EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA AND THE CONCEPT OF PAGANISM

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Abstract

In scholarship the term 'paganism' is often rejected on the grounds that it reflects Christian attempts to project a false unity onto the variety of ancient religions. Although this is true to a certain extent, this paper argues that philosophers of the imperial age already ascribed a fundamental unity to all religions, and that Christian apologists drew on these ideas to formulate their own concept of 'paganism'. The creation of paganism should thus been seen as a dialectical process, not as a one-sided projection.

Introduction: 'Paganism'

It is received wisdom that the term 'paganism' should only be used between inverted commas. The reason for this can be summarised as follows. Invented by Christianity in an attempt to systematise and dismiss the loosely-knit amalgam of traditional Graeco-Roman and new Oriental cults, the concept conveys, as we all know, a wrong impression of coherence and unity to what are in reality the pluralist religions of Greece and Rome.[1] Using the term in modern research equals treading in the footsteps of the Christian apologists who were trying to root out the venom of pagan superstition, and doing so merely perpetuates error and deformation.[2] Admittedly, we witness in Late Antiquity attempts by philosophers like Macrobius and Proclus to adumbrate some kind of system in their traditional beliefs, but these

[1] Christian term: the term *paganus* is in this sense first encountered in two early 4th c. inscriptions: *CIL* 6. 30463 = *ILCV* 1342; CIL 10.2 7112 = *ILCV* 1549. Cf. Chuvin (2002). For the term *hellenismos*, see Bowersock (1990); Cameron (1993); Van Liefferinge (2001). Pluralist religions: see the titles of Beard *et al.* (1998) and Price (1999).

[2] Fowden (1982) 182; Beard *et al.* (1998) 312; Frankfurter (1998) 33; Maas (2000) 166; Rothaus (2000) 305; Leppin (2004) 62.

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are due to the challenge and pressure of Christianity.[3] Like all other deconstructed terms, paganism only survives for want of an alternative, and, for the time being, it should be safely locked up between inverted commas.

Two main attempts to solve this deadlock seem to have been made, but they all lead into the same cul-de-sac. One is that we should use 'polytheism', and conform to current anthropological practice.[4] Polytheism, however, can be easily condemned on the same charges as paganism. As far as we know, the Hellenised Jew Philo of Alexandria was the first to stigmatise Roman and Greek religion as *polytheos*, and the term was later eagerly taken over by Christian authors.[5] With this history, the opposition of polytheism and monotheism turns out to be as much Judaeo-Christian as is that between paganism and Christianity.[6] Moreover, it might not be an adequate term either. Recent work on pagan monotheism has argued that, at least in Late Antiquity, there may have been a monotheistic brain behind the stunning variety of divine faces in Roman and Greek religion.[7] In addition, polytheism may do justice to the fact that there is more than one god in classical religion, but not to the fact that in the Roman and Greek world many religions competed for attraction. Polytheism may thus be as little adapted to describe the reality of ancient religions as the term it is supposed to replace.

On the other hand, one may try to dodge the difficulties involved in assessing theological conceptions (one God or many) by shifting attention to actual ritual practice. How people ritually acted may indeed yield a truer picture of how 'pagans' and 'Christians' really differed or, even, how close they were in many respects.[8] This is a most valuable approach, yet one which in recent years has acquired something of an ideological rigidity. At times it seems to be an axiom that belief is a modern concept, especially influenced by protestant theological reflection (Schleiermacher probably being the main culprit), and consequently utterly unsuitable for Roman and Greek religion where

[3] Chuvin (1991) 9–15; Fowden (1993) 38; Millar (1994) 105; Beard *et al.* (1998) 383–84; Athanassiadi & Frede (1999) 5; Liebeschuetz (1999); Lee (2000) 10.
[4] Fowden (1991) 119; Maas (2000) 166.
[5] E.g. Philo, *De migratione Abrahami*, 69, *De Opificio Mundi*, 171.
[6] Ahn (1993); Barnes (1994) x–xi.
[7] Athanassiadi & Frede (1999).
[8] Rothaus (1996).

belief supposedly did not play a major role at all.[9] I regard this position as an attempt to reify what is in reality a methodological restriction. One can indeed consider the ritual approach as the best one to study ancient religions, because it is easier to access ritual than beliefs or because ritual is the foremost expression of ancient religions. This is different, however, from denying the role of theology, religious psychology and thought in ancient religions altogether, a position that is unsustainable.[10] Moreover, by celebrating ritual, are we not running the danger of embracing another Christian apologetic cliché, which sees paganism as a bunch of rites devoid of intelligent reflection, to which even philosophy could not give a coherent meaning?[11] We should be careful not to identify the opposition between paganism and Christianity with the divide between ritual and belief, a mistake that betrays as much a unilateral understanding of Roman religion as a blindness for the ritual dimension in Christianity.

Ideology is a Hydra: the more of its heads you cut away, the more persistent they are in harassing you. For all their denunciation of ideological misrepresentation in the term 'paganism', the alternatives are themselves not entirely satisfactory. Yet there does not seem to be any real alternative. With the coming of postmodernism, heroes like Hercules are no more and we will have to accommodate life with the Hydra. But life with 'paganism' can be made easier. In what follows, I will practise the archaeology of paganism—archaeology in the Foucauldian sense that is. I want to show that paganism, although it gained its present form in Christian polemic, is essentially a dialectical concept, a construct that incorporates earlier strands of pagan reflection on their own religions. I do not want to repeat what is sufficiently known, namely that Christian anti-pagan polemic exploited for its own purposes the philosophical debates on divination or on oracles and fused it with the Jewish and biblical critique on idolatry.[12] I want to go one step further and show that the concept of paganism we find in Christian apologetics draws for its essential features on ideas already current in Early Imperial philosophical thought. In particular I am

[9] Belief a modern concept: Frankfurter (1998); Rothaus (2000) 4. No role for belief: this tendency can be seen in Price (1999).

[10] Bendlin (2000); King (2003); Rüpke (2004).

[11] Athenagoras, *Presbeia* 13–30. Such ideas also underlie Augustine's argument in *De civ. D.* 6–7.

[12] E.g. Fredouille (1986).

thinking of the idea for which the term 'paganism' is often criticised, namely that all different religions of the Mediterranean constitute in some way a coherent entity. Consequently, it was not under the pressure of Christianity, as is usually claimed, that Graeco-Roman thought started to perceive its religions as a unified whole.

I do not want to suggest that the criticism laid at the door of paganism is entirely unjustified, nor do I want to dismiss the profound influence of Christian polemics on our modern concept of paganism. By dismantling the edifice into its individual building blocks, I hope to show that this concept uses Early Imperial philosophical ideas for its foundations. Even when denouncing the essentially unsuited nature of paganism to describe the Greek and Roman religions and its birth in Christian polemic, one will have to accept that this concept originated in a dialectical relationship with pagan thought itself.

Eusebius of Caesarea's Concept of Greek Religion

All this cannot be done in a single paper and so I will concentrate on one important work, one of the places where 'paganism' is born: the *Praeparatio Evangelica* of Eusebius of Caesarea, a massive fifteen volume work written in the early 4th c. A.D. (between 313 and 324). As I will argue, Eusebius seems to have drawn his concept of 'Greek religion' (what we would call 'paganism') from earlier philosophical reflection on the subject. The coherence and essential characteristics he ascribes to paganism seem to have come from 2nd c. Middle-Platonist authors, read and quoted by Eusebius himself.

The *Praeparatio Evangelica* is a work only Eusebius could write. Just like his *Church History* or his *Life of Constantine*, it uses traditional literary motifs as a springboard in order to create something new and hard to classify. Its fifteen books are half of a gigantic apologetic enterprise. The *Praeparatio Evangelica* aims at showing that the Christians had good reasons to abandon Greek traditions in favour of those of the 'barbaric' Hebrews.[13] In the sequel, the *Demonstratio Evangelica* of twenty books, Eusebius shows why the Christians did not simply convert to Judaism but established a tradition of their own.[14] No other Christian apology

[13] *PE* 1.1.11–12, 1.5.2, 1.5.11–12, 1.9.1.
[14] *PE* 15.1.8–9, 15.62.16–18, *DE* pr. For this topic, see now Johnson (2006).

can rival, in scope and in length, Eusebius' *Praeparatio Evangelica*, which attempts no less than an overview of the religious traditions of the ancient world. To do this, Eusebius needed to know what paganism was, or more precisely, in his terms, what Greek religion consisted of. He apparently did: throughout the *Praeparatio Evangelica*, he uses an almost identical definition of Greek religion.[15] As I hope to show, it is not without interest. The following two passages may suffice to give a first impression of Eusebius' definition of paganism:

> Ποίας δὲ καταξιωθήσεσθαι συγγνώμης τοὺς τοὺς ἐξ αἰῶνος μὲν παρὰ πᾶσιν Ἕλλησι καὶ βαρβάροις κατὰ τε πόλεις καὶ ἀγροὺς παντοίοις ἱεροῖς καὶ τελεταῖς καὶ μυστηρίοις πρὸς ἁπάντων ὁμοῦ βασιλέων τε καὶ νομοθετῶν καὶ φιλοσόφων θεολογουμένους ἀποστραφέντας, ἑλομένους δὲ τὰ ἀσεβῆ καὶ ἄθεα τῶν ἐν ἀνθρώποις;
>
> How can they be pardoned, the people who turned away from the divinities that traditionally received worship among all Greeks and barbarians in the cities and the countryside, in all kinds of temples, initiations and mysteries, by all the kings and lawgivers, and philosophers; the people who then chose from among mankind's achievements, the irreligious and atheistic? (*PE* 1.2.3)

> Καὶ δὴ καί ἐν τοῖς λοιποῖς ἔθνεσι, κατὰ πάσας χώρας τε καὶ πόλεις, ἔν τε ἱεροῖς καὶ μυστηρίοις, αὐτὰ δὴ ταῦτα καὶ ὅσα τούτοις ὅμοια παρεφυλάττετο.
>
> And also, in the other nations, across all countries and cities, in the temples and the mysteries, these rites (Phoenician and Egyptian), and others similar to them, were observed. (*PE* 10.4.6)

These and many other passages scattered over the *Praeparatio* presuppose a standardised concept of Greek religion.[16] Its comprehensiveness is striking. Its geographical scope is explicitly defined as widely as possible: paganism is defined as the religion professed both by Greeks and barbarians—the Romans hardly play a role in the *Praeparatio*—and it is practised both in the cities and in the countryside.[17] Its principal manifestations are mentioned: temples and mysteries, obviously juxtaposing

[15] This feature has gone unnoticed in scholarship. Even the recent book of A. Kofsky (2000) on Eusebius' anti-pagan polemic has omitted to analyse Eusebius' concept of paganism.

[16] *PE* 1.10.55, 2.5.3, 5.1.1, 14.9.5, 15.1.2–3.

[17] The Roman tradition is produced once as an example of a purer form of worship (2.8), based on Dionysius of Halicarnassus.

public and secret cult. It is, finally, the religion taught by different kinds of people: kings, lawgivers and philosophers.

At first sight, the comprehensiveness and fixed character of this definition are enough to prove that it represents an outsider's view on Greek religion. No Greek would define his own religion in this way. But this does not necessarily have to mean that the elements from which it is composed are made up by Eusebius. Indeed, Eusebius is here reflecting earlier philosophical thought on religion, as we can see by observing two elements in this definition: first of all, the essential identity of the religions of all the different people of the Mediterranean (and hence the world) is assumed; and secondly, the mystery cults seem to occupy a remarkably important position in this unified view on religion.

All Religions are One

In the passages quoted above, it is assumed that the religions of the Greeks and of the barbarians are fundamentally identical; Eusebius ascribes the same basic formal characteristics to barbarian and Greek religion. A genealogy explains this formal identity: throughout the *Praeparatio Evangelica*, Eusebius assumes that Greek religion originated in Egypt, then Phoenicia, and that it was then transmitted to Greece:[18]

> Ὥσπερ οὖν τὴν περὶ πλειόνων θεῶν δόξαν τά τε μυστήρια καὶ τὰς τελετὰς καὶ προσέτι τὰς ἱστορίας καὶ τὰς μυθικὰς περὶ θεῶν διηγήσεις τῶν τε μύθων τὰς ἀλληγορουμένας φυσιολογίας καὶ τὴν λοιπὴν δεισιδαίμονα πλάνην παρὰ βαρβάρων εἰλῆφθαι αὐτοῖς φθάσας ὁ λόγος ἀπέδειξεν, ὁπηνίκα τὰ πάντα τοὺς Ἕλληνας, γῆν πολλὴν πλανηθέντας, οὐκ ἀταλαιπώρως μέν, ἐξ ἐράνου δὲ τῶν παρὰ βαρβάροῖς μαθημάτων τὴν οἰκείαν ὑποστήσασθαι θεολογίαν ἐφωράσαμεν (…)
>
> Polytheism, mysteries and initiations, as well as the histories, the mythical stories about the gods, the natural allegories of the myths and all the rest of the superstitious error were taken from the barbarians by the Greeks, as shown in the preceding argument, where we caught the Greeks, having travelled all over the world and not without any trouble, in forming their own theology from the teachings of the barbarians. (10.1.3)

[18] See also *PE* 1.6.7–2.3.

An important role in this process is attributed to Orpheus and Cadmus:

> Οἷς τὰ μὲν ἐκ Φοινίκης Κάδμος ὁ Ἀγήνορος, τὰ δὲ ἐξ Αἰγύπτου περὶ θεῶν ἤ καί ποθεν ἄλλοθεν, μυστήρια καὶ τελετὰς ξοάνων τε ἱδρύσεις καὶ ὕμνους ᾠδάς τε καὶ ἐπῳδάς, ἤτοι ὁ Θρᾴκιος Ὀρφεὺς ἤ καί τις ἕτερος Ἕλλην ἤ βάρβαρος, τῆς πλάνης ἀρχηγοὶ γενόμενοι, συνεστήσαντο.
>
> Mysteries, initiations, the setting up of statues, hymns, chants and incantations, were brought to the Greeks from Phoenicia by Cadmus, the son of Agenor, and from Egypt or elsewhere, by either the Thracian Orpheus or another Greek or barbarian, having become the leaders of this delusion. (*PE* 10.4.4)

All religions are branches of the same tree; for all their sartorial differences, they are in the end identical. This genealogy of Greek religion is maybe the least remarkable feature of Eusebius' definition. Ideas of this sort were long current in the Roman empire, and Eusebius can quote, for example, Philo of Byblos and Diodorus of Sicily in his support. There is, however, also a philosophical point in retracing religion to the earliest civilisations of mankind. In order to understand this, I must first address the second and less self-evident feature of Eusebius' definition, namely the role he attributes to mystery cults.

Mystery Cults as a Locus of Truth

In the previous quotation, Eusebius, noticeably, first mentions mystery cults and initiations as expressions of Greek religion. Although Eusebius is, throughout his oeuvre, more than once guilty of careless and creative writing, this is not without importance. In other passages, too, mystery cults are seen as central to Greek religion:

> τοῦτο γὰρ δέον ἦν ποιεῖν τοῖς τἀληθὲς ἐπεγνωκόσι, μηδὲ κατάγειν καὶ καταβάλλειν εἰς αἰσχρὰς καὶ ἐμπαθεῖς ἀρρητολογίας καί σκότου μυχοῖς ἀνδρῶν τε οἰκοδομαῖς σφᾶς αὐτοὺς ἐναποκλείειν, ὡς ἔνδον εὑρήσοντας τὸν θεόν, μηδ' ἐν ξοάνοις ἐξ ἀψύχου πεποιημένοις ὕλης τὰς θείας τιμᾶν οἴεσθαι δυνάμεις μηδὲ μὴν γεώδεσιν ἀτμοις αἱμάτων καὶ λύθρου καὶ νεκρῶν ζῴων αἵμασι κεχαρισμένα τῷ θεῷ πράττειν νομίζειν.
>
> That (worshipping the one true God) is what should have been done by those in possession of the truth (philosophers), and not to degrade and debase the venerable name of God into disgraceful and impassioned mysteries; not to shut themselves up in chambers and corners of darkness and human buildings as if they can find God in there; nor to assume that they can worship the divine powers in statues made of inanimate substance; nor to think that they please God with earthy vapours of blood and gore or with the blood of dead animals. (3.13.23)

This impassionate attack on pagan philosophers chides them for claiming to know the truth but still clinging to the traditional cults. According to Eusebius, some pagans, in particular Plato, were close to the Hebrew truth, but even he refused to give up traditional worship. Yet in a polemical reversal of Eusebius' own critique of paganism as a polytheistic aberration,[19] paganism is depicted as what looks like a kind of perverse monotheism:

> Ταύτῃ καὶ Ἕλληνες καὶ βάρβαροι, σοφοί τε καὶ ἰδιῶται, χαμαὶ καὶ ἐπὶ γαστέρα πεσόντες ὡς θεῷ τῇ ἡδόνῃ προσεκύνησαν πρηνεῖς τε σφᾶς αὐτοὺς ἑρπετῶν δίκην καταβάλοντες ἄμαχον καὶ ἀπαραίτητον θεὸν ταύτην ἡγήσαντό τε καὶ ἔστεξαν, ἔν τε ᾠδαῖς καὶ ὕμνοις ἔν τε θεῶν ἑορταῖς ἔν τε ταῖς πανδήμοις θέαις μόνης τῆς αἰσχρᾶς καὶ ἀκολάστου ἡδονῆς τὰ ὄργια καὶ τὰς ἀσέμνους τελετὰς μυούμενοί τε καὶ τελοῦντες, ὡς, εἰ καί τι ἄλλο, καὶ τόδε καλῶς παρ' ἡμῖν ἀνῃρῆσθαι· ἀρχὴ γὰρ πορνείας ἐπίνοια εἰδώλων.
>
> In this way, Greeks and barbarians, wise and simple, fall on the ground and on their bellies and worship Pleasure like a goddess. Having thrown themselves on the ground like reptiles, they think of her as an invincible and inexorable goddess and cherish her, being initiated in chants and hymns, in celebrations of gods and in public festivities, into the *orgia* and the unseemly mysteries of no other divinity than infamous and licentious Pleasure, so that, if nothing else, this was well suppressed by us. The origin of fornication is indeed the invention of idols. (7.2.4).

This passage draws on polemical stereotypes already found in, for example, Dio Chrysostom (12.36–37), where he argues against the Epicureans by establishing links between atheism and hedonism. Both passages, the second even more than the first, indicate that Eusebius saw the mystery cults as the central manifestation of paganism. In the first quotation, mystery cults are clearly the first expression of paganism. In the second, it is suggested that it is especially in the mysteries that the supreme goddess of paganism, vile pleasure, is worshipped.

Other passages bear out the same message that mystery cults are central to paganism. In 4.16.11, Eusebius claims that human sacrifice happened in the mysteries. This is another attempt to brand the mysteries as the full expression of the perversity of Greek religion. For Eusebius, blood sacrifice was a central element of pagan cult, and according to him (and pagans like Porphyry and much earlier

[19] E.g. *PE* 1.1.3, 10.1.3.

Theophrastus) blood sacrifice logically implied human sacrifice.[20] Finally, Eusebius often indicates that another less respectable element of Greek religion, myths, is best found in the mysteries. Myths are indeed best expressed in mystery cults, because the mysteries were organised in accordance with the myths.[21] The stories of fornication and adultery that bring out the perversity of Greek religion, are most correctly preserved in the mysteries.

Yet Eusebius' references to mysteries excel in vagueness and generality, something that is remarkable for an author who is usually keen to flood his reader with superfluous detail. Eusebius seems hardly interested in real mystery cults. Contrary to some earlier and contemporary anti-pagan polemics, like the *Protrepticus* of Clement of Alexandria and the *De errore profanorum religionum* of the convert Firmicus Maternus, mystery cults do not occupy much space in the polemic of Eusebius; only one chapter, taken from Clement, explicitly criticises them.[22] They clearly do not constitute his prime polemical target. Perhaps one might argue that mystery cults were the foremost expression of Greek religion in Eusebius' time, but this is explaining the puzzling by the unknown, as it is hard to determine their importance by the early 4th c.

Eusebius' vagueness on the precise role of mystery cults sufficiently indicates that we should not be looking in the concrete and historical for an explanation, but in the general and philosophical. We should try to grasp what role mystery cults play in his understanding of Greek religion. Only at the end of book 14 does an answer to this query emerge, in a passage where Eusebius opposes the disagreement among the pagan philosophers about the truth to the claim he apparently found among them, namely that certain knowledge about the gods can be revealed in mystery cults and in the theology of the ancients:

> Τί δὲ καὶ περὶ θεῶν νεώτερα χρῆν ἐπιζητεῖν τολμᾶν ἢ στασιάζειν καὶ διπυκτεύειν ἀλλήλοις, εἰ δὴ ἀσφαλὴς καὶ βεβαία θεῶν εὕρησις καὶ γνώσις εὐσεβείας ἀληθὴς ἐν τελεταῖς καὶ μυστηρίοις τῇ τε ἄλλῃ τῶν παλαιτάτων περιείχετο θεολογίᾳ, αὐτὴν ἐκείνην παρὸν ἀκίνητον καὶ ὁμολογουμένην συμφώνως περιέπειν;

[20] Cf. Porphyry, *De Abstinentia* 2.27.1 (drawn from Theophrastus), 4.21.2. Cf. Rives (1995).

[21] *PE* 1.10.55, 2.pr.2, 2.2.63–64, 10.1.2, 15.1.2–3.

[22] The only important attack is *PE* 2.3, quoted from Clem. Al., *Protr.* 11.1–23.1.

> And what use would it have been to dare to inquire into something new about the gods, or to disagree and fight among each other, if the infallible and certain discovery of the gods and the true knowledge of religion were contained in initiations, mysteries and in the rest of the theology of the ancients, this knowledge being treated as unchangeable and unanimously recognised? (14.9.7)

Is there not a contradiction, Eusebius asserts, between the general philosophical claim that true knowledge is to be found in the mysteries and the constant quarrel about the truth among the learned and the wise? For all its brevity, this passage contains the key to the understanding of the role mystery cults play in Eusebius. They are the prime expression of paganism, because, according to the pagan philosophers themselves, it was there that the ancient and most fundamental truth about the gods could be found; mystery cults are part of the theology of the ancients, and in perfect agreement with their teachings.

Let us briefly pause before looking into the sources of this definition of paganism. Eusebius sees in the religions of the Mediterranean an essential unity, as they all derive from primitive man's intuitions about the divine and from the institutions established to sustain this knowledge. This knowledge about the divine is best preserved in the mystery cults, which function as the institutional core of paganism, which was historically transmitted from Egypt to Phoenicia and then passed on to Greece. We can clearly recognise here an element of the coherence we find in the modern concept of paganism.

For all its references to ritual practice and geographical extension, it is essentially a philosophical definition. Mysteries are not put forward because they would be the foremost manifestations of Greek religion (which they were not), but because they contain the philosophical truth about the gods. The identity of the different religions is not sustained through a comparative analysis of rites and customs, but through a historical genealogy. Eusebius judges ancient religions on their philosophical truth, and for all the horror he expresses at the debased and immoral nature of the mysteries and other rites, their despicable nature stems from the fact that they express wrong conceptions of the divine. There is no evidence that Eusebius had first hand knowledge of real rituals: the *Praeparatio Evangelica* is the most bookish of books, an ivory tower academic study rather than anthropological fieldwork on paganism, and throughout this work Eusebius is not looking for purity of ritual but for purity of doctrine, which normally will guarantee purity of worship. Indeed, Plato is criticised for taking

part in pagan rituals although he was fully bred in Hebrew beliefs; and he did this, Eusebius points out, not because he was enchanted by these rites, but simply because he feared the Athenian mob, which had already killed his master Socrates.[23]

Sources

The source of Eusebius' definition clearly must be philosophical. In my opinion, the most appropriate candidate is Middle Platonism, where we encounter both the idea that mystery cults were a locus of truth and that all religions were considered more or less identical. I cannot attempt here a full analysis of the philosophy of religion of this period,[24] but two fragments, from a lost work of Plutarch (late 1st–early 2nd c. A.D.) and from the Neopythagorean (whatever that label means) Numenius (late 2nd c. A.D.), will, I hope, suffice to make the point. Significantly, as both fragments are preserved by Eusebius, this attests that Eusebius did read these authors with due attention.

Plutarch

According to Plutarch, it is not by virtue of divine inspiration that the truth about the cosmos is to be found in mysteries.[25] Rather, their antiquity guarantees the preservation of ancient wisdom in them. The first men had perceived basic truths about the cosmos, but expressed them in a veiled and unclear language. This view was widespread among philosophers of the Early Roman empire.[26] Plutarch states it thus in this fragment of *On the Festival of the Images at Plataeae*:

> Ὅτι μὲν οὖν ἡ παλαία φυσιολογία καὶ παρ' Ἕλλησι καὶ βαρβάροις λόγος ἦν φυσικὸς ἐγκεκαλυμμένος μύθοις, τὰ πολλὰ δι' αἰνιγμάτων καὶ ὑπονοιῶν ἐπίκρυφος, καὶ μυστηριώδης θεολογία, τά τε λαλούμενα τῶν σιγωμένων ἀσαφέστερα τοῖς πολλοῖς ἔχουσα καὶ τὰ σιγώμενα τῶν λαλουμένων ὑποπτότερα, κατάδηλον ἐστιν τοῖς Ὀρφικοῖς ἔπεσι καὶ τοῖς Αἰγυπτιακοῖς καὶ Φρυγίοις· μάλιστα δ' οἱ περὶ τὰς τελετὰς ὀργιασμοὶ

[23] *PE* 14.1–4. Cf. 11.13.

[24] See my forthcoming book *Images of Truth. Philosophy and Religion in the Roman Empire (1st–2nd c. A.D.)*.

[25] Pace Brisson (2004) 60–63.

[26] Boys-Stones (2001) 107–10; Van Nuffelen (2007) and (2010).

> καὶ τὰ δρώμενα συμβολικῶς ἐν ταῖς ἱερουργίαις τὴν τῶν παλαιῶν ἐμφαίνει διάνοιαν.
>
> Ancient natural science among both Greeks and foreign nations took the form of a scientific account hidden in mythology, veiled for the most part in riddles and hints, or of a theology such as is found in mystery-ceremonies: in it what is spoken is less clear to the masses than what is unsaid, and what is unsaid gives cause for more speculation than what is said. This is evident from the Orphic poems and the accounts given by Phrygians and Egyptians. But nothing does more to reveal what was in the mind of the ancients than the rites of initiation and the ritual acts that are performed in religious services with symbolic intent.[27]

Mysteries appear not only as loci of truth, they are loci of primordial truth, preserving in the best possible way the wisdom of the ancients. This wisdom is philosophical in essence, although not necessarily so in language: the truth is not expressed in plain philosophical language but in the mythological idiom one also finds in other religious manifestations. Moreover, it is not only Greek mysteries that are given a privileged position, as most people of the ancient world, according to Plutarch, share the primordial truth through their religion. Although the passage is quite unique in its explicitness, many parallels for this conception of mystery cults and its position in foreign cults can be found in Plutarch, and in contemporary authors.[28]

Eusebius obviously has this passage in mind when he talks about the truth hidden in the mysteries, as certain parallels in vocabulary suggest: 'the true knowledge of religion was contained in initiations, mysteries and in the rest of the theology of the ancients, this knowledge being treated as unchangeable and unanimously recognised'.[29] It may also account for the prominence attributed to mystery cults in Eusebius' definition, which is not therefore due to their prominence in practice but due to their philosophical valuation by much older authors.

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[27] *PE* 3.1 = Plutarch Fr. 157.1 (trans. F. Sandbach).

[28] Plutarch: see Van Nuffelen (2007) and (2010). Other authors: See Heraclitus, *Allegories,* 3.3, 6.4, 53.1; Dio Chrys., *Or.* 36.33–39; Cornutus, *Theol. Graec.,* 28 pp. 56.22–57.5. These parallels show that the idea is not limited to Middle Platonism, but also present in imperial stoicism. This is of little importance for my argument here.

[29] *PE* 14.9.7.

Numenius

My second example is Numenius of Apamea, a pre-Plotinian philosopher. In a brief fragment from his *Peri tagathou*, also conveniently preserved by Eusebius,[30] he writes:

> Εἰς δὲ τοῦτο δεήσει εἰπόντα καὶ σημηνάμενον ταῖς μαρτυρίαις ταῖς Πλάτωνος ἀναχωρήσασθαι καὶ συνδήσασθαι τοῖς λόγοις τοῦ Πυθαγόρου, ἐπικαλέσασθαι δὲ τὰ ἔθνη τὰ εὐδοκιμοῦντα, προσφερόμενον αὐτῶν τὰς τελετὰς καὶ τὰ δόγματα τάς τε ἱδρύσεις συντελουμένας Πλάτωνι ὁμολογουμένως, ὁπόσας Βραχμᾶνες καὶ Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ Μάγοι και Αἰγύπτιοι διέθεντο.
>
> With respect to this matter (the problem of God), having supported and sealed it with the testimonies from Plato, we must go back in time and relate it to the teachings of Pythagoras, and then call on people of renown, showing their initiations, dogmas and foundations inasmuch as they agree with Plato, and all those the Brahmans, the Jews, the Magi and Egyptians have established. (Numenius, Fr. 1a [Des Places] = Eusebius, *PE* 9.7.1)

In this fragment, we see the same two elements as in Plutarch, although articulated in a different way and with a distinct philosophical flavour. The fundamental truth has been laid down by Plato, who is the measuring rod for all glimpses of wisdom to be found both in earlier philosophy and in religion. Plato had indeed, according to Numenius, retrieved the primitive wisdom of the ancients.[31] In this passage the role of mysteries is less accentuated than in Plutarch, but other fragments of Numenius illustrate the importance he accorded to them.[32] It also shows that for Numenius all the religions of the world contain the same wisdom. This is supported by many other fragments, which show his pervasive interest in the foreign, the strange and the occult.

Was Eusebius influenced by Numenius? He must have been, because everybody was. Numenius' alleged influence on later philosophy stands in reverse proportion to the meagre remains of his work Eusebius has mainly preserved for us. It was said in Antiquity that Plotinus plagiarised him.[33] Porphyry, who reports this, was himself heavily indebted to Numenius, as the dominating figure of Neoplatonism in Late

[30] For Numenius in Eusebius, see Carriker (1996). On the topic in general, see Momigliano (1975).
[31] Boys-Stones (2001) 138–42.
[32] Fr. 1b and 55.
[33] Porph., *Plot.* 17–18.

Antiquity, Proclus, asserts.[34] More to the point here, modern scholarship attributes a fundamental influence of Numenius on Eusebius, whose particular logos-theology is according to H. Strutwolf, based on a combination of Plotinian and Numenian principles.[35] In the *Praeparatio Evangelica*, this alleged influence is far less visible. Eusebius has scant interest in Numenius himself or in the particularities of his own doctrine. In this work, the philosopher of Apamea is merely a suited interpreter of Plato's thought: in the *Praeparatio* he is often said to 'interpret' Plato.[36] And indeed, what is presented in Eusebius as Platonic is actually what Middle-Platonists thought Plato had said. One of his sources for this was Numenius.

A Numenian influence is indeed most probable, and we do find the two central elements of Eusebius' definition of paganism (the fundamental unity of all religions and the central role of mystery cults) in the quoted fragment. Just as in Plutarch's fragment, it also implies a view on the historical transmission of religion. If all the different cultures share the same truth in their religions, this must have been either derived from the same source or transmitted from one culture to another. As noted, this is also central in Eusebius' concept of paganism.

Porphyry

I might be criticised for disregarding the most obvious source of Eusebius' thought. It has been claimed, most forcefully by Michael Frede, that the layout of Eusebius' argument is an answer to Porphyry's critique of Christianity.[37] In particular, the historical thrust of the *Praeparatio Evangelica* would be directed against Porphyry's critique on the Christians, who had abandoned the ancestral customs in favour of some new and unfounded religion.

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[34] Procl., *In Ti.* 1.77.22–23 (Diehl) = Numenius, Fr. 37.25–26 (Des Places).

[35] Strutwolf (1999) 187–95, 274–75.

[36] *PE* 11.17.11 = Numenius Fr. 11; *PE* 11.21.7 = Numen. Fr. 2. See also 11.10.1, 11.18.25, 13.13.42, 13.18.17. *Hermeneuein* and *diermeneuein* imply a faithful exposition of the original doctrine and not an original interpretation (as Des Places (1974) 53 seems to assume). The same verbs are used, for example, by Philo of Alexandria (*PE* 11.24); see also *PE* 11.27.20: Porphyry *exaploi* Plato's doctrines.

[37] Frede (1994); Kofsky (2000) 17, 250–75. On Porphyry's *Against the Christians*, see Goulet (2004) with further literature.

It is possible that there is some Porphyrian influence. Certainly, the stress on the fundamental common identity of all religions is something we find in Porphyry. As Marco Zambon has recently shown, this is a thought Porphyry had in common with Numenius, and may even have borrowed from him.[38] So Eusebius may have received Numenian opinions through the intermediary of Porphyry, who was indeed reputed to have always had the same views as Numenius.[39]

But we cannot attribute Eusebius' definition entirely to Porphyry, as is already suggested by the fact that Eusebius read and quoted the Middle-Platonists themselves. In terms of the central role of the mystery cults, a dependency on Porphyry is less plausible. Although Porphyry indulged once in the writing of a poem entitled *Hieros gamos*, replete with mystical vocabulary and imagery, mystery cults seem to play no important role in his work; references are merely occasional and no particular function is attributed to them.[40] One interesting example is his *Life of Pythagoras*, which hardly pays any attention to Pythagoras' reputedly numerous initiations in all kinds of mysteries, putting it in particular contrast to their prominent presence in his contemporary Iamblichus' account.[41] In Porphyry's numerous other works, references are scarce, and often quotations from other authors.[42] For example, in the *Cave of the Nymphs*, there are some references to the cult of Mithras, which are probably taken from Numenius, Cronius, and Pallas, and in *De abstinentia*, Mithraism is the only mystery cult explicitly, and briefly, discussed.[43] But in none of these passages is there a hint that Porphyry attributed to mystery cults the same elevated role as did Plutarch.[44]

This difference in appreciation of mystery cults points to a more profound distinction between Early Imperial thought and Neoplatonism. Plutarch and Numenius recognised that the ancient truth was deposited in mystery cults, which could be retrieved by philosophical analysis. To find this ancestral truth was the task set for the philosopher of this age. Consequently, religion is seen as a different expression of the

[38] Zambon (2002) 248–50.
[39] Procl., *In Ti.* 1.77.22–23 (Diehl) = Numen., Fr. 37.25–26 (Des Places).
[40] *Hieros gamos*: Porph., *Plot.* 15.1–5.
[41] Porph., *Life of Pythagoras* 6–8, 11–12; Iambl., *VP* 14, 18–19, 72, 75, 138, 151.
[42] Porph., *Abst.* 2.36.6, 3.16, 4.5.4.
[43] Porph., *De antr. nymph.* 6, 17, 20, 24; Turcan (1975) 62. Porph., *Abst.* 2.56.3, 4.16 (a quotation from Pallas).
[44] I do not see the continuity from Plutarch to Porphyry perceived by Brisson (2004) 80–86.

same truth philosophy is striving for. Religions may well—as Plutarch's exegesis of the Egyptian cult and myth of Isis shows—contain, in veiled language, a full exposition of the metaphysical structure of the world. As far as the truth is concerned, religions and philosophy are on a par. Neoplatonism, on the other hand, self-consciously transcends local religions by positing itself as the supreme religion; philosophy contains a higher degree of truth than local religions. In *De abstinentia*, Porphyry styles the philosopher 'priest of the supreme god',[45] a higher kind of priest than the priests of the lesser gods, more elevated than those serving the traditional deities:

> Εἰκότως ἄρα ὁ φιλόσοφος καὶ θεοῦ τοῦ ἐπὶ πᾶσιν ἱερεύς πάσης ἀπέχεται ἐμψύχου βορᾶς, μόνος μόνῳ διὰ τοῦ ἑαυτοῦ θεῷ προσιέναι σπουδάζων ἄνευ τῆς τῶν παρομαρτούντων ἐνοχλήσεως, καὶ ἔστιν εὐλαβὴς τὰς τῆς φύσεως ἀνάγκης ἐξιστορηκώς. Ἵστωρ γὰρ πολλῶν ὁ ὄντως φιλόσοφος καὶ σημειωτικὸς καὶ καταληπτικὸς τῶν τῆς φύσεως πραγμάτων καὶ συνετὸς καὶ κόσμιος καὶ μέτριος, πανταχόθεν σῴζων ἑαυτόν. Καὶ ὥσπερ ὅ τινος τῶν κατὰ μέρος <θεῶν> ἱερεὺς ἔμπειρος τῆς ἱδρύσεως τῶν ἀγαλμάτων αὐτοῦ τῶν τε ὀργιασμῶν καὶ τελετῶν καθάρσεων τε καὶ τῶν ὁμοίων, οὕτως ὁ τοῦ ἐπὶ πᾶσι θεοῦ ἱερεὺς ἔμπειρος τῆς αὐτοῦ ἀγαλματοποιίας καθάρσεών τε καὶ τῶν ἄλλων δι' ὧν συνάπτεται τῷ θεῷ.
>
> So the philosopher, priest of the god who rules all, reasonably abstains from all animate food, working to approach the god, alone to alone, by his own effort, without disruption from an entourage, and he is wary because he has fully investigated the necessities of nature. The real philosopher has knowledge of many things: he notes signs, he understands the facts of nature, he is intelligent and orderly and moderate, protecting himself in all respects. And just as a priest of one of the particular gods is expert in setting up cult-statues of this god,[46] and in his rites and initiations and purifications and the like, so the priest of the god who rules all is expert in the making of his cult-statue and in purifications and the other rites by which he is linked to the god. (2.49 tr. G. Clark)

In this passage, possibly inspired by the thoughts and vocabulary of Plotinus, the neoplatonist philosopher elevates himself above all particular expressions of religion.[47] In Porphyry's mind, all the different

[45] Porph., *Abst.* 2.49. See also Porph., *Letter to Marcella* 16.

[46] Bouffartigue and Patillon (1979) 114 read αὐτοῦ (of the philosopher himself). Clark (2000) 159 prefers αὐτοῦ (statue of this god). I follow her, as it is the most logical meaning of the text.

[47] Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.6.7.9, 1.6.9.13, 6.7.34.7, 6.9.11.50. See Bouffartigue and Patillon (1979) 48–49, nuanced by Clark (2000) 159.

religions contain a grain of wisdom, but only philosophy the full truth.[48] This quotation is also instructive on the role of the mysteries, showing these as a particular element of religion, which can only aspire to lower truths. Moreover, it may be incidental, but it seems highly indicative to me, that in this quotation *orgiasmoi* and *teletai* are quoted after the setting up of statues, whereas in the quotations of Numenius and Plutarch, statues merit no mention. Indeed, Porphyry's philosophy of religion centred on statues (*On Statues* and *Letter to Anebo*) and oracles (*On the Philosophy from Oracles*), and not on mysteries.[49]

The transcendence from one particular religion by the philosopher became a dominant theme of late antique Neoplatonism. Of Proclus it is said by his biographer Marinus: 'that he observed with the proper rituals the significant holidays of every people and the ancestral rites of each', but also that he considered himself 'the common priest of the entire world'.[50] It is a lack of modesty never found among Middle-Platonists. Middle-Platonism is certainly distinguished by its interest in and valuation of traditional religions, but it did not claim to be a religion itself. Neoplatonism, by contrast, was a religion pretending to transcend all local religions.

Whatever the general importance of Porphyry for the *Praeparatio Evangelica*, Eusebius' work clearly contains more philosophical layers than only the Porphyrian one; in particular, the role attributed to the mystery cults by the Bishop of Caesarea goes back to Middle Platonism and cannot be traced to Porphyry.

Conclusion

It is time to make our way back to Eusebius and the concept of paganism. Although Eusebius' portrayal of Greek religion is certainly a disfiguration of what it really was, his concept is rooted in a dialectical relationship with earlier philosophical thought. Already the Middle-Platonists saw religion as a coherent entity with certain essential characteristics. They affirmed the essential identity of all religions and

[48] Schott (2005) 299–300.

[49] Note that an important topic of Early Imperial religious thought was whether statues were useful in religion or not: cf. Maximus of Tyre, *Orations* 2; Dio Chrys., *Or.* 12.

[50] Marinus, *Life of Proclus* 19 (transl. Edwards (2000) 87).

identified the mystery cults as loci of truth: in them the most truthful exposition about the nature of the gods could be found. Eusebius, who had read the key thinkers of that age, incorporated both these characteristics in his definition of Greek religion. I do not wish to deny the impact of other factors on Eusebius' concept of paganism, be it Porphyrian polemic or Christian stereotypes, but they alone do not suffice to explain the specific definition the Bishop of Caesarea gives of 'paganism', which has its roots in the Middle-Platonic reflection of religion.

Although Eusebius at times simply copied passages from Middle-Platonists, he did not blindly copy their ideas. In his polemical recreation of paganism, the precise philosophical 'Sitz im Leben' of these earlier ideas is lost, especially the mystery cults' function in the *Praeparatio Evangelica* as a sort of fossil, rather than a living element of current paganism. Although constantly present in Eusebius' definition of Greek religion, they hardly play any role at all in the work, not even in a negative way as the object of a sustained polemic effort. This is best explained by seeing the mystery cults as the old disaffected corner stones of Middle-Platonic ideas about religions, which Eusebius stumbled across. With hardly any idea of their original function, he relocated them and used them for his own construction of paganism. Only now and then does he offer us a glimpse of their original importance in Early Imperial philosophy.

The deconstruction of Eusebius' definition has also shown that some of the received truths about paganism may need correction. The idea that the religions of the Mediterranean formed a unity and shared essential characteristics did not originate in Late Antiquity under the pressure of Christianity, but goes back to at least Early Imperial philosophy of religion. Paganism is also not a purely polemical Christian construct: the creation of paganism is a dialectical process, which started in ancient philosophy and later developed through interaction with Christian apologists like Eusebius. Rather than seeing the concept of 'paganism' as a pure invention by Christians, which only enters in a dialectical relation with the pagans themselves in Late Antiquity, we must consider it as an essentially dialectical concept, shaped and reshaped in philosophical and (more often) polemical discussion on the nature of 'Greek religion'.

A last and, in the context of a volume on archaeology, a most pressing consideration arises: is the development of ancient thought about

religion of any use for those studying ancient religions—apart from giving some justification for the use of old and sometimes despised concepts like paganism? Two examples can illustrate the possible interest of what I have argued. Recently, James Rives has argued that the Decree of Decius of A.D. 250, ordering a universal sacrifice to the traditional gods, is an indication of a newly born "religion of empire" which was overarching, and to a certain extent superseding the local religions.[51] It is a development one can understand in the context of philosophical thought, which tended to stress more and more the fundamental unity of all religions. Philosophy does not explain Decius, but at least shows that similar ideas developed at the same time in various areas of Roman society.

The idea that all religions are manifestations of the same essence, may also account for the accumulation of different religious offices by some prominent late antique pagans like Praetextatus, who were initiated into many different traditional and oriental mystery cults and priesthoods of various divinities.[52] This fact has long puzzled scholars, with, for example, W. Liebeschuetz explaining it as personal syncretism.[53] Although more prosaic explanations must be considered as well, like a possible shortage of candidates for these priesthoods, it may be rather that behind this accumulation of office is the more general belief that all these different religions are fundamentally identical, rendering Praetextatus' actions not a personal expression, but a reflection of a general train of thought in his age. One should note indeed that in Macrobius' first book of the Saturnalia, Praetextatus defends a solar monotheism, to which all other gods can be reduced. In the light of the previous conclusions, the contradiction between Praetextatus' real attitude and that ascribed to him in the Saturnalia may only be superficial. These examples suggest that the study of the concept of religion may yield explanations for change we witness in religious practice, but much more work needs to be done before we can establish this link firmly.

[51] Rives (1999).
[52] Dessau, *ILS* 1259. Cf. Liebeschuetz (1999).
[53] Liebeschuetz (1999) 203–204.

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Abbreviations

PE = Libanius, *Praeparatio Evangelica*
DE = Libanius, *Demonstratio Evangelica*
ILCV = *Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres*, ed. E. Diehl, 4 vols. (Berlin 1961–67).

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