

Chapter 1

Aude Busine: Porphyry and the debate over traditional religious practices

This article will examine the references made by Porphyry to pagan rituals in the *De Philosophia ex oraculis* in order to understand better the author's attitude towards traditional religious practices.

In his work originally entitled Περὶ τῆς ἐκ λογίων φιλοσοφίας, Porphyry gathered pagan oracles, most of which were ascribed to the god Apollo. Each oracle was followed by a philosophical commentary by the author. As is well-known, this work is of considerable importance for our knowledge of the neoplatonic views on pagan traditional religion. However, the interpretation of this enigmatic work remains puzzling, thus creating further difficulties for the analysis of Porphyry's role in the debate over religious practices. Indeed, the work is not extant: it is only available to us in the form of quotations made by Christian apologists in their polemic writings against Porphyry and pagan religion in general.¹ Consequently, there are still doubts surrounding its date, the attribution of certain fragments, and its general composition.²

Despite its fragmentary state, scholars have attempted to reconstruct Porphyry's original work, but they agree neither as to whether the *De Philosophia* addressed a pagan or Christian audience, nor even about the general purpose of its author. Traditionally, modern scholars follow the conclusions of J. Bidez, who considered the *De Philosophia* as a work written by Porphyry before he stayed at Plotinus' school, when he was young and still superstitious.³ However, the uncertainty of this early date has been pointed out.⁴ At the same time, some scholars have proposed to associate the *De Philosophia* with other Porphyrian treatises: J. J. O'Meara suggested to add to the

De Philosophia the fragments generally attributed to the *De regressu animae*⁵. More recently, P. F. Beatrice has proposed to attribute to the *De Philosophia* the fragments usually ascribed to the work *Against the Christians*, a hypothesis which was firmly rejected by R. Goulet.⁶

I shall not discuss here the key issues that arise from these statements. Yet, it should be noted that these modern controversies have overlooked the analysis of the remaining fragments.

The aim of this article is to delve into Porphyry's attitude towards religious practices in the light of the fragments that are attributed with certainty to the *De Philosophia ex oraculis*. In addition, I shall also compare it with the fragments of the *Letter to Anebo*, as well as with Iamblichus' answer in his *De Mysteriis*. Indeed, while assessing Porphyry's views on religious practices, modern scholars have traditionally opposed the *De Philosophia* and the *Letter to Anebo*. They usually relied on the common interpretation of Porphyry's intellectual development, which supposes an evolution from early superstition to later rationalism. On the contrary, A. Smith has shown that these two works do not express opposite attitudes towards pagan religious practices; and he claimed that the *Letter to Anebo* should no longer be considered as the attack of a rationalist mind on superstition and magics, but rather as a constructive enquiry about pagan rituals.⁷

It is now time to turn to the prologue of the *De Philosophia ex oraculis* in which Porphyry explained the aim of his work.⁸ In the first lines, the author claims that an accurate interpretation of traditional oracles could help a philosopher in the search for salvation.⁹ According to Porphyry, the teaching of the gods' revelations could provide philosophers with a means to find an end to their questions.¹⁰

In this context, Porphyry announced that his commentaries on oracles aimed at

providing his reader, on the one hand, with some philosophical principles revealed by the gods and, on the other hand, with more practical accounts intended to help the person who looks at the contemplation and purification of life.¹¹ It is not clear whether, as has usually been asserted by scholars, the treatise was practically organised according to this dichotomy between philosophical accounts and practical features of the teaching of the oracles. In view of the remaining evidence, I would prefer to consider that this distinction constitutes two features of Porphyry's argumentation, and merely represents two different levels of interpretation.

At any rate, it is clear that, on many occasions, Porphyry sought to explain and justify the validity of religious practices. At that time, the justification of pagan rituals was at stake: indeed, pagan intellectuals increasingly tended to reject some traditional rituals, such as blood sacrifice.¹² The denunciation of pagan rituals as nonsense was at the core of the Christian attacks against paganism.

In the *De Philosophia ex oraculis*, Porphyry's main argument consists in justifying religious practices thanks to the assertion that everything concerning the divine world, and hence also ritual performances, was imposed upon men by the gods themselves. In this regard, the author claims that:

Not only have they (= the gods) themselves informed us of their mode of life, and the other things which I have mentioned, but they also suggested by what sort of things they are pleased and prevailed upon, and moreover by what they are compelled, and what one ought to sacrifice, and what day to avoid, and what sort of figure should be given to their statues, and in what shapes they themselves appear, and in what kind of places they abide; and all the things whereby men thus honour them there is not one which they were not taught by (the gods)

themselves. As the proofs which confirm this are many, we will bring forward a few out of number, not to leave our statement without witness (Transl. Gifford).¹³

In all likelihood, Porphyry referred here to the well-known account of Plato's Republic (IV 427b) where it is claimed that the Delphic Apollo has enacted the best laws 'having to do with the establishing of temples, sacrifices, and other forms of service to gods, daemons, and heroes, the burial of the dead, and the services that ensure their favour'.¹⁴

In this respect, Porphyry seized the opportunity to use oracular texts as witnesses of divine expression on cultic practices. The remaining fragments of the *De Philosophia* let appear four main themes related to religious practices: 1) the traditional blood sacrifice; 2) magical rituals; 3) the ways in which the god passes on his inspiration to his medium and 4) the inaccuracy of the divine predictions.

This article will focus on the manner in which Porphyry commented on the divine words in order to justify the first two features of the debate about religious practices, that is to say, sacrifices and magic.

First, Porphyry used Apollinian oracles in order to justify traditional blood sacrifices. In that context, Porphyry quotes a long verse oracle of Apollo. In this prophecy, the god gave precise information on the different victims to be sacrificed. According to him, the victims must differ, depending on the type of deities concerned, whether terrestrial, infernal or celestial.¹⁵ This is the kind of material typically used by Christian authors (here Eusebius) to emphasize the nonsense and barbarism of pagan religious practices. Modern scholars also referred to this kind of oracles in order to emphasize both Porphyry's superstition and his lack of criticism and rationality. However, as is shown by the remaining fragments, the commentaries made by

Porphyry in the *De Philosophia* differ from the contents of the oracles, and, therefore, we should not identify Porphyry's intentions merely with the contents of the texts he commented on.

In this particular example, Porphyry gives notice that he used this oracle in a part of the work intended to the worship (θεραπεία). It is employed in order to establish the rank (*τάξις*) of the different divine entities.¹⁶

In the following commentary, which is the longest piece of the *De Philosophia* we have properly preserved, Porphyry did his best to show the logics of the classification exposed in the oracle. His first explanation is that the sacrifices are meant to be *sumbola* (σύμβολα), which are only clear to clever men.¹⁷ In the view of Porphyry, oracular revelations thus contain symbolic meanings that are to be understood and interpreted by sensible men.

The second explanation refers to the principle according to which 'like is delighted about like' (τῷ ... ὁμοίῳ χαίρει τὸ ὁμοιον). As it has been recently reminded, this rule of 'like to like' goes back very far in Greek thought.¹⁸ However, in the context of theurgic practice, it refers to the identification of certain natural substances with definite parts of levels of the cosmos and the spiritual entities inhabiting them.¹⁹ Porphyry uses this rule in order to explain that one must sacrifice animals living in the same element as that of the deities for which the animal is intended.

The same kind of classification is found in the *Letter to Anebo*, where Porphyry claims that the divine entities are to be classified according to the different kinds of bodies (aetherial, aerial or earthly).²⁰

In the *De Mysteriis*, Iamblichus refutes this point because, according to him, one cannot confine the gods to certain parts of the cosmos places, because it does not

properly reflect the totality of their essence.²¹ In V 20, where he discusses sacrifices, Iamblichus also admits that ‘the rule of cult, obviously, assigns like to like’²², but in a different context (the criteria used by Iamblichus to connect the gods to the victims are not material; they rather follow the rule of empathy).

All this goes to show that Porphyry’s account on sacrifices in the *De Philosophia ex oraculis* is in line with the debate over the validity of the kinds of victims to be sacrificed, which is exposed in the *Letter to Anebo* and in Iamblichus’s *De Mysteriis*.

The second theme dealt with in this article is that of magic. Indeed, Porphyry found in oracles a justification for magical rituals and constraint exerted on gods. Just before quoting six oracles of the goddess Hekate²³, Porphyry refers to a certain Pythagoras of Rhodes according to whom ‘the gods who are invoked over the sacrifices have no pleasure therein, but come because they are dragged by a certain necessity of following, and some of them more, and some less’.²⁴

Porphyry admits the truth of Pythagoras’ statement, but only because it was confirmed by the oracles (ἐκ τῶν λογίων): ‘For as Pythagoras had made these statements, I learned how true his words are by close observation of the oracles’. Later on, Porphyry notes that ‘For all the gods say that they have come by compulsion, yet not simply so, but as it were, if I may so speak, by compulsion under the guise of persuasion’.²⁵ In this passage, Porphyry created a new word, πειθανάγκη, in order to explain that which happens when the gods accept to be invoked. This term combines the pejorative notion of constraint (ἀνάγκη), with that of persuasion (πείθω), whose importance is well-known in Platonism and will be developed by Iamblichus.

In the following passage, Porphyry quotes an oracle in which Apollo himself advises to someone to perform magical rituals (*τὰ μαγεία*) in order to purify his soul

and to be able to receive the god. Porphyry comments on the sacred prescription by asserting that ‘hereby it is clearly shown that the use of magic in loosing the bonds of fate was a gift from the gods, in order to advert it by any means’.²⁶ Regarding two other oracles about the constraint exerted on the gods during the divination act, Porphyry adds that ‘they give out answers for their own compulsion, as will be shown by Apollo’s answer about his own compulsion’.²⁷

We know that Porphyry would probably have condemned such magical practices. However, by describing magic as a gift from the gods and by showing that the gods themselves accepted to be constrained, Porphyry seems to answer the severe attack formulated by pagan philosophers and Christian apologetists against such practices.

Unfortunately, Eusebius’s scattered quotations do not allow for a proper understanding of Porphyry’s opinion about magic and constraint. Nevertheless, we can connect these comments to the passages of the *Letter to Anebo* where Porphyry has also questioned the manners in which men could address the gods.²⁸ Conversely, Iamblichus firmly refuted the fact that gods could be compelled by humans. He claimed that theurgy differs from magic especially because it does not exert constraint on gods.²⁹

In conclusion, we have seen that Porphyry used pagan oracles in order to justify some traditional religious practices, like sacrifices and magic. The first conclusion we can come to is that the philosopher’s explanation was that cultic matters depended on a divine rule, and that oracles of the gods were the expression of this rule. In this regard, the commentaries of Porphyry aimed at explaining the logics of this rule, which was sometimes hidden to men by the symbolic character of the oracular language.

The overwhelming impression conveyed by the evidence is that the accounts

about rituals were at the centre of the debate over religious practices, as expressed in the *Letter to Anebo* and in the *De Mysteriis*. Nevertheless, the fragmentary state of the *De Philosophia* does not allow us to have a complete view of Porphyry's attitude toward religious practices. In providing new views on traditional rituals, Porphyry likely wished to build a general interpretation of religious practices that would be able to resist the severe attack against traditional rituals formulated by other contemporary Neoplatonists and by Christian polemicists.

One may still wonder why Porphyry decided to gather such a collection of oracles, whose philosophical interpretation posed so many problems. Yet, the new status ascribed to the traditional oracles, called 'logia' by Porphyry, may have constituted a means to answer the Christian claims that truth and wisdom had to be found in the *logia* of the Bible³⁰. In that context, Porphyry has conversely tried to show that Pagans too had their own sacred texts in which men could find truth about philosophic principles and practical aspects of religion.

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1 See the collection of fragments in G. Wolff (1856/1983), replaced today by A. Smith (1993), pp. 351-407 (P. 43).

2 For an overview, see Smith (1987).

3 J. Bidez (1913), followed by T. Barnes (1973 and 1994), R. J. Hoffmann (1994), pp.

16-17.

4 See R. L. Wilken (1979 and 1984); G. Fowden (1981).

5 J. J. O'Meara (1959 and 1969).

6 P. F. Beatrice (1997), sv. Porphyrius, 27, pp. 54-9 (with previous bibliography); contra R. Goulet (2001), pp. 395-7; Id., (2004).

7 Smith (1997).

8 Porphyry F 303-304-305 (Smith) = Eusebius, *Prep. Ev.* IV 7-8.

9 Porphyry F 303 (Smith) = Eusebius, *Prep. Ev.* IV 7, 1.

10 Porphyry F 303 (Smith) = Eusebius, *Prep. ev.* IV 7, 2: ἦν δ' ἔχει ώφέλειαν ἡ συναγωγή, μάλιστα εἰσονται ὄσοιπερ τὴν ἀλήθειαν ώδίναντες ηὗξαντό ποτε τῆς ἐκ θεῶν ἐπιφανείας τυχόντες ἀνάπαυσιν λαβεῖν τῆς ἀπορίας διὰ τὴν τῶν λεγόντων ἀξιόπιστον διδασκαλίαν. ‘And the utility which this collection possesses will be best known to as many as have ever been in travail with the truth, and prayed that by receiving the manifestation of it from the gods they might gain relief from their perplexity by virtue of the trustworthy teaching of the speakers’ (Trans. Gifford).

11 Porphyry F 303 (Smith) = Eusebius, *Prep. ev.* IV 7, 1: ἔξει δὲ ἡ παροῦσα συναγωγὴ πολλῶν μὲν τῶν κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν δογμάτων ἀναγραφήν, ὡς οἱ θεοὶ τὰληθὲς ἔχειν ἐθέσπισαν· ἐπ' ὀλίγον δὲ καὶ τῆς χρηστικῆς ἀψόμεθα πραγματείας, ἥτις πρός τε τὴν θεωρίαν ὀνήσει καὶ τὴν ἄλλην κάθαρσιν τοῦ βίου. ‘And our present collection will contain a record of many doctrines of philosophy, according as the gods declared the truth to be; but to a small extent we shall also touch upon the practice of divination, such as will be useful both for the contemplation and the general purification of life’ (Trans. Gifford)

12 See for example S. Bradbury (1995).

13 Porphyry F 316 (Smith) = Eusebius, *Prep. Ev.* V 11, 1: Οὐ μόνον δὲ τὴν πολιτείαν αὐτῶν αὐτοὶ μεμηγύκασιν καὶ τὰ ἄλλα τὰ εἰρημένα, ἀλλὰ καὶ τίσι χαίρουσι καὶ κρατοῦνται ὑπηγόρευσαν, καὶ μὴν καὶ τίσιν ἀναγκάζονται τίνα τε δεῖ θύειν καὶ ἐκ ποίας ἡμέρας ἐκτρέπεσθαι τό τε σχῆμα τῶν ἀγαλμάτων ποταπὸν δεῖ ποιεῖν αὐτοί τε ποίοις σχήμασιν

φαίνονται ἐν τε ποίοις διατρίβουσιν τόποις· καὶ ὅλως ἐν οὐδένι ἔστιν ὁ μὴ παρ' αὐτῶν
μαθόντες ἄνθρωποι οὕτως αὐτοὺς ἐτίμησαν.

14 Plato, *Rep.* IV 427b: τῷ μέντοι Ἀπόλλωνι τῷ ἐν Δελφοῖς τά γε μέγιστα καὶ κάλλιστα
καὶ πρῶτα τῶν νομοθετημάτων. Τὰ ποῖα; ἢ δ' ὅς. Ἱερῶν τε ιδρύσεις καὶ θυσίαι καὶ ἄλλαι θεῶν
τε καὶ δαιμόνων καὶ ἡρώων θεραπεῖαι· τελευτησάντων <τε> αὗταις θῆκαι καὶ ὅσα τοῖς ἐκεῖ δεῖ
ὑπηρετοῦντας Ἄλεως αὐτοὺς ἔχειν. ‘... for the Delphic Apollo it remains to enact the greatest,
finest and first of laws. What laws are those? Those having to do with the establishing of
temples, sacrifices, and other forms of service to gods, daimons, and heroes, the burial of the
dead, and the services that ensure their favor’ (transl. G.M.A Grube).

15 Porphyry F 314 (Smith) = Eusebius, *Prep. Ev.* IV 9,1-2.

16 Porphyry F 314 (Smith) = Eusebius, *Prep. Ev.* IV 9, 1: Ἀκολούθως μετὰ τὰ ρήθεντα
περὶ εὐσεβείας ἢ περὶ τῆς θεραπείας αὐτῶν ἔχρησαν, ἀναγράφοιμεν ἂν ὃν ἐκ μέρους κὰν τοῖς
περὶ εὐσεβείας φθύσαντες παρατεθείκαμεν. ἔστιν δὲ ὁ χρησμὸς τοῦ Ἀπόλλωνος ἄμα καὶ
διαίρεσιν τῆς τῶν θεῶν περιέχων τάξεως. ‘Next in order after what has been said concerning
piety we shall record the responses given by them concerning their worship, part of which by
anticipation we have set forth in the statements concerning piety. Now this is the response of
Apollo, containing at the same time an orderly classification of the gods’ (Transl. Gifford)

17 Porphyry F 315 (Smith) = Eusebius, *Prep. Ev.* IV 9, 6: ἀρ' οὖν δεήσει ἐξηγήσασθαι
τῶν θυσιῶν τὰ σύμβολα τῷ εὐσυνέτῳ δῆλα;

18 E. C. Clarke, J. M. Dillon, J. P. Hershbell (2004) p. 261. See Plato, *Lys.* 214a-b for a
good statement of the principle, together with an attribution of it to Homer.

19 For further hints at this fundamental doctrine see Iamblichus, *De Myst.* I 5; I 6; I 15;
V 10.

20 Porphyry, *Ep. Ad Aneb.* F 2a = Iamblichus, *De Myst.* I 8: Οὐ μέντοι τὴν ύπὸ σοῦ
διάκρισιν ύποτεινομένην αὐτῶν προσιέμεθα, ἥτις τὴν πρὸς τὰ διαφέροντα σώματα κατάταξιν,
οἷον θεῶν μὲν πρὸς τὰ αἰθέρια, δαιμόνων δὲ πρὸς τὰ ἀέρια, ψυχῶν δὲ τῶν περὶ γῆν, αἰτίαν
εἶναι φησι τῆς νυνὶ ζητουμένης διαστάσεως.

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- 21 Iamblichus, *De Myst.* I 8: ἡ μὴ διειργομένη μερισταῖς περιγραφαῖς ὑποκειμένων κατέχεται μεριστῶς ὑπὸ τῶν μερῶν τοῦ κόσμου; τί δὲ δὴ καὶ τὸ διακωλῦν ἐστι τοὺς θεοὺς προϊέναι πανταχοῦ καὶ τὸ ἀνεῖργον αὐτῶν τὴν δύναμιν ὥστε ιέναι μέχρι τῆς οὐρανίας ἀψιδος;
- 22 Iamblichus, *De Myst.* V 20: ὁ δὴ τῆς θρησκείας νόμος τὰ ὅμοια δηλονότι τοῖς ὁμοίοις ἀπονέμει.
- 23 Porphyry F 347 (Smith) = Eusebius, *Prep. Ev.* V 8, 4-7 = *Chaldaean Oracles* F 219, 222, 221 and 223 (des Places). On these texts, see the brief accounts of S.I. Johnston (1990), pp. 130-1; C. Van Liefferinge (1999), pp. 143-4.
- 24 Porphyry F 347 (Smith) = Eusebius, *Prep. Ev.* V 8, 1: τοῦ γὰρ Πυθαγόρου ταῦτ' εἰρηκότος παρετήρησα ἐκ τῶν λογίων ως ἀληθές ἐστιν τὸ εἰρημένον. On the author, see K. Ziegler (1963), *sv. Pythagoras* n° 11, pp. 304-5.
- 25 Porphyry F 347 (Smith) = Eusebius, *Prep. Ev.* V 8, 3: πάντες γὰρ δι' ἀνάγκην φασὶν ἀφῆθαι, οὐχ ἀπλῶς δέ, ἀλλ' οἶον, εἰ χρὴ οὕτω φάναι, πειθανάγκην.
- 26 Porphyry F 339 (Smith) = Eusebius, *Prep. Ev.* VI 4, 1-2: δι' ὃν καὶ σαφῶς δεδήλωται ὅτι ἡ μαγεία ἐν τῷ λύειν τὰ τῆς εἰμαρμένης παρὰ θεῶν ἐδόθη εἰς τὸ ὄπωσοῦν ταύτην παρατρέπειν.
- 27 Porphyry F 348 (Smith) = Eusebius, *Prep. Ev.* V 8, 8-10: ἐπεὶ καὶ ἐπανάγκους ἔαυτῶν ἐκδιδόασιν, ως δηλώσει ὁ ἀπὸ τοῦ Ἀπόλλωνος ἐκδοθεὶς περὶ ἔαυτοῦ ἐπάναγκος.
- 28 Porphyry, *Letter to Anebo* F II 8c (Sodano p. 18-22) = Eusebius, *Prep. Ev.* V 10, 3.
- 29 See Van Liefferinge (1999), pp. 55-84; Ead., (2000).
- 30 See Busine (2004).