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Peter Van Nuffelen
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Introduction

This book studies the dominant philosophical reflections on religion and the pantheon in the Post-Hellenistic period. It does not do so from the perspective of the history of religion, as is usual, but attempts to understand these readings as part of the wider tendency of Post-Hellenistic philosophy to open up to external, non-philosophical sources of knowledge and authority. Rather than interpreting philosophical views on religion of this period as the direct result of changes in religious mentality, I propose to study how they fit into the philosophical discourse and how they can be understood in the light of specific characteristics of Post-Hellenistic philosophy. In particular, the book argues that although religion can be termed an external source of knowledge, it is not an independent one: religion is reinterpreted to fit the philosophical position of the interpreter and is allowed to enter the philosophical argument only when domesticated in that way. Focusing on two key themes and their polemical reconfigurations, this book suggests that Post-Hellenistic philosophy can be seen to have a relatively high degree of unity in its ideas on religion, which should not be reduced to a preparation for Neoplatonism. This unity should not be understood in the sense that all philosophers share the same doctrines, but rather that they share the same presuppositions and approaches.

From the end of the second century BC onwards major shifts can be identified in the way that philosophy was practised.[1] Besides showing up certain new doctrinal developments, the following centuries, often labelled the 'Post-Hellenistic period' (first century BC – second century AD), are characterised by a return to classical traditions, seen as authoritative, in particular to Plato and Aristotle.[2] In his epilogue to the *Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy* (1999), M. Frede draws attention to the renewal of Aristotelianism and the collapse of Academic Scepticism after

[1] Frede 1999a: 771; Sorabji 2007: 1; Trapp 2007: xi.
[2] For a brief characterisation of the Post-Hellenistic period, and the problems presented by the sources, see Gill 2006: xv–xvi.

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Antiochus of Ascalon's (*c.* 130–68/7 BC) break with the Sceptic tradition of his teacher Philo of Larissa and his return to Plato's doctrines as preserved in the Old Academy. This entailed more than a change in doctrine. H. Tarrant has pointed out that in contrast to Philo of Larissa, the last Sceptic scholarch of the Academy (158/7–84/3 BC), for whom the essential feature of a philosophical school was participation in the debating culture and internal intellectual life of that school,[3] Antiochus emphasised doctrinal agreement.[4] He thus needed a venerable source of authority, which he found in the Old Academy, to distinguish between the true doctrine and deviations from it. Notwithstanding the fragmentary nature of the evidence, it is possible to pinpoint a similar tendency in the Stoa. Indeed, the two towering figures of Late Hellenistic Stoicism, Panaetius (*c.* 185–109 BC) and Posidonius (*c.* 135–55 BC), not only are credited with major innovations but also started to look at Plato and Aristotle as authoritative sources of philosophical knowledge – with the latter tendency shaping the former.[5]

Elevating philosophers of the past to a position of doctrinal authority created the need for careful interpretation of their works: if their insights about the cosmos and mankind are better than those of anyone else, a thorough and close reading of their writings is a road to truthful understanding of the world. The Post-Hellenistic period thus sees the publication of editions, for example of the works of Aristotle (by Andronicus of Rhodes), Plato (by Thrasyllus) and Zeno (by Athenodorus), besides commentaries,[6] handbooks and compendia.[7] As suggested by M. Trapp, one 'was expected to defer – on pain of incomprehension and contempt – to an authoritative past history of philosophical endeavour and achievement'.[8] Various tendencies typically associated with Post-Hellenistic philosophy, such as eclecticism and the renewed interest in Pythagoreanism,[9] take on a new significance against this background. The divisions between the schools, obviously, did not disappear in this period and polemic remained an important practice among philosophers, but 'eclecticism' can be understood as a result of the new respect now commanded by ancient authorities

[3] See the words put in his mouth by Cic. *Acad. post.* 2.60. [4] Tarrant 2007: 323–4.
[5] Tieleman 2003: 284; Gill 2006: 266–90. On Panaetius and Posidonius in general, see Kidd 1988–99; Alesse 1994. As for Epicureanism, it had always been characterised by a strong allegiance to its founder and does not seem to have reviewed its critical stance towards Plato and Aristotle – though this does not exclude doctrinal revision in some areas: see Tsouna 2007 on Philodemus' ethics. In the Post-Hellenistic period, Epicureanism continued to be seen as setting itself apart from the other schools by professing a metaphysics of disorder and a hedonistic ethics.
[6] Sedley 1989 and 1997. [7] Sorabji 2007: 20–5. [8] Trapp 2007: 13.
[9] See, e.g., Dillon and Long 1988; Dillon 1996; Donini 2004; Bonazzi, Lévy and Steel 2007; Bonazzi and Helmig 2007.

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(even when not of one's own tradition), who could be used to shore up one's own position. Pythagoras had the advantage of great antiquity, and also of Plato's interest in his doctrines and a certain mysteriousness, all of which may have contributed to the great veneration that philosophers of the Roman Empire started to show for him.

In addition to the mainstream of the philosophical tradition, Post-Hellenistic philosophy starts to acknowledge other paths to truth and knowledge opened up by tradition. Not just ancient philosophers but also poets such as Homer and Pherecydes are now increasingly regarded as authorities worthy of respect and philosophical interest.[10] Stoic allegory is an obvious precursor of this tendency, but Platonists also begin to see true wisdom and knowledge in poets. Rather than banishing poets from the ideal state for corrupting the youth,[11] the second-century Platonist Maximus of Tyre addresses an oration on 'Homer the philosopher' (*Oration* 26) to his student audience. Indeed, in his monograph *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy*, G. Boys-Stones shows that ancient wisdom was supposed to reside in the works of these and other poets and that in particular Plato was seen as having recovered that knowledge and expressed it in a more philosophical language.[12] Post-Hellenistic philosophy is thus marked by an opening up not only to authorities within the philosophical tradition, but also to 'external' authorities. Such a process was obviously embedded in cultural traditions: just as Plato had been recognised as a great philosopher in the Hellenistic period, Homer had received philosophical attention before the first centuries AD as well.[13] What seems to be new and ever more visible in the Post-Hellenistic period is the degree of philosophical authority vested in such great figures from the past. It is not an accident of history that the literature and culture of the Post-Hellenistic era is marked by a similar return to 'classical' authorities in style and vocabulary.[14] This connection between the Second Sophistic and Post-Hellenistic philosophy is made tangible in the fact that numerous philosophers doubled as sophists (Plutarch is a case in point, although he would dislike the

[10] On the popularity of these authors in this period, see Lamberton 1986; Edwards 1990b.
[11] Pl. *Resp*. 364b–370a.
[12] Boys-Stones 2001. See also the papers in Boys-Stones 2003b, more narrowly focused on the use of allegory.
[13] Especially from the Stoics, see Long 1992; Goulet 2005; Gourinat 2005. See Gill 2006: xv–xvi, who sets out the difficulties in precisely setting apart the Hellenistic and Post-Hellenistic periods.
[14] See especially Swain 1996; Goldhill 2001; Whitmarsh 2001 and 2005. On the closeness of philosophers and sophists under the empire, see Hahn 1989: 46–54. See also Frede 1999a: 783, who points out that we should see the changes charted above as part of 'a much larger cultural development, the beginning of classicism.'

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latter label), whilst sophists, such as Dio Chrysostom, claimed the status of philosopher.

One of these new sources of authority and philosophical knowledge is the subject of the present book, namely religion: I propose to examine how philosophers interpreted traditional religion and appropriated it as a source of authority for their philosophical project in the Post-Hellenistic period. When reading through the philosophical output of this period, two major themes related to religion and the gods come up in numerous variations: religion is seen as created by wise ancients and is thus supposed to contain philosophical knowledge, and the pantheon is described as a perfect hierarchy that provides a model for order on all levels of being, including human society. The primary aim of this book is to chart these themes through their variations, and consequently much of it will be taken up by close readings of individual works or œuvres. It is obvious that both themes are not complete innovations of the Post-Hellenistic period: already Plato could refer to the 'ancient *logos*' of Orphism,[15] and there is a hierarchy in the heavens as created in the *Timaeus*[16] or as described in the Pseudo-Platonic *Epinomis*. My second aim is therefore to show that the two major themes are embedded in a discourse that incorporates numerous traditional elements but reconfigures them in new ways. These reconfigurations can tentatively be traced back to developments at the beginning of the Post-Hellenistic period. In relation to the first theme, philosophers start to emphasise, by contrast with the preceding philosophical tradition, that religion was created *on purpose* in line with philosophical knowledge by ancient sages and lawgivers. Religion thus becomes an extremely valuable source of knowledge. The second theme rests on an increased tendency to view human society as part of a cosmic hierarchy, the structure of which must be replicated in man's political communities. In this view, the pantheon becomes the paradigm of such a hierarchy. The book thus does not aim at a systematic exposition of everything that Post-Hellenistic philosophers have said about religion; I do hope, however, to uncover general characteristics of Post-Hellenistic thinking about religion by concentrating on the themes of ancient wisdom and cosmic hierarchy and to show how such ideas were received in wider literary culture. Aiming at recovering general, often implicit, modes of thinking about religion, the book will discuss both technical treatises of philosophy and works of literature, two categories that are, anyway, not always easy to distinguish in this period.

[15] Pl. *Leg.* 715e. [16] See, e.g., Pl. *Ti.* 40d–41a.

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In both discourses religion is invested with an increased respectability. Besides the fact that they allow the diversity in rituals and deities to be explained as the result of religion's creation by wise ancients, a profound unity is seen to underpin this variety: all the various gods worshipped in these rituals are part of a strict hierarchy that obeys the will of a highest god. But more is happening than a mere re-description of religion: religion can now also be used as a source of authority in philosophical discourse. Claiming to have fully understood the origins and nature of religion, philosophers define good and bad religious behaviour (namely as piety and superstition). But more importantly, religion can also be drawn upon as a source of authority in other areas: philosophers such as Plutarch and Numenius draw on religion to support their metaphysics and others put the pantheon forward as the paradigm of political order.

The process of philosophy's being 'opened up' to external sources of authority should therefore not be seen as a naïve or superficial project: philosophers do not draw on religion in its 'objective' reality (if there is such a thing) but reinterpret it in order to make it malleable. Religion is first philosophically domesticated before it is put forward as uniquely plausible and thus normative. This is a dynamic that underlies the entire turn of Post-Hellenistic philosophy towards other, external sources of authority. The 'classicism' that was noted above reshapes the past by canonising long-deceased authors as 'great' and by seeing in them the norm for contemporary literature; indeed, the authoritative figure of Plato in the first and second centuries AD differs in many ways from the fourth-century Plato. Whereas studies of the Second Sophistic have drawn attention to the dialectic of appropriation and reinterpretation that underpins the canonisation of the past,[17] philosophical scholarship on the Post-Hellenistic period has only recently started to note the opening-up of philosophy and has yet to study its full implications. Drawing on the example of religion, this book hopes to help to clarify this process.

The philosophical appropriation of religion as a source of authority may look largely circular to us. Post-Hellenistic philosophers tend to read their own metaphysics into religion: we shall see that both Platonists and Stoics claim Egyptian religion in support of their own doctrines. Whereas a certain circularity might be an inevitable characteristic of attempts to appropriate the foreign,[18] Post-Hellenistic philosophers put forward two

[17] See the works cited in note 14.
[18] It is the methodological problem that anthropology constantly grapples with: see Geertz 1973. One also wonders to what degree, for example, Heidegger projects his own philosophy on the poems of Hölderlin.

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propositions that, to an extent, justify the circularity: it is difficult to grasp the symbolic truths found in religion, and superstition has adulterated these. The difficulty of the undertaking will lead some, such as Plutarch, to admit that not all interpretations are certain (in some cases, even his own) and that other interpretations by other philosophical schools have a kernel of truth; yet he will still contend that his own reading is the best. His 'ecumenical' approach seems to show an awareness of the danger of circularity. Others, including Numenius, explicitly admit that the evidence of religion is only to be accepted when it does not contradict Platonism and they discount all the rest as superstition.[19] To whatever degree philosophers draw rhetorically on religion as a source of knowledge and authority, it remains an additional one, which does not supersede all other sources. The emphasis on superstition, in turn, blurs the line between normative and descriptive readings of religion: because philosophical training is the condition for retrieving the core of truth and identifying superstition so as to eliminate it, Post-Hellenistic readings of religion are not gratuitous *jeux d'esprit*. They pretend to rediscover the true nature of religion and are therefore at least implicitly prescriptive: an interpretation by an untrained individual cannot have the same authority as that of a philosopher.

Post-Hellenistic philosophy does not open up to religion as a new, untrodden territory full of as yet unknown lore: the process is underpinned by the assumption that religion was philosophical from its very origin. The apparent circularity of reading one's own philosophy into religion and the normative value of such readings stem from this. At the same time, because religion is supposed to go back a long time and to reveal the structure of the universe, it has an aura of respectability, which is, as we shall see, strategically exploited in arguments and polemic by Post-Hellenistic philosophers (and Second Sophistic authors in general). In such a context, the process of reinterpretation and reappropriation of poetry, religion and other 'external' sources of knowledge becomes obscured to increase the authority they can provide.

PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION IN THE EARLY ROMAN EMPIRE

As indicated above, most of the material this book is based on, namely philosophical texts or texts written by philosophically educated authors, is generally used by historians of religion to document a rise of interest in religion among philosophers of the first centuries AD, which is then seen

[19] See also Dio Chrys. *Or.* 31.144.

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as a part of profound changes in religious attitudes and mentality in the Roman Empire. My approach distinguishes itself from such interpretations in trying to understand these texts as part of philosophical discourses, rather than seeing in them reflections of wider changes in religious mentality.[20] In order to explain why I think such a focus on the philosophical discourse must precede any attempt to sketch a wider religious picture, I shall briefly assess the relation between philosophy and religion in this period and, in the next section, the various explanations offered for it.

Any generalisation on the vast and complex subject of the relation between philosophy and religion in Antiquity is hazardous, but philosophy's attitude towards religion in Antiquity can perhaps best be described as hovering between fascination and criticism. Often only one of these poles is stressed: there is a tendency in modern scholarship to construe the relationship as one of hostility or, at best, of critical distance. Impelled by a desire to grasp the true nature of reality rationally, it is argued, philosophers take on traditional cults and customs in order to demythologise them. Even when acknowledging the usefulness and value of religion within society, as Plato does in the *Laws*, so the argument continues, philosophers find religion harbouring untruth in areas such as cosmology, eschatology and morality and they attempt either to complement or to correct it.[21] Yet, in the face of a society that was fundamentally conservative and traditionalist, only a few philosophers, including Antisthenes and Zeno of Citium, seem actually to have taken the radical step of abandoning religion as practised in their *polis*. Most, in fact, acquiesced in traditional rituals and customs. This tendency to criticise religion but abide by its customs has famously been described as 'brain-balkanisation' by Paul Veyne. Such a situation has been found among Roman intellectuals of the Late Republic, whose attitude seems to be summed up in the philosopher Cotta's famous statement in Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*:

> I am not a little moved by your authority, Balbus, and by your speech, the peroration of which exorts me to remember that I am Cotta and a pontiff. That means, I believe, that we have to defend the views about the immortal gods that we have inherited from our ancestors, as well as the rites, ceremonies and observances of religion. For my part, I shall always defend them and have always done so, and no speech of a cultured or uncultured man will ever change my view about the

[20] For a similar approach but from a literary point of view, see Elm von der Osten 2006; Bendlin 2006; Goldhill 2006a and 2006b, who propose to see the interest in religion as part of the identity discourse of the Second Sophistic.

[21] E.g. Decharme 1904; Jaeger 1947; Merlan 1963; Babut 1974; Attridge 1978; West 1999: 30–40; Edwards 2002: 48–52, 74; Most 2003: 307–10; Martin 2004; Brisson 2007: 42.

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worship of the immortal gods from the one I have received from our ancestors. But on the issue of religion, I follow the high priests Tiberius Coruncianus and Publius Scipio and Publius Scaevola, not Zeno or Cleanthes or Chrysippus. (3.5)

Cotta's words have been taken to convey the impression that philosophy and religion are two distinct 'programmes de vérité', to borrow Paul Veyne's phrase.[22] The French scholar, with his love for paradox, suggests that both can only be reconciled by accepting that they are irreconcilable, fundamentally different modes of thought.

Philosophy's attitude towards religion should not, however, be reduced to criticism, possibly combined with fideism based on 'brain-balkanisation'. Traditional religion and cults were also a source of fascination for philosophers. It is fairly easy to point to Plato's regular references to mystery cults as having discovered some truths about the afterlife, an idea that Aristotle seems to express as well.[23] The Derveni Papyrus (*c.* 340 BC) is another example of a philosophical approach to and interest in religion,[24] and Cleanthes' hymn to Zeus (third century BC) is a remarkable expression of Stoic piety. Moreover, it may be unjustified to interpret Cotta as a typical Roman traditionalist. Indeed, Cicero styles him as an Academic Sceptic who argues against the dogmatic Epicureans and Stoics. Traditionalism was the basic attitude of any adherent of the New Academy: in the absence of firm criteria to decide on the truth of any proposition, sticking to tradition was the most sensible course to take.[25] Cotta's traditionalism is thus also a philosophical position, and a fairly common one, and it may be imprudent to take it as the paradigm of religious mentality in Late Republican Rome. The foregoing examples indeed suggest that criticism is just one face of philosophy's attitude towards religion in Antiquity. That we are sometimes inclined to take it as the dominant tendency in Antiquity may have to do with our modern understanding of philosophy, which is seen as firmly occupying the realm of the rational, whereas religion is understood as venturing beyond it into the irrational.

[22] Veyne 1983. The concept of 'brain-balkanisation' has been used by D. Feeney to characterise the intellectual situation in the Roman Empire (1998: 14–21). A similar, but more cautious, assessment is found in Brunt 1997: 198: 'It seems probable that the theological doubts and contradictions of the philosophic schools had little effect on Roman religious practices, or so far as concerns the mentality of most Romans, on the beliefs associated with them.' For an interpretation of the passage from Cicero on such lines, see Valgiglio 1973.

[23] Pl. *Phd.* 62b, 69c, 81a, *Cra.* 413a, *Ep.* 7.344; Aristotle, *Protr.* fr. 60. See also Pl. [*Ax.*] 371d–e.

[24] See now the edition by Kouremenous, Parassoglou and Tsantsanoglou 2006.

[25] This is clear from Minucius Felix, who in *Octavius* styles the pagan Caecilius as an Academic Sceptic staunchly defending tradition (see esp. 6.1): Fürst 2000: 276. See Schofield 1986 for the influence of Academic Scepticism on Cicero's views on divination in *On Divination*; Mansfeld 1999: 475–8 for Academic views on religion.

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The first two centuries AD offer evidence for both attitudes, namely criticism and interest. In Plutarch's *On the Daimonion of Socrates* (probably to be dated in the last quarter of the first century AD), for example, one of the characters, Galaxidorus, bursts into a tirade against the kind of philosophy that believes in divination. Such a philosophy goes contrary to the vocation and nature of philosophy itself (πρὸς τὴν ἐπαγγελίαν ἐναντίος):

> Having the vocation to teach the whole of the good and the profitable through reason, such a philosophy withdraws from the government of conduct to take refuge with the gods, as if despising reason. Scorning demonstration, supposedly her distinguishing mark, it resorts to divination and visions seen in dreams, in which the least of men is often no less rewarded with success than the greatest. (9.580A)

Such a passage could be read as evidence that philosophy was still strictly patrolling its borders with religion, the empire of the irrational. Significantly, however, Galaxidorus is the character who gets the wrong end of the stick: the rest of the dialogue serves to refute the strict separation he wants to see between philosophy and religion. The other interlocutors indeed defend the existence of Socrates' demon and his divinatory powers against the backdrop of a validation of traditional rites and customs.

The rather positive attitude towards religion as found in Plutarch's *On the Daimonion of Socrates* can be taken as representative of its author's age. In the early Roman Empire, the balance between criticism and attraction seems to have swung in favour of the latter. Although certain philosophers such as Seneca take a rather dim view of traditional religion,[26] many others start to explore the rituals and wisdom of Graeco-Roman as well as foreign cults, looking at religious traditions as a valuable source for philosophical reflection. Plutarch's religious works, in particular the so-called Delphic dialogues and *On Isis and Osiris*, immediately come to mind. But he does not stand alone. His contemporary Dio Chrysostom, consistently presenting himself as a philosopher, was happy to speak at the Olympic games and defend traditional artistic representations of the gods as a source of true knowledge about the divine (*Or.* 12). One of Nero's Stoic teachers, Cornutus, conceived his handbook on the interpretation of the gods as an act of piety.[27] Among second-century authors the interest

[26] Seneca is a fervent adherent of a cosmic religion (*Ep.* 41, 90) that takes the heavenly bodies as objects of worship, and nature as their temple. His lofty thought does not seem to leave room for a reflection on the truth to be found in the mundane trivialities of traditional religion. He stresses that real truth is only found in philosophy, not in tradition.

[27] Cornutus, *Theol. Graec.* 35 p. 76.8–16 Lang.

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continues. Maximus of Tyre reflects at length on the use of statues and other traditional practices (*Or.* 2), whereas Apuleius was proud of being religious to the point of looking like a magician (*Apol.* 55). Despite their brevity, the fragments of Numenius are eloquent about his fascination for all forms of religion, Graeco-Roman, Jewish and 'oriental'. A memorable scene in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* (early third century) can be taken as expressing the changed attitudes. The philosopher descends into the cave of the oracle of Trophonius, not with the aim of receiving an oracle, but for philosophical discussion. After a lengthy parley with the god, he re-emerges, in possession of a book of philosophy donated by the god.[28] Religion is thus not approached as alien to the philosophical enterprise but rather as highly conducive for the practice of philosophy.

The relation between philosophy and religion in the Roman Empire remains insufficiently characterised when merely understood as an increased fascination for things religious. On a personal level both become intertwined as well. Inscriptions testify to a relatively important number of priests who were also philosophers. Even Epicureans, usually notorious for their dismissal of religion, seem to have assumed sacred functions.[29] Plutarch, priest at Delphi, and Numenius, speculatively linked to the sanctuary of Bel in Apamea,[30] illustrate how even philosophers of repute took on religious offices. At the same time, we notice that philosophical concepts surface in oracles and cult-regulations emanating from traditional religious institutions. The so-called philosophical oracles are certainly the best-known example, but many others could be cited.[31] Already in the second century BC individuals had occasionally approached divinities with questions about the divine world and its structure[32] but questions of a philosophical nature such as 'What is the essence of god?' increasingly occupy priests and faithful alike, from the first century BC onwards. The importance of philosophical credibility for cults can be seen through Lucian's distorting mirror, when he depicts Alexander of Abonuteichus, the creator of a new cult in Paphlagonia, in close connection with Platonists, Stoics and Pythagoreans in the hope of giving a philosophical standing to his oracle.[33]

[28] Philostr. *VA* 8.19–20.
[29] See the references in M. Smith 1996; Dillon 2002b: 37–9; Bendlin 2006: 165, 180, 190.
[30] Athanassiadi 1999: 156 and 2006: 88.
[31] For the theological oracles, see Nock 1928; Gasparro 2002: 54–60, 183–4; Busine 2005: 154–225. For other examples see Merkelbach and Stauber 1998: 605–7 (with Frede 2002: 114); Bendlin 2006: 192–3.
[32] Busine 2005: 110–12.
[33] Lucian, *Alex.* 25, with the comments by Gasparro 2002: 192–7.

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