [2nd. ed.]) (Paris: Cerf, 1966).

43 *Epistle to Flora*, Epiphanius, *Pan*. 33. 7. 5–6; Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 314. In the next paragraph, the adversary (*antikeimenon*) is said to be material (*hylikos*) in his essence.

44 "docuit eum qui a lege et prophetis adnuntiatus sit. Deus non esse Patrem Domini nostri Christi Iesu. Hunc enim cognosci, illum autem ignorari; et alterum quidem iustum, alterum autem bonum esse" (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, I 27. 1 [SC, 348–9]).

45 Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, I. 27. 3 (Rousseau and Doutreleau, 352–3).

46 A. von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* (Berlin, 1921). I use here the French translation, made from the 2nd ed. [Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1924]: Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: l'évangile du Dieu étranger: contribution à l'histoire de la fondation de l'Église catholique* (Paris: Cerf, 2005), trans. Bernard Lauret, with three contributions and Michel Tardieu's essay "Marcion depuis Harnack". For a recent authoritative and integrative article on Marcion and his influence, see Winrich Löhr, "Markion," *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 24 (2012): 147–73.

47 Harnack, *Marcion*, 273; on this point, see further Sebastian Moll, *The Arch-Heresiarch Marcion* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 82 ff.

48 See Winrich Löhr, "Problems of Profiling Marcion," in *Christian Teachers in Second-Century Rome: Schools and Students in the Ancient City*, ed. H. G. Snyder (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 109–33, here 130: "Harnack was probably wrong when he celebrated Marcion as a kind of theological singularity in the second century."

49 Epiphanius, *Panarion* 33. 3. 2; See Quispel, ed., *Lettre à Flora*, commentary, 76; see further Tardieu in Harnack, *Marcion*, 437.

50 Harnack, *Marcion*, 184. See further Judith Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 152: "Ephrem's polemic against Marcion, invariably in association

with Bardesanes and Mani"; on the demiurge and his character, see especially 337–57.

51   Harnack, *Marcion*, 186.

52   Justin Martyr, *Apology* I. 26. On Marcion's ditheism, see M. David Litwa, "Did Marcion Call the Creator 'God'?" *Journal of Theological Studies* 72 (2021): 231–46. Litwa argues that Marcion would have found it difficult to speak of more than one true god.

53   "Sic adhuc videmur disputare quasi Marcion duos pares constituat . . . alioquin certi Marcionem dispares deos constitueree, alterum iudicem, ferum, bellipotentem, alterum mitem, placidum et tantummodo bonum atque optimum"; Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* I. 6. I use Ernest Evans, ed., trans., Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

54   Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, IV. 33. 2.

55   According to Ephrem, Jesus is for Marcion the son of the Stranger (*nukraya*); see Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic*, 329.

56   "Atque ita tres interim mihi deos numera Marcionis, factorem et locum et materiam"; Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* I. 15. 5. Tertullian seeks there to ridicule this doctrine, by arguing that if there is a need of a third god, also a fourth one will be expected, and so on . . .

57   Hippolytus, *Philosophoumena*, 17–19. On the morphology of Marcion's dualism, see R. Joseph Hoffmann, *Marcion: On the Restitution of Christianity; An Essay on the Development of Radical Paulinist Theology in the Second Century* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), 185–208.

58   See Carl Sean O'Brien, *The Demiurge in Ancient Thought: Secondary God and Divine Mediators* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). On the intriguing figure of Numenius, see the still very valuable study of Henri-Charles Puech, "Numenius d'Apamée et les philosophies orientales au second siècle," in his *En quête de la gnose, I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 25–54.

59   G. Widengren, *Mani and Manichaeism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1965), 11. Sinope as Marcion's birthplace occurs only in a late source, the fourth-century Epiphanius of Salamis (*Panarion* 42.1.3).

60   F. de Blois, "Dualism in Iranian and Christian Traditions," *Journal of the Royal Oriental Society* 10 (2000): 1–19, here 11.

61   See E. C. Blackman, *Marcion and his Influence* (London: SPCK, 1948), 4.

62   On the fast growth of Manichaeism along a very broad geographical spectrum, see, for instance, Samuel N. C. Lieu, Nils Arne Pedersen, Enrico Morano, and Erica Hunter, eds., *Manichaeism East and West* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017).

63   See H.-C. Puech, "Le prince des ténèbres en son royaume," in his *Sur le manichéisme et autres essais* (Paris, 1979), 103–51, esp. 143.

64   F. Cumont, *Recherches sur le manichéisme:* La cosmogonie manichéenne d'après Théodore bar Khôni (Brussels: Lamertin, 1908), 7: "Il [Théodore] affirme ensuite l'antithèse des deux principes opposés et formule ce dualisme, ou pour mieux dire de dithéisme, que Mâni emprunta aux mazdéens et développa avec une rigueur plus conséquente." This study is conveniently reprinted in Franz Cumont, *Manichéisme*, ed. D. Praet and M. Tardieu (Rome: Academia Belgica, Nino Aragno, 2017), 13–65, here 17. Cumont does not discuss here Marcion's dualism.

65   Puech, "Le prince des ténèbres en son royaume," 145. On matter (*hylē*) in Manichaeism, see H.-C. Puech, *Le manichéisme: son fondateur, sa doctrine* (Paris: Civilisations du sud, 1949), 161, n. 286.

66   The discovery of this text (the smallest codex of antiquity) was first announced by Albert Henrichs and Ludwig Koenen, "Ein Griechischer Mani-Codex (P. Colon. Inv. Nr. 4780)," in *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 5 (1970): 97–216. From 1975 to 1982, Albert Henrichs and Ludwig Koenen published the *editio princeps*, with an important commentary, in a number of issues of the *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*; reprinted in A. Henrichs and L. Koenen, *Der kölner Mani-Codex (P. Colon. Inv. Nr. 4780) Peri tēs gennēs tou sōmatou autou* (Bonn: Habelt, 1975–82). See the edition and German translation of L. Koenen and Cornelia Römer, *Der Kölner Mani-Kodex, Über das Werden seines Leibes* (Papyrologica Coloniensia XIV) (Westdeutscher Verlag, 1988).

67   See G. G. Stroumsa, *Savoir et salut* (Paris: Cerf, 1992), "Le roi et le porc: de la structure du dualisme manichéen," 243–58. Ludwig Koenen has sharpened my argument in pointing out that the *CMC* does not only refer to an early, not yet fully formed, Manichaean Weltanschauung; see Koenen, "How Dualistic is Mani's Dualism?" in L. Cirillo, *Codex Manichaeicus Coloniensis: Atti del Secondo Simposio Internazionale (Rende-Amantea, 27–28 Maggio 1988)* (Cosenza: Marra, 1990), 1–34. See further Concetta Giuffré Scribona, "How Monotheistic is Mani's Dualism? Once more on Monotheism and Dualism in Manichaean Gnosis," *Numen* 48 (2001): 444–67, as well as Iain Gardner, "Dualism in Mani and Manichaeism," *Xôra, REAM, Dualismes*, ed. F. Jourdan and A. Vasiliu (Iasi: Polirom, 2015), 417–36. Both Giuffré Scribona and Gardner agree with my argument that Mani perceived himself as a monotheist.

68   The *Shāpuragān*, meant to present Manichaean doctrine, and in particular its eschatology, to King Shapur I, is the single work of Mani redacted in Middle Persian. Various syncretistic elements in this text point to Zoroastrian, Christian, and Buddhist origin.

69   *Kephalaion* LXXXIX, 221.8–222.11, cf. 222.30–31. *Nazoraios* usually refers to a Jewish Christian, although for de Menasce

the reference here is to a Christian. For a discussion of this text, see further Chapter 4, "Elchasai and Mani."

70   "Faustus dixit: Unus deus est, an duo ? plane unus . . . quia bonorum et malorum duo principa traditis est quidem, quod duo principia confitemur, set unum ex his deum vocamus, alterum hylen, aut, ut communiter et usitate dixerim, daemonem"; Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, XXI (Zycha, 568).

71   M. A. Kugener and F. Cumont, *Recherches sur le manichéisme* II, *Extrait de la CXXIIIe homélie de Sévère d'Antioche* (Brussels: Lamertin, 1912), 123–4. This study too is reprinted in F. Cumont, *Manichéisme* (see n. 60 above), 83–145, here 111. As Samra Azarnouche reminded me, in the Mazdean tradition Ahriman first plans his attack against Ohrmad's world when his first perception of light at once fascinates him and arouses his jealousy. See *The Bundahišn* 1.15, trans. Domenico Agostini and Samuel Thrope (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 6.

72   M. Richard and M. Aubineau, eds., *Iohannis Caesariensis presbyteri et grammatici opera*, CCG 1 (Louvain-Turnhout: Brepols, 1977), 120–1: "*ei kai anarchos oun he kakia, alla polu tou theou hupodeei*."

73   Koenen, "How Dualistic is Mani's Dualism?" 28.

74   P. Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

75   See n. 5 above.

4 A Just God or a Good God? 🔓

Guy G Stroumsa

Abstract

Following the discussion of the various forms of dualism, a discussion of the tension between God's justice and his goodness is in order. Among the rabbis and the Church Fathers, justice and goodness are two essential attributes of God. Among different gnostic sects, however, the Just God is considered to be lower than the Good God. The centrality of justice in Abrahamic monotheism is replaced among dualists by the temptation of antinomianism, in particular the rejection of the Old Testament Law, the Torah. The Gnostic Carpocrates and his son Epiphanes (who wrote a treatise on "Justice"), as well as the Elchasaites (the Jewish–Christian sect in which Mani grew up) reflect such antinomian patterns, newly expressed among the Manichaeans.

Keywords: justice, Carpocrates, Epiphanes, Elchasai, Mani, antinomianism

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Divine Attributes and Divine Powers

As noted, we see the duality of divine powers in the book of Genesis, with the names Elohim and Yahwe. Before turning to the texts, a few preliminary remarks are in order on what I call cosmology (akin to the German *Weltanschauung*). Religious innovation, or the transformation of religious discourse and practice, must be understood as a major category of epistemic shifts in the history of religions.

Already in the Hellenistic period, as we saw in Chapter 3, Jewish traditions speculated on this duality of the divine names. For Philo, for instance, *kurios* represents the divine power of lawgiving and justice, while *theos* points to his power of goodness and mercy. Like lawgiving and justice, goodness and mercy are closely related.[1]

In rabbinic literature, these two powers were switched, the attribute of justice (*middat ha-din*) belonging to Elohim, and the attribute of mercy (*middat ha-raḥamim*) to the Lord.[2] This duality of divine attributes in ancient Judaism and the shift that occurred have long puzzled scholars. Mercy may have been the original feature associated with Yahwe in early Judaism, a feature later picked up by the rabbis. It is the Septuagint, however, that Hellenistic Jews were reading. For them, *kurios* (lit. "lord," "master," from *kuros*, "power," "might") was associated with the ruling power, and he was thus linked to justice rather than to mercy.

Seeking to understand the inversion of divine attributes in connection with various forms of Gnostic dualism, Arthur Marmorstein suggested that the name shift may be related to Gnostic attacks on the Jewish doctrine of

love.[3] Although Marmorstein's arguments have been rejected, it is noteworthy that ↳ late antique rabbinic literature recognized some duality in divine power, a dualism reflected in the two opposite dimensions of (the single) God.

Such a duality is never construed as a hierarchical one, in which one of the powers is higher on the ontological ladder, closer, as it were, to the supreme divine figure. As we saw in Chapter 3, Peter Schäfer demonstrated that a vertical dualism between a number of divine figures, angels or archangels, was prevalent in Jewish literature from the Second Temple period. In his view, nothing akin to Gnostic dualism (for him, horizontal in essence) can be found in rabbinic literature.[4] The focus will move here to the two hypostasized divine features, in order to apprehend the alternative between the idea that God is essentially just and that He is fundamentally good or merciful. This hierarchy of divine powers happens in most forms of monotheism. Indeed, as noted in the Introduction, there seems to be no historical case of a pure, unmediated form of monotheism—what Corbin called "the paradox of monotheism."[5] This paradox may be also perceived as a particular case of what may be dubbed the "antinomy of monotheism." Monotheism (but the same may be said about dualism and polytheism) is prone to split into two divine entities, with one subordinated to the other or in opposition to it. This split is often understood as resulting from a failure of theodicy, of a satisfying answer to the question of the origins of evil. In this way, Jewish apocalyptic literature, alongside the destruction of the Temple, has been considered to represent the cradle of Gnosticism.[6]

In early Christianity, some inbuilt features may have spurred on the tendency toward a dualist split. These features include the existence of two distinct scriptural ensembles, the Old and the New Testament, as well as the related idea that the Christian people represents the true Israel (*verus Israel*). Such a dual perception of the scriptures, old and new, as well as God's people, old and new, turned the difference between them into a radical opposition: between God's character, and even His nature, as reflected in the two Testaments, and between the old people of God, now demoted, and the new one.

Our present focus is on the phenomenon of the old duality of two complementary divine attributes becoming the dualism of two distinct divine powers. This change probably occurred in a two-step process. The first was when the two divine attributes, mercy and justice, became a hierarchy of ontologized divine *personae*. This original split in the deity established a hierarchy between these two powers, one of which was an archangel, and hence obviously subordinated to God.

The second step, which occurred at a later stage, transformed the hierarchical relationship between these two powers into an oppositional one. Thus, vertical duality morphed into horizontal dualism. The higher God had become the supreme and good God of love, while the other one, having undergone a devaluation, was now identified with the lower divine power, which sought to inflict painful justice on humankind. In various Gnostic trends, the process was completed with the inversion of the two divine figures, as the demiurge, or creator God, had become the "just" God, often bearing Satanic traits, and was set in opposition to the supreme and good God. By the end of the process, the two Gods endowed with opposite attributes had replaced the two attributes of the one God.

A further, final twist in this transformation would bring about the identification of the lower God with Satan, as justice slipped towards evil, whether the two eventually blended into a single figure or not. The original tension between two essential attributes of God had now been transformed into a full-fledged split, entailing a radical discontinuity between the two main divine figures.

A Good Judge

In the Hebrew Bible, as well as in other literary documents from Mediterranean and Near Eastern archaic societies, a good judge (as well as a good king) was expected to deliver justice (*ṣedeq*). This was true in Egypt as well as in Semitic societies. Similarly, God's justice is the expression of his goodness.[7] In the Pentateuch, God is

depicted as an active practitioner of justice and, as such, is ↳ characterized as righteous (*ṣadiq*). Below, I provide a few examples, and there are many more:

> Exodus 9:27: "The Lord is in the right" (*Yahwe ha-ṣadiq*, LXX *ho Kurios dikaios*, Vulgate *Dominus iustus*).[8] Similarly, in Zephania 3:5: "The Lord . . . is righteous" (*Yahwe . . . ṣadiq . . .; ho de Kurios dikaios . . .; Dominus iustus . . .*).
>
> God's action is defined by his justice: "all his ways are just (*ki kol derakhav mišpaṭ; kai pasai hai hodoi autou kriseis; Et omnes viae eius iudicia*), just and upright is he . . . (*ṣadiq ve-yashar hu; dikaios kai hosios Kurios; Deus . . . iustus et rectus*)."
>
> Similarly, God's ordinances, like his Law, are just: "And what other great nation (*goy*) has statutes and ordinances as just (*ḥuqim u-mišpaṭim ṣadikim*) as this entire law (*torah*) that I am setting before you today?" (Deut. 4:8)
>
> The descriptions of God's justice imply that a similar form of justice is expected to be practiced by humankind. More precisely, the Hebrew conception of justice is linked to the revealed Law. People must (follow the laws and) be just because God is just.[9] The Lawgiver, indeed, is conceived as *a just judge*: "Then the heavens proclaimed His righteousness (*ṣidqo; tēn dikaiosunēn autou*) / for He is a God who judges." (Psalms 50:6)

The figure of the messiah, too, is perceived as that of a Just. In the few biblical texts which refer to the messiah, he is called a *ṣadiq* (Jer. 23:5, 23:6, 33:15; Zech. 9: 9), the incarnation of supreme justice. In post-biblical Jewish literature of the second Commonwealth, righteousness is one of the marks of messianic times (e.g., *I Enoch* 38: 2, 53: 6).

In the books of the prophets as well as in Psalms, God demands that people follow the way of justice. At the same time, God does not tolerate human injustice, which will not remain unpunished. In Deuteronomy 16:20, for instance, we find a classic expression of the call for justice: "Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue" (*ṣedeq ṣedeq tirdof; dikaiōs to dikaion diōxēi; iuste quod iustum est persequeris*).[10]

Or again: "For I the Lord love justice (*mišpaṭ; dikaiosunēn, iudicium*), I hate robbery and wrongdoing" (Isa. 61:8).

Similarly: "And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice (*mišpaṭ; krima; iudicium*) and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

In Psalms 7:11, again, God is also called a righteous judge (*šophet ṣakiq; kritēs dikaios; iudex iustus*). Similarly, Ps. 9:7–9, Ps. 50:6, and Jer. 22:3 all describe God as a judge delivering justice.

The above examples highlight the centrality of the concept of justice in the Hebrew Bible, where justice is demanded from humans because it is part of God's nature. In contrast to the divine figure of the righteous

judge, the Old Testament warns against the corruption of some mortal judges who do not fear God (e.g., Ex. 23:8, Deut. 16:19, or Isa. 1:23).

The figure of the just prophet or priest also preoccupied various pious circles in the Second Commonwealth. The Teacher of Righteousness, *moreh ha-ṣedeq* (cf. Hosea 10:12), for instance, is a central, enigmatic figure in the *Damascus Rule*, a Hebrew text closely related to the Dead Sea Scrolls, though the messianic dimension of this figure is unclear. In rabbinic literature, we occasionally encounter the *cohen ṣedeq*, a messianic figure whose precise identity and function are also obscure.[11]

Starting in the Second Commonwealth, this fundamental status of justice in the Bible had a major impact on Jewish literature. In particular, the figure of the Teacher of Righteousness (either the founder of the sect or one of his successors) is rooted in this central concern with justice. His figure is exemplified at the beginning of the *Damascus Rule*: "And He raised for them a Teacher of Righteousness (*moreh ha-ṣedeq*), to guide them in the way of His heart."[12] To the Teacher of Righteousness, moreover, is counterposed the Wicked Priest (*ha-kohen ha-rashaʿ*). The Teacher of Righteousness, then, leads the sectarians in a life of justice— namely, in *imitatio Dei*. Beyond the Dead Sea Scrolls, the impact of the biblical concept of justice, both divine and human, would be felt in Jewish Hellenistic literature, including the writings of Philo and Josephus, as well as the *Testament of Judah*, where God is called a judge (*kritēs*).[13]

In the mental world of the early Christians, the Law (*nomos*; *lex*) was either Jewish or Roman. The Christians rejected Jewish Law or, more precisely, considered it obsolete after the coming of the messiah—but they never denied the legitimacy of the concept of law. The early Christians themselves, whom the Roman authorities did not consider as belonging to a traditional, ethnic religion, remained beyond the pale of legality in the Roman Empire. This complex relationship with the recognized law, both Hebrew and Roman, helps to explain the deep ambivalence toward the concept of law in early Christian literature. This relationship also has bearing on the concept of justice (*dikaiosunē*). Indeed, justice is first and foremost a legal term, and early Christian self-identity was shaped in opposition to the Israelite and Roman legal systems. Despite the various references to justice in early Christian literature, from the New Testament on, the topic of justice does not seem to have been a major concern for early Christian thinkers. Christian theologians devoted themselves to the issue of Christian ethics (and were known among Hellenic thinkers for their high ethical standards), but these ethics were built on the assumption that law and justice as practiced in the world were objectionable. For the most part, early Christian ethics remained supererogatory, while *dikaiosunè* referred to Pauline "justification."[14]

Notwithstanding this ambivalence, God is referred to as "judge" in the New Testament (see, for instance, *dikaios kritēs* in 2 Tim. 4:8), and the same title is also applied to Christ—as in, for example, Heb. 12:23. In Acts 7:52, Jesus Christ is also called Righteous (*dikaios*). Moreover, in his polemics with the scribes and the Pharisees, Jesus proclaims the "weightier matters of the Torah" which they had neglected: "justice and mercy and faith" (Matt. 23:23). Jesus is sent to "proclaim justice to the Gentiles" (Matt. 12:18). Of course, as in the Hebrew Bible, the Gospel too knows that some judges can be corrupt, if they do not fear God or respect man (e.g., Luke 18:18).

The earliest layers of Christian literature thus stand in the Hebrew biblical tradition. The trend represented by the leaders of the Jerusalem Church, and in particular by James, Jesus's brother, insists on the ways of justice to be followed by both the individual, who must be just, and the community. Jesus is presented ↳ as "the Righteous": in his last speech, Stephen calls Jesus "the Righteous" (*ho dikaios*, equivalent to *ha-ṣadiq*; Acts 7:52), and so does Pilatus's wife (Matt. 27:19). This epithet is messianic in nature.[15] The Ebionite conception of Jesus as being at once king, priest, and prophet reflects the unification of the three messianic figures described, for instance, in I Macc. 14:41.[16]

James, the leader of the Jerusalem community, is also called "the Righteous." Consider, for instance, the testimony of Eusebius: "He was called "the Righteous" by all men from the Lord's time to ours." And a little

further: "So due to his excessive righteousness he was called 'the Righteous and Oblias,' that is in Greek 'Rampart of the people and righteousness,' as the prophets declare concerning him."[17] In some New Testament texts, moreover, it is the community of believers itself which is described as *hē dikaiosunē.* In early Christian literature, "the way of righteousness (*hodos dikaiosunēs*)" seems to refer to Christianity itself,[18] and the same expression occurs in later patristic literature.[19]

The perception of justice in early Christianity, however, owes much of its complexity to the radical Pauline transformation of the concept of justice (*ṣedeq/dikaiosunē*).[20] The biblical injunction "The just shall live in his faith" (cf. *ṣadiq be-emunato yiḥye;* Hab. 2:4) becomes the leitmotiv of what is now justification of the sinner before God, an essential element of Paul's religious reinterpretation of the Jewish tradition.[21] This internalized justice (in this context, *dikaiosunē* is usually rendered by *righteousness* or *justification* in English) is directly related to Paul's view on the Law's hegemony.[22] For Paul, God's justice (*dikaiosunē; iustitia;* usually translated as

"righteousness") is a core ↳ concept, central to salvation. But it is in faith (*pistis; fides*), rather than in the Torah (*nomos; lex*), that it is manifested:

> But now, apart from law, the justice of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the justice of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. (Rom. 3:21–2)

According to Paul, then, Christ, through whom justification takes place, is the very model of *iustitia*. Justice, which is either the supreme virtue, or the very source of virtue, is therefore related to *pietas*. This striking insistence that God's justice does require the Torah in order to be manifest accounts for its status in Christian thought.

The Church Fathers on God's Justice

In his seminal book on the origins of European legal systems, Aldo Schiavone argues that, with the coming of Christianity, *ius* became "excarnated" from religion. When Christianity became prominent in the Roman Empire, it dropped the legal approach to religion, which had prevailed in Rome, and *ius* lost its traditional sacral quality.[23] Perhaps it would be more accurate to speak of *iustitia* as having been excarnated from *lex*. For Paul, as we have just seen, justice remains a core interest of God. What is dropped is the direct relationship between justice and the revealed law. In early Christianity, the relationship between justice and law indeed differs from how it manifests in Judaism.[24] But it is essential to note that justice never disappears from Christian religious discourse.

The God of the Church Fathers, like that of the Israelite prophets, is a God of justice. Thus, Clement of Alexandria, in his polemics against antinomians, refers to Malachi, who asks, "Where is the God of justice?"[25]

For him, indeed, ethics constitute the core of true religion, and the ethical behavior of the true ↳ Gnostic is justice (*dikaiosunē*).[26] Polemicizing elsewhere against Basilides, Clement insists that God is just.[27]

The fourth-century *Homily on Mercy and Justice*, attributed to Basil of Caesarea, shows that these two divine attributes could be perceived in patristic literature as complementary rather than competitive.[28] Just as mercy and justice are blended in God's conduct with humanity, people must act according to both these virtues. The text starts by noting that the Mosaic Law enjoins the practice of kindness and mercy, and the prohibition of harming one's neighbor. Religious practice without ethical behavior is done in vain: "The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination" (Prov. 15:8). One is required, then, to blend mercy and justice. "Preserve mercy and justice, and ever draw near to God" (Hos. 12:6). "Therefore, the one who practices mercy and justice draws near to God."[29]

Writing in the wake of the Constantinian revolution, Lactantius was the first Christian writer to offer a detailed analysis of the concept of justice. In Book V (*De iustitia*) of his *Divine Institutions*, he discusses *iustitia* as a human

virtue. Thus, the precepts of the Jewish Law (i.e., the Pentateuch) sought to express an outward manifestation of justice, although, also according to the Bible, the truly righteous person is often despised.[30] Although Lactantius mentions the Christian authors Minucius Felix, Tertullian, and Cyprian, his main source is Cicero, who, in his treatises *De republica*, *De legibus* and *De officiis*, discussed justice, the consciousness of belonging to human society, and the wish to retain it. As Cicero based his discussion on Plato and Aristotle, it is in fact the whole classical tradition, in particular the reflection on natural law (*nomos phuseōs, ius naturale, lex naturalis*), that Lactantius transmits. This tradition, it should be noted, does not discuss, or even recognize, the difference

between divine goodness and divine justice. Lactantius, however, reinterprets this tradition ↳ within a Christian framework, thus creating a link between human and divine justice.[31] For Lactantius, as for Paul, justice as a human virtue is directly associated with *pietas* and with the divine realm itself.[32]

For Lactantius, law involves justice, and, after the abolition of the Law, justification passes through Christ. Indeed, the Christian can be righteous only in Christ. But besides this rather general statement, Lactantius conceives of *iustitia* in Ciceronian rather than in biblical terms, and his discussion of justice is directly influenced by Cicero's argument in the *De Officiis*. Lactantius makes few references to Christian doctrine in his discussion, and the editor of the text mentions that he "does not recognize the paradox of Christian justice."[33] *Aequitas*, a deep sense of justice, rests on the recognition of the equality of all people before God, but Lactantius's interpretation of the evangelical dictum "Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God" entails the neutralization of the demand for political and social reform. The Christianization of the empire also meant the Romanization of Christianity.

Living in the Roman world, Christian theologians knew that the justice afforded by human laws is always mutable and relative, as it depends on cultural norms and customs. In a famous passage in the *Confessions*, Augustine contrasted the fluctuating character of human justice to the true, inward righteousness of the Law of God:

> I also did not know that true inward justice which judges not by custom but by the most righteous law of God. By this law the moral customs of different regions and periods were adapted to their places and times, while that law itself remains unaltered everywhere and always.[34]

For Augustine, indeed, true justice, like truth itself, is divine, and is to be found inwardly. It is one of the four main forms of loving, while sin consists in keeping or acquiring what is forbidden according to justice, and from which we are able to abstain.[35]

This brief review of patristic texts on God's justice leaves one with the impression that the patristic conception of justice stands at the crossroads of the Greco-Roman and biblical traditions. God is indeed considered just, while the expectation from human beings to behave righteously is derived from divine justice. In contrast, justice in the world, both social justice and the justice administered by judges, is mainly discussed within the tradition of Greco-Roman philosophy. Therefore, while the relationship between divine goodness and justice is never denied, it seems that little attention is devoted to the question of what exactly that relationship is. As we shall see below, it is in the patristic polemics with dualist challenges that this relationship will be forcefully argued.

Gnostic Justice

More radically than other Christians, dualist and Gnostic thinkers under the early empire objected to the revealed Biblical Law. In contrast, other early Christians (those later dubbed "orthodox") argued that Jesus had not come to abolish the Law (as he himself had said), but to offer a new interpretation of it. The Gnostics, by contrast, saw the Torah as an impediment to salvation. They thus built their theologies and mythologies around a rejection of the Law revealed by God to Israel.[36] Moreover, various Gnostic communities were established on the same principles, and the antinomian practices of some Gnostics, in particular some reported patterns of sexual behavior, formed the core of the Christian heresiologists' aversion to the dualist heresy.[37] In such contexts, the demiurge and lawgiver was perceived as a lower heavenly figure, who rebelled against the higher God.[38] The Law which he imparted to Israel was meant to keep the human race in slavery. Such a drastic

rejection of the Law and of its ↳ soteriological value had negative implications for the concept of justice. Law, indeed, is the *locus* of justice: there is no justice without law.

According to Irenaeus, as we already saw, the first heresiarch to claim that the demiurge of the Old Testament was not the Father of Jesus Christ was Cerdo, who came to Rome in the 130s from his native Syria.[39] While the demiurge is known, the Father remains unknowable; and while the former is just, the latter is good (*et alterum quidem iustum, alterum autem bonum esse; kai to men dikaion, ton de agathon huparchein*).[40] Marcion, writes Irenaeus, was Cerdo's successor. For him, the God announced by the Law and the Prophets does evil, loves war, and behaves in an incoherent, contradictory fashion. Jesus came to abolish the Law and the Prophets, and all the other deeds of the demiurge, or *Cosmocrator*.[41] Marcion calls this Lawgiver the *just* God, who is of lower rank than the good God, the Father of Jesus Christ.[42] For Marcion, the Righteous of the Old Testament, such as Abel, Enoch, and Noah [*et reliquos iustos*], do not partake in salvation, since they did not believe the message of Jesus.[43] Justice also plays a role in the thought of Basilides, for whom it is part of the Ogdoad, the group of the eight primary eons in Gnostic thought.[44]

This split between divine goodness and divine justice was the harbinger of a long thread of dualist heresies which would tear Christianity apart until the Middle Ages. According to Marcion, the demiurge, or judicial God, is *zēlōtēs* ("zealous," without the modern pejorative connotation of fanaticism), punishing children for the sins of their parents. The justice of such a God, then, is without generosity or goodness. In this interpretation, the

original duality of ↳ God's names represents a real distinction between two Gods, one associated with Jewish Law, or the Old Testament, the other with the Christian Gospel, the New Testament.

The usual perception of "justice" in Gnostic texts and traditions is, indeed, ambiguous. Irenaeus discusses the views of Cerdo and Marcion within his presentation of the heretical sources of Valentinus. In his *Epistle to Flora*, the Valentinian author Ptolemy describes the creation of the world as that of a just God, who hates evil (*dikaiou kai misoponērou*).[45] This God, who is "the umpire of justice" (*tēs kat' auton dikaiosunēs ôn brabeutēs*), is located between the perfect God and the devil: neither good nor evil or unjust.[46] Ptolemy argues that the Adversary (*ho antikeimenos*), namely, Satan, cannot be the author of the Law (*ho nomos*, i.e., the Pentateuch, and more broadly the Old Testament), as he opposes justice (*adikia*).[47] Therefore, the Lawgiver must be an intermediary between the good God and the devil, who is evil and unjust. The Lawgiver, hence, is called "just," as he is the umpire of justice.[48] Ptolemy adds that the Lawgiver, who is engendered, remains inferior to the perfect God *and to his justice* (*kai tēs ekeinou dikaiosunēs*).[49] For Ptolemy, then, the split in the divinity does not fully account for the separation between goodness and justice as belonging to two different deities.

Theodotos, another Valentinian theologian, discusses the Righteous (*hoi dikaioi*) of the Old Testament, those who lived justly. According to the *Extracts of Theodotus*, "Among the offspring of Adam, some, the righteous [*hoi men dikaioi*], going their way amidst created things, were retained in the Place [*para tōi topōi*]."[50] That is, they had been detained in "the Place" (*ho topos*), meaning with the God of the Old Testament, and Jesus freed these

Righteous from their entrapment. In the rabbinic literature of the period, "the Place" (*ha-maqom*) refers to God, and thus there seems to be Jewish context for this theologoumenon.[51]

Carpocrates and Epiphanes

Of all second-century Gnostic masters, Carpocrates may have aroused the strongest reaction from the Church Fathers. Such vehemence was probably connected to, among other things, the antinomian sexual practices of the Carpocratians, who argued, following Plato, for the community of women.[52] Epiphanes, Carpocrates's son, devoted a treatise to justice, the first treatise on the topic by a thinker at least nominally Christian. His *Peri dikaiosunēs* is lost, but substantial quotations from it are preserved by Clement of Alexandria.[53] This work has been surprisingly neglected, with only one recent article devoted to the topic.[54] The Gnostic attitude to justice, as reflected in Epiphanes's conception, seems to stand at the confluence of the Greek philosophical, Jewish, and early Christian traditions. About Carpocrates and his son Epiphanes we know only what is reported by the heresiological tradition. No Carpocratian text has been identified among those found at Nag Hammadi. The two main testimonies are those of Irenaeus,[55] repeated, more or less faithfully, by Hippolytus[56] and Clement of Alexandria.[57]

The heresiologists report that the Carpocratians (who seem to have originated in second-century Alexandria) called themselves *gnostikoi*. We are also told that they made cultic use of images of Christ, as well as of Greek philosophers, such as Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle. The strong Hellenic influence on their religious behavior contrasts with certain other beliefs which they ↳ shared with the Ebionites, for instance their claim that Jesus was the son of Joseph and was not possessed of a divine nature. What for the Carpocratians distinguished Jesus from other human beings, reports Hippolytus, is that he was "more just" (*dikaioteron*) than other people. Hence, the Carpocratians exhibit, alongside strong Hellenic syncretistic influences, the Jewish and Jewish–Christian conception of the messiah as a ṣ*adiq*.

Another related trait of Carpocratian theology, according to Hippolytus, is the belief that Jesus's soul kept the memory (*diamnēmoneusai; commemorata fuit*) of what it had seen above, "in the sphere of the unengendered God."[58] This memory of things seen before birth alludes to yet another Carpocratian belief: the transmigration of the soul. According to them, souls undergo a series of reincarnations, until they achieve salvation, which is freedom from the body—the soul's prison—and from the powers of the demiurgic angels. The motif of transmigration is probably inherited from the school of Pythagoras, while the mention of *sōma/sēma* refers to a common theme of Orphic origin.[59] This salvation from transmigration is understood to happen only after the soul has accomplished all possible actions and all possible ways of life. Such a criterion entails a strong antinomianism, or behavior in radical opposition to the requirements of the law, and its correlate belief is that no action is evil in itself, since there is nothing inherently evil in human nature. Acts are thus in themselves beyond good and evil, or indifferent (*adiaphora*), to use Stoic terminology, while only faith and love are significant for salvation. Our sources add that these beliefs were transmitted by Carpocrates to his disciples as esoteric teachings.[60]

One obvious consequence of such antinomian teachings is that Jesus, though he had been raised in the Jewish practices, despised them.[61] Tertullian adds that Carpocrates's disciples considered themselves to be equal to Christ.[62] Referring to *anamnēsis*, moreover, he notes the Platonic roots of the Gnostic heresies. In his analysis, Tertullian is on the right track, though also Orphic, Pythagorean, and Stoic elements can be identified in Carpocrates's doctrines as reported by Irenaeus.

According to Clement, Epiphanes, who was Alexandrian on his father's side and Cephalonian on his mother's side (Clement reports that she was called Alexandria), died when he was seventeen. After his death, a cult was offered to him on Cephalonia, where he was "honored as a god." Epiphanes's *Concerning Righteousness* has been uncharitably described as consisting "of the scribblings of an intelligent but nasty–minded adolescent of

somewhat pornographic tendencies."[63] The righteousness of God, says Epiphanes, is a kind of universal fairness and equality (*tēn dikaiosunēn tou theou koinōnian tina einai met' isotētos*). Equality is a quality of the cosmos; "the sun shines equally upon all." But it reflects also upon people: "there is no distinction between rich and poor, people and governor, stupid and clever, free men and slaves." God thus "establishes His righteousness to both good and bad." In other words, "the universal righteousness is given to all equally (*dikaiosunēs te tēs koinēs hapasin ep' isēs dotheisēs*)." Cosmic order, which he calls "the manifest universality of God's fairness," "is regulated by no law (*oudeni nomōi kratoumenē*)." This seems to be the kernel of Epiphanes's thought: the opposition he sets up between *dikaiosunē* and *nomos*. "And for birth, there is no written law (*all' oude ta tēs geneseōs nomon echei gegrammenon*). The Creator and Father of all with his own justice appointed all this . . . with a single command."[64]

First of all, says Epiphanes, prefiguring Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, laws are multiple, in opposition to divine fairness and righteousness. Moreover—and this in his view represents the laws' cardinal sin—the laws assume the existence of private property. The primordial state of the world, in which all of God's bounty was to be shared by all men, had disappeared, and the laws were at the heart of the current state of inequality and injustice. The original communism was God's will: "God made all things for man to be common property (*koinē toinun ho theos hapanta anthrōpōi poiēsas*)."[65] For Epiphanes, laws—human laws—are pitted against "divine law" or "universal fairness and equality." Although Epiphanes does not say so explicitly, it is likely that "divine law" is equivalent to the Greek "natural law," *phusikos nomos*.[66]

For Paul, the soteriological impotence of the Law meant the internalization of justice into "justification" through faith. With Epiphanes, however, ↳ we can follow the passage from the Jewish conception of a revealed law to the Greek conception of natural law. It is only within the parameters following this transformation that we can understand the new meaning given by Epiphanes to *dikaiosunē*. The argument for the community of women is another consequence of the community of goods advocated by natural law. Referring to Exod. 20:14 and Matt. 5:28, Clement sees here the open rejection of "both Law and Gospel." On this ground, he argues, Epiphanes should by no means be considered a Christian. Clement further claims that, although Plato had already argued for the community of women in the *Republic*, Epiphanes misunderstood him, as Plato held that only unmarried women could be held in common.[67]

Elchasai and Mani

As we have seen, according to the Carpocratians Jesus was, by definition, righteous. Various indications in Gnostic texts and traditions lead us to postulate close connections between Jewish-Christian and Gnostic theologoumena.[68] One of the most obvious indications is the importance of the figure of James the Just, Jesus's brother and the first leader of the Jewish-Christian community, among the Gnostics. His figure is present, for instance, in the *Gospel of Thomas*,[69] and in the *Second Apocryphon of James*, which begins: "This is the discourse that James the Just spoke in Jerusalem."

Such a connection between Jewish-Christian and Gnostic mindsets is highlighted in Mani's origins and teachings. Thanks to the *Cologne Mani Codex* (*CMC*), we now know a little more about the Elchasaite community in which Mani grew up. According to Hippolytus, Callistus brought to Rome the book that "a certain righteous, named Elchasai (*tina andra dikaion Elkhasai*) had received from the Seres of Parthia," and which advocated a new remission of sins.[70] Thus, Elchasai was referred to as "a righteous."[71] Another testimony about the same self-designation of Elchasai as *dikaios* is found in the *CMC*. The "image of a man" appears to
Elchasai in the water, asking him, "Why did you ↳ not respect me, you who claim to be a servant of God and a just (*su ho phaskōn latrēs einai kai dikaios*)?[72] Elchasai, who claimed to live "according to the Law,"[73] is portrayed as the leader of a Jewish-Christian Baptist sect. The epithet "just" was important in Elchasaite theology, and was used as a self-designation not only by Elchasai but also by the members of his sect. When, for instance, the

Baptist Sabbaios wanted to bring vegetables to the city elder, one of the vegetables cried out and asked him, "Are you not a Righteous? Are you not a Pure? (*ouk ei dikaios? ou katharos tugkhaneis?*)"[74] Notably, new members of the Elchasaite community had to swear that they were not guilty of injustice.[75]

The self-identification of the Baptist sectarians as "righteous" was passed on to the new religion established by Mani. The inner circle of the believers, the Manichaean monks, are called ṣadiqin in the Syriac sources (*ardavan* in Middle Persian; cf. *electi* in the Latin sources), as distinct from the *shemu'in* (*niyoshagan*; *auditores*).[76] Similarly, we read in the *Psalm Book* 99. 38: "O virtuous assembly of the righteous (*dikaios*) . . . gathered, full of hymns," where "the assembly of the righteous" seems to refer to the community of believers.

The importance of the concept of justice in Manichaeism is further established by the multiple references to a judge (*kritēs*) in Manichaean theological and mythological texts.[77] Perhaps the clearest mythological development of the judge figure presents itself in *Kephalaion* 28, "the twelve judges of the Father." These "judges" are mythological figures of the Manichaean pantheon: the Primal Man, the Great King of Honor, the Third Envoy, Yeshu Ziwa, the Virgin of Light, and so on. Mani ends his speech by mentioning that the believers are following "the path of justice (*dikaiosunē*)," and asking them "to judge according to true law as "judges of justice (*kritēs nte tdikaiosunē*)."[78]

Like the first Christian community, the Manichaean community identified itself as representing justice itself. This denomination is reflected in the very title of *Kephalaion* 80: "the Chapter of the Commandments (*entolē*) of Justice ↳ (*dikaiosunē*)." The meaning of justice is further clarified in the text, when the *Phōstēr* tells his disciples that "the first justice (*dikaiosunē*) that a man must do in order to be righteous (*dikaios*)" is the practice of Encratism (*egkrateia*) and purity. Further, he adds that "the first justice" is abstention from meat (*sarx*) and blood, according to which a man can be recognized as "righteous" (*dikaios*).[79]

Ascetic practices are thus the criterion through which a member of the community is identified as "just." As we have seen, God himself is called a judge. This denomination of God is perhaps nowhere clearer than in the discussion between a Nazoraean and Mani reported in *Kephalaion* 89, where the former argues that there is no such thing as a good judge.[80] All judges are evildoers, since they use cruel punishments; wherever there is a judge, one finds leather whips (*taurea*), with which he strikes people. Mani responds that his God is no evildoer; on the contrary, his role is to extirpate evil. It is the souls of those who have been seduced by Satan that he judges. God thus rewards just deeds and punishes evil ones. It is this that defines him as a judge.

Law and Antinomianism

In his seminal study *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, Ernst Troeltsch argues that both a revolutionary and a conservative trend can be detected in early Christian thought.[81] For Troeltsch, the development of the Catholic Church up to the fourth century reflects the victory of the conservative trend. It is partly due to their revolutionary tendency that the Gnostics, as well as the Manichaeans, lost the battle.

Despite their rejection of the just demiurge and his law, the antinomian early Christian thinkers, as we have seen, did not completely jettison the idea of justice/justification. Nonetheless, in Epiphanes's *Peri dikaiosunēs* we see the importance of law and justice in a system which denies the validity of the revealed law and of the justice it enhances. The concepts of *nomos* and of *dikaiosunē* are central for Epiphanes, but in his work the terms diverge from their biblical, Jewish, and early Christian meanings.

For Epiphanes, *nomos* refers not to the heavenly revealed law but to the Greek natural law (*phusikos nomos*). As we have seen, this yields a new meaning of *dikaiosunē*—namely, an interiorized form of "justification" as it was first developed by Paul. This meaning is reflected, for instance, in Epiphanes's reference to Paul's assertion (Rom. 7:7) that it is only though the law that one can know sin.[82]

Thus, Epiphanes's theology brings together central elements of two fundamentally distinct systems. Rather than follow other Gnostic thinkers in discarding the Jewish and Christian concepts of law and justice, he offered a radical reinterpretation of them. In doing so, he rejected the revealed law, but not the Jewish and Christian system of reference. The product of this fusion is the antinomianism of Carpocratian Gnosticism, which not only understands acts to be *adiaphora* but encourages the reversal of all values, by transforming forbidden acts into religious duties.

The example of Epiphanes sheds light on antinomianism. Yet, not every rejection of law involves antinomianism, as the case of Mani shows. Mani rejected the legal system of the Baptist community of his youth, including food taboos and ritual purity. However, he did not reject the idea of God's justice, which for him is identical to providence. Consequently, his rejection of the biblical tradition, far from entailing antinomian behavior, brought him to promote the strictest Encratism.

Two opposite attitudes can thus stem from the rejection of the divine law. Within the dualist movements of the first Christian centuries, it is possible to detect both encratic and antinomian attitudes. It seems that the development of these two attitudes is based on two different logics.[83] The approach of the Gnostics and of the Church Fathers to God's goodness and justice as either complementary or contradictory qualities of divinity reflects the encounter between the (continuously shifting) Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian cosmologies. The interface of these cosmologies produced radical transformations within monotheism, such as the splits in the divinity and in God's attributes of goodness and justice, in the early centuries of the common era.
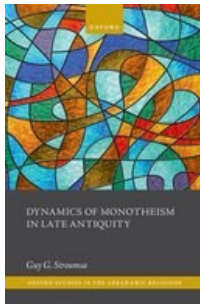
Notes

Footnotes

1   See, for instance, Philo, *De Abr.* 24–5, *De Plant.* 20, *Leg. Alleg.* III.23. See further Yehoshua Amir, "Philons Erörterungen über Gottesfurcht und Gottesliebe in ihren Verhältnis zum palästinischen Midrasch," in *Die hellenistische Gestalt des Judentums bei Philon von Alexandrien* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1983), 164–18. See Chapter 3, "Two Powers in Heaven."

2   See A. Marmorstein, "Philo and the Names of God," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 22 (1932): 295–306, as well as N. A. Dahl and Alan F. Segal, "Philo and the Rabbis on the Names of God," *Jewish Studies Journal* 9 (1978): 1–28. See the discussion in Chapter 3 above.

3   A. Marmorstein, "Philo and the Names of God," 206.

4   Gershom Scholem argued long ago about the existence of a Jewish Gnosticism. See G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: JTS Press, 1960). In his review of this book, David Flusser convincingly rejected Scholem's use of "Gnosticism" to describe the phenomena he was studying. See D. Flusser, "Scholem's Recent Book on Merkabah Literature," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 11 (1960): 59–68.

5   See H. Corbin, *Le paradoxe du monothéisme* (Paris: L'Herne, 1981). For Corbin, the positioning of a single, demiurgic God, extraneous to the world, renders the relationship with the deity difficult to establish and maintain. Hence the need in a monotheistic system to provide some way for contact between humans and the divine, namely through an intermediary (or intermediaries), an archangel (or archangels), obviously endowed with a lower status than God himself.

6   See, for instance, Robert M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966; 2nd ed.).

7   On God's justice in the Hebrew Bible, see in particular Jože Krašovec, *La justice (ṣedeq) de Dieu dans la Bible hébraïque et l'interprétation juive et chrétienne* (Fribourg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), where the thrust of the analysis is on verses from Isaiah and Psalms. Cf. Jože Krašovec, *God's Righteousness and Justice in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022). See further H. Shapira, "'For the Judgment is God's:' Human Judgment and Divine Justice in the Hebrew Bible and in Jewish Tradition," *Journal of Law and Religion* 27 (2012): 273–328.

8   When not mentioned otherwise, I use the New Revised Standard Version. Together with the Hebrew, I also bring the wording of both the Septuagint and the Vulgate, which stood at the root of patristic perceptions. On the translation of ṣedeq in the Septuagint, see, for instance, D. Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 82–162.

9 For discussion and literature, see the articles by Dihle and Merkel in *Gerechtigkeit: Richten und Retten in der abendländischen Tradition und ihren altorientalischen Urprüngen*, ed. Jan Assmann, Bernd Janowski, and Michael Welker (Paderborn: Fink, 1998).

10 For a similar plea, see Amos 5:24, 5:15.

11 See the entry "Messiah" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 11, 139 ff.

12 *Damascus Document*, Col. 1. See G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 143–6. See also the *Habbakuk Commentary*, where the Teacher of Right is a priest, and the *Commentary on Psalm 37*, 23–4. See further D. Stōkl-Ben Ezra, *Qumran*, 269–79 and F. Mébarki and É. Puech, *Les Manuscrits de la mer Morte*, (Rodez: Rouergue, 2002),143–9. Cf. Tavis B, Williams, *History and Memory in the Dead Sea Scolls* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

13 On God as *kritēs*, see Walter Bauer, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979), 453b, and G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 779b.

14 For various meanings of *dikaiosunē* and *iustitia* in pagan and Christian antiquity, see A. Dihle, "Gerechtigkeit," *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 10 (1978): 233–360, with a detailed bibliography. See also the various articles under the general title "Gerechtigkeit" in the *Theologische Real-Enzyklopädie* (*TRE*) 12 (1984), 404–48. On early Christian ethics, see, for instance, E. Osborn, *Ethical Patterns in Early Christian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), or W. A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: the First Two Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). For a summary of the question and further bibliography, see E. Osborn, "Ethics," in *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, I (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 286–8.

15 This messianic connotation will be carried over to Islam, where the returning messiah, or Imam, is characterized in the Hadith as the one who will fill the earth with justice.

16 See D. Flusser, "Messiah," *Enc. Jud.* 11, 140–1.

17 Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl*. II. 24. 4, 7 (LCL, 170–1).

18 See, for instance, *Barnabas* I. 4; V. 4 and *II Clement* V.7. Cf. *Halakha*, or the Qur'anic *sirât*.

19 See, for instance, Pseudo-Macarius, *Homilies* XVI.1. Ps. Macaire, *Oeuvres spirituelles*, I (SC 275) (Paris: Cerf, 1980), 178–9. See also A. Descamps, *Les justes et la justice dans les Évangiles et le christianisme primitif* (Louvain: Publications universitaires de Louvain, 1950).

20 The literature on this topic is vast. See, for instance, Schrenck, "*dikaiosunē," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* IV, 192–210, and K. Kertelge, "*dikaiosunē," Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* I, 329–30. On the interiorization of various concepts in Paul, see G. G. Stroumsa, "Interiorization and Intolerance in Early Christianity," in *Die Erfindung des inneren Mensch* (Studien zum Verstehen fremder Religionen, 6), ed. J. Assmann (Gütersloh: G. Mohn, 1993), 168–82.

21 For a magisterial discussion of the Roman context of early Christian "faith," see Teresa Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith:* Pistis *and* Fides *in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

22 On Paul and the Law, see the bibliography in G. Klein, "Gesetz" III (Neues Testament), in *TRE* 13, 58–75. The traditional view that Paul advocated the end of the Law's hegemony is no longer commonly accepted in contemporary scholarship.

23 I use the English translation; A. Schiavone, *The Invention of Law in the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); see, for instance, p. 200.

24 See, for instance, Christine Hayes, *What's Divine about Divine Law: Early Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), ch. 1. For a comparative and historical analysis of the concept of Divine Law, see in particular Rémi Brague, *La Loi de Dieu: Histoire philosophique d'une alliance* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

25 Malachi 2:17: *Pou estin ho theos tēs dikaiosunēs;* Clement, *Strom.* III. IV. 39.3. See Alain Le Boulluec, ed., trans., Clément d'Alexandrie, *Les Stromates*, III (SC 608) (Paris: Cerf, 2020), 152–3.

26 See Clement, *Strom*. VI, VII.60.3 (ed. and trans. Patrick Descourtieux; SC 446) (Paris: Cerf, 1999), 184–5.

27 Clement, *Strom*. IV.83. I use the edition and translation of Annewies van den Hoek and Claude Mondésert, SJ, (SC 464) (Paris: Cerf, 2001), 192–3.

28 Pseudo-Basilian *Homily on Mercy and Justice (Peri eleous kai kriseōs)*, *PG* 31, 1705–14. For an English translation of this text, see St. Basil the Great, *On Social Justice*, C. Paul Schroeder, trans. (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir Seminary Press, 2009), Appendix. The Apocalypse of Peter, too, discusses the relationship between God's justice and his mercy. See Bart D. Ehrman, *Journeys to Heaven and Hell: Tours of the Afterlife in the Early Christian Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), ch. VI, 177–211 and notes.

29 Pseudo-Basilian, *Homily on Mercy and Justice*, col. 1708 C. On the relationship between mercy and justice in the fourth-century Ephrem the Syrian, see Serger Ruzer and Aryeh Kofsky, *Syriac Idiosyncrasies: Theology and Hermeneutics in Early Syriac Literature* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010), ch. 2: "Ephrem on Justice, Free Will and Divine Mercy in the Story of the Fall," 40–60.

30 Lactantius, *Institutions Divines, Livre IV*, ed. and trans. Pierre Monat (SC 377) (Paris: Cerf, 1992); here IV.17.21 (p. 161).

31 See, for instance, *Inst. Div.* VI.8.6–11, ed. and trans. Christiane Ingremeau (SC 509) (Paris: Cerf, 2007), 184–7. On justice in late antique society, see Kevin Uhalde, "Justice and Equality," in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott

Fitzgerald Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 764–88. On justice in patristic literature, see further Eugen Schoenfeld, "Justice: An Elusive Concept in Early Christianity," *Review of Religious Research* 30 (1989): 236–45.

32 See Lactantius, *Institutions divines, Livre V*, ed. and trans. Pierre Monat (SC 204) (Paris: Cerf, 1973), 2 vols. For a contextual analysis of the argument, see Monat's introduction, ch. III: "La justice dans la tradition antique et biblique," 20–33. See a further discussion of the theme of justice in *Book VI* of the *Institutions*, ending with the words: "consumata et perfecta iustitia est." On *iustitia* and *pietas* in Lactantius, see Blandine Colot, *Lactance: Penser la conversion de Rome au temps de Constantin* (Florence: Olschki, 2016), ch. III, 103–68.

33 Monat (SC 204), Introduction.

34 Augustine, *Confessions* III. VII.13, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 44.: "Et non noveram iustitiam veram interiorem non ex consuetudine iudicantem, sed ex lege rectissima dei omnipotentis, qua formarentur mores regionum et dierum pro regionibus et diebus, cum ipsa ubique ac semper non alibi alia nec alias aliter" (text in St. Augustine, *Confessions*, I, trans. W. Watts (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1978), I, 122.

35 Augustine, *Retractationes* on *De duobus animabus*, I.15.4. See Mary T. Clarke, "Augustine on justice," *Revue des Études Augustiniennes et Patristiques* 9 (1963): 87–94.

36 See, for instance, H. Merkel, "Gesetz IV" (Alte Kirche) in *TRE* 13 (1984), 75–82, with bibliography. On the various attitudes to law in Christian thought, see J. Neumann, "Gesetz," *Handbuch der religionsgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe* III (1993): 9–17.

37 See, for instance, G. W. MacRae, SJ, "Why the Church Rejected Gnosticism," in his *Studies in the New Testament and Gnosticism* (Good News Studies, 26) (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1987), 251–62. See further M. Tardieu, "Épiphane contre les gnostiques," *Tel Quel* 88 (1981): 64–91.

38 See, for instance, G. Quispel, "The Origins of the Gnostic Demiurge," in *Kyriakon: Festschrift Johannes Quasten*, I (Münster: Aschendorff, 1970), 271–6.

39 Epiphanius of Salamis (*Panarion* 41.1.5) is our only source mentioning Syria as Cerdo's place of origin.

40 See Chapter 3, "The Stranger God," above. I quote according to Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies*, Livre I, ed. and trans. Adelin Rousseau and Louis Doutreleau (SC 264) (Paris: Cerf, 1979), I.27.1, 348–9. In *Adv. Haer.* I.26.1 (Rousseau and Doutreleau, 244–5), Irenaeus deals with Cerinthus as having taught that the demiurge had not been the supreme God, but a much lower power.

41 Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I.27.2 (Rousseau and Doutreleau, 250–1); cf. *Adv. Haer.* III.25.3. On divine goodness and justice according to Marcion, see Judith Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 343–9.

42 See, for instance, Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, I. 27. 3 (Rousseau and Doutreleau, 350–3). See further Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* I. 11 and I. 19 on the God of Israel and the separation of Law and Gospel (Evans, 26–7 and 46–9), and Origen, *Hom. in Num.*, 9. 4: "deus legis non est bonus, sed iustus." The best study on Marcion remains A. von Harnack, *Marcion: das Evangelium vom fremden Gott: eine Monographie zur Geschichte der Grundlegung der katholischen Kirche. Neue Studien zu Marcion* (TU 45) (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1924). The French translation of this classic work, *Marcion: L'évangile du Dieu étranger* (Paris: Le Cerf, 2005), includes Michel Tardieu's essay on "Marcion depuis Harnack."

43 Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I. 27. 3 (Rousseau and Doutreleau, 350–3).

44 The concept of the Ogdoad (*ogdoas*, "eightfold" in Greek) plays a major role in early Gnostic mythologies, in particular in the thought of Valentinus. For Basilides on the Ogdoad, see Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.*, IV 162. 1, and Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer*. I. 24. 3.

45 *Letter to Flora* 3. 6 (Quispel, 52–3).

46 *Letter to Flora*, 7. 5 (Quispel, 70–1). On this text, see Chapter 3, "The Gnostic *Mesotēs*," above.

47 *Lettre à Flora* 3.5, (Quispel, 52–3).

48 Ibid. 7.5 (Quispel, 70–1).

49 Ibid. 7.6 (Quispel, 70–1).

50 *Extr. Theod.* 37 (Sagnard, 140–1).

51 *Extraits de Théodote*, ed. and trans. François Sagnard, OP (SC 2) (2nd ed., Paris: Cerf, 1970), 37, 140–1. See Sagnard's note 1, p. 141.

52 In *Republic* V (457d–466d), Plato argued that marriage should be abolished among the city's guardians, and that women should be held, and children raised, in common. On Carpocrates and the Carpocratians, see A. Monaci Castagno in *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, I. 145A. See further M. Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), ch. 4 and app. 8.

53 See *Stromates* III.2.8,3; 9.2–3. 197,18–199,13. The text is reproduced in W. Völker, *Quellen zur Geschichte der christlichen Gnosis* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1932), 33–6. For a German commented translation, see H. Leisegang, *Die Gnosis* (4th ed., Stuttgart: Kröner, 1955), 261–70. I am using the translation in J. E. L. Oulton and H. Chadwick, *Alexandrian Christianity* (Library of Christian Classics) (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 42–5.

54 W. H. Löhr, "Epiphanes' Schrift *'Peri dikaiosunēs'* (= Clemens Alexandrinus, Str. III,6,1–9,3)," in *Logos: Festschrift für Luise*

Abramowski, ed. H. C. Brennecke, E. L. Grasmück, and C. Markschies (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft, 67) (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993), 12–29.

55 Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* I. 25.

56 Hippolytus, *Elenchos* VII. 32.

57 *Stromates* III.5–11. See A. Le Boulluec et al. (eds. and trans.), Clément d'Alexandrie, *Stromates III* (SC 608; Paris: Cerf, 2020),70–87, with useful notes. See further ibid., "Notes complémentaires, 1. Carpocrate et son fils Épiphane (5, 1–2)," 345–7. The Carpocratians have attracted new scholarly interest since the publication of M. Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), as the text discovered by Smith accuses the Carpocratians of misusing the Secret Gospel of Mark in Alexandria. A huge, and still growing, literature exists on Smith's discovery. See G. G. Stroumsa, ed., *Morton Smith and Gershom Scholem, Correspondence 1945–1982* (Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture, 9) (Leiden: Brill, 2008), Introduction, vii–xxiv.

58 *Elenchos,* ibid.

59 Cf. Diels, *Fragmente*, 11b. 7 (Xenophanes). On the belief in transmigration in early Christian thought, see K. Hoheisel, "Das frühes Christentum und die Seelenwanderung," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 27–8 (1984–5): 24–46.

60 On Gnostic esotericism, see G. G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Studies in the History of Religions 70) (Leiden: Brill, 2005 [1st ed. 1996]), 46–62.

61 Hippolytus, *Elenchos,* ibid.

62 Tertullian, *De Anima*, 23, 35.

63 Oulton and Chadwick, *Alexandrian Christianity*, Introduction, 25.

64 Clemens, *Strom.* III.7.1 (198, 20–6 Stählin).

65 Ibid., III.8.1 (199,4 Stählin).

66 On *phusikos nomos* in the early Christian context, see, for instance, H. Koester, "NOMOS PHYSEOS: the Concept of Natural Law in Greek Thought," in *Religions in Antiquity: Essays in Memory of E. R. Goodenough*, ed. J. Neusner (SHR 14) (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 521–41. For an analysis of Epiphanes's ideas in a comparative perspective, and for their possible influence on heretical movements in Sasanian Iran, see P. Crone, "Zoroastrian Communism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36 (1994): 447–62, esp. 461–2.

67 *Strom*. III. 10. This is also how Plato is understood by Epictetus, 2, 4: 8–10 (see Oulton and Chadwick, *Alexandrian Christianity*, 45, n. 24).

68 On the possible relationships between Jewish Christianity and Gnosis, see, for instance, G. G. Stroumsa, *Savoir et salut* (Paris: Cerf, 1992), 91, and the bibliography adduced in the notes.

69 Logion 12 (cf. logion 13, where Simon Peter compares Jesus to "a righteous angel").

70 Hippolytus, *Elenchos* IX. 13. 1 (Klijn and Reinink, 114–15).

71 According to Henrich and Koenen's commentary on the *Cologne Mani Codex* (*Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 32 (1978), 188–9, n. 278), *dikaios* represents here "möglicherweise nicht *tsadiqa* sondern *qushita*."

72 *CMC* 94. 9–95. 14. I use the text edited by L. Koenen and C. Römer, *Der Kölner Mani-Kodex: über das Werden seines Leibes* (Papyrologia Coloninsia 14) (Oplade: Westdeutscher Verlag), 1988. In *CMC* 58. 8 ff., Enoch is called *dikaios*.

73 *CMC* 14.1.

74 *CMC* 97. 18–99. 3.

75 *ouk adikēsō*; *CMC* 15. 6.

76 See G. Widengren, *Mani and Manichaeism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1965), 96.

77 For a list of all passages in the Coptic source—though with no detailed analysis of their meaning—see P. van Lindt, *The Names of Manichaean Mythological Figures* (Studies in Oriental Religions 26) (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992), 190–5. In the Manichaean sources, *dikaiosunē* is also a self-reference to the Manichaean community. See G. G. Stroumsa, "Aspects de l'eschatologie manichéenne," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 198 (1981): 163–81, esp. 166 and n. 16.

78 *Kephal*. 81. 13 ff. Polotsky-Böhlig. For an English translation, see Iain Gardner, *The Kephalaia of the Teacher: The Edited Coptic Manichaean Texts in Translation with Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

79 *Kephal*. 80 (Polotsky-Böhlig, 192–3).

80 Polotsky-Böhlig, 221–3. See I. Gardner, *The Kephalaia of the Teacher*, 229–31. See Chapter 3, n. 69, above. See further J. De Menasce, ed. and trans., *Skand Gumanic Vicar* (Collectanea Friburgensia 30) (Fribourg: Librairie de l'université, 1945), 206–7, 230; Augustine, *Contra Faustum* 19. 4. On God as a judge, cf. S. Shaked, "Mihr the Judge," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 2 (1980): 1–31.

81 *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* was first published in 1912.

82 In Clement, *Strom*. III.2.7.

83 On the two different attitudes which can result from despising the world and its creator, see Stroumsa, *Savoir et Salut*, ch. 4, 145–62.

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CHAPTER

5 Election and Ethnicity 🔓

Guy G Stroumsa

Abstract

The election of Abraham and of his offspring lies at the core of God's covenant with the patriarch. As highlighted in this chapter, the election, usually perceived as typical of Judaism, actually is also expressed, in different ways, in various Gnostic and Christian texts, as well as in the Qur'an. While the idea of election is directly related to that of a chosen people, the analysis of those various conceptions of religious election reveals that election is directly related to the idea of ethnicity. Contrary to broadly shared perceptions, Christians shared a clear perception of their own ethnicity, as expressed in Aphrahat's "a people from all peoples" (collective identity could only be expressed in such terms in the ancient world). The Qur'anic idea of the umma reflects a similar conception. In patristic literature and the Qur'an, contemporary Jews are thus contraposed to the ancient Hebrews, or "Sons of Israel."

Keywords: election, covenant, identity, Aphrahat, Hebrews, Jews

Subject: History of Religion, Comparative Religion, Theology, Religious Issues and Debates, Philosophy of Religion

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Jewish monotheism, both at the time of the Second Commonwealth and following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, upheld the election of Israel as God's "chosen people." For the Christians, the Jews had lost their privileged status as God's chosen when they did not recognize Jesus as the messiah, and the Christians had now become *verus Israel*. At the same time, the universality of the Christian doctrine of salvation has been traditionally understood as effacing ethnicity from the core of the religious message. As the present chapter will argue, such an approach oversimplifies both concepts, election and ethnicity, as they were understood in late antiquity.

Election and the Abrahamic Covenant

The collective dimension of religious election evokes the idea of a people chosen by God from among the nations.[1] Accordingly, it is associated with monotheism. Such a perception, I shall argue, is doubly misleading. First, the biblical idea of election started as an individual phenomenon and only later developed collective dimensions. Second, divine election is not found in all forms of monotheism but, rather, in the Abrahamic religions alone.

Chapter 4 dealt with the question of God's justice. The idea of justice constituted a core element of God's covenant with Abraham, and it became the central novelty of Abrahamic religion in the ancient world. Justice was a fundamental dimension of biblical religion, perhaps even more than truth, as argued by Jan Assmann.[2] Justice, between God and humans as well as between both individuals and societies, is a key concept for understanding the legal ↳ and political dimensions of cosmology (or *Weltanschauung*), a term which, perhaps better than "religion," emphasizes the interconnections between theology, ritual, ethics, law, and politics in the dynamics of societies.

The propensity to generate dualism seems inherent in the concept of election—an important, and thus far overlooked, fact. Ontological dualism, indeed, entails sociological dualism, with the cleft between the saved and the damned. Long late antiquity represents the crucible of the Abrahamic religions. Not only Christianity and Islam, but also rabbinic Judaism and Manichaeism, crystallized at that time. Hence, this period witnessed a profound cosmological shift. We shall follow here the double dialectics of election between the individual and the collective, as well as between various forms of monotheism and dualism. It is precisely within the interplay of this double dialectics that the critical political dimensions of election may be fully elucidated.

Let us start with Abraham himself:

> Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Many of us are familiar with the first verses of Genesis 12:1–3, where Abram is chosen by God, and in which the first occurrence the idea of election appears in the Bible. A fuller description of this election is found in Genesis 17:

> When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God." God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring ↳ after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you."

It is only as a consequence of God's choosing of Abraham that his offspring become the recipients of that election. Moreover, the divine election represents only one side of the covenant offered by God. Abraham, and his offspring after him, are expected to keep their side of the covenant, which is symbolized by the circumcision of the male descendants of Abraham.

Hence, in the first place, election is individual.[3] Moreover, if God is to keep his own promises, Abraham's offspring are expected to meet the religious and moral demands made upon them. Election, then, for the people of Israel is conditional upon Israel obeying God's voice and maintaining the covenant, thus becoming "a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. (*mamlekhet cohanim ve-goy qadosh*)" (Exod. 19:5–6). In religions of the ancient world, the idea of holiness involved being different, set apart, an idea expressed by the Hebrew *qadosh*, similar to the Greek *hosios* and the Latin *sacer*.[4]

As emphasized in Deuteronomy 7:6–10, God's choice of Israel, "the smallest of all peoples," as his own possession is conditioned upon Israel keeping its side of the bargain. God loves those who love him, while he destroys those who hate him. The opposite of God's choice, in the biblical text, is his rejection (*beḥartikha velo-me'astikha*, Isa. 41:10). God rejects those who betray their duty in the covenant: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities." (Amos 3:2).

To be elected, therefore, is to be set apart with a mission. In this case, it is not rights that multiply but, rather, moral duties.[5] The prophets' description ↳ of Israel as God's servant blurs the distinction between the personal and the collective dimensions of election. For the Second Isaiah, Israel is God's elect (*beḥiri*) and servant, whose mission is to announce to the nations justice (*mišpaṭ*), until justice reigns upon the earth (Isa. 42:1–4.). It is, moreover, because of his love for this small people that God has chosen Israel as his servant (Isa. 41:8–10).

Election is directly implied by the Abrahamic covenant—but not by monotheism itself. In his work on divine election, Reuven Firestone argues that, in the ancient Near East, each people considered itself as chosen by its own gods.[6] Indeed, in the ancient world, a special relationship did exist between a given people and its gods. However, Firestone's argument does not take into account that it is precisely at the crossroads between a defined ethnic identity and the notion of a universal God that the election of Israel stands.[7]

A major transformation of the idea of the covenant, and with it of divine election, can be seen in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The *Community Rule*, in particular, describes the organization of the Yaḥad, the sect of the Qumran covenanters (for all practical purposes, an offshoot of the Essenes) detailing the duties of its members.[8] The party to the covenant is displaced, shifting from the whole of Israel to the members of the Yaḥad. We witness here the very core of sectarian logic. Those who decide to live a pure life, seeking God with a whole heart and soul and following his commandments, need to isolate themselves from society at large, a society of sinners. Hence, they call themselves *qedoshim*, "saints." In doing so, they enter with God into a "covenant of grace." (*Community Rule* [1 QS], I).[9]

These self-proclaimed saints, who sought to practice truth, righteousness, and justice upon earth, saw themselves as God's true chosen. Thus, at Qumran, ↳ election returns to its original meaning, an essentially individual affair, even if it is applied to the small sectarian community: the accent is clearly placed on the duties of the individual. The *War Rule* details how, in the apocalyptical war, only the sect members, or Sons of Light, will be saved, while all those who do not belong, the Sons of Darkness, will be damned and destroyed:

> This shall be a time of salvation for the people of God, and an age of dominion for all the members of His company, and of everlasting destruction for all the company of Satan. (*War Scroll* [1 QM], I)

The radical social dualism expressed in this passage stems from the doctrine of "double predestination," wherein God decrees the salvation of certain individuals and the damnation of others, as well as electing certain individuals for divine grace. Qumran dualism, centered as it is upon the two spirits, one good and the

other evil, probably reflects Iranian influence (Palestine had been under Iranian rule from the sixth to the fourth centuries BCE).[10] For our purposes, it is important to recognize the social implications of the Qumran covenanters' *Weltanschauung*. Together with divine election comes divine rejection and the division of humanity into two categories, the saved and the damned. This radically dualist perception of society would have a major impact on later conceptions of divine election, in particular among Gnostics and Manichaeans. Thus, the idea of election, which we have seen to be an integral element of Abrahamic monotheism, is also a key element of dualist theologies.

Instead of the eschatological war between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness, the Jews suffered two defeats in the brutal wars they waged with the Romans, in 70 and 135 CE, and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, which would remain an even deeper trauma in Jewish religious and national memory. With the elimination of the political dimensions of Jewish existence in Roman Palestine, the Jews started to focus on the election of Israel over the idea of covenant. Although this shift is reflected in rabbinic literature, its significance is underrecognized. The political dejection of Israel brought the early rabbis to insist on God's love, while the *quid pro quo* expected from Israel was not deemed to require special emphasis. The idea of the covenant with God—unlike the election of Israel—made sense to the rabbis mainly when it was endowed with a political dimension.[11]

Christian Election

Matters became more complex with the emergence of Christianity and its transformation from a Jewish sect into a full-fledged religion. Judaism and Christianity soon began to define themselves in opposition to one another. By a process of sustained polemics, they developed two mutually exclusive interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, while both claimed to represent the true Israel and to be the single inheritor of God's covenant with Abraham. The key text in this regard is Paul's Letter to the Romans (Rom. 9:6–8):

> It is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel, and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants. . . . This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants.

Similar hermeneutics are applied by Paul to Abraham's two sons, that of the slave and that of the free woman, who respectively represent the son according to the flesh and that according to the promise (*di' epaggelias*). Hagar, coming from Arabia, represents Sinai and the Law (*nomos*; i.e., Torah), while Sarah symbolizes the heavenly Jerusalem (Gal. 4: 22–6).

The elect, sons of the promise, are the sons of Abraham and Sarah, while those who follow the Law are the sons of Hagar. Paul's sophisticated hermeneutics, at the root of the Christian conception of *Verus Israel*, follow in the footsteps of the Qumran covenanters as the "rest of Israel" and the true inheritors of God's covenant. The question of the relationship between Paul and the Dead Sea Scrolls has received a great deal of attention. For our purposes, it is important to note that, for both, God's elect, the true Israel, is not identical with the whole "seed of Abraham," Israel. Similarly to the double predestination from Qumran, the Epistle to the Ephesians (1: 4–6) expresses Paulinian thought patterns, and states that:

> [J]ust as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

Likewise, another Pauline epistle, I Thessalonians, refers literally to divine election: "For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, of your election (*tēn eklogēn humōn*)." (I Thess. 1:4).[12]

Of course, there is a vast difference between the sectarianism of the Qumran covenanters and the universal aspirations of the early Christians. Regarding the former, the community of the elect had shrunk to the size of their sect; as to the latter, they soon developed patterns of mission, seeking to spread their beliefs throughout the world.

Starting in the early second century, the Church Fathers argued that it is the Christians, not the Jews, who are God's elect and the true inheritors of his covenant with Abraham.[13] From the perspective of the rabbis, this polemic was an appropriation of the Jews' identity. The crystallization of the concept of a New Testament (as opposed to the final canonization of its writings in the fourth century) and the redaction of the Mishna both date from the last two decades of the second century. As I have argued elsewhere, these two texts show that the Jews and Christians competed throughout the second century in their biblical hermeneutics.[14] The Mishna (*deuterosis* in Greek) literally means the second [Torah], which is parallel to the idea of a new covenant (*diathēkē*) (an idea already introduced by Nehemiah).

The equivalence between the religious and ethnic identity of Abraham's children was axiomatic for the early rabbis. The Christians, however, rejected this equivalence, and transformed this identity into a mainly religious one. Nonetheless, the ethnic dimension was not totally erased. The term *Verus Israel*, chosen by the Church, is ethnic in nature; hence the idea of a collective election. Already in the second century, with Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* and the *Epistle to Diognetus*, a number of patristic writings exhibit what has been referred to as "ethnic reasoning."[15]

The Christian conception of divine election clearly differs from the Israelite and Jewish one. In early Christianity, we observe a radical reconfiguration of the relationship between the individual and collective dimensions of election. ↳ For the Christians, the personal choice made in order to assert faith in Jesus Christ represents the axis around which the structure of religious identity is built anew. Every Christian is a new Abraham, elected through his faith. The emphasis thus returns to the original individual dimension of election.

However, the collective dimensions of election did not disappear. Although early Christian thought distanced itself from the identification of the inheritors of Abraham with Israel, it did not give up entirely on the idea of ethnic identity.[16] In the ancient world, in which religion and ethnicity were entangled, the Christians perceived themselves not simply as a new religion but also as a new kind of people, a new race (*genos*).

From Gnosis to Qur'an

The election of a special *genos*, or race, is evident in Christian Gnostic trends, especially from the second century on. In the *Gospel of Thomas* (logion 49; 89: 27–8 Nag Hammadi Codex [NHC] II), for instance, we read:

> Jesus said: "Blessed are the solitary (*monachos*) and elect, for you shall find the Kingdom."

Elsewhere in Gnostic texts and traditions, one reads about the "seed" (*sperma*) or "race" (*genos*) of the elect ones, who are also called "spirituals" (*pneumatikoi*) and are saved by nature, as they "come from the light" (*Gospel of Thomas*, logion 50; 89: 33–5 NHC). Being the sons and the elect of the Living Father (logion 50; 90: 3–4 NHC), they are related, through a *suggneneia*, or family relationship, to divine essence (*ousia*), and therefore are saved by nature. These chosen ones, or *eklēktoi*, were "born from the light," in the words of the aforementioned *Epistle to Flora*.[17] Through their radical practice, or *askēsis*, the elect reject the material world, where they remain strangers, preparing their return to the sphere of the divine, or *plēroma,* to which they really belong.[18]

While Gnostic references to those "coming from the light" seem to echo the "sons of light" mentioned in the Qumran, Christianity grew from the same dualist background that saw the blossoming of the Essenes, where

the forces of God and those of the Devil fought an eschatological war. Dualist tendencies, ↳ at once metaphysical, anthropological, and ethical, are inherent in Abrahamic monotheism, as they account for the existence of evil. As we saw earlier, monotheism and dualism represent the two sides of the same coin, and always appear together in history. The very idea of election, which characterizes Abrahamic monotheism, generates dualism, as it sets apart the small minority of the elect from society at large. This aspect of election awaits its scholarly due.

The topic of pagan monotheism, as we saw above, has recently received much attention.[19] Among the Platonic philosophers of late antiquity, we find a number of monotheists. Their monotheism, however, diverged from that of the Jews and Christians in that it rejected the idea of election. Moreover, even a self-avowed polytheist such as the emperor Julian disavowed divine election. In *Against the Galileans*, Julian ridicules the smallness of the Jewish nation, as well as their conception of divine election. He pokes fun at Moses, as well as Jesus and Paul, who imagine a God who is at once the creator (*dēmiourgos*) of the universe (*kosmos*) and "chose the Hebrew nation" (*to tōn hebraiōn ethnos*), and that the Jews are his elect (*eklektous*) people, which he describes as "a little tribe which less than two thousand years before had settled in one part of Palestine."[20]

Throughout late antiquity, dualist tendencies would present a challenge to Christian thought. We see this, for example, in Augustine's writings, particularly in his polemical works against the Pelagians and his insistence on divine grace and predestination. For Augustine, human will is not quite free, as the individual is unable to choose himself/herself for salvation. God alone chooses the elect, those belonging, through predestination, to the *civitas dei*. These individuals alone will be saved, while all others are condemned to damnation.

It is worth mentioning that Augustine had been a Manichaean for a full decade before his double conversion, first to Platonism and then to Christianity. His writings represent an important source of knowledge about Manichaean doctrines and practices, and he never entirely shook off the influence of Mani's dualistic theology and anthropology. It is from Augustine's anti-Manichaean polemical tracts that we know of the *electi* and *auditores*.[21] The former, who were celibate, constituted the core of the Manichaean Church and would be ↳ saved, their souls moving to the heavenly abode. The *auditores*, by contrast, would be reincarnated until finally purified from any remaining evil matter. All others, outside the Church of Light, were doomed to fall into a cosmic hole, the *bolos*, to disappear.

In the sharp social dualism of the Manichaean Church, we hear strains of Buddhist doctrine. The community of the monks and nuns, or *sangha*, represents Buddhism's true kernel. It is possible that a direct Buddhist influence is perceptible in the dual structure of the Manichaean Church, as we know that the young Mani spent some time in Buddhist kingdoms of northern India.[22]

In any case, the concept of election turns out to be as central to dualist as to monotheist systems. Moreover, concepts such as "Race of the Elect," as well as "Sons of Light," can be found in texts belonging to movements as different as the Qumran Covenanters, the Christian Gnostics, and the Manichaeans.

The discussion of election in the Qur'an and in early Islam must be understood within the broader context of the importance of the figure of Abraham among Arabs before the birth of Islam.[23] The Christian conception of election reflected the polemical stance of the new religion replacing the older Jewish one, and the Qur'an also recognized God's early election of Israel:

> O Children of Israel! Remember My favor wherewith I favored you and how I preferred you (*faḍaltukum*) to (all) creatures. (Qur'an 2:47; trans. Pickthall, slightly emended)

Picking up where the Christians left off, the Qur'an rejects both the Jewish and Christian claims that they are God's chosen communities:

> The Jews and Christians say: We are sons of Allah and His loved ones. Say: Why then doth He chastise you for your sins? Nay, ye are but mortals of His creating. (5:18)

Indeed, God's elect community are now the Muslims:

> Ye are the best community (*umma*) that hath been raised up for mankind. Ye enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency; and ye believe in Allah. And if the people of the Scripture (*ahl al-kitāb*) had believed, it had been better for them. Some of them are believers, but most of them are evil-doers. (3:110; trans. Khan and al-Hilali)

Even more clearly, the Muslims are called "the chosen slaves of Allah" (*'ibād Allāh al-mukhlaṣīn*) (37:40).[24]

The above verses refer to collective election. Muhammad's individual election, however, is emphasized by his nickname *al-muṣṭafā*, which means the chosen, selected, appointed, and preferred.[25] As is the case in early Christianity, where the idea of election was discussed mainly within the polemical context against Judaism, the Qur'an deals with the *umma*'s election in its polemics against Jews and Christians, who have not realized that election has now moved to the new community of God's chosen. Like the Hebrew *'am* and Greek *ethnos*, the Arabic word *umma*, which refers to the community of the believers, highlights the ethnic reasoning of the early Islamic community.[26]

Election, Politics, and Identity

From the Hebrew Bible and up to the Qur'an, there are political consequences to election. While the Bible and rabbinic literature insist on the *collective* dimensions of election—namely, the election of a people—Christian texts emphasize the *individual* aspects of election. It oversimplifies matters, however, to explain this difference in terms of the particularistic nature of Judaism and ↳ the universalist nature of Christianity. The idea of an elect community, as we have seen, did not disappear in the early Christian and Islamic writings, which sought to broaden rather than erase the idea of a chosen people. In both cases, those belonging to the community of the elect are set against those without.

The *Sitz im Leben* of religious writers may shed light on the political implications of the idea of election in late antiquity. The rabbis, having long lost all access to the corridors of power, were clearly insulated from any political clout. The same is true for all patristic writers before Constantine. The case of early Islam, however, is completely different. The political dimension of the new religion was uncontestable since the establishment of the *umma* as a political entity, and Muhammad was like a Moses *redivivus*, both a religious and a political leader.[27] This political dimension would be emphasized by the rapidity of the Islamic conquests. Under conditions of *Entpolitisierung*, religious thinkers can develop radical hermeneutics, even about an eschatological war between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness. However, when a tradition of radical hermeneutics is suddenly confronted with new conditions imposed by sudden societal moves, religious thinkers are confronted with a new political responsibility.

From Schleiermacher on, nineteenth-century Protestant scholars and theologians, in particular in the Germanic world, were under Hegel's powerful influence.[28] Like him, they despised Judaism, and the religion of Israel was for them an essentially ethnic religion, in which only the collective, political dimensions of the chosen people's future (*Erwählungslehre*) were important. By contrast, the core of Christianity was the idea of salvation from the material world (*Erlösungsreligion*), which was always presented as personal rather than national. In this line of thinking, individual election and personal salvation went hand in hand. As for Islam, one could hardly deny it the title of a universal religion. It was nonetheless thought to remain squarely on the side of Judaism, as a religion *sans* salvation. Such theories arose together with the rise of antisemitism and Islamophobia in large sectors of Western society, including among intellectuals and scholars.

Like other standard categories in the scholarly study of religions, those of "national religions" and "universal religions" were coined during the last decades of the nineteenth century. For historians of religions like

Cornelis Petrus ↳ Tiele (1830–1902), the first seven centuries of our era, which saw the birth of Christianity and then of Manichaeism and of Islam, illuminated the passage from the ethnic, or national, religions of the ancient world, like Judaism, to universal religions.[29] To this day, this conception of the passage from ethnic to universal monotheism remains the default pattern.[30]

According to the taxonomy fashioned by Tiele, among others, there was a gap between Jewish ethnic monotheism and universal conceptions of monotheism such as those expressed in Christianity and Islam. For many of these scholars, however, the universalism of Islam was problematic, as Islam represented for them a "lower" form of religion, hence also less fully universal. The Semitist Ernest Renan, discussed in the Introduction, is a prominent example of a towering scholar who held Islam in low regard.[31]

The contiguity of ethnic and religious identity in ancient societies is epitomized in Herodotus's celebrated phrase regarding Hellenic collective identity: "Again, there is the Greek nation—the community of blood and language, temples and ritual; our common way of life."[32] Religions in the ancient world were primarily enacted in traditional rituals and were thus embedded into the lifestyle (Weber's *Lebensformen*) of ethnic groups. In other words, it was virtually impossible not to think of religion in terms of ethnicity. In the Roman Empire, however, the intensified circulation of individuals, from soldiers to merchants, and the constant mingling of peoples and ideas created not only a marketplace of competing religions but also an intensive dynamic of transformation of religious traditions. What are known today as the "mystery religions," such as the Mithraic rituals, were usually closer to cultic clubs than to full-fledged religions.[33]

In this sense, Rabbinic Judaism, the latest avatar of the religion of biblical Israel, was no exception to the ubiquitous equivalence between religion and peoplehood in the ancient world, as it basically equated Jewish religious and national identity. It is mainly through its insistence on one single true God that Judaism distinguished itself from Hellenic religion, as noticed by the emperor Julian, for whom, as we have seen above, Jewish rituals, and in particular blood sacrifices, were similar in nature to those of the Greeks.[34]

As noted, however, the history of religions in the Roman Empire reflects a more complex picture than the commonly perceived passage from ethnic to universal religions. Although the broad diffusion of Christianity did much to muddle the traditional closeness between religion and ethnicity, the ethnic dimension of religion never quite disappeared. While in earlier periods religion had been expressed in ethnic terms, in late antiquity ethnicity tended to be framed in religious language.

In summary, in both the Roman and the Sasanian empires, the intermingling of peoples produced religious encounters and generated new perceptions of religion (*thrēskeia, religio*).[35] Hence, through both religious dynamics and the fluidity of ethnic identities in the encounters between peoples in the Roman and Sasanian empires, the old embeddedness of religion in ethnicity was transformed while new forms of entanglement between the two emerged.

"A People from all Peoples"

In Galatians 3:29, Paul identified Abraham's offspring as those belonging to Christ. The Christian polemics against the Jews regarding the true Israel and the true children of Abraham offered the context for Christians to self-identify as a people as early as the first half of the second century. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Martyr notes that, like the Jews, the Christians believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Yet he adds that while the Law of Moses was addressed only to the Jews, the final Law (*teleutaios nomos*), superior to all others,

is meant for all.[36] Hence, he concludes, the Christians are the true ↳ and spiritual Israelite race (*genos*), that of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and of course Abraham, who was called by God "father of many nations" because of his faith, even at a time when he was still uncircumcised.[37] An allusion to the biblical verse appears in the *Epistle of Barnabas*, which refers, in what seems to be a mixed quote of Genesis 17:5 and Romans 4:1: "Behold, I have made thee, Abraham, the father of the nations (*patera ethnōn*—i.e., the gentiles) who believe in God in uncircumcision."[38] The lexical imprecision in Justin's use of *genos* and *ethnos* strikes me as reflecting the terms' fluidity and fuzziness in contemporaneous usage.[39]

Further on in the text, Justin maintains, echoing I Peter 2:9–10, that it is the Christians, rather than the Jews, who are God's "holy people."[40] He insists again that the Christians, indeed, are a nation, the one promised by God to Abraham, destined to become "the father of many nations."[41] Together with Abraham, he adds, we Christians will inherit the Holy Land.[42] Genesis 17:5 is thus a key verse in the patristic understanding of the Christians' peoplehood. The Christians are portrayed as a distinct people of their own, but one made up of many different peoples. For Justin, although the Christians may have been latecomers to the scene of history, Christianity is really the oldest of all religions, since Christ, the Logos, was God's firstborn. Hence, those who

lived according to the Logos before the coming of Jesus—Socrates, Heraclitus, ↳ Abraham, Azaria, Mishael, and Eli, among others—can be considered Christians.[43]

It is with the second-century crystallization of Christian self-perception as a category of its own, ethnological as well as religious in nature, that the "parting of the ways" between Jews and Christians asserted itself, even though the terminology was still fluctuating in patristic literature. Aristides refers in his *Apology* to three races (*tria genē*) of humans, according to their religious beliefs: pagans (essentially Chaldeans, Greeks, and Egyptians, who are at the root of all other polytheisms), Jews, and Christians.[44] In his *Oratio ad Greacos*, Tatian, who is also well aware of the multiplicity of pagan religions, is mainly interested in opposing Christians to "Greeks." He uses, however, intellectual rather than ethnological categories, when he writes: "our philosophy is older than Greek practices."[45]

Perhaps the most striking description of the Christians' peculiar ethnological identity is that of the anonymous second-century *Letter to Diognetus*. According to this text, nothing distinguishes the Christians from other people. They live among all peoples, Greeks and barbarians, but only as resident strangers (*paroikoi*). They obey the "paradoxical" laws of their own "republic" (*politeia*) while outwardly living according to local custom. In short, "every foreign land is for them a motherland, but every motherland is a foreign land to them."[46]

In the footsteps of Aristides, the anonymous *Kerygmata Petrou*, a text dating from the first half of the second century, develops the idea that Christians represent a "third race," alongside Jews and Greeks. The context makes it clear, however, that the taxonomy is ethnic rather than religious. In a reference to the idea of a "new covenant" (Jer. 31:31; LXX 38:31–2), the author writes: "We, the Christians, worship [God] in a new way (*kainōs*), like a third race (*tritōi genei*)."[47]

For the Church Fathers, indeed, the Christians represented a people. Origen notes that, just as the Jews in earlier times had been called "God's people" (*ho palai laos theou*), so the Christians of his time were "Christ's people" (*to christou laon*).[48] However, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius refers to the Christians as a "new people" (*neon ethnos*). The new Christian *ethnos* stands in contradistinction to that of the Hebrews, "honored among all men for its antiquity."[49] But Jesus Christ, despite the recent date of his advent, can in no way be thought to be a

recently born figure (Historia Ecclesiastica, I.4.1), Eusebius explains. He notes that Christian life, practice (*ho bios ... kai tēs agōgēs ho tropos*), and the precepts of the religion (*eusebeias dogmasin*) are not new.

> [It] has not been recently invented by us, but from the first creation of man, so to speak, has been upheld by the natural concepts of the men of old who were the friends of God (*phusikais ennoiais tōn palai theophilōn andrōn*). (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, I.4.4)

Further on, Eusebius mentions the direct line from Adam to Abraham. He claims that it is this original, true religion of the protoplast that was rediscovered by Abraham "and those lovers of God who followed him" (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, I.4.10), and which is now the one practiced by Christians (I.4.14).[50]

The novel collective identity of the Christians, originally belonging to different ethnicities and then coming together to form a new collective identity, comes from Aphrahat, an early fourth-century Syriac writer from Mesopotamia ("the Persian sage," d.345). Aphrahat, whose thought retains ↳ some patterns from earlier centuries, coined the phrase *'amma de 'amme* ("a people from peoples") to describe the global community of Christians. He testifies to the continued importance of the exegetical tradition that sees in Genesis 17:5 (Abraham as the father of many peoples) a reference to the Christian people. *Demonstration* 16: "On the Peoples in Place of the People (*'amā*)" is devoted explicitly to this theme. Starting with a quote from Genesis 17:5, it polemicizes with the Jews, who boast that they are "the people of God and the children of Abraham." *Demonstration* 17 starts thus: "[This is] a response to the Jews, who revile the people that is from the peoples." Similarly, in *Demonstration* 11 ("On circumcision"), Aphrahat refers to the Jews' belief they are the seed of Abraham, while it is actually the Christians, "the people that is from the peoples," who can truly be called "children and heirs of Abraham."[51] This exegesis extends beyond the Eastern tradition, appearing in the fifth-century Quodvultdeus, an author under the influence of Augustine.[52]

Hebrews and Jews

Eusebius summarizes these considerations at the start of the *Ecclesiastical History* in a striking passage introducing his *Proof of the Gospel* (*Demonstatio Evangelica* 1.5.2), where he argues that:

> the law and life of our Savior Jesus Christ shows itself to be such, renewing the ancient pre-Mosaic religion (*tēn palaiotatēn kai presbuteran Mōseōs eusebeian ananeoumentos*), in which Abraham, the friend of God (*ho theophilēs Abraham*), and his forefathers are shown to have lived.

The key word here is Abraham. Christianity represents a renewal of the religion of Abraham, who, following just men such as Enoch and Noah, ↳ retrieved the original natural religion of humankind, restoring it from idolatry.[53] In his important monograph on Eusebius's *Demonstratio Evangelica*, Sébastien Morlet noted that Eusebius contrasts the "ancient Hebrew" (*hoi palaioi hebraioi*), namely, the pre–Mosaic holy men of the Old Testament, with contemporary Jews observing the commandments given to them by Moses. While the Jews follow the law (Torah, *nomos*), the religion of the "ancient Hebrews" is that of nature (*phusis*) (*Demonstratio Evangelica*, III.2.12; V.2.2).[54] For Eusebius, these "ancient Hebrews" represent a third mode of piety, which is also the most ancient one, as they are neither idolaters nor Jews (see, for instance, *Die Demonstratio Evangelica,* I.2.8–10). Hence Eusebius's above-mentioned claim that Christianity represents a return to the oldest and truest form of religion. For him, Jesus will extend the seminal piety of the ancient Hebrews to the whole of humanity (I.7). Christianity, the religion of the Logos, is the ancient Hebrew religion universalized.

Remarkably, the religion of the ancient Hebrews is for Eusebius identical to natural religion. In this, he joins earlier Christian authors, who themselves followed the lead of Philo. As we have seen, Justin Martyr had already claimed a century earlier that all just men of the early generations of humankind, not only Abraham (the only one among them to be circumcised), obeyed natural and rational ethical rules (*Apology* 46.3). Irenaeus

mentions the natural precepts (Adversus Haereses, IV.15.1) and notes that the Ten Commandments correspond to these precepts (*phusika, naturalia*), which represent values common (*koina*) to all humans (IV.16.4–5). Similarly, Tertullian claims that before the written law of Moses, that of the Patriarchs was natural (*Adversus Iudaeos,* 2.7). Morlet showed that Eusebius, the inheritor of this tradition, is influenced by Philo in his exposition of the patriarchs. He also demonstrated that Eusebius broadens Abraham's intellectual approach, making it that of the ancient Hebrews.[55]

A few years before Morlet's study of the *Demonstratio Evangelica*, Aaron Johnson provided a thorough analysis of the role and status of ethnicity in Eusebius's *Praeparatio Evangelica*.[56] Johnson showed that what he calls "ethnic argumentation" in patristic literature, from Aristides and Tatian through ↳ Origen and up to Eusebius, permitted the founding of apologetics upon ethnic identities.[57]

The examples adduced here, which could easily be multiplied, indicate that, for the Church Fathers, the self-perception of Christians as a people is anchored in their self-identity as *Verus Israel*, the true children of Abraham, inheritors of the divine promise made to him. The Christian notion of God's people parallels patristic biblical hermeneutics and figurative interpretations of the Torah's ritual commandments. However, while religion, for the Christian authors, was no longer embedded in ethnicity, it was not entirely disentangled from it. Christianity soon became a universal religion, but without relinquishing the connection between religion and peoplehood.

Mani to Muhammad: World Religion and *Umma*

It was Manichaeism, not Christianity, which established itself as the first universal, or world, religion. For Mani, Buddha in the East, Zarathustra in the central lands, and Jesus in the West had all been his precursors. As we have seen, Mani grew up among the Elchasaite community, a Jewish-Christian sect. Although we do not know why he left the customs of his youth, we do know that he sought to achieve full liberation from what he considered the fetters of the biblical tradition. Only thus was he able to embrace the plurality of religions and of peoples and develop his own theory within that new historico-theological framework. This approach enabled a cleavage between ethnic identity and religion as an organized system of discourse and practice. The Gnostic rejection of the God of Israel may have left an impression on Mani. So may have his cultural and geographical positioning, and his contacts with both Zoroastrians and Buddhists. According to Jason BeDuhn, the idea of religion as disassociated from ethnicity is indebted to religions in third-century Iran, and to Manichaeism in particular.[58]

As noted, the Church Fathers, from Justin to Eusebius, insisted that while the Christians were a new people, Christianity was the oldest of all religions. This insistence on the antiquity of Christianity may seem surprising, as novelty ↳ was generally considered a virtue in early Christian literature. Newness, a central theme in apocalyptic literature, with its promise of a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21:1, 2 Pet. 3:13) is identified with the religious innovation of Jesus, as in John 13:34–5: "I give you a new commandment (*entolēn kainēn*)". Moreover, the Christian "new covenant," set in opposition to the "old covenant" already in Hebrews, would permit the formation of the idea of a New Testament.[59]

Alongside the positive evaluation of novelty, however, one may discern in patristic literature a different approach, in which novelty is indicative of heresy. Tertullian, for example, mocks the Marcionites' claim to novelty: "When they boast of their God as 'new' (*novum*), they mean new in men's knowledge of him. But it is precisely this conception of novelty, in its impact upon simple souls, it is precisely this natural attractiveness of novelty that I am determined to resist."[60] In their polemics with Judaism, Christian writers thus emphasized the novelty of their religious stance. But, in their apologetical enterprise in the Greco-Roman intellectual world, they sought to demonstrate their religious community's ancient roots. In a world which held tradition in high esteem, and for which religion represented ethnic (traditional) identity, deeper roots could confer legitimacy.

A number of the themes surveyed here evoke Qur'anic conceptions. This is true of the idea of a Christian universal people, of Christianity as a renewal of the oldest form of (true) religion, and of Christianity as being identical both to the religion of Abraham and to the natural religion of the earliest generations. Taken together, these themes support the idea that certain Qur'anic conceptions are rooted in notions developed in early Christian texts. The idea of a Christian universal people may well be echoed in the Qur'anic concept of *umma*, which can be understood as a kind of meta-nation embracing all peoples. The term is used in a broad sense (e.g., "every nation has a prophet"), but soon starts to refer to "the nation of believers," which generally refers to the Islamic community. The Arabic term is a cognate of the Hebrew word *ʾumma* [nation]. The conception of Christianity as the original, natural religion recalls the Qur'anic concept of *fiṭra*, which means, among others,

innate nature ↳ and natural religion.[61] Finally, like Christianity, which was conceived by the Christians as the renewal of the religion of Abraham—the friend of God, who was not a Jew—Islam is understood in the Qur'an to be the true monotheistic religion of the *ḥanīf* Ibrahim, who was neither a Jew nor a Christian but, like other pre-Islamic *ḥunafāʾ*, retained the original *fiṭra* intact.[62]

It seems, then, that the traditional appraisal, among historians of religion, of the late antique passage from ethnic to universal religions oversimplifies historical reality and misses the point of new interpretations of ethnic identity and its entanglement with religion. In late antiquity, religion became increasingly distinct from ethnic identity. However, it would never totally detach from it, certainly not within the Abrahamic religions, which all harked back to the same source family.

Notes

Footnotes
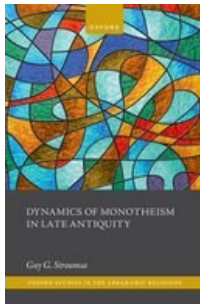
1   On early perceptions of Hebrew ethnicity, see, for instance, Fabio Porzia, *Le peuple aux trois noms: une histoire de l'ancien Israël à travers le prisme de ses ethnonymes* (Leuven, Paris, Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2022). For Jewish collective identity in the Greco-Roman world, see Youval Rotman, "Between *ethnos* and *populus*: The Boundaries of Being a Jew," in *Rome, An Empire of Many Nations: New Perspectives on Ethnic Diversity*, ed. Jonathan J. Price, Margalit Finkelberg, and Yuval Shahar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 203–333. Rotman shows that in order to define features of collective identity, the Jews used criteria extant in the Greco-Roman world.

2   On Assmann's view of monotheism, see in particular Chapter 6 and Conclusion.

3   On the biblical concept of election and its individual dimensions, see Horst Seebass, "bāchar," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), II, 73–87. Besides Abraham, Seebass refers to the election of Saul and to that of David (for instance, 2 Sam. 16:18). See further Dale Patrick and Gary S. Shogren, "Election," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), II, 434–44, esp. 436–7, on Abraham's election.

4   On the idea of holiness in ancient religions, see the entry "Heilig" (Carsten Colpe), in *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*, III, ed. Hubert Cancik, Burkhard Gladigow, and Karl-Heinz Kohl (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1993), 74–80.

5   On the relationship between monotheism and mission, see Rodney Stark, *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), ch. 2: "God's Chosen: Monotheism and Mission," 31–114. On the concept of religious election, see, for instance, Ellen M. Umansky, "Election," in Encyclopedia of Religion 5 (London: Macmillan, 1987), 75–81; J. Edgar Bauer, "Erwählung," in Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe 2 (1990), 330–41. See further "Erwählung," in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 2, 1478–90; also "Erwählung," in *Theologische RealEnzyklopädie* 10, 182–205.

6   See R. Firestone, *Who are the Real Chosen People?: The Meaning of Chosenness in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Path Publications, 2008); see further R. Firestone, "Chosenness and Exclusivity of Truth," in *Learned Ignorance: Intellectual Humility among Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, ed. James Heft, R. Firestone, and Omid Safi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 107–28. Firestone points out that Hebrew *segula* (in the biblical *ʿam segula*, often translated as "chosen people") is related to Akkadian *segulu*, slave, and to Ugaritic *sig/kiltu*, referring to a vassal preferred by the ruler. For some philosophical remarks on the idea of election, see Rémi Brague, *La loi de Dieu: histoire*

philosophique d'une alliance (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 67–9. For a contemporary theological reflection on Israel's election, see David Novak, *The Election of Israel: The Idea of the Chosen People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

7   On election in the Hebrew Bible, see, for instance, Peter Altmann, *Erwählungstheologie und Universalismus im Altes Testament* (Beihefte 92, Zeitschrift für Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft) (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1964).

8   On Qumran, see in particular Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, *Qumran: Die Texte vom Toten Meer und das antike Judentum* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), with rich bibliographies. For an English translation of the texts, see Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (London: Penguin, 1990 [3rd ed.])

9   See Bilhah Nitsan, "The Concept of the Covenant in Qumran Literature," in *Historical Perspectives: From the Hasmoneans to Bar Kokhba in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. D. Goodblatt, A. Pinnick, and D. R. Schwartz (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 85–104.

10   Much has been written on dualism in the Dead Sea Scrolls. For a short, synthetic study, see Annette Steudel, "Les Fils de Lumière et les Fils des Ténèbres ou le dualisme à Qumran," in Farah Mébarki and Émile Puech, *Les Manuscrits de la mer Morte* (Rodez: Éditions du Rouergue, 2002), 159–65.

11   See Benjamin Helfgott, *The Doctrine of Election in Tannaitic Literature* (New York: King's Crown, 1954), and in particular the seminal work of Solomon Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology: Major Concepts of the Talmud* (New York: Schocken, 1961 [1909]), ch. 4: "Election of Israel," 57–64, which refers to important passages in *Midrash Tehilim*, 117.2, *Psikta deRav Kahana*, 16a, and *Leviticus Rabba*, 2.4.

12   On the idea of election in the New Testament, see Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 4, "*eklegomai, eklogē, eklektos*," 144–92.

13   See, for instance, David Rokeah, "Early Christian-Jewish Polemics on Divine Election," in *Chosen People, Elect Nation and Universal Mission*, ed. Shmuel Almog and Michael Heyd (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1991), 71–98 (in Hebrew). Rokeah rightly insists on perceiving these polemics within the broader, triangular frame of arguments between Jews, Christians, and pagans.

14   See G. G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom* (Leiden: Brill, 2005 [1996]), 79–91.

15   See in particular Denise Kimber Buell, *Why this New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). Cf. Aaron Johnson's similar formula, "ethnic argumentation" (see n. 57 below). On the Paulinian roots of the theme, see Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

16   See section "A People from All Peoples," below. Cf. Buell, *Why this New Race*.

17   See the discussion of this text in Chapter 3 above.

18   The best discussion is still that of Charles-Henri Puech, *En quête de la Gnose* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), especially vol. 2, *Sur l'Évangile selon Thomas*, in particular on Logion 49, and *passim*.

19   See Chapters 2 and 3 above.

20   Julian, *Against the Galileans*, 99E–100A and 106D; 340–5 LCL; see further Julien l'Empereur, *Contre les Galiléens*, ed. and trans. Angelo Giavatto and Robert Muller (Paris: Vrin, 2018), Fragment 19, 74–5.

21   For the most convenient publication of these texts, see *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin: Six Traités anti-manichéens*, trans., intro., and notes by R. Jolivet and M. Jourjon (Desclée de Brouwer, 1961). See further Michel Tardieu, *Le manichéisme* (Que sais-je?) (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1981), 72, quoting Augustine's *De haeresibus ad Quodvultdeum*, ch. 46.

22   See G. G. Stroumsa, *Barbarian Philosophy: The Religious Revolution of Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), "Purification and its Discontents: Mani's Rejection of Baptism," 268–81, repr. in *The Religious History of the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, ed. John A. North and Simon R. F. Price (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 460–78.

23   See, for instance, Fergus Millar, "Hagar, Ishmael and the Origins of Islam," in Millar, *The Greek World, the Jews, and the East* (Chapel Hill: University of North California Press, 2006), 351–77, in particular his discussion of Sozomenus, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 6.38, which refers to Judaizing traditions among Arabs. See also Sarah Stroumsa, *Das Kaleidoskop der Convivencia*, ch. 1, "'*Unser* Vater': Die abrahamische(n) Religione(n) im Mittelalter," 19–43.

24   From the same root, *ikhlāṣ* refers to the act of picking out. See Meir M. Bar-Asher, *Les juifs dans le Coran* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2019), esp. ch. 2, "Les enfants d'Israël, peuple élu", 66–74, who points out that, in the Qur'an, election appears almost always in polemical context. See further Haggai Ben-Shammai, "The Idea of Election in Early Islam," in *Chosen People*, ed. Shmuel Almog and Michael Heyd, 147–77 (in Hebrew). See further R. Firestone, "Is there a Notion of 'Divine Election' in the Qur'ān?," in *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in its Historical Context II*, ed. G. Reynolds (New York: Routledge, 2011), as well as R. Firestone, "Contextualizing Anti-Semitism in Islam: Chosenness, Choosing, and the Emergence of a New Religion," *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 4 (2007): 235–54.

25   See also Uri Rubin, "Pre-Existence and Light—Aspects of the Concept of *Nûr Muḥammad*," *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975): 62–119.

26   See John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 85: "A marked feature of Islamic prophetology is its ethnic orientation, nowhere more clearly expressed than in the Quranic concept of *umam khāliya* (the nations which have perished)." On the early Islamic *umma*, its genesis and its

relationship to the Jewish *umma*, see Anoush Ganjipour, *L'ambivalence politique de l'islam: Pasteur ou Léviathan?* (Paris: Seuil, 2021), 74–83.

27 See G. G. Stroumsa, *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), ch. 7: "God's Rule in Late Antiquity," 123–34.

28 See further G. G. Stroumsa, "'Religions de Salut': Origines et valeur heuristique d'un concept," in *Sauver?*, ed. Rémi Brague (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2023), 419–39.

29 See in particular C. P. Tiele, *Outlines of the History of Religion to the Spread of the Universal Religions* (London: Trübner, 1877). The original Dutch version was published in Amsterdam in 1876.

30 See, for instance, Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 71, where the ethnic monotheism of Judaism is contrasted with proselytizing Christianity.

31 See G. G. Stroumsa, *The Idea of Semitic Monotheism: The Rise and Fall of a Scholarly Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 11–130. See also Domenico Paone, *La fabrique des Sémites: Ernest Renan entre langues et religions* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2023). A similar attitude, stemming from a very different viewpoint, is that of the Lutheran theologian Adolf von Harnack, for whom Islam was but Judaism adapted to the Arabs.

32 Herodotus, *Histories* VIII.144.2. I quote the translation of Aubrey de Sélincourt, rev. A. R. Burns (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 575. On religion and ethnicity in antiquity, see already the seminal remarks of A. D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933). See further Aaron P. Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), ch. 2: "The Language of Ethnicity," 25–54, which summarizes the contemporary state of research. Cf. Jeremy M. Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 5–9.

33 See, for instance, Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

34 Julian, *Against the Galileans*, fragment 72; see Julien l'Empereur, *Contre les Galiléens*, ed. and trans. Angelo Giavatto et Robert Muller (Paris: Vrin, 2018), 168–9. Before the end of the second century, the pagan intellectual Celsus had already noted that Jewish religion (*thrēskeia*) was by nature similar to that of all other nations (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, V. 25).

35 On these two concepts, see C. A. Barton and D. Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

36 *Dial. Tryph.* 11. 1–2. I use the edition and translation of Philippe Bobichon, Justin Martyr, *Dialogue avec Tryphon* (2 vols.) (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2003); here, I, 210–11.

37 Gen. 17:5: *'av hamon goyyim*; LXX *patera pollōn ethnōn*. Justin Martyr, *Dial. Tryph.* 1.5; Bobichon, 21–213. Similar understanding of Abraham as father of the peoples (*tōn ethnōn* i.e., of the pagans), for instance, in Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* III.8.6 (Le Boulluec, 80–1; SC 608 [2020]).

38 *Ep. Barnabas* XIII.7 (trans. K. Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, I, LCL [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967], 388–9). On this text, see Theresia Heither, OSB, and Christina Reemts, OSB, *Biblische Gestalten bei den Kirchenvätern: Abraham* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2009), 299 and n. 256 there. There are, of course, many studies of the multidimensional figure of Abraham in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim sources. See, for instance, Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Abraham: A Symbol of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims* (London: SCM Press, 1995), and Carol Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Interpretations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

39 On *genos* and *ethnos*, a different approach is held by Bobichon, Appendix XI, "*Genos, ethnos, laos:* Étude terminologique," vol. II, 971–6. For him, Justin's imprecision is purposeful, pointing to ethnic multiplicity. See further Buell, *Why This New Race*, esp. 95–115. The significance of Buell's important insights is weakened by her insistent use of "race," a term reflecting more directly the contemporary scene in the USA than perceptions of ethnic identity in the Roman Empire. On *genos* and *ethnos*, see Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica*, 33–51.

40 *genos eklekton*, *ethnos hagion*, and *laos theou* all appear in I Pet. 2:9–10. See already Isa. 62:12. On a classical treatment of these and other self-denominations among Christians, see Adolf von Harnack, *Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* (Leipzig: Hinrichs: 1915 [1st ed. 1902]), vol. I, 381–405. [English trans.: *The Expansion of Christianity in the first Three Centuries* (New York: Norgate, 1905), vol. II, 1–45.]

41 Cf. also Eusebius (see n. 50 below).

42 Justin, *Dial. Tryph.* 119. 3–5; I, Bobichon, *Dialogue*, 502–5. See n. 11 in Bobichon, *Dialogue*, II, 872, where he analyzes Justin's meaning of Abraham's offspring.

43 Justin Martyr, *Apology* 46. 2–3. I use Charles Munier, ed. and trans., Justin, *Apologie pour les Chrétiens* (SC 507) (Paris: Cerf, 2006), 250–1. This is structurally closely similar to the Qur'anic figure of the *ḥanīf* (see Chapter 2 above).

44 Aristide, *Apologie* II.2 (ed. and trans. Bernard Pouderon et al. (SC 470) (Paris: Cerf, 2003), 258–9.

45 Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos* 31.1, ed. and trans. Molly Whittaker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 54–7: "*presbuteran tēn hēmeteran philosophian tōn Hellēsin epitēdeumatōn.*" He adds that it is even older than writing itself.

46 *A Diognète*, V.1.1–5 : "*pasa xenē patris estin autōn, kai pasa patris xenē,*" ed. and trans. Henri Irénée Marrou (SC; Paris) (Cerf,

1951), 62–3. This inherent foreignness of Christians calls to mind Gnostic texts of the same period. See, for instance, Charles-Henri Puech, *En quête de la gnose* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), vol. I.

47   The text of the *Kerygmata Petrou* is referred to by Clement, *Stromata* VI.41.6, in Patrick Descourtieux, ed. and trans. (SC 446) (Paris: Cerf, 1999), 144–5. Descourtieux also refers to *Strom*. III. 69. 1 (144, n. 2). For the *Kerygmata Petrou*, there had been, then, two previous divine covenants: parallel to that with the Jews, God had made a covenant with the Greeks. The implicit reference must be to Greek philosophy. On the concept of the Christians as a "third race," see Harnack, *The Expansion of Christianity*, I, 259–81.

48   Origen, *Com. in Joh.* I.1; in Origène, *Commentaire sur l'Évangile de Jean*, ed. and trans. Cécile Blanc; SC120 bis (Paris: Cerf, 1996), 52–3. For a pagan thinker such as Celsus, the Jews were clearly perceived as a people, with their own religion. Although their worship might be quite peculiar, it was at least traditional, and as such should not be impiously abandoned, as the Christians did. See Origen, *Contra Celsum* V. 25 (Chadwick, 283). Both Celsus's claim and Origen's response show the "combination of nationhood, racial ancestry, customs and piety into a single integrated cluster of ideas that was so typical of the ancient world," in the words of Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica*, 8–9.

49   Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* I. 4. 2; see Kirsopp Lake, 38–9 (LCL, vol. I), whose dated translation renders *ethnos* as "race."

50   On Eusebius's contradistinction between Christianity as an ancient religion and the Christians as a new nation, see Dale B. Martin, *Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocratics to the Christians* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 213–17 and 274–6 (notes). See also Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 54–7, who points out that Eusebius's "ethnic map," in which Christianity is the most ancient religion, allows him to perceive Jews, Platonists and Scythians, for instance, as Christian heresies.

51   The Syriac text, together with a Latin translation, was published by D. I. Parisot as the first volume of the *Patrologia Syriaca* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1894). For the English translation, see Adam Letho, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010), *Demonstration* 16: 373–383, *Demonstration* 17: 385; *Demonstration* 11: 262. Cf. Jacob Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism: The Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth-Century Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 135: "practically every useful reference to 'nations' or 'peoples' for Aphrahat became a reference to 'the people which is of the peoples,' namely the Church would come into being in the Messianic times." This interpretation of the messianic meaning of "the people from the peoples" is unconvincing. I thank Yonatan Moss for having called my attention to this reference.

52   Quodvultdeus, *Liber Promissorum et Praedicatorum Dei*, I.13 (CCL 60, Braun), 28ff., a reference given by Heither and Reemts, *Biblische Gestalten bei den Kirchenvätern: Abraham*, 313.

53   See Eusebius, *Die Demonstratio Evangelica*, ed. Ivar A. Heikel (Eusebius, Werke VI, GCS 23) (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2013 [1913]), 20. Cf. the English translation of W. J. Ferrar, Eusebius, *The Proof of the Gospel*, I (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981 [1920]), 25.

54   Sébastien Morlet, *La Démonstration Évangélique d'Eusèbe de Césarée: Étude sur l'apologétique chrétienne à l'époque de Constantin* (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 2009); see in particular Part I, ch. 1, 151–201.

55   See Sébastien Morlet, "Les premiers hommes et la raison, d'après Philon et les premiers chrétiens," in *Religion et rationalité: Philon d'Alexandrie et sa postérité*, ed. Jérôme Moreau et Olivier Munnich (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 230–53.

56   Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica*.

57   See n. 15 above.

58   See J. BeDuhn, "Mani and the Crystallization of the Concept of 'Religion' in Third-Century Iran," in *Mani at the Court of the Persian Kings*, ed. Iain Gardner, Jason BeDuhn, and Paul Dilley (Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 87) (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 247–75. See further J. BeDuhn, "The Co-Formation of the Manichaean and Zoroastrian Religions in Third-Century Iran," *Entangled Religions* 11–12 (2020).

59   See, for instance, Behm, "*Kainos, ktl.*," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, III, ed. G. Kittel, 447–54. See further Jonathan Klawans, *Heresy, Forgery, Novelty: Condemning, Denying, and Asserting Innovation in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), ch. 4: "Innovation Asserted: The Novelties of Early Christianity," 117–58. For a balanced understanding of the status of "novelty" in early Christianity, see Anders Klostergaard Petersen, "Between Old and New: The Problem of Acculturation Illustrated by the Early Christian Usage of the Phoenix Motif," in *Jerusalem, Alexandria and Rome: Studies in Ancient Cultural Interaction in Honour of A. Hilhorst*, ed. Fiorentino García Martínez and Gerard P. Luttikhuizen (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2003), 147–64.

60   Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* I. 9 (I; Evans, 20–1): *quod deum novum proferant*.

61   See, for example, Qur'an 30:30.

62   See, for example, Qur'an 3:67, 4:125, or 10:105. On *fiṭra*, see in particular Geneviève Gobillot, *La Conception originelle, ses interpretations et fonctions chez les penseurs musulmans* (Cairo: IFAO, 200), as well as Gobillot, "Nature innée," in *Dictionnaire du Coran*, ed. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi (Paris: Laffont, 2007), 591–5. See also D. B. Macdonald, "Fiṭra," *Encyclopedia of Islam* II, 931–2. For a discussion of *fiṭra* as akin to natural law, see Rémi Brague, *Sur l'islam* (Paris:

Gallimard, 2023), 121–9, and 293, n. 33. On *umma*, see F. M. Denny, "Umma," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, X, 859–63. On Islam as a renewal of Abraham's covenant (*milla*), see Angelika Neuwirth, *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike: Ein europäischer Zugang* (Berlin: Verlag der Religionen: 2010), 647–9. On the idea of monotheism in the Qur'an and its roots, see Denise Masson, *Monothéisme coranique et monothéisme biblique: doctrines comparées* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1976).

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CHAPTER

6 Discourse and Violence 🔓

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Abstract

A major theme in the study of religion in late antiquity insists on the growth of religious violence in the Christianized empire. In ancient religions, blood sacrifices represented the clearest, and most common, expression of violence. With the disappearance of sacrifice from public religion, violence became expressed in different ways. This chapter seeks to understand more precisely how the end of sacrifice and the growth of intolerance were related, and finds an answer in what can be called "the hermeneutical turn." In other words, religious violence must be understood, first of all, as a matter of discourse. The chapter ends with a survey of interpretations of religious violence in late antiquity.

Keywords: violence, sacrifice, intolerance, hermeneutical turn, discourse

Subject: History of Religion, Comparative Religion, Theology, Religious Issues and Debates, Philosophy of Religion

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In the Roman world, as we saw in the last chapter, election and ethnicity were eventually redefined as they became emmeshed within webs of competing religious communities. The communities of the Christianized Roman Empire were at the nexus of those engaged in the collective self-fashioning of a new Christian identity. Rather than dodging the idea of ethnicity, Christian universalism offered a new understanding of it. In various texts, the Christians were said to form "a third race" or "a people from all peoples." Collective identities became more centered upon religious communities, mainly identified by both their ritual practices and their myths and beliefs—namely, their narratives of historical identity, for instance as children of Abraham. In a sense, one can speak here of a historicizing of religion, from its origins to its last days. By definition, salvation history retains a historical dimension.[1] The accent put by these communities on (mythical) history as a marker of identity often weakened traditional markers of identity, such as language and culture, which were less prominent than they had been in the Hellenistic world.

The rising status of these communities became one of the "distinguishing characteristics of the late antique world."[2] Between webs of communities belonging to different religious "families," as well as between communities within the same family, competition was often based on hermeneutics. In other words, the polemical arguments centered around the correct interpretation of shared stories and ritual injunctions, oral as well as scriptural.[3] The conflictual relationship between these communities, which was often an urban rather

than a ↳ rural phenomenon, stimulated intercommunal intolerance and violence.[4] To be sure, religious strife did not necessarily translate into persecution and physical violence. Yet verbal abuse remained endemic to polemical discourse. And as discourse is a major motor of social construction, it has a direct impact upon force and violence.[5]

As we shall see in the last section of this chapter ("Mapping Religious Violence"), there is growing evidence of a rise in various forms of physical violence between religious communities in the Christianized Roman Empire, from the fourth century on. However, the phenomena of the end of public sacrifice and the growth of religious violence have yet to be studied together. In this chapter, I examine the interface between the avatars of blood sacrifice in the Roman Empire and what is believed to be increased violence between and within religious communities.

The development of scriptural religions such as early Christianity, rabbinic Judaism, Manichaeism, and Zoroastrianism, up to emergent Islam, were all established upon a *historia sacra*. It entailed a major growth of hermeneutics, oral as well as written, translations, and the growing centrality of discourse within the sphere of religion. In its turn, this centrality of discourse brought about a new balance between *praxis* and *logos*—namely, between rituals and the narrative dimensions of religion in the long late antiquity. Put differently, the new centrality of scriptures entailed the creation of new connections between narrative and ritual. It should be noted that the term "discourse" above refers not only to written texts, such as Scriptures, commentaries, or theological treatises, but also to the oral medium, like prayer and orally transmitted stories. Accordingly, the growth of Christianity should be viewed less as a cause than as a consequence of this major shift in the balance between ritual and narrative in religion.

The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by Titus in 70 CE opened the way to another major transformation of religion, which would find its acme in the 380s, with Theodosius II's ban on pagan sacrifices. In *The End of Sacrifice*, I proposed that the disappearance of blood sacrifices stimulated a major transformation of religion in the Mediterranean and Near East.[6] Animal slaughter represents an almost universal form of ritual. The violence

inherent to blood ↳ sacrifices seems to be intimately linked to the very core of religion, as a number of major approaches since the late nineteenth century have sought to show.

Sacrifice may well have slipped from center stage to the fringes of the public sphere in late antiquity. It did not, however, disappear. Both in rabbinic Judaism and in early Christianity, sacrificial language remained the norm—though in very different ways.[7] The idea of sacrifice thus remained alive. For the Church Fathers, expounding on some of the earliest Christian texts, the core ritual of the new religion, the Eucharist, was a sacrifice, performed by priests and offered in memory of the ultimate sacrifice, that of Jesus Christ. Moreover, the violence inherent in sacrifice is reflected by some of the Christian martyrs, who sought to imitate Christ in their self-sacrifice.

For the rabbis, sacrifices were a basic religious duty, although after the destruction of the Temple that duty could no longer be performed. The expectation of the Temple's rebuilding remained intensely alive among Jews, as shown by their reaction to the emperor Julian's permission to rebuild it. Even without a temple, the sacrifices were kept alive in the realm of discourse: Talmudic literature leaves little doubt about the centrality of the idea of sacrifice for the rabbis.

Rather than vanishing without leaving a trace, then, the practice of sacrifice was transformed into what one may call "a discourse on sacrifice." In this discourse, sacrifice was intensively discussed by the rabbis, from its

overall religious value to the minute details of its performance—irrespective of whether or not it was practiced. Both in Judaism and in Christianity, sacrifice became metaphorized, as words, rather than deeds, expressed its essence, and these metaphorical sacrifices sometimes became the core of religious rituals. Sacrifice thus underwent, as it were, a transformation into an *ekphrasis* of sacrifice.[8] As this chapter will argue, both polemical language and references to sacrifice reveal the ways in which late antique discourse retained and cultivated religious violence.

The Violence of Sacrifice

Sacrifice has long held pride of place in the study of religion. Since the days of William Roberson Smith, Sylvain

p. 120 Lévi, Henri Hubert, Marcel Mauss, and ↳ Émile Durkheim, philologists, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists have focused on the violence involved in ritual slaughter, which lies at the heart of blood sacrifice, arguing that it reflects directly on the essence of religion. For Freud, who accepted (quite uncritically) Robertson Smith's theory, blood sacrifice echoed the original murder.[9]

In his seminal *Homo Necans*, the Hellenist Walter Burkert searched for the roots of sacrifice in hunting practices. Using insights gleaned from ethology, and drawing on Karl Meuli's groundbreaking studies on prehistoric religious human behavior, Burkert focused on the role of sacrifice in Greek religion. However, his core argument is applicable to various antique religious systems.[10]

In 1972, the publication year of *Homo Necans*, another influential theory on the origins and meaning of sacrifice saw the light of day. In *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard considers sacrifice to be "the primordial institution of humanity." In this book, he discusses what he refers to as "mimetic violence," creating, following Frazer and Freud, a scapegoat in order to refer to an original, or "foundational," murder. It is around the element of violence at the core of sacrifice that Girard built his general theory of religion in *Violence and the Sacred*.[11] Girard's approach is diametrically opposed to that heralded by the Enlightenment thinkers, for whom Christianity was guilty of having sapped the tolerant attitudes of ancient polytheistic religions. According to Girard, Christianity radically rejected sacrificial violence.

Girard's theory sits uneasily with the fact that, from its very beginnings, Christianity has perceived itself as a new kind of sacrificial religion. The Christian conception of the sacrifice of God's Son differs from sacrificial rituals in other religions of the ancient world. But the central ritual of Christianity, the Eucharist, is called the *anamnēsis*, or re-enactment, of a sacrifice, that of God's Son—a sacrifice which offers redemption from human

p. 121 sins and enables death ↳ to be overcome. Moreover, Girard's claim that Christianity overcame sacrificial violence is hardly compatible with the pervasiveness of religious violence in the Christianized Roman Empire.

Despite these problems, Girard offers some important insights on the nature and function of (blood) sacrifice. He argues, in particular, that as a constitutive ritual of the community in which it is performed, sacrifice succeeded in canalizing the violence endemic in archaic societies. A scapegoat, in the proper as well as in the metaphorical sense of the word, the sacrificial animal attracts and absorbs the violence endemic in any community, canalizing it into a narrow path, thus avoiding its overall spread.

The End of Sacrifice?

The rejection of animal sacrifice as a core religious ritual grew gradually, but does not seem to have reflected the zeitgeist before the fifth century. In his *De Abstinentia*, the third-century philosopher Porphyry expresses a deep revulsion at the animal killing involved in sacrifice (as well as in consuming animal flesh). This opinion of a philosopher leaning towards asceticism was, at the time, that of a minority.[12] For the emperor Julian, in the mid-fourth century, the Jewish and Hellenic traditions, which both affirmed the fundamental significance of animal sacrifices, exemplified rather similar religious approaches. Notably, Julian did not deem their disagreement on whether there are many gods, or only one, to have represented a crucial difference between them. Religions, for him, were defined by their rituals rather than by their theologies.

As noted, although after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by Titus in 70 CE blood sacrifices could no longer epitomize public religion, the idea of sacrifice remained central to the self-understanding of rabbinic Judaism during the first centuries of the Common Era. The temple represented the single official locus where Jews could offer animal sacrifices (the existence of a Jewish temple in Elephantine during the sixth and fifth century BCE had long been forgotten, and the Samaritans, with their temple on Mount Gerizim, were not considered Jews by the rabbis). The destruction of the temple entailed a dramatic weakening of the priestly caste and their replacement as religious leaders by the rabbis, or sages. This reform was triggered by Rabbi

Yohanan ↳ ben Zakkai's decision to leave besieged Jerusalem for Yavneh, in the coastal area, where he established an alternative intellectual and religious leadership, built upon the oral law—namely, the interpretation of the Torah.

In *Blood for Thought*, Mira Balberg showed that sacrifice, far from disappearing from the intellectual and religious horizon of the rabbis, actively framed their thought patterns.[13] As the subtitle of her book indicates, she speaks of the rabbinic "reinvention" of sacrifice. Balberg demonstrates the persistence of sacrifice as a "nonmetaphorical practice" in rabbinic literature, noting that changes in religious practice do not necessarily indicate changes in religious consciousness. She concludes that "the early rabbis should not be understood primarily as creating substitutes for sacrifice, but rather as *creating a discursive reform in understanding and approaching sacrifice*."[14] To some extent, Balberg's conclusions challenge those of *The End of Sacrifice*. Her argument, however, focuses almost exclusively on rabbinic discourse. Across Mediterranean societies, the practice of animal sacrifice in fact vanished from the core of public rituals.

The Jews indeed learned to live without performing sacrifices, contenting themselves to mention them in their prayers and to discuss the rules of these rituals in their legal discussions, as preserved for us in the Mishnaic and Talmudic texts of late antiquity. One could, then, speak of the "neutralization," or of the "bracketing," of sacrifice in rabbinic thought, of sacrifice having been put on hold, disactivated, as it were. We might here speak of sacrifice having been translated: in their hermeneutical practice, the rabbis learned "how to do things with words."[15] The Talmudic stenographic summaries of their discussions on the complex rules of sacrificial practice in the destroyed temple show that, for them, the meticulous description of the sacrificial laws had replaced, *faute de mieux*, the actual practice of sacrifice.

Although early Christian literature exemplifies an approach to sacrifice very different from that of the rabbis, it reflects a similar translation of sacrifice into new practices, retaining the term while radically reinterpreting sacrificial rituals.[16] Jesus's prediction about the destruction of the Temple (Matt. 24:1–3 and parallels), the Epistle to the Hebrews, as well as early patristic writers such as Justin Martyr in the first half of the second

century emphasize the Christian ↳ rejection of the continued validity of sacrificial rituals. This context explains the traditional scholarly perception regarding Christian rejection of animal sacrifices. Yet such a rejection is far from self-evident. Recent studies appreciate anew the views of the Gospels on sacrifice, just as they have recognized the significance devoted by Paul to sacrifice as a crucial component of religion. The Epistle to the Hebrews acknowledges the power of sacrifice, as it is only thanks to the death of Christ, perceived

as a blood sacrifice, that we can be redeemed. A similar conception is reflected in Melito of Sardis's second-century *Paschal Homily*, where Jesus is identified as the sacrificial lamb.

During the second and third centuries, the Christian martyrs expressed a willingness to die for their faith as both an *imitatio Christi* and a new form of sacrificial offering.[17] This is clearly seen in the descriptions of Polycarp's and Perpetua's martyrdom, which offer a gripping testimony of the perception of the martyr as a sacrifice. As convincingly argued by Glen Bowersock, it is in the context of city life in the Roman Empire that the radical phenomenon of Christian martyrdom should be understood.[18] The growth of cities in the early empire permitted the development of a new phenomenon: the daily and complex interface between diverse communities, both ethnic and religious. The notion of interface, rather than symbiosis, reflects the reality that these hermeneutical communities, living side by side and rubbing up against each other on a daily basis, felt strong animosity for each other that was further exacerbated by the practical demands of city life.

From the second century on, Jews and Christians formed two competing webs of communities, ensconced in hermeneutical fights about the correct interpretation of Scriptures. Although discourse might appear to be "only" words, we know from the philosopher John Austin that words can be performative.[19] In his discussion of eighteenth-century Hasidim, Gershom Scholem characterized their attitude to messianism as its "neutralization."[20] As we saw here, however, discourse does not represent the neutralization of a previous religious action; rather, it transfers this action to another level, that of potentiality. As Aristotle noted, the

passage from potentiality to actuality can always ↳ be expected: the dialectics between discourse and praxis always works in both directions.[21]

The cultural and religious diversity observable in the Roman Empire did not lead to a pluralistic world. Even in a society where there was a considerable interface of shared life among competing communities, conflicting discourses about religious truth ensured, at best, forbearance for competitors—which certainly does not mean tolerance, in the modern sense of the word. It is worth mentioning that the term tolerance first appeared in John Locke's *De tolerantia*, published in 1648.[22] Alongside the "discourse of sacrifice," a "discourse of violence" is evident in the later Roman world, where identities became increasingly centered on religious communities.

Growth of Intolerance

According to Polymnia Athanassiadi, concomitant with the Christianization of the Roman Empire, hermeneutical communities replaced the polis as the main locus of identity.[23] In her view, however, the growth of intolerance in late antiquity cannot be attributed solely to Christian monotheism, as pagans often showed similar thought and behavioral patterns. As she puts it, the polemics of pagans and Christians do not reflect a "dialogue of the deaf." She insists that the passage from "polydoxa" to "monodoxa" represents the new zeitgeist, shared by all. In the new ethos, dialogue morphs into polemics and reflects the passage of pagans and Christians alike from a world of politics to one of religion, and from pluralism to fundamentalism.

This passage also represents, as highlighted by Simon Goldhill, the end of dialogue in late antiquity. To his question "Why don't Christians do dialogue?" Goldhill answers that dialogue, as exemplified in Greek classical literature and society, cannot thrive without democracy. More sharply than Athanassiadi, however, he argues that it was the rise of Christianity to political power that was responsible for the disappearance of Greek

dialogue, in the original sense, ↳ from the world of late antiquity.[24] To Goldhill's insistence that no real dialogue can thrive in an authoritarian society, Averil Cameron has responded with a detailed study, showing that, rather than disappearing in late antiquity, dialogue morphs into debate—usually, interreligious debate.[25]

In 380 CE, Theodosius I published his edict "*Cunctos populos*," making Catholic Nicene Christianity the state religion of the empire. As a consequence, religious toleration for pagans, heretics, and Jews shrank, and religious intercommunal violence rose. Although Constantius II, Constantine's son, had in 341 enacted

legislation forbidding pagan sacrifices in Roman Italy, most pagan temples would remain open until the reign of Justinian (527–65), even though non-Christians had become a small minority by the end of the fifth century. Justinian finalized the trend started by Eusebius, which insisted on a strict connection between religious orthodoxy and political power. Although religious intolerance and religious violence are distinct phenomena, a clear path leads from the first to the second.[26] This linkage explains why modern scholarship has tended to deal with the two phenomena in concert. Intolerance belongs to the genealogy of violence.

Since Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88), a long tradition of scholarship has perceived in the later Roman Empire a dramatic growth of religious violence, itself linked to a significant shrinking of religious tolerance. This double phenomenon, following the scholarly tradition, reflects the empire's Christianization.[27] As Andreas Bendlin has noted, this tradition reflects views expressed by David Hume (1711–76) and the Baron d'Holbach (1723–89). For these figures, religious intolerance was associated with monotheism, while polytheistic systems reflected more lenient views about other religions.[28]

Today, this intellectual tradition is echoed by various scholars of ancient Mediterranean societies, who often contrast pagan forbearance with monotheistic zeal. Offering a new formulation of the argument, the

Egyptologist and ↳ historian of religion Jan Assmann spoke of the "Mosaic distinction," distinguishing between truth and falsehood in religion, first made by Moses, that lies at the core of Hebrew religion.[29] For Assmann, this fundamental trait was shared by all the religions stemming from the biblical narrative of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This modification in the basic conception of religion, which Assmann dubs revolutionary, would have dramatic historical implications. In *The Price of Monotheism*, in particular, Assmann further investigated these implications, arguing that intolerance, violence and exclusion were direct consequences of the perception of true *versus* false religion.[30] In polytheistic societies of the archaic world, religion had simply reflected the traditional identity of a people, without involving any truth value. As he put it, the Egyptians knew about the gods rather than believed in them.

Assmann identifies a steep turn in the history of religion during the Bronze Age, which he understands as the passage from primary to secondary religions—religions also identified by their reliance on revealed books (*Buchreligionen*), which constitute the core around which communities are established. Assmann's distinction between ritual religions and book religions ("vom Kult zu Buch"), however, is misleading, as Scriptures do not replace ritual but, rather, move to its very core. Assmann echoes here what Karl Jaspers called the *Achsenzeit*, or "axial age," identified by Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt as an age of intellectual and religious reflexivity.[31] Jaspers's conception of one single axial age during which major changes occurred more or less simultaneously in highly diverse societies, from China to Greece, has been submitted to much criticism in the past decades—including by Assmann himself.[32] Today, Jaspers's conception of one universal "axial age" is considered mythological, albeit heuristically quite fruitful.

For Assmann, the Mosaic distinction had grim and far-reaching effects on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as intolerance became inherent to monotheism, with violence as its consequence. While Christianity and Islam are universalist religions, the rabbis gave up on seeking conversion on a broad scale ↳ (as had been present in

Judaism during the Hellenistic era), developing instead an exclusivist character. As the Church Fathers asserted the universalist dimensions of their new religion, the rabbis effected a retreat into an ethnic religion, representing in their view the traditions of their fathers. Nowadays, universalism has a positive connotation, while exclusivism has a negative one. Yet Christian and Muslim universalism have generated intolerant views of those who refuse to join the fold and insist on their own separate identity, and these "universalists" have sometimes also promoted violence against outsiders.[33]

A Hermeneutical Turn

As mentioned in the Introduction, the cultural and religious transformations of the long late antiquity were so momentous that they may be considered a new axial age, no less significant than the one observed by Jaspers in archaic societies starting around the mid-first millennium BCE.[34] As we saw, the late antique rise of religions of the book, which Wilfred Cantwell Smith called a "scriptural movement," was also an age of canonization and codification, when the foundational texts became objects of interpretation.[35]

Two main facts reflect the transformation of reading in late antiquity. The invention and fast spread of the codex had a crucial impact on the growth of Christianity, permitting easier intertextual hermeneutics of the Scriptures. Smith's "scriptural movement" might perhaps be more accurately referred to as a "hermeneutical turn," as it involved orality as much as written scriptures. Moreover, the discovery and growth of silent reading enhanced the individuation, or privatization, of one's relation to the scriptural text. A multifaceted transformation of the ritual, and the passage from mainly public to predominantly communitarian forms of religion, permitted the development of what Brian Stock, discussing medieval monasticism, has called "textual communities," in which the sacred Scriptures are read, translated, sung, and interpreted.[36] Such groups were p. 128 already well established in late antiquity, not only ↳ among Christian monks. The schools run by rabbis, philosophers, and doctors alike represent similar examples of textual communities, centered around either the biblical text or Plato's dialogues.

The Abrahamic religious communities of late antiquity were often in competition with each other, each claiming to offer the correct interpretation of the Scriptures. This competition was usually directly confrontational, although it sometimes remained indirect or allusive. In that sense, "hermeneutical" or perhaps even "midrashic" might describe these communities more appropriately than "textual," as the nature of the stories they were telling reflected their own polemical understanding of the Scriptures, set against that of their competitors.[37]

In such context, polemical discourse would soon become a leading mode of expression, exhibiting heated, sometimes violent, argumentation. Except for the limited archaeological and historiographical evidence, much of our evidence for religious violence in late antiquity is found in polemical literature.[38] Of course, aggressive language does not necessarily reflect violent reality. But language certainly has an impact on reality. The embedded violence of words in the religious rhetoric of the time is quite obvious to anyone who reads or listens to the polemic texts of that era. A classic example is John Chrysostom's eight *Homilies against the Jews*, preached in church in Antioch toward the end of the fourth century. These homilies were aimed at Judaizers rather than at Jews. Even if their vicious language did not directly launch physical attacks on the Jewish community, it had powerful echoes throughout the centuries.[39]

At least until the invention of printing, the world of scriptural religions was more a world of orality than one of letters, involving, for the most part, speaking, singing, and listening. In late antiquity, literacy was a privilege of the few (usually males). Cantillation, prayer, interpretation, and preaching were all essentially oral activities, although our evidence, by nature, remains literary. The oral dimension of religious texts was significant among p. 129 Christians, but to an even greater extent among Jews, as well as among Zoroastrians. Rabbinic ↳ literature, the vast Jewish hermeneutical endeavor of late antiquity, was essentially oral, not written, and referred to as "the Oral Torah." The religious communities which became the hallmark of late antique collective identity were communities of spoken words as much as of texts.

Mapping Religious Violence

A number of facts highlight the deep transformation of the status and function of religion in late antique society. While in archaic societies religion had been embedded in ethnic and cultural communities, in late antiquity it began to develop a clearly defined identity of its own, independent from other aspects of society. In other words, religion at that time became disembodied from other dimensions of society. More and more, the core of personal and collective identity moved from language, ethnicity, and society to religious community. This major change has often been noted, though it not always been interpreted correctly. In the context of her work on religious violence, Wendy Mayer convincingly argues that it is the embeddedness of religion in society, common in the ancient world before the Roman Empire, that lies at the root of the denial of the existence of religion in the ancient world.[40]

The newly central role of religion in identity led to the development of a contemporary fashion, at least in American scholarship, according to which religion itself is seen as an invention of late antiquity. Like most fashions, it remains largely unconvincing. A prominent advocate of this approach, Daniel Boyarin, argues that one cannot really speak of religion before Constantine, who in a real sense invented both Christianity and Judaism.[41] Boyarin is correct, at least, in calling attention to the profound impact of the Constantinian revolution on Jewish self-understanding. Jews now had to take Christianity into consideration in their own discourse. And while scriptural religions are structurally dissimilar to archaic and traditional religions of the ancient world, they, too, should be considered religions, although endowed with different characteristics.

Recent studies have shed new light on the rise of sacred violence in the Christianized empire, and we have
learned to approach the complex ↳ phenomenon through a number of different viewpoints.[42] In particular, the Gibbonian approach has been questioned and its rather simplistic character highlighted. The existence of religious violence in the pagan Roman Empire is now more commonly recognized. Of course, violence in general was endemic in the Greco-Roman world, and it stands to reason that violence was mostly not of a religious nature. Andreas Bendlin has argued that there is no evidence of an increase in violence with the Christianization of the empire. The general question of violence in the empire, however, is distinct from that of specifically religious violence and of its increase after the empire's Christianization. In this regard, it is worth pointing out that the Sasanian Empire (which was certainly not devoid of religious violence) shows a pattern strikingly different from that observable in the Roman Empire, where religious diversity shrank significantly after its Christianization. Eventually, the Zoroastrian Sasanian political leadership learned to rule "as an arbiter of justice and order among the Jews, Christians, Mandeans, Buddhists, Hindus, Zoroastrians and other religious communities in the Empire."[43] The fact that the state religion, Mazdeism, had no universalist ambitions seems to have permitted, when no foreign threat was perceived by the priestly caste and imperial power, a certain degree of toleration for minority religious communities.

Understanding religious violence requires us to distinguish between different definitions of the term "religious violence." In ancient societies, for example, it is not always possible to isolate religion from its ethnic, economic, or political dimensions. In addition, violence may not be limited to its immediate, physical reference. Cultural and structural violence, for instance, can be perpetrated against minority communities, even in the absence of a physical dimension.[44] In this context, Wendy Mayer searches for a clearer definition of religious violence and cautions against operating within a paradigm of direct causal relationship.[45] I cannot here enter into a comprehensive discussion of the topic but wish at least, with Mayer, to call attention to the highly dialectical relationship between the emergence of new forms of discourse and the rise of distinct practices of religious violence.

In a world of competing hermeneutical communities, collective identity entails fostering one's own version of
the myth, or sacred narrative, while ↳ rejecting competing visions. Polemical literature, indeed, soon became, mainly in patristic literature, an important literary genre, laced through and through with violence.[46] In this

world, antagonistic discourse had become a major dimension of religion. In and of itself, narrated violence increases the level of perceived violence in society. The same is true even of the use of brutally deprecatory language when talking about opponents. Here, the new approaches of the neurosciences may possibly help in understanding more accurately the mental and collective processes at play.[47]

The map of religious violence in the Christianized Roman Empire has been clearly drawn by Johannes Hahn.[48] Analyzing cases in various regional contexts, including Alexandria, Antioch, Gaza, and Panopolis, Hahn argues that there is a dual nature to this violence. On the one hand, it is a major social phenomenon that affects society as a whole; on the other, it particularly relates to radical and alienated religious groups. The translation of religious differences into violence, insists Hahn, reflects societal problems. Christianity often functioned as a social movement, and Hahn shows how the existence of tensions between religious and socioeconomic realities contributed to its victory.

The fourth century saw the transformation of religious conflict, which eventually became invested with new, more brutal, features, as political power now sought to accommodate, sustain, and reinforce religious orthodoxy in its fights against competitors from within (heretics) and without (mainly pagans and Jews). In his study of acts of violence enacted by Christians in the name of their religion, Michael Gaddis notes that widespread violent discourse is the key to understanding its broad acceptance by many fourth- and fifth-century Christians. He devotes a chapter to Shenute, abbot of the White Monastery in Egypt in the first half of the fifth century, a figure notorious for promoting violence, in language and action, against pagans and heretics of all kinds. Analyzing Shenute's language of violence, Gaddis focuses on representations of violence rather than on physical violence, showing how such a discourse justifying violence reflects thought habits from earlier times, when Christians ↳ were still a persecuted minority.[49] He notes that it is at the intersection between religion and power that violence arises, and that radical or extremist behavior happens when no accommodation with the world or compromise with practical considerations are deemed possible or legitimate. Extremists, as shown in his discussion of Donatists and Augustine, can show a striking fervor, and even a willingness to be martyred. Martyrdom, indeed, also reflects religious violence, a violence turned, this time, against oneself.[50]

Aiming to read discourse of religious violence within the broad framework of communal identity, Thomas Sizgorich further advanced this discussion in his *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity*.[51] Sizgorich was able to push back the diachronic dimension, integrating what happened in the first centuries after the Islamic conquests to the situation in the later Roman Empire. He convincingly shows that, in the passage from Christianity to Islam, violent religious rhetoric was an enduring feature. For him, the formation of communal identity requires imaginative borders, a process in which the historical narrative plays a crucial role. Communities were driven to invent elaborate narratives of their communal past as part of their identity formation. Sizgorich emphasizes that religious communities were not quite segregated on the ground, and that this caused much of the violence released by the process of identity formation, which could not develop in autarchy. Violence emerges from the transgression of communal boundaries. Limiting the interface between communities, such as with high fences and clear borders, might have restrained some of the violent impulses, in word or action. In his analysis, Sizgorich accepts the thesis of Harold Drake, according to which intolerance (and hence a propensity to violence) cannot be considered as inherently belonging to Christianity. Rather, intolerance is the fruit of political and social context.[52] Again, Sizgorich emphasizes the importance of discourse and shows that religious communities often succeeded in limiting physical expressions of religious violence.

A similar interest in the rhetoric of violence is seen in Brent Shaw's monumental work on religious violence in Christian Africa.[53] Although Shaw discusses how Christians related to pagans and Jews, he focuses mainly on the "history of hatred" between Catholics and Donatists, studying how both sides remembered and expressed the roots of this hatred and the ways it was constituted, as well as how this knowledge was communicated to

the people. The narrative worlds constructed by each side provided the context and created the preliminary condition for physical violence between Catholics and Donatists.

In a remarkable monograph, Peter van Nuffelen has sought to synthesize what recent scholarship has taught us on religious tolerance and its limits in late antiquity.[54] In *Penser la tolérance durant l'antiquité tardive*, van Nuffelen first notes that our idea of religious tolerance is rooted in modern agnosticism about supreme truths and can in no way be applied to premodern societies. He argues, moreover, that too much attention has been devoted to paroxysmic events, and he seeks to differentiate between various kinds of violence. He points out, in this context, that recent scholarship has often failed to note that acts of religious violence effected by Christians are usually presented in patristic texts in a negative light. As a rule, indeed, violence was not considered a Christian virtue. He also shows that patristic conceptions of tolerance, which share the same core concepts as those of Greco-Roman philosophy, always insist on its limitations. In late antiquity, public discourse was predicated upon the idea of shared rationality and persuasion. The truth, it was believed, could be discovered through dialogical discourse. Hence, rhetoric was at the core of religious polemics.

In a number of important studies, all probing, and from different perspectives, the relationship between rhetoric and reality in late antiquity, Maijastina Kahlos has made a sustained effort to understand the clash between pagans and Christians and its implications for intolerance, polemics, and dissent. In *Debate and Dialogue*, she argues that Christian writers forged their collective identity "through inventing, fabricating and sharpening binary oppositions" between themselves and their pagan opponents, between "Babylon and Jerusalem," in her words.[55]

In *Forbearance and Compulsion*, Kahlos focuses on the articulation between these two attitudes and its dialectics from the third to the late fifth centuries, once the new system of values imported by the Christian emperors had been established and stabilized.[56] Kahlos disputes the "Gibbonian" tradition according to which Christianity, or monotheism, is the main culprit for the growth of religious intolerance (and hence of religious violence) in late antiquity. Like van Nuffelen, she prefers to speak of "cultic diversity" to describe the religious situation in the Roman world. For her, while religious intolerance is not in itself physical violence, it fits the description of mental violence, as also argued by Brent Shaw.

More recently, Kahlos has studied *together* rhetoric and realities, something which, she argues, is necessary in order to understand the religious transformations of late antiquity (again, mainly from the viewpoint of the dynamic relationship between pagans and Christians).[57] Only such a double vision, she claims, sidesteps the danger of taking highly rhetorical sources at face value and falling into the trap of what she calls "melodramatic grand narratives." The religious dissenters of Christianity in late antiquity were all automatically labeled "pagans", while "heretics" were defined as deviants—and hence isolated and fought—by both imperial and ecclesial authorities. A similar argument, I propose, could be made about Jews, who are also perceived in Christian theology and rhetoric, as well as in imperial law, as belonging to a peculiar kind of Christian heresy.[58]

This chapter has dealt with two important religious phenomena in the Roman world—the end of sacrifice and the rise of religious violence—and shown the dialectical relationship between reality and rhetoric, as well as the impact of monotheism on society, in particular in the Christianized Roman Empire. These phenomena also point to the intricate link between a discourse of violence to the violence of discourse, within and between "hermeneutical communities." Both are verbal expressions of sacrifice and intolerance. In the next chapter, we will move to the anthropological implications of the discourse of monotheism.

Notes

Footnotes

1   See David Engels, "Historizing Religion between Spiritual Continuity and Friendly takeover: Salvation History and Religious Competition during the First Millenium AD," in *Religion and Competition in Antiquity*, ed. D. Engels and P. van Nuffelen, 237–83. See further Guy G. Stroumsa, "'Religions de Salut': Origines et valeur heuristique d'un concept," in *Sauver?*, ed. Rémi Brague (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2023).

2   G. Fowden, "Religious Communities," in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Post-Classical World*, ed. G. W. Bowersock, P. Brown, and O. Grabar (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 82–106, here 83.

3   For a particularly insightful analysis of this phenomenon, see John Wansbrough, *The Sectarian Milieu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

4   This pattern would go on after the Islamic conquests, as shown by Jack Tannous, *The Making of the Islamic Middle East: Religion, Society, and Simple Believers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

5   See, for instance, Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014 [1989]), 1–6.

6   See Guy G. Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009 [original French ed. 2005]).

7   On the broader context, see Maria-Zoe Petropoulos, *Animal Sacrifice in Ancient Greek Religion, Judaism, and Christianity, 100 BC to AD 200* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

8   I use here *ekphrasis*, a term originally referring to the literary description of visual art, in a metaphorical sense. For an overview of perceptions of sacrifice in the Abrahamic religions, see David L. Weddle, *Sacrifice in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

9   The literature on the topic is vast. I shall mention only the seminal comparative work of Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2016 [1899]), on which see Guy G. Stroumsa, *The Idea of Semitic Monotheism*: The Rise and Fall of a Scholarly Myth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), ch. 10, 219–44. Christoph Auffahrt has analyzed the changing meanings of sacrifice since antiquity in *Opfer: Eine Europäische Religionsgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2023). For a brief introduction to modern research, see Cristiano Grottanelli, *Il sacrificio* (Rome, Bari: Laterza, 1999).

10   Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: Interpretationen altgriechischer Opferriten und Mythen* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972). The publication, in 1983, of the book's English translation brought numerous discussions. See, for instance, Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, ed., *Violent Origins: Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

11   René Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972). Girard developed his theories in a number of later publications. For present purposes, see especially R. Girard, *Le sacrifice* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2003).

12   See, for instance, Philippa Townsend, "Bonds of Flesh and Blood: Porphyry, Animal Sacrifice, and Empire," in *Ancient Mediterranean Sacrifice*, ed. Jennifer Wright Knust and Zsuzsanna Varhelyi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 214–32.

13   Mira Balberg, *Blood for Thought: The Reinvention of Sacrifice in Early Rabbinic Literature* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

14   See Balberg, *Blood for Thought*, 233. See further her whole conclusion, "The End of Sacrifice, Revisited," 223–50.

15   See n. 19 below.

16   See Daniel C. Ullucci, *The Christian Rejection of Animal Sacrifice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Cf. my review in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 21 (2013): 142–3.

17   See Guy G. Stroumsa, "Sacrifice and Martyrdom in the Roman Empire," in Stroumsa, *The Crucible of Religion in Late Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 126–36. See further James B. Rives, "Animal Sacrifice and the Roman Persecution of Christians (Second to Third Century)," in *Religious Violence in the Ancient World: From Classical Athens to Late Antiquity*, ed. J. H. F. Dijkstra and C. R. Raschl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 177–202.

18   G. W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

19   John Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

20   G. Scholem, "The Neutralization of the Messianic Element in Early Hasidism," in his *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 176–202.

21   "Also in the case of evils the end or actuality must be worse than the potentiality: for that which is capable is capable alike of both contraries"; *Metaphysics* IX.9.3, 1051a 16–18.

22   In *Penser la tolérance durant l'antiquité tardive* (Paris: Cerf, 2018), Peter van Nuffelen notes that modern thought allows a natural space for toleration in the public sphere precisely because it asserts agnosticism about supreme truths. Cf P. van Nuffelen, "Coercion in Late Antiquity: A Brief Intellectual History," in *Religious Violence in the Ancient World*, ed. Dijkstra and Raschle, 266–85.

23   P. Athanassiadi, *Vers la pensée unique: La montée de l'intolérance dans l'Antiquité tardive* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2010), 17.

24   Simon Goldhill, "Why Don't Christians Do Dialogue?" in *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity*, ed. S. Goldhill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1–11. Noting that dialogue forms the backbone of the Talmud, Goldhill suggests that, in a theocratic society, dialogue is possible only for those on the margins of society.

25   A. Cameron, *Dialoguing in Late Antiquity* (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2014).

26   On the deep transformations of the intellectual and religious ethos, see Athanassiadi, *Vers la pensée unique.*

27   On some of the problems related to the growth of religious intolerance in the Christian Roman Empire, see Guy G. Stroumsa, "On the Roots of Christian Intolerance," in Stroumsa, *The Crucible of Religion in Late Antiquity*, 224–45.

28   See Andreas Bendlin, "Religion, Violence and the Diasporic Experience: The Jewish Diaspora in Flavian Rome and Puteoli," in *Religious Violence in the Ancient World*, ed. Dijkstra and Raschle, 133–46, here 136.

29   Assmann first spelled out the idea of the "Mosaic distinction" in his *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

30   J. Assmann, *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung, oder der Preis des Monotheismus* (Munich: Hanser, 2003), translated as *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010). See further Rodney Stark, *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), ch. 3: "God's Wrath: Religious Conflict," 115–72. For another approach to the roots of religious conflict, see Ara Norenzayan, *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), esp. ch. 9: "From Religious Cooperation to Religious Conflict."

31   See in particular Robert Bellah and Hans Joas, eds., *The Axial Age and its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

32   J. Assmann, *Achsenzeit: Eine Archäologie der Moderne* (Munich: Beck, 2018).

33   This is not to say, however, that Christianity, in itself, promotes violence. Such an argument was developed in Philippe Buc, *Holy War, Martyrdom, and Terror: Christianity, Violence, and the West* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2015). See the strongly critical review of Patrick Henriet, "Christianisme et sainte violence. Les religions peuvent-elles évoluer?" *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 237 (2020): 397–412.

34   See Guy G. Stroumsa, "Axial Religion in the Late Antique Scriptural Galaxy," in Stroumsa, *The Crucible of Religion in Late Antiquity*, 206–23.

35   For some implications of the "scriptural movement," see Guy G. Stroumsa, *The Scriptural Universe of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

36   See in particular B. Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

37   On religious competition, see David Engels and P. van Nuffelen, "Religion and Competition in Antiquity: An Introduction," in *Religion and Competition in Antiquity*, ed. D. Engels and P. van Nuffelen (Brussels: Latomus, 2014), 9–44. The authors note that, already in the Hellenistic world, competition between cults, which happens when religion is disembedded from society as a whole, represented an engine of religious change.

38   On the archaeological evidence, see Eberhard Sauer, *The Archaeology of Religious Hatred in the Roman and Early Medieval World* (Stroud: Tempus, 2003).

39   For a study that emphasizes the rhetorical dimension of these homilies, see Robert L. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late 4th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

40   W. Mayer, "Religious Violence in Late Antiquity," in *Religious Violence in the Ancient World*, ed. Djikstra and Raschle, 251–65.

41   See in particular Daniel Boyarin, *Borderlines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

42   For a good collection of articles, see Albert Gelijon and Riemer Roukema, eds., *Violence in Ancient Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); for the comparative perspective, see in particular Jan N. Bremmer, "Religious Violence between Greeks, Romans, Christians and Jews," in ibid., 8–30.

43   Touraj Daraye, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 97.

44   Bendlin, "Religion, Violence and the Diasporic Experience," 135.

45   Mayer, "Religious Violence in Late Antiquity," 257–8.

46   See, for instance, Averil Cameron, "The Violence of Orthodoxy," in *Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity*, ed. Eduard Iricinschi and Holger Zellentin (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 101–14.

47   On possible contributions from the neurosciences, see W. Mayer, "Re-Theorizing Religious Conflict: Early Christianity to Late Antiquity and Beyond," in *Reconceiving Religious Conflict: New Views from the Formative Centuries of Christianity*, ed. W. Mayer and Chris L. de Wet (London: Routledge, 2018), 3–29.

48   Johannes Hahn, *Gewalt und religiöser Konflikt: Studien zu den Auseinandersetzungen zwischen Christen, Heiden und Juden im Osten des Römischen Reiches—Von Konstantin bis Theodosius II* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004).

49   For an analysis of these processes, see Guy. G. Stroumsa, "Early Christianity as Radical Religion," in Stroumsa, Barbarian

Philosophy: The Religious Revolution of Early Christianity (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 8–26.

50 Michael Gaddis, "*There is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ:" Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). On the violence implied in martyrdom, see, for instance, Guy G. Stroumsa, "Sacrifice and Martyrdom in the Roman Empire," and "Les martyrs chrétiens et linversion des émotions," in Stroumsa, *The Crucible of Religion in Late Antiquity*, 126–36 and 137–48.

51 Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

52 H. A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

53 Brent D. Shaw, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

54 P. van Nuffelen, *Penser la tolérance durant l'antiquité tardive* (Paris: Cerf, 2018). The book developed from a series of lectures at the École Pratique des Hautes Études. Cf. my review in *Journal of Theological Studies* 70 (2019): 860–1.

55 M. Kahlos, *Debate and Dialogue: Christian and Pagan Cultures c. 360–430* (New York: Routledge, 2007), Introduction.

56 M. Kahlos, *Forbearance and Compulsion: The Rhetoric of Religious Tolerance and Intolerance in Late Antiquity* (London: Duckworth, 2009). Cf. my review in *Ancient History Bulletin* 1 (2011): 101–2.

57 M. Kahlos, *Religious Dissent in Late Antiquity, 350–450* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). Kahlos notes the problematic nature of the concept of "Christianization," while admitting that it is hard to avoid using it (p. 9).

58 See Guy G. Stroumsa, *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 175–88.

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CHAPTER

7   One God, One Self? 🔓

Guy G Stroumsa

Abstract

The final chapter discusses some major anthropological implications of monotheism. In the polytheistic context of ancient Greece, the core of the human person was usually identified with the soul, or the spiritual side of the human composite. The concept of person, as shown brilliantly by Marcel Mauss, has a history, and the development of Christianity plays a major role in this history. It is only in Christian context that the human person could be truly unified. After a review of shamanistic phenomena, the chapter studies the intriguing idea of the person's double (doppelgänger), as well as that of the heavenly twin, in religious context. Finally, the early development of the concept of "guardian angel" is shown to be related to the idea of a split soul. The conclusion discusses some major repercussions of monotheism.

Keywords: shamanism, anthropology, the double, heavenly twin, guardian angel

Subject: History of Religion, Comparative Religion, Theology, Religious Issues and Debates, Philosophy of Religion

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Anthropological Implications of Monotheism

The story is told of a woman who walked with her husband on a path. At some point, the path split, and the woman saw her husband, too, split into two. When the two paths reunited, the two husbands became one again. The husband's name was "They are two paths running in parallel." This myth of the Seneca Indians (one of the five nations of the Iroquois Confederacy), retold by Claude Lévi-Strauss, expresses the idea that different societies hold different conceptions of the self.[1]

In 1938, Marcel Mauss published a seminal article on the idea of the person in its historical development.[2] Since then, research has sharpened his intuitions on the various stages through which the modern conception of an

individual self emerged and crystallized. According to Mauss, in ancient societies the relationship between soul and body was perceived differently, as was the relationship between the individual and the cosmos. There were competing conceptions of the soul, including its pre-existence to birth and its survival after death. The eschatological idea of a future resurrection of the body, as depicted in Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones (Ezek. 37) was adopted and transmitted to later generations by the earliest Christian communities. For Mauss, early Christianity was the watershed in the formation of the modern idea of the unified person, which was rooted in the theological conception of one single God. Christianity transformed the moral person into a metaphysical entity. ↳ The unity of the person, and that of the Church in relation to the unity of God, was now formulated.[3]

The present chapter will seek to reflect on Mauss's intuition. If the birth of the single person can be traced to monotheism, may one assume a correlation between multiple gods and plural (or split) conceptions of the person? Put differently, if a universe ruled by a single supreme power implies the unity of the person, does a plurality of heavenly powers imply the development of a dualist anthropology, which can be expressed as a split person (either between soul and body, or as a divided soul), or as the coexistence of two souls within the body?

It is worth mentioning that the historical impact of religious transformations is never univalent. Religious innovations overlay the new upon the old, forming an uneasy coexistence of different perceptions of reality. Such a phenomenon, according to which the new does not completely erase the old, has also been observed in other historical contexts.[4] If this is the case in the history of religions, then major religious innovations, even revolutions, do not turn existing religious worldviews into a new homogeneous configuration but, rather, enhance the cohabitation of diverse thought and ritual patterns. As these patterns can be at odds with one another, their interaction may be highly complex. In other words, the assumption of a relationship between theological and anthropological conceptions must be seen as indicating an inclination rather than an implication.

Regarding the core religious transformation of the long late antiquity, one may speak of "the monotheistic turn."[5] This expression has the disadvantage of excluding the development of Zoroastrianism in the Sasanian Empire. However, as we have seen in previous chapters, dualism and monotheism can be seen as two sides of the same coin. The monotheistic turn may be a more adequate term than, for example, that of the "Scriptural moment" *à la* Wilfred Cantwell Smith.[6] The monotheistic turn that was characterized by a protracted competition between monotheistic and dualistic cosmologies may ↳ even be more momentous than that between monotheism and polytheism, precisely because of the family resemblance between monotheistic and dualist worldviews. Our current investigation of the ways in which the "monotheistic turn" impinged upon conceptions of the self must therefore focus on the differences between dualist and monotheistic theologies and their anthropological implications.

As we already saw in the Introduction, dualism had already a long history before our period. In the ancient world, Iran epitomized the classical expression of a dualist religion. However, as Arthur Darby Nock noted long ago, the dearth of evidence makes any evaluation of the impact of Iran on Greek thought highly speculative.[7] Prior to Plutarch's *Isis and Osiris*, Greek literature had no sustained discourse on Mazdean dualism. Plato's dualism is of a different nature altogether, neither cosmological nor theological.[8] As we saw in Chapter 3, however, it is easier to assess the impact of Iranian dualist conceptions on Judaism. After all, Palestine was under Iranian rule for a long time, and Jewish communities in Babylonia absorbed many Iranian religious ideas. The "two spirits" theory known from the Qumran texts preserve the most striking impact of Iranian dualism on Jewish anthropology. Partly because of its relatively late date, however, any possible Iranian influence on the earliest strata of Gnosticism probably came through the proximate channel of Judaism, while the Platonic tradition provides the most obvious ground for later Gnostic conceptions.[9]

Augustine and the New Reflexive Self

Scholars have sought to identify in patristic literature key elements of what one may call the new reflexive self. This self appears, for example, in Augustine's *Confessions*, in ways which would not have been possible in "pagan" Greek or ↳ Latin literatures.[10] Postulating a link between theological and anthropological ideas, I argue that the combination of three core Christian theological concepts influenced ideas of the human person. First, the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, or more precisely of the cosmos and mankind being created by a transcendent God, countered the notion of a shared nature between man and the divine. A second concept was that of Jesus Christ, who, although possessed of two natures, human and divine, remained one single person. Third, the belief in the eventual resurrection of the body—highlighted by the resurrection of Jesus—set Christianity apart from the various schools of thought in the Greco-Roman Empire. Taken together, these Christian thought patterns placed a new and strong emphasis on the unity of the human person, body jointly with soul.

According to the new cosmology ushered in by the Church Fathers, the world was created by a transcendent God who remains beyond the cosmos, even when acting upon it. The new anthropology, by contrast, which insisted on the unity of the person, hindered the soul's release from the body, before or after death, in order to return to its true abode in the heavenly world. The disappearance of the Platonic *sungeneia* between the human soul and the divine world threatened to block the traditional channel of contact between man and God. Augustine's solution was that the creator God resides beyond the cosmos, but it is within man himself that He may be found. Thus, Augustine wrote: "Do not wander outside, return into yourself. It is in inward man that truth dwells."[11]

Augustine bequeathed this new radical reflexivity of the self to the West. In *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor followed the Augustinian heritage of reflexivity across the history of Western thought.[12] For the ancients, the idea of a dialogue between man and God usually seemed preposterous, so incommensurable were the two protagonists. Its possibility was saved only through its identification, by Augustine, with soliloquy. From then on, it is within the soul that the Christian would seek God.[13] Finding the transcendent God within the ↳ soul—namely, within the human person—is paradoxical. Christian mystical literature contains many expressions of this paradox and attempts to put into words experiences beyond discourse.[14]

The new conception of the human person heralded by early Christian theology thus brought about significant changes in ancient anthropology. In the process, traditional patterns of religious experience were transformed. Augustine's perception of the inner self as the locus of the highest religious experience—namely, the individual's encounter with God—entailed a rejection of "ecstasy," literally, the individual moving out of himself or herself and exiting the physical body. In ancient societies, ecstasy represented the paradigmatic peak religious experience.[15] Mystical ecstasy appears frequently in Christian mystical literature, denoting bliss or elation, but rarely being beyond oneself.

However, the dissociation (to use a modern term) of the soul from the body is often depicted in ancient literatures. Although we do not know if these portrayals describe actual experiences, it is clear that they reflect the importance of this theme in religious culture. Oftentimes, the texts tell of a soul that leaves the body and travels to another world. Such travels are typically ascents, visits to the heavenly abode, referred to by some scholars as *Himmelsreise der Seele*.[16] However, such trips may also entail a descent (*katabasis*) to the netherworld, known in Homeric literature as *Nekyia*.[17] Since the late nineteenth century, ↳ these journeys have been studied in various ancient literatures.[18] Nonetheless, including in the inquiry various related phenomena of a split between two aspects of the person (or of the soul) may help us to better grasp the picture of ancient anthropology.

Shamanistic Phenomena

In shamanism, first studied among Siberian populations, the shaman's self temporarily splits off, leaves his body, and undergoes a heavenly experience.[19] Analogous experiences were known in various ancient societies.[20] Shamanistic phenomena, in the broader sense, entail altered states of consciousness, in which the soul detaches from the body and engages in (typically) extraterrestrial travels before returning to the body and revealing what it has learned. The widespread phenomenon of prophecy in the ancient world, both in the Near East and in Greece, retains clear patterns of physio-psychological states of ecstasy and trance similar to those we associate with shamanism.[21]

Scholars have long been intrigued by the resonances between shamanism and some ancient Iranian phenomena.[22] Among these, by far the most famous is the account of Ardā Wīrāz's heavenly voyage, or more precisely his soul's trip during the seven days in which it left the hero's body, which remained upon the earth.[23] Similarly, the vision of the third-century high priest Kirdēr, which we know from the inscription of Naqsh-e Rajab, describes his heavenly journey to ↳ ascertain the correctness of Mazdean rituals.[24] The relationship between vision and ecstasy indicated by such accounts is clear.[25] Scholars are divided, however, on the question whether late texts like the *Arda Wiraz Namāg* refer to concrete experiences or had become metaphorical by Sasanian times. Philippe Gignoux is a leading representative of the "Shamanist" school, while Shaul Shaked saw in these testimonies the reflection of a literary *topos* rather than an authentic report of a lived religious experience. The separation between body and soul indicated in these two famous examples underscores the parallelism in ancient Iranian thought between cosmological and anthropological dualism. Shaked acknowledged this parallelism, while insisting that multiple modes of thought coexisted in ancient Iran.[26]

Since Erwin Rohde's *Psyche*, the study of Greek shamanism has attracted the attention of classicists.[27] E. R. Dodds, for instance, argued that:

> Empedocles represents not a new but a very old type of personality, the shaman . . . For him, shamans diffused the belief in a detachable soul or self which by suitable techniques can be withdrawn from the body even during life, a self which is older than the body and will outlast it.[28]

Following Dodds, Peter Kingsley emphasizes the role of the Iranians as intermediaries in the process of transmission. He further argues that Empedocles, who could reportedly descend at will to the underworld and return from it, exemplifies the Greek shaman and might have been inspired by the Magi.[29] Martin West put the matter as follows: "while we cannot speak of shamanism as a living institution in this historical period, there are clear traces of it in myth, and even in stories attaching to historical persons."[30]

Similar to the experiences of Empedocles, the frenzy of Greek maenads represents a phenomenon strikingly different from the various kinds of mystical experience observed in the Abrahamic religions. They reflect significantly different conceptions of the self, with boundaries which may be characterized as fluid. A comprehensive discussion of the conceptions of the self in ancient societies, or even in Greece, is beyond the scope of this work. Here, it is important to note the complexity of such conceptions, and their plurality, which notably diverge from what would become the rule in patristic Christianity.

The idea of a possible split within the person, at least among people endowed with special gifts and power, such as shamans, whose soul may temporarily leave their body, renders possible the idea of a multiple personality, either divided between soul and body or else made up of two or more souls. We have encountered in Mazdean anthropology the idea of a multiple soul, and the Iranian belief in the simultaneous existence of two souls within the human body was well known to the Greeks.

In this regard, Xenophon's testimony is crucial. In the *Cyropedia*, Araspas says:

> Yes, Cyrus . . . for I evidently have two souls . . . But it is obvious that there are two souls, and when the good one prevails, what is right is done; but when the bad one gains the ascendency, what is wrong is attempted.[31]

This Iranian conception of two souls, or at least the Greek perception of this duality, seems to be at the root of Plato's claim that we have two souls, one endowed with positive character traits, the other negative.[32] The conception of two souls was afforded a long *Fortleben*, certainly within the Platonic tradition, but with a significant twist. In the second century, Numenius argues that one of these souls is reasonable, while the other is irrational.[33] A similar duality of the soul is found among some Gnostic teachers, for instance Isidoros,

p. 143 Basilides's ↳ son, who is said to be here following Pythagoras, and the *Excerpta ex Theodoto*, for whom one soul is irrational, while the other one is divine.[34] In the following century, Plotinus states that humans have two souls, one of which belongs to the intelligible world.[35]

Things were different in the Roman world, where the old Latin tradition about a genius attached from birth to each person was at some point revived. According to the fourth-century Servius Grammaticus, each person receives two geniuses at birth: one exhorting him/ her to do good, the other inciting him/her to do evil.[36] This doubling of the genius reflects a Greek influence (the *daimōn agathos* and the *daimōn kakos*).[37] However, Greece was probably only the proximate channel, as the conception can be traced to Iran. The Latin *genius*, moreover, seems to have acquired some of the competences of the Jewish angel in the early Christian era.[38] This osmosis of ideas from diverse origins, an enduring feature of early Christian texts, was enabled by the "family resemblance" of such ideas reflecting, in various ways, the dual structure of the person, or of the soul itself.

The Double

The notion of two demons, or two angels, accompanying each person is distinct from the idea of two souls or that of a split soul. In a melting pot of cultures, however, various channels can connect these notions, while osmosis processes may give birth to new conceptions. The idea of a "double" of the self, or of an *alter ego*, differs from that of a split or double self, but both have ancient roots. Here, too, various traditions about the

p. 144 double of a person are found in different ↳ cultural traditions. Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern anthropological, mythical, theological, and philosophical conceptions often present the double as the higher, better, truer part of the individual. Such a duality is vertical rather than horizontal, like the good versus the evil soul. Social anthropologists have analyzed similar psychological conceptions in many societies throughout the world. In such conceptions, the higher part of the soul can be endowed with its own identity, becoming a second, spiritual or heavenly self.

The Greeks referred to the soul as an *eidolon*, a polysemic term denoting the phantom of a dead person, but also the ethereal "double" of a living figure. A famous example of the double in Greek literature is the *eidolon* of Helen, as preserved for us by the poet Stesichorus in the sixth century and employed by Euripides. In this retelling of the classic tale, Helen never went to Troy.[39] It was her double or phantom, her *eidolon*, that was there with Paris. The true Helen was in Egypt, studying the wisdom of old with Egyptian priests in their temples.[40] The Greeks used the term *kolossos* to denote the presence of the invisible "double." In his study of the Greek concept of the double, Jean–Pierre Vernant argues that the *kolossos* is a form of the *psuchē*.[41]

According to Plato, Socrates possessed his own *daimonion*, a spiritual being, or voice (*phōnē*) that functioned as a guardian angel.[42] Although no one but Socrates had this particular *daimonion*, various sources point to similar divine figures accompanying other individuals in Greek and Latin texts.[43] As Peter Brown notes, the figure of the *daimonion* had a long *Fortleben* in Mediterranean piety and lives on in the guardian angel trope found in Judaism and Christianity.[44]

A whole array of patterns developed from the (presumed) original dualistic structure of the self. The soul's existence is not material, at least not in the sense that the body is. It is either invisible or else appears as something on the borderline of matter—a shadow.[45] Ancient traditions identify the self's double as the higher, or the deeper, part of the individual, representing the worthier part of the self or even the "true" self. This dichotomy stems from reflections on death, when the soul (*psuchē, anima, nefesh*) separates from the body, thus ensuring some kind of survival to the departed.

In a lively monograph, Maurizio Bettini examines various Greek and Latin texts, from Homer and Pindar to Virgil and Lucretius.[46] Discussing what he calls "fragments" of the double and of its history, he differentiates between "synchronic" doubles, like twins, and the "diachronic" doubles found in Stoic conceptions. Bettini argues that the epiphany of the Homeric gods represents an illusion of the senses, and he shows that the "cultural logic" of the Greeks and the Romans differed from our modern one. Regarding mythological twins, they represent individuals born with their own double, *eidola*, created by the gods in order to mislead humans.[47] In his introduction, Bettini offers "a possible history of this fascinating cultural nucleus in Western culture," marshaling evidence from non-Christian literature, aside from the brief mention of Gnostic texts and a cryptic reference to the Docetic view of the crucifixion in the Qur'an.[48] For Bettini, it is to the ancient polytheistic systems and their mythologies that the multiple facets of the double belong.[49]

It is possible to detect traces of the phenomenon illustrated by Helen's double in the early Christian heresy of Docetism.[50] According to this doctrine, Jesus only appeared (from *dokein*, "to seem") to die on the cross.

Someone else, often identified as Simon of Cyrene, the man who helped Jesus bear his ↳ cross, took his place, while Jesus himself was carried up to heaven, laughing at the wicked fools who thought they had killed him. Docetic proclivities appear in some of the earliest Gnostic texts, as well as in traditions reported by the Church Fathers about the early heresies. Moreover, the idea of substitution has a long history within biblical literature, appearing as early as in the story of Abraham's sacrifice (or rather binding, *aqeda*) of Isaac in Genesis. Jewish exegetical traditions about the *Aqeda* seem to be at the root of the Docetic conceptions, which may represent the thought of some of the earliest Christians, who were, of course, Jews.[51] A similar Jewish–Christian influence may also be implied in the Qur'an's theology of substitution. The latter also reflects a Docetic perception of Jesus's crucifixion.[52]

Various Gnostic texts, as mentioned above, express related ideas. According to some texts and traditions, in particular one presented as coming from the lost *Gospel according to the Hebrews*, Jesus had a divine force within him (Greek *dunamis*, Aramaic *ḥayl*) that left him on the cross and returned to heaven, resulting in Jesus's cry: "Eli, Eli (my God, my God), why did you abandon me?"[53] This dual perception of the Savior, according to which Jesus's divine power leaves the mortal body of Jesus on the cross, reflects a striking anthropology of which we have seen various examples in other cultural contexts in ancient societies.

The Twin

A fascination with twins, often possessing divine powers, is found in many cultures and mythologies. In the ancient world, this *topos* was ubiquitous.[54] Here, however, it is the idea of the spiritual or heavenly twin of an

individual that is under discussion—the vertical rather than horizontal conception of twinhood. ↳ Yet the two kinds of twins—the earthly and the heavenly—may be related, as they both reflect a duality within the personality, or a dual self.

In the history of religions, Mani's heavenly twin exemplifies the dual conception of the prophet's person. While the idea of Mani's twin is distinct from the two souls of Manichaean anthropology, it too reflects a split within the person. In Manichaean doctrine, every living being has two souls, one belonging to the race of light, the other to the race of darkness. Both leave the body at death.[55] We find a clear description of Mani's heavenly twin in the *Cologne Mani Codex* (*CMC*), the spiritual biography of the prophet Mani that was redacted soon after

his death.[56] When he was twelve years old, Mani met his heavenly twin, or *syzygos*—a Greek term used to translate the Aramaic *taumā* (later, "Thomas").[57] According to the *CMC*, there was a trance-like experience that enabled the earthly and the heavenly Mani to unite at times, but at times not.

In his groundbreaking study on the "Divine Double," Charles Stang focuses on the idea of the heavenly twin.[58] He reads Christian and Manichaean texts within the broader literary and intellectual context of the Greco-Roman world, going back to Socrates's *daimonion*, or "guardian spirit," and to Plato's anthropological dualism. Analyzing an array of dialogues, he shows that, for Plato, the higher part of the human being retains a divine nature. The person is thus essentially, and tragically, "double." Stang also discusses the figure of Thomas, Jesus's "twin," in Gnostic texts such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, as well as in various texts from early patristic literature. After discussing Mani and his heavenly twin, and its parallels in Arabic sources, Stang returns to the Platonic tradition with Plotinus's conception of the double self.

Bettini's and Stang's studies each deal with one aspect of the double of the individual. Thus, while Bettini overlooks the figure of the *syzygos*, Stang makes no mention of the *eidolon* in the structure of archaic psychology. Neither scholar takes into account the broader religious and anthropological contexts of the double in ancient cultures.

From Split Soul to Guardian Angel

Regarding the divine double, exclusive focus upon Greek and Latin literary texts and the Platonic tradition is misleading, as it is in Jewish notions that the origins of early Christian, Gnostic, and Manichaean conceptions are to be found. Indeed, Andrei Orlov recently showed the existence of such Jewish heavenly counterparts in texts dating from the Second Temple period, as well as in rabbinic literature of late antiquity.[59]

The *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, exhortatory texts from second-century BCE Palestine, were preserved in Greek thanks to their popularity in early Christianity. The *Testament of Judah* refers to the two spirits, the spirit of truth and the spirit of error, both dwelling in man's mind.[60] The *Testament of Asher* mentions two paths, one good and one evil, and two "dispositions within our breasts." The soul must choose between these paths, or dispositions.[61]

Fragments of these texts were found among the Qumran manuscripts. This is not surprising, as anthropological dualism is central to the *Community Rule*. For example, in the *Community Rule* we read: "He has created man to govern the world, and has appointed for him two spirits in which to walk until the time of His visitation: the spirits of truth and iniquity (*ruaḥ ha-emet* and *ruaḥ ha-'avel*)." According to this scroll, the Prince of Light and the Angel of Darkness rule, respectively, over the children of righteousness and those of iniquity.[62] Every man shares in these two spirits, which are engaged in constant struggle, but both spirits remain subjugated to one God. The dualism represented by these two spirits is central to the Essene doctrine and exhibits dualistic thought patterns originating in Zoroastrianism.[63]

Philo speaks of two powers (*dunameis*) that enter the soul at birth, the one salutary (*hē men sōtēria*), the other destructive (*hē de phthoropoios*).[64] In this, he appears to follow Plato in *Laws* X. 896. Although Philo does not mention spirits, his discussion is broadly in line with the aforementioned concepts in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* and the *Community Rule*. Of course, for Philo, there is fundamental agreement between Plato and the Bible. The rabbis' conception of two impulses within each person, the good and the evil (*yeṣer ha-tov* and *yeṣer ha-ra'*), is in clear continuity with the Hellenistic Jewish teaching of the two warring powers within each person.[65]

These Jewish perspectives on the duality within the human soul appear in early Christian theological texts. The *Didachē* ("Teaching"), probably written at the end of the first century CE, mentions two paths, one good and

one bad. Although these paths are not presented as interiorized within the person, they point to a close relationship with the Dead Sea Scrolls. The *Epistle of Barnabas*, a text redacted before 130, shows a hermeneutical midrashic pattern and retains a clear Jewish imprint. Like the *Didachē*, Barnabas mentions "two ways of teaching and power, one of light and one of darkness. For over the one are set the light-bringing angels of God, but over the other angels of Satan."[66]

The Shepherd of Hermas, a Greek text dated to the first half of the second century, mentions the "holy spirit" (*to pneuma to hagion*) dwelling in man and a second, evil spirit (*hupo heterou ponērou pneumatos*).[67] When the evil spirit enters the soul, it chases the holy spirit away (*Shepard*, 6. 3). The terminology here seems rather fluid, as Hermas refers elsewhere to "the two angels" within the person (*duo eisin aggeloi meta tou anthrōpou*), the angel of justice (*heis tēs dikaiosunēs*) and the angel of wickedness (*heis tēs ponērias*).[68]

A bit later, Tatian (c.120–c.180) also mentions two spirits in his *Oratio ad Graecos*. However, he presents a slightly different conception of their relationship to the soul. For him, only one of them is called soul (*psuchē*), while the ↳ other one is greater than the soul (*meizon men tēs psuchēs*).[69] In the third century, Origen states that each person receives the help of two angels, the angel of justice and the angel of iniquity: "*Unicuique duo assistant angeli, alter iustitiae, alter iniquitatis*." If good thoughts fill our hearts and if justice has produced many fruits in us, it is the angel of the Lord who is speaking to us. However, if evil thoughts fill our hearts, they are suggested to us by the devil's angel.[70] This Origenian conception recalls the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Shepherd*. Origen acknowledges his dependence on the latter.[71]

Like Origen, the fourth-century Cappadocian Father Gregory of Nyssa inscribes himself within the Platonic tradition. Yet, in his *Life of Moses*, he refers to doctrine derived from the earliest Christian tradition. He writes that providence placed an angel next to every person, while "the corruptor of our race" placed a demon in the same location. It is up to each of us to make the angel triumph over the demon.[72] In her study of angelology in early Christianity, Ellen Muehlberger discusses what she calls "the companion angel tradition" in patristic literature, showing how the concept of "guardian angel" developed, in particular in the ascetic tradition, from Origen to Evagrius.[73] In her search for the roots of the early Christian conception of the guardian angel, Muehlberger correctly goes back to Socrates's *daimonion*, as mentioned in Plato's *Apology* 31 c–d: "something divine and spiritual comes to me." She does not discuss, however, another spiritual being attached to the individual, this one sent by Satan. Nor does she mention Mani's heavenly twin. It seems to me that these various traditions should be studied together in order to be fully understood.[74]

The winding trajectory of the self that we followed in this chapter took us from Iran and Greece, through Rome, Qumran, Judaism, Gnosis, and Manichaeism, to ancient Christianity. The various expressions of a dual or split self which we surveyed find their ultimate roots in Iran. In patristic Christianity, this duality eventually became that of two spirits, or angels, that accompany each person. As a consequence of this unification of the self in a ↳ monotheistic climate, the dissociation of the person typical of altered states of consciousness and shamanistic phenomena would become metaphorized in mystical ecstasy. According to Mauss, this last stage represented the main pivot toward the discovery of the unified self. Our conclusions support Mauss's remarkable insight into the critical impact of monotheism on the transformation of psychological categories. ↳

Notes

Footnotes

1   C. Lévi-Strauss, *Nous sommes tous des cannibales* (Paris: Seuil, 2013), 154.

2   M. Mauss, "Une catégorie de l'esprit humain: la notion de personne, celle de 'moi', " in his *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1950), 331–62. The text, read as the Huxley Memorial Lecture in 1938, was first published that same year in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* LXVIII. For a more recent anthropological evaluation of Mauss's argument, see Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins, and Steven Lukes, eds., *The Category of the Person* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). For an approach from the viewpoint of the history of philosophy and the passage from Greek to patristic and medieval thinkers, see John M. Rist, *What is a Person? Realities, Constructs, Illusions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

3   "Ce sont les chrétiens qui ont fait de la personne morale une entité métaphysique après en avoir senti la force religieuse. La question était posée de l'unité de la personne, de l'unité de l'Église par rapport à l'unité de Dieu *heis*"; Mauss, "Une catégorie de l'esprit humain," 367. Mauss refers to a few texts, such as Gregory Nazianzen's *Discourse on Epiphany* (PG 39; 630A).

4   For instance, none of the major technical and economic innovations since Neolithic times has meant, in Africa at least, the disappearance of older patterns of economic behavior, as noted by François-Xavier Fauvelle, *Penser l'histoire de l'Afrique* (Paris: CNRS, 2022), 20.

5   The expression was coined by Youval Rotman; see his "The Relational Mind: In Between History, Psychology and Anthropology," *History of Psychology* 23 (2020): 1–22.

6   See the discussion in Guy G. Stroumsa, The Scriptural Universe of Ancient Christianity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), esp. ch. IV, 55–70.

7   A. D. Nock, "Iranian Influences in Greek Thought," in his *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), I, 195–201.

8   For a classical analysis, see Simone Pétrement, *Le dualisme chez Platon, les gnostiques et les manichéens* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1947).

9   See in particular Alexander J. Mazur, *The Platonizing Sethian Background of Plotinus's Mysticism* (NHMS, 89) (Leiden: Brill, 2020). See Chapter 2 above. Plotinus's conception of the person is to some extent similar to that developed in patristic texts, to the extent that his conception of the Divinity too emphasizes its unity. The major difference remains, however, in his lack of appreciation of the body as an integral part of the person. See, for instance, Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI. 9. 11: "the flight of the alone to the alone (*fugē monou pros monon*)." On this, see Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 36–51, as well as Kevin Corrigan, "Solitary Mysticism in Plotinus, Proclus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Pseudo-Dionysius," *Journal of Religion* 76 (1996): 28–42.

10   For my own attempt, see Guy G. Stroumsa, "*Caro Salutis Cardo*: Shaping the Person in Early Christian Thought," *History of Religions* 30 (1990): 25–50, reprinted in Stroumsa, Barbarian Philosophy: The Religious Revolution of Early Christianity (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 168–90. As well as Augustine, Tertullian plays a major role in the formation of the Christian person, see in particular 183–5. See also Introduction, note 74.

11   "Noli foras ire, in teipsum redi: in interiore homine habitat veritas," *De vera religione*, 39. 72. Cf. C. Colpe, in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 9 (1974), 587 ff., on the two tendencies of volition in both the cosmic order and the human soul.

12   Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); see in particular ch. 7, 127–42. For the perspective of a philosopher trained in the classical tradition and deeply cognizant of patristic literature, see John Rist, *What is a Person? Realities, Constructs, Illusions*, in particular ch. 5, on Augustine's *personae*.

13   See in particular Hans Jonas, "Myth and Mysticism: A Study of Objectification and Interiorization in Religious Thought," *Journal of Religion* 49 (1969): 315–29.

14   This is characteristic of mystical literature in general, and is also the case in other religious traditions.

15   On ecstasy in the history of religions, see, for instance, Ioan P. Culiano, *Expériences de l'extase: Extase, ascension et récit visionnaire de l'hellénisme au moyen-âge*, Préface M. Eliade (Paris: Payot, 1984).

16   See *Bibliothek Warburg, Vorträge 1928–29: Über die Vortellungen der Himmelsreise der Seele* (Berlin, Leipzig: Teubner, 1930). For an excellent choice of patristic and medieval Greek and Latin texts, see Manlio Simonetti, ed., Piero Boitani, intr., *Il viaggio dell'anima* (Fondazione Lorenzo Valla: Mondadori, 2007). Before the Church Fathers, Philo had compared Abraham's emigration from Chaldea, as well as the Exodus from Egypt, to the soul escaping the body, for instance in his *De migratione Abrahamo* 14 (Philo, LCL IV, 138–42). See the thorough study of Carsten Colpe, "Jehnseitsfahrt (Himmelfahrt)," in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 17 (1996), 407–543.

17   In *Odyssey* XI, the *nekyia* refers to Odysseus's journey to the Halls of Hades. The classic study of the phenomenon in ancient literature is Albrecht Dieterich's *Nekyia: Beiträge zur Erklärung der neuentdeckten Petrusapokalypse* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1893). For a recent important study, see Yulia Ustinova, *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind: Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). In Greek literature, the descent into Hades long remained a literary *topos*, as exemplified by Lucian of Samosata's *Menippus, or descent into Hades*, a text written in 161–2 CE. I have studied later rituals of *katabasis* in Stroumsa, Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the

Roots of Christian Mysticism (Numen Book Series 70) (Leiden: Brill, 2005 [1996]), 169–83. Christ's descent into the underworld (I Pet. 4:6), which became known as the *Descensus Christi ad inferos*, would have a long *Fortleben* throughout the Middle Ages. For a psychoanalytical perspective, see James Hillman, *The Dream of the Underworld* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).

18   For a delimitation of the phenomenon and a survey of modern historiography, see Ioan Petru Culianu, *Psychanodia I: A Survey of the Evidence Concerning the Ascension of the Soul and its Relevance* (Leiden: Brill, 1983). According to the author, Wilhem Bousset's formula "Himmelsreise der Seele" is highly improper (5).

19   Carlo Ginzburg has devoted much attention to shamanistic phenomena since his *Storia notturna* (1989) (translated as *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* [London: Penguin, 1991]). For further studies on these themes, see Cora Presetti, ed., *Streghe, sciamani, visionari: In margine a Storia notturna di Carlo Ginzburg* (Rome: Viella, 2019). See further Carlo Ginzburg, "The Europeans Discover (or Rediscover) the Shamans," in his *Threads and Traces: True, False, Fictive* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021), 83–95.

20   This is true, for instance, in Greece, where the phenomenon has been widely studied in the last century. For a summary of the ongoing polemics on the topic, see Jan N. Bremmer, "Shamanism in Classical Scholarship: Where are We Now?," in *Horizons of Shamanism: A Triangular Approach*, ed. Peter Jackson (Stockholm Studies in Comparative Religion 35) (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2016), 57–78.

21   See, for instance, Martti Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy: Near Eastern, Biblical, and Greek Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), in particular ch. 5. For a striking biblical example, see Numbers 24:4, where the prophet (Balaam) is described as falling into a trance, his eyes wide open.

22   See in particular Philippe Gignoux, "Corps osseux et âme osseuse: Essai sur le chamanisme dans l'Iran ancien, " *Journal Asiatique* 267 (1979): 41–79.

23   The description of Arda Wiraz's heavenly journey is described in ch. 3 of the book. See Philippe Gignoux, *Le Livre d'Arda Viraz* (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1984), 153 ff.

24   On Kirdēr (also spelled Kartir), see, for instance, James Russell, "Kartir and Mani: A Shamanistic Model of their Conflict," in Russell, *Armenian and Iranian Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 407–20.

25   See Anders Hulgård, "Ecstasy and Vision," in *Religious Ecstasy*, ed. Nils G. Holm (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1982), 218–25.

26   See in particular S. Shaked, *Dualism in Transformation: Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran* (London: SOAS, 1994), 49–51 and 59.

27   E. Rohde, *Psyche: Seelenkult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1910).

28   E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 146–7; see the whole of ch. 5, 135–78.

29   P. Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 227. See also Kingsley, "Greeks, Shamans and Magi," *Studia Iranica* 23 (1994): 187–98. In "Shamanism in Classical Scholarship," Jan Bremmer refers to Rohde's and Meuli's work, and objects to Kingsley's approach. These arguments are further developed in J. N. Bremmer, "Method and Madness in the Study of Greek Shamanism: The Case of Peter Kingsley," *Asdiwal* 13 (2018): 93–109. See also J. N. Bremmer, *The Early Greek Conception of the Soul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 33–8.

30   M. L. West, *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 146.

31   Xenophon, *Cyropedia* VI. 1. 41 (trans. W. Miller, LCL, vol. II, 140–3). On references to Mazdean conceptions in the classical world, see Albert de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

32   Plato, *Laws*, X. 896 d–e. See Stroumsa, "The Two Souls," in *Barbarian Philosophy*, 282–91. Turning to Iran for the origins of the Greek conception of two souls is more convincing than speculations searching for these origins in Indo-European conceptions of a *Freiseele* or *Aussenseele*.

33   Numenius, Fragment 44, in Numénius, *Fragments*, ed. and trans. Édouard des Places, SJ (Collection Budé) (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1973), 91. On the two souls in Numenius, see Henri-Charles Puech, "Numénius d'Apamée et les théologies orientales au second siècle," in Puech, *En quête de la gnose I, La gnose et le temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 25–54, esp. 36. This text, which dates from 1934, perceives Numenius as "ce Sémite à l'esprit changeant et porté au bizarre" (35), while Plotinus "a compris la nécessité d'une 'défense de l'Occident' contre cet envahissement de l'Orient" (54). Such a striking lack of immunization from the zeitgeist on the part of a serious scholar is at once shocking and depressing.

34   On Isidoros as a follower of Pythagoras and a proponent of the two souls, see Clement, *Stromata*, 2.20. On the different souls, see Clement, *Exc. Theod*., 14.

35   *Enn.* II. 1 [40] 5. On Plotinus and the double intellect, see Charles M. Stang, *Our Divine Double* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 185–230. See further Dennis O'Brien, "Plotinus and the Gnostics," in *Herméneutique et ontologie, Mélanges Pierre Aubenque, phronimos anēr*, ed. Rémi Brague and Jean-François Courtine (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1990), 183, n. 3, as well as Gary M. Gurtler, SJ, *From the Alien to the Alone: A Study of Soul in Plotinus* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2022), ch. 4.: "Two Selves and Three Souls," 119–40. On Plotinus's highly complex

stance, however, which also brings him to insist on the unification of the human intellect with the divine, see Chapter 1 above.

36   See Robert Schilling, "Genius et ange," in his *Rites, cultes, dieux de Rome* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1979), 415 ff.

37   See Pierre Boyancé, "Les deux démons personnels dans l'antiquité grecque et romaine," *Revue des Études Anciennes* (1935): 189–202.

38   As noted by Schilling (n. 36 above). See further Gilles Quispel, "Genius and Spirit," in *Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts, in Honour of Pahor Labib*, ed. Martin Krause (Nag Hammadi Studies 6) (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 155–69.

39   See Karen Bassi, "Helen and the Discourse of Denial in Stesichorus's *Palinode*," *Arethusa* 26 (1993): 51–76. For comparative perspectives, see Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), esp. ch. 1: "The Shadow Sita and the Phantom Helen," 8–87.

40   For discussion of this theme and references to Greek literature as well as to modern scholarship, see Ronnie Goldstein and Guy G. Stroumsa, "The Greek and Jewish Origins of Docetism: A New Proposal," *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 10 (2006): 423–41; on *eidōlon*, see esp. 425–9.

41   See J-P. Vernant, "Figuration de l'invisible et catégorie psychologique du double: le colossos, " in his *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs* (Paris: Maspero, 1974), II, 65–78. On aspects of "soul" and "self" in the Greek world, see Frédérique Ildefonse, *Le multiple dans l'âme: Sur l'intériorité comme problème* (Paris: Vrin, 2022).

42   Plato, *Apology* 31 c–d, 40 a–41 d, and parallels in other dialogues.

43   On the *daimon* in the Platonic tradition, see, for instance, Andrei Timotin, *La démonologie platonicienne: Histoire de la notion de* daimôn *de Platon aux derniers néoplatoniciens* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2012), in particular chs 5 (163–241) and 6 (243–322). Cicero was the first to translate Greek philosophical concepts into Latin. His translation of *daimonion—divinum aliquid*—reflects the difficulty of finding an adequate Latin term but also clearly points to the direction of the divine. Cicero also calls a friend "a second self," while Seneca coins the concept of *alter ego*.

44   P. Brown, *Journeys of the Mind: A Life in History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 402.

45   See Victor I. Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 18, who notes that Erwin Rohde demonstrated at the start of his *Psyche* that the Greeks symbolically linked shadow, soul, and a person's double.

46   M. Bettini, *Je est l'autre? Sur les traces du double dans la culture ancienne* (Paris: Belin, 2012); the title is a quote from a famous letter of Arthur Rimbaud. The book is based on four lectures given at the Collège de France in 2008. See further M. Bettini, "Sosia and his Substitute: Thinking the Double at Rome," in M. Bettini, *The Ears of Hermes* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 171–99, as well as M. Bettini, "Constructing the Invisible. A Dossier on the double in classical culture," in *Das Double*, ed. Victor I. Stoichita (Wolfenbütteler Forschungen 113) (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006), 79–91.

47   See, for instance, pp. 7, 22, and 51.

48   Such texts are discussed in Goldstein and Stroumsa, "The Greek and Jewish Origins of Docetism."

49   On the complex polysemy of polytheistic cults in late antiquity, which cannot simply be understood as "paganism," see Dario Cellamare and Francesco Massa, "I culti politeisti nella Tarda Antichità: osservazioni metodologiche e storiografiche," *Mythos* 17 (2023), https://journals.openedition.org/mythos/6529 (accessed 27 October 2024).

50   As argued in Goldstein and Stroumsa, "The Greek and Jewish Origins of Docetism."

51   See Guy G. Stroumsa, "Christ's Laughter: Docetic Origins Reconsidered," in *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 12 (2004): 267–88.

52   See Guy G. Stroumsa, "Jewish Christianity and Islamic Origins," in *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honor of Patricia Crone*, ed. Benham Sadeghi, Asad Q. Ahmed, Adam Silverstein, and Robert Hoyland (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 72–96. On substitution, see Guillaume Dye, "La théologie de la substitution du point de vue de l'Islam, " in *Judaïsme, christianisme, islam. Entre théologie de la falsification et théologie de la substitution*, ed. Thomas Gergely and Eliezer Ben-Rafael (Brussels, Didier Devillez, 2010), 85–103.

53   Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34; *eli* ("my God") is understood as *hayli* ("my power" in Aramaic and Hebrew), a word starting with the letter *het*, a guttural which cannot be transliterated in Greek.

54   See, for instance, Raymond Kuntzmann, *Le symbolisme des jumeaux au Proche-Orient ancien: naissance, fonction et évolution d'un symbole* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1983); Reinhard Rathmayer, *Zwillinge in der griechisch-römischen Antike* (Vienna: Böhlen, 2000); Véronique Dasen, *Jumeaux, jumelles dans l'antiquité grecque et romaine* (Kilchberg: Akanthus, 2005).

55   See, for instance, Augustine, *De duabus animabus* and *Contra Faustum*, VI. 8. On the two souls in Manichaeism, see Stroumsa, "The Two Souls," n. 32 above. See further R. Ferwerda, "Two Souls: Origen's and Augustine's Attitude toward the Two Souls Doctrine. Its Place in Greek and Christian Philosophy," *Vigiliae Christianae* 37 (1983): 360–78.

56   On the *CMC*, see Chapter 3, "The King and the Swine," above.

57   See in particular Wolfgang Fauth, "Manis anderes Ich: Gestalthafte Metaphysik in Kölner Mani-Kodex," in *Gnosis und Philosophie: Miscellanea*, ed. R. Berlinger and W. Schrader (Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994), 75–14. In the same volume, see further W. Fauth, "Syzygos und Eikon: Mani's himmlicher Doppelgänger vor dem Hintergrund der platonischen Urbild-

Abbild Theorie," 115–39. Quispel is unduly simplifying things when he notes: "Mani transformed the Jewish-Christian Angel of the Spirit as a special guardian of the true prophet." See "Genius and Spirit," 169.

58   Charles M. Stang, *Our Divine Double* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

59   See Andrei A. Orlov, *The Greatest Mirror: Heavenly Counterparts in the Jewish Pseudepigraphs* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017). Orlov, who emphasizes the importance of Enochic literature, expresses surprise (p. 2) that these early Jewish accounts have been neglected by eminent scholars. For a rabbinic text that conceives Israel as Jacob's heavenly twin, see, for instance, *Genesis Rabba* 68:12. See further A. A. Orlov, *The Glory of the Invisible God: Two Powers in Heaven: Traditions and Early Christianity* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2019), which deals with cosmic aspects of dualist proclivities.

60   *Testament of Judah* XX. 1–3, in James Charlesworth, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963 [1st ed. 1913]), II, 800. See H. W. Hollander, M. de Jonge, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs: A Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 1985); on *Testament of Judah* XX, see 219–20.

61   *Testament of Asher* I. 3–9 (Charlesworth, 816–17)

62   *Community Rule* III, 18 ff. I quote Geza Vermes's translation, 64–5. See also *IV Ezra* III. 21 and IV. 30–1.

63   As demonstrated by Shaul Shaked, "Qumran and Iran: Further Considerations," *Israel Oriental Studies* 2 (1972): 432–46.

64   I quote Ralph Marcus's English translation from the Armenian in *Philo, Supplement II, Questions and Answers on Exodus* (Loeb Classical Library) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Heinemann, 1970 [repr.]), I.23, 32–3.

65   On the two *yeṣarim* in rabbinic literature, see Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desire: "Yetser Hara" and the Problem of Evil in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2021). The book lacks a sustained comparative analysis, taking Greek and Iranian traditions into consideration.

66   *Epistle of Barnabas,* 18. 1. Similar view of the two paths in the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies*, VII. 7.

67   Hermas, *Shepard*, *Mandate* 5. 2.

68   Ibid., *Mandate* VI. 2. 1. The moral dualism of Hermas has attracted much attention. See already Oscar J. F. Seitz, "Antecedents and Signification of the Term DIPSYCHOS," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 66 (1947): 211–19; Seitz notes the close similarity between the notion of a "double heart" and the rabbinic teaching of two *yetsarim*. See further Pedro Lluis-Font, "Sources de la doctrine d'Hermas sur les deux esprits," *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique* 39 (1963): 83–98, who calls Hermas "un chrétien d'origine essénienne."

69   Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 12. 1, in the Molly Whittaker edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 22–3.

70   Origen, *Homilies on Luke* XII. 4; I use Origène, *Homélies sur Luc*, ed. and trans. H. Crouzel, F. Fournier, and P. Périchon (Sources Chrétiennes 87) (Paris: Cerf, 1962), 202–3.

71   Origen, *Peri Archon* III. 2. 4.

72   Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* II, 45–6; I use Grégoire de Nysse, *Vie de Moïse*, ed. and trans. J. Daniélou (Sources Chrétiennes 1 [3rd ed.]) (Paris: Cerf, 1968), 130–3.

73   E. Muehlberger, *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022). See in particular chs 3 and 4, where she deals with Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* (133–45), arguing that "the divine power" (*hē theia dunamis*), like "the helper" in Athanasius's *Life of Antony*, is a companion angel.

74   This point is also made by Charles M. Stang in his review of Muehlberger's book, in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 24 (2016): 130–2.

Dynamics of Monotheism in Late Antiquity

Guy G Stroumsa

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Conclusion: Political Repercussions of Monotheism 🔓

Guy G Stroumsa

Abstract

The Conclusion briefly points out some political repercussions of Abrahamic monotheism, which could not be discussed in the chapters. In late antiquity, the Christianized Roman Empire showed a shrinking spectrum of religious tolerance. In the last century, scholars have asked whether monotheism is to some extent responsible for that. Jan Assmann has spoken of the "Mosaic distinction" between true and false religion as the main culprit for religious intolerance. There are different forms of religious intolerance, according to either exclusivist (Judaism) or universalist (Christianity and Islam) forms of monotheism. A related theme is that of religious time, its fundamental ambivalence, and apocalypticism. The interplay between these different questions is briefly discussed.

Keywords: empire, universalism, exclusivism, time, apocalypticism, ambivalence
Subject: History of Religion, Comparative Religion, Theology, Religious Issues and Debates, Philosophy of Religion
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This book has put forth a bi-level argument. On the one hand, it has claimed that the interplay of religious ideas should be understood as a spectrum rather than as a binary. On the other hand, a spectrum is no vector. How then should one understand religious developments in our period, or what I have called the dynamics of monotheism? The answer may lie in the shifting balance between ideas in dialectic tension, and in the fundamental ambivalence of religious time. Between kerygma and eschatology, religious time is ever compelled to find a modus vivendi with political power. More precisely, this ambivalence is reflected and echoed in the societal embeddedness of religious communities. This key topic, the impact of monotheistic beliefs on political frameworks, has been dealt with here only through the prism of religious violence in Chapter 6.[1] Instead of a conclusion summing up this bi-level argument, I wish here to offer some suggestions

on the ambivalence of religious time and on the relationship between religion and political power at the point when late antiquity gives way to the Middle Ages.

In the past century, the far-reaching political implications of monotheism, in its Abrahamic garb, have attracted much scholarly attention. The conversation was initiated by the publication of Erik Peterson's *Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem* (1935).[2] Peterson, a theologian and convert to Catholicism, argued that the merging of Hellenistic kingship traditions with the Hebrew idea of God's monarchy lay at the root of patristic perceptions of the Roman Empire. In his writings, Peterson sought to counter the legal scholar Carl Schmitt, who tried to legitimize Nazi rule by arguing that, in a "state of exception" (*Ausnahmezustand*), martial law was akin to the power of God. It was Peterson's work that launched the contemporary study of political theology.[3] ↳ Among the many studies inspired by Peterson's argumentation, that of Arnaldo Momigliano merits particular note. Examining pagan and Christian attitudes toward the Roman Empire, Momigliano argues that Christians were more likely than pagans to see themselves in political terms.[4]

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Jan Assmann played a leading role in launching the discussion anew.[5] He also helped to move the debate to another level, that of the novelty of monotheism in the ancient world, and of its implications for the relationship between religion and violence, and between the two realms of religion and politics. A stormy polemic erupted when Assmann proposed the concept of "Mosaic distinction," first developed in *Moses the Egyptian* (1998).[6] This book sets forth the idea of the birth of monotheism as a revolutionary phenomenon. In Assmann's view, the Pentateuch brought a revolutionary innovation in the history of religions, through what he calls the "Mosaic distinction" and the entry of the concept of truth into the very definition of religion, which was until then centered upon tradition.

For Assmann, the transition from polytheism to monotheism meant a shift from what he referred to as "primary religion" to that of "secondary religion." The latter, based on revelation, arises in opposition to more archaic forms of religion, and is sometimes referred to as "counter-religion." The testimony of such revelation is primarily found in scriptural form, and Assmann also speaks of the passage from "Kultreligion" to "Buchreligion." While the schematic opposition of ritualistic to bookish religions lacks heuristic value, the focus on truth, revelation, and a new kind of ritual offers a fresh perspective for historical research.

According to Assmann, the traditions of truth versus falsehood embedded in the Hebrew Bible lie at the root of religious intolerance and violence in the Western world. It is worth mentioning that Assmann was widely criticized for his views on this topic and was (wrongly) accused of antisemitism. In responding to the critique, Assman clarified that, unlike Christianity and Islam, rabbinic Judaism did not engage in religious intolerance.[7] For the rabbis, ↳ the seven Noachide commandments imposed by God upon all humankind offered an ethical alternative to monotheism. If the particularist form of monotheism professed by the rabbis does not fit the intolerant character of other monotheisms, it is because intolerance is not peculiar to monotheism in general but, rather, to universalist forms of monotheism. Judaism is often seen as an exclusivist religion, while Christianity is perceived to reflect universalist religious patterns. This neat distinction remains the scholarly default. However, it fails to take into account that, for example, theological inclusivism (e.g., the idea of a universal religion) does not necessarily uphold social inclusivism (e.g., admitting salvation for all), or that social exclusivism (e.g., the idea of election) does not necessarily uphold theological exclusivism (e.g., *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*).[8]

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Religious time is inherently ambivalent, interfacing as it does between the mortal and immortal domains. While it makes no real sense to speak of a single monotheistic conception of time, we can mark distinct approaches to time in each of the Abrahamic religions.[9] Since their biblical origins, all three have perceived of historical time, which is also the "history of salvation," or *Heilsgeschichte*, as inserted within the mythical dimensions of the *Urzeit* and the *Endzeit*. This time stretches from cosmogony and anthropogony at one end to eschatology, both human and cosmic, at the other. The longstanding characterization of monotheistic time as linear and polytheistic time as cyclical should be laid to rest.

In fact, each of the Abrahamic religions (to oversimplify a vastly complex and evolving reality) reflects a different attitude to time. These religions perceive revelation and salvation differently, as each emphasizes different components of these two terms. In addition, the state of *mixis* of our contemporary political reality implies that late antique Jews, Christians, and Muslims held distinctly diverse attitudes toward salvation and revelation.

The eschatological milieu in which Christianity was born was short-lived. It is no surprise that the last, eschatological chapters of Irenaeus's *Contra Haereses* V would soon disappear from most manuscripts. After the fourth century, expectations of Christ's *parousia*, his second coming, or eschatological return at the end times, dwindled in theological literature. In the Eusebian vision of history, the Roman Empire became a Christian one,

its glorious present ↳ all but obliterating the expectation of the end. While, as the savior, Jesus Christ is spiritually present within the person of the believer, his historical dimension now belongs to the past, and the moment of his incarnation represents the very heart of history.

Just as the Christian people became *Verus Israel*, Byzantium, the New Rome, became the New Jerusalem. Caesaropapism, as Gilbert Dagron has shown, became embedded in new forms of political rule. As demonstrated in Byzantium's urban geography and official rituals, the Byzantine emperor became both the new king of Israel and the high priest of God's new Temple.[10] Augustine's *City of God* is a reminder that things were quite different in the Latin West, where the relationship between *civitas humana* and *civitas divina* remained one of inescapable tension.[11] Focusing on Christianity in Western history, Rodney Stark has offered a broad reflection on the impact of monotheism on society, tackling issues such as mission, conflict, and pluralism.[12]

In the Jewish world, matters could not have been more different. After the Jews' failed war against Rome and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, even symbolic elements of self-governance had disappeared, together with political independence. The Jewish polity was a thing of the past and as such remembered, celebrated, and mourned. Hopes of national rebirth were pushed into the distant messianic future. While dreams of a return to ancient glory never completely disappeared—recall the excitement around Julian's decision to permit building the temple anew—Jewish political thought had become mere hermeneutical reflections on lost grandeur. Indeed, the disappearance of polity from present reality served to stimulate messianic impulses. Between reveries about the glory that had once been Israel and dreams about the eventual coming of the messiah, the rabbis knew that the reality of the Jews on the ground was rather bleaker. There was no *mythos* here, only the bare *logoi* of their endless Talmudic discussions.[13]

From the fourth to the seventh century, the cultures and religions of the Near East struggled to define

themselves between the rival empires of Christianized ↳ Rome and Sasanian Persia.[14] Then the Islamic caliphate was born, carving its territory from both those empires. Each of these political entities was identified with a religious faith—and, eventually with the orthodox version of that faith that was accepted by the emperor (or the caliph). And yet, it is possible to speak of late antique religion as becoming disembodied from social, linguistic, ethnic, and political structures. This disembodiment is arguably the key characteristic of religious life emerging in late antiquity.[15] In his important essay *Empire to Commonwealth*, Garth Fowden discussed the political implications of monotheism on Byzantium and the early realm of Islam.[16]

It is at the end of a lengthy period of development of religious ideas and identities in the long late antique world that Islam emerged. In recent years, Islamic origins have been increasingly perceived and studied as forming part of the history of late antique religion. Yet this holistic approach does not imply a hidden teleological vision of history.[17] Rather, it reflects a recognition that the transformation of polytheisms into monotheisms cannot be equated with the victory of Christianity over paganism. We have learned to apprehend nascent Islam within the context of late antiquity. Furthermore, recent archeological and epigraphical discoveries have added new dimensions to our understanding of monotheistic tendencies in pre-Islamic West Arabia and Himyar.[18] But

tendencies themselves cannot explain eruptions of religious innovation. Such phenomena require the presence of something else, a yeast or catalyst of sorts.

Like the birth of Christianity in the first century, that of Islam in the seventh was embedded in the profoundly apocalyptical context of the late sixth and early seventh centuries. Averil Cameron has spoken of "turbulence"

during those years, describing the Near East as a "region in ferment."[19] In this context, ↳ one might also refer to "religions in ferment," as a burst of apocalypticism shuffled individuals, communities, and states, tossing men and ideas into a maelstrom from which new forms of belief, behavior, and identity emerged. Recent studies have shown that apocalyptic and eschatological expectations helped shape religious communities around the birth of Islam.[20]

In the case of Islam, the original *umma* became a polity endowed with political and military power. Muhammad's original community served as the model upon which Islamic communities would be established. To Muslims, the eschatology of the end of days meant endlessly aiming to re-establish the Prophet's holy community. Moreover, Muhammad had been a prophet, not a messiah. Hence, alongside the concretization of the past, the powerful images of the *Endzeit* judgment, too, were endowed with the tangible dimension of the present: it was *hic et nunc* that the prophet had to lead the *umma*.[21]

Yet Islam also reflects ambivalence towards the political dimension. Anoush Ganjipour studied the trajectory of this ambivalence from the early days of the *umma* to contemporary Islamic societies.[22] In this context, he offers a keen analysis of Michel Foucault's discussion of "pastoral power" (i.e., political power established upon the spiritual leader's, or the prophet's, charisma) in the political dimension of monotheistic religions. As Ganjipour notes, the polarity between pastoral and monarchic forms of power was never overcome in Islamic societies. Foucault, thinking about early Christianity, highlighted the resistance of the pastoral model to the ancient conception of the city. The idea of "pastoral power" permits us to understand anew the theologico-political problem and the relationship between salvation, law, and truth.[23]

Of course, political ambivalence is far from an Islamic privilege. *Mutatis mutandis*, a similar ambivalence exists in Christianity. It also exists in Judaism—at least in potential, although the Jews' precarious, interstitial existence among Christian and Muslim societies, all of whom claimed to be ruling in God's name, deprived them of the opportunity to develop national and political policies.[24] One wonders whether this monotheistic

ambivalence towards political ↳ power is not at the root of "commonwealth" as Fowden defines it, namely, as a multiethnic politico–cultural federation, more loosely united by central power than an empire.[25]

I shall conclude with a final remark regarding the Abrahamic religions' attitudes toward time. Just as earliest Christianity saw itself as the true Israel, Islam perceived itself, from the start, as the only religion faithful to the true tradition of Abraham, because Jews and Christians had (in different ways) betrayed the testimony of truth. As such, one may speak of a "hermeneutical galaxy," in which the Christian reinterpretation of Israel is itself reinterpreted by Islam.[26] On their side, the Jewish communities, straddling throughout the centuries Christendom and the Islamicate world, juggled a mythical past, messianic dreams, and present precarity. Thus, the three Abrahamic religions, through their differently structured tensions among past, present, and future, installed what François Hartog has referred to as "regimes of historicity."[27] Perceiving history as an ongoing reproduction of a *typos*, or, to borrow Erich Auerbach's term, *figura*, is predicated on an ambivalent conception of time, and hence of the attitude to political symbols. Religious history, as it turns out, is indeed more spiral

than vector. ↳

Notes

Footnotes

1   I have dealt elsewhere with the question of God's rule in society—a rule obviously predicated upon theological perceptions. See Guy G. Stroumsa, "God's Rule in Late Antiquity," in Stroumsa, The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), ch. 7, 123–35.

2   E. Peterson, *Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem* (Leipzig: Hegner, 1935).

3   See, for instance, Alfred Schindler, ed., *Monotheismus als politisches Problem? Erik Peterson und die Kritik der politischen Theologie* (Gütersloh, 1978). See further Hans Meier, "Erik Peterson und das Problem der politischen Theologie," *Zeitschfift für Politik* 38 (1991): 33–46, as well as György Geréby, "Political Theology versus Theological Politics: Erik Peterson and Carl Schmitt," *New German Critique* 105 (2008): 7–33.

4   A. Momigliano, "The Disadvantages of Monotheism for a Universal State," *Classical Philology* 81 (1986): 285–97, repr. in A. Momigliano, *On Pagans, Jews and Christians* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 142–58.

5   See in particular J. Assmann, *Politische Theologie zwischen Ägypten und Israel* (Munich: Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, 1991).

6   See in particular J. Assmann, *Die mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus* [= *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010)]. Cf. J. Assmann, *From Akhenaten to Moses: Ancient Egypt and Religious Change* (Cairo, New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2014), where he discusses the passage from polytheism to monotheism as an evolution or a revolution (ch. III, 43–60). Cf., *inter alia*, Christoph Markschies, "The Price of Monotheism," in *One God*, ed. Stephen Mitchell and Peter van Nuffelen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 100–11.

7   Jan Assmann, "Autour de l'Exode: monothéisme, différence et violence," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 231 (2014): 5–26.

8   On monotheism and cultural universalism, see Garth Fowden, Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism *in* Late Antiquity (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), esp. 2–9.

9   I have attempted to do that in "Shapes of Time in the Abrahamic Religions," in Guy G. Stroumsa, *The Crucible of Religions in Late Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 287–300.

10 See G. Dagron, *Empereur et prêtre: Étude sur le "Césaropapisme" byzantin* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996). The book's last sentence reads: "L'aporie politique 'prêtre et roi' est l'un des problèmes fondamentaux de l'humanité, mais ses solutions historiques ne sont jamais que les avatars d'acculturations diverses."

11 On the particular qualities of Christian time, see Simon Goldhill, *The Christian Invention of Time: Temporality and the Literature of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). Cf. my review in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 75 (2024): 148–50.

12 Rodney Stark, *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

13 On rabbinic conceptions of time, see Sarit Kattan-Gribetz, *Time and Difference in Rabbinic Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

14 For a comparison of the Roman Empire and the Indian Maurya Empire, see Sheldon Pollock, "Axialism and Empire," in *Axial Civilizations and World History*, ed. Johann P. Arnason, S. N. Eisenstadt, and Björn Wittrock (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 397–450. For the late antique conflicts between empires, see G. W. Bowersock, *Empires in Collision in Late Antiquity* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2013), and Peter Sarris, *Empires of Faith: The Fall of Rome to the Rise of Islam, 500–700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

15 The same concept of "dis-embedment" of religion is central to Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

16 See n. 8 above.

17 See, for instance, Robert Hoyland, "Early Islam as a Late Antique Religion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. S. F. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1053–77, who insists that Arabia in the seventh century is part of the late antique world.

18 Averil Cameron, "Patristic Studies and the Emergence of Islam," in *Patristic Studies in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, Theodore de Bruyn, and Carol Harrison (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 249–78, offers a magisterial synthesis of the work accomplished in the last generation.

19 See Cameron, "Patristic Studies and the Emergence of Islam," 256.

20 See, for instance, Hagit Amirav, Emmanouela Grypeou, and Guy G. Stroumsa, eds., *Apocalypticism and Eschatology in Late Antiquity: Encounters in the Abrahamic Religions, 6th–8th Centuries* (Leuven: Peeters, 2017).

21 Eschatological expectations have recently made a comeback in contemporary Islam, especially among Shi'ites.

22 A. Ganjipour, *L'ambivalence politique de l'islam* (Paris: Seuil, 2021); on which, see Bruno Karsenti, "Islam: l'ambivalence politique comme inquiétante étrangeté," *Critique* 903–4 (2022): 934–48. Following Leo Strauss, Ganjipour highlights the similarities between Islam and Judaism, in contrast to Christianity.

23   See Philippe Büttgen, "Théologie politique et pouvoir pastoral," *Annales HSS*, 62 (2007): 1129–54.

24   See Sarris, *Empires of Faith*.

25   See Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 169–70.

26   Carlo Ginzburg has called attention to the significance of this reinterpretation for the formation of European historiography. See Guy G. Stroumsa, *Religion as Intellectual Challenge in the Long Twentieth Century* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 161–78 ("The Hidden Face of History: Carlo Ginzburg on Religion").

27   See F. Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité: présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2012 [2003]). See further F. Hartog, *Chronos: L'Occident aux prises avec le Temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 2020).

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