



Exploratory Workshop Scheme

Scientific Review Group for the
Humanities

ESF Exploratory Workshop on
**Definitions of Paganism in Late Antiquity,
Medieval Christianity and Islam**

Munich (Germany), 26-29 November 2014

Convened by:
**Bert van den Berg, Peter Adamson
and John Marenbon**

SCIENTIFIC REPORT

1. Executive summary

The workshop took place in Munich at the Munich School of Ancient Philosophy (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München). It studied paganism in relation to the Abrahamic faiths by bringing together the three relevant areas of study (classical antiquity, the Islamic and Christian Middle Ages) and had been organized to pave the way for a larger collaborative project. Of the convenors, Peter Adamson acted as the local organizer.

Participants arrived on Wednesday, 26 November 2014. Those who wished to do so were invited to attend a lecture by dr. Mohammed Rustom on “Mullā Ṣadrā on Existence, Death and Dreaming” (a topic of direct interest to the theme of the workshop) and have dinner afterwards with the convenors.

The workshop itself started on Thursday morning, 27 November and ran for two and a half days ending with lunch on Saturday afternoon, 29 November. In total 18 scholars from 9 countries participated. Each session of one and a half hour consisted of a paper lasting no more than 40 minutes, comments by a respondent who had received the paper previously to the workshop lasting no more than 20 minutes and half an hour of general discussion by all participants. The exception to this rule was the contribution by one of the convenors, John Marenbon, which was based on his forthcoming book on the ‘Problem of Paganism’ and which had been circulated among all participants in advance. Whereas most contributions were specialized studies on a particular topic, this paper presented a broad thesis along with some illustrations. In line with the intentions of the convenors, this scheme allowed ample time for, often very animated, discussion. Most participants had a background in (the history of) philosophy, which gave them sufficiently common ground to engage in each other’s papers, even though not all participants were necessarily well at home in all three areas represented in this workshop. In fact, this situation allowed us to abstract from the various case studies and to look at the topic from a more abstract perspective. Informal discussion continued over lunch, served at the workshop venue, and dinner in nearby restaurants.

The final session was taken up by a concluding discussion, which consisted of two parts. In the first part, chaired by Taneli Kukkonen, we tried to summarize our findings. It was, among other things, concluded that what we had been dealing with were pre-modern ways of reasoning about religion. In the second part, directed by the convenors, we discussed possibilities of future collaboration. It was commonly agreed upon that this workshop had been very inspiring and fruitful and the proposal to continue our collaboration was greeted with enthusiasm. Given the fact that the workshop had in part been informed by well-advanced research on paganism (including Marenbon’s forthcoming book), we felt that we needed to look beyond the somewhat restricted theme of paganism for a broader theme that would appeal to students of all three areas of studies that had been involved in this workshop such as the topic of pre-modern ways of reasoning about religion that we had already identified as a common concern in the first part of the final session. Furthermore it was decided that the focus should be philosophical, though still informed by the study of historical texts bearing on the question of rationality within religious contexts.

2. Scientific content of the event

The workshop tried to articulate various notions of paganism in Graeco-Roman antiquity, the Islamic Middle Ages as well as the Christian Middle Ages in the Latin-speaking West.

Session 1 addressed paganism in antiquity. George Boys-Stones kicked off with a discussion of the workings of Providence according to the so-called Middle Platonists (including philosophers like Atticus, Apuleius and ps.-Plutarch). Boys-Stones took issue with the popular view that, unlike the Christians, pagan Platonists could not have a personal relationship with god. He argued that even though the highest God of the Platonists may

indeed be an abstract entity, he transmits his providential care through lower divine beings, with whom in fact a personal relationship is possible. The commentator, Bernard Collette, agreed with the speaker on his account of the working of providence according to the Middle Platonists, yet raised a number of points for further consideration, e.g. the question whether a personal relation with god requires providence.

In **session 2**, George Karamanolis presented his recent research on the relation between Graeco-Roman, i.e. pagan, philosophy and Christian thought. He demonstrated that the relation between the two was far more complex and subtle than has often been assumed to be the case. On the one hand, Christian intellectuals took care to distinguish between themselves and the pagan philosophers, while on the other hand, they were happy to present their own intellectual activities as philosophy, be it of a different and superior kind. This distinction between one superior type of philosophy and all other schools of philosophy is, Karamanolis argued, comparable to the way in which (pagan) ancient sceptics framed the relation between scepticism and the other philosophical schools to which they were opposed. The sceptics pointed to the *diaphonia* (disagreement) that existed among the traditional philosophical schools in order to discredit them. The Christians did likewise, arguing that the reason for this *diaphonia* was that the truth, as revealed to mankind in the incarnation of Christ, was unknown to the pagan philosophers. In his response, Gerd van Riel stressed that we should not exaggerate the differences between Christian and pagan philosophers. Much of the anti-pagan polemics of the Christians were not that different from the traditional invectives that went on between the pagan philosophical schools.

Session 3 concerned itself with paganism in the Latin Middle Ages. In preparation of the workshop, John Marenbon had circulated a summary of his forthcoming book on the Problem of Paganism in the Long Middle Ages (i.e. the period from Augustine to Leibniz). Confronted with the cases of noble pagans from the past who had lived before the advent of Christ (e.g. the Roman Lucretia) or of those living in distant places outside the range of Christian missionaries (e.g. India, pre-Columbian America), Christian intellectuals wrestled with a set of questions: Can these noble pagans be virtuous? Can they have knowledge of god? Is there salvation for them? Marenbon refers to this set of questions as the aforementioned Problem of Paganism. Even though the questions as such do occur in medieval authors (e.g. in Augustine and Dante), none of them articulated the problem of paganism as such. The central issue of Marenbon's presentation was whether his Problem of Paganism is a useful way of looking at a variety of medieval philosophical texts or rather a misleading label. Both commentators, Jill Kraye, from the perspective of a historian, and Luca Bianchi, representing the philosophical perspective, elaborated on this Problem of Paganism and concluded that it was a useful historical tool.

The subsequent presentation (**session 4**) by Christophe Grellard fitted in smoothly with that of Marenbon. Grellard discussed the issue of 'invincible ignorance' in later scholasticism. Well before the discovery of the Americas theologians had discussed the question under what circumstances ignorance would not automatically result in the condemnation of the ignorant soul, for example in the case of a baptized child that is brought up in a pagan country and that is thus ignorant of Christianity. Grellard showed how the discovery of the New World gave this question a whole new dimension. Especially important in this new context became the idea of natural knowledge, the sort of knowledge about God which any intelligent person could arrive at by himself (e.g. 'there is only one true god', 'good people will be rewarded, bad people will be punished', 'God's law is good'). The idea that this natural knowledge could be sufficient for salvation was in particular popular with Dominicans and Franciscans from Salamanca, but did not necessarily go down well with the Inquisition, as the Dominican friar Francisco de la Cruz found out the hard way when he was condemned and burnt at the stake for, among other things, this 'Salamanca solution' to the problem of invincible ignorance. The paper was commented upon by Peter Adamson whose questions focused on philosophical issues raised by the material Grellard presented, for instance whether we can make sense of the idea that someone could have a moral obligation to believe something (given that beliefs are not necessarily subject to our will).

The next day of the workshop continued with a talk by David Bennett (**session 5**) on paganism and early kalām. He discussed the little-studied phenomenon of heretical and pagan groups (the boundary here is itself rather unclear in the historical record) commented upon by Islamic theologians the first generations of the Abbasid period. Bennett is in fact rather doubtful as to whether all the groups discussed by these theologians existed: at least some may be fictional ‘straw man’ invented to create a foil for the theologians’ own theories. In terms of the doctrinal content of such groups, Bennett pointed to such frequently appearing tropes as a contrast between, and mingling of, ‘light’ and ‘dark’ forces in the generation of the cosmos, which obviously has Gnostic or Manichean echoes. In her comments, Rosalind Hansberger provided further context for these discussions, drawing on her own expertise on the Greek-Arabic translation movement.

Session 6 brought us back to the Latin West. Katja Krause raised the question whether Thomas Aquinas had a conception of paganism as such. Having answered that question in the affirmative, she then concentrated on two case studies of Aquinas’ reception of the Greek pagan Aristotelian Alexander of Aphrodisias. As one might expect, Aquinas has little patience with Alexander’s discussion of the human intellect. More surprisingly though, Aquinas adopts Alexander’s conception of formal causality to construct his own conception of the beatific vision (i.e. the direct contemplation of God). In the course of the discussion, kicked off by Matteo di Giovanni, it was suggested that perhaps the distinction between paganism and Christianity was less important to Aquinas than a distinction between philosophical ‘families’, i.e. that of Platonists and Aristotelians.

Sonia Gentili (**section 7**) approached the pagan-Christian distinction from a more literary perspective. On the basis of Dante’s *Inferno* XXVI she argued that in Aristotelian ethics friendship matters more than it did in the Christian Middle Ages, since for Aristotle the practice of virtue requires friendship, whereas Dante values friendship mostly in practical terms. Unlike Aristotle who thinks of a human being first and foremost as a social animal that interacts with other human beings, medieval Christians focus on a personal relationship with God. Part of the subsequent discussion centered around the question whether the historical Aristotle—as opposed to however Dante may have conceived of him—did indeed hold that there can be no virtue without friendship. It was pointed out that in *Nicomachean Ethics* X Aristotle famously distinguishes between two types of happiness, that of man as a social animal and that of man as a divine being whose intellectual virtue and happiness does not depend on friendship.

In the final session of that day (**session 8**), Bert van den Berg took up a question from the presentation of John Marenbon, whether there existed a sort of mirror-image problem of the Problem of Paganism in the case of the pagan philosophers of antiquity. Van den Berg reported that he had been unable to find traces of such a problem in the case of the pagan Platonists, but came up with another problem. If, as the pagan philosophers held, Christianity was a great evil, why did the gods allow this to happen? For as George Boys-Stones had shown in his presentation, Platonists place much emphasis on the workings of divine providence, even on a personal level. In his response, Sébastien Morlet contributed some helpful insights on an author discussed by Van den Berg, Sal(l)ustius, who was one of the few pagan philosophers to explicitly raise this problem.

The final day of the workshop started with a presentation (**session 9**) by Sajjad Rizvi who introduced us to the enigmatic figure of Mullā Sadrā, an 17th Persian thinker. Interestingly, for Mullā Sadrā there does not seem to have been any problem of paganism. Just as the Islamic Empires had succeeded other empires, so they had appropriated foreign philosophies that had been at home in those conquered empires. More in particular, Greek pagan philosophy, and especially Neoplatonism, supposedly derived from the Egyptian

Hermes, whom Mullā Sadrā thought of as an Arabic thinker. Hence he claimed that philosophy returned to its Arabic home through the writings of the Greeks. In response to this paper, Peter Adamson made some remarks about the Neoplatonic sources in Arabic translation that were so influential on Sadrā, and posed a number of historical questions about the resurgence of interest in paganism in the Safavid period.

In conclusion of the workshop, Taneli Kukkonen chaired a roundtable discussion (**session 10**). As he observed, two notions of ancient paganism prevailed in the Islamic and Christian Middle Ages, one positive and one negative. According to the former, positive view, pagan philosophy represented the pinnacle of classical culture and contained much that was of value and that could be appropriated; according to the latter negative view paganism was seen as the false practice of idolatry that was totally objectionable, as the diagram below illustrates.

	Positive / ' true'	Negative / ' false'
' Us'	True doctrines / orthodoxy	False doctrines / heresy
' Them'	Doctrines ripe for appropriation / ' good paganism'	Idolatry / ' bad paganism'

Discussions by pre-modern authors in which they try to argue for the (in)validity of some specific doctrine and the way in which some specific pagan doctrine might be appropriated bring up all sorts of meta-reflections on the ways in which, in pre-modern times, philosophers assumed that one could or indeed should reason about religion.

3. Assessment of the results, contribution to the future direction of the field, outcome

For reasons explained under §1 above, the participants decided in favor of further collaboration on a somewhat different theme, i.e. that of pre-modern ways of reasoning about religion. Our plans are:

- (1) to 'publish' a selection of recorded talks on the web (not, however, the comments by the respondent or the general discussion).
- (2) to involve other people in the project, in part because we feel we need additional expertise (e.g. a philosopher of religion).
- (3) to apply for a major grant (e.g. under HERA III).
- (4) to have smaller activities / projects around the theme of pre-modern ways of reasoning about religion, that would not necessarily involve all participants.

4. Final programme

Thursday, 27 November 2014

09.00-09.30 **Welcome by Convenor**

Bert van den Berg (Leiden University, NL)

09.40-13.00 Morning Session

- 09.30-11.00 **Session 1:** George Boys-Stones (Durham), 'Can a Platonist have a Personal Relationship with God?', comments by Bernard Collette (Laval)
- 11.00-11.30 *Coffee / Tea Break*
- 11.30-13.00 **Session 2:** George Karamanolis (Vienna) 'Early Christian Thinkers on Philosophy and Christianity as Philosophy', comments by Gerd van Riel (Leuven)
- 13.00-14.30 *Lunch*
- 14.30-18.00 Afternoon Session**
- 14.30-16.00 **Session 3:** John Marenbon (Cambridge), 'The Problem of Paganism': a useful historiographical tool or a misleading label?', comments by Jill Kraye (London) and Luca Bianchi (Piemonte)
- 16.00-16.30 *Coffee / tea break*
- 16.30-18.00 **Session 4:** Christophe Grellard (Paris) 'Pagans' Invincible Ignorance in Late Scholasticism', comments by Peter Adamson (Munich)
- Dinner*

Friday, 28 November 2014

- 09.30-13.00 Morning Session**
- 09.30-11.00 **Session 5:** David Bennett (London), 'Paganism and Early Kalam', comments by Rotraud Hansberger (Munich)
- 11.00-11.30 *Coffee / Tea Break*
- 11.30-13.00 **Session 6:** Katja Krause (Berlin), 'Aquinas' Attitude toward Pagan Philosophy' comments by Matteo di Giovanni (Munich)
- 13.00-14.30 *Lunch*
- 14.30-18.00 Afternoon Session**
- 14.30-16.00 **Session 7:** Sonia Gentili (Rome) 'Dante, Ulysses and the Limit of the Aristotelian Virtue', comments by John Marenbon (Cambridge)
- 16.00-16.30 *Coffee / Tea Break*
- 16.30-18.00 **Session 8:** Bert van den Berg (Leiden), 'The Virtue of Platonic Paganism', comments by Sébastien Morlet (Paris)
- Dinner*

Saturday, 29 November 2014

09.30-13.00	Morning Session
09.30-11.00	Session 9: Sajjad Rizvi (Exeter), 'Paganism in Later Islamic Philosophy', comments by Peter Adamson (Munich)
11.00-11.30	<i>Coffee / Tea Break</i>
11.30-13.00	Session 10: Concluding discussion chaired by Taneli Kukkonen (Otago)
	<i>Lunch / Departure</i>

5. Final list of participants

Peter ADAMSON (Munich)
David BENNET (King's College, London)
Luca BIANCHI (Piemonte Orientale)
George BOYS-STONES (Durham)
Bernard Collette (Laval)
Matteo DI GIOVANNINI (Munich)
Sonia GENTILI (Sapienza-Università di Roma)
Christophe GRELLARD (Paris)
Rotraud HANSBERGER (Munich)
George KARAMANOLIS (Vienna)
Katja KRAUSE (Max Planck Institute Berlin)
Jill KRAYE (The Warburg Institute, London)
Taneli KUKKONEN (Otago)
John MARENBOON (Cambridge)
Sébastien MORLET (Paris)
Sajjad RIZVI (Exeter)
Bert VAN DEN BERG (Leiden)
Gerd VAN RIEL (Leuven)

6. Statistical information on participants

Total number of participants: 18.

Countries of origin: Austria: 1; Belgium: 1; Canada: 1; Germany: 4; France: 2; Italy: 2; Netherlands: 1; New Zealand: 1; U.K.: 5.

M/F repartition

M: 14

F: 4

Note: two female scholars who had originally agreed to participate could in the end not attend the workshop and had to be replaced on short notice. The organizers were lucky that Sébastien Morlet (Paris) and Bernard Collette (a visiting scholar from Canada) were willing to step in. Unfortunately, this affected the M/F repartition.