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POLYTHEIST ROME: TOWARD CULTURAL UNIVERSALISM WITHIN EMPIRE

THE OBVIOUS late antique cultural or, more specifically, religious universalisms, those of Christ and Mani, were universalisms from birth. Mazdaism, though not universalist, had discovered how to present itself as a focused, coherent national faith that might afford valuable support to Sasanian imperialism. But the polytheism of the Romans and Greeks and other peoples who had fallen under Roman rule was almost by definition not universalist, and certainly not universalist from birth. It was a phenomenon about which we can hardly talk meaningfully except in terms of a multiplicity of independent cults. For that precise reason, though, the study of universalist tendencies within late polytheism is uniquely useful. By illustrating the evolution and the transformative power of universalist ideas, it enables us to understand more clearly, because progressively, what late antique universalism, and in particular cultural universalism, meant.

SEEDS OF POLYTHEIST UNIVERSALISM

Unlike the Jews, who when they entered their "Promised Land" brutally eradicated the gods of the peoples they supplanted, all other ancient states considered that conquered peoples' deities had the right to continued honor provided they recognized their subordinate position. Not infrequently, they were adopted by the conqueror. But whatever the origin of the conqueror's gods, they had to be visible and recognizable, not just at the political center but at the periphery too. This visibility and recognizability was achieved by both unofficial and official means. Unofficially, syncretism allowed the gods of the center to be manifest at the periphery in local garb. Officially, at least in the Roman Empire, it was through the cult of Rome and of the emperor and his family that the religious system and values of the center were projected to the periphery. The imperial cult could be seen as more than just a perfunctorily worn badge of political loyalty. Since it was highly conspicuous, thanks to the central location of its temples in the provincial cities, and specific in that

it was devoted to a small group of easily recognizable personifications or persons, yet at the same time capable of assimilation to other polytheist cults,¹ the imperial cult could also act as a focus for what one might call a polytheist identity.² Typically, it was through refusing participation in the imperial cult that Christians came into conflict with polytheism and the political system that imposed it. The imperial cult, though a part, came to stand for the whole. Recent work has emphasized how the cult of the emperor helped subjects understand their relationship to power;³ but we should not lose sight of the way in which the center used it to assimilate the periphery and unify the empire. The extreme ease with which one might conform to its requirements made it an ideal common denominator, while the plethora of polytheisms from which it had emerged went on doing what they were best at—expressing the natural variety of human religious behavior by allowing it to direct itself toward many objects.

But the imperial cult was not the only seed of polytheist universalism that was germinating in the Roman world. Christians called the cult of the old gods “paganism”, that is, “rusticity”, not just because the expression was derogatory but also because it was such a convenient shorthand for this vast spectrum of cults ranging from the international to the ethnic and local, some totally isolated, some richly syncretized with others, but none claiming exclusivity. It was easier to shoot at one target than at many—and the one target was carefully painted in the most lurid possible colors, derived from cults selected for barbarity, not typicality. In self-defense, polytheists sought to explain themselves and rationalize their uncontrollably complex heritage.

Long before Christian monotheism became a serious threat, philosophers had sought the common ground held by the polytheist world’s many theological traditions. Hence the symbolic significance attached to Pythagoras’s and Plato’s studies with Egyptian priests, Chaldaeans, and Magi.⁴ This tendency became especially marked in late antiquity, which privileged “the purified philosophy of Plato”,⁵ but had adopted much that was in origin Aristotelian, Stoic, and in particular Pythag-

¹ See, e.g., Ghedini, *Giulia Domna*, esp. 123–84, 188–93.

² Cf. *Passio Sanctorum Scilitanorum* 3, Saturninus the proconsul attempting to persuade Christians to conform: “We too are a religious people, and our religion is a simple one: we swear by the genius of our lord the emperor and we offer prayers for his health—as you also ought to do” (tr. H. Musurillo). See also references in Frend, *Rise of Christianity* 274.

³ Price, *Rituals and power*.

⁴ Diogenes Laertius III.6–7, VIII.2–3.

⁵ Hierocles, *De providentia* ap. Photius, *Bibliotheca* 214.173a.

orean. The bitter controversies of the old schools were transcended in order to create a united front against Christianity, and a monotheist theology was offered on Plato’s immense authority. Those, like Iamblichus, who favored the Pythagorean element in this synthesis sought with special insistence a *rapprochement* between Greek wisdom and that of the barbarians, notably the Chaldeans and Egyptians.

But it was not easy to see how the gods and their less intellectual worshippers might be similarly reformed. The second-century philosopher Celsus recognized common ground between the various polytheisms,⁶ but he also took their diversity for granted, and rejected not only Christianity’s claim to be a law for all nations, but the very possibility that such a law might exist.⁷ A century or so later Porphyry, a leading Platonist and redoubtable polemicist against Christianity, seems to have been less certain. According to Augustine, he admitted “that no doctrine has yet been established to form the teaching of a philosophical sect, which offers a universal way (*universalem viam*) for the liberation of the soul; that no such way has been produced by any philosophy (in the truest sense of the word), or by the moral disciplines and teachings of the Indians, or by the ‘elevation’ (*inductione*) of the Chaldeans, or in any other way; and that this universal way had never been brought to his knowledge in his study of history.”⁸ Much of the argument’s original texture has clearly been lost in the Augustinian filter. It seems likely that Porphyry was concerned with teachings applicable beyond the narrow circles of philosophers; but did he really believe, as Augustine appears to imply, that there may be a “universal way” of salvation for all mankind? And if he believed that, would he have admitted his failure to find it? Or had Porphyry in fact argued for pluralism, on the ground that there is no uniquely valid way?⁹ To Augustine it was self-evident that Porphyry could not have found a universal way among the purveyors of alien wisdoms, “because those nations were especially influenced by a superstitious interest in the doctrine and the cult of angels of various kinds”. And his vigorous assertion of Christianity’s universality marked a significant advance over Celsus’s opponent Origen, who did not disagree in theory, but admitted that mankind was more likely to follow a single doctrine in the next world than in this.¹⁰ As for Porphyry, we can at least assume that the question of universality had posed itself to him, and that

⁶ Celsus ap. Origen, *Contra Celsum* V.41.

⁷ *Ibid.*, VIII.72.

⁸ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* X.32 (tr. H. Bettenson).

⁹ As argued by Vanderspoel, in *Grace, politics and desire* 180–81.

¹⁰ Celsus ap. Origen, *Contra Celsum* VIII.72.

he had thought further along these lines than Celsus, just as Augustine found it possible to be less skeptical than Origen about universalism, at least in its cultural form.¹¹

For Augustine it was essential to overlook or obscure any progress his opponents were making toward a more coherent self-representation—hence his notorious assumption that Varro is on an equal footing with his own personal observations and experiences as a source for the nature of polytheism.¹² But his correspondent the grammarian Maximus of Madauros knew better. In a letter he wrote to Augustine (circa 390), he asked:

Who is so foolish, so mentally astray, as to deny the very certain truth that there is one supreme god, without beginning, without natural offspring, like a great and splendid father? His powers that permeate the universe he has made we call upon by many names, since to all of us his right name is of course unknown. For god is a name common to all cults, and so it is that while with differing prayers we pursue, as it were, his members piecemeal, we seem, in truth, to worship him entire.¹³

As he surveyed the temples gathered around the forum of Madauros, Maximus found it natural to see the many local gods as but aspects of one universal god, satraps of a divine King of Kings.¹⁴ This centripetal view of polytheism built on tendencies in Greek thought already detectable in Homer.¹⁵ But they became much more common currency in late antiquity.

Acceptance of such ideas in wider circles was assisted by the habits of syncretizing related deities into single composites, and envisaging gods

¹¹ Note e.g. Porphyry's inclusion on an equal footing of Egyptian as well as Greek material in his *De imaginibus*, which proposes a variety of rational interpretations of cult-symbols. Porphyry's esteem for Christ as distinct from the use made of him by Christians (Wilken, in *Early Christian literature*) is another sign that he may indeed have tried to formulate an inclusive "universal way". Nor was he alone in pursuing this line of thought: Parke, *Oracles of Apollo* 104–5. O'Meara, *Pythagoras revived* 26–28, argues that Porphyry did in fact succeed in finding Plato almost everywhere he looked: he was a "universalizing Platonist". For Augustine's skepticism about political universalism, see above, pp. 14–15.

¹² Augustine, *De civitate Dei* IV.1.

¹³ Augustine, *ep.* XVI.1 (tr. J. H. Baxter). Earlier see, e.g., Celsus ap. Origen, *Contra Celsum* V.41.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, VIII.35; and, on the idea's pedigree, Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* xvii–xx.

¹⁵ Peterson, *Monotheismus* 47–49; Kenney, in *Classical Mediterranean spirituality*.

as impersonal powers.¹⁶ In the Roman period henotheist ideas were quite widespread in the general population, but it is not always easy to put one's finger on them. When the fourth-century rhetor Libanius remarks that as a dwelling place for the gods Antioch can vie even with Mount Olympus,¹⁷ he intends no more than a boast about the city's many temples. Rhetors who spoke in praise of cities were expected to claim that they had "built very many temples, or (temples) of all the gods, or many (temples) for each god".¹⁸ And in its emphasis, at least, Libanius's understanding of polytheism was the exact opposite of that of Maximus. "Festivals of the gods", he maintained, "are marked off by their geographical location: neighboring peoples can be seen in procession, one to this god, one to that; and the name of the deity to whom sacrifice is offered is mighty in the eyes of the one or the other, but it is never the same for both."¹⁹ For the likes of Libanius, then, the temples of Antioch existed for the sake of the city, and there was no reason why a mere plurality of gods should there evolve into a consciously universal, far less henotheist or monotheist religion. In less strictly conventional situations, though, the frequent dedications "to all the gods (and goddesses)", or Didymean Apollo's command to "honor and reverence all the blessed ones",²⁰ may betray such a tendency. This is certainly the case at holy places where the worship of a primary god or goddess attracts other divinities, generates a multiplicity of cults, and, eventually, stimulates speculation about their interrelationship. Eleusis, for example, is called the "common sanctuary of the [whole] world" by the rhetor Aelius Aristides, speaking in 171.²¹ In principle this need mean no more than that people from all over the world visited Eleusis to be initiated into Demeter's mysteries; but in such a situation syncretisms were inevitable, which is why we read in an aretology of Isis discovered on a late Hellenistic inscription at Maroneia in Thrace: "It pleased you [Isis] to dwell in Egypt; in Greece you honored above all Athens. . . . That is why in Greece we hasten to gaze upon Athens, and in Athens, Eleusis, for we deem the city the ornament of Europe, and the sanctuary the ornament of the city."²²

¹⁶ Nock, *Essays* 34–45; Nilsson, *Geschichte* 2.534–43, 569–78; Habicht, *In-schriften des Asklepieions* 12–14; Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes* 75–94.

¹⁷ Libanius, *or.* XI.115.

¹⁸ Menander Rhetor I.362.26–28.

¹⁹ Libanius, *or.* XII.15 (tr. A. F. Norman).

²⁰ Günther, *M.D.A.I.(I.)* 21 (1971): 99–105 (probably a third-century inscription).

²¹ Aelius Aristides, *or.* XXII.2.

²² Grandjean, *Aréologie d'Isis* 18.

Possession of a sacred center was not, of course, a precondition of universality. Some of the most popular cults, especially mysteries such as those of Isis or Mithras, had no sacred center, but instead a network of autonomous cult-places, which had the advantage of making the cult accessible to a larger and more diverse public. And no cult could even become a candidate for diffusion until it had something to offer that was of more than purely national or local appeal. If a god formulated a spiritual message to the individual as an individual rather than purely as a member of a social collectivity, his or her adepts were more likely to propagate the cult wherever they might go, and start it on the long road toward universality. The horizontal extension of any cult presupposed a strong vertical axis between the individual believer and his or her god.

Even so, if the universality of a particular cult and eventually of polytheism generally was to be perceived, some focus and definition that was apparent from without was plainly desirable. The statements of theologians and philosophers were all very well, but in practice, and as far as most people were concerned, this external mode of definition was topographical—the sacred center. And in the Maroneia aretalogy we begin to see how syncretism—here, that of Isis and Demeter—could push a holy place that was no longer content with being merely famous toward a claim to universal significance on the theological level.

A much more explicit statement of this view, with reference to the holy land of Egypt, can be found in the Hermetic *Asclepius*, a Latin version of a lost Greek original that was perhaps composed in the third century: "Are you not aware, Asclepius, that Egypt is the image of heaven or, to put it better, the place where everything that is directed and superintended in heaven is transferred and comes down to earth? Indeed, if we are to tell the full truth, our land is the temple of the whole world (*terra nostra mundi totius est templum*)."²³ In the opinion of the fifth-century Platonist Proclus, the same was true of the individual holy places of the Egyptians, with their vast priestly archives full of records stretching back to the beginning of memory. The Egyptian temple was like an icon of cosmic order: "If then the World is the most holy of temples, in which eternally reside the principles that hold together the All, then the registering of ancient deeds in the temples must represent the image of the constitution of these principles."²⁴ But it was firmly believed that the image *is* the god;²⁵ so the final logical step was to make the stability of the universe dependent on the correct performance of the temple cults: "All things remain immobile and everlasting, because the

²³ *Asclepius* 24.

²⁴ Proclus, *In Timaeum* 38d.

²⁵ Funke, *R.L.A.C.* 11.714–16.

sun never halts in its course; all things remain perfect and whole, because the mysteries of Abydos are never revealed."²⁶ This view was formulated with unique clarity in Egypt, which had been less Hellenized than other parts of Alexander's empire and still regarded itself as an especially holy land; but the polytheists of Greece believed no less strongly in the universal significance of their mysteries. When in 364 the Emperor Valens banned nocturnal sacrifice, they petitioned that the mysteries, "which maintain in security the human race", be exempted; and when in the 390s the temples of Greece were destroyed, there were not a few who committed suicide rather than witness the inevitable cosmic catastrophe.²⁷

The precise mechanisms by which a holy place acquired such a universal or even cosmic role, and became a sacred center, can still be grasped at Didyma or Epidauros, where a profusion of altars and dedications to different gods turns what started out as a temple of Apollo or Asclepius into a veritable pantheon.²⁸ At the Pergamene Asclepeum, the dedication to "Zeus Asclepius" of the Hadrianic round temple that so resembles the Roman Pantheon reflects a recognition, at least in intellectual circles, that God was one and all-embracing.²⁹ Such sanctuaries offered a possibility, at a particular point on the earth's face, for the worshipper to feel in contact, like Maximus in the forum at Madauros, not just with the gods of that place, but with the whole divine world, whether conceived of as syncretistic or merely symbiotic, more pluralistic or less. This was not a new perception in late antiquity, and the authors of the illustrative texts of various dates just quoted did not see themselves as innovators. But it took a long time for such ideas to seep into wide circulation, for which some would have held that they were anyway not suited. Proclus, for example, continuing the passage just referred to, argues that cities can never aspire to the symbolic clarity of temples, because their nature partakes too much of the temporal and partial.³⁰ Nonetheless, two later Roman cities, Alexandria and Rome, were widely held to play a universal role in the worship of the gods. Both preserved the public rituals of the old religion when elsewhere they had already been abandoned.³¹ Both therefore offered the Church an oppor-

²⁶ Iamblichus, *De mysteriis* VI.7.

²⁷ Zosimus IV.3.2–3; Eunapius, *Vitae philosophorum* VIII.1.10–11.

²⁸ Rehm, *Didyma* 2 no. 504 (πάνθεος περιβωμισμός; Diocletianic), and Günther, *M.D.A.I.(I.)* 21 (1971): 99–105; *I.G.* 4².380–588 (Epidauros); and cf. Herodian V.5.8 (temple of Elagabalus, Rome) and 6.8.

²⁹ Habicht, *Pergamon* 11–14.

³⁰ Proclus, *In Timaeum* 38e.

³¹ Libanius, *or.* XXX.33, 35.

tunity of exceptional validity and consequence to disprove the old religion, by attacking it in its sacred centers.

Alexandria

For the polytheist historian Eunapius of Sardis, writing around the year 399, Alexandria had been, "on account of the sanctuary of Serapis, a whole sacred world".³² Writing a few decades earlier, before the temple's destruction, the author of the *Expositio totius mundi* says of Alexandria that "the gods are worshipped most assiduously; and the temple of Serapis is there, a spectacle unique in the whole world. For nowhere in the world is there to be found such a building, nor a temple of such a plan, nor such devotion."³³ And the historian Ammianus Marcellinus is only slightly less ecstatic: "Next to the Capitolium, with which revered Rome elevates herself to eternity, the whole world beholds nothing more magnificent."³⁴ Alexandria was "a whole sacred world" in several inter-related senses: because pilgrims came in large numbers and from faraway places to visit the Serapeum; because through that shrine and through Serapis's association with other gods, such as Isis and her son Harpocrates, they found a way into the whole exotic world of Egyptian religion (or what passed for such in non-Egyptian circles); and because Serapis and his companions had so successfully transcended the particularity of their Egyptian origins, to become gods for all mankind.

Since Serapis was also, at least for those of Greek culture, the lord of the River Nile, Alexandria became the center for those rites in honor of the river on which Egypt's prosperity (and its very survival) depended.³⁵ It was in this capacity that the Christians first attacked him—Constantine disbanded the group of priests responsible for the Nile cult, and removed the "sacred cubit", by which the annual flood was symbolically measured, from the Serapeum to a church.³⁶ But sacrifices to the Nile continued,³⁷ until Bishop Theophilus destroyed the Serapeum in 391. With reference to each stage in this assault—the disbanding of the priests, the removal of the Nile cubit, and the destruction of the

³² Eunapius, *Vitae philosophorum* VI.10.8 (ἰερά τις ἡν οἰκουμένην).

³³ *Expositio totius mundi* 35.

³⁴ Ammianus Marcellinus XXII.16.12. Note also *I.G.U.R.* 1191, an epigram in which "a pure handmaid of all the blessed ones" calls her native Alexandria and adopted Rome "the metropolises of the cosmos and the earth"; and the assertion by the first century B.C./A.D. P. Berl. 13045.28–30 (Kunst, *Rhetorische papyri* 17) that Alexandria stands out among the other cities of Egypt as the only one that belongs truly to the *oikoumene*.

³⁵ Bonneau, *La crue du Nil* 319–24, 353–54, 426–35.

³⁶ Sources and discussion in Hermann, *Jb.A.C.* 2 (1959): 30–35.

³⁷ Libanius, *ep.* 1183 and *or.* XXX.35.

Serapeum—one or another of the sources preserves the story of how, immediately afterward, all waited in suspense to see whether or not the Nile would rise, until the Christians were rewarded with a superabundant flood, to the dismay of the polytheists. The story may be legendary, but it underlines the palpable disproof, which shook the world, of what had until then been axiomatic: that the land of Egypt would be destroyed if the old gods ceased to be worshipped, above all in Alexandria.³⁸

Rome

Despite its cosmopolitanism and the native Egyptians' hostility, Alexandria was enmeshed in the egocentricity of Egypt.³⁹ Only Rome could aspire to be a truly universal city. The cult of "Dea/Urbs Roma" may have been more a cultural and political metaphor than a "religious experience", but it was nonetheless fostered with special zeal in the second, third, and fourth centuries: "She is worshipped with blood after the fashion of a goddess, the name of the place is reckoned as a divinity, the temples of the City and Venus rise to the same high top, and incense is burned to the pair of goddesses together." Thus Prudentius, not later than 402–3, used the historic present to describe a freshly remembered past.⁴⁰

By diplomatic guile or right of arms, the Romans had also made their city "a place meet to be the resort of every god", "Rome the place of empire and the gods."⁴¹ Later in the *Contra Symmachum*, Prudentius has this to say:

As her valor conquered cities and won her famous triumphs, Rome got herself countless gods; amid the smoking ruins of temples the victor's armed right hand took her enemies' images and carried them home in captivity, worshipping them as divinities. One figure she seized from the ruins of Corinth by the two seas, another she took for booty from burning Athens; the defeat of Cleopatra gave

³⁸ Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes* 13.

³⁹ Cf. Severus of Antioch, *ep.* 46, p. 146: "It is the habit of the Alexandrians to think that the sun rises for them only, and towards them only the lamp burns, so that they even jestingly term outside cities 'lampless'" (tr. E. W. Brooks).

⁴⁰ Prudentius, *Contra Symmachum* 1.219–22 (tr. H. J. Thomson). On the cult of Rome, see Gagé, *A.I.Ph.O.* 4 (1936); Knoche, in *Prinzipat und Freiheit*; Turcan, *A.N.R.W.* II.16.2, 1069–71.

⁴¹ Ovid, *Fasti* IV.270 (tr. J. G. Frazer), *Tristia* I.5.70 (tr. A. L. Wheeler). Cf. also, e.g., Lucan III.91 ("deum sedes"), Claudian, *Panegyricus dictus Honorio Augusto VI cos.* 185 ("urbem . . . deorum").

her some dog-headed figures, and when she conquered the sands of Ammon there were horned heads among her trophies from the African desert.⁴²

The accumulation of sacred works of art at Rome by Augustus and his immediate successors had largely aesthetic motives,⁴³ but the gods did not cease to be gods in their new environment. From the time of the Severans onward, when Rome began to be ruled by emperors from outside the traditional Western elite, foreign divinities came in the guise of conquerors as well as captives—one thinks particularly of Caracalla's innovative establishment of a temple of Serapis within the city limits. Elagabalus succeeded only in alienating the Romans when he imposed on them the uncompromisingly Oriental sun-god of his native Emesa. But fifty years later, Aurelian captured Palmyra (272–73), carried off to Rome statues of the Sun and Bel to adorn his magnificent new temple of Sol,⁴⁴ and knew how not to offend Roman taste, while preserving the cult's Syrian connections. The concept expressed by Hadrian's Pantheon was being consciously enriched; and the idea of Rome as the whole earth's "communis patria", the "common town" (*asty koinon*), the "acropolis" where all the "demes" of the world assemble,⁴⁵ was increasingly linked with the idea of Rome as a "holy city".⁴⁶ With Prudentius, one could then draw the conclusion that the capital was the "one single home for all earthborn divinities",⁴⁷ the focus of all the sacred forces within the empire, "an assembly of gods", as the Constantinopolitan rhetor Themistius put it in a speech delivered to the Roman senate in 376, "a deme of heroes, a tribe of guardian spirits. . . , the ocean of beauty",⁴⁸ "the temple of the whole world".

⁴² Prudentius, *Contra Symmachum* II.347–56. Similarly Claudian, *De consulatu Stilichonis* III.169–73.

⁴³ Dio Chrysostom, *or.* XXXI.147–48, 151; Pausanias VIII.46.

⁴⁴ Zosimus I.61.2.

⁴⁵ *Digesta* XXVII.1.6.11, XLVIII.22.18(19), L.1.33; Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* I.36.20bc; Aelius Aristides, *or.* XXVI.61; Rutilius Namatianus I.66. Cp. Sozomen, *H.E.* VII.4.5, on the New Rome as "citadel of the whole world".

⁴⁶ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* XI.26; Themistius, *or.* XIII.178b.

⁴⁷ Prudentius, *Contra Symmachum* I.189.

⁴⁸ Themistius, *or.* XIII.177d–178b. For other expressions of this idea by polytheists, either directly preserved or reported in Christian polemic, see Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 6 (each people worships its own gods, but the Romans worship them all); Arnobius, *Adversus nationes* VI.7 ("civitas maxima et numinum cunctorum cultrix"); *Historia Augusta*, *Vita Aureliani* XX.5 ("templum deorum omnium"); Claudian, *De consulatu Stilichonis* III.135 (Rome "septem scopulis zonas imitatur Olympi"); Rutilius Namatianus I.49–50 ("genetrix . . . deorum, / non procul a caelo per tua templa sumus"); Gelasius I, *Adversum Andromachum* (*Collectio Avellana*, ep. 100) 14.

This last phrase occurs not in Themistius but in the account by Ammianus Marcellinus of how Constantine removed from the temple of Amun in Egyptian Thebes (Karnak) the mighty obelisk that today stands in the Piazza San Giovanni in Laterano: "Constantine . . . tore the huge mass from its foundations, and rightly thought that he was committing no sacrilege if he took this marvel from one temple and consecrated it at Rome, that is to say, in the temple of the whole world (*in templo mundi totius*)."⁴⁹ This seems to have been the emperor's present to Rome on the twentieth anniversary of his accession—his *vicennalia* (326). And Ammianus's phrase perhaps comes from the declaration Constantine himself made on that occasion to announce the intended gift, which was finally delivered by his son Constantius, thirty-one years later. *Templum mundi totius* is precisely what Egypt is called in the passage already quoted from the Hermetic *Asclepius*. This text circulated widely in Constantine's time and milieu, and it seems likely that in his speech the emperor quoted it in order to underline the significance of the object he was giving to the old and still substantially polytheist capital. Constantius eventually set it up on the central barrier of the Circus Maximus, where it joined a collection of art that made many allusions to the empire's varied religious traditions,⁵⁰ and could be seen by the whole population gathered to watch the chariot races. The Circus Maximus was considered an image of the cosmos,⁵¹ and over it presided the emperor, himself "the metropolis of all pieties",⁵² whose "sacred precinct is the whole earth",⁵³ but whose home was the Eternal City: "Of a truth no other city could fitly be the home of the world's rulers; on this hill is majesty most herself, and knows the height of her supreme sway; the palace, raising its head above the forum that lies at its feet, sees around it so many temples and is surrounded by so many protecting deities."⁵⁴ Constantine's compliment, so perfectly attuned to these ways of thought, nonetheless signified their impending redundancy. It was merely a palliative for his already apparent intention to relieve Rome of the two functions, as capital of the empire and residence of the emperor, that explained her accumulation of gods.

Nevertheless, half a century or so was to pass before any emperor could feel free of the need to mollify the powerful pagan element in the

⁴⁹ Ammianus Marcellinus XVII.4.13; and, for the interpretation here offered, Fowden, *J.H.S.* 107 (1987).

⁵⁰ Humphrey, *Roman circuses* 175–294.

⁵¹ Dagron, *Naissance d'une capitale* 330–38.

⁵² Eusebius, *H.E.* IX.7.6 (rescript of Maximin Daia against the Christians, 312).

⁵³ Dio Cassius LII.35.5.

⁵⁴ Claudian, *Panegyricus dictus Honorio Augusto* VI cos. 39–44 (tr. M. Platnauer).

old capital's senatorial aristocracy. It was the Emperor Gratian (375–83) who took the fateful steps of repudiating the title "Pontifex Maximus", withdrawing state subsidies to the cult of the old gods, and removing from the Senate House the altar of Victoria,⁵⁵ by whose favor the city had become the universal temple. In all probability he acted at the bidding of Ambrose, the powerful and aggressive bishop of Milan. Ambrose well knew that the gods of Rome still enjoyed enough prestige to render their disproof an urgent necessity. In the evil times that had now fallen on polytheism in many parts of the empire, Rome was seen as a bulwark of the old ways—even in the Greek East, which had nothing to learn about religion from the Latin West. None other than the patriotic Antiochene Libanius conceded, in a speech probably composed in 386, that "the gods in Rome grant greater blessings. . . . The stability of empire depends on the sacrifices performed there."⁵⁶

With this continued affirmation, at least in certain circles, of the Eternal City's role as "temple of the whole world", we may also connect the well-known cultic eclecticism of the senatorial aristocracy. The often-quoted inscription on the tomb of one of the polytheist senatorial circle's leading lights, Vettius Agorius Praetextatus (d. 384), proclaims him "augur, priest of Vesta, priest of Sol, *quindecimvir*, *curialis* of Hercules, consecrated to Liber and in the Eleusinian [mysteries], hierophant [of Hecate at Aegina], *neocorus* [i.e., priest of Serapis], initiate of the taurobolium [of Cybele], Father of Fathers [i.e., initiate of Mithras]"; while his wife, Fabia Aconia Paulina, was "consecrated at Eleusis to the god Iacchus, Ceres and Cora, consecrated at Lerna to the god Liber, Ceres and Cora, consecrated to the goddesses at Aegina, initiate of the taurobolium [of Cybele] and of Isis, hierophant of the goddess Hecate and consecrated to the Greek goddess Ceres [i.e., Demeter]."⁵⁷ Though never unknown, multiple priesthoods and initiations probably became more common in late antiquity.⁵⁸ They are attested especially often in Rome, where a circle of which Praetextatus and Paulina are only the best-known representatives self-consciously espoused and proclaimed the universal polytheism, Roman, Greek, and Oriental, that is so comprehensively abused in the *Carmen contra paganos*.⁵⁹ The em-

⁵⁵ Cf. Croke and Harries, *Religious conflict* 28–51.

⁵⁶ Libanius, *or.* XXX.33; and cf. Themistius, *or.* XIII.177d–178b, with Dagron, *T.&M.Byz.* 3 (1968): 160–61, 191–98.

⁵⁷ *I.L.S.* 1259–60; cf. Bloch, *H.Th.R.* 38 (1945): 242–44 and table. Macrobius, *Saturnalia* I.17.1, calls Praetextatus 'sacrorum omnium praesul'.

⁵⁸ Nock, *Essays* 38; Bloch, *H.Th.R.* 38 (1945): 211–13; Reynolds and Ward-Perkins, *Inscriptions of Roman Tripolitania* nos. 567–68, on which see Lepelley, *Cités de l'Afrique romaine* 2.347–48; Libanius, *or.* XIV.5–7; Eunapius, *Vitae philosophorum* VII.3.1–4.

⁵⁹ On this, see Barnes, in *Grace, politics and desire* 167–68.

peror was now a Christian; Gratian had recently abandoned the title "Pontifex Maximus"; and the imperial cult, once one of the most omnipresent and (at least implicitly) universalist aspects of polytheism, was so conducted that Christians could participate and even hold priest-hoods in it.⁶⁰ Under these circumstances, someone else had to stand for the unity of the old religion.

Rome as a sacred center was destined to have a new lease on life under the Christian dispensation. In the period here in question some Christian writers were content to adopt the old vocabulary—Ausonius, for example, happily calls Rome "first among cities, the home of the gods".⁶¹ Others qualified it, but did not doubt that what had once been a great pagan city would become a great Christian city, as soon as it was cleansed of its ancient pollution: "Rome, thou ancient mother of temples, now given up to Christ."⁶² Because of Rome's importance, its purification had to be exemplary. Hence Ambrose's insistence on the removal of the Altar of Victory, and hence Theodosius's insistence on the role of both Rome and Alexandria as touchstones of Christian orthodoxy,⁶³ rather in the same way that churches were built over temples to efface memories of the old gods. Now that polytheism has been struck in its head, Augustine argued in a sermon delivered at Carthage in June 401, it must also be attacked in its limbs, the provincial cities. "Si in capite gentium res praecessit, membra non sunt secutura?"⁶⁴ Augustine's allusion is vague, but foremost among the events he had in mind must have been the Battle of the River Frigidus, at which Theodosius I had eliminated Eugenius and his backers among the polytheist elite of Rome. In his *De civitate Dei* Augustine gives an account of this battle that carefully underlines both sides' invocation of divine support—polytheist by Eugenius's followers, Christian by those of Theodosius. So do several of the other Christian accounts, while the polytheist Zosimus omits this aspect out of embarrassment rather than ignorance.⁶⁵ For Christian writers the battle by the Frigidus was the most convincing disproof of Roman polytheism, especially because the capital's fall to the Goths in 410 admitted no such easy explanation. The old

⁶⁰ Chastagnol, *Evolution politique* 174–82; Lepelley, *Cités de l'Afrique romaine* 1.362–69; Bowersock, in *Jewish and Christian self-definition* 3 176–82 (on distinctively Christian elements introduced into the cult after Constantine's death); Clover, *B.C.T.H.* 15–16B (1984).

⁶¹ Ausonius, *Ordo urbium nobilium* I.

⁶² Prudentius, *Peristephanon* II.1–2.

⁶³ *Codex Theodosianus* XVI.1.2.

⁶⁴ Augustine, *sermo* XXIV.6. On the date, cf. Lambot's edition, 324–25.

⁶⁵ Zosimus IV.58, and Paschoud's edition, 2(2).488–500, for the text of the other accounts.

gods had already been banned, so they could hardly be blamed; but the Church, despite a growing self-identification with Rome, was not yet ready to accept full responsibility for the fortunes of a city so burdened by its past. Zosimus, discerning that here at least polytheism had not suffered a clear-cut defeat, squeezes what consolation he can from the situation—the dilemma of Pope Innocent, forced to allow invocations of the old gods but insisting they be kept private; the success of certain Etruscan diviners in saving the town of Narni, even if not Rome itself, from Alaric.⁶⁶ But Augustine's mind was not tempted by this sort of pettiness. Realizing the impossibility of the situation, he turned his eyes from the earthly city to the City of God.

This was a natural enough reaction, granted that Christianity was a monotheism at once universal and transcendent. Since its kingdom was not of this world, it was easy for Christianity to extract itself from the rough-and-tumble of history—though that was not destined to be its most usual reaction, and indeed it was quite soon to be proclaiming Rome greater as Peter's see than it had ever been as the seat of empire.⁶⁷ The many gods of polytheism, by contrast, had allowed themselves to be defined too much in terms of their function here below in time and space, and in particular in relation to imperial Rome, city and empire. The late polytheist universalism we have been looking at was still at heart a locally or at best nationally based universalism, fully within the traditions of a religion that had always lacked central authority. One focused the many gods in one place, to the glory of that place; then one might or might not go on to wonder whether the many gods were really one. Christianity, by contrast, aimed to embrace all places in one universal Church, and did not think to be confined by the bounds of the Roman or any other empire. But the inherent limits of polytheist universalism and the challenge from Christianity do not exhaust the catalogue of problems faced by polytheists attempting to come to terms with the changing world of late antiquity.

THE THIRD CENTURY

Not long after he murdered his brother and co-emperor Geta, Caracalla declared to the Roman senate that "just as Zeus alone of the gods holds power, so he gives it to one among men".⁶⁸ The element of special pleading here will have escaped no one. But at least Caracalla's divine

⁶⁶ Zosimus V.41.1–3.

⁶⁷ See the passages in Leo and Prosper of Aquitaine discussed by Markus, in *Inheritance of historiography* 37–39.

⁶⁸ Herodian IV.5.7.

analogue needed no introduction. When Elagabalus presented his Syrian Baal to the same august audience, and sought to subordinate all other gods to him, he went too far. The Severans were well aware of the political applications of subordinationist theology—perhaps they were even au courant with Christian discussions of this problem.⁶⁹ But they were also a little ahead of their times.

In the aftermath of the last Severan's death, in 235, Rome's chaotic political situation and the lack of dynastic continuity severely undermined the imperial cult's effectiveness. It probably seemed decreasingly meaningful to offer divine honors to the ephemeral rulers spawned by the crisis of the mid-third century; certainly the evidence for the conduct of an imperial cult dwindles rapidly. But some attempt continued to be made to find an alternative, by privileging a supreme god whose reflection or representative the emperor had long been held to be by those political thinkers who espoused the Hellenistic tradition that the king was the "living law".⁷⁰ Aurelian's cult of Sol, the Sun, is the obvious example.⁷¹ Aurelian (270–75) worked desperately hard and with much success to restore the cohesion of the Roman world after the disastrous 250s and 260s. He seems to have felt that the earthly autocrat needed a heavenly mirror image: once this heavenly autocrat was accepted, his earthly counterpart might expect to be still further magnified. Aurelian was no longer "like god" but "born god", just as his divine protector, with whom he communicated in personal visions, had been raised above the other gods. These ideas were not without echo among Aurelian's successors, and they are an important stage in the prehistory of the Christian doctrine of empire forged by Constantine and formulated by Eusebius: one god, one empire, one emperor. But in the meantime the tetrarchy attempted something slightly different: the combination of a personal relationship with the gods with a bureaucratic type of dynasticism that privileged the office rather than its holder.

Diocletian's idea⁷² was to split the empire with a second Augustus, assimilating himself to Jupiter and his colleague to Hercules. The Augusti made no claim to personal divinity, though we may wonder

⁶⁹ Momigliano, *Ottavo contributo* 318–19; dal Covolo, *Severi* 61–73; Buraselis, *Θεία δωρεά* 52–64.

⁷⁰ Dvornik, *Early Christian and Byzantine political philosophy* 245–77, 453–557. Versnel, *Ter unus* 37, remarks: "the growth of henotheism . . . and the development of . . . monarchical forms of rulership in the . . . Hellenistic empires . . . are more than sheer chronological coincidences". He develops this point in ch. 1. As to which was the model and which the imitation, see the pointed remarks of Veyne, *Latomus* 45 (1986): 282–83.

⁷¹ Halsberghe, *Sol invictus* 130–71; Turcan, *A.N.R.W.* II.16.2, 1064–73; Štaerman, in *Mélanges Léviéque* 4.374–79.

⁷² Kolb, *Diocletian*, esp. 88–114, 168–72.

whether many of their subjects noticed. Both were assisted by Caesars, who were adopted as sons, married to daughters of the Augusti, referred to as "Iovius" or "Herculius", and perhaps, more or less officially, protected respectively by Mars and Sol-Apollo. The raw materials of this system were impeccably Roman. As far as its theological aspects are concerned, Jupiter, Hercules, and Mars were central to Rome's "veterima religio", while Sol had long been naturalized. Even the idea that particular gods might occupy privileged positions in the official pantheon was by now familiar. But the politico-religious synthesis implied by the tetrarchic system was newer. It may even be that Jupiter and his son Hercules were calculated to steal some of the Christians' thunder. Certainly they did not get their jobs just because Diocletian felt full of ancestral devotion toward them, or was suddenly overwhelmed by visionary enthusiasm. They both have a rather premeditated air; and when the tetrarchic system that they mirrored collapsed, they too were condemned, sooner or later, to hang separately.

JULIAN AND HELIOS-MITHRAS

Of all the late polytheist rulers and thinkers, the Emperor Julian best understood the contrast between and differing consequences of Christian universalism that flowed from the unicity of God, and polytheist universalism that had to be painstakingly constructed, by process of addition, from an overpopulated Olympus or even from local particularisms. Julian went to some pains in his polemical treatise against Christianity (*Contra Galilaeos*) to emphasize the firm bonds that united the different races of men with their national gods. But he also evolved a theology strongly influenced by the philosophers, a theology of basically henotheist character that started from "the common father and king of all peoples";⁷³ and he aspired to build an integrated and centralized polytheist Church Militant, on the Christian model, in order to propagate his theological vision.⁷⁴

In his attempt to restructure polytheism along more universalist lines, Julian appears to have seen a powerful ally in the cult of the Sun—Sol in Latin, Helios in Greek—identified with Mithras. At the end of his satirical work the *Caesars*, in which he imagines a contest before the Olympians to find who had been the best emperor of Rome, Julian has Hermes turn to him and say: "As for thee, I have granted thee knowledge of thy father Mithras. Do thou keep his commandments, and thus secure for thyself a cable and sure anchorage throughout thy life, and

⁷³ Julian, *Contra Galilaeos* fr. 21.115d; id., *or.* XI on Helios, esp. 131c and the clear statements of henotheism at 138b and 151 ab.

⁷⁴ Julian, *ep.* 84, 89; Sozomen, *H.E.* V.16.1–4.

when thou must depart from the world thou canst with good hopes adopt him as thy guardian god."⁷⁵ Julian's special attachment to Mithras, which at the end of the *Caesars* is directly paralleled to Constantine's attachment to Jesus, certainly owed something to the remarkable coherence of a cult that in the second to fourth centuries united males of all races, though mainly soldiers and officials, across the length and breadth of the empire, organized at least the more dedicated of them in a firmly defined seven-grade hierarchy, and gathered them in sanctuaries whose iconographic program is uniform to a degree unusual in the polytheist tradition, to worship a god regarded as superior to other gods and everywhere the same. Mithras did not, as Isis for example so often did, depend on local syncretisms for his specific identity. His was "an omnipotence which tends to put all the other gods in the shade or marginalize them and subordinate them to his action. . . . Although Mithraism belongs iconographically to polytheism, it in practice resembles . . . a cultic monotheism."⁷⁶ This is not the place to examine the reasons for the Mithras cult's wide dissemination and appeal. But one or two aspects of this in almost every way problematic and controversial religion should be singled out for their relevance to our discussion of late antique universalism.

Mithras was not originally a Greco-Roman but an Iranian god, and one of the grades of initiation through which adepts passed continued to be called "the Persian". Writing around the year 346, Firmicus Maternus bitterly attacks Mithraists as self-conscious Iranizers: "You then who claim that in these temples you celebrate your mysteries in the manner of the Magi, according to the Persian ritual, why is it only these customs of the Persians that you praise? If you think it worthy of the Roman name to follow Persian rituals and Persian laws. . . ." ⁷⁷ But in reaction to Franz Cumont's view of the Mithras cult as a religion with

⁷⁵ Julian, *Caesares* 336c (tr. W. C. Wright); and *cp. or.* XI.130bc, 155b. On Julian and Mithraism, see Simon, in *Etudes Mithriaques* 470–75.

⁷⁶ Turcan, in *Knowledge of God* 260. See also the recent syntheses on Mithraism by Merkelbach, *Mithras*, with Beck's review, *Phoenix* 41 (1987); Turcan, *Cultes orientaux* 193–241; Clauss, *Mithras*. The exclusion of women partially undermines the Mithras cult's universalist credentials, though in practice it cannot be isolated from the wider context of polytheism, which certainly did not exclude women; compare the initiations of Praetextatus and his wife, above, p. 48.

⁷⁷ Firmicus Maternus, *De errore profanarum religionum* V.2. It has been supposed that the two pages missing at this point from our only manuscript dealt at greater length with the Mithras cult (see the note ad loc. in Turcan's edition); but the context indicates that Firmicus Maternus went on to list, in time-honored fashion, the abominable habits of the Persians, and to ask why Mithraists did not follow them too, as well as the Magian ritual. The Iranian origin of Mithras and his cult was uncontroversial in antiquity: Lucian, *Deorum concilium* 9; Celsus ap. Origen, *Contra Celsum* VI.22; Proclus, *In Rempublicam* 2, p. 345 (Kroll).

deep and specific roots in Iran, as, in effect, a Romanized Mazdaism, and therefore essentially an import into the Roman Empire, the 1970s revival of Mithraic scholarship tended toward a "Western" view of this god and reduced the direct Iranian contribution to Mithras's name and little (if anything) more.⁷⁸

The Roman cult of Mithras certainly was unrecognizably different from the Iranian cult of Mithra. But Firmicus Maternus was not fooled, and in any case religions do change, even unrecognizably, in transmission. The Greeks (and Romans) notoriously recast alien cultures in their own image, or at least in digestible form—Zarathushtra is scarcely more recognizable in Greco-Roman garb than Mithra.⁷⁹ We know that the Iranian communities established by the Achaemenids in Asia Minor, western as well as eastern, persisted through the Hellenistic and Roman periods,⁸⁰ while in western Asia Minor Mithra's fellow Iranian divinity Anahit acquired a virtually independent cult, partly merged with that of Cybele.⁸¹ Mithra himself is attested in Armenia, Commagene, Capadocia, Pontus, Phrygia, and perhaps Lycia.⁸² This was the natural and unsurprising counterpart—in fact, the predecessor—of Alexander's implantation of Hellenism in Iran. Common sense suggests, and there is now a tendency for scholarly opinion to accept,⁸³ that Greco-Roman worship of an originally Iranian god must have evolved where Iranians, Mithra(s), Greeks, and Romans were all to be found together, in an atmosphere of religious syncretism but also of adaptation of the Iranian tradition even by those who were closest to it, the communities of Magians or "Magousaioi".⁸⁴ James Russell's recent study *Zoro-*

⁷⁸ Beck, A.N.R.W. II.17.4, surveys the field.

⁷⁹ Beck, in Boyce and Grenet, *History of Zoroastrianism* 3.

⁸⁰ Boyce and Grenet, *History of Zoroastrianism* 3.197–308; and above, p. 33.

⁸¹ Boyce and Grenet, *History of Zoroastrianism* 3.252.

⁸² Merkelbach, *Mithras* 43–72; Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia* 261–87; Boyce and Grenet, *History of Zoroastrianism* 3.259–61, 272–73, 301–3, 325–26, 476. With the mountain, rock-cut staircase tunnel (or "cave"?), and Mithra-cult at Pekiç some 90 km. west of Erzurum (Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia* 264; Sinclair, *Eastern Turkey* 2.250 and pl. 69–70), compare all the same at Arsameia in Commagene (Dörner and Goell, *Arsameia am Nymphaios*, esp. ch. 8 and pl. 29–33). These are not Roman-style Mithraea, but may represent a development in that direction, in which an element of Mazdean hilltop worship is still preserved.

⁸³ Beck, A.N.R.W. II.17.4, 2071–74; Ries, A.N.R.W. II.18.4, 2769, 2772–74; Boyce and Grenet, *History of Zoroastrianism* 3.468–90.

⁸⁴ On these see above, p. 33; and on their unorthodoxy Chaumont, *Historia* 22 (1973): 681–83. Cp. also the transmission of Mithra-worship eastwards into the Kushan sphere, where the god is identified with Helios and there is (1) a strong Greek element in the cultural mix and (2) an indisposition to adopt the dominant gods of contemporary Iran, e.g., Ahura Mazda: Rosenfield, *Dynastic arts of the Kushans* 77, 81–82; Colpe,

astrianism in Armenia traces in detail the gradual transformation of the Mazdean tradition as it passed through the Armenian filter. Though Russell underlines the fully Iranian character of the Armenian Mihr,⁸⁵ what becomes clear from his book is that those who accept some evolutionary connection between Mazdean Mithra and the Mithras of the Rhine camps have harmed their case by ignoring the middle ground of cultural interaction across which Mithra slowly travels from East to West. Among the many and varied carriers were Plutarch's famous Mithraic pirates of first-century B.C. Cilicia,⁸⁶ and Tiridates, the Parthian king of Armenia, who amidst immense publicity traveled to Rome to receive his crown from Nero, and declared at the coronation ceremony that he did obeisance to Nero "even as I do unto Mithras".⁸⁷ We still do not know how the Roman Mithras cult acquired the complex and distinctive doctrine, iconography, and ritual that characterize its maturity, from the second century A.D. onward. But Christianity is our best witness that such evolutions are possible.

Reinhold Merkelbach has rightly pointed out that the collapse of native Oriental milieus in the aftermath of Alexander had much to do with the uprooted, universalizing style not only of the Mithras cult but of all those other mystery religions from the East that went beyond the usually quite narrowly local appeal of the more traditional Greco-Roman gods.⁸⁸ In particular, the whole vast liminal zone on the marches of the Iranian world, where the Romano-Iranian and later the Byzantine-Arab frontier ran, especially the ancient cultures and gods of the Tigris-Euphrates region, once convinced of their universal vocation, now dominated by superpowers whose center of gravity lay far away, provided fertile ground for the genesis of universalizing religions that saw the whole world as potentially theirs⁸⁹—and might well, as Mithras did, shed almost all evidence of their ultimate origin. With the incorporation of Anatolia into the Roman Empire, its religions gained access to a

C.H.Ir. 3.850–51; Staviskij, *Bactriane* 196–97; also Gonda, *Mitra* 131–36, on relations with the Indian Mitra.

⁸⁵ As does Waldmann, *Der kommagenische Mazdaismus*, esp. 36, that of the Commagene Mithras.

⁸⁶ Plutarch, *Pompeius* XXIV.5.

⁸⁷ Cassius Dio LXIII.5. For the accuracy of this report, see Garsoian, *Armenia* X.35–40.

⁸⁸ Merkelbach, *Mithras* 39, 75–6. Compare, e.g., the known client cities of even the famous oracle of Apollo at Claros (map: Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* 174) with the distribution of Mithraea (maps in Vermaseren, *Corpus*, esp. at the end of vol. 2).

⁸⁹ See, e.g., the articles by Westenholz and Steiner in *Power and propaganda*; Irmscher, *Klio* 60 (1978) 178–79; and below, p. 122, on the Nestorian Church's universalist claims.

political continuum that allowed the Mithras cult, for example, to spread from the Euphrates to Hadrian's Wall,⁹⁰ and, supplementing polytheism's internal dynamic, encouraged the more general universalist tendencies that already existed within it. The role of the city of Rome in these developments was particularly significant, as transmitter and perhaps also as generator. It is at least possible that the Roman Mithras's evolution received significant impetus there.

But still more important to Mithras was his identification with the Sun, which allowed him to draw on the considerable reserves of Solar piety throughout the Roman Empire. The Emperor Aurelian's attempt to advance Sol to cultic primacy had considerably increased these reserves, and Julian planned to capitalize on them by placing Sol-Helios-Mithras at the heart of his polytheist restoration. Through his initiation in the mysteries of Mithras, Julian had gained an intimate personal relationship with the god; but his *Hymn to King Helios* also makes clear from its opening lines the universal role of the Sun, under the Good, as ruler of all beings including the gods, who are subordinated to his beneficent "hegemony". By underlining that it was Helios who caused him to be born into the House of Constantine, and that he himself represented the fourth generation of the family that had been attached to worship of the Sun, Julian also drew special attention to the link between earthly and heavenly monarchy. To Mithras he made only passing allusion, sensing that a mystery cult that had not disseminated itself indifferently through all social categories and was associated with Rome's hereditary enemy was not the ideal standard-bearer for his campaign. On the other hand, the Mithras cult did provide a uniquely structured and appealingly personal approach to the worship of the Sun. Examining it in the light of its solar connections, Julian probably found it the most radical and convincing manifestation of such universalist tendencies as were then at work within polytheism. No wonder he espoused it with such warmth. But just as the Christians' disproof of polytheism in its most ambitious settings, Alexandria and Rome, echoed around the world with special resonance, so too Julian's failure did unique harm to his cause because his aims were so visibly universalist. He had given the Christians what they had previously been obliged to invent for themselves—an incarnation of polytheism, a single target to shoot at.

⁹⁰ See, e.g., the remark of Aelius Aristides, *or.* XXVI (*Regarding Rome*). 105: "When were the times more suitable or when did the cities have a greater portion? The grace of Asclepius and the Egyptian gods now has experienced the most extensive increase among mankind" (tr. C. A. Behr).

UNIVERSALISM AND ROME'S IDENTITY

Despite Aurelian and Julian, the universalist tendencies implicit and increasingly explicit in polytheism did not cohere into a political and historical force to be reckoned with. Polytheism was inchoate enough as a religion without being expected to turn into a political philosophy as well; while the cities genuinely needed their local gods, and wanted them to be satraps, not Roman provincial governors here today and gone tomorrow.⁹¹ Although until Constantine the Roman Empire was ruled by polytheist emperors, polytheist universalism did not impart motive or expansive force to empire even to the limited extent that Christianity would. Rather, polytheism used the symbol and reality of Rome as a core around which to crystallize its own identity. Polytheist universalism remained cultural universalism *within* empire, without significant political motive beyond the preservation of that empire. As late as the fifth century the Platonist sage Proclus devoted himself to the regular worship of a thoroughly ecumenical selection of the old gods, and maintained that "it befits the philosopher not to observe the rites of any one city or of only a few nations, but to be the hierophant of the whole world in common".⁹² Yet his was a purely private initiative, which many polytheists would have regarded as invalid, at least as public cult, on the grounds that worship of the gods benefited the state only if paid for by the state.⁹³ Meanwhile the Egyptian Nonnus was composing his epic poem the *Dionysiaca*, celebrating the travels both within the empire and as far afield as India of the god whose legend and iconography had long symbolized Rome's universalist political and even, in the imagination of some, cultural-religious aspirations, especially in the East.⁹⁴ But these last manifestations of polytheist universalism—and Nonnus was in fact, it seems, a Christian—remain confined to the personal religious or literary sphere.

Even granted the limitations of polytheist universalism, though, we have now seen enough to be able to claim some understanding of what cultural universalism meant in late antiquity. What we are dealing with could be described, in the broadest terms, as the emergence of the

⁹¹ See above, p. 40.

⁹² Marinus, *Vita Procli* 19 (tr. L. J. Rosán, with adjustments). Proclus's example was perhaps imitated by the long-lived polytheist community at Harran: see next chapter, and Tardieu, in *Simplicius*, esp. 57.

⁹³ Zosimus IV.18.2, 59.3; V.41.3.

⁹⁴ Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* XIII.1–34; Turcan, *Sarcophages romains* 441–72; plate 2.



2. Triumph of Dionysus. Sarcophagus, circa 170–80.

imperial Roman identity,⁹⁵ expressed from the fourth century in the use of the word *Romania* to denote the empire.⁹⁶ The emergence of this identity was an extremely slow process—even the city of Rome could hardly play the universal assembly and acropolis without the kaleidoscopic but complicating and retarding variety of its visiting and resident provincials, both gods and men. “Cette hétérogénéité est la rançon de l’universalité”⁹⁷—polytheist universalism is additive, and therefore inherently pluralistic. The process of identity formation is more readily apparent once one gets out into the provinces and watches the evolution and spread, especially in the second century, of the typical Roman city with its standardized buildings, the imperial cult, and even the Oriental religions that by this time were so widely accepted throughout the empire. Among the most influential patrons of these Oriental religions were the Severans, the first imperial family of non-European origin. And it was Caracalla who gave legal expression to the ideal of a united and egalitarian empire with a firmly Roman identity by extending Roman citizenship to the great majority of his subjects (*Constitutio Antoniniana*, 212/13). On the cultural level, Hellenism performed a similar role, providing a common frame of reference, or at least allowing those

⁹⁵ For an excellent brief sketch of this process, see Millar, *Roman Empire and its neighbours* 1–12.

⁹⁶ Irmscher, in *Popoli e spazio romano*.

⁹⁷ Turcan, in *Popoli e spazio romano* 60.

rooted in local cultures to express themselves in terms comprehensible to those rooted in other local cultures.⁹⁸ For provincial identities persisted: provincial law, for example, did not sink without trace in the wake of the *Constitutio Antoniniana*.⁹⁹ If a homogeneous Roman identity was the ideal, a more dynamic and coherent force seemed to be needed to underpin it—not myth that explains but revelation that exhorts, speaking directly through a charismatic prophet to a human condition that is the victim of circumstance as well as history’s one constant. Perhaps Constantine was in part responding to this perceived need when he accepted Christianity for himself and by implication for his empire.

One point remains to be made. If the sort of cultural universalism that made Christianity appear so useful an ally of Romanity was not wholly a Christian invention, we must modify the fashionable assumption that polytheist Rome was ideally pluralist and tolerant. This assertion is often made in order to point a contrast with a monolithic and intolerant Christian Rome. Much of the rest of this essay will argue how little monolithic Christian Rome was, in no small part precisely because it espoused monotheism. That it also became less and less tolerant of polytheists, Jews, and heretics is beyond dispute; but it is not helpful to make this point by trying to construct an ideally pluralist and tolerant polytheism that never existed. This is what Arnaldo Momigliano did in a late article oddly entitled “The disadvantages of monotheism for a universal state”.¹⁰⁰ Between his *Fragestellung* (“whether and how plurality of gods was related to the pluri-national character of the Empire”) and the conclusion that “pagans never managed . . . to produce a consistent case for the interdependence between polytheism and political pluralism in the Roman Empire”, there is a significant terminological slippage, for plurinationalism is not the same as political pluralism, which in any case the Roman Empire never espoused. Momigliano apparently thought that since Christians paralleled the Empire’s unity with that of the Church, polytheists ought not to have been content with the polytheism-plurinationalism equation (as Celsus and Julian were), but to have evolved a polyarchic political philosophy too. The polyarchy of polytheism is indeed a theme of Christian apologetic—but, quite rightly, with

⁹⁸ Such is the argument of Bowersock, *Hellenism*, e.g., 13: “It was Greek culture that allowed the infinite multiplicity of . . . far-flung and diverse cults to exist as part of a loosely-defined common enterprise that we call paganism and that the Greek-speakers of the time quite rightly called Hellenism.”

⁹⁹ See, e.g., Seidl, *Rechtsgeschichte Ägyptens* 237–39.

¹⁰⁰ Momigliano, *Ottavo contributo* 313–28.

CHAPTER 2

reference to the whole world, not the Roman Empire's internal arrangements.¹⁰¹ When the Christian Procopius, invited to pour a libation to the tetrarchs, quoted back Homer's line, "It is not good to have many lords; let there be one lord, one king", he was alluding to a specific and transient political reality. Before he had time to explain that he was only joking, he had become the first of Eusebius's Palestinian martyrs.¹⁰² The search for a systematic polytheist justification of polyarchy ends in failure; and we know that an increasing body of late antique opinion regarded monotheism as theoretically advantageous for the universal state. Hence Momigliano's disillusioned (and correct) conclusion: that exponents of "enlightened pluralism" are better sought in the eighteenth than the second, third, or fourth century.

¹⁰¹ Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos* 28–29; Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* I.4.2, and *De laudibus Constantini* III.6, XVI.2–7; and cp. Celsus ap. Origen, *Contra Celsum* VIII.72, on the impossibility of "uniting under one law the inhabitants of Asia, Europe and Libya, both Greeks and barbarians even at the furthest limits" (tr. H. Chadwick).

¹⁰² Eusebius, *De martyribus Palaestinae* I.1.