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Non uno itinere

Quintus Aurelius Symmachus
and the invention of 'paganism'

Non uno itinere: Quintus Aurelius Symmachus and the invention of 'paganism'

Thesis - Research Master Classics and Ancient Civilizations

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Image on front page: Tommaso Laureti, *Trionfo del cristianesimo sul paganismo* (1517/1524), Sala di Costantino, Musei Vaticani

Contents

As for Me, I had thought: you were gods,
    and the sons of the Most High were you all.
Yet indeed like humans you shall die,
    and like one of the princes, fall.

אֲנִי־אָמַרְתִּי אֱלֹהִים אַתֶּם
וּבְנֵי עֶלְיוֹן כֻּלְּכֶם:
אָכֵן כְּאָדָם תְּמוּתוּן
וּכְאַחַד הַשָּׂרִים תִּפֹּלוּ:

Psalm 82:6-7

(transl. Robert Alter)

Religion and revolution

Introduction

"Toch vereert u de oude goden, net als ik?" "Ik vereer de goden niet." Voor het eerst keek hij mij aan met een glimp van achterdocht in zijn blik. "Maar u bent geen christen?" "Ik ben geen christen." "Stilicho was christen. Ik heb mij vaak afgevraagd hoe het mogelijk was dat u, met uw opvattingen…" "U kent mijn opvattingen niet." "Ik heb uw gedichten gelezen en herlezen," zei hij scherp.

Hella S. Haasse, *Een nieuwer testament*[1]

This fictional dialogue between the wealthy Roman aristocrat Marcus Anicius Rufus and the poet Claudian was written at a turning point in the history of Christianity in the Netherlands. Since the beginning of the 19th century, belonging to a Christian congregation of some kind had been normal and membership of Christian congregations generally matched population growth. In the 1960s, however, things started to change. In the wake of the revolutionary movements that swept across the western world, church attendance became a deliberate, personal choice rather than a common habit, and, especially in intellectual circles, being 'agnostic', 'atheist' or otherwise not affiliated to any church congregation quickly came en vogue: "[b]y the end of the twentieth century, the primacy of individual conscience had been raised to a point where it appeared to overshadow the older virtue of obedience to Church teaching" – a sentence Mary Heinemann wrote in 1999, but that can still be applied to the current situation.[2] Many scholars would argue that religion has left the academy definitively since the 1960s, and any 'religious influence' in academia would probably be looked upon with suspicion. However, the attitude towards religion in general and Christianity in specific seems to change slowly: "the theological still haunts the classical, in ways that we ignore at our peril," the Postclassicisms Collective wrote a few years ago.[3]

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[1] Haasse 1967: 105-106.
[2] Heinemann 1999: 505.
[3] Postclassicisms Collective 2020: 84.

Haasse's novel *Een nieuwer testament* is set in early 5th-century Rome. In the dialogue I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, the (fictional) Roman aristocrat Marcus Anicius Rufus asks the poet Claudian to reveal his religious conviction: is Claudian a pagan or a Christian? Between two religions battling for primacy, Claudian refuses to take sides and shows an agnostic, maybe even atheist stance towards the religious issues he is confronted with, thus writing a non-Christian, non-pagan 'newer testament' that overrules earlier, biblical or non-biblical testaments of faith. This is a stance that would certainly have appealed to many 1960s intellectuals, and might still appeal to many people today – at least, similar attitudes towards religion in late antiquity are still present in popular scholarship.[4] In the fields of popular culture and popular scholarship, the stock character of the agnostic pagan is often combined with the narrative of decline and fall that originates in Edward Gibbon's masterpiece of Enlightenment historiography, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.[5] For Gibbon (1737-1794) – himself probably a devout Anglican who has been reinterpreted as a proto-atheist freethinker in recent times – the rise of Christianity in the 4th and 5th centuries was met by fierce pagan opposition, a situation that is surprisingly reminiscent of the protestant Reformation in the 16th century.[6] For two of the major scholars of late antiquity in the last two centuries, the German Otto Seeck (1850-1921) and the Hungarian American András Alföldi (1895-1981), Christianity takes the form of a 19th-century state church, against which the pagan 'nationalists' of Rome revolt.[7] In Haasse's novel, the notion of a declining Roman Empire looms large as well; Claudian's only way to escape the decline is to perform a kind of inner emigration by writing his agnostic manifesto. Thus, the silent pagan intellectual Claudian embodies a world of freethinkers, liberated from their religious yoke, that would only be established fifteen-and-a-half centuries later, in Haasse's own times.

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[4] E.g. Nixey 2017, Hulspas 2019 and Van Hooff 2023.

[5] See Koutrakos 2022 and Henschel 2022. The combination of the agnostic pagan stock character and the decline and fall narrative can be seen very clearly in Alejandro Almenábar's 2009 film *Agora*, on the Christian suppression of 'pagan philosophy' in early-5th-century Alexandria, with the film's main character Hypatia as an agnostic scientist avant la lettre (cf. van den Berg 2011).

[6] Nippel 2006 and Rebenich 2022; cf. Blom 2022: 181-229. See Young 1998 for Gibbon's personal religious environment.

[7] Salzman, Sághy & Lizzi Testa 2015: 1-2 and Rebenich 2022: 23-24. Cf. Raedts 2011 for Gibbon's *Nachleben* in 19th-century historiography.

In the past decades, an increasing number of specialists in late antique history and culture have stressed that scholars and poets alike tend to use late antiquity as a *Projektionsfläche* for reflecting issues they encountered in their own times.[8] As especially the literary heritage of the period during which Christianity became the major religion of Europe, Northern Africa and the Middle East has since long been regarded as particularly 'religious', modern and anachronistic concepts of religion and what it means to be religious are haunting the field of late antiquity.[9] This all the more shows that "the theological still haunts the classical, in ways that we ignore at our peril."[10] It would be reckless to try to eliminate this peril in a master thesis, but the following pages are an attempt at raising awareness of this peril.

In this thesis, I will delve into one specific case that has gained quite some attention ever since Gibbon devoted a chapter to it in the third volume of his *Decline and Fall*: the senator Quintus Aurelius Symmachus and the removal of the Altar of Victory from the Roman Curia.[11] Symmachus is often treated as the 'prototypical pagan', but is this image right? How does Symmachus 'behave' in his own texts, and how was he received during his life and in the decades after his death? Do his early receptions paint him as a staunch 'pagan', or is this idea an invention of later scholarship? The texts I will discuss in this thesis – the epistolary debate between Symmachus and the Milanese bishop Ambrose that ensued in 384 CE, in the wake of the altar's removal a few years earlier, and the literary reception of the figure of Symmachus, especially in Prudentius' didactic epic *Contra Symmachum* (finished around 402/403) and Macrobius' sympotic dialogue *Saturnalia* (written approximately around 430) – are considered among the primary literary evidence for a supposed 'battle between paganism and Christianity'.[12] In the remainder of this introductory chapter, I will shortly present the historical event of the Altar's removal and its modern historiographical aftermath. The chapter will end with a discussion of modern theories about ancient religion, centred around the question of how to analyse and

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[8] E.g. Salzman, Sághy & Lizzi Testa 2015 and Rebenich 2022.

[9] Hunt 2018: 20; cf. Rüpke 2016 and Meier 2019, esp. 39-51.

[10] Postclassicisms Collective 2020: 84.

[11] Gibbon 1781: 69-103.

[12] See for the dating of Macrobius' *Saturnalia* Cameron 1966. An extensive, if not exhaustive assessment of the 'battle between paganism and Christianity' can be found in Cameron 2011.

identify religion in late antique texts, and a short presentation of the aims and focus of this thesis.

1.1 · Symmachus and the 'pagan revolution'

In the preface to the first book of his apologetic-didactic epic *Contra Symmachum*, the poet Aurelius Prudentius Clemens (348 – after 405) presents a short vignette, in which he selectively rewrites a story from the New Testament.[13] Paul and the crew of his ship have reached the shore after a cold and stormy voyage and they start building a fire to warm themselves. When putting some wood on the fire, Paul is bitten in his finger by a snake that had accidentally ended up in the firewood:

> Haerentem digiti uulnere mordicus
> pendentem gerens Paulus inhorruit.
> Exclamant alii, quod cute liuida
> uirus mortiferum serpere crederent.
> At non intrepidum terret apostolum
> tristis tam subiti forma periculi.
> Attollens oculos sidera suspicit
> Christum sub tacito pectore murmurans
> excussumque procul discutit aspidem.

> *When he carried [the snake] that was holding fast with its teeth to the wound in his finger, dangling from it, Paul shivered. Some cried out as they believed that the deadly venom crept under his blueing skin. But the gloomy appearance of this sudden hazard did not scare the unshaken apostle: raising up his eyes, he looked at the skies, murmured at Christ in the silence of his heart, and after he had cast away the snake, he shattered it.*[14]

Prudentius then explains this biblical vignette in an allegorical way.[15] The ship of the universal church (*catholicam puppem*, 59-60) has been steered through difficult waters, but it has reached safe shores, where its crew has lighted a warm fire (*praecalidos igniculos*, 67) to make everyone feel comfortable. The fire's heat, however, has unexpectedly caused the filth of flourishing idol worship (*silvosi inluviem idoli*, 72) to wake up and unexpectedly attack the universal church.

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[13] The poem is based on Acts 28:1-6.

[14] Prud. *C.Symm.* I.praef.29-37. All quotes from Prud. *C.Symm* are taken from the edition by Cunningham 1966.

[15] Prud. *C.Symm.* I.praef.45-79.

However, as pagan idolatry tried to spread its venom through rhetoric, God's right hand (*dextra*, 76) has prevented the intellectual venom (*ingenii virus*, 78) from spreading.[16]

Prudentius' rhetoric is not new: the allegory he presents us in his preface is strongly grounded in the narrative of 'proto-orthodoxy', the idea that there was one 'correct' Christian perspective that had remained the same from the teachings of Jesus Christ himself until the days of the 4th-century fathers of the church.[17] But whereas this teleological perspective on Christianity had until the times of Prudentius primarily been applied to different currents within Christianity, the fact that Christianity by the end of the 4th century had become the majority religion of the Roman Empire allowed for a more aggressive stance towards any non-orthodox-Christian group, including traditional Roman polytheism.[18] In *Contra Symmachum*, this framework of othering, which from the perspective of Christian historiography proved especially successful in denouncing all kinds of Christian 'heresies', is used in this way to create an immense gap between 'paganism' and 'Christianity', whose two main protagonists (retrospectively at least), Symmachus and Ambrose, are not mentioned by name.

Prudentius' teleological view of Roman history as culminating in a triumph of Christianity, despite fierce 'pagan' opposition, did not only enjoy popularity in ancient times. It was especially advocated by Edward Gibbon, who, referring to *Contra Symmachum*, writes about a counter-revolution incited in 384 by the pagan faction of the Roman senate, led by Quintus Aurelius Symmachus in a movement that causes the senate's "dying embers of freedom [...], for a moment," to be "revived and inflamed by the breath of fanaticism":

> The breast of Symmachus was animated by the warmest zeal for the cause of expiring Paganism; and his religious antagonists lamented the abuse of his genius, and the inefficacy of his moral virtues.[19]

Gibbon's apparent sympathy for late antique adherents of polytheism, like Symmachus or the (in)famous emperor Julian, has had an enormous influence on

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[16] *Dextra* might refer to the prominent Christian bishop and politician Ambrose, but a more abstract interpretation of *dextra* as a 'divine intervention' is also possible.

[17] Ehrman 2003: 4-5, 91-157. This narrative is apparent from the earliest Christian writings, cf. Lauster 2020: 37-89.

[18] E.g. Veyne 2008: 18-25, Humphries 2018. When referring to the historical circumstances, I prefer to use the term 'traditional Roman polytheism' instead of 'paganism', as the latter term in my opinion suggests a more fixed entity that does not seem to have been there as such (see e.g. Jürgasch 2015).

[19] Gibbon 1781: 72-73; cf. Sogno 2006: 41-42.

later scholarship:[20] the nature of 'pagan resistance' in the late antique Roman world remained a popular object of study in enlightened, nationalist and, especially since the 19th and 20th century, growingly secularised scholarship.[21] Admittedly, Gibbon's story about a promethean figure leading the revolt against the powerful authority of the Christian church, works: as we have seen in the previous section of this thesis, not only in literary works and films, but also in (popular) scholarship, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* has provided a powerful paradigm in which authors reflect on contemporary events through the *medium* of late antique history. Almost always, the rise of Christianity from the reign of Constantine the Great until the eventual 'Christianisation' of the Roman Empire by Theodosius I is mirrored in a late 4th- and early 5th-century 'pagan counter-revolution', and it is beyond doubt that the end of paganism was and is remembered as a battle.

Until fairly recently, this 'Gibbonian' view had remained virtually uncontested, even in academia, but in the last decades a growing number of scholars in ancient history and classics have started expressing their doubts about the revolutionary spirit that more than two centuries of scholarship had attributed to the political circles of late 4th-century Rome: was the depiction of Symmachus as an advocate of 'paganism' really defendable on the basis of his letters?[22] Couldn't the 'triumph of Christianity' in the late 4th century have been a more gradual process?[23] Isn't our perception of Symmachus' religious identity influenced by post-Reformation and post-Enlightenment concepts of what it means to be religious?[24] In spite of these developments, especially in the field of classical literature a strong opposition of 'pagan' and 'Christian' currents in late-4th-century Roman society remains the starting point for a lot of scholarship, not in the least place because the major histories of Roman literature create a sharp division between 'pagan' and 'Christian' literature.[25] The spirits of Prudentius and Edward Gibbon haunt modern research into late antique literature more persistently than one might expect, as the division of late 4th-century

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[20] Nippel 2006, Lauster 2020: 126-127. A vivid description of the Enlightenment environments in which radical anti-religious thoughts emerged can be found in Blom 2011.

[21] E.g. Seeck 1913: 195-199; Sheridan 1966; Klein 1971; Wytzes 1977; Fuhrmann 1994: 59-80; Gerbrandy 2007: 402-409; Roeck 2017: 84-86. See Heinemann 1999 for a brief overview of secularisation in Western Europe.

[22] Sogno 2006: 31-57.

[23] Cameron 2011: 1-13.

[24] Iara 2015.

[25] E.g. Conte 1994: 621-697; von Albrecht 2012: 1091-1117.

'pagan' and 'Christian' literatures is still often traced back to the figure of Symmachus and his 'battle for the Altar of Victory'.[26]

Even though one should agree with Gibbon and his followers that these texts somehow deal with a phenomenon that we would identify as 'religion', both the historiographical discussion about the 'battle between paganism and Christianity' and literary scholars' separating 'pagan' and 'Christian' literature seem to consider this phenomenon as self-evidently clear. I do not in fact think that it is reasonable to assume that a modern reader simply understands the religious situation that Symmachus, Ambrose, Prudentius and Macrobius are reflecting on. Before turning to the ancient texts, I will therefore delve into modern theories of ancient religion, thus hopefully establishing a framework that enables a less 'polarised' reading of Symmachus', Ambrose's, Prudentius' and Macrobius' texts.

1.2 · Ancient 'religion' – a modern perspective?

Regardless of the historical period one refers to, 'religion' is notoriously hard to define – as is shown by the vast amount of literature that was written on this subject in the past century. Summarily, definitions of 'religion' can be divided into two categories: narrow, minimalist definitions, primarily covering the relation between human and suprahuman beings, and broad, maximalist definitions, trying to incorporate elements that are maybe not evident in a relation between human and suprahuman beings.[27] An example of a narrow definition would be the one given by Jörg Rüpke in his book *Pantheon*, a compact history of religion in the Roman world:

> [D]as situative Einbeziehen von Akteuren (ob sie nun als Göttliches oder Götter, Dämonen oder Engel, Tote oder Unsterbliche bezeichnet werden), die in bestimmter Hinsicht überlegen sind.[28]

Rüpke's abstract definition focuses on the communication between human and suprahuman actors, which allows for including both pre-Christian religious practices (such as burnt offerings) and Christian ones (such as personal prayers); the definition thus seems to work perfectly fine for studying religion in late antiquity. However, in times of increasing 'secularisation', scholars from the field of religious studies have developed a more anthropological perspective on

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[26] Conte 1994: 634-636; Gerbrandy 2007: 402-409; von Albrecht 2012: 1236-1240.

[27] Nongbri 2013: 18-23.

[28] Rüpke 2016: 19.

'religion', in order to include religious phenomena considered to be less tradi-
tional – such as neo-paganism, ritual atheism or secular Judaism – or less colo-
nial – such as animist cults or ancestor worship – phenomena that do not nec-
essarily strive to retain close ties with suprahuman actors through a belief sys-
tem with a strong 'administrative' side, as is the case in Islam and Christianity.[29]
These scholars tend to contest narrow and traditional definitions of 'religion',
as is for instance the case in Meredith McGuire's influential book *Lived Reli-
gion*:

> Is "folk" or "popular" or "non-official" religiosity any less religious than "official"
> or "church" religiosity? Does "religion" have to pertain to a deity or the super-
> natural, or could someone be equally religious without worshiping some supra-
> human being?[30]

According to McGuire, anyone studying religion is hampered by the fact that
"assumptions, embedded in their field's basic definitions, get in the way of un-
derstanding the phenomenon they are observing".[31]

In a similar vein, yet more radically, Brent Nongbri argues in his 2013 mon-
ograph *Before Religion* that the label of 'religion' is often imposed on situations
that do not correspond to our understanding of the word, since "it has become
clear that the isolation of something called 'religion' as a sphere of life ideally
separated from politics, economics, and science is not a universal feature of hu-
man history".[32] Nongbri writes that in modern, Western societies, 'religion' is
considered to refer to "an essentially private or spiritual realm that somehow
transcends the mundane world of language and history". It is also considered to
"refer to a genus that contains a variety of species, that is, the individual reli-
gions of the world". Lastly, Nongbri writes that the difference between descrip-
tive, 'first-order', and redescriptive, 'second-order', usage of the term 'religion'
tends to be blurred in scholarship: there seems to be a general assumption that
languages do not need to have a word for 'religion' in order for societies to
reflect upon it.[33] Opposite to general, modern notions of 'religion', Nongbri
proposes to "thoroughly rearrange those bits and pieces of what we once gath-
ered together as 'ancient religions'", and to accept that ancient authors – even

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[29] Cf. Smith 1963: 15-19, esp. 19; Nongbri 2013: 106-131.

[30] McGuire 2008: 20. The 'cultural' side of religion is emphasised by many modern histo-
rians of religion, e.g. Lauster 2020: 615-617.

[31] McGuire 2008: 19.

[32] Nongbri 2013: 2. This thought is present in many modern studies of the 'history of
religion', cf. e.g. Dubuisson 2003: 147-186.

[33] Nongbri 2013: 18-23.

Early Christian ones – seem to have identified themselves primarily in ethnic or civic terms, and not in religious ones.[34] Thus, "study of religion ought to address itself to the various shifting ideologies and institutions that enable 'religion' to be identified, formalized, and reproduced".[35]

Carlin Barton and Daniel Boyarin stress Nongbri's radical awareness of our own 'anachronisticness' on a lexical level in their aptly titled book *Imagine no Religions. How modern abstractions hide ancient realities*. According to Barton and Boyarin, many modern scholars are translating 'religion' into ancient texts.[36] It has indeed long been noted that ancient Latin did not have an equivalent to the modern English word *religion*, but despite their attempts at un-translating *religio* as 'religion', Barton and Boyarin acknowledge that authors like Varro and Cicero made attempts at defining *religio* in ways that are unexpectedly close to our modern 'religion'.[37] The new currents in the study of ancient religion are also being taken into account in Josef Lössl and Nicholas J. Baker-Brian's 2018 *Companion to Religion in Late Antiquity*, especially in the theoretical introduction by Thomas E. Hunt.[38] According to Hunt, "[t]he study of Late Antiquity began in attempts to make sense of either the religious or the political formation of post-Reformation Europe", with additional shaping by "the ideological presuppositions of twentieth-century academia," and as such, the superimposition of concepts from modernity on late antique society seems almost inherent to the field of study: "'Late Antiquity' was produced when sociological definitions of religion were applied to explain human societies far away in time."[39] But Hunt remarks that it is especially late antiquity's textual heritage that made scholars combine the concepts of 'religion' and 'late antiquity', by considering this textual heritage as particularly religious:

> At the heart of the late antique project is a desire to connect literary texts to the social and cultural life of people in the Mediterranean around the second to the eighth centuries. The religious character of these textual survivals meant placing religion at the heart of Late Antiquity. Born in the decades after the Second World War, Late Antiquity was a 'rhetoric of modernity'. As with

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[34] Nongbri 2013: 46-64, quote from p. 159.
[35] Hunt 2018: 15.
[36] Barton & Boyarin 2016: 1-9.
[37] Platvoet 1999: 466-476; Barton & Boyarin 2016: 15-52; Rüpke 2016: 185-191.
[38] Hunt 2018.
[39] Hunt 2018: 16-24, quote from p. 24.

modernity itself, religion provided the nucleus around which Late Antiquity was constituted.[40]

Thus Hunt moves away from the rigidly anthropological definitions of scholars like McGuire and Nongbri by adding insights from cultural history. As such, the suggestion that scholarship would be better off reorganising the entire field by doing away with essentially modern (and therefore necessarily anachronistic) categories like 'late antiquity' or 'religion' altogether – as is in fact argued by Brent Nongbri – is rejected by Hunt.[41] It is important to keep in mind that "[i]f scholars choose not to apply the term 'religion' when it is not a native category, then many other analytical tools are also lost".[42] By lack of a better term, I will therefore use the word 'religion' on account of its cultural-historical implications, but not without keeping the anthropological defamiliarisation that Brent Nongbri proposes in mind. In the end, reflection on the cultural phenomenon that we, however anachronistically, refer to as 'religion' is what thematically unites the texts that constitute the corpus treated in this thesis.

1.3 · Finding 'religion' in ancient literature

As has been mentioned before, the textual heritage of late antiquity has been considered particularly religious.[43] Although one can indeed ask what aspects of a text exactly make it 'religious', this claim is actually supported by Guy G. Stroumsa's theory of the 'scriptural galaxy' of late antiquity.[44] According to Stroumsa, literature and religion, as media of memory, underwent major changes in late antiquity.[45] In spite of Nongbri's idea that what we call 'religion' simply wasn't really there, Stroumsa's suggestion that "reading, as well as writing and copying, became for Christians a normative activity, a religious duty, infused with spiritual meaning", suggests that the ancient situation is not as simple as Nongbri wants us to believe.[46] Even though ancient cultures might be considered primarily oral, especially in late antiquity there seems to have

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[40] Hunt 2018: 20.

[41] Nongbri 2013: 154-159.

[42] Hunt 2018: 15.

[43] Hunt 2018: 20.

[44] Stroumsa 2016 and Stroumsa 2018. Smith 1993 is the key publication on the nature of 'scripture': "being scripture is not a quality inherent in a given text, or type of text, so much as an interactive relation between that text and a community of persons" (p. ix).

[45] Stroumsa 2008; 2016; 2018.

[46] Stroumsa 2016: 132-133.

been extensive written reflection on the social and – maybe even more importantly – cultural phenomenon that we would call 'religion'.

For instance, the fact that a word like *religio* was already subject of theoretical discussions in late republican times lays bare a complex socio-cultural reality that cannot simply be solved by refraining from using the word 'religion' when referring to antiquity. Without completely discarding Nongbri's (arguably unrealistic) suggestion of removing 'religion' entirely from our discussions of (late) antiquity, Carlin Barton and Daniel Boyarin show that the ancient complexity can even be found in texts pre-dating what is generally considered to be late antiquity. As mentioned before, Brent Nongbri opposes the notion that languages do not need to have a word for 'religion' in order for societies to reflect upon it: even if scholars show awareness of the fact that the concept itself did not really exist, religion is often considered to be embedded in other domains, which would create the false impression that there still was 'religion' in the ancient world, but not as a neatly defined category.[47] Barton and Boyarin's extensive lexical study into the Latin *religio* and its Greek equivalent θρησκεία provides the necessary illustration of Nongbri's abstractions. Barton and Boyarin lay bare a complicated ancient reality, in which there still might be room for the category 'religion'. Key figures in the development of both the ancient Latin *religio* and the modern English 'religion' seem to have been the late-Republican authors Varro and, most notably, Cicero, "in whose works [one] can occasionally find examples of the use of *religio* that seem to fit with our modern notions of 'religion'" – especially when looking at specific passages from certain orations (e.g. *De domo sua*) or philosophical treatises (e.g. *De legibus* and *De natura deorum*):[48]

> It is possible to conclude from this very limited selection of the passages that for Cicero, the word *religio* was (1) a universal; (2) a distinct and bounded sphere of human behavior; (3) an institutionalized and hierarchical aspect of a *civitas*; (4) a power structure demanding submission and obedience; and finally (5) an order instituted, authorized and enforced both by all-powerful, all-knowing gods and the magistrates and priests of the state. These Ciceronian notions are compatible with many ancient and modern Christian notions of 'religion' and so appear to justify the use by modern scholars of 'religion' as both a covering category and to translate *religio*.[49]

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[47] Nongbri 2013: 21-22, 150-152.
[48] Barton & Boyarin 2016: 39-52, quote from p. 17.
[49] Barton & Boyarin 2016: 18. Cf. Rüpke 2016: 166-302.

Despite the fact that on this basis, Cicero has often been credited with inventing modern religion, his rather philosophical use of *religio* did emerge in times when an enormous range of meanings was associated with the word. Throughout antiquity, *religio* seems to include both awe for, or even fear of whatever is being venerated, and a sense of obligation to do so in a conscientious way – and as such, its connotations were not merely positive.[50] Barton and Boyarin stress that *religio* should be understood within the context of the reciprocal society it was part of, within the emotional scripts it functioned in: "[it] embraced and expressed a balancing system so sensitive that it trembled."[51] Indeed, Cicero's choice to use the word *religio* in his 'religious treatises' might be motivated by the very fact that *religio* was such a versatile term that could encompass many, not seldomly opposite elements of this balancing system.[52]

In his book *Pantheon*, Jörg Rüpke takes a rather different stance than Nongbri, Barton and Boyarin, arguing that the roots of our modern notion of 'religion' can indeed be found in antiquity: "[a]us einer Welt, in der man religiöse Rituale praktizierte, wurde eine Welt, in der man Religionen angehören konnte."[53] Starting from a more conservative definition of 'religion', Rüpke argues that with figures like Cicero, the basis of our modern 'religions' was laid.[54] He describes how the phenomenon that we call 'religion' nowadays seems to have started off as a marginal, rather *ad hoc* phenomenon in the Bronze Age, but becomes increasingly central to societies in the period between c. 1000 and c. 500 BCE.[55] The increased visibility and complexity of communication with supranatural actors led to a process that Rüpke calls *sacralisation*, in which rituals became public performances, carried out by a select group of religious experts.[56] The ongoing codification of religious knowledge and the *invented traditions* of the Augustan era show that religion became something that could be learnt (be it from books or through physical experience of public rituals, images, inscriptions or 'sacred spaces', like sanctuaries, temples, tombs etc.) and reflected upon, an influential tool for the political elite that aimed to create a

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[50] Barton & Boyarin 2016: 19-33. Cf. Platvoet 1999: 466-476.

[51] Barton & Boyarin 2016: 37-38, quote from p. 38.

[52] Barton & Boyarin 2016: 51-52. The focus on Cicero – and, to a lesser extent, Varro – obscures the fact that they are not the only authors elaborating on *religio* and 'religion'; authors like Lucretius have to be kept in mind as well (cf. e.g. the famous 'critique of religion' in Lucr. I, 80-101).

[53] Rüpke 2016: 13-34, quote from p. 13.

[54] Rüpke 2016: 166-191. See section 1.3 for Rüpke's definition of religion.

[55] Rüpke 2016: 35-94.

[56] Rüpke 2016: 95-165.

powerful collective identity through the institutionalisation of religious practices and through the spread of these institutionalised religious practices over the vast empire it had created.[57] This creation was to a large extent achieved through the powerful ideology of *res publica*, due to which a strong sense of civic belonging seems to have arisen. Rüpke then argues that in the *res publica* ideology, we can distinguish the roots of modern *religions*, even though this ideology did not yet offer the comprehensive worldview, the 'belief system' that one could find in different philosophical schools, and that later *religions* would offer.[58]

According to Rüpke, the emergence of these *religions* takes place in late antiquity, in the wake of the sacralisation processes in the late Roman Republic and the Roman Empire. The more complicated the situation gets – both due to the growing number of official religious experts, and due to the increased complexity of performed rituals – the larger the religious 'grey market' becomes, with all kinds of competing, more or less independent experts, like soothsayers, magicians and gurus.[59] Moreover, the large number of associations, *collegia*, in which a substantial part of the Empire's population engaged, enabled an increase of this grey zone of religious life, which in turn resulted in particular religious group identities, linked to the respective *collegia*.[60] Consequently, these group identities became a means of competition, for instance in polemical and apologetic texts. In these competitions, political actors – such as the emperor Constantine in the early 4th century – became thoroughly involved as well, in their attempts to secure their power base: next to civic and ethnic belonging, a seed for another type of belonging, religious belonging, was planted.[61] Thus, Rüpke writes, it is possible to identify a growing domain in ancient societies that was understood as 'religion', even though the ancient authors might not have named it that way.[62] At first glance, Rüpke's assessment of the religious developments in late antiquity still allows the paradigm of competing 'pagan' and 'Christian factions' to exist, but the author nuances the notion of a 'battle' between two 'religions', by emphasising that this battle is primarily a literary one.[63] In the second half of the 4th century CE, evidence for syncretic,

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[57] Rüpke 2016: 166-302.

[58] Rüpke 2016: 166-191. Cf. Leppin 2019: 172-186.

[59] Rüpke 2016: 303-334.

[60] Rüpke 2016: 335-370. See Kloppenborg 2019 for the link between (religious) *collegia* and identity formation.

[61] Rüpke 2016: 371-394.

[62] Rüpke 2016: 333-334, 366-370, 395-399.

[63] Rüpke 2016: 371-394. Cf. Cameron 2011: 1-13.

polytheist-Christian developments (such as the *Chronograph of 354*) is more numerous and more straight-forwardly interpretable than evidence for serious enmity on the basis of either strong Christian or strong polytheist sentiments.[64]

An unexpected contribution to the question whether ancient authors wrote about 'religion' can be found in Peter Sloterdijk's 2020 book-length essay *Den Himmel zum Sprechen bringen*. Heavily influenced by German memory scholarship, Sloterdijk's book evolves around the question whether religions (the author does not define the word, but uses it in its modern, variegated and difficult to define sense) don't in fact resemble theatrical plays: don't religions always employ the old theatre trick of the *deus ex machina*, to make up for the gods generally being silent themselves ("Zeigen die Götter sich nicht von selbst, bringt man ihnen das Erscheinen bei")?[65] Sloterdijk writes that it can't be denied that the literary aftermath gives the supposed epiphany of the divine its form, and embeds it into narratives of religion that the author calls *Theopoesie*, which could be translated as 'poetics of religion'.[66] This *Theopoesie* is a result of humans' 'living in plausibilities':

> Menschen existieren als anthropopoetische Wesen. Was immer sie tun, es ist Teil ihrer lokalen Anthropodizee. Sie bringen ihre Menschwerdung – und ihre Absetzung vom Unmenschlichen – voran, indem sie sich an das angleichen, was sie sich in Bezug auf ihr Höheres "vormachen". Seit langem ist ihnen bewußt, daß es etwas an ihnen gibt, das über sie hinausgeht.[67]

Thus, from the earliest times, *Theopoesie* is at the core of literary output. Taking Rüpke's *Pantheon* into account, Sloterdijk sees religion as a strategy of belonging, but from his perspective as an explicitly post-religious philosopher, he allows himself to use the vehicle of *Theopoesie* to analyse religion in a different way:[68]

> Was von den historischen Religionen bleibt, sind Schriften, Gesten, Klangwelten, die noch den einzelnen unserer Tage gelegentlich helfen, sich mit

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[64] Rüpke 2016: 384-388.

[65] Sloterdijk 2020: 15-17, quote from p. 15. Sloterdijk's thoughts also seem to have been inspired by the notion of religion as 'play', as brought forth in Huizinga's *Homo ludens* (Huizinga 1958, esp. 1-28).

[66] Sloterdijk 2020: 17-32.

[67] Sloterdijk 2020: 76.

[68] Sloterdijk 2020: 141-165.

aufgehobenen Formeln auf die Verlegenheit ihres einzigartigen Daseins zu be-
ziehen. Das übrige ist Anhänglichkeit, begleitet vom Verlangen nach Teilhabe.[69]

Sloterdijk's typology of *Theopoesie* consists of three different *Poesien*: firstly, the
Poesie des Lobs, 'poetics of praise', which includes all glorifications of a higher
power, ranging from seemingly factual narratives like the first chapters of Gen-
esis to obvious panegyrics;[70] secondly, the *Poesie der Geduld*, 'poetics of pa-
tience', which focuses on enduring hardship (as in the biblical book of Job) and,
by extension, the surrender to a higher power (such as in martyrologies), and
enabling the 'poetics of recovery' (*Poesie der Wiederherstellung*);[71] thirdly, the
Poesien der Übertreibung, 'poetics of exaggeration', which include representa-
tions of any mystical, revelatory or in another way transgressive experience, but
also the exaltation of death and suffering.[72] Despite the fact that Sloterdijk is
not a scholar of religion and doesn't really participate in the discussion about
the nature of what we call 'religion', his assessment of religion as a 'literary
product' is really helpful for our understanding of texts that do not necessarily
appear as religious themselves, but nevertheless somehow tie into religion, as is
the case with many texts from (late) antiquity.[73]

In contrast to influential scholars of religion from the past decades, like
McGuire and Nongbri, both Rüpke and Sloterdijk firmly stand in the German
scholarly tradition of *Kulturelles Gedächtnis*, in which religion functions as a
medium of memory, and thus has strong cultural implications. Their ideas are
very much indebted to Jan and Aleida Assmann's theory of cultural memory.[74]
Although memory theorist Astrid Erll considers religion and literature to be
two separate *media* of memory, Sloterdijk's *Theopoesie*, like Stroumsa's ideas
about the scriptural galaxy of late antiquity, stresses the similarity between and
inseparability of religion and literature as entangled *media* of memory, showing
that religion is itself, to a large extent, literature, and the other way around.[75]
Seen from the perspective of cultural memory, religion is not only an anthro-
pological category that is transferred from our modern reality to antiquity, but
also a socio-cultural phenomenon that leaves its traces in literary and material
culture and as such can show us the transformations of memory over time.

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[69] Sloterdijk 2020: 336.

[70] Sloterdijk 2020: 183-197.

[71] Sloterdijk 2020: 198-219.

[72] Sloterdijk 2020: 220-258.

[73] Cf. Hunt 2018, esp. 15.

[74] Assmann 1992: 15-160 and Erll 2017: 24-30

[75] Cf. Erll 2017: 167-190.

Through the way in which religion and literature (and thus *Theopoesie*) deal with history, memory cultures (*Erinnerungskulturen*) are established, and by studying past societies' *Theopoesie*, we can get a glimpse of how they constructed their respective pasts, how they made sense of their place in the world.

1.4 · Scope, aims and structure of this thesis

This thesis will examine the literary (after)life of Quintus Aurelius Symmachus in the light of the discussions about the nature of 'religion' in late antiquity mentioned in the two previous sections. Within the scope of this thesis it is impossible to present an extensive treatment of this subject. As mentioned before, I will limit myself to analyses of a number of specific texts closely connected to the Roman senator Symmachus and the debate that followed after his petition requesting the return of the Altar of Victory to the Curia. In the following chapters, I will treat the three (sets) of texts announced at the end of section 1.2 in chronological order. Chapter 2 will be concerned with Symmachus' third *Relatio* and Ambrose's *Epistulae* 17 & 18, in the light of the question of religious identity and (self-)identification. Chapter 3 and 4 will both deal with the memory of 'paganism' in the early fifth century. Chapter 3 is devoted to an analysis of *Contra Symmachum*, probably Prudentius' least studied poem. In this apologetic didactic, Prudentius develops a Christian discourse of 'paganism', partly through a refutation of the arguments Symmachus brought forth in *Relat.* 3. Chapter 4 will scratch the surface of a very large work that since the last decade is receiving the attention it deserves: Macrobius' *Saturnalia*. Scholars are tearing Macrobius apart between the camps of 'paganism' and Christianity, but a necessarily brief analysis of some of the work's many aspects shows that the profound ambivalence of the *Saturnalia*'s nature call for a much more nuanced assessment. Macrobius leaves Symmachus, one of the dialogue's principal interlocutors, dangling in a wide web of antiquarian knowledge. The conclusion will try to combine the loose ends created in the preceding chapters and provide an answer – albeit not a final one – to the questions about the image of Symmachus asked at the beginning of this chapter.

Looking at the same stars[76]

The quest for the religious identity of Symmachus and Ambrose

> Das kurze, äußerlich geringfügige Geschehen um den Victoria-Altar in Rom hat indes die Besonderheit, daß dort zwei bedeutende Repräsentanten der beiden Lager aufeinander prallten: Symmachus und Ambrosius, der eine Stadtpräfekt von Rom, der andere Bischof von Mailand. Sie waren beide große Redner, und sie kämpften mit vollem Einsatz ihrer Wortgewalt; so gewann die Auseinandersetzung die Kraft eines Symbols für das Ringen der beiden Geistesmächte, der heidnischen Tradition und des christlichen Glaubens.
>
> Manfred Fuhrmann, *Rom in der Spätantike*[77]

In modern assessments of the removal of the Altar of Victory and the debate it sparked, the assumption that both protagonists – Symmachus and Ambrose – acted on the basis of strong, personal convictions is omnipresent.[78] In the light of secularisation processes in 19th- and 20th-century academia, it might not be surprising that authors generally show a certain degree of sympathy towards the traditional polytheist side of the conflict, as does Manfred Fuhrmann when contrasting "heidnische Tradition" and "christlicher Glaube". As a result of this, Symmachus' *Relatio* 3, and therefore also Ambrose's *Epistulae* 17 and 18, are treated as if they were religious manifestoes.[79] The centrality of the debate around the removal of the Altar of Victory in the traditional narrative about late antique religion thus causes assessments of later texts, such as Prudentius' *Contra Symmachum* and Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, to be read in the light of Symmachus' and Ambrose's supposed religious convictions. Before turning to the

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[76] The basis for this chapter was laid in a paper I wrote for the course 'Historical Methods for the Study of Early Christianity' under supervision of prof. dr. Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta, at the University of Groningen.

[77] Fuhrmann 1994: 59.

[78] E.g. Seeck 1913: 195-199; Sheridan 1966; Klein 1971; Wytzes 1977; Fuhrmann 1994: 59-80; Gerbrandy 2007: 402-409; Mitchell 2016; Roeck 2017: 84-86.

[79] Fuhrmann 1994: 59-80; Gerbrandy 2007: 402-409; Mitchell 2016: 202-237.

texts Prudentius and Macrobius wrote twenty to fifty years after the debate, it is therefore important to shed some light on the texts that not only seem to reflect an ancient debate, but thoroughly influence our modern take on what might have happened in 384.

The main question of this chapter is that of religious identity. As Thomas Jürgasch has made clear in his 2015 chapter on the subject, dividing late antique society into a traditional polytheist and a Christian entity confuses the literary construct of 'paganism' with an ancient reality in which these entities were not as clear-cut as in the texts that emerged from this reality.[80] However, these texts, in turn, shaped social realities and "only after 'realizing' that they are in fact pagans, in the sense of 'non-Christians', that non-Christian authors from the fourth century onward actually started to speak of themselves as 'pagans'".[81] In the case of Symmachus, Jillian Mitchell has tried to argue – in a somewhat circular way – that the Roman senator was self-consciously 'pagan':

> [T]he passion Symmachus displays in *Relatio* 3 shows a man prepared to defend his religious beliefs. No-one after all queries the religious convictions of Ambrose, so why then should those of Symmachus be doubted and even disparaged? This last position owes a lot I would argue to the influence Christianity still has on Western scholarship. The fact that Symmachus tried to reverse the declining fortunes of paganism by writing this *Relatio* proves his religious conviction. It would have been so much easier to have done nothing.[82]

Beyond doubt, Mitchell is right about the influence of Christianity. But is the lack of studies questioning Ambrose's religious convictions sufficient to take those that have been attributed to Symmachus for granted? Is Symmachus in his third *Relatio* indeed self-identifying as 'pagan'? How does Ambrose actually identify himself in *Ep.* 17 and how does he react to Symmachus' text in *Ep.* 18? In these cases, we should be careful not to "conceptualize individuals' religions as little versions of some institutional model", as Meredith McGuire writes.[83] In turn, individual expressions about religion cannot be taken as representing the religious identity of a larger group or entity, as Rebillard and Rüpke make clear, even though some, especially Christian authors were, both by their contemporaries and by later generations, considered to be 'orthodox'.[84] In this

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[80] Jürgasch 2015: 135-136.
[81] Jürgasch 2015: 136.
[82] Mitchell 2016: 236.
[83] McGuire 2008: 185.
[84] Rébillard & Rüpke 2015: 3-6; Ehrman 2003: 4-5, 91-157.

chapter, I will therefore try to answer these questions by reviewing Symmachus' *Relatio* 3 and Ambrose's *Epistulae* 17 and 18 in the light of the religion-related caveats I presented in the second and third sections of the previous chapter. The three texts will be briefly discussed, and special attention will be given to any elements in the letters that might point towards religious self-identification.

2.1 · Religion, philosophy and politics (Symm. *Relat.* 3)

Symmachus' third *Relatio* and Ambrose's 17th *Epistula* were written independently from each other, as Ambrose did not yet get hold of a copy of Symmachus' text when he wrote his letter.[85] These two letters would thus be the most likely candidates for any 'religious manifesto'. Both texts were written in the period when Symmachus was *praefectus urbi* (between July 384 and January 385); neither Symm. *Relat.* 3 nor Ambr. *Ep.* 17 carries an exact date, but they must both have been written in the summer of 384.[86]

Repetimus igitur religionum statum, qui rei publicae diu profuit, "Therefore we ask again for the religious situation that has long been beneficial to the state."[87] This short sentence is without doubt the core message of Symmachus' third *Relatio*. In twenty short paragraphs, addressed to "the lords emperors, the illustrious victors and triumphers Valentinianus, Theodosius and Arcadius, ever august" (*domini imperatores Valentiniane, Theodosi et Arcadi incliti victores ac triumphatores semper augusti*, 1), Symmachus presents the presence of the Altar of Victory in the Roman Curia as a symbol for this *religionum status*, in the meantime referring to other cuts in the state sponsoring of polytheist religious organisations. The author moves back and forth between the concrete case of the removal of the altar and the more abstract restauration of the *religionum status*, in a powerful piece of rhetoric interspersed with Neoplatonic *sententiae*.[88]

The *Relatio* starts with a short introduction (1-2), a *captatio benevolentiae* directed towards the emperors, that leads up to the request for the restauration of the *religionum status* in 3. Symmachus' request is grounded in a traditionalist ideology of *mos maiorum*, as already becomes clear at the end of 2, in the sentence before the request quoted above: *[Fama] tunc maior est, cum vobis contra*

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[85] Ambr. *Ep.* 17.13.

[86] Sogno 2008: 31-58; Mitchell 2016: 203-209.

[87] Symm. *Relat* 3.3.

[88] Fuhrmann 1994: 70-77.

morem parentum intellegitis nil licere, "[Your fame] is even greater if you under-
stand that you are not allowed to do anything that is against the customs of our
ancestors."[89] Symmachus could build on a long range of earlier authors like
Cicero and Livy referring to the *mos maiorum* in cases where a definitive answer
was needed to settle religious uncertainties, but the *mos maiorum* is not his only
pet peeve.[90] In parallel with the concept of *mos maiorum* Symmachus presents
the other fundamental concept of Romanness: the *res publica*.[91] By starting and
ending with the good name of the emperors (1-2 and 20), the two concepts of
mos maiorum and *res publica* are framed as inherently linked to imperial power.[92]
In the middle part of the *Relatio*, one can distinguish two parts in Symmachus'
argumentation, the first focusing on *mos maiorum* (3-8), and the second, pre-
sented as a speech by the personified city of Rome, focusing on *res publica* (9-
19).[93]

Symmachus is actually quite nuanced, if not plainly vague about his concep-
tion of any suprahuman actors. In fact, his treatment of the divine is always
related to humans' perception of it, something which probably caused this text's
popularity from the Enlightenment onwards. In the first part of his *Relatio*,
Symmachus explains that the figure of Victoria is both *numen*, 'divine author-
ity', and *nomen,* 'name': should the emperors not accept the *numen*, they should
at least be respectful to the *nomen*, as whatever power one assumes behind Vic-
toria, "Your Eternity owes her a lot, and will owe her even more" (*Multa Vic-
toriae debet aeternitas vestra et adhuc plura debebit*, 3). The equation of *numen*
and *nomen* in 3 clears the ground for Symmachus' *mos maiorum* argument: as
we have worshipped Victoria for so long, why shouldn't we continue worship-
ping her, be it as *numen* or as *nomen*? The author develops this argument by
pointing out that acting against the *consuetudo* of the Roman senators will not
only result in a bad reputation for the emperors, but it will also undermine their
authority: removing the Altar of Victory means removing the place in the Curia
that is traditionally linked to swearing an oath ("What form of worship will
scare a villainous mind from committing perjury?", *Qua religione mens falsa*

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[89] Sogno 2006: 44-45.
[90] Kierfeld 2000.
[91] Symm. *Relat.* 3.3; cf. Rüpke 2016: e.g. 127-131.
[92] The idea of an imperial framing of *res publica* and *mos maiorum* was suggested to me by
my supervisor, Christoph Pieper.
[93] My division differs considerably from the one given by Klein 1972: 31-33.

terrebitur, ne in testimoniis mentiatur, 5).[94] Symmachus acknowledges that Constantius had removed the altar before, but he presents this as one of the very few mistakes of an otherwise impeccable emperor who, in this case, didn't care for his reputation. The reigning emperors should learn from the negative example set by their deceased predecessor and focus on the clemency that the Christian Constantius showed towards polytheist religious organisations in general, such as the Vestal Virgins (6-7).

Symmachus finishes his *mos maiorum* argument with a passage that has been interpreted as a very personal statement on his own religious convictions, or a plea for religious tolerance from a Neoplatonic perspective.[95] This interpretation is especially based on the first sentence of 8: *Suus enim cuique mos, suus cuique ritus est*, "For everyone has their own habits, everyone has their own rites." In the remainder of 8, Symmachus combines a Neoplatonic worldview with the traditionalist ideology he has pursued in the previous paragraph. He seems to assume that a people's religious orientation (i.e. which divine beings they worship) is somehow innate, and that this innateness explains the *mos maiorum:* a group of people caring for their own *genii fatales* is like a human being caring for its own *anima*. When rational explanations are not available (*cum omnis ratio sit in operto*), one should care for the *numina* that are proven to have been effective in the past, taking into account the public, ritual side of this *mos*. The lack of agency that Symmachus in this text ascribes to these *numina* might seem odd, as it does not provide a powerful countering of Christianity, which one would expect from someone belonging to the 'camp of the pagan tradition'. It is therefore tempting to read a kind of 'agnosticism' or 'secularism' into the text, but as the following capita of Symmachus' speech will show, 'tolerance' might be the strongest term one can safely use when referring to the religious views Symmachus expresses in this text.[96]

In the following capita, Symmachus focuses on his other ideological principle, the *res publica*. This principle is represented by a personification of the city of Rome; she starts by emphasising her age and the fact that she is happy with the religious situation as it was (*Utar caerimoniis avitis*, "I will stay with the ancestral rites", 9 – the *mos maiorum* pops up again).[97] She then makes a very

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[94] This sentence from *Relat.* 3.5 clearly shows that Symmachus' *religio* has a meaning quite different from that of our word 'religion'.

[95] Fuhrmann 1994: 70-77; Gerbrandy 2007: 402-409.

[96] Cf. Sogno 2006: 49.

[97] Cf. Fuhrmann 1994: 76-77.

Neoplatonic remark, quite similar to the *suus cuique mos, suus cuique ritus* statement in 8. This is probably the most famous of all *sententiae* in the entire text; Rome doesn't really care for an opposition between polytheists and Christians since in the end, everyone has the same goal:

> *Eadem spectamus astra, commune caelum est, idem nos mundus involvit. Quid interest, qua quisque prudentia verum requirat? Uno itinere non potest perveniri ad tam grande secretum.*

> We look at the same stars, the sky is for us all, the same world surrounds us. Does it even matter, by which way of thinking one searches for the truth? It is impossible to reach such a great secret by a single approach.[98]

The fact that *Relat.* 3 displays an interesting combination of Neoplatonic and *res publica* thought has already been remarked by Fuhrmann, who asserts that the idea expressed in this *sententia* – a unity of the manifold – is actually a Neoplatonic dogma.[99] As Fuhrmann writes, this thought must have been familiar to Christian ears; Fuhrmann quotes a letter from the Arian bishop Maximus of Madaura, who writes that there is only one God, even though he is venerated in multiple appearances.[100]

The Neoplatonic thought remains in the air when Symmachus returns to its more practical implications: because of this unity of the manifold, Rome considers the confiscations and restrictions that have been applied to polytheist cultic organisations as instances of unfair greed; she warns the emperors that this behaviour will lead to the deterioration of their good reputation (11-14). Moreover, a recent and severe famine in the Mediterranean, described vividly and elaborately, demonstrates the necessity of venerating the traditional gods: there is no example of such a severe famine from times when the traditional cults were still sponsored by the state (15-17). It is thus not *sola causa religionum*, "merely the case of the religious situation", that the personified Rome – and Symmachus himself – defend, but also the state's wellbeing in general (15).[101] Capita 18 and 19 are more or less a continuation of the points on the application of confiscations and restrictions that the author brought up in 11-14, but Symmachus appears to slightly mold the legal truth here: according to Symmachus,

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[98] Symm. *Relat.* 3.10.

[99] Fuhrmann 1994: 74.

[100] Fuhrmann 1994: 76.

[101] To me, it is not entirely clear where (or maybe rather: if) Rome's speech ends and Symmachus returns to his own senatorial persona.

"since individuals constitute the state, anything that comes forth from the state becomes individual property again" (*Nam cum res publica de singulis constet, quod ab ea proficiscitur, fit rursus proprium singulorum*, 18).[102] This, however, allows the author to take away the emperor's responsibility in the state funding (*sumptum publicum*) of polytheist cults (19).

In this extended passage on the confiscation of goods and property belonging to polytheist cultic organisations, it is hard to avoid the impression that any measures taken against what was later identified as 'paganism' were in fact primarily taken to curtail the power of the senatorial elite, an idea that is also suggested in Cristiana Sogno's biography of Symmachus and in Peter Brown's *Through the Eye of a Needle*.[103] As Cristiana Sogno writes:

> [A]n attentive study of the evidence, free from the prejudice of a dichotomy between Christian and pagan senators, shows that conflict and competition among aristocrats are independent from differences of religion, and that the mentality and attitudes of the senatorial aristocracy, whether Christian or pagan, show a remarkable similarity and continuity, particularly with the old republican tradition.[104]

In the summarising conclusion of his *Relatio* (19-20), Symmachus starts by emphasising that the emperor receives invisible support (*arcana praesidia*) from all of the 'religions' (*sectae*) present in his empire – but the author cunningly remarks that the traditional cults "supplied the fortunate leader with legitimate heirs" (*qui fortunato principi legitimos suffecit heredes*, 19). In the last caput, Symmachus suggests that the emperors themselves – neither Gratian, nor Valentinian II – would not have wanted to stop state support of the polytheist cults: it is a result of bad advice (*alieni consilii*, "someone else's plan", 20)[105] and of malevolent courtiers refusing to grant access to the senatorial embassy (implied in 20, but this had already been mentioned in 1), thus returning to the theme of the emperors' good name.

Eadem spectamus astra, commune caelum est, idem nos mundus involvit. Especially this powerful *sententia* continues to linger in the mind after reading Symmachus' text. The relatively short philosophical explanation Symmachus gives for

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[102] See Klein 1972: 180 for Symmachus' molding of the legal truth.
[103] Brown 2012: 103-109.
[104] Sogno 2006: viii. Cf. Cameron 2011: 163-168.
[105] Klein 1972: 180 sees a reference to Ambrose here.

his stance towards the Altar's removal (8-10) is probably the closest we get to a 'manifesto' in *Relat.* 3. It gives the argument behind the author's plea for a *status quo*: the idea that each *secta* is useful in its own way, since in the end, the suprahuman actor, who is behind all representations of the divine, be they Christian or polytheist, is one and the same; the more ways of venerating this unknowable suprahuman actor, the better – as long as people can keep to their own 'innate' way of venerating the *numina* (8). Mitchell's statement that "Symmachus did believe, however, fundamentally that the state was protected and supported by adherence to the *sacra publica* so that if protection was to continue, the state must continue to support the old gods and their temples and priests, alongside the new religion if necessary", does not seem to take into account Symmachus' Neoplatonic ambivalence: is Symmachus' rather vague conception of any suprahuman actors proof of him being a defender of 'paganism'?[106] And how to judge Symmachus' rhetoric, would it be too relativist to read his plea as an example of Sloterdijk's "Anhänglichkeit, begleitet vom Verlangen nach Teilhabe"?[107]

It is important to draw some attention to the last part of the third *Relatio*, where Symmachus is writing about the end to the state funding of polytheist cults. Symmachus' own involvement as a priest in these cults, on the basis of his aristocratic lineage, shows that there were definitely some personal interests for the Roman senator.[108] Cutting the budgets of these cults would probably have had minor financial effects for the wealthy aristocrat, but it would have meant a dramatic ideological blow: it would undo the fundament of the *mos maiorum* ideology that Symmachus – and other members of the Roman aristocracy – defended so staunchly.[109]

2.2 · Politics and salvation (Ambr. *Ep.* 17)

To a modern reader, Symmachus' third *Relatio* might not seem very controversial, and indeed, later traditions have generally regarded this text as voicing the 'rational side' of the debate concerning the removal of the Altar of Victory.[110] That 4th- and 5th-century Christian apologists did nevertheless consider the text

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[106] Mitchell 2016: 223.

[107] Sloterdijk 2020: 336

[108] Cameron 2011: 163-168.

[109] Cf. Rebillard & Rüpke 2015 and Iara 2015.

[110] Fuhrmann 1994: 59-80; Gerbrandy 2007: 402-409.

to be potentially dangerous is shown by the three letters Ambrose wrote about it and by Prudentius' didactic epic *Contra Symmachum* (which will be treated in chapter 3). As mentioned above, Ambrose's reactions to Symmachus' third *Relatio* have thoroughly influenced later assessments of the historical circumstances of the removal of the Altar of Victory. None of these letters are directed to Symmachus, but the first two (*Ep.* 17 and 18), written in 384, are addressed to one of Symmachus' addressees, the young emperor Valentinian II, and the third (*Ep.* 57, which will not be treated in this thesis), written nine years later, is addressed to the usurping emperor Eugenius.

Ambrose's first letter (*Ep.* 17) is not really a reaction to Symmachus' *Relatio*, but rather a warning on beforehand. The letter was written before Ambrose got hold of a copy of Symmachus' third *Relatio*, as the author makes clear in 17.13. Nevertheless, Ambrose seems to suspect a 'pagan' attack to Christian institutions, as is suggested by the short statement based on Psalm 96:5a he includes in the very first caput of his letter:[111]

> *Aliter enim salus tuta esse non poterit, nisi unusquisque deum verum, hoc est, deum christianorum, a quo cuncta reguntur, veraciter colat; ipse enim solus verus est deus, qui intima mente veneretur.* Dii enim gentium daemonia*, sicut scriptura dicit.*

> For there could be no safe well-being unless everyone devoutly venerates the one true God, that is: the God of the Christians, who reigns over everything, since he himself is the sole true God, who has to be honoured by our inner soul – for "the gods of the gentiles are demons" [Ps. 96:5a], as scripture says.[112]

This statement – which, at the same time, is a clear exhortation to the young emperor – is elaborated in 17.2-3, where Ambrose suggests that any concession to non-Christians (Ambrose does not use the word *paganus* in his letters; instead, he uses *gentilis* and qualifies certain practices as *profanus*) will be interpreted as an act of apostasy, both by God and by the Christians.[113] Ambrose makes a range of different arguments against conceding to non-Christians: it is unfair to give something to people who did not spare Christians' lives in recent history (17.4); the appeal for concessions is an attempt to manipulate a young,

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[111] Ps. 95:5 in the Vulgate.

[112] Ambr. *Ep.* 17.1; the NRSV translates the Hebrew of Ps. 96:5a as follows: "For all the gods of the peoples are idols".

[113] Words like *paganus*, *profanes* and *gentilis* are all examples of 'othering' by Christians, as traditional polytheists never qualify themselves by these terms (see Cameron 2011: 14-32; Jürgasch 2015).

Christian emperor (17.6-10); the previous situation is not workable for Christian senators (17.11). But in the end, the given of the Christian God being the one true God is decisive for Ambrose's argument. This theme keeps returning, as Ambrose attributes the waiving of non-Christian priests' privileges by the deceased emperor Gratian to his firm faith (*fidei verae ratione sublata*, 17.5). Moreover, Ambrose finishes his letter by writing that it would be an insult to Valentinian's Christian brother (16), his Christian father (17) and God (18) if he would concede to the non-Christians' appeal: *peto ut id facias, quod saluti tuae apud deum intelligis profuturum*, "I ask you to do that of which you understand that it will benefit your well-being before God."[114]

It should be noted that Ambrose, in reminding the emperor that he is a good Christian and should therefore not concede to the polytheists, strongly emphasises the word *fides*. Moreover, the word *religio* does not occur quite as often in Ambrose's letters as it does in Symmachus' third *Relatio*: in contrast with 10 instances of the word *religio* in *Relat.* 3, Ambrose only has 5 in his 17th letter. The centrality of the word *fides* to Christianity (as a translation of πίστις, used most notably in the letters of Paul) has since long been an object of study for theologians and linguists: the fact that a not originally Christian word became almost intrinsically linked to Christianity has for many years been a fruitful topic.[115] Symmachus uses the word *fides* only twice, once when referring to the tradition of swearing oaths at the Altar of Victory (*illa ara fidem convenit singulorum*, "this altar fits the confidence of the ones [swearing at it]", *Relat.* 3.5), and once in the paragraph preceding Rome's speech, in combination with *religio*:

> *Iam si longa aetas auctoritatem religionibus faciat, servanda est tot saeculis fides et sequendi sunt nobis parentes, qui secuti sunt feliciter suos.*

> If a long period of time has already given authority to religious practices, we have to keep the confidence [that has been kept in them] for so many ages and follow our ancestors, who have successfully followed their ancestors.[116]

Especially in this last passage, Symmachus seems to use *fides* in its untransferred sense, that could be translated as 'confidence' or 'trust', whereas the Christian *fides* Ambrose uses applies the original signification of *fides* in a metaphorical

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[114] Ambr. *Ep.* 17.18.

[115] Morgan 2015 gives an interesting overview of the use of both πίστις and *fides*.

[116] Symm. *Relat.* 3.8.

way (i.e. that which produces trust/confidence: 'belief').[117] This reflects the tendency that Teresa Morgan clarifies in her monograph *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*: according to Morgan, the Christian interpretation of *fides* as a description of the attitude of the believer towards the divine would have been impossible in a polytheist context, since "Christian *pistis/fides* becomes increasingly distinctive: as a theological virtue, a body of doctrine, devotion seeking understanding, a personified foundation of the church, a mystery in the modern as well as the ancient sense, and a religion".[118] *Fides* occurs no less than 11 times in *Ep.* 17; the beginning of the letter programmatically summarises the place of *fides* in Ambrose's worldview:

> *Cum omnes homines, qui sub dicione Romana sunt, vobis militant, imperatoribus terrarum atque principibus, tum ipsi vos omnipotenti deo et sacrae fidei militatis.*

> Whereas all humans, who are under Roman rule, are your soldiers, dear emperors and rulers of the whole world, you are yourselves soldiers of the almighty God and of the holy faith.[119]

Ambrose firmly establishes *fides* as a primary concept to which even the highest leaders are subjec; hence he qualifies *fides* as *sacra* or *vera* several times. His repeated use of the verb *militare* might give this idea a Neoplatonic ring, as the relation between the emperor and his subjects could be seen as an emanation of the relation between God and the emperor.[120]

In contrast to Symmachus' rather undefined mentioning of *tam grande secretum*, Ambrose adds a crucial Christian element to the discourse about the supranatural: scripture. For Ambrose, scripture is the pivotal point between the physical world and the supranatural: through scripture, one can discern what exactly is *vera fides*, as is implied by a phrase like *sicut scriptura dicit*, "as scripture says", at the end of *Ep.* 17.1. The centrality of scripture is not an invention of Ambrose himself but rather a trait of (late) ancient religious and literary culture, as was already noted by Wilfred Cantwell Smith in his 1993 study *What Is Scripture?* and by Jan Assmann.[121] Guy Stroumsa expands on this centrality of scripture by combining Assmann's theories of cultural memory and Smith's notion that what counts as scripture is defined by specific groups:

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[117] OLD s.v. *fides*.
[118] Morgan 2015: 514.
[119] Ambr. *Ep.* 17.1.
[120] Cf. Courcelle 1950 for Ambrose and Neoplatonic thought.
[121] Smith 1993: 1-91; Assmann 1992 and, more summarily, Assmann 1994: 411-418.

> [L]'Antiquité tardive se caractérise [...] par la prolifération de tels groupes con-
> fessionnels, qui ne se distinguent pas toujours facilement les uns des autres. Le
> moyen que trouvent ces communautés de définir leur identité, en s'opposant
> aux autres communautés, c'est de transformer en rituel le récit (le Livre) sur
> lequel elles s'appuient.[122]

As a means of identity formation, Ambrose's scripture enhances the distinction that had already been introduced by the concept of *fides*. By these two concepts, Ambrose shows a worldview that is quite different from that of Symmachus: even though the exact thoughts of the suprahuman actor that Ambrose calls *deus* might remain unknown, humans' stance towards him is perfectly clear, as *scriptura* shows that a relation of *fides* has to be maintained from the human being towards God, a point that Ambrose makes clear in 17.1 and that remains the basis of both the remainder of *Ep.* 17 and *Ep.* 18.

2.3 · Reacting to Symmachus (Ambr. *Ep.* 18)

Ambrose's second letter expands on his first one, as his refutation of Symmachus' arguments is not primarily based on his opponent's concerns but, again, on the given of the Christian God being the only true God. However, Ambrose is now trying to outdo his opponent by referring to the common ground of classical learning.

The given of the Christian God being the only true God already becomes clear in 18.2 and, very strongly, in 18.8. Here one of Symmachus' pointy *sententiae* is quoted – and refuted:

> *Uno, inquit, itinere non potest perveniri ad tam grande secretum. Quod vos ignoratis, id nos dei voce cognovimus. Et quod vos suspicionibus quaeritis, nos ex ipsa sapientia dei et veritate conpertum habemus. Non congruunt igitur vestra nobiscum.*

> Symmachus says: "It is impossible to reach such a great secret by a single approach." That which you do not know, we have come to know through the voice of God. And that for which you search through indications and suggestions, we have obtained through God's wisdom itself and through His truth. Therefore your objectives do not fit us.[123]

Ambrose's letter is based on a refutation of three of the points made in *Relat.* 3, which he singles out in 18.3: (i) Rome wants the restauration of her old cults

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[122] Stroumsa 2005: 163. Cf. Smith 1993: 212-242.

[123] Ambr. *Ep.* 18.8, cf. Symm. *Relat.* 3.10.

(*quod Roma veteres, ut ait, suos cultus requirat*); (ii) traditional polytheist priests should receive a state income; (iii) the famine Symmachus discusses in *Relat.* 3.15-17 was caused by the removal of the altar of Victory from the Curia. In his refutation of Symmachus' first point (18.4-10), Ambrose starts by listing examples of cases in which the ancient cults have not been effective, and in which the salvation of Rome should be ascribed to courage rather than intervention of the gods venerated by the *gentiles* (18.4-7). Like Symmachus, Ambrose makes a personification of Rome speak: *Quid me casso cottidie gregis innoxii sanguine cruentatis? Non in fibris pecudum, sed in viribus bellatorum tropaea victoriae sunt,* "Why do you stain me everyday with innocent animals' blood, shed in vain? The signs of victory cannot be found in the flesh of cattle, but in the courage of warriors."[124] A long list of *viri illustres* from Roman history follows. To his refutation of Symmachus' *sententia* in 18.8, however, Ambrose adds Christian apologetic arguments that don't seem to have any ground in Symmachus' letter. Firstly, Ambrose writes that the traditional polytheists practice idolatry, which is not the right way to venerate God, as some philosophers have already pointed out (18.8).[125] Secondly, the author writes that it is ridiculous not to acknowledge the death and resurrection of Christ, when you venerate statues made of stone and wood (18.9). Thirdly, returning to Symmachus' plea for keeping the old artefacts in the Curia for heritage reasons (*Relat.* 3.4), Ambrose argues that one cannot force a Christian emperor to do so, just as an *imperator gentilis* never erected an altar for Christ (*Ep.* 18.10). Ambrose closes off his first refutation by remarking that the situation Symmachus wants does not exist anymore: *ea, quae fuerunt, reposcunt,* "they demand back that which has been."

In 18.11-11a, Ambrose moves towards his refutation of the second point he announced in 18.3, the fact that traditional polytheist priests should receive a state income. By contrasting the Vestal virgins – who are praised by Symmachus because of their chastity dedicated to the *res publica* in *Relat.* 3.11 – and Christian virgins, Ambrose formulates an attack on the priests' privileges that Symmachus defends: *Prima castitatis victoria est facultatum cupiditates vincere,* "The prime victory of chastity is to overcome your desire for riches."[126] The fact that neither the numerous Christian virgins nor the many Christian priests enjoy any financial privileges, but instead suffer legal discrimination, as Ambrose contends in

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[124] Ambr. *Ep.* 18.7.

[125] This argument against non-Christians can already be found in the letters of Paul (e.g. 1 Cor. 12:2-3).

[126] Ambr. *Ep.* 18.12.

Ep. 18.12-16, is not something to be lamented, but it provides some perspective to the polytheists' cause (*Quod ego non ut querar, sed ut sciant, quid non querar, comprehendi*, "I did not mention this so that I could complain, but in order for them to know the things I don't complain about", 18.14).

The last point Ambrose mentions in 18.3 – the famine Symmachus discusses was supposedly caused by the removal of the altar of Victory from the Curia – is refuted in 18.17-21: Ambrose, extensively quoting Vergil's *Georgics* and *Aeneid*, stresses the inconsistency of a year's harvest (*Quis ergo tam novus humanis usibus, ut vices stupeat annorum?* "Well then, who is to such an extent unaccustomed to human habits that he is surprised by the alternation of the years?", 21) and concludes that this cannot be linked with certainty to the Romans venerating or not venerating their traditional deities. The fact that especially in this paragraph, Ambrose introduces some clear reminiscences of passages in Vergil's *Georgics* and *Aeneid* would be unexpected from a traditional perspective. In 18.18, when countering Symmachus' famine argument, Ambrose skillfully demonstrates his qualities as an interpreter of Vergil's *Georgics*:

> *Et unde **Graecis oracula habitae** suae **quercus**, nisi quia remedium silvestris alimoniae caelestis religionis putarunt? Talia enim suorum munera credunt deorum. Quis **Dodonaeas** arbores nisi gentium populus adoravit, cum pabulum triste sacri nemoris honore donaret? Non est verisimile quod indignantes eorum dii id pro poena intulerint quod solebant placati conferre pro munere. Quae autem aequitas ut paucis sacerdotibus dolentes **victum negatum** ipsi omnibus **denegarent**, cum inclementior esset vindicta quam culpa?*

> And because of what **did the Greeks take** their **oaks to be oracles,** if not because they considered the relief that the food from the woods offered to originate from their worship of the divine? For they believe the gifts of their gods to be of this kind. Who but the pagan folk venerated the trees **of Dodona**, when they sacrificed their miserable food with the honour of a sacred grove? It is unlikely that their gods brought as a punishment that which they were used to offer as a gift when appeased. And wouldn't it be unfair **to deny food** to everyone, if they were upset that it **had been denied** to some priests, as the punishment would be stronger than the fault?[127]

Ambrose bases his wording two passages from the *Georgics* referring to the tension between natural growth and agriculture:

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[127] Ambr. *Ep.* 18.18.

pars autem posito surgunt de semine, ut altae
castaneae, nemorumque Ioui quae maxima frondet
*aesculus, atque **habitae Grais oracula quercus.***

But in part, they rise from fallen seed, like the tall chestnut trees, the enormous italian oak from Jupiter's sacred groves that spreads its shadow, and the pedunculate oaks that **are held to be oracles by the Greeks**.[128]

prima Ceres ferro mortalis uertere terram
instituit, cum iam glandes atque arbuta sacrae
*deficerent siluae et **uictum Dodona negaret.***

Ceres was the first to instruct mortals how to turn the soil about with iron, just when the acorns and wild strawberries of the sacred forest ceased to appear and **Dodona denied its food**.[129]

As Paul Hosle remarked in a research note on this passage from Ambrose's 18th letter, Ambrose uses the Vergilian intertext to emphasise the inconsistency of Symmachus' argument: "when humans are reduced by famine to eating acorns they cannot complain of suffering and of being denied gifts, when acorns should be the very gifts! The argument as it stands rests on the premise that acorns are to be understood specifically as the gifts of the oracle. This crucial part of the argument is accounted for by allusive reference to Vergil's etymological play."[130] Thus, as Hosle concludes, in a rather conservative way, "[i]n his determination to undermine the religiosity of the pagan tradition, Ambrose subtly exploited its greatest poet".[131] But interestingly, Ambrose's peg seems to be a remark in Vergil's *Georgics* that has some subjectivity of its own: *habitae Grais oracula quercus*, "the pedunculate oaks that are held to be oracles by the Greeks." Contrary to Hosle's suggestion of Ambrose 'exploiting' Vergil, the anti-polytheist interpretation of *G.* I, 147-149 might thus be perfectly well defendable, both for Christian and for polytheist readers.[132]

From 18.22 onwards, Ambrose adds a 'bonus' to his refutation of the three points from Symmachus' *Relatio* mentioned in *Ep.* 18.3: based on the sentence *Vos defendant, a nobis colantur* ("Let them defend you and be venerated by us",

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[128] Verg. *G.* II, 14-16. All quotes from the works of Vergil have been taken from the edition by Mynors 1969.
[129] Verg. *G.* I, 147-149.
[130] Hosle 2021: 229.
[131] Hosle 2021: 230.
[132] See MacCormack 1998: 1-44 for the wide-rangingness of ancient Vergilian exegesis.

Relat. 3.19), Ambrose also turns to the theme Symmachus treats especially in the beginning and at the end of his text – the good name of the emperors. According to Ambrose, the *gentiles* will "interpret [the emperor's] tolerance as agreement" (*dissimulationem pro consensu interpretantes*, 18.22), thus giving a negative ring to the word *dissimulatio*, which Symmachus uses in a positive way, as opposite to *religio*, in *Relat.* 3.3. Symmachus' stress on the *mos maiorum* ideology is discarded by Ambrose: *Quid, quod omnia postea in melius profecerunt?* "What about the fact that everything has always advanced towards something better afterwards?", a thought he elaborates on with a lengthy excursion on creation and progress.[133] He closes off this thought by referring to the numerous *alieni ritus* Rome took over from other peoples as a counterexample of Symmachus' *mos maiorum* (18.30).

Ambrose's *peroratio* concerns the actual request made by Symmachus: the return of the altar of Victory. Ambrose emphasises that it is ideologically impossible for Christian senators to attend traditional polytheists' rituals, which would necessarily be the case if the altar were to be returned (18.30-33). The author then lists, in a fashion reminiscent of the *viri illustres* paradigm, four famous leaders that were, in his eyes, deceived by traditional polytheism – Pompey, Cyrus, Hamilcar and the emperor Julian – and adds that no one has yet been deceived by Christianity (*neminem etenim promissa nostra luserunt*, 18.38). In the final paragraph of his letter (18.39), Ambrose returns to the theme of brotherly love he ended his former letter with: again he encourages the young emperor to follow his faith (*fides*) and the decisions his brother made, taking Symmachus' *dissimulatio proximorum* (*Relat.* 3.3) as referring to Gratian's decisions. By emphasising the progress that has been made since Christianity took over the Roman Empire, Ambrose replaces the *mos maiorum* ideology that provided the backbone for Symmachus' letter with a tweaked version of the *res publica*. The two concepts are not inherently linked, and thus, *mos maiorum* can be discarded, since a Christian version of Symmachus' *res publica* can exist in a society based on moral progress and Christian *fides*.

2.4 · A 'pillarised' late antiquity

In spite of Jillian Mitchell's fear of an unfair and too Christian perspective on Symmachus as a 'pagan' senator, it is hard not to get the impression that the

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[133] Ambr. *Ep.* 18.23-29, quote from 18.23.

figure of Symmachus has a stronger appeal to modern scholarly imagination than the figure of Ambrose.[134] Symmachus is presented as a defender of the classical, 'pagan' tradition, whereas Ambrose is seen as a zealot attempting to eliminate *ratio* and replace it with *fides*, 'faith'. Yet at the same time, it is Ambrose who in his refutation of Symmachus' *Relatio* presents himself as a champion of classical tradition by quoting from Vergil's *Georgics* and *Aeneid*.[135] It has since long been noted that Ambrose often refers to texts that, in our opinion, are inextricably part of 'the classical tradition', and that even Neoplatonic thought has entered the bishop's treatises.[136] In fact, the cultural κοινή from which both Symmachus and Ambrose drew their inspiration seems to have been very much the same, and it appears as if Vergil for Ambrose had considerable authority. This shows that the supposedly different religious identities of the traditional polytheist senator and the Christian bishop are in fact rather superficial, to paraphrase Thomas Jürgasch.[137]

Thus, the question is whether the tool of 'religious identity' is really apt for studying the texts of Symmachus and Ambrose, maybe even whether it is apt for studying any texts that have gained attention in the paradigm of a 'pagan'/'Christian' dichotomy. In the end, the religious identity of Symmachus might not emerge as clearly from his 3rd *Relatio* as Mitchell would like it to. In the case of Ambrose, too, subjecting his *Epp.* 17 and 18 to closer scrutiny does not reveal the religious identity one would suspect: although Ambrose's language is firmly grounded in Christian discourse, he and Symmachus seem to share a cultural common ground that clearly implies an education in the 'classical tradition' and knowledge of Neoplatonic trends – which makes them have more in common than the traditional bipolar paradigm of 'paganism' and Christianity shows. In the context of this shared cultural common ground, Ambrose's remarkable Vergilian exegesis stands out. As mentioned before, Hosle concludes that "[i]n his determination to undermine the religiosity of the pagan tradition, Ambrose subtly exploited its greatest poet".[138] But as I suggested, this is not the right conclusion to draw from Ambrose's use of Vergil's *Georgics*. The fact that Vergil kept playing an enormously important role in Christian discourse, as Sabine MacCormack has shown by the example of Augustine,

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[134] See the introduction to this chapter.

[135] Ambr. *Ep.* 18.17-20.

[136] Courcelle 1950; cf. Wytzes 1977: 50sqq.

[137] Jürgasch 2015: 135-136.

[138] Hosle 2021: 230.

demonstrates that the corpus of his works was not merely a tool for anti-pagan rhetoric, but, in hierarchy maybe a little below the Bible, kept playing an important role as an authoritative text.[139]

From the texts discussed in this chapter it becomes clear that Fuhrmann's idea of a battle between the two *Geistesmächte* of "heidnische Tradition" and "christlicher Glaube" takes the superficial difference in religious identities to a deeper level of 'pillarisation', which probably gives a distorted impression of the way these texts would have functioned in their original environments. As an answer to the studies of Fuhrmann and Mitchell, this chapter has tried to present an exploratory analysis of tools that would work in bridging the traditional categories of 'pagan' and 'Christian' literature. Looking at the shared, classical background of authors traditionally put in different containers is one of them. The two other suggestions that were made over the course of this chapter, focusing on reading and writing practices that eventually appear to be similar 'on both sides' – such as the use of authoritative texts –, and analysing a strongly connoted term like *fides*, will be further explored in the next chapters.

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[139] MacCormack 1998.

In search of true faith

The invention of 'paganism' in Prudentius' *Contra Symmachum*

> Het lijdt geen twijfel: de mythologische verbeeldingen strooken in de periode die ze in geijkten vorm overlevert, niet meer met het bereikte geestesniveau. Nu moet dus de mythe, om als heilig element der cultuur in eere te blijven, of wel mystisch geïnterpreteerd worden, of louter als litteratuur gecultiveerd blijken. Naarmate het element geloof uit den mythe wijkt, klinkt de ludieke toon, die er van den beginne af in thuishoort, weer sterker door.

> J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens*[140]

Traditionally, Aurelius Prudentius Clemens' *Contra Symmachum* has been regarded as a work directly relevant to the debate that followed after Symmachus' petition requesting the return of the Altar of Victory to the Curia.[141] By the time Prudentius wrote his *Contra Symmachum*, however, Symmachus himself was probably dead.[142] As Herman Tränkle has shown, there are many uncertainties about the nature of the debate concerning the Altar of Victory – even whether it continued at all; as a result, the circumstances under which *Contra Symmachum*'s came into being are not entirely clear.[143] Critique of Prudentius' diptych *Contra Symmachum* is generally unfavourable. If one judges by the number of studies that have been devoted to it, *Contra Symmachum* does not count among Prudentius' most popular works, and the studies that nevertheless have the Christian apologetic poem as their subject, often describe *C.Symm.* as

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[140] Huizinga 1958: 132-133.

[141] As can be seen by the fact that both Lavarenne 1948, Cunningham 1966 and Tränkle 2008 include (parts of) Symmachus' 3rd *Relatio* in their editions of Prudentius' text. Cf. Cameron 2011: 337-340.

[142] Sogno 2006: 85; Herbert de la Portbarré-Viard 2018: 149-151.

[143] Tränkle 2008: 26-27.

'difficult' or 'enigmatic'.[144] The names tradition has attached to the poem, *Contra Symmachum* or *Contra orationem Symmachi*, might not be entirely apt, as especially the former suggests an invective against the figure of Symmachus – which is only partly the case: apart from providing a refutation of Symmachus' arguments in book II (as the latter title makes clear), *C.Symm.* is primarily a didactic epic that draws heavily on didactic epics of the Roman past. As both Emanuele Rapisarda and Philip Hardie write, four of Prudentius' works – *Apotheosis, Hamartigenia, Psychomachia* and *Contra Symmachum* – show very clear reminiscences of Lucretius' work and should thus be regarded as didactic epics in the Lucretian sense:[145] "a didactic poem with pronounced epic features."[146] And especially because Lucretius' work could be regarded as 'atheist' in the sense that the role the Roman pantheon is expected to play has been strongly reduced, a Christian author like Prudentius could find ample material in *De rerum natura* to employ for his own purposes.[147]

Characterising the work as a 'didactic epic' may help us to steer away from the need of a direct relation to specific historical circumstances, to move away from the traditional place that has been assigned to *Contra Symmachum* in the contrastive history of 'pagan' and 'Christian' literature, as a reaction to a 'pagan revival' around the year 400, since it allows us to avoid the polarity of religious identity as described in the previous chapter.[148] After some more turbulent times at the end of the 4th century, the beginning of the 5th century seems to show the first attempts of giving the Roman polytheist past a place in the history of a Christian *res publica*.[149] Alan Cameron is one of the first scholars to move away from this traditional place of *Contra Symmachum* in the contrastive history of 'pagan' and 'Christian' literature, arguing that Ambrose's refutation

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[144] E.g. Herbert de la Portbarré-Viard 2018: 150, "Le *Contra Symmachum* de Prudence est un texte dont bien des aspects restent énigmatiques" – but Lavarenne 1948: 105 writes: "Le *Contra Symmachum* est certainement le moins ennuyeux des poèmes didactiques de Prudence."

[145] Rapisarda 1950: 48 and Hardie 2020: 134.

[146] Hardie 2020: 134.

[147] Rapisarda 1950 and Hardie 2020. As a result of the 'atheising' of *De rerum natura*, the rediscovery of Lucretius has been understood as a pivotal moment in the formation of the modern world (see e.g. Greenblatt 2011).

[148] For the traditional view, see e.g. Herbert de la Portbarré-Viard 2018. Cf. the extensive and nuanced assessments in Cameron 2011: 337-349, who aims to explain the circumstances under which the poem emerged as explicitly 'post-Symmachean', and Tränkle 2008: 7-48.

[149] Cf. Cameron 2011: 33-92; Meier 2019: 39-51.

of Symmachus' arguments in *Ep.* 18 was sufficient, except for one point: "Yet there was one argument that was not so easily answered, the argument, significantly enough, with which *C.Symm.* II begins: 'who is such a friend of the barbarians that he does not need the altar of Victory?'"[150] In Cameron's assessment, *Contra Symmachum* is a text that discusses the problem of what we would call 'religion', even though it clearly polarises itself by siding with 'the Christians'. In doing so, however, it elaborates on the shared literary and cultural heritage that, below all rhetoric, still unites 'pagans' and 'Christians', as we saw in the previous chapter. By the time of *Contra Symmachum*, the process of sacralisation as described by Jörg Rüpke is well underway, and the respective group identities have become a clear means of competition.[151] Prudentius contributes to this development with his didactic epic: the author creates a new memory of 'paganism' for a largely (but apparently not solely) Christian audience. But how does Prudentius go about creating this new memory, and how does he place the figure of Symmachus within the context of the 'paganism' he creates? In this chapter, I will try to formulate an answer to this question. After an analytical summary of the entirety of *C.Symm.* and some remarks on the work's unity, I will highlight two of the work's themes that shed light on Prudentius' construction of a memory of 'paganism' around the figure of Symmachus.

3.1 · The complex nature of *Contra Symmachum*

As mentioned before, *Contra Symmachum* consists of two books that are unequal in length (book I has 657 verses, book II has 1132).[152] Both books are preceded by an introductory poem in lyrical metre based on a biblical vignette: a poem on Paul and the snake (after Acts 28:1-6) introduces book I, a poem on Peter's attempt to walk on water (after Matthew 14:22-32) introduces book II. As the refutation of Symmachus' arguments can be found in book II, and only the conclusion of book I hints at the figure of Symmachus, it is tempting to question the work's unity (as both Tränkle and Cameron do), but the two introductory poems about the 'iconic duo' Paul and Peter might suggest that at least the poem's final edition should be read as a whole.[153] Not only are Peter

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[150] Cameron 2011: 339-340.
[151] Rüpke 2016: 371-394.
[152] I use the edition of Cunningham 1966.
[153] Tränkle 2008: 44-48; Cameron 2011: 343. Charlet 2017 pleads for the work's unity.

and Paul the two main protagonists of the New Testament book of Acts, they have also been the two patron saints of the city of Rome since early Christian times, often celebrated together.[154] Although these poems may have been added to the text in a later stage, their contents show an interesting combination of biblical exegesis and allegory.[155]

Book I at times reads like a Juvenalian satire:[156] after the allegory of Paul and the snake in the firewood, the hexametric part opens with a complaint about the fact that the "ancient disease" (*antiquus morbus*, I.2) of polytheism is still thriving in Rome, despite the efforts Theodosius made to heal the city and the empire (1-8). Presented by Prudentius as the true philosopher-king, Theodosius takes the place of the Muse from ancient epic poetry (9-41). A long list of 'gods' follows, all of whom are discredited by Prudentius, because they were actually mere mortal kings, so thirsty for power and sex that they still inspired fear long after their deaths (42-196); proof for this hypothesis is given by the fact that mortals such as Augustus, Livia and Antinous were deified in early imperial times (245-277). Romans were stuck in their own *mos maiorum*, which has turned out to be a *mos tenebrosus* ("dark custom", 244): fear-induced veneration of all things occurring in nature obscured the fact that *deus Christus* was actually to be thanked for everything (215-244, 278-296). Nevertheless, it has always been clear that all things in the universe underly the power of one creator, even though people were staunchly venerating gloomy things from subterranean caverns just because their predecessors did so (297-407). When Theodosius came, he found a Rome whose head (the speech attributed to Theodosius is directed at a personification of Rome) was covered by clouds; Theodosius removes the gloominess of old religion and spreads the light of *ratio* (408-505). Theodosius succeeds in converting Rome, thus removing many Catilinas that could harm the *res publica* (529-530) and establishing an *imperium sine fine* ("empire without end", 542), which is to be more durable than that of Augustus.[157] The Roman families of old now visit the church, everyone is happy – except for a few staunch

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[154] Weren 2003.

[155] Tränkle 2008: 28-29. A short discussion of the preface to book I was given in section 1.1 of this thesis.

[156] Cf. Lavarenne 1948: 105. A thorough, yet somewhat old-fashioned analysis of the entirety of *C.Symm.* can be found in Lavarenne 1948: 90-106; a more neutral analysis is given in Tränkle 2008: 28-44; the analysis of Cameron 2011: 337-349 is very much concerned with the date and with denying the supposed 'pagan revival' Prudentius' *C.Symm.* might have reacted on.

[157] Here, Prudentius is of course referring to the famous words from Verg. *A.* I.279.

polytheists, who keep observing their gloomy customs, as is the case with Symmachus (whose name is not mentioned) (544-657).

The allegory with which book II starts, interprets the story of Peter's attempt to join Jesus walking on the stormy water of the Sea of Galilee as the attempt of Prudentius to defy the storm surge of Symmachus' *eloquium* (II.praef.58). A structured refutation of several points from *Relat.* 3 follows (*dictis dicta refellam*, "I will disprove arguments with arguments", II.4). The first point Prudentius attacks, is the idea that Victory needs a sanctuary because leaders are keen on achieving victory.[158] The refutation in vv. 17-66 – by mouth of the *fratres duces* (16-17), Theodosius' sons, the emperors Arcadius and Honorius – is threefold: (i) Victory is achieved by one's own strength (*propriis viribus*, 31), not by some goddess; (ii) God is the final arbiter; (iii) gods and goddesses (like Victory) are the product of artists' and poets' imagination, which subsequently influences rituals. This powerful triad inspires the rest of Prudentius' arguments in book II.

The second argument to be refuted is the idea that, according to Symmachus, religious practices are innate and that this explains the *mos maiorum*, which should be the benchmark for deciding in religious matters: *Suus est mos cuique genti, | per quod iter properans eat ad tam grande profundum*, "For every people has its own habits, via which way it rapidly goes towards such a deep mystery", as Prudentius paraphrases Symmachus' argument.[159] The sole answer to this is *fides*, as it provides the only fruitful way towards the divine (91-119). The author then makes God say that *fides* in him provides eternal life, which is not the case for any polytheist cults (120-160). God's promise of eternity is a precondition for morality: in the here-and-now, bad people are seldomly properly punished, but God's punishment is eternal, as is his blessing. Thus, God is the one to be venerated, not his creations (like Victory), and this should happen in a *templum mentis*, not in a physical sanctuary (161-269).[160] Does Symmachus, despite these counterarguments, still stay with his *mos pristinus* instead of accepting the *fides veri* (270-276)? Prudentius argues that development is natural, and that innovation is therefore inherent to *mos maiorum* (277-334): *Roma antiqua sibi non constat*, "ancient Rome was not consistent with itself" (303). For those who have *cura vetusti | moris*, "care for the ancient *mos*", there

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[158] Prudentius keeps quiet about the difference Symmachus makes between *numen* and *nomen* in *Relat.* 3.3 (see section 2.1).

[159] Prud. *C.Symm.* II.89-90. Cf. Symm. *Relat.* 3.8.

[160] The idea of a 'mental temple' is especially present in the Gospel according to John.

is the Old Testament, showing that God has been there for a long time, and even the earliest Romans were happy with only a few gods: it was only later victories – achieved *propriis viribus* – that enlarged the number of gods venerated. Thus Symmachus' *mos maiorum* is not even that old (335-369). Prudentius limits innateness to the *genii* worshiped by a certain group of people, which Symmachus compared to the workings of the human *anima* in *Relat.* 3.8. Prudentius says that he doesn't understand how a *genius loci* can be compared to the human *anima*, but that Symmachus seems to forget that it is the humans, not some *genius*, who make a community thrive:

> *Romam dico uiros quos mentem credimus urbis,*
> *non genium, cuius frustra simulatur imago.*

> I call 'Rome' the people whom we consider to be the mind of the city, not a *genius* whose image is made in vain.[161]

Not even the other gods were behind the prosperity Rome came to enjoy: in many situations, gods stopped caring for the city they were associated with (488-577). In fact, it was the one God's plan of salvation that granted Rome its victories, in order to spread Christianity (578-633). The old and feeble Rome Symmachus brings to the stage is misleading: the fact that Rome is now a Christian empire ushers in a new *pax Romana* (*pax et Roma tenent*, 636), as Rome herself makes clear in a speech Prudentius attributes to her (634-768): *Christus* and *mera virtus* caused her to achieve victory (745).[162]

The third argument Prudentius counters is the one from Symmachus' *eadem spectamus astra* sententia.[163] Although Prudentius acknowledges that everyone lives in the same world, he states that people differ according to merit. Thus, Symmachus' idea that "it is impossible to reach such a great secret by a single approach" is nonsense: by contrast of the many dark, misleading paths of polytheism, the *simplex via* of Christianity provides light (773-909).

The fourth and last argument Prudentius refutes had already been countered by Ambrose: the ban on polytheist worship caused a widespread famine. Like Ambrose (*Ep.* 18.17-21), Prudentius denies the severity of the famine by referring to the fact that people did not have to eat acorns (946). A bad harvest

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[161] Prud. *C.Symm.* II.443-444.

[162] Prudentius refers to the Battle of Pollentia (402) as the final victory of the new, peaceful and Christian Rome. Cf. Tränkle 2008: 40-42.

[163] Symm. *Relat.* 3.10. See section 2.1.

occurs every now and then – and if there really was a bad harvest, why didn't it affect only Christians (910-1019)? Prudentius here mentions the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:3-9) in order to turn the situation around: polytheists might have had a bad harvest because they weren't Christians (1020-1063). The epilogue, loosely connected to Symmachus' famine argument, deals with the Vestal Virgins, apparently still operating at the time when *C.Symm.* was written: why are they expected to watch human sacrifices in the amphitheatre (1064-1113)? The work ends with an appeal to the reigning emperors: only a ban on gladiator games will complete the Christianisation of Rome (1114-1132).

3.2 · From gut feelings to rational faith

In spite of *Contra Symmachum*'s apparent lack of unity, I think there is a major theme that recurs in both books: the idea of progress from fear-induced worship, on the basis of *mos maiorum*, of things one doesn't understand to a rational *fides veri*, a theme that has not sufficiently been discussed in secondary literature. The refutation of Symmachus' *mos maiorum* argument in II.67-768 as an unfounded religious gut feeling may be seen as mirroring the entirety of book I, taking into account that both books culminate in a long speech: Theodosius addresses Rome in I.408-505 and Rome reflects on her own situation in II.634-768. The stark and omnipresent contrast between the darkness of polytheism and the light of Christianity is the most obvious way by which Prudentius tries to discredit his polytheist opponents, but despite his strong apologetic stance, many of his ideas about 'paganism' seem to have entered our collective memory, not in the least through Gibbon's extensive use of Prudentius' text.[164] In this section and the following one, I will therefore comment on some passages that shed light on Prudentius' construct of 'paganism'.

The idea that the move from paganism to Christianity entails a kind of progress can already be found in Ambrose's rejection of Symmachus' *mos maiorum* argument: *Quid, quod omnia postea in melius profecerunt?* "What about the fact that everything has always advanced towards something better afterwards?"[165] Prudentius expands on this thought by 'anchoring' the innovation of Christianity in a narrative of change: he argues that true *mos maiorum* would mean rejecting all social achievements, and returning to the pre-agricultural phase of

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[164] Gibbon 1781: 69-103. An interesting study that deals with the twisted origins and *Nachleben* of this idea is Blom 2022, see esp. pp. 92-105.
[165] Ambr. *Ep.* 18.23.

mankind Vergil describes in the first book of his *Georgics*, and to which Ambrose had referred in his rejection of Symmachus' famine argument:

> *quid sibi aratra uolunt, quid cura superflua rastri?*
> *ilignis melius saturatur glandibus aluus.*

> What does a plough even want, what about the unnecessary care for the rake? Your stomach can better be filled with acorns from oak-trees.[166]

With this pun on Ambrose's interpretation of Symmachus' famine argument, Prudentius makes clear that even *mos maiorum* is not resistant to change, as human life, enhanced by Christianity has become as much *mos maiorum* as the religious practices Symmachus advocates, since descendants of Cato, Evander and the Gracchi now visit the church (I.544-568).

As was the case in the letters of Ambrose, the term *fides* plays an important role in this discourse. For Prudentius, *fides* is the concept *par excellence* that embodies this necessary progress, as the author makes clear in the first words of his long refutation of Symmachus' *mos maiorum*:

> *His tam magnificis tantaque fluentibus arte*
> *respondet uel sola **Fides** doctissima primum*
> *pandere uestibulum uerae ad penetralia sectae.*

> On these magnificent words, flowing with such skill, only most learned **faith** itself can first open an entry towards the inner sanctuary of the right way of believing.[167]

Like Ambrose, Prudentius uses *fides* – notably qualified as *doctissima* here – to describe the relationship between humans and the one true God of Christianity, and as a term that cannot be applied to the gods of polytheism, as they are no true gods (I.42-196) and have no universal claim (II.120-160).[168] However, in his analysis of the sacred spaces of polytheism, Prudentius does apply the term *fides* to the relation between humans and their polytheist pantheon a few times. Especially the first book reads like a 'social archaeology' of the term.[169] The first time the reader encounters the word *fides* in the hexametric text, Prudentius

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[166] Prud. *C.Symm.* II.283-284. Cf. Verg. *G.* I.147-149, see section 2.2.

[167] Prud. *C.Symm.* II.91-93. The capital F in *Fides* is in Cunningham's edition.

[168] Cf. the battle between *Fides* and *veterum Cultura deorum* in Prud. *Psych.* 21-39 (see Frisch 2020: 177-198).

[169] For the sacred spaces of Roman religion, cf. Rüpke 2016: 166-302.

has just explained that the figures traditionally venerated as gods were in fact just wicked kings:

> *Nam quid rusticitas non crederet indomitorum*
> *stulta uirum, pecudes inter ritusque ferinos*
> *dedere sueta animum diae rationis egenum?*
> *In quamcumque **fidem** nebulonis callida traxit*
> *nequitia, infelix facilem gens praebuit aurem.*

> For what wouldn't the stupid rudeness of untamed men believe? Living among cattle and feral habits, these rude men were used to yielding their minds, void of divine reason. Cunning idleness lured them into placing every possible **faith** in a scoundrel – the poor people lent their simple ear.[170]

As Prudentius writes, the absence of *dia ratio* leads the uncultivated Romans to use the instrument of *fides* wrongly.[171] The Romans' fear of everything and the fact that they simply continue the practices of their predecessors cause later generations to apply the same *fides* – in a similarly wrong way – to statues. In a Juvenal-like scene, Prudentius imagines a Roman boy growing up amidst fear-induced, superstitious polytheist practices:

> *Iamque domo egrediens, ut publica festa diesque*
> *et ludos stupuit celsa et Capitolia uidit*
> *laurigerosque deum templis adstare ministros*
> *ac sacram resonare uiam mugitibus ante*
> *delubrum Romae [...]*
> *uera ratus quaecumque senatu auctore probantur,*
> *contulit ad simulacra **fidem** dominosque putauit*
> *aetheris horrifico qui stant ex ordine uultu.*

> When [this boy] leaves his home, as soon as he admires the public festivals, the holidays and the games, as soon as he sees the high Capitol, and sees that laurel-bearing officials take their service at the temples of the gods, as soon as he sees that noise reverberates throughout the Via Sacra in front of the sanctuary of Rome [...], then he deems true everything that is recognised under the

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[170] Prud. *C.Symm.* I.79-83.
[171] Cf. Prud. *C.Symm.* II.91-93, quoted above, where *fides* is presented as the sole instrument to reach the divine. Cf. Tränkle 2008: 68.

command of the senate, he turns his **faith** toward the statues and considers the sirs that stand in a row with their dreadful faces to be the lords of heaven.[172]

The idea that statues were thought to be gods themselves can already be found in the letters of Paul.[173] Prudentius here adds the suggestion that the statues inspired some kind of fear in the polytheist worshipers. As already became clear in the summary analysis in section 3.1, fear-inducedness is one of the two main characteristics Prudentius ascribes to 'paganism'. The other main characteristic, darkness, is elaborated on in another scene that might remind the reader of Juvenal's *Satires*:

> *Anne **fides** dubia est tibi sub caligine caeca*
> *esse deum quem tu tacitis rimeris in umbris?*
> *Ecce, deos manes cur infitiaris haberi?*
> *Ipsa patrum monumenta probant: DIS MANIBUS illic*
> *marmora secta lego, quacumque Latina uetustos*
> *custodit cineres densisque Salaria bustis.*

> Isn't it a dubious **faith**, that in the deepest darkness [of the underworld] there exists a god whom you seek in the silent shadows? Look, why then do you deny that people consider the Manes to be gods? The monuments of our fathers deliver proof: there, I read *Dis Manibus* inscribed in marble, wherever the Via Latina watches the old ashes and the Via Salaria watches over tombs close to each other.[174]

Equally unfortunate is the application of the term *fides* to another aspect of traditional Roman polytheism, the belief in divine 'spirits' from the underworld. The scene serves as a peg for the speech of Theodosius, in which the head of the personified city and empire of Rome is described as "barred by clouds floating close-by" (*nebulis propter uolitantibus obsitus*, I.419). After the dark scene in I.297-407, Theodosius is the true bringer of light, who finally makes everyone apply *fides* in the right way, as their faith in Christ. After his long speech, the Roman Empire finally understands how to relate to the divine:

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[172] Prud. *C.Symm.* I.215-219 [...] 223-225. Many passages from Juvenal's satires would provide apt material for a comparison, but cf. e.g. the famous beginning of Juv. *Sat.* I.1-30.

[173] 1 Cor. 8-11, esp. 8:4 and 10:14; cf. Acts 17:16-32.

[174] Prud. *C.Symm.* I.400-405

Ne tanto imperio maneat pietate repulsa
crimen saeuitiae, monstrata piacula quaerit
*inque **fidem** Christi pleno transfertur amore.*

In order that no cruel crime should be attached to so great an empire if [Rome] rejected [Gods'] mercy, [Rome] sought the proper way of penance, and devoted itself lovingly to **faith** in Christ.[175]

By saying that *fides* had not been understood and applied correctly by the Roman predecessors, who instead solely relied on the irrational gut feelings of their ancestors, Prudentius embraces Ambrose's idea of progress (*omnia postea in melius proficere*).[176] Theodosius is presented as the better version of all famous Romans of the past, on account of the fact that he, apparently as the first Roman leader in history, understands rational faith.[177] Although it would be in line with expectations, especially after reading *C.Symm.* II.277-344, this progress from gut feelings to rational faith does not entail an outright rejection of anything 'old'. Prudentius does seem to aim for a certain degree of reconciliation between the old and the new.

3.3 · Reconciling the old and the new

Prudentius' ridiculing of the idea of *mos maiorum* as Symmachus advocates it (at least in Prudentius' own interpretation) in *C.Symm.* II.277-344 has a clear apologetic aim, as became clear from in the previous section. In addition to this, however, the author makes an attempt to give the polytheism of the past a place in the new Christian *res publica*. It is clear from every letter in *C.Symm.* that Prudentius considers polytheism to be the wrong way of venerating the divine.[178] That the pagan past nevertheless still has a place in salvation history, becomes clear at the end of *C.Symm.* I. Here Prudentius compares Theodosius' actions with Cicero's:

[…] nec tantum Arpinas consul tibi, Roma, medellae
contulit extincto iusta inter uincla Cethego,
quantum praecipuus nostro sub tempore princeps
prospexit tribuitque boni. Multos Catilinas

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[175] Prud. *C.Symm.* I.521-523.
[176] Ambr. *Ep.* 18.23.
[177] Prud. *C.Symm.* I.415-505.
[178] Cf. especially Prud. *C.Symm.* II.91-119.

ille domo pepulit, non saeua incendia tectis
aut sicas patribus sed tartara nigra animabus
internoque hominum statui tormenta parantes.

[...] neither did the consul from Arpinum (after Cethegus, who rightly was in chains, had been killed) contribute something so essential, as the good thing the prime leader in our times provided and bestowed upon us. He expelled many Catilinas from his own home – not those that cause wild fires in buildings or prepare daggers to hit senators, but those that open the dark Tartarus for our souls and cause anguish to be established in humans' hearts.[179]

Like the Catilinarian conspiracy, the polytheist sentiments referred to in I.1-8 were threatening the *res publica* – maybe not visibly, but certainly invisibly in people's souls. Prudentius thus creates a parallel between the new conversion, brought about by Theodosius' measurements, and the Catilinarian conspiracy, an event that was remembered as a constitutive moment for the history of the Roman *res publica*.[180] Moreover, by name-dropping Cato (545), Evander (550), Brutus (556) and the Gracchi (561), in a very small catalogue of *viri illustres*, Prudentius creates an association between the progress brought about by Theodosius' implementation of correct *fides* and the famous names of virtuous Romans from the pre-Christian past.

What exactly is Prudentius doing here, is he beating the enemy with their own weapons and exploiting paganism's greatest asset, to paraphrase Hosle?[181] There might be more going on here, as Prudentius suggests that these names of old now comply with the new belief, a suggestion he also makes when addressing the material heritage of polytheism. In I.224-225 we read about *dominos ... horrifico qui stant ex ordine uultu*, "the sirs that stand in a row with their dreadful faces", clearly referring to a row of statues of deities that are – at least according to the author – intended to inspire fear. The statues return in Theodosius' speech, later in *C.Symm.* I:

Marmora tabenti respergine tincta lauate,
o proceres. Liceat statuas consistere puras,
artificium magnorum opera.

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[179] Prud. *C.Symm.* I.526-531.
[180] Jansen 2022, esp. 21-39.
[181] Hosle 2021.

> Dear leaders, wash the marbles that are soaked in dripping defilement. Let the statues stand free from dirt, as the works of great artists.[182]

This is conspicuously similar to what Symmachus wrote in his third *Relatio* concerning the Altar and/or statue of Victory (3.4), where the Roman senator argued that the polytheist equipment could remain in the Curia for heritage reasons (*ornamentis saltem curiae decuit abstineri*, "at least one shouldn't have touched the furnishings of the Curia"). Hermann Tränkle suggests that Prudentius' representation of Theodosius' opinion is in line with what the *Codex Theodosianum* declares about polytheist statues – but especially the qualification of these statues as *artificium magnorum opera* shows a stance quite different from the traditional iconoclast mentality that is traditionally attributed to late antique Christianity.[183] The name-dropping of Cato, Evander, Brutus and the Gracchi might serve a similar cause: it is not radical eradication of the 'pagan' past that Prudentius wants to achieve, he rather tries to incorporate the polytheist past, which at the time of writing was assumedly still visible everywhere, into a new Christian narrative.

A final example of the reconciliation of polytheism and Christianity in Prudentius' *Contra Symmachum* is something that has been noted in section 2, concerning the 18th letter of Ambrose: the use of Vergil. Paul Hosle suggested that "[i]n his determination to undermine the religiosity of the pagan tradition, Ambrose subtly exploited its greatest poet".[184] Although Prudentius does not directly reflect on his use of Vergil, an interesting poetological remark, reminiscent of the beginning of Horace's *Ars poetica*, can be found at the beginning of *C.Symm.* II:[185]

> *Aut uos pictorum docuit manus adsimulatis*
> *iure poetarum numen conponere monstris;*
> *aut lepida ex uestro sumpsit pictura sacello*
> *quod uariis imitata notis ceraque liquenti*
> *duceret in faciem sociique poematis arte*
> *aucta coloratis auderet ludere fucis.*
> *Sic unum sectantur iter, sic inania rerum*
> *somnia concipiunt et Homerus et acer Apelles*

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[182] Prud. *C.Symm.* I.501-503.
[183] Tränkle 2008: 145 n. 97. Cf. Nixey 2017.
[184] Hosle 2021: 230.
[185] Tränkle 2008: 166-168 n. 136-139.

et Numa, cognatumque uolunt pigmenta Camenae
idola.

Either the painters' hand taught you to compose divine authority out of monsters that were invented with the poets' permission – or a fine painting took something from your private sanctuary, portrayed with various distinctive features in liquid wax, and turned it into a figure, and by the increasing skill of poetry, painting's ally, it ventured to play with this deceit. Thus Homer, the clever Apelles and Numa followed one and the same way, thus they conceived worthless dreams, and the Muses, pigments and images want something similar.[186]

This adds an element to Prudentius' theory about the emergence of the polytheist pantheon that had not explicitly been mentioned in book I: apart from fear, it was the painters and the poets (as in Sloterdijk's *Theopoesie*) that inspired polytheism – and in the light of the passages about statues discussed above, we might add the sculptors. On the basis of the positive qualification of polytheist sculptures as *artificium magnorum opera*, I think there is a good reason to doubt whether this is an outright rejection of art and poetry. Moreover, like Ambrose, Prudentius often refers to passages from Vergil's works, assumedly not just in order to discredit "paganism's greatest poet", but also for more subtle reasons. A very interesting example can be found in Prudentius' use of the Vergilian phrase *vana superstitio*, that originates from the eighth book of the *Aeneid*, at the beginning of Evander's long speech on the history of Hercules and Cacus and the way Hercules' victory over Cacus is remembered in Evander's days:

non haec sollemnia nobis,
has ex more dapes, hanc tanti numinis aram
uana superstitio *ueterumque ignara deorum*
imposuit: saeuis, hospes Troiane, periclis
seruati facimus meritosque nouamus honores.

These ceremonies, these customary banquets, this altar of such a great divinity were not imposed upon us by groundless superstition, unaware of the ancient deities: dear Trojan guest, we do this because we were saved from severe dangers, and we renew the respect that is due.[187]

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[186] Prud. *C.Symm.* II.39-48. Cf. Hor. *A.P.* 1-13.
[187] Verg. *A.* VIII.185-189.

R.D. Williams reads a political connotation in the Vergilian original, related to politico-religious change during the reign of Augustus and the suggestion of the cults installed or revived by Augustus being *vanus*, "empty"; Evander's making sense of what he is doing serves as a refutation of this suggestion.[188] Prudentius in turn uses the same expression in *C.Symm.* I, just after he explained his hypothesis that the gods of previous generations were actually mere mortal kings, who still inspired fear long after their deaths:

> *Ut semel obsedit gentilia pectora patrum*
> **uana superstitio,** *non interrupta cucurrit*
> *aetatum per mille gradus.*
>
> As soon as groundless superstition had occupied the senators' hearts, it did not cease to run through the generations over a thousand steps.[189]

After this, Prudentius draws a sharp distinction between *usus*, that in this case could be translated as "ritual" or "practice", closely related to *mos maiorum*, and *ratio*, which the ancient polytheists did not achieve (199-214). As an illustration of this, Prudentius draws the scene of the Roman boy growing up amidst fear-induced, superstitious polytheist practices, which was quoted in the previous section. But after that, Prudentius writes that on the basis of *usus* and *mos maiorum*, Augustus and Livia were deified (245-270): the Vergilian *vana superstitio* is thus reinterpreted as also referring to the religious practices of Vergil's own political environment. Through this, Vergil seems to be disconnected from his original cultural context, which would also explain the many other direct quotes from his works that are to be found in *Contra Symmachum*. This can be seen as an example of what Sabine MacCormack wrote in her study of Augustine's use of the works of Vergil. As she writes, Christian use of Vergil did not simply aim at rejecting 'pagan' statements in favour of Christian ones, since Vergil was turned into

> a theologian to whom Christians could appeal so as to instruct pagans. Even though Vergil's "true things" had been "mingled with the false," he could help to force a bridgehead into the land of Christian revelation. However, the realm occupied by Vergil was one of profound ambivalence.[190]

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[188] Williams 1973: 240. Cf. Rüpke 2016: 192-217.

[189] Prud. *C.Symm.* I.197-199.

[190] MacCormack 1998: 1-44, quote from p. 30.

Both Vergil's status as a canonical author and the ambivalence of the contents of his writings enabled Christian authors like Prudentius to creatively rewrite his texts.

3.4 · Prudentius' 'paganism' revisited

As we have seen, it is definitely not the historical Symmachus that Prudentius is interested in. The Roman senator was widely known as a skilled orator and an advocate of the 'classics', and thus it was not in line with Prudentius' own classical learning to reject him as a person. It is his third *Relatio* that provides the main theme of Prudentius' didactic epic: *mos maiorum*. As Cameron already pointed out, bashing Symmachus is not Prudentius' primary goal; the "remarkable courtesy" with which Prudentius treats the Roman senator as a person is by no means odd, as it is his mentality of *mos maiorum* that the author attacks – the fact that Symmachus is a vocal advocate of this mentality is only secondary.[191]

The detail with which Prudentius describes certain polytheist practices is stunning; it is as if the author wants to show he thoroughly studied 'paganism' before rejecting it. There should be no doubt that *Contra Symmachum* is an apology of Christianity – but it is an apology that has a lot to offer to the more classically trained reader: the author refutes the points made by Symmachus in his *Relat.* 3, but he is reluctant to entirely replace the 'classical' with the 'Christian'. As a result, Prudentius has to manoeuvre between his rejection of the values Symmachus stands for on the one hand, and the incorporation of elements from the classical common ground on the other. In line with Thomas Jürgasch's study of Christian strategies of othering, it has to be argued that Prudentius makes a significant contribution to the invention of 'paganism' with his didactic epic. It is his vivid description of the fear-induced religious practices before Christianity brought the light of *ratio* that inspire Gibbon's descriptions of 'paganism' in his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and thus, via many side alleys, ended up in western scholarship.

It is important to acknowledge that despite the stunning amount of details, Prudentius' 'paganism' is a construct, and that his easy explanation of the coming-into-being of the gods in the polytheist pantheon by no means meets modern scientific standards. Nevertheless, the critique of polytheist 'religion' that

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[191] Cameron 2011: 337-349.

Prudentius puts forth is interesting in its own right. As has been noted in the introduction, Peter Sloterdijk writes in his book-length essay *Den Himmel zum Sprechen bringen* that it can't be denied that the literary aftermath gives the supposed epiphany of the divine its form.[192] In *Contra Symmachum* we find a similar thought, albeit not concerning what we call 'religion' in general, but concerning the specific case of (Roman) polytheism: the polytheist pantheon is a human creation, inspired by fear of what humans didn't understand (I.42-407) and enhanced by the imagination of poets and painters (II.39-48). Inspired by the (admittedly vague) remarks Symmachus made about humans' relation to the divine, and by Ambrose's sharp rejection of Symmachus' arguments, Prudentius wrote a text, at the heart of which lies the question of how to relate to the divine. From his Christian perspective, Prudentius takes the nature of the divine – *deus Christus* – for granted and he does not dive into the discussions about the nature of this divine unity/duality/trinity for which late antique Christianity is famous. Prudentius presents the application of *fides* to the Christian God and Saviour as the final answer to the question of the relation between humans and the divine, on the basis of the fact that natural progress must lead to faith in God and Christ (whatever their exact nature may be).

In reacting to Symmachus' plea, Prudentius carefully establishes 'paganism' as something that is to be rejected as a practice, but also as something that cannot simply be forgotten, as it is part of Rome's heritage. By mentioning the famous names of the Roman past, by assigning to the Roman monuments a function as works of art, and by often quoting Vergil's works the author shows that despite its 'pagan' past, the culture of the Roman predecessors deserves a place in the new, Christian Rome. In the Christian world of Prudentius, there is absolutely no place for polytheist rituals, but at the same time, it is the inherited, 'classical' tradition that keeps providing a frame of reference to the Romans living in Prudentius' own times, be they Christian or still convinced of the need to perform polytheist rituals. In his rejection of polytheism, Prudentius maybe even displays some antiquarian interests: in order to understand why *fides* in God and Christ is the one right way to reach the divine, it is equally important to understand why traditional polytheist rituals are not – hence also Prudentius' elaborate description of traditional Roman religion in book I.

Contra Symmachum is a far more complicated work than scholarship has been willing to acknowledge thus far. It is one of the key texts for

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[192] Sloterdijk 2020: 17-32.

understanding the way in which we consider 'paganism' nowadays. Through *Contra Symmachum*, Symmachus ended up to be framed – most likely post mortem – as a defender of the 'paganism' that Prudentius had himself invented. It is this Symmachus that we remember today, even though he could have been – and at certain times probably was – remembered differently, as we will see in the next chapter.

Theologies of polytheism

Macrobius' re-invention of 'paganism'

*Sed Evangelus, postquam tantum coetum adsurgentem sibi ingressus offendit,
"casusne," inquit, "hos omnes ad te, Praetextate, contraxit, an altius quiddam,
cui remotis arbitris opus sit, cogitaturi ex disposito convenistis?"*

But when Evangelus was met with such a large company rising up against
him after he had entered, he said: "Is it chance that drew all these people
together at your place, Praetextatus, or have you come together according
to a plan, to ponder something deeper, from which eyewitnesses need to
stay away?"

Macrobius, *Saturnalia* I.7.4[193]

In a 2007 article, scholar of religion Christa Frateantonio suggests that Macro-
bius' *Saturnalia* could be considered a 'pagan' answer to Christianity. According
to Frateantonio, Macrobius re-invents 'paganism' by introducing a symposium
celebrating 'pagan culture' as an answer to the church-centred model of 'Chris-
tian culture'. The peg for Frateantonio's suggestion is the character of Evange-
lus, whose name bears a striking resemblance to the word *evangelium*, and who
thus might refer to a Christian stereotype:

> [M]öglicherweise zeigt sich [in den *Saturnalia*] eine Imitation und zugleich
> Überbietung des christlichen Versammlungsmodells. Dies kann sowohl der
> Selbstlegitimation wie Selbstvergewisserung paganer Positionen gedient haben
> und war durch die Gestalt des Euangelus möglicherweise auch nicht ganz und
> gar von der Parodierung des neuen christlichen Modells frei.[194]

But how certain can we be about Macrobius' 'paganism'? More than four dec-
ades before Frateantonio wrote her contribution to the discussion about Mac-
robius and religion, in 1966, Alan Cameron published a remarkable article in
which he challenged a thesis that had been taken for granted for many years.

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[193] All quotes from Macr. *Sat.* are taken from the edition by Kaster 2012.
[194] Frateantonio 2007: 376.

Influential scholars of late antiquity like Pierre Courcelle had dated Macrobius' *Saturnalia* to the last decade of the 4th century CE – but Cameron argued against this date by suggesting that the work was written approximately half a century later: "It is widely held that the *Saturnalia* paints a faithful *first-hand* picture of the interests and ideals of the circle of Symmachus. [...] [T]his view must now be abandoned."[195] The idea of Macrobius' *magnum opus* as a retrospectively idealising work, rather than an eyewitness account, kept Cameron busy for several decades, and in his 2011 book *The Last Pagans of Rome*, he expanded his countering of the thesis he had already argued against in 1966: in a long chapter on the subject, Cameron argued that Macrobius might well have been a Christian, writing for a Christian audience.[196]

The radical opposition between Frateantonio's and Cameron's positions shows the lack of consensus in Macrobian scholarship – even though Robert Kaster's early approval of Cameron's hypothesis is proof of the fact that something is changing in the scholarly approach to Macrobius' *Saturnalia*.[197] A lot seems to be at stake when Macrobius becomes a 5th-century Christian author, instead of an eyewitness of late-4th-century 'paganism': the *Saturnalia* can no longer be seen as intellectual product of a 'pagan' faction that somehow underwent a revival. As a result, the entire divide between 'Christianity' and 'paganism' would have to be revisited, since many fields of classics are using Macrobius' works as a *Fundgrube* for 'pagan' thought.

Dangling in between the two poles of Christianity and 'paganism' in the study of Macrobius' text is the figure of Symmachus. After the analysis of how Prudentius used Symmachus' third *Relatio* as a vehicle for beating traditional Roman religion, I think it is clear that the fact that Symmachus is one of the principal interlocutors of Macrobius' sympotic dialogue should not in itself be taken as proof for the text having a clear 'pagan' goal.[198] How, then, should we judge the interplay between the figure of Symmachus as presented in Macrobius' *Saturnalia* and the ambiguous stance the text seems to take in religious matters? As a final stage in my survey of the figure of Symmachus and the late antique invention of 'paganism', this chapter will try to answer this question by analysing the setting of the dialogue, limiting itself to book I (with some

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[195] Cameron 1966: 37-38, author's emphasis.

[196] Cameron 2011: 231-272.

[197] Kaster 1980, Kaster 2011: xxi-xxiv. Cf. Cameron 2011: 265-272 for an assessment of Macrobian scholarship up to the time of the publication of *The Last Pagans of Rome*.

[198] See ch. 3. Frateantonio 2007: 363-364 nevertheless suggests this.

exceptions), the book in which both the figure of Symmachus and what we today would call 'religion' play the most visible role.

4.1 · 'Pillarising' Macrobius

Contrary to the assessment of Prudentius' *Contra Symmachum* in the previous chapter, my view of Macrobius' *Saturnalia* does not allow for a clear separation between the figure of Symmachus and the one arguably 'pagan' apologetic text he wrote, his third *Relatio*.[199] Even though a remark made by Praetextatus in *Sat.* I.7.6 in response to Evangelus' question (quoted at the beginning of this chapter) might allude to Symmachus' *tam grande secretum* by stating that the discussion the interlocutors are having contains *nullum tale secretum*, "no such secret", similar possible allusions to Symmachus' text remain very speculative.[200] Nevertheless, as Alan Cameron puts forward, the sympotic setting of the *Saturnalia* functions as a "vehicle for material that interested Macrobius".[201] According to Cameron, the author collected material from diverse sources into a single "body" and used the backgrounds traditionally associated with the figures gathered at Praetextatus', Symmachus' and Nicomachus Flavianus' party to create thematic divisions in the material he had collected, without either attributing very clear political-religious positions to his characters, or taking a clear stance himself.[202] Macrobius' apparent love for 'paganism' is actually antiquarianism, an admiration of all things that are *digna memoratu*, "worth remembering".[203]

The question then is whether the setting (which is to a large extent fictional, as the author himself admits) should indeed be seen as significant in any way, or that the dialogue's participants are mere 'vehicles' for providing structure to

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[199] For a general introduction to the background and contents of Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, see Kaster 2011: xi-lxxiii. Schematic overviews of the work's contents can be found in Goldlust 2010: 59-63 and Kaster 2011: il-liii.

[200] Cf. Symm. *Relat.* 3.10.

[201] Cameron 2011: 266.

[202] Cameron 2011: 266-267. Cf. Macr. *Sat.* I.praef.3, *ita quoddam digesta corpus est, ut quae indistincte atque promiscue ad subsidium memoriae adnotaveramus, in ordinem instar membrorum cohaerentia convenirent*, "[my material] is organised into something of a body, so that the things I wrote down in a general way and without distinction, as a memory aid, come together in order and coherently, like body members".

[203] Macr. *Sat.* I.praef.3. Cf. König 2012.

the dialogue, as Cameron suggests.[204] At the risk of groundlessly considering the text as particularly religious, it seems as if the fact that the dialogue is set during the Saturnalia festival does provide a firmly pagan context – although the Roman festive calendar did not change into a Christian one overnight, as Jörg Rüpke notes.[205] Although I think Cameron's suggestion of Macrobius probably being a Christian himself is convincing in combination with the *Saturnalia*'s later date, the evidence for Macrobius' awareness of Christianity in the society he probably lived in is very scant – although deliberately 'paganising' the text is probably just as far-fetched.[206] An enlightening comment was made in 1999 by Wolfgang Liebeschuetz:

> [c]ertainly the fact that Macrobius honours and values the Roman past in its entirety means that he honours and values Roman religious antiquities, but this is not the same as to call on his contemporaries to return to the traditional worship. Since the Renaissance many generations of European academics have honoured and valued Graeco-Roman antiquities, including religious antiquities, without urging their pupils to abandon Christianity.[207]

Cameron's and Frateantonio's analyses of the *Saturnalia* both fail to provide a conclusive answer to the question if one should judge the setting – be it 'pagan' or not – in regard to the earlier picture of 'paganism' as especially painted by Ambrose and Prudentius. Had the image that Ambrose and Prudentius had drawn of the Roman senator Symmachus as a champion of irrational belief been entirely forgotten by the time Macrobius' *Saturnalia* were published? Had the entire debate concerning the return of the Altar of Victory and its literary reception been forgotten by the early 5th century? It is interesting that – if we follow Cameron's relativist interpretation of the dialogue's structure – Symmachus is, like in *Contra Symmachum*, again made into a vehicle for explaining aspects of polytheism, together with fellow Roman intellectuals (who did not engage in the debate around the Altar of Victory, but whom scholarship nevertheless seems to treat as 'pagans by proxy') from a relatively recent past. A closer analysis of the figure of Symmachus within the setting of the first book of the *Saturnalia* may help to better understand the supposedly 'pagan' nature of the work.

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[204] Macr. *Sat.* I.1.1-7; Cameron 2011: 265-272.

[205] Hunt 2018: 20; Rüpke 2016: 384-388.

[206] Cameron 2011: 267-272; Goldlust 2010: 14-20.

[207] Liebeschuetz 1999: 200-201.

4.2 · Symmachus in Macrobius' *Saturnalia*

At the end of a 1980 article about the figure of Servius in Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, Robert Kaster asked an important question: is Macrobius projecting a post-Sack-of-Rome view of society on a recent 'golden past', or is he using famous names from this recent past to construct his own notion of a 'classical age'?[208] Kaster wrote this article before the 'memory boom' of the late 1980s and 1990s; four decades later, we might rephrase Kaster's question as follows: what memory of 'paganism' is Macrobius trying to construct? In his book about the rhetoric and poetics of the *Saturnalia*, Benjamin Goldlust lays emphasis on the fact that the author "a respecté l'impératif de la notoriété des convives de son banquet" and thus has created "un cadre socio-culturel bien marqué".[209] Especially the selection of party hosts – Praetextatus, Symmachus and Nicomachus Flavianus successively – stresses that the dialogue takes place in an early 380s intellectual, 'pagan' environment.[210]

But how is Symmachus characterised by Macrobius, what role do the dialogue partners attribute to him? Symmachus hosts the largest part of the Saturnalia symposium as we can find it in our modern editions: the conversations in book IV-VII take place somewhere on his estate.[211] Symmachus' own contributions to the discussion are, at least in the text's current state, limited. They include a passage on Cicero's wit (II.3) and a now lost piece on Vergil as a rhetorician, announced at the end of *Sat.* I.[212] Nevertheless, it is clear that the figure of Symmachus is primarily intended as a specialist in the field of rhetoric, since matters of what we would call 'religion' are discussed by the other dialogue partners (especially Praetextatus).[213] J. Flamant concludes that "l'image que les *Saturnales* donnent de Symmaque est en tous points ressemblante à celle que révèlent ses lettres et ses discours".[214] Goldlust suggests that this might even point at an attempt of Macrobius to rehabilitate Symmachus after the bad press

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[208] Kaster 1980: 262.

[209] Goldlust 2010: 183-184.

[210] Cf. Goldlust 2010: 10; Kaster 2011: xxiv-xxv.

[211] See Goldlust 2010: 218-221 and Kaster 2011: xxviiii for a general discussion of the figure of Symmachus in Macr. *Sat.*

[212] For more on the textual tradition of the *Saturnalia*, see the preface to Kaster's edition (Kaster 2012: v-xlvi) and Kaster 2010.

[213] Goldlust 2010: 215-218, 221.

[214] Flamant 1977: 45.

he received in Prudentius' *Contra Symmachum*.[215] Yet at the same time, Prudentius' didactic epic made clear that Symmachus' rhetorical skill was beyond dispute, so Macrobius' choice to portray Symmachus as a specialist of rhetoric might also be in line with Prudentius' earlier, apologetically Christian portrayal of the Roman senator.[216]

The more or less completely transmitted first book of Macrobius' *Saturnalia* provides us with the best information on the setting of the symposium. In this book, Praetextatus and Symmachus play the role of leaders of the symposium.[217] Once the discussion has started, it is especially Praetextatus and Symmachus who provide the discussion starters and give the word to the different participants.[218] They seem to be fully aware of the different guests' specialisms and act as the *membra* of the *corpus* that Macrobius wants to present in his work, as for instance becomes clear from the distribution of discussion topics among different speakers in *Sat.* I.24.13-21. Praetextatus clearly is the 'king of the symposium', as is apparent from the enormous amount of learning he is able to display (each time greeted with admiration by the other guests), but Symmachus clearly is a senior partner, as he for instance shows in a short discussion with Evangelus on the authority of Vergil after Praetextatus' long exposition on 'solar theology'.[219] Evangelus there makes an attempt at discrediting Vergil:

> *verum quod Mantuanum nostrum ad singula, cum de divinis sermo est, testem citatis, gratiosius est quam ut iudicio fieri putetur.*

> But that you cite our poet from Mantua [i.e. Vergil] as witness for single details when the discussion is about the divine, that should be considered as a choice made on the basis of the author's popularity, rather than on the basis of fair judgement,[220]

to which Symmachus answers in a slightly paternalising way:

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[215] Goldlust 2010: 221 attributes this suggestion to Flamant 1977, but the reference Goldlust gives does not support this.

[216] Cf. Prud. *C.Symm.* I.632-642.

[217] Goldlust 2010: 199-224.

[218] For Symmachus' discussion starters, cf. in book I e.g. 12.1 and 24.1-8.

[219] Praetextatus' exposition runs from I.17.1 all the way up to I.23.22. For an analysis, see Liebeschuetz 1999.

[220] Macr. *Sat.* I.24.2.

respondeas volo utrum poetae huius opera instituendis tantum pueris idonea iudices, an alia illis altiora inesse fatearis. videris enim mihi ita adhuc Vergilianos habere versus qualiter eos pueri magistris praelegentibus canebamus.

Please say to me whether you think that the works of this poet are only suitable to provide teaching material for boys, or if you grant that there is also something deeper in them. It appears to me that so far you looked at Vergil's verses like us, when we used to chant them as boys, while the teachers read them out.[221]

In the short discussion between Evangelus and Symmahcus, Macrobius does not present the latter – like he had presented himself in *Relat.* 3 – as a staunch defender of *mos maiorum* for the sake of *mos maiorum*, but his Symmachus makes a real effort to provide arguments for the superiority of Vergil, by introducing some of the aspects for which Vergil should rightfully be esteemed so highly, especially his oratorical skill, and later the other guests add even more aspects: knowledge about religious observance, Hellenism and philosophy.[222]

Jason König's assessment of Macrobius as an author who "is committed to the idea that the voices of the past can speak through the speaker of the present, inextricably mingling with his or her words and thoughts" sheds a nuanced light on the setting of the *Saturnalia* and the occurrence of Symmachus as one of the dialogue's principal interlocutors.[223] As König convincingly shows, the main goal of the *Saturnalia* is "classicising Roman identity": Macrobius creates a community in which his characters (and, subsequently, his readers) engage in a mutually shared love for everything pertaining to Romanness.[224] This includes the 'appropriation' of ancient Roman texts (most explicitly Vergil) and prominent Roman figures from the past (like Praetextatus and Symmachus). König's suggestions thus provide an answer to the question Robert Kaster asked in 1980, whether Macrobius projects a post-Sack-of-Rome view of society on a recent 'golden past', or uses famous names from this recent past to construct his own notion of a 'classical age'.[225] The latter seems to be the case: the antiquarianist obsession of the guests at Macrobius' symposium shows that Macrobius wants (or maybe even expects) his readers to see figures like Symmachus irrespective of their contemporary political fame, as reliable transmitters of knowledge

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[221] Macr. *Sat.* I.24.2.

[222] Macr. *Sat.* I.24.8-15sqq.

[223] König 2012: 208. Cf. Macr. *Sat.* I.praef.3-9.

[224] König 2012: 208-214, quote from p. 208.

[225] Kaster 1980: 262.

deemed 'classical'. From this perspective, Macrobius' project is actually very similar to Prudentius', in the sense that both authors try to recalibrate the classical Roman past – although Macrobius of course lacks the Christian apologetic ring of *Contra Symmachum*. However, this might make the fact that the *Saturnalia* contain so many elaborate descriptions of religious concepts and practices considered 'pagan' in our times (and, judging from Prudentius' *Contra Symmachum*, this was also the case in late antiquity, at least for Christian apologists) all the more interesting: what is the use of constructing 'paganism' when the goal of this is not to be apologetic?

4.3 · A pagans' Bible?

Before being interviewed himself about religious matters, Praetextatus denies the arcane nature of the party, something the uninvited guest Evangelus (according to Frateantonio's suggestion, solely based on his name, a Christian stock character) seems to fear:[226] *nullum inter nos tale secretum opinarere quod non vel tibi vel etiam vulgo fieri dilucidum posset*, "you should not think that there is a secret among us of the kind that it could not be made entirely clear to you, or even to the public."[227] After reading Symm. *Relat.* 3, one is tempted to understand Praetextatus' *nullum tale secretum* as an echo of Symmachus' *tam grande secretum*:[228] in line with Frateantonio, one could argue that Macrobius reverses Prudentius' idea of the divine realm of traditional Roman religion as impenetrably secret. If he indeed does so, is his agenda that of a 'pagan' attempting to divulge his convictions, or that of a Christian (or maybe rather: someone operating in an increasingly Christianised context) treating 'paganism' as something of the past that can now be studied from a distance?

The answer to this question is obviously not straightforward, but the scholarly reputation of Symmachus and Praetextatus as 'notorious pagans' does not help either. As mentioned before, Frateantonio has attempted to read Macrobius' *Saturnalia* as 'pagan liturgy', departing from the given of a "Verschiebung des religiösen Paradigmas (pagan – christlich)" and the apparent need for a "Neu-Inszenierung" of Roman religion that followed it – in short, the 'battle between paganism and Christianity' paradigm.[229] Despite the theme of the

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[226] Frateantonio 2007: 370.

[227] Macr. *Sat.* I.7.6. Evangelus' question is quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

[228] Symm. *Relat.* 3.10.

[229] Frateantonio 2007: 361.

Saturnalia evolving around what we would call 'religion', there is an almost total lack of religious statements of the kind we find in the texts of Symmachus, Ambrose and Prudentius discussed in the previous chapters. Especially in the case of Symmachus, the Latin text of the *Saturnalia* as it appears to us today does not show a Symmachus who engages with religious matters as such.[230] Praetextatus, the character with most contributions in general, is indeed described as someone with impeccable knowledge of anything pertaining to religious observance, as becomes clear after his long exposition on 'solar theology', where he is described as *unum arcanae deorum naturae conscium qui solus divina et adsequi animo et eloqui posset ingenio*, "the one man privy to the arcane nature of the divine, who could comprehend it with his mind and speak about it with his intellect".[231] But even in the arguably most explicitly 'religious' part of the *Saturnalia*, the segment in which Praetextatus talks about pontifical law in Vergil, including quite some explanations of religious terminology, does not include any personal statements of the prime interlocutor – it is all about his learning, his knowledge of everything 'classical'.[232]

It is especially the long shadow of Vergil that seems to fuel Frateantonio's idea that the *Saturnalia* show some kind of 'pagan liturgy', a "Neu-Inszenierung" of traditional Roman religion. According to her, Macrobius' *Saturnalia* only deal with two (or rather three) overlapping themes: "Religion, Religion in Vergils Werk, Vergil".[233] As mentioned before, the idea that Vergil's works were authoritative texts for late antique intellectuals is very much present in scholarship. According to Frateantonio, Evangelus' negative judgement of Vergil's works (such as in the discussion between him and Symmachus, partially quoted in the previous section) might be read as a play with earlier 'pagan' criticism on the Christians' Bible:

> Die Anwesenden sind von seinen Fragen regelmäßig unangenehm berührt, vor allem denjenigen, mit denen er Vergil unterstellt, dieser sei *imperitus*, *indoctus et rusticus* – Vorwürfe, die den Christen, ihrer Religion und vor allem ihren Heiligen Schriften bekanntermaßen von den gebildeten Heiden gemacht wurden.[234]

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[230] Cf. Flamant 1977: 40-45.

[231] Macr. *Sat.* I.24.1. Cf. Goldlust 2010: 215-218.

[232] Macr. *Sat.* III.1-12. Cf. Lamberton 1986: 263; König 2012: 208-214.

[233] Frateantonio 2007: 368.

[234] Frateantonio 2007: 370.

Apart from one very indirect hint, Macrobius indeed does not show any awareness of the Christian Bible, but instead takes Vergil as the source of all knowledge.[235] The question is of course whether this justifies to read the *Saturnalia* as a 'pagan' work. As mentioned in the two previous chapters, Vergil's work is very much present in the works of Ambrose and Prudentius that were discussed there. It provides a learned intertext in the letters of Ambrose, appealing to the common ground of 'classical' learning shared by him and his opponent Symmachus. Prudentius turns the language of Vergil into a language fit for Christianity, by reinterpreting phrases from Vergil's works in an apologetically Christian context. Macrobius' way of treating Vergil is admittedly different (at least at first glance), as the *Saturnalia*'s interlocutors clearly aim to comment on Vergil's text as such in order to explicitly stress its omniscience and 'omnirelevance' – making Vergil's works in a sense into scripture, since "for a work to be scripture means that it participates in the movement of the Spiritual life of those for whom it is so".[236] But couldn't Macrobius' stance towards Vergil be a more explicit, theoretically based version of something both Ambrose and Prudentius do in a more practical way?

As becomes very clear in books III-VII of the *Saturnalia*, Macrobius' Vergil plays the same role as the Neoplatonists' Homer described in Robert Lamberton's 1986 study *Homer the Theologian*: especially according to his Neoplatonist interpreters, "Homer was a divine sage with revealed knowledge of the fate of souls and the structure of reality, and [...] the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are mystical allegories yielding information of this sort if properly read".[237] Vergil is equated with Homer quite early in the *Saturnalia*, when the Greek rhetor Eusthatius calls him *Homerus vester Mantuanus*, "your Mantuan Homer", and the authoritative status Homer acquired is thus easily extended to the Latin poet.[238] Sabine MacCormack has shown in the case of Augustine that the exegetical methods of the time made it possible for Vergil to be interpreted in many different ways, by Christians and non-Christians alike.[239] As Jason König notes, the boundary between the interlocutors' own words and those of the authors they quote

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[235] Among the jokes attributed to Augustus, there is one referring to the Massacre of the Innocents (Matthew 2:16-18), see Macr. *Sat.* II.4.11.

[236] Smith 1993: 36. Cf. Macr. *Sat.* I.24.8-21.

[237] Lamberton 1986: 1.

[238] Macr. *Sat.* I.16.43. See Lamberton 1986: 263-271.

[239] MacCormack 1998: 1-44.

becomes blurred.[240] As a result, a new, organic whole comes into being: the author re-invents the information found in earlier sources by organising it in an entirely different way – just as Ambrose and Prudentius did with 'their' Vergil.

An interesting case of this blurring can be found in *Sat.* I.17.2. Avienus has just asked why the sun goes under the names of various other deities; he expects that Praetextatus will be able to answer this question. Praetextatus embarks on his long exposition of 'solar theology', probably one of the most famous passages from the *Saturnalia* (and probably a passage that makes it most tempting to brand the work as 'pagan').[241] The first lines reveal an interesting stance on the use of earlier authors:

> *cave aestimes, mi Aviene, poetarum gregem, cum de dis fabulantur, non ab adytis plerumque philosophiae semina mutuari. nam quod omnes paene deos, dumtaxat qui sub caelo sunt, ad solem referent, non **vana superstitio** sed ratio divina commendat.*

> Be careful, dear Avienus, not to regard the company of poets, when they speak about the gods, as not often getting their seeds of philosophy from the innermost sanctuary. That they draw a connection between almost all of the gods (at least those that live under the heavenly sky) is not informed by **groundless superstition**, but by divine ratio.[242]

The fact that the phrase *vana superstitio* pops up in a context of the philosophical/theological wisdom of poets does not seem coincidental. By referring to the speech of Evander in Vergil's *Aeneid* (which we already encountered in Prudentius' *C.Symm.*) by mouth of Praetextatus, Macrobius underlines that the study of Vergil's texts has deeper implications than just the philological ones that were discussed at the beginning of the *Saturnalia*'s first book.[243] Vergil is in possession of *ratio divina*, and there must be *quiddam altius*, "something deeper", as Evangelus phrases it, in his works.[244] The rest of the *Saturnalia* is devoted to the pursuit of this something, that – at least for educational purposes – is of use for the aristocratic people living in Macrobius' own times.[245]

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[240] König 2012: 206. Cf. Macr. *Sat.* I.praef.3-9.

[241] For an analysis of this exposition, see Liebeschuetz 1999.

[242] Macr. *Sat.* I.17.2.

[243] Cf. Verg. *A.* VIII.187 and section 3.3 of this thesis. Kaster 2011 does not note the reference.

[244] Cf. Macr. *Sat.* I.7.4, quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

[245] Cf. Macr. *Sat.* I.praef.1-2.

4.4 · The enigma of the *Saturnalia*

In scholarhip, Macrobius' *Saturnalia* have probably raised more questions than they have answered. The lack of any Christian elements in the work is striking – but as Liebeschuetz rightly remarked, the fact that a work deals with non-Christian subjects doesn't have to mean that it is apologetically 'pagan'.[246] From the bulk of Macrobian scholarship of the last half century one gets the impression that the fact that Symmachus and Praetextatus are in post-Gibbon scholarship considered to be champions of 'paganism' must mean that they were seen as such in Macrobius' own times as well. This is of course not necessarily true, and if we look at Macrobius' treatment of the figure of Symmachus, we indeed see the man that also comes to the fore from the letters he wrote: a skilled orator (as was also acknowledged by Prudentius) and a specialist on ancient Roman oratorical theory, but not someone who is very much engaged in religious affairs. The one possible reference to *Relat.* 3 is, at least in my opinion, too speculative to use as evidence for any 'pagan' sentiments of the *Saturnalia*'s author. Macrobius' supposed 'pagan' convictions are thus rather a product of an argumentative detour ('Symmachus was a pagan, and therefore Macrobius, taking Symmachus as a character, should be one as well') than grounded in actual evidence.

As Jason König wrote, the *Saturnalia* are a celebration of everything Roman.[247] By writing an educational commentary on Vergil, Macrobius did indeed preserve all kinds of knowledge about rituals and practices of ancient Roman religion, but he nowhere presents the knowledge of these rituals and practices as per se relevant for the present. Often, they pop up in reflections on the text of Vergil, in long, apparently organically growing catalogues of things worth knowing, and they are always presented as ancient lore. Macrobius' re-invention of 'paganism', like that of Ambrose and Prudentius, thus happens through a very specific lens, and although this will probably not discredit the *Saturnalia* as a *Fundgrube* for elements of ancient Roman religion, it is important to keep this lens in mind. There is no evidence for any 'pagan liturgy' being performed at the invented Saturnalia party Macrobius paints for his readers – other than in the fact that it is a celebration of the ancient Roman festival of the Saturnalia, but this may also be understood as an attempt to create a frame of credibility around the characters the author brings to the stage. In any case, it is highly

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[246] Liebeschuetz 1999: 200-201.

[247] König 2012.

likely that the characterization of Macrobius' *Saturnalia* as a work of waning 'paganism' is rather inspired by the fact that Symmachus is one of the dialogue's interlocutors, than by the fact that the *Saturnalia* show Symmachus as a staunch 'pagan'. It is the 'contents' of antiquarianism that are of real interest to Macrobius: like Prudentius, the author tries to evoke a world of 'classical' learning, yet not in an apologetic poem, but in a carefully constructed, benevolent discussion of 'classical' religion and the core 'classical' texts of Vergil.

Pondering something deeper

Conclusion

> Evenmin als twee schilders ooit dezelfde 'wereldbeschouwing' hebben, evenmin kunnen het twee onafhankelijke, denkende geesten. Waar dit zo schijnt, is steeds kunstmatig dogmatiseren en critiekloos navolgen van een als 'waarheid' aangenomen systeem in het spel. En dat zich dit bij ons in West-Europa zo geregeld voordoet, wijst alweer op de dogmatische (maatschappelijke) gezindheid van de West-Europeaan die, menend de leer van een 'geopenbaarde waarheid' te zijn ontvlucht, zonder geopenbaarde waarheid zijn steun verliest, zich in het vloeiende en wankele onvast en onveilig gevoelt, en dus uit de filosofische gehoorzaal de dogma's mee naar huis brengt, waarvoor hij de kerk ontlopen is. Of zich laat vertellen hoe kunst 'moet zijn'.
>
> Carry van Bruggen, *Prometheus*[248]

With their warning that "the theological still haunts the classical, in ways that we ignore at our peril", the Postclassicisms Collective in 2020 wanted to stress that classics as a discipline still is "the study of a primarily *pagan* Greco-Roman antiquity (and we mean the offensive othering embedded in the term 'pagan' to resonate loudly)".[249] The boundary of the discipline understood in this way is theologically motivated and sharpened by Enlightenment ideas about secularisation: denying theological influence is not the same as making an attempt at overcoming this influence by addressing it.[250] In this thesis, I have aimed to expand on this idea, by studying texts that traditionally belonged to the fixed containers of 'pagan' and 'Christian' literature. I intended to show that just because some texts are apologetically 'Christian', that doesn't mean that their not-explicitly-Christian contemporaries are apologetically 'pagan'. Moreover, like the predicate 'pagan', the predicate 'Christian' is equally in need of nuancing explanation – otherwise we are at risk (if we can ever escape this risk) of pasting

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[248] Van Bruggen 1955: 108.
[249] Postclassicisms Collective 2020: 85. Authors' emphasis.
[250] Postclassicisms Collective 2020: 85-88.

post-Reformation notions of Christianity onto a situation that is considerably different from the one we live in, regardless of any progress that secularist tendencies might have brought on a disciplinary level.[251]

It has been my primary aim to show how much texts that have traditionally been branded 'pagan' or 'Christian' actually have in common. By tracing the figure of Symmachus in a set of late-4th- and early-5th-century Latin texts, I have tried to describe how Symmachus functions as a peg for reflections on what we would call 'religion', playing a bridging role between 'classical' culture and the late antique present. Therefore, this thesis did not take the form of a comparison of the historical figure and his *Nachleben*; it rather attempted to study the figure of Symmachus as part of the new contexts in which it was introduced.

In order to understand the figure of Symmachus and his new contexts, I deemed it necessary to provide some information on the scholarly debate on 'religion' in late antiquity. As the Postclassicisms Collective showed, there is a strong tendency of leaving religion out of the discussion, even though it is vital to understanding our own discipline. As especially the late antique literary heritage has been considered particularly 'religious', it is necessary to determine what we actually mean by this word. Although it is difficult – if not impossible – to give a definition of 'religion', I tried to show that a basic understanding of the debates among scholars of (late) ancient religion is needed to understand the late antique texts discussed in this thesis: in order to avoid too easy assumptions about the religious identity of certain authors, it is fundamental to refrain from pasting any modern notions of religion onto these ancient texts.

I started my analysis of the ancient textual material with texts from Symmachus' lifetime that reflect the famous (and famously blown out of proportion) debate around the Altar of Victory in the Roman Curia. Symmachus and Ambrose seem to share a cultural common ground that clearly implies an education in the 'classical tradition', especially in regard to the works of Vergil and knowledge of Neoplatonic trends. The polar religious identities that – at least since Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* – have been attributed to them show a strong post-Reformation understanding of religion. We have to keep in mind that Ambrose, who certainly identified as Christian, but would probably not recognise too much when attending an Anglican service in Gibbon's 18th-century

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[251] Postclassicisms Collective 2020: 91-99.

England. Below the superficial layer of religious identity, a set of values concerning what it means to be Roman looms large.

Ambrose's framing of the figure of Symmachus provided the backbone for the way in which Prudentius treated the Roman senator in *Contra Symmachum* – although it is clear that for Prudentius, the primary aim was no longer to argue against Symmachus as a person: the author used the figure of Symmachus and his third *Relatio* to write a Christian apologetic didactic epic on the two *sectae* of traditional Roman religion on the one hand, and Christianity on the other. Through *Contra Symmachum*, Symmachus ended up being framed – most likely post mortem – as a defender of the 'paganism' that Prudentius had himself invented.

Finally, Macrobius' *Saturnalia* show that the memory Symmachus could have ended up differently than how we remember him today. Macrobius focuses on Symmachus' oratorical skill, and on the fact that he was a famous figure from a relatively recent 'golden past'. Due to later, post-Gibbon interpretations of 'paganism', Macrobius' *Saturnalia* came to be interpreted as entangled with the historical figures of Symmachus and Praetextatus, who were now considered to be staunch defenders of the 'pagan faith' – almost as late antique equivalents of Martin Luther.

Within the limited space of this thesis, I have tried to provide some tools for revisiting the debate around the Altar of Victory as it appears from the texts of Symmachus and Ambrose. Moreover, I have merely scratched the surface of Prudentius' *Contra Symmachum* and Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, two texts not normally studied together, as texts belonging to the same cultural κοινή. Although I hope to have underlined the importance of studying together texts that are traditionally taken to fit into fixed containers of 'paganism' and Christianity, there is still a lot of work to do. It is as if the fact that the late antique textual heritage is considered particularly religious (and, admittedly, there are many texts dealing with subjects that would today be branded as belonging to 'religion') invites scholars to paste modern, post-Reformation and post-Enlightenment concepts of 'religion' onto the texts of Symmachus, Ambrose, Prudentius and Macrobius. Wouldn't it be better to entirely do away with the term 'religion' and simply study these texts for their literary merits? Frankly, I don't think that this is a viable solution to the problem: even if we would be able to separate the 'religious' from the 'literary' in texts like those of Prudentius and Macrobius, we would still be stuck with our traditional ideas about Christianity and 'paganism', and the suggestion that there is a clear separation between the

two. Peter Sloterdijk's plea for studying religion and literature in tandem and Jörg Rüpke's idea of an entangled polytheist-Christian culture in the 4th and early 5th centuries may require a rewriting of many textbooks of ancient literature, but it probably is the only way of overcoming the sharp divide between 'pagan' and Christian literature. I hope to have given an example of how the entangled literary history of Symmachus, Ambrose, Prudentius and Macrobius could be rewritten.

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