Mysteriously Meant

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THE WITHERING AWAY of the great Olympians can be sensed in the epics of Homer and is made plain when his champions defended his apparent irreligion with allegorical explanations. The unacceptability of the pantheon to philosophers is clear in Cicero's philosophical treatises, in the poem of Lucretius, and even in the late theologies of Plutarch and Marcus Aurelius. When the last aristocratic defender of orthodoxy, Symmachus, informed the Senate that the search for religious truth is a private matter—"we do not come to so great a mystery by one road"—he may have been pleading for tolerance but he sounds very much like an indifferentist. Nonetheless, the generous views expressed in "The Oration on the Altar of Victory" are probably to be preferred to the eclectic superstitions buzzing in the skull of Constantine, Christ's Warwick, or the esoteric doctrines embraced by Julian, pagan precursor of St. John of the Cross. Pagans and semi-pagans show a nervous liberalism toward the new doctrine and an undiscriminating eagerness to tinker with their own convictions that suggest the erosion of a theology. Actually, the gods were turning into metaphors. By the fifth century, Sidonius, Count of Lyons and Bishop to the Averni, can, as a Christian, reject them all.

NOTE: Unless otherwise indicated, all references to patristic writers are to Migne, Series graeca (Paris, 1857-1903), cited as PG, or Series latina (Paris, 1844-1903), cited as PL. To avoid typographical problems, Greek titles are given in Latin translation or transliteration. Volume and column numbers only are cited when the title is mentioned in the text.

1 Symmachus, Opera, ed. O. Seeck (Berlin, 1883), p. 282.
in a few verses of one poem but call them back as theological tinsel in some marriage hymns written for Christian communicants.

The contest between the new and old faith began conventionally.\(^2\) First, the Jews, spoiled of their religion and scandalized by its perversion, attacked and were counterattacked; then the idolators joined the assault. Early Gentile opinion, as it echoes in the asides of Valerius Maximus, Horace, the younger Pliny, Tacitus, and Suetonius, is contemptuous of Christian doctrine and disgusted with the vulgarity of Christianity. As the Church prospered and became politically and materially threatening, pagan responses became either occultly hilarious or learnedly serious. The first tone is heard in Lucian or Philostratus; the second probably dominated the lost book of Fronto (so charmingly confuted by Minucius Felix), Celsus' *Book of Truth* (partially preserved by Origen's rejoinder), and the vanished *Against the Christians* of the quasi-Christian Porphyry. Most of these anti-Christian complaints were written early; nevertheless, Christian apologists continued to advance their case until the time of Augustine. Paganism was obviously a tough snake that required a great deal of killing.

The records of Eusebius and the allusions of the controversialists inform us that there were other second-century apologists besides Justin, Tatian, Athenagoras, and Tertullian, whose polemics against pagans we possess. But what these four men wrote plainly provided the model schema for an apology. Some men before Christ, a synopsis might begin, had glimmerings of Christian truth, but it was so altered by devils disguised as gods it was more like a corrupted biblical imitation or a very primitive form of Christian dogma. Because Christian truth was debauched, wiser pagans assumed that the gods were either deified heroes or allegorized natural processes. Once this truth, dark in the revelation to Moses and the Prophets, was lighted by the New Dispensation, nothing could stand before it. This brief for Christianity carried the court with it after numerous public trials, but the Church's eventual victory provided questions for many centuries: Is the Bible the oldest book? Will pious pre-Christians be granted salvation? Is all non-Christian myth or legend basically historical, philosophical, physical?

The double assault of the Christian apologist on both Jewish and Gentile criticism can be surveyed in Justin’s two polemics, the *Apologia pro Christianis* and the *Dialogus cum Tryphone Judaeo*. In the debate with Trypho, Justin practically invents typology to convince his Hebrew opponents of their erroneous blindness, but he also indicates what must have been the common tenor of pagan jeering. Trypho had charged Christians with basing the Christ story on the legend of Perseus, and Justin responds to this accusation by attacking its lack of originality. The Gentiles had long been complaining that the life and nature of Christ was stolen from the myths of Hercules, Bacchus, and Aesculapius. Justin responded by parading a series of ur-Christers so that he could ask their pagan adherents why it was possible to believe in Hercules or Bacchus and not in Jesus. This was, of course, simply a means of turning the pagans’ knives against them and in no sense can be considered blasphemy on the part of the defending saint, who presumed that all mythology had been invented by demons who eavesdropped on the Prophets’ ecstasies and, foretasting the future, attempted to put obstacles in the way of Christianity. Learning that Christ would “tie his foal to a vine and wash his robes in the blood of the grape,” the besotted devils created the myths of Bacchus and Bellerophon. In similar wise they tried to forestall and hence weaken belief in the Virgin Birth with the story of Perseus’ immaculate origin. When they read that the promised Messiah would have “the strength of a giant to run his course,” they concocted the myth of the demigod Hercules.

The fiends spying on the manuscripts of Isaiah and Jeremiah might be the inventors of the Graeco-Roman mythology. According to Justin, however, Moses, who was more ancient than any Attic literate, is the source of all Greek philosophy. Plato’s theory of creation, as expressed in the *Timaeus*, is only one indication of the enormous pagan debt to Genesis, but there are numerous other obligations. Whenever the reader finds a curiously Christian idea among the litter and trash of Greek

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3 It is known that Justin wrote an *Oratio ad Graecos* and a *Cohortatio ad Graecos*, but the texts printed by Migne are spurious.
5 Ibid., col. 630.
6 Justin, *Apologia*, PG VI, 358-82.
7 Ibid., cols. 410-11, 426. Certain Christian rites, such as baptism and communion, were incorporated in pagan ritual (cols. 422, 427).
8 Ibid., cols. 415-18.
philosophy, he knows its divine source. "So the seeds of truth seem to be among all men, but their [Greek philosophers] contradictions indicate the failure of men to grasp the exact meaning." Justin is just new enough in controversy to be decent; hence, he is ready to grant that the Logos was always available to men, even those "considered atheists," who lived by right reason. "They who lived before Christ reasonably, and still do, are Christians." As a consequence of this Christian but highly doubtful conjecture, Socrates can be held a forerunner of Christ, and there is for Justin sufficient evidence for this supposition. The Greek philosopher urged men to reject the testimony of demons and to search for the "unknown God," warning his disciples "that it is neither easy to find the Father and Maker of all, nor having found him is it safe to declare him to all." The Christian truth underlying the second half of this statement became manifest when the devils, distressed by Socrates' "vague knowledge," saw to it that he was put to death.

Three other Greek contemporaries of Justin, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Tatian, commend the half-light of the philosophers, who glimpsed, according to Theophilus, the basic truths present in divine inspiration given all wise men. All of them mention the names of eminent Greek thinkers (even the Aristotle of the First Mover) who were aware of one, increase God. Theophilus adds to the list the Sibyl, whom he quotes relentlessly; she is comparable in authority to the Prophets, but unfortunately her pronouncements on monotheism and theodicy, like those of Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, Archilochus, Simonides, Sophocles, and Euripides are probably the fruit of human excogitation rather than divinely revealed. These other apologists further agree that the pagan pantheon, if not a poetic invention, is nothing more than a roster of deified human heroes or a Mosaic revelation, once perused and badly remembered.

Theophilus reminds the Greeks that all they have in the way of ancient history—the early floods of Deucalion and Clymenus—is merely

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10 Ibid., col. 398.
11 Ibid., cols. 438-62, 335. The hallowing of St. Socrates apparently begins with Justin according to J. Geffcken, Sokrates und das alte Christentum (Heidelberg, 1908).
12 Theophilus, Ad Autolycum, PG VI, 1143-44.
13 Ibid., cols. 1051-55; Athenagoras, Legatio pro Christianis, PG VI, 899-903; Tatian, Oratio adversus Graecos, PG VI, 810. Tatian had a squint eye for Diogenes, Plato, Aristotle, Heraclitus, and Zeno, but thinks well of Socrates.
15 Ibid., cols. 1059, 1115-19.
a garbled version of the correct Mosaic account.\textsuperscript{17} In a sense, the errors of the pagan theologians are somewhat innocent. At the time Moses set down the revealed truth, the remainder of mankind was totally illiterate. In due course Homer and Hesiod either badly remembered the revelation of Moses or purposely perverted the "glory of the unique God." The whole process of textual corruption, Theophilus writes, had been carefully recorded by Euhemerus, "a man of extraordinary impiety . . . who, after he had discussed the gods, concluded that they did not exist and that the universe was self-governing."\textsuperscript{18} Aware of the nature of Greek interpretation, Theophilus offers his unbelieving opponents a fine Christian interpretation of the mysteries hidden in Moses' description of the first days of Creation.\textsuperscript{19}

Tatian devotes a book of the \textit{Oratio adversus Graecos} to proving that Moses lived long before the Trojan War and was the leader of the most ancient of nations.\textsuperscript{20} He also was perfectly aware that some Greeks saw only moral or physical allegory in their traditional legends,\textsuperscript{21} but he was also not ignorant of the double readings found in biblical texts by Clement of Rome, Barnabas, and Justin. The modes of interpretation were in his opinion utterly different, and he does not hesitate to inform the Greeks that what can be found beneath the letter of the inspired Scripture is quite opposite from what can be read into a mythology invented by lying demons.

Believe me then, O Greeks, and do not see allegories in your gods. If you do this, the divine as you conceive it disappears for you and for us. For these demons, naturally evil, are restored by physical reading. I cannot bring myself to adore material elements or persuade others so to do. Metrodorus of Lampsacus is childish in his book on Homer when he turns it all into allegory and says that Hera, Athena, and Zeus are not what those who worship them believe but are either natural things or forces. You say the same of Hector, Achilles, Agamemnon, all the Greeks and Trojans, and of Helen and Paris. They are poetic inventions and never lived.\textsuperscript{22}

With this opinion, Athenagoras, writing a few years later to Marcus Aurelius, agreed; he stringently criticizes the Greek allegorists, whose wealth of allegorical lore he displays and casts out as useless to believers in the true God.\textsuperscript{23}

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\textsuperscript{17} Theophilus, \textit{PG VI}, 1146-47.  
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid.}, col. 1130.  
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid.}, cols. 1075-79.  
\textsuperscript{20} Tatian, \textit{PG VI}, 869, 879-87.  
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ibid.}.  
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Ibid.}, col. 854.  
\textsuperscript{23} Athenagoras, \textit{PG VI}, 935-39. 
\end{flushright}
When Christian apologetics moved to the West, rather than Minucius Felix, it was Tertullian who was the legitimate heir of the Greeks, and it was this erudite Carthaginian who kindled the passion for discovering and separating the literal reading from the figurative understanding. Like Tatian, Tertullian maintained that second or nonliteral readings were the exclusive property and privilege of the Church, because all sectarian, the Gnostics for instance, use symbols and enigmas incorrectly. Pagans, whose theologians he read expertly, are naturally inferior to Christian heretics in the method of under-reading; and, hence, he laughs at their continual search for significant etymological exposition and hidden physical theory. The Ad nationes contains his principal arguments against the non-Christians, but his objections to pagan allegorical commitment come forward firmly in his Contra Marcion.

The superstition of the masses inspired by common idol worship and ashamed of the names and fables of their ancient dead now borne by idols turns to an interpretation of natural objects and so with cleverness covers its own disgrace by figuratively making Jupiter a heated substance and Juno one of air... Vesta is made fire; the Muses, water; and the Great Mother, earth. Thus Osiris is buried and expected to come to life as a symbol of the regularity of the return of fruits and the restoration of life as the year turns. The lions of Mithra are emblems of arid and dry Nature.

On a level with his scorn of pagan allegory, Tertullian condemns stellar theology, but for him, as for Tatian, Euhemerus is a pagan of a more sympathetic complexion because he was a comfort to Christians in his sacrilegious fashion.

In the Apologeticus Tertullian details the human weaknesses, the occupations, and the avocations of the unholy pagan pantheon. The heroes—Romulus, fratricide, rapist, and manurer of fields, and Aeneas, bastard, traitor, and fornicator—fare no better. He finds their ultimate
He knows, of course, the euhemerists' theory that the gods were formerly benefactors of mankind; and he inquires why this honor is no longer accorded men who have more recently made great contributions to society. He points out that even in the past, star-performers, Socrates, Demosthenes, Cato, Cicero, among others, were not elevated to Olympus, but coldly left "among the dead." The Egyptians had far more wisdom than most heathens when they converted Joseph, "one of our saints," into their god Serapis, and Tertullian knows exactly how it came about.

The Egyptians called him Serapis from his turban... of pointed shape memorializing his providing of corn and giving evidence, through the ears of corn ornamenting its edges, that the care of provisions was on his head. For the same reason that the care of the Egyptians was under his hand, they made a sacred figure of the dog at his right, and put it under his hand.

Tertullian's conviction that everything holy the pagans know they learned from the Jews governs to a degree his evaluation of Greek culture. The classical poets are liars or immoral, and the literature found in the Scriptures is library enough for Christians; nonetheless, the Christian study of Graeco-Roman texts "partly cannot be allowed, partly cannot be avoided." He also inquires, "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?" and almost shouts, "Away with all attempts to make a speckled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition!" But he knows many of the great philosophers well. Seneca gets a short ovation. In general, however, Tertullian regards the heathen poets and philosophers as so wrong, so unoriginal that he can hardly tolerate his patristic predecessors, who quoted them because of their seemingly brief glimpses of Christian truths.

Now Tertullian does not doubt that monotheism is an innate idea which is demonstrated by the fact that in moments of stress men everywhere exclaim, "Great God! Good God!" the testimony of a soul "naturally Christian." But the cry also shows that Christian doctrine is

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32 Ad nationes, PL I, 598–99.
33 Ibid., col. 606; Apologeticus, PL I, 336–37.
34 Ad nationes, PL I, 596–97.
36 De spectaculis, PL I, 660.
37 De idolatria, PL I, 675.
38 De praeescriptione haereticorum, PL II, 20; Apologeticus, PL I, 342–43.
39 De testimoio animae, PL I, 609.
40 Apologeticus, PL I, 377. Minucius Felix makes the same point (XVIII. 11) and this with other similarities suggests that he and Tertullian had some sort of relationship or used the same predecessor. See H. J. Bayliss, Minucius Felix (London, 1928), pp. 274–259.
To support this conviction, Tertullian states that Moses, a contemporary of Inachus and prior to Saturn, lived four hundred years before the founding of Troy and, consequently, fifteen hundred years before Homer, the earliest Greek writer. At this earlier date the Hebrews promulgated their concept of God, but the philosophers found it too simple.

They would not talk of Him as they found Him; they had to discuss His quality, nature, and abode. Some think Him incorporeal; others corporeal (the Platonists and Stoics). Others say He is atoms or numbers (the Epicureans and Pythagoreans). Heraclitus says fire. The Platonists represent Him as taking care of the world; the Epicureans think Him idle without human interest. The Stoics put Him outside the world . . .; the Platonists put Him inside.45

Because the philosophers had this original access to truth and twisted it satanically, Tertullian, contrary to Justin, gives them no hope of grace. Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and especially Socrates (who was inspired by a demon, and was both idolator and pederast), are surely damned.46 God has hardened His heart against these men, not because they were ignorant of Christian teachings but rather because “they did not perceive God in His works and followed idolatry instead.”47

III

Although Tertullian, father of Latin apologetics, was a man of immense learning, he is hardly in the same class either as scholar or as thinker with his two great Greek contemporaries, Clement and Origen, both Alexandrians. The former instructed the latter and probably regarded Christianity as a superlative philosophy; the latter was certainly the greatest theologian before Augustine and is the founder of Christian dogmatics and biblical criticism. Christianity, which denied both of them beatitude, is probably more indebted to them in the long run than to the blood of the martyrs; on the other hand, they are both in debt to the philosophizing Jew, Philo, and brought his Rab-

41 Tertullian, De testimonio animae, PL I, 615-17; De anima, PL II, 648-51; Apologeticus, PL I, 383-88, 515-16, 519-20; Ad nationes, PL I, 588.
42 Apologeticus, PL I, 515-20.
43 Ibid., col. 405; De anima, PL II, 647-48.
44 Apologeticus, col. 376; De anima, PL II, 720; Contra Marcion, PL II, 511.
binical version of Greek interpretation safely into the Christian circuit.\textsuperscript{45}

For Clement, as for his predecessors, the Graeco-Roman theology was the ultimate in superstitions,\textsuperscript{46} but pagan philosophy, especially that of Plato, had a tincture of divine inspiration.

Before the coming of Christ, philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness . . . God is the cause of all good things, but of some before others; hence, first the two Testaments and second, philosophy. Now philosophy was given first to the Greeks until they could be called by God, because philosophy brought the Greeks to Christ as the Law did the Jews. Philosophy, therefore, prepares the way for him who would be perfected in Christ.\textsuperscript{47}

The Greeks, Clement supposed, had their philosophy through the ministrations of inferior angels\textsuperscript{48} and also from Moses and the Prophets.\textsuperscript{49} The latter two sources were despoiled of “fragments of truth,” which the philosophers went on to claim as their own, “masking some points, using their ingenuity to sophisticate others, and, since they were probably possessed by the spirit of perception, discovering certain tenets on their own.”\textsuperscript{50} But what they copied from the essential Christian doctrines of faith, hope, love, temperance, repentance, and fear of God, they invariably falsified;\textsuperscript{51} nevertheless, a few sober-living men, styled “atheists” by their contemporaries, men like Euhemerus, Diagoras, Hippo, and Theodorus, “though they did not reach truth, suspected error . . . and this suspicion is a seed which can grow into the plant of wisdom.”\textsuperscript{52}

Other ancients, Socrates, who drew his ideas from Moses,\textsuperscript{53} Orpheus, Linus, Musaeus, and Homer, who were instructed by the Prophets, philosophized “by way of a hidden sense . . . poetry is for them a veil against the many.”\textsuperscript{54} Plato, however, is Clement’s great Christian before the Advent; he not only “heard right well the all-wise

\textsuperscript{47} Clement, \textit{Stromateis}, I. 5. 28.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., VII. 2. 6.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., V. 14. 89–141.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., I. 17. 87.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., II. 1. 1.
\textsuperscript{52} Clement, \textit{Cohortatio}, II. 24.
\textsuperscript{53} Clement, \textit{Stromateis}, V. 11. 67.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., V. 4. 24. Clement states that Numa, influenced by the precepts of Moses, saw to it that no graven images were adored and taught his subjects that the mind alone apprehends the “Best of Beings” (ibid., I. 15. 71).
Moses" but can also be called "Moses Atticans." Clement spends a large portion of the fifth book of the Stromateis explicating the doctrines of "Hebraizing Plato," who may have gone to the Egyptians, Babylonians, and Assyrians for some of his other knowledge but learned his religion from the Jews. The Greeks, failing to find God in Nature, should more wisely have followed the almost Christian doctrine of their greatest philosopher. But unlike Justin or his coeval, Irenaeus, Clement, though he follows his predecessors thus far, seems unready to acquit Socrates and Plato before the presiding magistrate in the tribunal of Jehovah.

Given their acknowledged provenience, pagan writings properly understood could yield Christian messages. Clement divides all nonliteral meaning, which he calls by a variety of nondiscriminated terms, into ethical, theological, and physical comprehension, and there is no indication that he limited this sort of arcane interpretation to Christian texts alone. He is precise in his knowledge of Egyptian symbolism, but he knows, too, that the Greeks "have veiled the first principles of things, delivering the truth in enigmas, symbols, allegories, metaphors, and such kinds of tropes." He states that he cannot live long enough to set down the names of those "who have philosophized in a symbolical manner." The method they employed has many advantages. Truth shines more brightly in the dark, thereby revealing its edges more sharply. Nonetheless, truth should not be commonly bestowed on all or communicated "to those . . . who are not purified in soul," nor are "the mysteries of the Word to be explained to the profane."

This closing decision of Clement is not unlike those proposed by the Neo-Platonic allegorizers of Homer, but his associate Origen is even more obsessed than he with grasping the spirit lurking behind the letter. His impulsion toward the occult comes not only from the practiced

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55 Ibid., V. 12. 78. (It should be observed that Eusebius devotes the tenth book of his Praeparatio evangelica to Greek borrowings from the Bible.)
56 Ibid., I. 22. 150.
57 Ibid., I. 1. 10.
58 Clement, Cohortatio, VI. 70.
59 Clement, Stromateis, II. 14. 1.
60 In his Adversus haereses (PG VII, 1047) Irenaeus states that Christ did not come just for Romans living in the age of Tiberius Caesar, "but for all men without exception, who from the beginning by His aid . . . feared and loved God, practised justice and goodness towards neighbors, desired to see Christ and hear His voice."
61 Clement, Stromateis, V. 4. 19–21; 7. 41–42.
62 Ibid., V. 8. 44–55.
63 Ibid., V. 9. 56–59.
customs of his predecessors and from the injunctions of St. Paul but also from his own conviction that some stories in the Old Testament are likely to turn the stomach of a decent man unless they can be explained as mythical covers of an inner mystery. However, a better notion of his temper in regard to the origin of legends and their pious explication can be had from his distinguished controversy with the brilliant Celsus, long safely dead.

In his Book of Truth Celsus had asserted that almost all Christian doctrines were warped versions of Platonic idealism, but in addition Christians had certain other dogmas and rites eclectically put together of borrowings from the philosophy of the Stoics, the Jewish tradition, the mysteries of Mithra, the myths of Typhon, Osiris, and the Cabiri. The story of Christ is no more than a concatenation of various old myths plus the remembrances of various wandering Greek and barbarian wonder-workers who had plagued antiquity. Celsus was also a bit of a Janus. He explained the impious or salacious pagan stories as allegories, but he refused this right to Christians. At least he did not follow his principles when he read sportive biblical events. Origen thinks that all legends should be searched for their good or bad import. If this were done, it would then be discovered that demons wrote the narratives of the gods, whereas God saw to it that for moral or spiritual reasons, not for sheer Rabelesian ribaldry, the account of Noah’s inebriation, Jacob’s polygamy, and Lot’s incest were recorded.

To turn the tables, Origen recalls Celsus’ mirth over the silliness of the story of Adam and Eve and his comment that “more rational Jews and Christians were ashamed of these things and try to allegorize them.” This is, indeed, an uncritical statement from a man whose compatriots allegorize the obviously analogous and purloined Pandora myth and fail to perceive in Plato’s private myth of Penia and Porus the Edenic foundation, “hit on by accident” or learned from “those who interpret the Jew’s traditions philosophically.” The special understand-

65 Origen, De principatibus, PG XI, 360-1. Actually, almost everything he read in the Bible had for him allegorical meaning. Wolfson (op. cit. I, 58-59) brings this out, but one should also see Origen’s various homilies (PG, XII, 185, 198-201, 218-20, 454-56, 699, 774-75).
66 Origen, Contra Celsum, PG XI, 1287-1503.
67 Ibid., cols. 951-54.
68 Ibid., col. 742.
69 Ibid., cols. 691-95, 714, 1106-14.
70 Ibid., cols. 1586, 1086-91.
ing concealed in these legends can be disclosed in other Bible tales, which Celsus assumed were all imitations of Greek myths. A general rule of thumb for both pagans and Christians disturbed by a venerable but possibly dubious tale might, Origen thinks, be as follows:

Anyone who reads the stories with a free mind, who wants to keep himself from being deceived by them, will decide what he will accept [literally] and what he will interpret allegorically, searching out the meaning of the authors who wrote such fictions.

It can be assumed that this formula of personal interrogation and individual interpretation which Origen recommends for Bible students and mythographers is also useful to readers of the biography of Christ, which, in the opinion of Celsus, was conflated out of the myths of Hercules, Bacchus, and Orpheus. History knew, Celsus said, a considerable number of females who were pregnant by supernatural penetration; for example, the mother of Plato had born a child to Apollo. But Celsus was gravelled by various other episodes in the life of Christ. How could one prove that the dove which descended on him was the Holy Ghost? How can one prove, Origen responds, that Oedipus ever lived or that a war was fought against Troy? The magic test of ends again, as always, provides Christians with assurance. The gentle religion of Christ, free of blood sacrifice and burnt offerings, and His own exemplary career are proof enough of His divinity. But there is proof beyond this. Can any of the other so-called saviours of mankind show that “there are people who have reformed in morals and become better men as a consequence of their lives and teachings”?

IV

After the brilliant efforts of Clement and Origen, the responsibility for Christian apologetics passed to the Latins, and during the next two centuries engaged the defending minds of Cyprian, Arnobius the Elder, Lactantius, and Augustine. The Greek exponents of the Christian his-

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71 Ibid., cols. 1098-1106.
72 Ibid., col. 738.
73 Ibid., cols. 1047, 1498.
74 Ibid., col. 731.
75 Ibid., col. 738.
76 Ibid., col. 967.
77 Ibid., col. 974.
tory and theology had put together such a fine case for their superiority that there was practically nothing new to say. Occasionally, however, some badly informed apologist like Arnobius made the mistake of unconsciously letting his own heresies drop into the open while attacking the position of the unconvinced pagans.

In the *Adversus gentes*, a treatise in seven parts, Arnobius opens his denunciation by repeating most of Cyprian's *Ad Demetrianum*: Christianity was not responsible for the troubles of the Roman Empire. In the last two books he flagellates the modes of worship in pagan cults. The middle sections reject the proposal of the syncretists that all religions be brought into union, supports and praises Cicero's low evaluation of the Roman pantheon, and expends an enormous number of pages in reporting, mocking, and rejecting the various Greek and Latin moral and physical allegorizers of the poets and the mythologies. One of Arnobius' central theses is the basically human origin of all of pagan religion; hence, he is not one to blame the famous Greek and Roman atheists "for refusing to credit what is obscure." The euhemerists, he is certain, should be praised because they have truly heaped historical honors on a whole roster of dead heroes by supposing their deification. These views firmly enabled him to introduce the *Adversus gentes* with an invitation to the pagan world, long given to worshipping its human benefactors, to see at last the superlative benefactions of Christ.

Though far more readable than Arnobius, Lactantius has likewise nothing very novel to say to the pagans in his *Divinae institutiones*, which was written in a symbolical seven books, three of which attack the pagans whereas four celebrate Christianity as the true religion, teaching all men justice and proper worship and providing for its adherents a happy life. In the adversative first books Lactantius spreads out the pronouncements of poets and philosophers, of the Sibyl, and even of the Delphic Apollo in behalf of monotheism. These testifiers did not really ascertain the truth, "because one cannot be so blind as fail to see it." Actually, both the Sibyl and Hermes Trismegistus knew the Logos, and hence were able to foresee the Advent and the Mission of Christ. With

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78 Arnobius, *PL* V, 939.
these convincing testimonies before them, it is amazing that men still subscribed to the shocking legends of polytheism, worshipping gods who are born, die, and are buried in known tombs.85 The truth is that heathenism itself is subsequent to “a knowledge of the true God”;86 and, having wandered from the original and right course, a philosopher’s discussion of some apparent Christian doctrine is invariably erroneous.87 Although he rejects Cicero’s distinction between superstition and religion,88 Lactantius partially approves his criticism of paganism, yet blames him for standing back and allowing “the general public to stray in idolatry.” Both Cicero and Lucretius “were wiser than their fellows in their understanding of the error of false religion, but also so much more foolish because they did not think there was a true one.”89

The Christian apologists culminate in Augustine, whose famous brief against the pagans is really no fresher than those of Arnobius and Lactantius, although his range of information is greater and his prose more splendid than theirs. By the fifth century, deep-dyed pagans were of the order of straw men, and, as Augustine makes so clear to Dioscorus, the various Greek philosophies are now unimportant compared to the dangers inherent in the heretical opinions of the Manichaeans, Donatists, Arians, Eunomians, and Cataphrygians.90 Be this as the great bishop says; nonetheless, before the completion of the De civitate Dei, he took a number of practice shots at both the flamens and the philosophers.91 He knew these orders well and was completely at home in pagan practice and theory. The corridor to the De civitate runs through

85 Ibid., cols. 156–211.
86 Ibid., cols. 328–29.
88 Ibid., cols. 535–38.
90 Augustine, Epistolae, PL XXXII, 437–38.
91 In “Sex quæstiones contra paganos” (PL XXXIII, 370–86), Augustine, writing to Deogratias, defends major aspects of Christian rite and belief against the mocking slurs of Porphyry. In Contra Faustus Manichaeum (PL XLII) he is amazed that the pagans continue to worship their gods long after they have seen them as allegories (cols. 374). He tells them they worship in the temple” (col. 275). In the De consensus evangelistarum (PL XXXIV) he that since the meanings of their fables are not very clear, “what they laugh at in the theater, points out that all pagan myths are laughable unless they can be philosophically interpreted (cols. 1056–58), and goes on to give examples of euhemerism in the past and present and to reveal his knowledge of etymological interpretation. The Liber de divinatione daemonum (PL XI, 582–91) is, as the title suggests, an attack on oracles. For additional information see H. I. Marrou, Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique (Paris, 1938), pp. 387–503; Sr. Mary D. Madden, The Pagan Divinities and their Worship as Depicted in the Works of Saint Augustine exclusive of The City of God, C.U.A. Patristic Studies, XXIV (Washington, D. C., 1930).
the usual confessional in which the almost puritan memories of Augustine are purged.

When I was a young man, I sometimes went to these sacrilegious spectacles. I heard the choristers and watched the priests raging in religious ecstasy. I was pleased with the shameless games in honor of gods and goddesses, of the Virgo Cælestis and Berecynthia, mother of all, before whose couch on the solemn day of her lustration obscene acts were sung in public which would be indecent to be heard, I shall not say by the mother of the gods or by the mother of someone among the senators or among honest men, but by one of the actors’ mothers.92

Of these productions the mature man could say, as he does of theemasculated effeminates consecrated to the Great Mother, “interpretation failed, reason blushed, speech ceased.”93

Augustine has objections of his own to the pantheon: its variety, licentiousness,94 and obvious demonic possession.95 He cites Cicero’s testimony against the gods,96 quotes from Seneca’s lost book on superstition,97 and leans so heavily on Varro’s Antiquitates that his numerous quotations almost supply us with the vanished manuscript. As did his predecessors, Augustine votes strongly for the historical theories of “the historian Euhemerus translated into Latin by Ennius,”98 but it is against the physical or natural interpretation of the fables of the poets and the myths of the priests that he strikes with hard hands. As one of the many examples of this form of nonsense, he cites the physical allegorization of the Attis story by Porphyry.

The celebrated philosopher Porphyry has said that Attis signifies the flowers which adorn the spring, most beautiful of seasons, because he was cut off as the flowers fall before fruition. Therefore, they have not compared the man or the quasi-man they call Attis to flowers, but rather his genitals which fell while he was living. Moreover they did not fall . . . but were torn away. Nor when the flower was lost not fruit but sterility followed. . . . What interpretation proceeds from this?99

92 Augustine, De civitate II. 4. All references to De civitate are to the edition of J. E. C. Welldon, London, 1924.
93 Ibid., VII. 26.
94 Ibid., IV. 10–11.
95 Ibid., II. 29; III. 5; IX. 9.
96 Ibid., IV. 30.
97 Ibid., VI. 10.
98 Ibid., VII. 16, 18–19, 27; VIII, 26.
99 Ibid., VII. 25. Augustine’s citations of Varro’s Antiquitates are numerous, but some are more significant than others. Varro apparently points out that poets rather than philosophers are responsible for the generation of gods (IV. 32) and confesses that many myths are false (III. 4). Augustine knows Varro’s ways of classifying the gods and goddesses and the
Varro, Augustine continues, is silent about this sensational undermeaning, although it must not have been unknown "to this very learned man."

At first glance Augustine's continuous complaint about pagan allegory seems a trifle nearsighted in a man who is not hostile to the principal fosterers of Christian allegory and who devotes most of the second book of his De doctrina to the meaning of signs. There is, besides, a letter to Januarius stating that "anything made known by means of allegorical signification is more moving, delightful, and respected than if it were stated openly in words." But Augustine, though he does not oppose allegory like Jovinian and, probably, Jerome, is very temperate in his attitude toward it. When he talks of a triple allegory in De vera religione or a fourfold allegory in the later De utilitate credendi, he is clearly discoursing on distinctions in the literal or historical reading. Probably the most open statement of his position appears in the De civitate, where, after summarizing some traditional allegorical interpretations of the Garden of Eden, he states that "a spiritual understanding" is permitted provided "it is also believed that the history of Paradise and the things done there are faithfully recorded." In other words, once the reader is absolutely convinced of the veracity of the literal, he may then hunt for second readings. The Augustinian implication, however, is that this search is more properly in the realm of rhetoric than in that of hermeneutics. The firm rule is that one cannot believe in the literal truth of pagan myths, and, hence, there is no sense in searching out a second meaning of any sort. But when one examines the second meanings found by the Graeco-Roman allegorists, one learns they have nothing to do with divinity or deity but with natural process and physical manifestations. So what is the good of it?

There are, however, orthodox readings for Christians in the better pagan literal. Much of it is nonsense, "false and superstitious fancies," but there is also instruction adaptable to the uses of truth, "and some truths in regard even to the worship of the one God are found among them." These truths are not the product of their dialectic, but "were dug out of the mines of God's Providence and everywhere scattered

diverse theologies (VII. 2; VI. 5-6); he quotes Varro, Cicero, and Seneca on superstition (IV. 31; VI. 9), but also notices the contradictions and absurdities in his admittedly confused efforts to expound the natural functions of the pantheon (VII. 5, 17, 28).

100 Epistolae, PL XXXIII, 214.
101 PL XXXIV, 165-66.
102 PL XLIII, 68.
103 De civitate XIII. 21.
104 Ibid., VI. 8.
abroad. This "Egyptian gold and silver" should be stolen by Christians who must, however, remember that useful knowledge gathered from heathen sources is poor, indeed, when compared with the solid knowledge of the Holy Scripture. This opinion of Augustine may be practically illustrated by his expressed estimate of Plato and the Platonists.

Although Augustine seems to have known Plato's writings only in a limited fashion through the translations and commentaries of Cicero, Chalcidius, and Apuleius, his Contra Academicos makes clear his rather comprehensive understanding of the major Platonic doctrines; in fact, he remarks in this work that he was confident he would find among the Platonists "what is not in opposition to our faith," and delivers a eulogy of Plato which would have charmed the Athenian's dearest disciple. The praise of Plato does not end here but occurs again and again in Augustine's subsequent writings. In the De civitate, he rebukes the pagans for erecting temples to an inordinate number of gods and demigods but failing to dedicate even a "little shrine" to Plato. "Were it not," he asks, "more in agreement with virtue to read Plato's writings in a Temple of Plato, than . . . to witness the priests of Cybele mutilating themselves?" Later on, he explains why the Platonic philosophy is for a Christian better than any other rational system and develops an explanation of the similarities between the two philosophies which is not exactly new. Plato could not have heard Jeremiah, as some thought, or read Hebrew Scripture, but he might have acquired his semi-Christian information through the offices of a translator. Hermes Trismegistus and the Sibyl also glided near the truth. Augustine further observes that had Plato and Porphyry come to a reasonable compromise of their positions on the relation of soul and body, they would have reached the correct Christian doctrine.

Augustine's cordiality to the thought and character of Plato—naturally he rejects certain of his theories—might suggest that, like a few of his predecessors, he would be inclined to accord salvation to this almost

105 De doctrina, PL XXIV, 63.
106 Ibid., col. 65.
107 Marrou, op. cit., p. 34; see C. Boyer, Christianisme et Néo-Platonisme dans la formation de S. Augustin, Paris, 1920.
108 Contra Academicos, PL XXXII, 957.
109 Ibid., col. 955.
110 De civitate II. 15.
111 Ibid., II. 7.
112 Ibid., VIII. 5.
113 Ibid., VIII. 11-12.
114 Ibid., XXII. 27.
Christian theologian. There are, however, two letters, one written in about 409 and the other in about 411, which seem to make plain Augustine's position on the troubling question of the parsimony of Christian salvation. In the letter to Deogratias, he fondles Porphyry's question about the eternal fate of good men who lived before the birth of Christ and admits his own sentimental affirmative reaction in another letter directed to Bishop Evodius. There are (he writes his episcopal colleague), poets, orators, and philosophers who confessed to the existence of one, only one, God, led praiseworthy lives, and, in spite of their superstitious notions or vain forms of worship, are sometimes held up as models to be imitated.

Yet, when all these good deeds are not consecrated toward the righteous and true worship of God but to hollow pride, to human praise and glory, they fade and are devoid of profit. Nonetheless, some of these writers awake such a response in us we could wish them freed from Hell pangs . . . but human sentiments are not the same as divine justice.115

When interrogated about how some pagans managed almost to enunciate Christian doctrine, Augustine responded, as he did to Deogratias, in a manner similar to that of some earlier fathers but in different words.

From the beginning of mankind, at times covertly and at times openly . . . He continued to prophesy, and before He became incarnate, there were men who believed in Him . . . among the people of Israel . . . and among other peoples.116

These "other peoples," Augustine admits, are not mentioned in the Bible, but they must have existed. If he is right in this conviction, some of them were probably redeemed when Hell was harrowed. "All those who believed in Him," he writes Deogratias, "and lived good and devout lives according to His commandments, whenever and wherever they lived, were undoubtedly saved." The commentary on this interesting conclusion comes in the letter to Evodius, "I am still uncertain whether He saved all those He found there or certain ones He thought worthy." Who were these worthy ones? They were those who His foreknowledge revealed would have been Christians had they lived in the generation of Christ.

115 Epistolae, PL XXXIII, 709–18. There is no tolerance in Augustine's response (col. 82) to Maximus of Madura's definition of a unique God "whose virtues diffused through the universe we adore under many names since we do not know His name. God belongs to all religions; hence, while we address separate parts of Him in our several supplications, we are really worshipping the whole God under a thousand names in a harmonious discord."

116 Ibid., col. 374.
These judgments of the Christian apologists about pagan theologians and philosophers returned hauntingly when men began to search the texts of non-Christians for secret wisdom or lost history. The revitalization in the Renaissance of allegory (made tired and tiresome by fifteen centuries of monkish endeavor), through the rediscovery of the Greek and Latin interpreters, the publication of the mysterious documents from Egypt, and the efforts of antiquarians to understand and explain monuments produced suspicions about the evolution and interrelations of creeds that were the beginnings of the study of comparative religion. None of this later activity could have occurred if the Christian authorities had treated the literary and philosophical texts of Greece and Rome as rigorously as they handled the parchments of their pagan opponents. Of course the world was Roman; and though the Roman gods lacked the poetic charm and beauty of the original Olympians, yet they were a great deal more moral and had, in fact, taken in Christian deities like Virtue and Piety. Be this as it may, it is also clear, no matter how loud the protest to the contrary, that the Bible was an insufficient religious library. Classical books were required for many Christian purposes, but they were gingerly opened and scanned with a hoc caute legendum. Since the same problem vexed some of the devout during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the original reasons for having pagan shelves in the Christian library should be stated once more.

With few exceptions most of the apologists agreed that pre-Christian poets and philosophers possessed proximate truth. Some—Plato, Hermes Trismegistus, Plotinus, Cicero, Seneca—had more than others, but almost no ancient was without a grain of wisdom. Everyone knew (in fact, Justin mentioned it) that St. Paul was not loath to borrow a phrase or two from the Greek poets; hence, it was sensible for properly controlled Christians to find a use for “the gold and silver of the Egyptians.” The earliest apologists knew that one had to read the pagans to refute them, but by the time of Tertullian, and especially by that of Augustine, it was becoming obvious that secular erudition was necessary for the correct study of the Bible. There was also the still more necessary fact that if the Christians were to have a learned priesthood, they would have to go to the pagans for formal training until they could establish schools of their own. But there was another side to the question.

Clement might see philosophy as the preparation for the under-
standing of the Christian message, but too many early fathers were sure that all pagan wisdom was either invented by demons or perverted by them from the texts of Moses and the prophets. There is an aloofness about many of these men characteristic of anyone who is convinced that he has a unique truth. With truth in their possession there was no need to know untruths or, at best, partial truths. The myths of the poets and the theories of the philosophers had seduced some Christian converts back to the old church. It was certainly reasonable to see that the enticement of the mythology might lead to fleshly immorality, whereas philosophical speculation might be a sure inductor into the society of heretics. Opinions of this nature led some members of the Church to prize the illiterate Christian, who was later to cause Christian humanists like Erasmus so much pain. But whereas Augustine and Jerome preferred an illiterate Christian to a learned renegade or heretic, they agreed that even though the study of pagan books was time-consuming and not soul-feeding, a learned Christian was a sturdy pillar of the Church militant.117