IX

Pagan and Christian Traditionalism in the First Three Centuries A.D.

Let us be clear to begin with, about what is meant by "traditionalism" in this context. It is something which goes far beyond the unconscious influence or the free use of traditional material. And it does not mean an attitude to the authorities of the tradition to which one regards oneself as belonging which is respectful but at the same time genuinely critical. This latter attitude is excellently summed up in a few sentences from a sermon of a Christian Platonist of a later century, the Cambridge divine John Smith. "Whilst we plead so much our right to the patrimony of our fathers, we may take too fast a possession of their errors, as well as of their sober opinions. There are *idola specus* – innate prejudices and deceitful hypotheses that many times wander up and down in the minds of good men, that may fly out from them with their graver determinations. We can never be well assured what our traditional divinity is: nor can we securely enough addict ourselves to any sect of men. That which was the philosophers' motto *ἐλεύθερον εἶναι δεῖ τῇ γνώμῃ τὸν μέλλοντα φιλοσοφεῖν* we may a little enlarge and so fit it for an ingenuous pursuer of divine truth: 'He that will find truth, must seek it with a free judgement and a sanctified mind'."[1] We may find as we study the ancients something in the freedom of spirit with which Origen the Christian or Plotinus handled the traditions which they regarded as sacred which reminds us of this admirable statement. But they like other thinkers, Christian and pagan, of their time (and John Smith himself and other Christian thinkers of the 17th century and the whole period between it and the age of the early Fathers), would have accepted a restriction on that freedom which many, even among the small minority who have any respect whatever for ancient tradition, would no longer be prepared to accept. They would hold, that is, that there was one traditional authority which was an authority in the full sense, a body of teaching in which the fulness of universal truth was contained and with which it was not permissible to disagree, though of course it had to be interpreted rightly and intelligently. For many, perhaps most, of those few of us now-a-days who still try to believe in some way in a traditional religion and have some veneration for the past, this kind of restriction can no longer hold. For a number of converging reasons, one or

[1] John Smith Discourses I, most conveniently accessible in Gerald R. Cragg The Cambridge Platonists (New York 1968): the sentences quoted are on p. 84.

two of which may emerge from this paper, it has become a matter of obligation for us to approach even the most sacred authority and the most venerable tradition in the free critical spirit so admirably expressed by John Smith and to make no exception for Scripture or the most authoritative Church pronouncements.[2] This makes it all the more necessary to study the ancient form of traditionalism as seriously and sympathetically as possible, and to show clearly the degree of genuine freedom and rationality which was possible within its limitations.

We should note at this point that in most cases in the first Christian centuries, among both Christians and pagan philosophers, what we are dealing with is the acceptance of *one* traditional authority, not an undiscriminating blanket acceptance of everything handed down from antiquity. For practically all Christians the Bible stood alone and unchallenged as the one traditional authority in the full sense: though some gnostic sects, the Carpocratians and Naassenes, may have attempted to bring pagan philosophies or mystery-religions into their authoritative tradition.[3] Among the pagan philosophers there were certainly those, like Antiochus of Ascalon in the 1st century B.C. who held that all the great ancient philosophers had taught essentially the same doctrines: the same over-ecumenical attitude is to be found in Hierocles in the 5th century A.D. and was probably not uncommon among the less thoughtful enthusiasts for the ancient philosophical tradition in the intervening period. But the more serious philosophers generally recognised one and only one traditional authority in the full sense. This is obviously true for Epicureans. Stoics are rather more eclectic, but on the whole the conservative Stoics of the Empire seem to have held firmly and exclusively to the main lines of Old Stoic dogma. Genuine Aristotelians are rather difficult to find in our period, but there is no doubt that for the great Alexander of Aphrodisias Aristotle was the one sufficient authority. And for the Platonists, with whom we shall be mainly concerned in this paper, Plato (often coupled with Pythagoras) is the only full traditional authority. Of course the traditional authority might be thought of as presenting in its perfected form a much more ancient wisdom going back to time immemorial. This will be discussed later in the paper, as will also the degree of authority attached to Christian Church and pagan school tradition.

But before we begin to discuss ancient traditionalism in its full and proper sense, the acceptance of an absolute traditional authority, it will be as well to glance at the very large areas in which the kind of free critical examination of earlier thought recommended in my quotation from John Smith could proceed completely freely and without inhibition. Because the thinkers of the

[2] Maurice Wiles's books The Making of Christian Doctrine (Cambridge 1967) and The Remaking of Christian Doctrine (London 1974) are excellent examples of this sort of total critical rethinking of the tradition.

[3] For Carpocratian reverence for ancient philosophers see Irenaeus Adv. Haer. I, 25, 6. For Naassene exegesis of mystery-cults and pagan mythology see Hippolytus Ref. V 7–9.

first three centuries A.D. recognised, for the most part, one and only one specific tradition which was for them fully authoritative, there was a great deal of older thought which they could consider freely and criticise uninhibitedly, rejecting what they found unreasonable and unacceptable from the point of view of their own tradition and accepting whatever they found useful for the elucidation and development of that tradition. The so-called "eclecticism" of the philosophers of our period is in most cases, where the more serious thinkers are concerned, a matter of this sort of critical selection and adaptation of useful material from other traditions. The way the Platonists made use of Aristotle and their attitude towards him are particularly interesting in this connection. Aristotle, in spite of his unsparing criticism of Plato, stood in some ways very close to Platonism, and, as is generally recognised, considerable Aristotelian elements are to be found in some forms of Middle Platonism and in Neoplatonism. But Aristotle was never quite accepted into the Platonist canon, so to speak, of Scripture: he never became in the full sense a traditional authority for Platonists. Their attitude towards him varied considerably. Alcinous[4] quietly and without acknowledgement incorporates a great deal of Aristotelian thought into his introductory account of Platonism. Atticus[5] attacks Aristotle in the most passionate tones. Numenius proposed to "separate Plato from Aristotle, Zeno and the Academy".[6] But we have most material for judging the attitude of Plotinus and later Neoplatonists. Plotinus, who had read Aristotle and his commentators extensively and uses a great many Aristotelian ideas, approaches Peripatetic thought with a critical respect very satisfactory to a modern scholar or scholarly philosopher. He thinks that Aristotle does disagree with Plato, and is wrong when he does so, but he takes his ideas seriously, discusses them thoroughly and intelligently, and often finds them worth adopting and adapting. Porphyry and the later Neoplatonists treat Aristotle more respectfully, study and comment on him more closely and thoroughly, and are inclined to minimise the degree of his differences with Plato. But his works are never part of Scripture for them. He is not a traditional authority in the full sense. Most of them (Hierocles the partisan of universal agreement is an exception)[7] think like Plotinus that he disagrees with Plato on important points, and do not hesitate to criticise him when he does.[8] The interac-

[4] Professor J. Whittaker's articles ("Parisinus Graecus 1962 and the Writings of Albinus 1 and 2, Phoenix 28 (1974) 3 and 4) give ample reasons for restoring the Didaskalikos to the obscure author to whom it is attributed in the MSS and no longer attributing it to the eminent Albinus.

[5] Ap. Eusebius Praep. Ev. XV 3–9.

[6] Fr. 24 des Places (1 Leemans) 1. 68–69 = Eusebius Praep. Ev. XIV 4. 728 D.

[7] Ap. Photius Bibliotheca III 214 p. 129 Henry (173 A).

[8] The carefully qualified attribution of a limited authority to Aristotle in the lower parts of philosophy by Syrianus in his introduction to his commentary to Books M and N of the Metaphysics should be compared with such criticisms as those of Proclus In Tim I. 252. 11-254. 18: 262. 5–29: 266. 19-268. 23 Diehl which though respectful, are sufficiently deci-

tion of Platonism and Aristotelianism in late antiquity was continuous and fruitful: but the two never fused into a single tradition, then or later.

For the Christians, as has been said, the Bible (as read in the Churches and interpreted by the holy Fathers as soon as there were any) was the sole absolute traditional authority with which it was not permissible to disagree. This meant that the whole of Greek philosophy was free to them for critical reading, selective acceptance or rejection, and adaptation according to the requirements of their own sacred and authoritative tradition. This must be taken into account in assessing the relative degrees of freedom of thought and originality of Christians and pagan philosophers respectively. Here I must reluctantly disagree with a remark made by Dr. H. Chadwick in his admirable chapter on Origen in the Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Mediaeval Philosophy[9], which represents a point of view fairly widely held among Christian scholars. He says "The Platonism of Celsus, Porphyry, and, for that matter, Plotinus is in its feeling and temper a scholasticism bound by authority and regarding innovation and originality as synonymous with error. They would not have understood an attitude such as that expressed by Origen when he writes that 'philosophy and the Word of God are not always at loggerheads, neither are they always in harmony. For philosophy is neither in all things contrary to God's law nor is it in all respects consonant'." Surely Plotinus, and other Platonists too, could have understood Origen's attitude here perfectly well if they could have overcome the distaste induced by his selection of a barbarian traditional authority. It does not differ greatly from the attitude of Plotinus to Aristotle. Philosophy for Origen was not a traditional authority, but was something to be taken seriously, examined critically, and its conclusions favourably received when they agreed with the traditional authority which he did accept, rationally interpreted. And this is just how Plotinus, as we have seen, regards Peripatetic philosophy. And the later Neoplatonists were perfectly capable of examining earlier philosophers whom they did not regard as authoritative in the full sense, notably Plotinus and Porphyry, accepting their conclusions when they agreed with what they regarded as the reasonable interpretations of Plato and other great traditional divinely inspired authorities, and rejecting them when they did not. Both pagans and Christians of this period were capable of independent and critical thinking in much the same cojndi tions and within much the same limitations. It has been maintained that the much sharper contrasts and conflicts between the Judaeo-Christian and the Hellenic traditions produced more striking and important originalities than the debates between pagan Hellenic philosophers – that they led to the discovery of the concept of personality, the philosophy of Being, and other interesting things. But these large claims do not seem to stand up very well

sive in tone and free of that awestruck reverence for sacred authority of which Proclus is eminently capable.

[9] Part II ch. 11. p. 186.

to close critical examination. It does however remain true that an exceptional degree of freedom and independence can be discerned in the thought of Origen the Christian, as in the thought of Plotinus. Both were later regarded, by their Christian and pagan successors respectively, as deplorably original. An attempt will be made later in the paper to suggest very tentatively a possible reason for this exceptional freedom.

We now need to consider the reasons for the prevalence of this sort of traditionalism in our period and later. It will make for greater clarity if at this point we consider pagan and Christian traditionalists separately, though without losing sight of the very great deal which they had in common. Among the pagans, one important reason for the general swing back to tradition was fear, the sense that inherited ways of life and thinking were disintegrating from within, or, later, under attack from without by those unpleasant and aggressive barbarizers and deserters to an alien way of life and thinking, the Christians. Another particularly strong reason for the traditionalism of later antiquity, which has been given particular prominence by Heinrich Dörrie and others[10], was the general conviction of the age that the oldest is always best, that we live in an age of decadence, at a low point on the universal cycle: that the ancients were nearer to the gods and the beginning of things and therefore knew much more about them than we can: the true, unalterable and unimprovable Logos was revealed in the beginning. It is certainly important to remember this if we are to understand the thought of late antiquity rightly. It was a conviction shared by both pagans and Christians, and the argument from superior antiquity which is based on it played a particularly important part in Jewish and Christian apologetic[11]: though the Christians' conviction of the antiquity of their revelation has theological implications which go deeper than mere polemic, and will be discussed later. This is why Plotinus had to set Amelius and Porphyry to demonstrate elaborately and at great length that the books of the gnostics were recent forgeries, not documents of ancient Oriental wisdom.[12] If the Gnostics had been able to make people believe that their "book of Zoroaster" was really by that ancient sage it would have become immediately highly authoritative.

But I am not entirely satisfied that this explanation of the traditionalism of late antiquity, if it is presented without qualification or reference to the earlier history of Greek thought, accounts completely and satisfactorily for the phenomenon. We need to remember that there was a very strong tendency

[10] cp. J. H. Waszink "Bemerkungen zum Einfluss des Platonismus im Frühen Christentum" Vig. Christ. 19. 1965. 129–162: H. Dörrie "Die platonische Theologie des Kelsos in ihrer Auseinandersetzung mit der christlichen Theologie" N. A. G. phil-hist. 1967, 23–55.

[11] For a fine, vigorous, exaggerated example see Tertullian Apologeticum 19: but the argument is very common, and can be found in much more reasonable people than Tertullian.

[12] Porphyry, Life of Plotinus 16.

to traditionalism, to following ancestral custom in art, literature and social behaviour, even in classical Greece, which would easily extend to philosophy when it had developed to a certain point, when the philosophers had produced intellectual structures which looked to some at least of their contemporaries as complete, final and satisfying as a Doric temple. The fascination of classical Greek literature and thought for us is at least partly due to the fact that they were the products of a society which was both a primitive agricultural, and therfore intensely traditionalist, community and an intensely sophisticated one, with a more than normal proportion of intellectually mature, independent-minded, critical and questioning people. We should have a more vivid idea of the particular flavour of the mental life of a Greek intellectual if we remembered more often and more vividly the sort of things Socrates and Plato (and the women of their families) did when they fulfilled their religious obligations as Athenian citizens. Perhaps, at least when we imagine the great writers and thinkers, we are still too much under the spell of the old classicist picture of gentlemen in white robes singing beautiful hymns before dignified marble statues. We tend to forget the blood and the phallic symbols and images, the lively piglets and lumps of very dead pork with which the most highminded and critical intellectual would inevitably find himself involved when he carried out the normal public and private rituals many of which went back to the Stone Age. Anything which at any period had been brought to what seemed an ultimately satisfactory form by the ancients was repeated with very little change to the end of antiquity by their descendants. And a great deal of this instinctive social and religious traditionalism persisted into late antiquity alongside the self-conscious revivalism and archaism and respect for the ancients based on a theory of primeval revelation and universal decadence prevalent among the tiny educated class.[13]

Further, it seems to me that late Greek traditionalism is perfectly compatible with the belief found among so many Greek intellectuals in the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. in progress up to a point.[14] Man, these intellectuals thought, had indeed progressed from a brutish state. His political institutions, his practical skills, and, eventually, his philosophy, had developed from primitive beginnings to their present much improved condition. But in the phrase "Man *had* progressed", the accent must be on had: progress, it was generally thought, was now finished. A Greek, long before the Roman Imperial period with its general conviction of the decadence of the present

[13] A particularly important type of social and cultural traditionalism, which came to have increasing religious significance, was the veneration of the educated classes for the literary classics of Greek and Roman antiquity, which has been so extensively studied by Marrou and others, and was maintained, as they have shown, by the unchanging forms of ancient literary education from early Hellenistic times onwards. This of course was an important reason for the conviction of philosophers that philosophic wisdom was to be found in the ancient poets, mentioned in the next paragraph.

[14] See W. K. C. Guthrie in The Beginning (London 1957) and E. R. Dodds The Ancient Concept of Progress (Oxford 1973).

and the superiority of antiquity, might well hold that philosophy had progressed up to a point, but that point was the high point, and all change thereafter must be decadence, or, at best, clarification of the essential doctrines and modification of detail. Aristotle, like many great philosophers since, seems to have thought in this way about his own philosophy. It is of course true that the thinkers of late antiquity generally believed and were sometimes seriously concerned to show that the teaching of the great philosophers whom they regarded as supreme traditional authorities presented in perfected and fully developed form an immemorial wisdom which was expressed symbolically in the myths told by the ancient inspired poets and could be found in the teachings of still more ancient Oriental sages: true philosophy for them had in some way to go back to the beginning of things. But the degree to which this belief in the immemorial antiquity of the doctrines discovered in the traditional authority was important seems to have varied a good deal according to the temperament and outlook of individual thinkers. Plutarch thought it worth while to show at length in his Isis and Osiris that all the Oriental wisdom known to him agreed with the teaching of Plato as he understood it. Numenius also clearly considered it important to show that the teachings of Brahmins and Jews and Magi and Egyptians agreed with those of Plato and Pythagoras.[15] And to judge from a story told by Proclus on the authority of Porphyry[16], it seems that the inspired authority of Homer was of quite desperate importance to that rather commonplace person the pagan Platonist Origen (I hope it is not any longer necessary to demonstrate that he was a different person from Origen the Christian). This Origen is reported to have continued bellowing for three days, purple in the face and streaming with sweat, in furious protest against the idea that Plato could possibly have meant to suggest that Homer and other ancient inspired poets were unfit to describe the achievements of the philosophic warriors of antediluvian Athens in their war with Atlantis.

But when we turn to Origen's greater fellow-student of Ammonius, Plotinus, the picture is rather different. There is a good deal of evidence in the Enneads that he shared the general conviction that philosophic wisdom was to be found allegorically expressed in ancient poetry and mythology. But, as Cilento has shown[17], this was not a matter of much importance to

[15] Fr. 1 a and b des Places (9 a and b Leemans): 8 des Places (17 Leemans).

[16] Proclus In Tim 19 D-E. I 63, 24 ff. Diehl (=fr. 10 Weber). Origen's views (though not necessarily his emotionalism about them) were shared by the conservative Platonist Longinus (l.c.) The following comments by Porphyry and Proclus are interesting. Porphyry clearly did not in this context regard Homer as a philosophical authority (though he takes him considerably more seriously in the De Antro Nympharum). Proclus's concluding settlement of the question is an excellent example of the calm ingenuity with which the later Neoplatonists reconciled sacred texts and showed to their own satisfaction that there was really no quarrel between poetry and philosophy, Homer and Plato.

[17] "Mito e Poesia nelle Enneadi di Plotino" Entretiens Hardt V (Les Sources de Plotin) (Vandoeuvres-Genève 1960) pp. 245–310.

him. And the story of how he tried to go East to study Persian and Indian philosophy suggests that he also shared the general belief in ancient Oriental wisdom[18], though there is very little trace of this in the Enneads[19], and again it does not seem to have been very important to him. As regards philosophy earlier than Plato, his casual references to the Pre-Socratics suggest that he thought that Plato had improved on them very considerably. His attitude to Pythagoras is particularly interesting. For Numenius before him, and for Porphyry and still more Iamblichus after him, that comparatively ancient sage was a traditional authority if anything more venerable, though less universal, than Plato. Pythagoreanism and Platonism formed a single tradition of which the true founder was Pythagoras. But Plotinus twice attacks views which he knows to be attributed to the Pythagoreans – their identification of time with the whole heaven and the famous soul-harmony doctrine.[20] In neither case does he commit himself to saying that the Pythagoreans actually held the views attributed to them by others, and in the second he says clearly that he thinks they have been misunderstood. But he makes no attempt to expound or defend what he considers to be the true Pythagorean doctrines, and is clearly not very much interested in them. And in another passage, from the treatise On the Descent of the Soul[21], in the course of a very rapid survey of Pre-Socratic views on the fall of the soul, he remarks that the "the riddling statements of Pythagoras and his followers on this and many other matters" are no clearer than those of Empedocles (though of course Empedocles makes himself still more obscure by writing poetry). This is hardly even polite to Pythagoras, and suggests an attitude to Pythagoreanism rather more like that of Aristotle than that of Iamblichus. Plotinus was a firm traditionalist in the ancient manner, but it does not seem that he thought that the oldest philosophy was always the best. His one traditional authority in the full sense, the one ancient sage with whom he does not consider it permissible to disagree, is Plato.[22] And it is important to notice that even the more extreme admirers of remote antiquity refer to the most ancient wisdom to confirm, not to criticise, their much more recent supreme traditional authority, who always remains central and uniquely important, and is never thought of as declining from or distorting the primeval Logos.

[18] Porphyry Life ch. 3, 15–17.

[19] In the most important passage, the observation on hieroglyphics in V 8 (31) 6 he is careful to leave the question open whether the sages of ancient Egypt arrived at their admirable representation of the non-discursiveness of the intelligible world *ἀκριβεῖ ἐπιστήμῃ . . . εἴτε καὶ συμφύτῳ* (1–2).

[20] III 7 (45) 2 and 8: IV 7 (1) 84.

[21] IV 8 (6) 1, 17–22.

[22] I have discussed the attitude of Plotinus to Plato at some length in my "Tradition, Reason and Experience in the Thought of Plotinus" Plotino e il Neoplatonismo in Oriente e in Occidente (Rome 1974) pp. 171–194 [= Plotinian and Christian Studies XVII] and given some reasons for doubting Professor Rist's view that Plotinus did occasionally think it permissible to disagree with Plato (pp. 178–180).

Christian attemps to appeal back to the primeval revelation in its pure form in the Jewish Scriptures from the garbled versions given by the Greek philosophers were very ill received by their pagan contemporaries, just as Christians were not best pleased when Jews or pagans suggested that their religion was a recent perversion of the ancient Jewish tradition.

The traditionalism of the Christians of our period and later centuries is first of all to be attributed to the fact that they were men of their age and shared its spirit and outlook. What Dr. Meijering has so well demonstrated about the Father's adaption of certain contemporary ideas [23] applies with even more force to their traditionalist outlook. As he says "One does not choose a 'Zeitgeist', but the 'Zeitgeist' has us in its grip whether we like it or not." [24] As a result of their necessarily independent and hostile attitude to Hellenic pagan rites and the Jewish ceremonial law they were not bound in the same way as their pagan contemporaries by the instinctive traditionalism of Mediterranean societies in matters of religious practice which I mentioned earlier.[25] This contrast became more marked, as far as the philosophers were concerned, in the fourth and succeeding centuries when the last pagan Platonists committed themselves to the defence of all the antique cults and observances of Mediterrranean paganism. But as far as thought was concerned the Christians were as traditionalist as any of their contemporaries. They looked back to a supreme traditional authority with which they held that it was not permissible to disagree even more clearly and firmly than the pagans. And they were convinced, and demonstrated at great length, that the teachings of this supreme authority, the teachings of Christ and his Apostles recorded in the New Testament, were in all essentials the same as those of the Old Testament, the most ancient of Oriental traditions going back to a time long before the earliest of the poets whom the pagans regarded as inspired, and making by comparison Greek philosophy seem, when this was required for apologetic purposes, a very modern and dubious affair. The Christians, as is well known, were very conscious of the apologetic advantage which their claim to possess an immemorial Oriental wisdom gave in their world, and asserted and exploited it to the full. But it would be a grave misjudgement to dismiss the Christian conviction of the unity of the Testaments as nothing more than the result of the spirit of the age or as a successful apologetic device. There were deep religious reasons for it, of which controversy with Gnostics and Marcionites made Christians of the Great Church fully conscious. To maintain the unity of the revealed tradition from the beginning was for them to maintain the unity of God's action in the world. It meant that the Redeemer was also the Creator: that the same God, the same Logos and

[23] In the papers collected in his God Being History (Amsterdam-Oxford-New York 1975): cp. also his earlier book Orthodoxy and Platonism in Athanasius (Leiden 1968).

[24] op cit. "What could be the Relevance" p. 150.

[25] p. 419. This sort of instinctive traditionalism, of course, asserted itself with great force in the Church of later centuries.

the same Spirit had acted, spoken, given life and inspired in the beginning and throughout all the ages who continued to do so with even greater fulness and clarity in the new dispensation. This was the orthodox Christians' essential defence in principle against the absolute supernaturalism of the Gnostics, the complete dichotomy between the life of the elect and the irrelevant, futile or evil world in which they found themselves: and it could be the foundation of a very positive attitude to God's good creation and magnificent hope of its total redemption: though it must be admitted that very orthodox Christians who were horrified by Gnostic or Marcionite theology have not infrequently adopted an attitude of practical Gnosticism towards God's creation, or considerable parts of it. Irenaeus' superb exposition of this great theme is well known: and it has recently been very precisely discussed and compared with relevant aspects of the thought of Plotinus in one of the best of Meijering's excellent articles on Irenaeus.[26] It will therefore be unnecessary to discuss it further here, except perhaps to comment briefly on Meijering's mild criticism of some remarks of my own, in a comparison of pagan Neoplatonist and Christian attitudes to the cosmos which I offered in honour of Professor J. H. Waszink.[27] I had detected in general in the Christian thought of the first three centuries and later, as compared with the Platonism of Plotinus, a certain shift of religious emphasis from the natural to the ecclesiastical cosmos resulting in a new and radical sort of religious anthropocentrism, which I suspect may have had far-reaching and rather undesirable consequences. Meijering is undoubtedly right in implying that I should have paid more explicit attention to the doctrine of the unity of Creation and Redemption which he and Irenaeus expound so well: and he is also right in drawing attention to the obvious fact, which I omitted to mention, that the Christians, though they disagree with the Platonists, agree with the Stoics in their anthropocentric view of Divine Providence[28] (this may possibly have had some influence on the monstrous development of theoretical and practical anthropocentrism in post-Renaissance European thought, in the teeth of the discoveries of modern science about the universe and man's place in it). But it still seems to me to be possible that I might have been right as well: that even given the noble doctrine of Irenaeus, and given that it was shared by many other Christian teachers and preached to the faithful of many Christian congregations, the material cosmos as a whole might still have had less religious relevance for Christians than for pagan Platonists, and that there may have been, even in these first centuries, a perhaps at first small but decisive shift towards a "churchy" view of the sacred.

[26] "God Cosmos History" Vigiliae Christianae 28. 4. December 1974 pp. 248–276, reprinted in God Being History pp. 52–80.

[27] "Man in the Cosmos" Romanitas et Christianitas ed. W. den Boer et al. (Amsterdam-London 1973) [= Plotinian and Christian Studies XXII].

[28] H. Chadwick, Origen Contra Celsum (Cambridge[2] 1965) X f.

Though the Christians had such deep and good reasons for maintaining the unity of their tradition back to the primal revelation, and found such apologetic advantage in the maintenance of its antiquity, they were of course even more effectively safeguarded than the pagan philosophers from any unthinking assumption that the oldest was always the best. They were as unshakably convinced of the immeasurably superior fulness and power of the revelation given in Christ Incarnate and recorded in the New Testament to that given in the Old as they were of the essential unity and continuity of the two. Their supreme traditional authority was both noticeably more recent and far more authoritative in comparison with earlier utterances of the universal Logos than any great classical Greek philosopher, even Pythagoras or Plato, could seem to the most devoutly traditionalist pagan contemporary. I do not propose at this point, or any other, to make much of the sharp distinction which some might wish to introduce between the authority of "revelation" for the Christians and "reason", even of the most venerable traditionally guaranteed sort, for the philosophers. To do so would, I think, misrepresent the position of the ancient philosophers, who, in our period certainly, and quite often before, were not "rationalists" in any sense in which the word would naturally be used nowadays. The kind of spiritual or intellectual insight, possible only to those who were good as well as wise, which was alone the mark of real philosophical attainment among the ancients, went far beyond rationality as we usually conceive it, and was felt as a participation in and an illumination by the one divine Logos, however precisely it was conceived. Plotinus is the least "supernaturalist" of the Neoplatonists. But he was continually aware of the lifting love and enlightening radiance which came to him from the transcendent Good through the noetic world in which he felt himself rightfully at home. (The difficulties which a modern translator encounters in rendering the Greek word *Nous* perhaps indicate something of what is in question here.)[29] And Porphyry unhesitatingly attributes his master's philosophic attainment to divine guidance.[30] The later Neoplatonists after Iamblichus had a still more explicit sense of the need for divine help and guidance in philosophy, but to discuss their position and its implications would take us too far outside our limits. But for the pagan philosophers the action of God on the human mind is universal and continual; the divine light is always available to all men according to their capacity to attain it. Till we come to the later Neoplatonists, they do not think much in terms of particular revelations. And the Christians *were* thinking in terms of a particular revelation given to special groups of men, the old and the new Israel: groups, moreover, which were thought of in some way as representing the whole human race. We encounter here the paradox which has been a great source of strength to the Church in ancient times, as of increasing weakness in more modern ones: the universal claims of a society which in fact is, and always has been, obviously particular and peculiar. It was this vivid awareness of a recent particular revelation with universal claims which transcended and at the same time fulfilled and was continous with the earlier revelation which led to the development of the form which some early Christian thinkers gave to the general Judaeo-Christian conviction that God works out his purposes in human history. This was the great doctrine of God's gradual education of the human race through his progressive self-revelation, again best expounded by Irenaeus[31], and explicitly extended by Clement of Alexandria[32] to the divine education of the Greeks through philosophy, a doctrine which goes well beyond the classical Greek ideas of intellectual progress referred to earlier.

[29] cp. the interesting remarks of Cilento and others in Entretiens Hardt V pp. 421–425.

[30] Life ch. 23.

A distinction which is not always sufficiently clearly made in considering ancient traditionalism is that between the authority of the original teaching of the Founder of Church or School and the authority of the continuing tradition, the interpretation of that teaching in the church or school itself. It would be simple, but rather over-simplified, to dismiss the question of the differences here apparent between pagan philosophers and Christians by saying that the Church and a philosophical school are very different sorts of entities. This is true, but the differences between them are interesting and deserve a little closer examination in this context. In studying any philosophical school of our period, especially the Platonist, which was most important and about which we know most, we discover that though the authority of the Founder was absolute, the authority of school tradition was very slight indeed. Ancient philosophical traditionalism was not "scholastic" in any very meaningful sense of the word. The authority of the School was no sort of court of appeal. There was plenty of the "I read it in a book therefore it is true" sort of mentality about, and unintelligent and unoriginal people, then as now, simply reproduced what they had been taught or read. But the attitude of serious philosophers to their predecessors as well as their contemporaries in the School was highly independent and critical. It is now well established that this was the attitude of Plotinus to the commentators who were read at his lectures and the school traditon in general.[33] But the most interesting evidence here comes from Numenius, now so much more accessible to us thanks to the admirable new edition of the fragments by Professor des Places.[34] In the fragments which Eusebius has preserved of his acidulous and unfair, but penetrating and often entertaining book On the Disagreement of the Academics with Plato he shows himself an extreme

[31] Adv. Haer. IV 9, 11, 14, 20, 28. cp. Meijering art. cit. pp. 259–260 (pp. 63–64 of God Being History).

[32] e.g.: Strom. 1. 5, 28, 1 with its precise parallelism of the educative functions of Greek philosophy and the Jewish Law. cp. Salvatore Lilla Clement of Alexandria (Oxford 1971) ch. 1 where many further references are given.

[33] H. Dörrie "Plotino-Tradizionalista o Innovatore" Plotino e il Neoplatonismo (Rome 1974) 195–201 is one of the latest and best treatments of the subject.

[34] Paris 1973.

traditionalist in the sense in which the word has been used in this paper. He says of Plato's immediate successors *καὶ γὰρ με δάκνει ὅτι μὴ πᾶν ἔπαθον τε καὶ ἔδρων σώζοντες τῷ Πλάτωνι κατὰ πάντα πάντῃ πάσην ὁμοδοξίαν*.[35] And he goes on, very strikingly for a Platonist, to praise Epicureans for their devout and absolute fidelity to the teachings of their master and their condemnation of innovation as impiety.[36] It is clear that *ὁμοδοξία* with Pythagoras and Plato is as important to Numenius as *ὀρθοδοξία* to the most traditionalist Christian. But his attitude to the School is in the highest degree disrespectful. Any dogmatic and traditionalist Platonist would of course have had to repudiate the rather long sceptical period in the history of the Academy, and the fact that there had been this period may have affected the Platonic attitude to school tradition in general, though there is no evidence that it differed greatly from that of the other dogmatic schools. (The Epicureans, as Numenius remarks, claimed to have no distinct school tradition at all, but simply to preach from generation to generation nothing more or less than the pure gospel of the Founder). Numenius, however, extends his disapproval well beyond the Sceptical Academy. Antiochus, the restorer of dogmatic teaching in the school, is dismissed as an innovator.[37] And, more remarkably still, Plato's immediate successors, including his immediate disciples and close associates Speusippus and Xenocrates and Polemo, Xenocrates' convert, are accused of giving up a great many of Plato's ideas and distorting (*στρεβλοῦντες*) others[38] – though Numenius might have been expected to be sympathetic to them because of their Pythagoreanizing tendencies as well as their closeness to Plato. The traditionalism of Numenius, though rigid and absolute, is a traditionalism of return to the sources rather than of maintenance of a continuing tradition – one might almost speak of it anachronistically as a Liberal Protestant traditionalism.

It is fairly easy to see some reasons for the lack of authority of the continuing traditions of the philosophical schools in this very traditionalist age. The pursuit of philosophical wisdom was always an individual matter, the struggle to follow a personal vocation, though it was generally begun under the guidance of an often deeply revered master and carried on in a group of like-minded friends. The philosophical schools were never institutionalized even to the extent of the Churches of the first three centuries. There was nothing in late antiquity resembling a mediaval or modern university. And it is important to realise that the headship of such rudimentary institutions as there were (such as the Platonic Academy at Athens) or the holding of an official chair conferred no authority whatever on a philosopher. The Platonic Diadochi in the lifetime of Longinus and Plotinus were clearly quite insignificant persons who enjoyed no prestige of office among Platonists.[39]

[35] Fr. 24 (1 Leemans) p. 63, 16–18 des Places.
[36] l. c. lines 23–31.
[37] Fr. 28 (8 Leemans).
[38] Fr. 24 (1 L.) ad init. p. 62 des Places.
[39] Porphyry, Life chs. 15 and 20.

There were no philosophical bishops, no persons in the philosophical world who were recognised as having authority to teach, and special divine assistance to enable them to do so rightly, in virtue of their office. It is possible that European attitudes to official Christianity may have been considerably influenced by the existence at the beginning of this alternative, unofficial, individual way of thinking about and teaching religious truth and the remembrance and persistent revival of it in later centuries. The bishops have never had it quite their own way because there has always been at least the danger of an outbreak of philosophy in the ancient manner and attempts at inoculation with an episcopally approved philosophy have never been very successful.

We all know that on the Christian side things were very different, at least in the Great Church. The rather Epicurean view of tradition so well expounded by Irenaeus was generally accepted. Sects and heresies there had indeed been, perhaps from the beginning, but the main tradition had always been and remained one, uniform and unchanging. To discover what Christ and his Apostles (between whom difference was inconceivable) had truly meant to teach, one only needed to consult the contemporary teaching of the Churches; and this meant more and more clearly from the second century onwards the teaching of the bishops. There are many ways of looking at and accounting for this much greater emphasis on the community and its continuing tradition in the Christian Church than in the philosophical schools. One reason for it which seems to me important is that for the pagans God's self-revelation was natural and universal and needed no special body to carry it other than that of the cosmos and the whole community of its intelligent inhabitants, especially of course those of Hellenic culture. The great philosopher who was accepted as the authority in a particular school had seen with incomparable clarity what God had to say to men in the universe, but he had seen what in principle was available to all. But the Christians, as has been said before[40], were thinking in terms of a special revelation given at one particular time, and such a special revelation requires a particular body to carry it, and special divine assistance and safeguarding to ensure that it continues to be reproduced authentically in each succeeding generation: this is particularly important if the core of the revelation consists in a number of what are asserted to be historical facts, which must not be allegorized away or deprived of their true significance by a too free interpretation.

But, though great emphasis on the continuing tradition of the Church is indeed characteristic of the Christian thought of our period, ecclesiastical traditionalism was not yet as rigid as it became increasingly from the fourth century onwards. (To discuss the various reasons for this increasing rigidity and elaboration, and the rather similar rigidity and elaboration which developed in the pagan Platonic school of the fifth and sixth centuries would

[40] p. 424.

require another paper.) But the Church in our period had not so much to say authoritatively as it had later, and here and there, especially at Alexandria, a good deal of freedom is apparent in the attitude to what it did say. Clement of Alexandria and Origen the Christian are thoroughly traditionalist in the sense that they hold that all truth is contained in the doctrine of Christ preached by the Apostles and contained in the Scriptures and that no genuine seeker after truth can go outside or disagree with this inexhaustibly vast body of authoritative teaching, the letter of which, at least, is transmitted in the Church of which they are loyal members. But Origen, to a considerably greater extent than Clement, feels himself free to go very far beyond the ordinary elementary teaching of the Churches here below and their bishops, and does not take a very high view of these or regard their authority with profound respect.[41] He moves in the great world of the Scriptures with extraordinary freedom and confidence in his spiritual insight, and propounds original doctrines highly disconcerting to the ordinary Churchman with great assurance and absolute convinction that they represent the real meaning of Scripture. There is a certain likeness here to the freedom with which Plotinus handles Plato and the confidence which he has that his spiritual insight will enable him to attain the deepest truths of Platonic doctrine; though there are also important differences. Origen is much more concerned with detailed exegesis than Plotinus (he resembles Porphyry more closely here), though his methods are such that this does not inhibit his original insight. And there is another way in which a peculiar spirit of freedom seems to manifest itself in the teachings of the great pagan and the great Christian. In both the spirit of man can range freely through the spiritual universe from the summit to the lowest depths. There are of course most important differences between Origen's vision of the cyclic history of the community of free spirits and Plotinus' more static conviction that the self has no bounds or limits which it cannot transcend. But in both of them the spirit is free, able to transcend all limits till it reaches union with God[42], not fixed in its appropriate place in a rigid hierarchy. And I think that it is possible that this conviction of unlimited spiritual freedom may have something to do with the ease and freedom of their exegesis of traditionally authoritative texts.

[41] I find F. H. Kettler's view of Origen on the whole convincing. See his "Der ursprüngliche Sinn der Dogmatik des Origenes" (Berlin 1966). On Origen's attitude to the earthly Church ἡ νομιζομένη (or ὀνομαζομένη ἐκκλησία) cp. the mass of passages collected by Kettler from the works which survive in Greek in his enormous note 190 (pp. 48–51), and especially the passage from the Commentary on John on 4. 21 (worship in spirit and in truth, XIII 16. 240, 11 ff).

[42] W. Theiler has noted this characteristic of the thought of Origen, but makes no comparison with Plotinus, and because of his mistaken reliance on the Hierocles text in Photius as a source of information about Ammonius, makes it a point of separation between Ammonius and Origen: "Ammonios der Lehrer des Origenes" Forschungen zum Neuplatonismus, Berlin 1966) pp. 30 ff.

If it is really possible to detect an unusual spirit of freedom and originality which set Origen the Christian and Plotinus somewhat apart from their contemporaries, and made them both seem deplorable innovators and heretics to their more conservative traditionalist successors, it is tempting, though hazardous, to speculate that the man who taught them both, Ammonius, might have had something to do with it. During this last year a seminar at Dalhousie University, under my direction, set itself to examine the scanty evidence yet again in the faint hope that we might find some light on this mysterious figure. As was to be expected, we emerged from our studies knowing no more about any doctrines which Ammonius may have taught than Professor E.R. Dodds[43], that is to say next to nothing. But, considerably to our surprise, we found ourselves with a very vivid impression of the sort of man he might have been. We came to see him as a man of the highest spiritual attainment, what my Oriental friends, on whose help in understanding the thinkers of late antiquity I increasingly rely, call a "Mahatma" or a "Hakim": a man who, by example perhaps more than precept, inspired confidence in his pupils that it was posible to ascend to the summit of the spiritual world (however the nature of that summit and the reasons for that possibility were conceived, and these may have been matters which were discussed endlessly and inconclusively in his circle). With this may perhaps have gone a freedom in handling traditional texts which would be a natural consequence of his consciousness of spiritual achievement. This at least would have been the sort of man of whom Plotinus could have said τοῦτον ἐζήτουν, and with whom he could have stayed happily for eleven years[44]: and the sort of man who could have done something to bring out the spiritual confidence and powerful originality of Origen the Christian. (Origen the pagan, from what little we know about him, does not seem to have taken light from his master in the same way: but the closest associates of great philosophers do not always seem to appreciate their masters fully or share their deepest insights. Numenius was, after all, probably not so far wrong about Speusippus and Xenocrates.[45] Theophrastus was never very comfortable with Aristotle's metaphysics. And if we see Ammonius as a sort of late antique Socrates, we might see Origen the pagan as his Xenophon.)

I have given some reasons for not taking very much account of the distinction between "revelation" and "reason", except in the form of a distinction between a universal and continuous and a particular, once-for-all divine self-communication or self-manifestation. But it is important that we should take account of the distinction between "authority" and "reason", and I shall conclude this paper by discussing briefly how the traditionalist pagans and Christians of the first three centuries, and later, saw the relationship between the two. In this context I would define a reasonable man, one who

[43] "Numenius and Ammonius", Entretiens Hardt V, pp. 24–61 (with full discussion).

[44] Porphyry, Life ch. 3.

[45] above p. 426.

genuinely and seriously recognises the necessity of reason, as one who feels obliged to try to give an account of what he believes which is coherent and internally consistent and also in accord with all human experience which is available to him. In this sense I believe that the best and greatest thinkers, pagan and Christian, of our period and the succeeding traditionalist centuries, were eminently reasonable men. There were of course plenty of Christians in our period, of whom the best known example is Tertullian[46], who insisted very strongly on the weakness and corruption of human reason due to original sin and saw their traditional authority as opposed to, authoritative against, and overriding human reason. This is a position which it has always been tempting for Christians to adopt, and many less anti-rational Christians than Tertullian, men like the Cappadocian Fathers and Augustine, who did try very hard to make reasonable sense of the authoritative tradition, sometimes use this sort of language (it would be unkind, but not altogether untrue, to suggest that it is particularly attractive to controversialists when they get into intellectual difficulties and find themselves faced with rational arguments to which they cannot think of an answer). It is a position which can be (and frequently was) powerfully supported by the arguments from the disagreements of the philosophers so ingeniously used by the ancient Sceptics, which were particularly well set out in our period by Sextus Empiricus. But it is quite alien to the minds of any of the philosophers of late antiquity who made positive contributions to religious thought. It is not to be found in the later Neoplatonists, Iamblichus and his successors, who are so often unfairly accused of gross superstition and irrationalism. If we are to make a fair comparison between Christians and pagans and appreciate the real rational strength of ancient traditionalism we need to pay more attention to a very different view of the relation between authority and reason which is generally current in our period.

According to this, tradition is accepted as authoritative because in it is found the perfection of wisdom. It is assumed with complete confidence that whatever is found in the documents of traditional authority will, if properly investigated, turn out to be perfectly reasonable and, in all essentials, consistent. There can therefore be no question of a clash between reason and traditional authority: the two cannot be opposed. All important truths are to be found in the Scriptures or in Plato: and right interpretation of them will show that their teaching is both perfectly coherent in itself and alone adequate to give a reasonable account of all human experience. This seems to me to be the position of Plotinus and other pagan Neoplatonists, and Justin, Clement and Origen and, on the whole, of most of the most intelligent traditional Christians in succeeding centuries. It is important, if justice is to be done to them that this should be fully understood.[47] They are not traditionalists or authoritarians in a way which requires the conscious perversion of reason to comply with the demands of traditional authority. When confronted with a piece of apparent nonsense in the tradition, they do not accept it as higher sense, or ineffably superior to sense. They, so to speak, take hold of it by the scruff of the neck and shake it till it makes sense. They apply whatever exegetical violence is necessary to produce an interpretation in accordance with reason. Their confidence in the total reasonableness of the traditional authority is absolute and unbounded, and their confidence in their own ability to interpret its teachings in the only rational, and therefore the only right, way, is hardly less so. This absolute confidence at once in authority and reason is the source of the intellectual strength and creativity of the Fathers and the great philosophers of their age.[48] But it is a confidence which most of us cannot share. We are too deeply affected by a sense of historical relativity to accept the teaching of any traditional authority as absolutely definitive and all-sufficient and we are too vividly conscious of our own relativity and limitations to believe that our methods will bring us to final and universal truth. Whatever we learn from the ancients, and I believe that we can learn very much, will have to be received in a spirit of honest tentativeness and perennially questioning uncertainty which would have horrified our teachers.

[46] See e.g. De Praescriptione Haereticorum 6–12.

[47] This and the four sentences immediately following are taken from my Rome paper, Tradition, Reason and Experience in the Thought of Plotinus, p. 173.

[48] Something should be said here about the very different attitude of the great Galen, esteemed by his contemporaries as a philosopher as well as a physician, at the end of the 2nd century A.D. This has been admirably discussed and documented by R. Walzer in his well known and often quoted Galen on Jews and Christians (Oxford 1949). Galen was certainly not a traditionalist in the sense in which the word has been used in this paper and could, as Walzer abundantly shows, be called a "Hellenic rationalist" without further explanation or qualification. But Walzer was rather inclined to see Galen as more typical of the pagan Hellenic thought of his own period and the preceding century than I think that he actually was. Galen himself was fully conscious that his independent-mindedness, his explicit refusal to give unqualified allegiance to any tradition, philosophical or medical, was most uncommon in his own time. This is particularly clear in the passage De pulsuum differentiis iii 3: VIII 656. 8 Kuehn so well discussed by Walzer (pp. 37 ff.). And I think that anything like it had been uncommon and untypical for some considerable time before him: it did not represent the attitude of most professed philosophers. As for Walzer's very interesting discussion of possible Galenic influence on Theodotus and his group of Monarchians at Rome (ch. III, p. 75 ff), it does not seem to show that they were not traditionalists in the sense in which the word has been used here. Even if we accept as exact everything said by the heresiologists about their Hellenizing rationalism, it only shows them as engaging in just the sort of exegesis which has just been described, with all the help which Hellenic logic could give them. And their alleged passion for emending the text of the Scriptures is in its way a sign of extreme traditionalism. If the sacred and authoritative text cannot be made by the most vigorous exegesis to give a thoroughly reasonable sense, then the text as it stands in the available MSS cannot be correct. It must therefore be emended till it does give a reasonable sense.