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Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy in Later Antiquity

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There is a temptation to think that one thing which ultimately distinguished Christians from pagans in antiquity was that the Christians, following the Jews, believed in one God, whereas the pagans believed in many gods. Sometimes this is expressed by saying that the Christians were monotheists, while the pagans were polytheists. Obviously, even in antiquity, Christians were tempted to present matters as if they believed in one God, whereas the pagans believed in many gods. This is the way matters are presented, for instance, by Marius Victorinus.

Marius Victorinus in his short treatise *De hominous recipiendo*, a few lines into the first paragraph, says: 'The Greeks, whom they call Hellenes or pagans, talk of many gods, the Jews or Hebrews of one, but we, as truth and grace have come later, against the pagans talk of one God, against the Jews of the Father and the Son.'

It seems to me that both the Christian and the pagan positions are a good deal more complex than this simple contrast would suggest. But in what follows I will not discuss the position or the positions of the pagans in late antiquity generally, but focus on the vast majority of philosophers in late antiquity. I will argue that, as far as the question whether there is one God or whether there are many gods is concerned, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between the Christian position and the position of Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, and their followers in later antiquity and thus the vast majority of philosophers in late antiquity.

However, before we look at the Platonists, the Peripatetics, and the Stoics, let us very briefly consider the other major groups of philosophers in later and late antiquity.

The Epicureans had no difficulty in believing in any number of gods. But it was crucial for them to insist that we and these gods have nothing

to do with each other, that these gods have not the slightest inclination to destroy their bliss by meddling in human affairs, even if they could interfere, and that hence it is completely irrational to believe that we have anything to fear from them, in this or a supposed afterlife, or that we could expect any help from them or could gain their benevolence by worshipping them. The existence of the gods is simply irrelevant to our lives. This critical attitude of the Epicureans in religious matters must have contributed significantly to their extinction in late antiquity.

There is little of substance to say about the Cynics, except perhaps that they apparently tended to reject traditional religion. Demonax was accused of impiety for refusing to worship Athena, and Oenomaus criticized the oracles, but also sorcery.

Then there were the Sceptics, first the Academics and then the Pyrrhoneans. It was part of their radical scepticism not only to think that they did not know the truth concerning the gods, but even not to know what to believe about them. So in this sense they certainly did not believe in any gods, let alone in many gods. Some of them, though, like Sextus Empiricus, thought that this was perfectly compatible with worshipping the gods of one's forefathers. Given that one had to do something—either to continue in joining the cult of the traditional gods of one's community or to refuse to do so—and given that reason offered no guidance one way or the other, it seemed most sensible simply to continue to do what everybody in one's community since times immemorial had been doing.

But there were also representatives of a form of mitigated scepticism, introduced into the Academy by Philo of Larissa and Metrodorus, whose most familiar representative is Cicero. Through Cicero's later influence in the Latin world, especially among those in the Latin world who had little or no direct access to Greek thought, this mitigated form of scepticism also continued to find its adherents long after it had been given up by philosophers. Augustine, for instance, was attracted to it for many years. A sceptic of this kind would still insist that we do not know the truth about the gods, but he would think that his scepticism was perfectly compatible with the assumption that one had some rational justification for believing certain things, for instance, for believing that there are certain divine beings.

Minucius Felix in his *Octavius*, a dialogue between a pagan and a Christian in which the pagan is won over to Christianity, represents the pagan Caecilius as holding a position of such mitigated scepticism. Caecilius argues that the truth in matters divine is hidden and impos-

sible to know. But, given that there are cults with an ancient tradition, it seems most reasonable to believe in and worship the gods of these traditional cults. Against this Minucius Felix has Octavius argue that, looking at the world and the way it is organized, it seems much more reasonable to believe in one God who providentially governs the universe.

There are various things which are noteworthy or even puzzling about this dialogue. One thing to note is that, if we set aside Epicureanism, whose adherents did not worship any gods, the position espoused by Caecilius is the only philosophical or at least philosophically inspired position in late antiquity I am aware of which reasonably straightforwardly corresponds to our conception of polytheism. Caecilius does believe in and worship many traditional gods, in part precisely because his scepticism, however mitigated it may be, prevents him from committing himself to a more theoretical, more speculative conception of matters divine. In this he is completely unrepresentative of the attitude of philosophers in late antiquity, but, I suspect, also of the general attitude of the educated elite at least in the East. Platonists, Peripatetics, and Stoics all took the position Octavius tries to persuade Caecilius of, namely that there is one God who providentially governs the universe.

Now the phrase 'belief in one God who governs the universe' hides a certain ambiguity, and one might argue that everything turns on this ambiguity. One might argue that the Platonists, the Peripatetics, and the Stoics believe in one highest god who governs the universe, but that they also believe in many other gods. By contrast, one will say, the Christians believe in one and only one God, namely the being which governs the universe. And one will rightly insist that to believe in one highest god is not the same as to believe in one God, even if this highest god should be conceived of in such a lofty fashion as to be thought of as governing the whole universe.

But the matter, primarily for two reasons, is more complicated than this. In the first place, the Platonists, the Peripatetics, and the Stoics do not just believe in one highest god, they believe in something which they must take to be unique even as a god. For they call it 'God' or even 'the God', as if in some crucial way it was the only thing which deserved to be called 'god'.¹ If, thus, they also believe that there are further beings which can be called 'divine' or 'god', they must have thought that these further beings could be called 'divine' only in some less strict, diminished, or derived sense. Second, the Christians themselves speak not only of the one true God, but also of a plurality of beings which can

¹ e.g. Plotinus, *Enn.* 6. 8. 1, line 19 in conjunction with lines 1 and 6.

be called 'divine' or 'god'; for instance, the un-fallen angels or redeemed and saved human beings.

I will return later to the Christian position and to a comparison between it and the position of our philosophers. We have to consider first the position of these philosophers in more detail. Their theology—even in its, for our purposes, most crucial respects—is a vast and complicated subject, and my discussion will therefore be determined more than I would like by considerations of expediency of exposition, mainly of brevity. As a matter of such expediency I begin by considering Aristotle's position.

As is well known, Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* is concerned to identify the ultimate principles of what there is. *Metaphysics Lambda*, presumably originally an independent treatise, makes a fresh start in this endeavour. It is also well known that Aristotle elsewhere, but in particular in *Metaphysics Lambda*, identifies as one of these first principles (indeed in some sense as the first principle) the so-called unmoved mover. On this principle, he claims in *A17*, 1072^b13–14, the heaven and the whole of nature depend. He goes on to refer to this principle as *ὁ θεός*, 'the God' (1072^b25, 28–9, 30). This is what tradition came to regard as Aristotle's God.

This traditional interpretation, however, has been rejected by Ingemar Düring,² and since these objections are highly relevant to our concerns, we should take time to consider them. Düring claims that *ὁ θεός* here cannot refer to a single and unique god, but must be referring to the whole class of divine beings; Aristotle is supposed to use the phrase 'the god' collectively, just as one might talk about 'the French farmer' or 'the tax-payer', not referring to a single and unique individual, but to any and every number of a group of persons, or to them as a group (p. 214).

To assume otherwise, Düring argues (p. 219), is to fall prey to a grievous anachronism, namely to suppose that Aristotle was concerned with the issue of monotheism versus polytheism. He quotes Eduard Meyer who remarks that the Greeks were interested in the question whether there are gods, but hardly in the question whether there is one or whether there are many gods.³ He goes on to claim that to assume that Aristotle is talking of one God when he speaks of 'the god' is to follow a

² I. Düring, *Aristotle* (Heidelberg, 1966).

³ This, incidentally, is a point often repeated in the literature, e.g. by Guthrie in his comments on Xenophanes (W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, i (Cambridge, 1962), 375).

'medieval interpretatio Christiana'. The suggestion is that Aristotle could not be speaking of one God, since the issue of whether god is one or many arises only with Judaism and Christianity.

To begin with a minute point, we find here the re-association of Christianity with the Middle Ages, as if Christianity were not a thoroughly ancient phenomenon, one without which antiquity would not be fully understood, and one which would not be fully understood, at least historically, without understanding its origins in antiquity. There is a more important point, namely the close association made here between monotheism and Judaism or Christianity, as if one had to be confronted with Judaism or Christianity to think of the possibility, and conceive of a reason, to assume that there is just one god. This is obviously mistaken. Antisthenes for instance, as the Christians were well aware, claimed that in reality there is just one god.

It is also untrue that this is exclusively the medieval Christian interpretation of Aristotle; it is already the ancient pagan learned understanding of Aristotle. And this is not surprising, as it so obviously is the correct interpretation. Aristotle begins his argument in *A16* with the assumption that, since time does not have a beginning or an end, there must be something which always has been and always will be moving in a circle. He goes on to argue that this never-ending motion can only be explained if we assume that there is something which itself is not subject to motion or change and which causes this motion. But it would be a mistake to assume that this is Aristotle's argument for the so-called unmoved mover. It is just an argument which purports to show that there must be objects which unceasingly are in motion and that such a motion in each case has to be explained in terms of an eternal object which itself is not in motion. In fact, it turns out in chapter 8, as Aristotle hinted in chapter 6, 1071^b20–2, that there are quite a number of such eternally moving objects, and hence quite a number of such unmoved movers. What Aristotle primarily is concerned to show is not that such eternally moving objects have a certain kind of principle and explanation, but that there is one unique principle which is a principle of everything there is, and in this sense the principle of everything there is. He does so by showing in the second part of chapter 6 and in chapter 7 that there is one object which eternally moves in a circle on whose motion the motions of all other eternally moving objects—and indeed all other motions and changes—depend, namely the heaven of the fixed stars. It follows, given what he has argued at the beginning of chapter 6, that this motion can only be explained in terms of an unmoved mover. It is this

first unmoved mover which he then goes on in chapter 7 to identify as the God.

It should be obvious that it is difficult enough to follow Aristotle in the assumption that the motions of the heavenly spheres each require an unmoved mover. It is impossible to see why Aristotle should compound his difficulties by assuming that there are any number of gods who are involved in moving the one first heaven of the fixed stars. Indeed, Aristotle explains at 8, 1074^a36–7 why this first mover has to be numerically one, rather than just one kind of thing, possibly instantiated by any number of things. He also explains (e.g. 10, 1075^a11) that the relation between God and the world is rather like that of a general to his army: it is a good general who makes for a good army, rather than the other way round. The simile does not make much sense, unless we assume that Aristotle thinks of the God as an individual. For though there are many armies and perhaps some good armies and hence some good generals, there is just one world which, if we follow Aristotle, needs one God. Nor does the final sentence of *Met. A* (1076^a3–4) make any sense on Düring's interpretation 'What there is does not want to be governed badly' (οὐκ ἀγαθὸν πολυκοιρανίῃ· εἰς κοίρανος).

Hence, I conclude that when Aristotle talks about 'the God' he does not use the phrase in that vague sense we sometimes find in classical times in which it might be used interchangeably with τὸ θεῖον and οἱ θεοί to refer to a vaguely conceived divine source of the order of things. On the contrary, Aristotle does mean to talk about one particular being which governs the world. There must be some deep-rooted prejudice at work, if one wants to deny this in the face of all the evidence to the contrary.

But Aristotle's text also allows us to see a crucial point which Düring seems to miss entirely, namely, why, long before the issue of monotheism versus polytheism arose, Greek philosophers had very good reason to assume that there is one unique God who is the, or an, ultimate principle of what there is. Aristotle quite rightly thinks that philosophy from its very beginnings had consisted in an attempt to identify the principles of reality and to explain whatever there is in terms of these. Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* also points out quite rightly that philosophers originally identified these principles with the ultimate material constituents of things, in terms of which they then tried to explain the phenomena. But it is also not surprising that some philosophers should have thought that an explanation just in terms of elementary or basic material constituents was bound to fail: some bits of

earth, air, fire, and water do not in themselves suffice to explain the existence of an object, let alone its behaviour. An object which behaves in a certain way must have a certain structure or organization imposed on its material constituents. It is only because the material is thus organized that the object thus constituted can behave in its characteristic way. Moreover, one might think, it takes somebody to impose this structure or order on the material. And one might finally think that at least in some cases the behaviour of an object is to be understood in terms of the end it tries or is meant to achieve, or the good it aims at. Against this background we readily understand Socrates' remarks in the methodological section in Plato's *Phaedo*. Socrates complains that natural philosophers talk as if one could understand Socrates' behaviour in terms of his physical constituents. And he reports how delighted he was when he first heard of Anaxagoras' theory of a cosmic intellect, only to be bitterly disappointed when he found out that Anaxagoras, having introduced such an intellect, then continued to explain the world in terms of its material constituents.

For our purposes it suffices to point out that it lies in the very nature of the enterprise in which Thales, Anaximander, and later philosophers were engaged that, sooner or later, somebody would claim, and that many would follow him in claiming, that to explain the world we not only need some ultimate material principle or principles but also an agent who imposes an order on this material. It is in this spirit that Plato in the *Timaeus* introduces a demiurge who, looking at the forms or ideas, imposes the order determined or defined by the ideas on matter, a position later doxography summarizes by saying that according to Plato there are three principles: God, the ideas, and matter. And it is for similar reasons that the Stoics say that there are two ultimate principles, an active and a passive one, God and matter.

It also lies in the very nature of the enterprise that one tries to explain the world in terms of as few principles as possible. The principles themselves, moreover, must be such that they themselves do not stand in need of further explanation. For they are supposed to constitute the final answer to any question. Given this, it would ruin the whole enterprise to assume more than one principle which is divine, unless there turns out to be some special reason for this. A pressure is generated by the very nature of the enterprise to have either no God or a God whose postulation has enough explanatory power for there to be no need to postulate further gods as ultimate active principles. Having a number of them would create immediate pressure to try to reduce them to an ulterior

single divine principle. Thus, if one does postulate an intelligent agent as an ultimate principle at all, one will try to postulate a unique, single agent of sufficient power, unless there are overwhelming considerations to the contrary. This will be done for the same reason as one will try to get away with postulating fire as one element, rather than a whole number of irreducibly different kinds of fire. Hence, though it is perfectly true that Aristotle did not have to concern himself with the question of monotheism versus polytheism, he, like Plato before him and philosophers like the Stoics after him, had a precise reason to assume that there was one particular, individual, active principle which governs the world.

We may ask why such an active principle should be regarded as divine. Here it will be relevant that even the first philosophers of nature, when they tried to explain how everything had arisen out of such stuff as their *arche* or their *archai*, used the language appropriate to the divine for their first principles. Presumably this has something to do with the fact that their accounts were meant to replace creation stories. Second, it lies in the nature of a first principle, as the philosophers quickly came to see, that it is not subject to generation and corruption itself and hence in this sense is immortal. Third, an active principle was seen as an intelligent, indeed wise, agent, being not only immortal but also, in his wisdom, not beset by the troubles and confusions we mortals suffer from and thus enjoying a life of never-ending bliss. Tellingly, it is only after Aristotle in *A7* has explained that his first unmoved mover is an intellect enjoying an eternal life of bliss that he identifies him as the God (1072^b24–30).

It may be noted in passing that Aristotle seems to go out of his way to characterize this divine principle as a living, thinking being. This should be enough to set aside another prejudice, namely, the view that, though ancient pagan thought may have moved in the direction of postulating one supreme God, this God was conceived of more as an abstract principle than as a concrete person. There is nothing impersonal about Aristotle's God, or the God of the Stoics, or the God of Numenius or Plotinus.

What we have said explains why Aristotle regards the first unmoved mover as a god; it also explains why he regards the first unmoved mover as a unique individual. We need numerically only one item in our ontology to fulfil the role of a first principle of this kind, and, in the absence of particular reasons to the contrary, there does not seem any place or justification for more than one item of this kind. And this already in itself goes some way to explain the special status of the first

unmoved mover as a divine being. But to the extent that we regard a god not only as a living, intelligent being which is immortal and enjoys eternal bliss, but also as a source of order and goodness, and as of some power, the first unmoved mover also, in this regard, has a not only very elated but a unique status. As the principle of everything it is, according to Aristotle, the ultimate source of all order and goodness in the world. And Aristotle explicitly attributes unlimited power to it. So when Aristotle talks about the God, he means one particular divine being whose status, even as a divine being, is so unique that it can be called 'the God'.

It is perhaps not entirely inappropriate to dwell on this point for a moment. Any theory which postulates one divine being as a first principle automatically puts the status of all other beings one may want to call 'divine' into a perspective in which their divinity appears limited, subordinate, derived. So, for instance, the traditional gods will appear at best as very derivative beings with a highly subordinate role to play in the general order of things. Indeed, given the way philosophers conceive of the order of things and the derivation of subordinate beings from first principles, no philosopher accepts the traditional gods as they are traditionally represented. Aristotle, for instance, at the end of chapter 8 of *Metaphysics Lambda* explains that the traditional stories about the gods are due to the fact that our ancestors grasped that nature is governed by the divine and that there are gods, namely immaterial substances, but that they cast these simple truths into the form of the traditional myths. Otherwise ordinary people would have accepted these simple truths. Their belief in these traditional stories also serves an important social function, for instance in that it makes people more inclined to abide by the laws. Even if the order of things envisaged leaves room for beings which can be called 'divine', it is clear that they will be so fundamentally derivative and subordinate to the God that, for instance, talk of a 'highest God' is in some ways quite misleading. For the relation between a first principle and those things which depend on the principle involves a much more radical subordination than that involved in a pantheon or hierarchy of gods with one god at the apex. A fortiori, the analogy with Zeus is somewhat misleading. The relation between the first principle and other divine beings is quite unlike the relation between Zeus and, for instance, the other Olympian gods. It would be quite misleading to say that somebody who believes in one divine first principle and five further divine beings believes in six gods. To say this would be to disregard the categorial difference between first

principles and the things derived from them. This becomes particularly clear if we consider the Platonist position. The demands Platonists tend to make on first principles are so stringent that most Platonists come to insist that God cannot be regarded as a being, let alone as a further being, as one further item on a list of things which are. Hence, if one talks of a first principle as 'the God', and yet allows for other things to be called 'god', the predicate 'god' here will not be used in the same way or sense. It is for this reason that Aristotle can call the first unmoved mover 'the God' and then go on to talk of other beings as gods, as if there were no conflict. There is no conflict because the way the first principle is a god is unique.

Given that it is clear that there is a substantial sense in which Aristotle believes in one God, though there are many other things he is prepared to call 'divine', let us briefly consider these. Having introduced the first unmoved mover in *A6-7* as a substance which is not subject to any kind of change, but rather is the ultimate source or principle of all change, Aristotle in chapter 8 turns to the question whether there are other substances which also are not subject to any change and, if so, how many they are. He argues that we have to postulate forty-seven spheres to account for the motion of the planets, the divine bodies, as he calls them (1074^a30), and that hence there must be forty-seven further substances which are not subject to change to account for the never-ending rotation of these spheres. It is these substances which, in 1074^b2-3, he calls 'gods'. So, apart from the first unmoved mover, he also calls the unmoved movers of the planetary spheres, and thus of the planets, 'divine'. It is easy to see why he does so. It is part of the order of the universe which depends on the first unmoved mover that there be immaterial substances, pure unembodied minds who, being immortal, enjoy eternal bliss contemplating the first unmoved mover and the order which depends on him. But it is also part of the order of the universe that there be planets which eternally move in the same way, not to be derailed from their steady path by passion, and which thereby can be seen to be superbly intelligent and wise beings which are equally immortal and enjoy eternal bliss. Obviously there are great difficulties in understanding the details of this, but the main point for us seems rather simple and straightforward. On Aristotle's view of the world it is part of the order of things determined by the God that there be intelligent, living beings which are not subject to generation or corruption and which enjoy a life of eternal bliss. This alone, given ordinary Greek usage, suffices to call them 'divine'.

I have discussed Aristotle in some detail, because he offers us in *Metaphysics Lambda* a short text on the basis of which we can establish and understand the relevant points with considerable confidence. Once we have understood the crucial points in his case, it is also much easier to see them in the case of Stoicism and Platonism, though the evidence to be taken into account there is much more complex and controversial. Since Platonism raises a further problem relevant to our inquiry, I will begin with the Stoics.

According to the Stoics there are two ultimate principles, an active and a passive one, God (or the God), and matter. There is a controversial problem of interpretation here which I will not try to resolve. Given the way God and matter are contrasted, one might think that God is conceived of as immaterial. But the Stoics not only think that all beings are material or corporeal, they also, more specifically, identify God or Zeus with a certain kind of fire which is supposed to be intelligent, active, and creative. So perhaps we have to assume that the Stoics distinguish two aspects of the fiery substance which is Zeus, two aspects, though, which in reality are never separated, namely its divine, creative character, and its material character. Thus God and Zeus are the same to the extent that Zeus is active, creative, intelligent. Now the Stoics also believe that the world is a rational animal that periodically turns entirely into the fiery substance which is Zeus. What happens is that the reason of this animal is itself constituted by this fiery substance, and that this reason slowly consumes and absorbs into itself the soul and the body of the world. Thus, in this state of conflagration, the world, the reason of the world, and Zeus completely coincide. But as soon as the conflagration has taken place, Zeus, the creative fiery substance, sets out to create the world anew, or, put differently, the reason of the world creates for itself a new soul and a new body. Zeus does so by partially turning himself first into air and then through air into water and ultimately into earth and, again, fire, while at the same time completely pervading these newly created elements, mixing them and mixing with them in such a way as to shape them into the world as we know it. As part of this process the stars arise which consist of this divine fiery substance and human beings which are governed by reason, which also involves a high concentration of the fiery substance. Some Stoics believe that this human reason, if perfected, has enough stability to survive the death of a human being, only to be reabsorbed into Zeus or cosmic reason at the next conflagration.

The details of this are complicated or even controversial, but the points which concern us stand out clearly enough. On this view of the

world there is one intelligent being which governs the world and which alone survives all of its changes, including the periodic conflagrations. It alone is eternal. All other beings are the product of its providential creation. So we readily understand that it, being a first principle in this way, should be called *the God*. That this for the Stoics means that, strictly speaking, there is just one God is made clear also by the following detail. Plutarch (*De comm. not.* 1051 E–F) reports that everybody is in agreement that a god is not subject to generation and destruction, and he then specifically quotes Antipater of Tarsus for the Stoic view that the natural notion of a god is one according to which a god is enjoying a life of bliss, is not subject to destruction, and is provident for, or beneficent of, human beings. On the basis of this he accuses Chrysippus of contradicting himself when he claims that fire or Zeus alone among the gods is not subject to destruction (1052a; *De comm. not.* 1077 E), whereas the other gods are consumed by the fire in the general conflagration. But it is also clear how the apparent inconsistency is to be resolved. We also learn from Plutarch (*De comm. not.* 1075 c) that the Stoics distinguish between 'not subject to destruction' and 'not subject to death' or 'immortal'. This allows them to say that Zeus alone is not subject to destruction, but that the other gods are at least immortal in that they last till the conflagration, when they do not die, but are reabsorbed by Zeus. Nevertheless, this clearly means that only Zeus satisfies the criterion for being a god fully, whereas all other gods only satisfy the criterion by not insisting on strict indestructibility, but by accepting a weak form of immortality. It is only in this diminished sense that things other than Zeus can be called 'god'. More importantly, though, these other gods only exist because the God has created them as part of his creation of the best possible world, in which they are meant to play a certain role. The power they thus have is merely the power to do what the God has fated them to do. They act completely in accordance with the divine plan.

Given this radical subordination one may ask why the Stoics are prepared in the first instance to accommodate a plurality of gods by the questionable manoeuvre of attributing a rather tenuous form of immortality to them. Here we have to take note of a significant shift in the attitude towards traditional stories about the gods. As we saw, Aristotle was only willing to acknowledge that these stories had a minimal element of truth, which truth was presented in mythical form both to make it acceptable to ordinary people and also because of the social utility of popular belief in the truth of these stories. By Aristotle's time there was also a tradition of reinterpreting these stories allegorically to

justify them as true, though perhaps veiled, accounts. This tradition the Stoics take up and carry to an extreme. They see these traditional stories about the gods as veiled accounts of the truth as explicated by Stoic physics. So they will identify each of the traditional gods with some entity in true physics, Zeus with the creative fire, Hera with air, Poseidon with water, etc. They will account for the divinity of the stars in terms of their being constituted by the divine fiery substance. They might, in particular, account for the divinity of the sun as the seat of the divine reason which governs the world, analogous to the heart which, according to the Stoics, is the seat of the *hegemonikon* of a human being, i.e. its reason. They might account for the quasi-divinity of the souls, or rather minds, of the departed who have achieved wisdom and virtue in terms of their high proportion of the fiery substance which gives them the stability to continue to live the life of the mind until the conflagration. The crucial point in all this is that the Stoics see themselves able, by virtue of their theory, to accommodate popular beliefs concerning the gods. That they do so does not mean, though, that they accept these stories and the corresponding religious beliefs at face value, and it does not mean that they are prepared to compromise their belief in one God, the God who providentially governs the universe. It is very clear in their case, even more so than in Aristotle's, that these further divine beings are radically dependent on the God and only exist because they have a place in the divine order of things. Far from governing the universe or having any independent share in its governance, they only share in the execution of the divine plan; they are not even immortal, strictly speaking. Theirs is a rather tenuous divinity.

When we come to the Platonists, matters for a variety of reasons are more complicated, too complicated to do justice here even to all the major details. Let us begin with the view concerning first principles, which later doxography ascribes to Plato. According to Plato the first principles are supposed to be God, the ideas, and matter. The report clearly is based on the *Timaeus*, according to which the world is created by a demiurge who realizes the intelligible order defined by the ideas in an antecedently given matter to the extent that this is possible. This creation not only includes the stars but also the soul of the world and the souls of human beings. Now one crucial element of the account is that the beings which have been created by the demiurge directly, having been created, are not by their very nature eternal, but are granted immortality by the demiurge who promises to see to it that they will not face death and destruction (*Tim.* 41 A). This allows Plato to talk not only

of the world (34 A, B), on his view a living intelligent animal, but also of the planets (similarly intelligent beings) and certain beings or powers which reveal themselves in the workings of the world as gods. So there is one God, but there are also other beings which are called 'divine', though they are created, because they are by Divine grace immortal and enjoy a good life. But they only exist as part of God's creation and they are immortal and hence divine only due to the God's benevolence or grace, that is to say they owe their very divinity to God. So far, then, the Platonist account, in its essential features, is very much like that of Aristotle and that of the Stoics.

In late antiquity, though, this account becomes much more complex in the following way. The one God of the *Timaeus*, the demiurge, comes himself increasingly to be seen as something of considerable internal complexity, a complexity according to later Platonists only hinted at in the *Timaeus*, for instance when Plato speaks of the world as an *agalma* of the eternal gods, as if there were a plurality of truly divine beings of which the creation is a reflection.

The reasons for this are easy to see. If we think of the demiurge as being constrained by the ideas as something antecedently given to him, this in itself, combined with the complexity introduced into him by assuming that he tries to realize these ideas in the visible world, seems to be incompatible with his status as an absolutely first principle. Hence we see that Platonists begin to distinguish between God (the first principle) and the divine intellect (mind or reason, which will be identified with the ideas as the thoughts of the divine intellect). Once we come to Numenius and to Plotinus we have a further distinction between the divine intellect which is purely contemplative and a third divine principle which is demiurgic or creative. Thus Numenius can talk of a first and of a second God and, by implication, of a third God. But Platonists after Plotinus think they can articulate this trinity further.

In spite of this vertical articulation of the God into a first God, a second God, and a third God and further subarticulations, the plurality thus introduced is not supposed to obscure the fact that we are just dealing with different hypostases of the one God. The second God, very roughly put, is simply the first God who in himself is beyond being and intelligibility, but reveals himself at the level of being and thinking as the divine intellect. Thus the vertical articulation is supposed to preserve the unity of the one God. What is true of his vertical articulation also is true of a certain horizontal articulation. Consider the divine intellect. It is identified with the Platonic ideas. It is thus a plurality of things, indeed

a plurality of intellects. For each idea is a divine thought, and each thought is an intellect. And yet the divine intellect is not supposed to lose its unity as one intellect. So the one God turns out to be many things, without thereby losing his unity. Instead of pursuing this, though, I want to consider one detail concerning the divine intellect. According to the *Timaeus* the rational part of the soul is created by the demiurge himself and thus immortal by divine grace. But Plotinus and others consider the possibility that there are ideas, not only of kinds of things, but in the case of man also of individual men. So these will be intellects, too. This raises the question whether the individual human intellect may not be part of the divine intellect insofar as the divine intellect contains the idea of the individual human being. In any case, Platonists generally assume that the human intellect is part of the intelligible rather than the sensible world. And this introduces a lack of clarity as to whether there are two creations or just one, whether part of the intelligible world is already created.

However this may be, we see that the God who creates, according to later Platonists, in truth reveals an internal structure and multiplicity which allows us to talk not only of uncreated gods, but also of any number of gods which are created but proceed from the first principle. But this plurality is not supposed to affect the unity of God. After all, the divine intellect is just the intellect of God, the way God presents himself in thought. Hence, though the Platonists can talk of many gods, at the level both of created and of uncreated beings, this is not supposed to undermine the belief that there is one God.

To sum up our discussion so far. There is a clear sense in which Platonists, Peripatetics, and Stoics and thus the vast majority of philosophers in late antiquity believed in one God. They believed in a god who not only enjoys eternal bliss, but in a god who as a god is unique in that he is a first principle which determines and providentially governs reality. There are, as part of the divinely imposed order of things, derivative beings which also enjoy immortality and bliss, and which, hence, following Greek usage, are also called 'divine'. But in the case of Plato's and the Stoics' created gods even this immortality exists only through divine benevolence and, for the Stoics, is not even a genuine immortality. The fact that they assume the existence of such divine beings does not in the least conflict with their belief in one God. This simple picture is complicated in the case of late Platonists by their belief in uncreated gods. Though they are completely subordinated to the first principle they are nevertheless divine in a much more powerful sense

than the secondary created gods we have been considering. This reflects the fact that they are so intimately connected with the first principle as to be articulations of what is already contained in it. But for this very reason belief in them would surely threaten the belief in one God as little as the belief in God's justice or God's wisdom would threaten the belief in one God who is absolutely simple.

I want to conclude this part of my argument by referring to at least some of the evidence which indicates not only that the vast majority of philosophers in antiquity believed in one God who providentially governs the universe, but that this is also what they were perceived to believe by the ancients themselves.

In later antiquity there were two basic issues for theology: namely, whether there is a God who governs the universe and whether God is provident. Stoics, Peripatetics, and Platonists, and thus the vast majority of philosophers, answered both questions affirmatively, whereas Epicureans answered them negatively. These also are the only theological issues which *Sextus Empiricus* at the end of the second century AD addresses in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. He does so in the context of considering the views of the dogmatic philosophers concerning the principles and causes of reality (3. 1 ff.). Dogmatic philosophers, according to Sextus, distinguish between active and passive or material principles. They claim that the active principles are more important, or may be more justly called 'principles', than the material ones. And the majority of philosophers, he says (3. 2), claim that the most important active principle is a God, or, as he also puts it (3. 3, 4, 5, 6), the God. He then attacks this view arguing that it is quite unclear how we are supposed to conceive of a god and that, moreover, it is quite unclear whether there is such a thing as a god. He then goes on to consider the question whether we should think of a god as provident for the things in this world (3. 9 ff.). Here he adduces Epicurean arguments against providence. He concludes his remarks in this way (3. 12):

As a result of this we come to think that perhaps those who insist on claiming that there is a god are forced to be impious. For in claiming that he is provident about all things they will be saying that he is the cause of all evil, but if they claim that he is provident only about some things or nothing, they will be forced to say either that the God lacks good will or is weak; yet obviously only people who are impious will say this.

So Sextus' discussion, to say the very least, strongly suggests that at the end of the second century AD, if you were a philosopher you would

usually assume that there is a god, the God, who is the most important cause or principle of reality and who is provident. And this God would not be conceived of as just the highest of a plurality of gods, but as unique in his divinity, as the expression 'the God' shows.

We get the same impression from many other texts, for instance from Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho*. Trypho, a Jewish refugee from the war in Palestine, has been attending the lectures of a philosopher. Questioned by Justin as to whether he really expects to draw the kind of enlightenment from philosophy one gets from Moses and the prophets, Trypho answers, 'Don't the philosophers talk all the time about God and do not their enquiries always concern divine monarchy and providence?' (1. 3). Justin's response (1. 4) is less enthusiastic. He agrees, but complains that the great majority of philosophers have not sufficiently considered the question whether there is one God or whether there are many, and whether divine providence extends down to each individual among us or whether, as some philosophers argue (he has Aristotle in mind), is limited to the general order of things. Yet even Justin's criticism confirms that the vast majority of philosophers in the later second century AD believe in one God who governs the universe and who is provident to some degree. What Justin's response also shows is that he has some difficulty appreciating the distinction between the sense in which there is one God and the sense in which there are many gods, or at least that he sees some lack of clarity in this distinction. Justin's response may also reflect the fact that the distinction was not always sufficiently clear to the pagans.

Before I turn to the Christians, it must be at least briefly noted that there was a further source of confusion. Both Stoics and Platonists assumed that the world above the earth was filled with demons. Not all of them were divine. Some of them were far from living a life of bliss, because they were far from being wise and virtuous, if not outright malevolent. Nevertheless, they might have extraordinary powers and knowledge, for instance, about the future. If one knew how to do it, one could, because of their weaknesses, manipulate them to exercise these powers for one's own benefit or to reveal their knowledge. This line between good demons and questionable demons, or rather the line between enrolling the help of good demons and manipulating questionable demons, was not so easy to draw.

If we now turn to the *Christian view*, it should be clear that the position Minucius Felix' Octavius converts Caecilius to, namely, the belief in one God who providentially governs the world, does not differ

from the belief of most pagan philosophers. But, one might argue, the difference is that the Christians only believe in the one god who providentially governs the world, whereas the pagans also believe in many other gods. I have already tried to explain that this is a prejudicial and misleading way to put the matter: the pagans believe in one God, but also in further beings which, for reasons which are easy to understand, they also are willing to call 'divine', without thereby wanting to deny that there is a strict sense in which there is one and only one God. But we should not overlook that the Christians themselves, in fact, did not differ from the pagans in being willing to acknowledge a sense in which there are further beings which can be called 'gods'.

Though the Christians in general avoided speaking of gods in the plural (in particular the West had difficulties with the plural, both in the case of the Trinity, and in general; cf. Synod of Rome 382, Tomus Damasi, §24, Denzinger 176) there were doctrinal reasons which made it difficult for them to deny that even created beings could be called 'divine' or 'gods'. After all, there was scriptural authority for this. Scripture, Psalms for instance, is full of references to the gods in the plural, for example in such phrases as 'the God of the gods' (Ps. 49: 1). Even the Suida, hardly a source suspect of unorthodoxy, has an entry *theoi*, drawn from *Theodoretus* (*In Ps.*, PG 80. 1229c), explaining 'those created in the divine image who have managed to preserve the image undefiled' and referring to Psalms 49: 1. Origen (*C. Celsum* 5. 4) refers to this and other passages to show that talk of 'gods' as such must be unobjectionable, and so does Augustine (*De civ. Dei* 9. 23). Origen takes Scripture to refer to the angels. After all, they do enjoy a life of eternal bliss. Augustine in 9. 23 takes Scripture to refer in this way both to angels and to the saints, because they are immortal and blessed. Notoriously, Arnobius in his *Adversus Nationes* repeatedly speaks of 'gods'; as if he believed in a plurality of divine beings (e.g. 6. 3). This has given rise to great puzzlement and been taken to be an indication of Arnobius' lack of proper instruction in Christian doctrine. But presumably Arnobius, too, is just referring to the angels. We also find Boethius in *Contra Eutychem* (1. 29) speaking of 'God and the other divine beings', thinking apparently of the angels (2. 28).

So we understand why the pagan philosopher to whom Macarius Magnes responds in his *Monogenes* (4. 21) can claim that surely it is just a matter of terminology whether one calls these beings 'angels' or 'gods'. This claim presupposes that from the point of view of this pagan philosopher there is really no issue here between Christians and pagans.

It is often assumed that the philosopher in question, in fact, is Porphyry.⁴ What speaks in favour of this hypothesis, among many other things, is that Augustine in *De civ. Dei* (9. 23) seems to respond to the same point, and, indeed, to agree that it is just a matter of terminology whether one calls these beings 'gods', provided that they are wise and virtuous. Augustine says:

If the Platonists prefer to call these 'gods' rather than 'daemons' and to count them among those of whom their founder and master Plato writes that they are gods created by the highest God, let them say what they want. For one should not engage with them in a controversy of words. For if they say that they are not blessed by themselves, but by being attached to him who has created them, then they say precisely what we say, whichever word they may use for them. . . . For even as far as the word is concerned, that they call creatures which are immortal and blessed in this way 'gods', this is not really a matter of disagreement between us and them.

What is no longer a matter merely of terminology is the doctrine of the deification of man, that is to say the doctrine that human beings who have been redeemed and saved are divine, which Augustine also alludes to as we saw. As we noted, there are many passages in the Psalms which speak of 'gods' in the plural.⁵ Another such passage is Psalms 81: 6: 'I have told you: you are gods.' The commentary attributed to Cyril of Alexandria again takes this to be a reference to human beings who by participation are gods, and so do others. Athanasius in *Contra Arianos* (1. 9) has no difficulty in referring to this text according to which even human beings might be divine. He argues that Arius' mistake does not consist in regarding Jesus as God, but in regarding him as divine only by participation, rather than as divine in himself, as we might become divine by participation, but, of course, are not divine in ourselves. This is a view which we also find in Origen. Thus, for instance, in the *Commentary on John* (2. 16–17) Origen discusses the difficulty some Christians have in acknowledging the divinity of Christ for fear of compromising their belief in one God. Origen thinks that the way to resolve the problem is this: we have to distinguish between 'the God' with the article and a 'god' without the article. There is the Father who is the God, but this does not prevent us from believing that there is a god or even

⁴ Cf. A. von Harnack, *Porphyrius, 'Gegen die Christen'*, 15 Bücher Zeugnisse, Fragmente und Referate (Abh. Berliner Akad. d. Wiss. 1916, no. 1), fr. 76.

⁵ One such passage is Psalms 95: 4. Cyril of Alexandria (PG 69. 1244D) warns us not to take this to be a reference to the saints, not because the saints cannot be called 'gods', but because the next line, he argues presumably wrongly, makes it clear that the Psalmist is speaking of demons.

that there are many gods by participation in the God. And again he refers to Psalms 49, 'The God of gods, the Lord has spoken', to assure us that there is nothing wrong about speaking about gods in the plural. The fact that later orthodoxy will think that Christ is placed here on the wrong side of the participation relation and that Origen thus reveals himself as a precursor of Arius should not distract us from the fact that Origen distinguishes between the God and a god in the very terms I have ascribed to pagan philosophers, and that there is nothing unorthodox about the distinction as such. So the Christians are willing, and even committed, to talk of a plurality of created beings as 'gods'. For they take it to be understood that these beings are not the God himself, but mere creatures of him.

But what about the uncreated gods of the Platonists? It is also Origen who, following the precedent of Philo of Alexandria, but more importantly of Numenius, can speak of a first and a second God, referring to the persons of the Trinity. In this he is followed by Eusebius (e.g. *PE* 11. 14. 3). It is true that later orthodoxy will avoid this language which reflects Origen's subordinationist view of the persons of the Trinity. But even authors of unquestionable orthodoxy will not deny that there are three uncreated persons each of whom can be called 'God'. Yet neither the language of a first, a second, a third God, nor the language of a plurality of divine persons is supposed to undermine the Christians' claim to believe in just one God. A Platonist does not have any difficulty in accepting this.

Given all this, I do not see any way in which the Christians are in a position to claim that they believe in one God, whereas the pagan philosophers believe in many gods. We have seen that the belief in one highest god, combined with the belief in many gods, might or might not be monotheistic, depending on whether or not the many gods are subordinated to the highest god in the appropriate way. If, as in the case of our philosophers, they are subordinated to the first principle in the way they are taken to be subordinated to it, the fact that these philosophers also talk of many gods does not in the least mean that they do not believe in one God precisely in the way the Christians do.

This seems so obvious as to raise the question how Christians even could have been tempted to present things otherwise. To make this question appear more pressing, I want to consider what might seem to be a more differentiated and more promising attempt to distinguish between pagans and Christians, namely Augustine's in the *De Civitate Dei*. This has the added advantage that Augustine specifically addresses

the philosophers. I want to argue that this attempt is not a particularly successful one. But I hope that its discussion brings us somewhat nearer to an answer to the question why the Christians might have been tempted to claim that the Christians believe in one God, whereas the pagans, even their philosophers, believe in many gods.

As Augustine himself tells us towards the end of his life in his *Retractions* (2. 43 *init.*), he wrote the *De Civitate Dei* in response to those who, after the sack of Rome by Alaric in 410, 'tried to put the blame for its fall on Christian religion, being themselves worshippers of false and many gods, those whom we call "pagans", to use an established term' (*quos usitato nomine paganos vocamus*). The definition is based on Tertullian, *Cor. Mil.* 11.

In the *De Civitate Dei* itself he sets out to show that it is true of even the most respectable among pagan philosophers, the Platonists, that they worship many false gods. Following Augustine's actual argument we can analyse this claim into the following three assertions:

1. even pagan philosophers believe in many gods;
2. these gods, some or all of them, are false gods;
3. even if they are not false gods, it would be wrong to worship some or all of them.

We have already seen that Augustine in the course of his argument concedes that, properly understood, there is nothing wrong as such about believing in many gods.

He also concedes that the sense in which the best Platonists believe in many gods is unobjectionable. So, though Augustine still tries to accuse the pagans of polytheism, the emphasis of his attack has shifted. It is now a question of believing in the right god and of worship. So the suggestion now is that the pagans are in the wrong, because they believe in the wrong gods, that is to say either in pure fictions or in things which, though real, are not divine. Augustine is encouraged in this thought by scriptural authority. In 9. 23 he refers to Psalm 95: 4–5 where we are told that, though there are gods, the gods of the Gentiles are mere demons. Already Origen, in *Contra Celsum* 8. 3–4, had not only referred to five passages in the Psalms to show that besides the God of gods there are gods, but also, on the basis of some passages in Paul, distinguished between gods and so-called gods, and then quoted from the Psalms the same passage according to which the gods of the Gentiles are mere daemons. Superficially, both Origen and Augustine have some evidence to support their claim. Origen (*C. Celsum* 8. 67) can point out that

Celsus defends the worship of demons, and Augustine can rely on Apuleius' *De Deo Socratis* to give him an excuse to spend nine chapters criticizing Apuleius' praise of demons (*De Civ. Dei* 8. 14–22). I will just note that both Stoics and Platonists believed in demons, that there was some lack of clarity or even confusion about the boundary-line between gods and demons, but that no Platonist would have taken a demon who was a demon also in the Christian sense to be a god.

Rather than pursuing this, it seems more promising to take up the general claim that the many gods of the pagans are false in the sense that they are not truly gods, a claim constantly repeated in Christian anti-pagan literature right from its beginnings. Given that the philosophers in question believe in one God and many derivative divine beings, one naturally asks oneself whether the Christians want to claim that all these gods are false or whether they accept that these philosophers at least believe in the one true God, though they also believe in many false gods.

The Christian argument tends to rely on a conception of a god which is in essence the conception that the Stoics' claim to be natural or common (cf. Plut. *De Stoic. ref.* 1051 E–F). A god has to be incorruptible and eternal, that is to say he must be without beginning and end, since anything which has a beginning, at least as far as its nature is concerned, also has an end. He must, moreover, enjoy eternal bliss. This is supposed to exclude his being subject to passions, let alone to moral corruption. And he must be benevolent or provident, in particular towards human beings. Given this notion, it is easy to see how the Christians can argue that neither the God of Aristotle, nor the God of the Stoics qualify. The providence of the God of Aristotle does not extend to the sublunar realm and hence to human beings. Moreover, there is some confusion already in the pagan doxography concerning Aristotle's first principles which allows Christians to think that Aristotle regards ether, the quintessence, and hence the stars as divine (cf. Clem. *Recog.* 8. 15, Athen. *Leg.* 6. 3). But if Aristotle's God is corporeal, he is created and hence not eternal, at least by his own nature. Lactantius notes the conflicting evidence about Aristotle (*Div. Inst.* 1. 5), but is inclined to think that on balance Aristotle believes in a divine intellect governing the world. Even in this case, though, Aristotle's God is ruled out by not being sufficiently provident.

Similarly the God of the Stoics sometimes is rejected on account of his corporeality (cf. Tatian *Ad Graecos* 25; Clem. *Strom.* 5. 14). In fact, it is remarkable that some authors like Athenagoras do not avail themselves of this argument. Athenagoras argues (*Leg.* 20. 3) that the created gods of the Stoics cannot be gods, because they perish in the con-

flagration, but somewhat later (22. 5), in a rather tortuous paragraph in which he makes the same point, he also seems to adduce the Stoic doctrine of the one God as if it were testimony in favour of the Christian belief in one God. He addresses the Stoics: 'if you believe that the highest God is one, has not come into being and is eternal . . .'. So the Christians can argue, as far as the God of the Stoics and the Peripatetics is concerned, that although these philosophers believe in one God, they do not believe in the one true God. But when it comes to the Platonists, Athenagoras, for instance, definitely thinks, as we can see from *Leg.* 6. 2, like most Christians Fathers do, and as Augustine does in *De Civ. Dei* (10. 1), that the God of Plato and the Platonists is the one true God.

So, the picture, as far as the God is concerned, is not entirely clear. Put in terms which are most favourable to the philosophers, Aristotle makes the mistake of not attributing universal providence to God. This need not prevent one, as the attitude of Platonists and some Christians in late antiquity and the Middle Ages shows, from thinking that Aristotle is talking about the God, though his conception of him is limited and inadequate. The Stoics do not make the mistake of denying God universal providence, but think of him as a spiritual, rather than as an incorporeal being. Only the conception of the Platonists seems to be beyond reproach. Nevertheless, all these pagan philosophers believe in the God the Christians believe in, certainly from a time when they are almost invariably Platonists. On the other hand, even at this abstract level, one can see why the Christians might insist that the philosophers in general do not believe in the one true God, since believing in the one God from their point of view would be a matter of believing not only in the one true God, but in 'the God who has revealed himself in the Old Testament and in Christ'.

As far as the created gods are concerned, the Christian argument rarely seems to take into account that they are not meant to be measured by the criteria of what it is, strictly speaking, to be a god. Hence, for instance, Athenagoras' argument against the Stoic secondary gods, which we mentioned earlier, seems to miss the point. He should have argued that they are not even immortal by divine grace, rather than that they are not eternal. He and other Christian authors seem to forget that they themselves want to assume gods by participation. It is easy to see why the Christians are not prepared to regard the elements divine even in the secondary sense. But they can hardly, given their own views, reject Aristotelian immaterial substances, later interpreted as angels, or the

Platonists' secondary gods or good demons or angels. One would also have to discuss under this heading why the Christians reject the divinity of the stars. They are, no doubt, right in this, but one suspects that in this regard the stars fall victim to the Christian's rejection of fatalism and astrology.

This is a very summary discussion of the question of the secondary gods. But even so, it should emerge clearly enough that the Christians are doubtlessly right in rejecting many of these gods as false. But it should be equally clear that, given their own views, they are not in a position to declare all of them as false. Most importantly, given the appropriate kind of Platonism, they are hardly in a position to declare the Platonist gods as false.

It is in part for this reason, I take it, that Augustine finally resorts to the claim that these beings, even if they are gods, should not be worshipped. I say 'in part', because one might argue that to believe in the one God anyway was not just a matter of, as it were intellectually, assuming there to be an entity of a certain kind, but having a sufficient grasp on the fact that it, and it alone, in virtue of being this kind of entity, demanded a certain kind of attitude towards it expressed by worship. One might argue that this attitude was part of what it was to believe in the one God. Hence it is incompatible with this belief to worship other beings, even if they are divine. Augustine argues that, being created, they owe their immortality and their salvation to God. Hence it is absurd to expect salvation from them, when they themselves owe their salvation to divine grace. This again obviously is a complex topic which I can only address very briefly here.

Notoriously in the *De oratione* (15) Origen took the position that only God the Father should be invoked. But obviously there are a number of increasingly wider Christian positions in this regard. One is that God is to be worshipped; another is that God in all of his persons is to be worshipped. Paul (Col. 2: 18) warns the Colossians not to give themselves to the worship of angels, but now the question arises what we mean by 'cult', 'worship', 'invocation'. Even on an orthodox view there is a place for the invocation or even the veneration of the angels and the saints in some sense of these words.

On the pagan side, one crucial text is Plato, *Timaeus* 37 c, according to which the world, itself divine, is itself an image (agalma) of the everlasting gods. We certainly do not expect Plato or any Platonists to worship the world. What we do expect is that they treat the world with respect, given that it is an image of higher things. It is clear, at least in the

case of Platonists, that divine beings form a hierarchy in which the lower beings are images or reflections of the higher beings, and in which each being, however modest its position in this hierarchy, represents the divinely ordained order of things and is a reflection of the God. It is clear even from what Origen quotes from Celsus that Celsus argues that we should pay respect to or even worship demons because in doing so we show respect for God and the divine order. This suggests a line of thought which justifies the worship of lesser gods, as long as they are understood to be mere images, pale reflections of the God. On the other hand, it is also clear from Augustine (*De Civ. Dei* 10. 26) that Porphyry, at least at times, thought that we should not worship or invoke any secondary gods or angels, but only take them as an example, emulate them. This is a position strikingly similar to the one Origen takes in *Contra Celsum* 5. 5. Origen enjoins us to invoke God only through Christ, and not the angels, but to imitate the angels so that they may be well disposed towards us and that in this way we may achieve a clearer understanding of Christ. Augustine himself points out that Porphyry's view in this regard corresponds closely to the Christian position (*De Civ. Dei* 10 26 *init.*). It should also be pointed out that neither Porphyry nor any Platonist will expect salvation from a secondary god. For salvation consists in the vision of the first principle through which one becomes like God. And this vision one can only achieve oneself—if, that is, God reveals himself to one. Hence I also think that Augustine's claim that even the Platonists worship beings which do not deserve to be worshipped in this generality does not stand up too well to closer scrutiny. Either Platonists do not invoke and worship secondary gods, and from what we know about Platonists like Plotinus it would be incongruous to imagine him as, say, sacrificing to the gods or consulting oracles; or, when Platonists so invoke and worship secondary gods, we have to see whether this does not happen in the rather qualified sense in which the Christians venerate and invoke the saints and the angels.

Nevertheless, it also becomes clear from *De Civ. Dei* 10. 26 what part of Augustine's concern is here: he accuses Porphyry of not sufficiently distancing himself from those who engage in magic and theurgy. At this point it may help to note that, though philosophers always remained critical of traditional religious belief and cult, their attitude towards traditional religion from Aristotle's time onwards became more and more positive. Aristotle had been willing to admit that traditional religious belief contained a very small though important element of truth, but was willing to defend it as the only way ordinary people would

accept this element of truth and because of its social utility. The Stoics and, following them, the Platonists believed that traditional belief by and large was true in the sense that it had an elaborate hidden meaning which corresponded to the truth in whose knowledge salvation consists. If this truth was only accessible to ordinary people in the disguised form of traditional belief, it nevertheless offered them some kind of access to the truth which saves, an access which can be deepened by reflection and philosophical instruction. And it seems that Porphyry took a similar attitude to traditional worship—that, despite of all its distortions, it does reflect the truth and thus, if only properly understood, is perfectly acceptable. If properly engaged in and reflected on, it does put one in touch with a higher reality, which in turn would be a reflection of a yet higher reality and so forth. Hence Porphyry seems to have thought that worship, engaged in the proper way, might put one on the road to salvation. It might be the only way open to a non-philosopher to come nearer to the truth. Some later Platonists took a much more positive attitude towards cult as a means of attaining the truth which saves. In any case Porphyry clearly defended and encouraged the traditional cults of the gods, perhaps even as a means to salvation of a limited kind. Porphyry, of course, did this on the understanding that there was a true reinterpretation of these gods and their cults. And it was open to the Christians to argue, obviously correctly, that the traditional stories about the gods did not contain a hidden message which made them true, but that they were to be taken at face value, and taken this way were an abomination. If this was the position one took, Porphyry's advocacy of the traditional pagan cults could not but seem an invitation to worship false gods.

Porphyry also defended the use of oracles, indeed the use of oracles to gain philosophical knowledge and understanding. For a Christian like Augustine it seemed clear that this involved, if not the appeal to, then the use of questionable demons. So for Augustine oracular cults amounted to the worship of false gods.⁶

Given Porphyry's aggressive defence of paganism and the impact it had, it is perhaps somewhat easier to understand why a Christian like Augustine might be tempted to say in arguing against them that the pagans, even pagan philosophers, instead of worshipping the one true God worship many false gods. But, however far we go in understanding and accepting this claim, it seems that it will not be quite the truth.

⁶ Needless to say, this is not how Porphyry looked at the matter: for him revelation was a genuine possibility, a possibility Christians could hardly deny.

What are we to make of all this? One conclusion which suggests itself is that the pagan philosophers we have been considering, in particular the Platonists, were monotheists in precisely the sense the Christians were. Given this, it is tempting to assume that also the Hellenes Marius Victorinus refers to in the passage quoted at the beginning—at least those among them who thought of themselves as representing, maintaining, and defending the tradition of Hellenicity, for the most part under the influence of the philosophers—were monotheists. We have to be cautious here, though, because, as we have seen, the mere belief in a highest god who rules the universe does not in itself qualify one as a monotheist. But even with this qualification it seems likely that a good part of the educated elite was monotheist. It thus seems all the more puzzling why the Christians insisted on their monotheism as a distinguishing mark.

Another puzzle which arises is that the discussion we have been reviewing from a Christian point of view seems to obscure the real issue. The real issue is whether Jesus is God. The pagan response to this claim, as we can see from Celsus, is that it compromises the belief in one God, for, if it were true, the Christians would believe in and worship two gods, God the Father and Jesus. Moreover, there is no way in which Jesus can be God himself, being a man. He, given his life, cannot even claim to be a divine man. This might go some way to explain the Christian emphasis on pagan polytheism as a polemical response. If the pagans are unwilling to countenance even the possibility that Jesus is God, why should the Christians take the claim seriously that idols and the traditional gods, properly understood, are true reflections of God? The Christians could then go on to argue that, even with a reinterpretation of the traditional gods, the pagans were still believing in and worshipping many false gods, instead of the one true God.

The fact that the Christians availed themselves of this sort of argument to maintain their position should not mislead us, though, into believing that pagans in late antiquity almost by definition were polytheists.

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