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POPULAR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND THE LATE ROMAN HISTORIANS

by ARNALDO MOMIGLIANO

STUDENTS of historiography have become increasingly gloomy in their evaluation of the Greek founding fathers of historiography. All the limits, the shortcomings, and the failures of conventional history writing – the *histoire événementielle* of French terminology – have been laid at the door of Thucydides. Herodotus has escaped obloquy, either because he offered a promise of variety, curiosity, humour and sensitiveness which Thucydides spoiled, or because (as Professor Seth Benardete says in a very recent book) ‘his foundations are not those of modern historiography’.¹ Thucydides has become the great villain of historiography in so far as he identified history with political and military events. Professor Moses Finley and I may in the past have said some unkind words about Thucydides – so did the late Professor Collingwood. But we are now made to look like mild apologists of Thucydides by Hermann Strasburger. This most penetrating interpreter of ancient historians has treated Thucydides’s approach to history as the survival of a prehistoric mode of thinking, for which war was the most important event. According to Strasburger, Thucydides excluded *das Humanum* from history and therefore derived his scale of values from ‘prescientific and ultimately precivilised, prehistoric strata of thought’.² Strasburger tries to show that some hellenistic historians, such as Agatharchides and Posidonius, showed more interest in the business of peaceful coexistence than Thucydides ever did, but he is under no illusion about their ultimate success. Thucydides’s historical approach prevailed: deviationists were silenced. The Romans inherited from the Greeks a type of historical writing for which war was the central theme. What Thucydides did not know was not history.

Though we may reserve our gloom for nearer relatives in the historiographical family it must be recognised that classical historians did not cover all the field of history in which we are interested. They explored

¹ *Herodotean Inquiries* (The Hague 1969) p 2.

² *Die Wesensbestimmung der Geschichte durch die antike Geschichtsschreibung* (Wiesbaden 1966) p 71.

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a limited field which corresponds to what we call military and political history, to the almost total exclusion of economic, social and religious phenomena. Furthermore, their interests were centred on contemporary history or on the history of the recent past; and their techniques of research implied a definite preference of direct observation for the study of the present and of oral tradition for the study of the past. When a classical historian ceased to be an independent enquirer about things seen or heard, he tended to become a compiler from previous historians. Research in archives was seldom, and unsystematically, practised by classical historians.

This limitation to political and military history was in itself an attitude towards religion. Religious (and moral) emotions were left out of history, unless they were regarded as having influenced specific military or political events. Even in such cases the historian was unlikely to emphasise direct intervention of the gods in history. Thucydides registered the profanation of the herms in 415 BC because it was directly relevant to the history of the Sicilian expedition. He did not mention the trial of Diagoras the atheist, which many of us would date, *pace* Felix Jacoby, in 415 and consider very significant for the religious situation of the time.

Xenophon states that the gods punished the Spartans for having treacherously seized the acropolis of Thebes,¹ but he does not extend his religious interpretation to the whole period of history with which he is dealing. He just hints at the wide implications of Socrates's dissent during the trial of the generals after the battle of the Arginusae.² He does not interpret the catastrophe of 404 BC as a divine punishment for the miscarriage of justice. If Theopompus relates the political decline of Cotys, king of Thrace, to a vulgar episode of impiety³ or reports ominous signs about Sicilian tyrants,⁴ we are not entitled to generalise his specific allusions to divine intervention in given situations. Timaeus was notoriously accused by Polybius of writing histories 'full of dreams, prodigies, incredible tales and, to put it shortly, craven superstition and womanish love of the marvellous'.⁵ What we know of Timaeus, either directly from the fragments of his work or indirectly from the

¹ *Hellenica*, v, 4, 1.

² *Ibid.*, i, 7, 15.

³ Theopompus, *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*, ed F. Jacoby (Berlin 1926–30) II, B, p 115, fr 31.

⁴ *Ibid.*, fr 331.

⁵ Polybius, *Histories*, ed and trans W. R. Paton, 6 vols (London, Loeb Library, 1922–7) XII, 24, 5. Cf F. Taeger, *Charisma*, I (Stuttgart 1957) p. 381.

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authors who used him as a source, shows that Timaeus attempted no more than an occasional and unsystematic correlation of divine and human affairs in the field of political and military history. Even Livy, in the most religious of his books (Book V on Camillus, Veii and the Gauls), does no more than relate Roman victories and defeats to proper observance of rituals.¹ What meaning Polybius attributed to fortune and Tacitus to fate is a favourite subject for academic disputes, but no one has yet made out a reasonable case for Polybius or Tacitus as religious interpreters of history.²

Interventions of gods, miracles and portents, together with other curiosities, were often confined by the historians to digressions and excursuses. Many Greek and Roman historians had some chapters or even books about extraordinary happenings. Theopompus created a model with his excursus on *thaumasia* in Book X of his *Philippic Histories*: in it he spoke about Zarathustra and about the Cretan Epimenides who woke up after fifty-seven years of sleep in a cavern. *Thaumasia* grew into a literary genre, as is shown by Pseudo-Aristotle's *Thaumasia*. Much information about religious beliefs and practices was also included by historians in their ethnographic chapters and books. Posidonius provided information in this manner about Celtic and Jewish religious practices. Roman historians, who imitated the Greek technique of excursus, added of their own the registration of *prodigia* which they inherited from the archaic annals of the pontiffs: though we must hasten to add that the relation between the *prodigia* of the pontifical records and the *prodigia* of Livy and his excerptors is by no means simple and clear.

Such isolation of religious phenomena in special compartments amounted to more than a declaration that the historian's real business was elsewhere. The historian with the mind either of a politician or of a general or of a learned man established a distance between himself and the religious practices or miraculous events he described. If he classified them as *thaumasia* he disclaimed responsibility for the truth of what he told: his excursus represented a parenthesis of amusement. If he included religion in a piece of ethnography he automatically placed it outside the world of the educated Greek or Roman: ethnography applied either to barbarians or to backwater Greeks or provincials, according to time and circumstance. Timaeus may have had a superstitious, and Posidonius a

¹ G. Stübler, *Die Religiosität des Livius* (Stuttgart 1941); W. Liebeschütz, *[ournal of] R[oman] S[tudies]*, LVII (London 1967) pp 45–55.

² Much information in R. Häussler, *Tacitus und das historische Bewusstsein* (Heidelberg 1965).

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religious, mind (a distinction to which we shall soon return), but neither of them presented what he wrote about the beliefs of foreign nations as the truth. The attitude of the historian towards religious beliefs underlined the inherent aristocratic character of history writing. This detachment is equally evident, though in a different form, in Livy's attitude towards the Roman *prodigia*. True enough, he deplored the negligence of those who no longer announced the *prodigia* or reported them in the *Annals*.¹ But he made it only too plain that in his concern with prodigies there was an element of literary pose: 'vetustas res scribenti, nescio quo pacto anticus fit animus'.

A partial exception is represented by writers of biography. The biographer has to register the beliefs and superstitions of his hero, whether they influenced his political and military activity or not. Many biographies dealt with non-political and non-military men. Furthermore, Roman biographical writing seems to have made a special feature of collecting portents about a man in order to bring his exceptional personality into prominence. To judge from what we know of Sulla's and Augustus's autobiographies it was indeed perfectly respectable for a Roman politician to emphasise his own *charisma* by mentioning divine signs and other miracles. It would not be very helpful here to observe that in the ancient theory biography was never quite a part of historiography. What is more important is that the main account of the life of a man was not seriously affected either by the report of his religious beliefs or by the encroachment of the religious beliefs of his biographer. To find in the pagan world the biography of a religious man as such, we must perhaps go to the life of Apollonius of Tyana by Philostratus in the third century after Christ. In any case biography was not likely to reflect popular beliefs except incidentally: the proper subject for biography was by definition a man above the crowd.

Broadly speaking, a historian's approval of a religious belief would be registered in Greek by putting it in the category of *theosebeia* or *eusebeia*, while disapproval would be expressed by the word *deisidaimonia*. The corresponding (though not semantically identical) expressions in Latin would of course be *religio* and *superstitio*. *Deisidaimonia* and *superstitio* applied both to foreign cults and to the religious beliefs and practices of the lower orders. *Deisidaimonia* is the word chosen by Polybius to indicate the religious feelings of the lower classes which the Roman upper class fostered and exploited. Livy applied *superstitio* to the penetration of foreign cults into early Rome² or to the excessive trust in

¹ Livy, XLIII, 13, 1.² *Ibid.*, IV, 30, 9.

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prodigia at the end of the second Punic war.¹ Tacitus speaks, *inter alia*, of Christianity as *exitiabilis superstitio*² and of the *superstitio vana* of the Druids.³ Modern studies have done more to clarify the notion of *deisidaimonia* in Theophrastus and Plutarch or the earlier meanings of the difficult word *superstitio* than to interpret the actual usage of *deisidaimonia* and *superstitio* in historical texts. Livy, for instance, avoids the word *superstitio* and speaks of *simplices et religiosi homines* about the belief in *prodigia* in 214 BC, when we would expect the mention of *superstitio*. His prudent usage of *superstitio* in relating the scandal of the Bacchanalia – a *coniuratio* – should be noticed. It would be premature to say that we are at present well-informed about the distinction between *theosebeia* and *deisidaimonia* or between *religio* and *superstitio*. But we are perhaps justified in stating that, before Christianity complicated matters, *deisidaimonia* and *superstitio* were key-words in the evaluation of religious phenomena by Greek and Roman historians.⁴

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Although historians of the hellenistic period, as Professor Strasburger has shown, were less exclusively interested in politics and war than their masters of the fifth and fourth centuries BC, a real change in the methods and contents of historical research did not take place until the late Roman empire. Ferdinand Christian Baur taught us 150 years ago that if Herodotus was the father of history, Eusebius was the father of a new history. The notion of ecclesiastical history implied a new importance being attributed to documentary evidence, a true universal scope both in time and in space, and finally a revolutionary change in contents. Religious beliefs and practices replaced military and political events as the central subject of historiography.

Some change of emphasis is, however, also noticeable in those pagan historians who in the fourth century AD intended to continue the pagan tradition of history writing. Ammianus Marcellinus continued the narrative of Tacitus; the *Historia Augusta* was modelled on Suetonius's *Twelve Caesars*. Eunapius as a historian continued Dexippus and as a biographer modelled himself on Philostratus's lives of the sophists. In each case greater emphasis was placed on religion and magic.

¹ *Ibid.*, xxix, 14, 2.

² *Annals*, xv, 44, 5.

³ *Histories*, iv, 54.

⁴ P. J. Koets, 'Deisidaimonia' (diss. Utrecht 1929); H. Fugier, *Recherches sur l'expression du sacré dans la langue latine* (Paris 1963) p 172. Cf also the general histories of Greek and Roman religion by M.P. Nilsson and K. Latte.

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The *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* are aware of the new value attached to documents in contemporary writing, and where they have no documents they invent them. On the level of frivolity and even of obscenity they produce much information about religious beliefs. They mention *Iudaorum libri*,¹ *doctissimi mathematicorum*,² a golden column inscribed with Egyptian letters.³ Flavius Vopiscus, one of the alleged six biographers, claims to have received information from his own grandfather about the *omen imperii* of Diocletian.⁴ There is nothing new in the fact that emperors should show interest in foreign cults and travel to remote sanctuaries, as the *Historia Augusta* tells us about Septimius Severus.⁵ But Hadrian is made to say in a letter that in Egypt those who worship Serapis are Christians, while those who claim to be bishops of Christ are devotees of Serapis.⁶ This passage must have been written before the destruction of the Serapeum of Alexandria in AD 391. No pagan author after that event could have joked about bishops of Christ being devotees of Serapis.⁷ The *Historia Augusta* is certainly written from a pagan point of view under the shadow of christian victory. According to the *Historia Augusta*, Hadrian wanted to build a temple to Christ but was prevented by those who, having consulted the sacred books, discovered that if Hadrian had done so ‘omnes Christianos futuros... et templa reliqua deserenda’ – Christianity would have prevailed.⁸ Christian hostility to *libri Sibyllini* is openly mentioned. But it was not yet absurd to consider placing Christ in a pagan pantheon. Jews are looked upon with a certain sympathy and knowledge, and even Samaritans are mentioned.⁹ Trebellius Pollio quotes in the life of Claudius Gothicus¹⁰ a legend about Moses who was said to complain about having to die young at the age of 125 – a legend which has some parallels in the Talmud.¹¹

The attitude of the *Historia Augusta* towards Christianity would be

¹ *S[criptores] H[istoriae] A[ugustae]*, ed D. Magie, 3 vols (London 1930–2), *Claudius*, II, 4.

² *Ibid.*

³ *SHA*, *Tyranni triginta*, xxii, 13.

⁴ *SHA*, *Caracalla*, xiv, 1.

⁵ *SHA*, *Severus*, xvii, 3.

⁶ *SHA*, *Quadrige tyrannorum*, vii, 4.

⁷ For a different opinion see W. Schmid, *Historia Augusta Colloquium 1964–65* (Bonn 1965) pp 153–84.

⁸ *SHA*, *Alexander Severus*, xliii, 7.

⁹ *SHA*, *Heliogabalus*, iii, 5; xxviii, 4. *Alexander Severus*, xxix; xlv, 6; li, 7. *Gordian*, xxxiv, 2. *Quadrige tyrannorum*, vii–viii.

¹⁰ *SHA*, Trebellius Pollio, *Divus Claudius*, ii, 4.

¹¹ J. Geffcken, ‘Religionsgeschichtliches in der *Historia Augusta*’, *Hermes* LV (Berlin 1920) p 294.

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even more interesting if it were true that its author or authors knew and mocked christian writers such as St Jerome. As this point is of basic importance for the evaluation of the *Historia Augusta*, I may be allowed to show by a single example why in my opinion, and contrary to present orthodoxy, the matter is still *sub judice*. Professor André Chastagnol, in a brilliant chapter of his newly published *Recherches sur l'Histoire Auguste*,¹ has argued that the *Historia Augusta* knows and ridicules St Jerome's letter to Rufinus about their mutual friend Bonosus:² a letter which must have been written about 375. The *Historia Augusta* includes a life of the usurper Bonosus. The identity of name with the holy friend of Rufinus, according to Chastagnol, suggested a certain number of literary tricks to the humorous author of the *Historia Augusta*. One of these tricks would have been to transform Onesimus, the faithful follower of the holy Bonosus, into one of the many imaginary sources of the *Historia Augusta*. Now we happen to know from the *Suda* that a historian by the name of Onesimus lived under Constantine; and it is certain that the *Suda* does not depend on the *Historia Augusta* for this piece of information. It follows that the historian Onesimus was not invented by the *Historia Augusta*. We are in the fortunate and rare position of being able to say that the suggestion that the *Historia Augusta* found the name of Onesimus in St Jerome's letter (where Onesimus has nothing to do with history writing) is disproved by good evidence. Future researchers may find echoes of christian Fathers in the *Historia Augusta*, but up to the present, in my submission, the search has not been fruitful.

Even if we suspend judgement on the *Historia Augusta's* alleged mockery of christian writers there is enough in this work to make it a first-class document of the reformed paganism of the fourth century. Not once does the word *superstitio* occur in it. Pagan practices of every class and country are registered with sympathy and benevolent irony – unless they happen to offend morality *and* to be supported by emperors hostile to the Senate (as in the case of Heliogabalus). *Sortes Vergilianae* are mentioned,³ and there is in the life of Probus a strange messianic pacifism which seems to have been introduced to compete with christian millenarian dreams: 'brevi milites necessarios non futuros'.⁴ The sympathy towards Jews and the desire to see Christianity dislodged

¹ Bonn 1970, pp 69–98.

² Ep 3.

³ *SHA, Alexander Severus*, xiv, 5. Cf Y. de Kisch, *Mélanges de l'Ecole Française de Rome*, lxxxii (Rome 1970) pp 321–62.

⁴ *SHA, Probus*, xx, 3; xxii, 4; xxiii, 1.

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from its pre-eminence and turned into a syncretistic cult are, as I have said, hardly concealed. While the traditional aristocratic attitude of the Roman historian towards lower-class beliefs and foreign superstitions does not disappear altogether – as is obvious from the life of Heliogabalus – it is fundamentally affected by the new situation. The pagans cannot afford to be divided at a time when the Christians are all out to occupy the key positions in the Roman government. The weakness of the position of the *Historia Augusta* betrays itself in the utopian character of many of its serious statements – and in the triviality of much of the rest.

Ammianus Marcellinus, who is never trivial, does use the word *superstitio*. He uses it very prominently in the passage in which he accuses the emperor Constantius of having corrupted the simple religion of the Christians by encouraging theological disputes: ‘Christianam religionem absolutam et simplicem anili superstitione confundens in qua scrutanda perplexius quam componenda gravius, excitavit discidia plurima’.¹ By the second half of the fourth century *superstitio* and *deisidaimonia* were current names for paganism in christian writers. To quote only the obvious, Lactantius says: ‘nimirum religio veri cultus est, superstitio falsi... sed quia deorum cultores religiosos se putant, cum sint superstitiosi, nec religionem possunt a superstitione discernere nec significantiam nominum exprimere’.² The polemical intention of Ammianus is therefore patent: state protection introduced an element of superstition into the christian religion. Superstition is not the prerogative of the pagans.

No less significant is Ammianus’s usage of *superstitio* in his excursus about the Huns. The Huns, according to him, have neither religion nor superstition: ‘nullius religionis vel superstitionis reverentia aliquando districti’.³ What puts the Huns outside the world of human beings is the absence of both religion and superstition. There is a difference between the Huns who have no superstition and the Alani who with barbaric rites worship the naked sword.⁴ Ammianus is altogether no longer prepared to draw a sharp distinction between religion and superstition. Pagans and Christians have something of both. A vague monotheist and fatalist himself, he is above all a tolerant man who would like to be surrounded by tolerant men. With all his admiration for Julian, he disapproves of his persecution of the Christians. He even reproaches Julian with being ‘superstitiosus magis quam sacrorum legitimus

¹ Amm[ianus] Marc[ellinus], *Res Gestae*, ed C. U. Clark (Berlin 1910–15) XXI, 16, 18.

² *Divinae Institutiones*, IV, 28, 11. For editions see *ODCC*.

³ Amm Marc, xxxi, 2, 11.

⁴ *Ibid*, xxxi, 2, 23.

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observer'. He praises Valentinian I because 'inter religionum diversitates medius stetit nec quemquam inquietavit'.¹ He believes in magic, astronomy, and divination, for the last of which he gives a scientific explanation at some length.² He regrets that portents were no longer expiated by public rites.³ He appreciates the religion of the Egyptians – the cradle of all religions – and the religion of the Persians, in which astrology and divination were prominent.⁴ In practice, therefore, Ammianus is open to the amplest appreciation of different cults and tenets, including the cult of the christian martyrs.⁵ Whatever objection he has to Christianity is confined to the intolerance, the feuds, and above all the greed of certain christian emperors, high civil servants and bishops: he does not generalise about them either. On a different level of intellectual refinement and integrity, Ammianus is not very far from the outlook of the *Historia Augusta*. The difference between religion and superstition is kept alive for polemical purposes only. Within the empire there is no significant distinction between the beliefs of the upper classes and those of the lower classes. What we would normally call superstition, such as readiness to believe in prodigies and magic practices, is quietly incorporated in religion.

A few years later, at the beginning of the fifth century, Eunapius was in a different mood. He belonged to the generation of pagan intellectuals for whom the official prohibition of pagan cults and the destruction of the Serapeum in AD 391 were the central experiences. He accused the monks, 'the men clad in black raiments', of having opened the gates of Greece to Alarich in 395.⁶ But he, too, within the range of pagan opinions, practically ignored any distinction between religion and superstition. His philosophers and sophists, quite unlike the sophists pictured by Philostratus, are deeply concerned with the knowledge of the nature of the gods, and consequently with divination and magic. Apollonius of Tyana, as we know, became a model for these men. It was not now infrequent for such philosophers to combine theology, rhetoric and medicine. Two kinds of divination were open to them. As Eunapius explains, one type of divination was given to men for the benefit of medicine, the other derived its dionysiac inspiration from philosophy.⁷ There were of course doubts and discussions about the

¹ *Ibid.*, xxv, 4, 17; xxx, 9, 5.² *Ibid.*, xxi, 1, 7.³ *Ibid.*, xix, 12, 20.⁴ *Ibid.*, xxii, 16, 2; xxiii, 6, 32.⁵ *Ibid.*, xxvii, 7, 5–6.⁶ Eunapius, [*Vitae Sophistarum*], ed J. F. Boissonade (Paris, Didot edition, 1849) p 476. Ed and trans W. Cave Wright (London, Loeb Library, 1922).⁷ Eunapius, p 499.

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legitimate limits of magic and divination. Prudence had its part. One of these philosophers, Antoninus, 'displayed no tendency to theurgy... perhaps he kept a wary eye on the imperial views and policy which were opposed to these practices'.¹ Eusebius of Pergamum warned his pupil Julian, the future emperor, against the impostures of witchcraft. Julian managed to extract from Eusebius the information that he had alluded to Maximus of Ephesus. 'You have shown me the man I was in search of', exclaimed Julian, and went off to Ephesus to be taught by Maximus.² Eunapius himself was present when a hierophant of Eleusis foretold the overthrow of the temples and the ruin of the whole of Greece. He even foresaw that the cult of Eleusis would come to an end during the office of his own successor.³ Christian sophists were not necessarily excluded from this circle. But when the famous christian rhetorician Prohaeresius showed his ability to foretell future events it was discreetly assumed that he had stolen his knowledge from the hierophant of Eleusis.

Zosimus must have derived from Eunapius the story that when Alarich approached Athens in AD 395 he saw Athena Promachos touring the walls and Achilles dressed as if he were marching against the Trojans to revenge the death of Patroclus.⁴ The pagan Olympiodorus, who about 425 continued Eunapius's history, wrote that the removal of an old cult image at Rhegium was followed by a barbarian invasion of Sicily and by eruptions of Etna.⁵ In the same way the removal of three silver statues in barbarian clothing from a pagan holy place in Thrace opened the gates of the region to Goths, Huns and Sarmathians.⁶ In Zosimus the death of Serena, Stilicho's wife, is connected with a sacrilege she was alleged to have committed against Vesta:⁷ this may be derived either from Eunapius or from Olympiodorus. But what Zosimus has to say about the revivals of pagan rituals in Rome during the siege of Alarich almost certainly comes from Olympiodorus. He must be the source of the information that the bishop of Rome, Innocentius, putting the preservation of the city before his religious opinions, consented to this revival.⁸ Unfortunately, according to Zosimus, lack of popular support spoilt the experiment. The *Liber prodigiorum* by

¹ *Ibid*, p 471.² *Ibid*, p 475.³ *Ibid*.⁴ Zosimus, [*History of the Roman Empire*], v, 6, 6. For editions see *ODCC*.⁵ Photius, *Bibliotheca*, Code LXXX, 57b, in *PG*, CIII (1860) col 261; ed and trans (French) R. Henry (Budé edition, Paris 1959).⁶ *Ibid*, LXXX, 60a, *PG*, CIII (1860) col 268.⁷ Zosimus, v, 38, 2.⁸ *Ibid*, v, 41, 2.