CREDO IN UNUM DEUM

P. ATHANASSIADI, M. FREDE (edd.): *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*. Pp. 211, 3 pls, maps. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999. Cased, £40. ISBN: 0-19-815252-3.

In A.D. 374, Gregory, bishop of the small town of Nazianzus in the Cappadocian hinterland, delivered a funeral oration in praise of his father. Amongst many pious vignettes, Gregory offered a thumbnail sketch of his father's conversion to orthodoxy in 325 following an encounter with a party of bishops on their way to the Council of Nicaea. (Fortunately, it appears, these persuasive prelates were not supporters of Arius.) As a result of his conversations with these godly men, Gregory's father abandoned his previous faith:'[My father] was a branch sprung from a root not at all to be admired . . . To the humble they are called Hypsistarians, and the Pantokrator is the only god they worship' (*Or.* 18.5; *PG* 35: 989D–992A).

Like all good panegyrists, Gregory of Nazianzus revealed as much as he obscured. In quickly dismissing the Hypsistarians and their monotheistic theology, he sought both to marginalize the cult and to align it with other Christian heresies. But the Hypsistarians had a longer history than Gregory chose to imply. And their monotheism was more than a deviant or confused form of Christianity.

In a first-rate paper—marked by a thoughtful use of epigraphic material, which might even have provoked an approving smile from Louis Robert—Stephen Mitchell plots a widespread cult of *Theos Hypsistos* (the Greatest God) dating back at least to the second century B.C. The cult involved some familiar polytheist elements, such as the offering of votives for health or prosperity, but its adherents did not practise animal sacrifice, participate in civic festivals, nor represent their god in anthropomorphic form. Most strikingly, Hypsistarians developed a sophisticated understanding of an abstract, incorporeal, and distant deity mediated through angelic messengers such as Apollo. In its language and concepts, this theology shared much with contemporary Jewish and neo-Platonic thought. 'By any definition this was one of the most spectacular demonstrations of religious syncretism that the ancient world has to offer' (p. 121).

Like Mitchell, other contributors to this volume are keen to expose the deep roots of monotheism in the Mediterranean world and to erode any comfortable sense that belief in One God was the exclusive preserve of a Judaeo-Christian tradition (orthodox or heretical), isolated from the classical world which surrounded and enveloped it. M. L. West examines monotheistic thinking in early Mesopotamian, Hebrew, and Greek religions; Michael Frede in the major philosophical schools of classical antiquity; John Dillon in the various monistic forms of Gnosticism; and Wolf Liebeschuetz in the syncretic arguments for a Supreme Deity advanced by Praetextatus in Macrobius' *Saturnalia*.

The cumulative impact and importance of these essays should not be underrated. Together they make a powerful case for the proposition 'that not only philosophers, but a very substantial portion of late antique pagans was consciously monotheistic' (p. 20). Moreover, they show that it is difficult to conceive of the rise of Christianity as marking a simple movement from polytheism to monotheism, or for pagan monotheism to be understood as a belated rearguard response to Christian successes: 'far from arising as a reaction to Christianity, pagan monotheism was a deeply rooted trend in ancient philosophy which developed under its own momentum' (p. 20).

That central concern to present a continuous history of monotheism also underpins the editors' refusal to follow convention in understanding 'late Antiquity' as a

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https://doi.org/10.1093/cr/52.1.135 Published online by Cambridge University Press

period which opens at the beginning of the fourth century A.D. with the emperor Constantine's adoption of Christianity. Indeed, in this volume, 'late Antiquity' seems almost boundless, running from West's Mesopotamia through classical Greece, the Gnosticism of the second century A.D., to Liebeschuetz's fifth-century Rome. More often than not (and somewhat confusingly at times), 'late Antiquity' refers to the first four centuries A.D.

As Gregory of Nazianzus knew well, such arresting rhetorical tactics can both reveal and obscure. From time to time, it is undoubtedly worthwhile for historians to kick over the boundary markers which divide and demarcate the past. In this case, the dilution of late Antiquity has the startling effect of emphasizing the substantial continuities which connect monotheist thought after Constantine with much preceding religious practice and theological speculation.

But the centuries after Constantine might also have been noticeably different for polytheism as well as for Christianity. In an elegant paper, Polymnia Athanassiadi neatly explicates the complex, intricate, and often conflicting exegeses of the late second-century Chaldaean Oracles by the neo-Platonists Proclus in the fifth century and his pupil Damascius in the sixth. Despite their differences, both philosophers were keen to explicate these sacred texts in monotheistic terms. Importantly too, they both conceived of their project as 'the formulation of an orthodoxy based on the correct interpretation of a canon of texts' (p. 181).

Of course, it may be that these expressions of polytheist theology were part of a long-term internal process of elaboration, or that the monotheistic 'spiritual globalization' of the ancient world—in A.'s pleasing phrase (p. 181)—was the result of a series of convergences and overlaps between long-standing monotheistic theologies and Christianity. But it also seems attractive, at least in part, to think of these developments as an explicit reaction to the insistent pressure of Christianity's exegetical and rhetorical strategies. These may also have been important factors in provoking 'sharper contours and a clearer definition to polytheistic belief' (pp. 126–7), as well as a growing sense amongst polytheists of 'themselves as a group with a common cultural past and a common interest' (p. 5).

For that reason, a 'late-antique boundary' might for the moment be worth retaining. Not because it signals the triumph of one religion over another, nor because it represents the victory of a particular set of beliefs in One God, but because the unsteady rise of Christianity after Constantine may still be indicative of a wider shift in the religious sensibilities of the Mediterranean world, a shift which itself had a marked impact on the understanding and expression of monotheism in both Christian and polytheist theologies.

Corpus Christi College, Cambridge CHRISTOPHER KELLY

SEEING AND BELIEVING

G. FRANK: *The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity*. (The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 30.) Pp. xiii + 219. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2000. Cased, £24.95. ISBN: 0-520-22205-9.

Eastertide in Antioch in A.D. 390 was unsettling for newly baptized Christians. Instructed in the mysteries of the Christian faith by their priest John Chrysostom

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