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Ancient scepticism and ancient religion

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The ancient Pyrrhonists claim that scepticism does not lead to conflict with the living of ordinary life, and in this they include the practice of religion. I am pleased to explore some aspects of this issue in this paper in honour of Jonathan Barnes. Jonathan's work has for many years dazzled us with its brilliance and scholarship, and has never been dull. We are especially in his debt for his work on the ancient Pyrrhonists, including Sextus Empiricus' strange claim that they are on the side of ordinary life. In the process of our joint translating of Sextus' *Outlines of Scepticism* I learned a lot from the intellectual companionship of a brilliant and rare mind, and it was great fun. The present paper is a feeble attempt at thanks, presenting to Jonathan a study combining two themes which I hope are still of interest to him: scepticism and religion.

In Diogenes Laertius' *Life of Pyrrho* we find, among the stories illustrating the idea that Pyrrho lived a normal life consistently with his philosophy, the claim that he became a high priest in his home town of Elis.¹ (Also, though I shall not be talking about the Academics, it is interesting that when Cicero in his dialogue *The Nature of the Gods* needs a character to attack arguments for the existence of the gods he chooses Aurelius Cotta, who values his traditional priesthood. Cotta even says: 'No words from any person, whether learned or unlearned, will ever budge me from the views which I inherited from our ancestors concerning the worship of the immortal gods.'²)

Sextus twice gives arguments for and against the existence of the gods, at *M* IX 11–194 and *PH* III 2–12. Each time he claims that the sceptic, who comes to suspension of judgement on this, will lead an ordinary religious life.³ At *M* IX 49, he says that the sceptic will be *safer* than other philosophers, since 'in conformity with his ancestral customs and the laws he declares that the gods exist, and performs everything which contributes to their worship and veneration, but, so far as concerns philosophic

¹ Diogenes Laertius (1999), IX, 62, 64.

² Cicero (1999), III 5; cf. I 61.

³ As is standard, *M* refers to *Adversus Mathematicos* VII–XI, and *PH* to the three books of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. All translations from the latter are taken from Annas and Barnes (2000).

investigation, declines to commit himself rashly.⁴ At *PH* III 2 he says, ‘following ordinary life (*bios*) without opinions (*adoxastos*) we say that there are gods and we are pious towards the gods and say that they are provident: it is against the rashness of the Dogmatists that we make the following points’.

So for Sextus, religion can be part of the sceptic’s life—one in which he refrains from rash assent to dogmatic claims and lives *adoxastos*, without opinions. I will not here proceed to take a stand on the issue of what kind of opinion or belief, if any, the sceptic can have (an issue on which Jonathan has famously contributed). Rather, I want to explore scepticism about religion as itself a contribution to this issue of belief.

To us it may seem strange to claim that religion, of all things, can be a genuine part of a sceptical life—a life in which you suspend judgement about whether God exists and which is lived *adoxastos*, without opinions. In a recent discussion, Alan Bailey claims that Sextus’ claim is deeply unsatisfactory: ‘If the Pyrrhonist does not have the belief that a divine being exists, then his participation in religious worship would seem to be little more than a piece of hypocrisy and dissimulation.’ Hence Bailey claims that Sextus is misleading: all he means is that the Pyrrhonist ‘can be relied upon, in the right cultural setting, to perform the characteristic actions associated with religious believers’.⁵ He can go through the motions; but he cannot retain the ordinary religious beliefs.⁶

Bailey is too quick here. If we look at the nature of ancient pagan religion we can see that Sextus’ claim that the sceptic can lead an ordinary religious life has more plausibility than we may at first suspect.⁷ I will first set out some distinctive points about ancient pagan religion, and then look at the relation of positive philosophical thought about religion (the ideas of Sextus’ dogmatists) to religious beliefs and practices. Then I will return to scepticism and its impact on religious belief and practice.

Ancient pagan religion is polytheistic: there is not just one god, but many, with different functions which overlap and can conflict. It is also pluralist. Pagans were aware that religions were culturally specific. One’s own was not the only religion, and different religions were not seen as excluding one another. Greeks were aware that different Greek cities had different major gods, and that other peoples had religions of entirely different forms. The Egyptians had theriomorphic rather than anthropomorphic gods, the Persians’ religion was aniconic, and so on. These religions, belonging to different people, were not seen as competing. Ancient pagans felt no need, nor urge, to proselytize, worshippers of a different or foreign religion were not seen as heathen in need of conversion, and members of pagan religions saw no need to suppress or to persecute members of others. Indeed, for pagans the gods of other people were seen as the *easiest* part of those cultures to understand; they functioned as

⁴ Sextus (1968). ⁵ Bailey (2002), p. 193.

⁶ This is also the ‘rustic Pyrrhonist’ interpretation of these passages; see Barnes (1997), p. 85.

⁷ For an interesting and historically sensitive discussion of ancient sceptical arguments about religion, see Knuutila and Sihvola (2000).

what Jan Assmann has called ‘a means of intercultural translatability . . . The different peoples worshipped different gods, but nobody contested the reality of foreign gods and the legitimacy of foreign forms of worship.’⁸ In cases where ancient Greek and Roman pagans did persecute members of other religions, the reasons were not religious ones.⁹

From the classical period to the late Roman empire we can notice two developments of this general attitude. One is syncretism, the identification of gods from different traditions—as, for example, the Romans identified the native British goddess Sul with Minerva when they turned her mineral spring into a Roman spa.¹⁰ The other is the practice of adding several religions to one’s own original one without subtracting any. A spectacular example of this is to be found in the funeral inscription of Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, who died as consul-designate in 384 AD. He was a member of two of the ancient Roman priesthoods, as well as holding a more recent priesthood and being an augur—an expert in interpreting signs from the gods. He had been initiated into the Eastern cult of the Great Mother, the rites of the Greek goddess Hecate, and the cult of the Persian god Mithras, as well as being a priest of Hercules and of the Egyptian god Sarapis.¹¹ Less striking (and less expensive) examples of this phenomenon are easily to be found.

How can different religions *not* exclude one another? Obviously, they compete for the worshipper’s time, energy, and money. But do they import a conflict of beliefs? Clearly, for ancient pagans they did not. In their case, let us distinguish *religious beliefs* (somewhat different from what we expect of religious beliefs). These are culturally specific beliefs about Athena, Mithras, and Isis, about animal sacrifice, vows, dedications, temples, and so on. They differ from what I shall call *theological beliefs*, which are beliefs about the gods, God, or the divine (*hoi theoi, ho theos, to theion*), where this is taken to be about something universal and cross-cultural. (This is obviously not the only way of distinguishing religious from theological beliefs, and I make no claim for the distinction beyond the use which I make of it in this paper.)

What is the relation, in ancient pagan religion, between religious and theological beliefs? It might seem, from the above brief characterization, that ancient pagan religious beliefs must have implied the theological belief that there is a divine being, God (*ho theos*) or the divine (*to theion*), of which different religions present different representations. Ancient pagan religious belief and practice, however, do not from the start presuppose anything as robust as a commitment to a cross-cultural belief about the divine over and above one’s own culturally specific religious beliefs. Rather, ancient

⁸ Assmann (1997), p. 3. The book is very illuminating about the differences made to this attitude by monotheism.

⁹ Antiochus Epiphanes’ persecution of the Jews and the Romans’ persecution of the Christians were based on perceived disloyalty to rulers. The Roman suppression of Bacchic rites and Druidism was based on the alleged practices of sexual orgies and human sacrifice. More could be said about all these cases, but they are clearly different from the persecuting practices of the monotheistic religions.

¹⁰ See Beard, North, and Price (1998), 2.9. *Aquae Sulis* is now Bath.

¹¹ *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* VI 1778. See Beard, North, and Price (1998), 8.9.

paganism before late antiquity is best understood by noting that for ancient pagans different religions—to a greater or lesser extent, more or less easily—are intercomprehensible. Pagans are committed to their own religion, and they accept and—to a greater or lesser extent, more or less easily—recognize others and understand them as forms of religion. This falls well short of commitment to claims which hold cross-culturally, still less to such claims which might explain the intercomprehensibility. Noticing that there are different languages, but that they are intertranslatable, you might have a vague idea that there is something behind this—perhaps even something explaining it—but have no commitment to its nature or indeed to their being any *one* such item. Similarly, ancient pagans could hold and act upon their own religious beliefs, and notice that they could understand very different religious beliefs, without being committed to a further, different sort of claim: that God or the divine exists and has a certain nature, this being taken as universal, cross-cultural claim, perhaps capable of explaining the intercomprehensibility of the different religious beliefs.

In later antiquity we can see pagans becoming ever more self-conscious on this issue. Different religions do come to be seen as culturally different ways of expressing something which cannot be adequately expressed by any one of them alone. Maximus of Tyre, in *Oration 2*, discusses the different kinds of representation found among different peoples, and concludes that it is indifferent which one uses, since humans cannot understand the nature of God and thus are limited to their own particular traditions, while recognizing that no tradition on its own is adequate.¹² Plutarch, in *Isis and Osiris*, makes similar remarks.¹³ We should note that this position does not imply relativism about different religions. Particular religions differ about some matters—for example, the type of images of the gods that they use—but this in no way implies that each side is speaking within a cultural framework cut off from the other. There can even be rational comparative evaluations between religions. Maximus, for example, criticizes Egyptians for worshipping gods in the form of animals, as do many Greeks, who think that the gods should be shown in human form. And there is a minor competing strain of pagan thought which criticizes Greek and Roman anthropomorphic representation of the gods as immature, and commends the aniconic worship of the Persians and Jews.¹⁴

Once Christians enter the debate, pagans have to argue even more explicitly. So we find in anti-Christian writers such as Celsus and the Emperor Julian the

¹² Maximus of Tyre (1997). Cf. Dio Chrysostom (1995), *Discourse* 31.11, who argues that honouring one god does not, as with humans, exclude the honour given to others. Cf. also Celsus (1987) pp. 115–16.

¹³ Plutarch (1970), *Isis and Osiris* 377f–378a. Different peoples honour the same governing reason in different ways, just as they have differing names for the sun and moon.

¹⁴ Cicero (1997) II 70–72, on the Stoic view that early humans had a more direct conception of God than did people in more culturally developed societies, who have possibly misleading images of, and myths about, the gods. Cf. Dio Chrysostom (1993), *Discourse* 12 (who still gives a qualified defence of anthropomorphic images), and Varro in Augustine (*City of God* IV 31), who claims that for the first 170 years of Rome's history the Romans worshipped the gods without images, comparing the Jews. Whatever the historicity of these claims, it is clear that the idea of an idealized past with aniconic worship has great appeal.

Apostate¹⁵ the claim that religions are non-exclusive because they are all versions of an original universal cross-cultural truth about the divine, of which different cultures produce different expressions. As Celsus expresses it, there is an original ‘true doctrine’ (*alethes logos*) of which different religions provide different representations, while wise men of every nation have tried to understand the true doctrine itself. Hence ‘it matters not a bit what one calls the supreme God—or whether one uses Greek names or Indian names or the names used formerly by the Egyptians’.¹⁶

This idea certainly does not rule out the position that one or more religions have got things wrong. Celsus uses it to argue against Christianity; but later the tables were turned, with Christian writers arguing that it is Judaism and then Christianity which is the most faithful expression of ancient wisdom, while it is paganism which is the wrong turning and thus the awful mistake.¹⁷ By this point, it is clear that defenders of paganism are self-consciously accepting and defending a full-blown theological belief about the divine.

Prior to self-conscious confrontation with monotheistic religion, however, ancient pagans could live a religious life and have what I have called religious beliefs, while not holding beliefs or *dogmata* as Sextus describes them at *PHI* 13: ‘assent to some unclear object of investigation’.¹⁸ His claim at *PH* III 2, that the sceptic will live a religious life ‘without opinions’ (*adoxastos*), is joined there and in the *M* passage by the claim that the sceptic will avoid the rashness of the dogmatists and the philosophers. In terms of the distinction made above, the sceptic will suspend judgement on theological beliefs, which will be *dogmata*, but can retain religious beliefs, which are not. Religious beliefs, in the terms of the present distinction, are not about unclear matters. There is nothing unclear about the cult of Athena, say, and the practices and beliefs that go with it. Indeed, since religious beliefs are embedded in a cultural context: they will present themselves to the sceptic less as matters of commitment than as something he accepts because he belongs to a particular culture. What is there to question, or to commit yourself to, about the cult of Athena, if you are an Athenian? This may be why Sextus presents religious life as an *easy*, obvious example of the sceptical life at *PHI* 24: ‘By the handing down of customs and laws, we accept, from an everyday point of view, that piety is good and impiety bad.’

Does the account just presented imply that ancient pagans were insincere or hypocritical in their religious beliefs? Clearly not. Athenian devotion to Athena was

¹⁵ See Origen (1953), and, for a reconstruction, Celsus (1987). Cf. Frede (1994) and (1997); Julian (1923), *Against the Galileans*.

¹⁶ Celsus (1987) p. 56.

¹⁷ This idea often takes a chronological form—the oldest version of ancient wisdom being the most authentic; hence the Jewish and Christian anxiety to produce a chronology proving them to be older than the mainstream classical culture. See Boys-Stones (2001), Part II.

¹⁸ This could also be the position of an unreflective pagan, even at a period when reflective pagans were working out responses to Christianity. (After Constantine it was difficult for pagans to be unreflective on the issue. One of the most famous statements of the position that there is more than one route to understanding the divine comes from the pagan senator Symmachus, on the occasion when Christian authorities removed the altar of Victory from the Roman Senate House.)

not undermined by knowledge that Persians and Egyptians did not worship her. It never occurred to the Athenians to try to convert Persians and Egyptians to the worship of Athena, but again this does not mean that they were tepid or unconvinced in their own observances. Indeed, in late antiquity it seems to have been the more, not the less devout who shopped around for many religions. Sincere pagan religious belief can flourish in the absence of commitment to, or indeed any interest in, specific theological beliefs. This does not turn it into a detached attitude—a mere going through the motions. To assume, as many modern scholars do, that it can only be mindless routine cuts us off from exploring an interesting example of what Sextus takes to be the sceptic's life 'without opinions' and with no commitment to *dogmata*.

What is the relation to religious beliefs and practices of positive philosophical thought—the contributions of Sextus' dogmatists? Most philosophers from the Presocratics onwards theorize about the divine. Presocratic philosophers tend to think that the fundamental principle of the universe, whatever that turns out to be, is divine. Aristotle, the Epicureans, and the Stoics all discuss God or the divine at great length. It is clear that in terms of the above distinction they are discussing theological rather than religious beliefs. 'Theology' occurs as a part of philosophical systems, falling under the 'physical' part once this distinction is made, and corresponding in contemporary terms to part of metaphysics.

It is striking that philosophical theology is not directed towards removing or reforming ordinary religious beliefs. The Stoics, for example, argue that God is properly to be understood as the active principle in the entire universe—a conclusion which on the face of it would seem to imply that popular polytheistic beliefs are drastically wrong and confused. Yet their theology contains within itself no drive to change popular beliefs. Indeed, they go in for strategies of allegorizing and the use of etymology in order to show that popular religious beliefs are versions, though dim and confused, of philosophical truths about the divine. Bizarre myths in Homer and Hesiod are not rejected, but are rather interpreted as childish attempts to formulate metaphysical truths, and regarded as the best that a feeble level of understanding can do.

Furthermore, philosophers, even when their theological conclusions would appear to conflict with popular religious beliefs and practices, see no real conflict, and take care to conform to traditional religious practice. Epicurus' views about the gods centrally include the thought that they are unconcerned with humans—a position which would appear to make prayer and sacrifice a waste of time. Yet Epicurus was personally pious, and his followers took pains to establish that he was in no way trying to undermine any aspect of the worship of the gods.¹⁹ Rather than reject popular religion, he tries to reinterpret what it is that worshippers are achieving: for an Epicurean it increases psychological tranquillity, rather than pleasing gods, but the worship itself is fully accepted.

¹⁹ Cf. Obbink (1989) and (1996).

Aristotle is a particularly revealing example here. He argues at length that God is properly to be thought of as the unmoved mover of the cosmos, sustaining all activity and movement in the universe, but itself moved by nothing further, functioning by attraction like an object of love, and thinking only of itself, not of any mundane happenings within the cosmos. This could hardly seem further from popular religious beliefs about many conflicting gods interacting with humans. Aristotle says that popular beliefs contain a dim grasp of truth only insofar as they count the heavenly bodies as divine. The rest, however, he adds calmly, is just myth to persuade people to behave.²⁰ This is an extremely detached attitude, and elsewhere we find Aristotle taking an almost sociological approach to the form which Greek religion takes. Monarchy, he says, used to be the usual form of human government, and that is why the gods are taken to have a king, since humans ascribe their own ways of life, as well as their human form, to the gods.²¹ But it is notable that on the everyday level Aristotle's engagement with religion seems unaffected. In his will he leaves money for setting up large, expensive stone statues to Zeus and Athena the Saviours in Stagira, in fulfilment of a vow that he made for Nicanor's safe return.²² In his ethical and political works, religion figures as an important part of civic life, but he shows no desire to reform or improve people's beliefs about it, even in his ideal state.

There is one great exception here: Plato. In the *Laws*, Plato insists that membership in the political community requires correct beliefs about the gods. This clearly requires an implicit or, if challenged, explicit acceptance of some theological beliefs—in fact, very specific and determinate theological beliefs. All citizens, Plato demands, must have the same, correct beliefs about the divine. Moreover, these beliefs do require reform of religious practice; public worship is stripped of many elements and made uniform, and private worship is forbidden. What is relevant here is that this differs strongly from other pagan philosophical thought, and that it is no accident that just this commended Plato to Jewish and Christian thinkers, whose view of the relation of religious to theological beliefs was entirely different from that of pagans.

Apart from Plato's theories, philosophers' theories about the divine are not taken to undermine, or to demand the removal or modification of, popular religious beliefs and practices. Everyday religious life is taken to be self-standing. This may at first seem like arbitrary insulation of religion from theory, but it does not have to be seen that way. Rather, we have seen that we can more naturally make sense of it in terms of the distinction between religious and theological beliefs. Religious beliefs can be

²⁰ 'The rest of the tradition has been added later in mythical form with a view to the persuasion of the multitude and to its use in legal and expedient matters; they say these gods are in the form of humans or like some of the other animals' *Metaphysics* XII 8, 1074 a 38–b 10, from Aristotle (1984), with slight alterations. At *Nicomachean Ethics* X 8 he similarly distinguishes anthropomorphic beliefs from beliefs he takes to be true of the divine: namely, that the gods are blessed and active.

²¹ *Politics* 1252b 19–27. No other ancient thinker of whom I am aware notices the significance of the fact that Aristotle notices a cultural time-lag here.

²² Diogenes Laertius (1999), V 16. He also provides for the setting-up of a statue of, or for, his mother, dedicated to Demeter.

sincerely and even intensely held in the absence of theological belief; commitment to theological belief does not produce a direct impact on religious belief. Philosophical theories are seen as attempts to understand and explain the nature of the divine, and are seen as neither supporting nor undermining particular religious beliefs.²³ Aristotle's theory that the divine is the Unmoved Mover thus neither supports nor undermines his setting up statues to Zeus and Athena the Saviours. The latter practice is a culturally specific one; the theory makes cross-cultural claims about the divine, of which the culturally specific practice is one representation among others. Aristotle did not expect anyone but Greeks to set up statues to Zeus and Athena the Saviours; but he aimed to show, not that God was the Unmoved Mover for Greeks (whatever that might mean), but that God was the Unmoved Mover. God, of course, is something that Greeks and others represent in culturally specific ways. Interestingly, the Unmoved Mover idea has been held by not only polytheists but by monotheists in the Jewish, Christian, and Moslem traditions, so it clearly does have very considerable cross-cultural acceptability.

Since many philosophers produced theories of a theological nature about the divine as part of their cosmological and metaphysical theories, it is not surprising that we find philosophical disagreement about the divine. This is, for Sextus, where the trouble starts. In his two sections on God in *PH* and *M* he argues at great length about the conception we have of the divine, and presents arguments for and against the claim that God exists. The arguments are about theological rather than religious issues. God is, in both works, introduced in the section on physics, under the heading of the active as opposed to the passive cause, and so is in a theoretical framework to begin with. This is a highly metaphysical context in which to bring in God. Sextus' treatment in fact reflects Stoic thinking; many of the positive arguments for the existence of God are Stoic ones, and many of the counter-arguments come from the sceptical Academy. There is considerable overlap between Sextus' material here and the arguments in books 2 and 3 of Cicero's *The Nature of the Gods*. We find especial emphasis on Stoic arguments from the rationally ordered condition of the universe to the existence of active rational ordering, and in the counter-arguments we find ones which use the Stoic forms of argument to draw absurd conclusions. Sextus also, like Cicero, includes Carneades' sorites argument. As usual, he makes extensive use of philosophers' disagreements among themselves.

The people whom Sextus has in mind here, as victims of dogmatic rashness, are people who have begun to follow philosophers' arguments about theological matters, and who thus are worried about whether God is material or immaterial, and whether

²³ The Presocratics Heraclitus and Xenophanes may seem to be exceptions here, since both give apparently debunking accounts of religious practices and ceremonies (Heraclitus B 5, B 15, Xenophanes B 14 and B 15 DK). We have no indication, however, that they intended to abolish or reform these practices; they are merely pointing to the dim level of understanding of the divine that popular religion expresses, as opposed to their own more profound theological understanding. We have no reason to think that they, as opposed to the Christian writers who retail these fragments, intended their theological claims to *undermine* actual religious belief and practice. Sextus is happy to retail Xenophanes' *ethical* criticisms of the gods (see below).

God is the rational ordering of the universe. Sextus claims, as usual, that these and all arguments for and against the existence of God under any conception turn out to be equipollent in force, so that the sceptic who follows them all through ends up suspending judgement about whether or not God, or the gods, exist. As we have seen, he describes the result, at *MIX* 49, in an interesting way: the sceptic will be ‘safer’ than those who philosophize otherwise. This is because he will live an ordinary religious life, saying that gods exist and doing everything relevant to worshipping and venerating them in accordance with his community’s customs and laws. He will, however, make no rash commitments with respect to philosophical investigation.

Such a person will not, for example, commit himself to Aristotle’s view that God is the Unmoved Mover. He will be aware of the force of the arguments against this and other theories, and so will reject the claim to truth of any philosophical theory about God’s existence—any claim, that is, to universal, cross-cultural truth about God. He will not, of course, claim that no such account is true—that there are no true universal and cross-cultural claims about God’s existence. That would be shutting down the investigation, and that would also be premature commitment. The sceptic is therefore still enquiring, and is open-minded as to whether there can be a true universal, cross-cultural claim that God exists. We can see why Sextus thinks that this is a ‘safe’ position in which to be. For if the worshipper is *antecedently* committed to a philosophical claim of this sort about God’s existence, this will produce worry and anxiety about the extent to which his particular cultural religious tradition provides an adequate and worthy representation of it, and hence he will begin to worry about the status of what he is doing.

Bailey is wrong, then, to take this *MIX* 49 passage as showing that Sextus is ignoring a ‘deeper disquiet’: namely, the alleged fact that suspending judgement on arguments about God empties out the religious life, leaving only mindless going through the motions. As we have seen, Sextus, as a pagan, is quite entitled here to make use of the relative independence of religious beliefs from theological beliefs, and thus to take only the latter to be *dogmata*, involving rash assent to the unclear. Suppose an ancient pagan does become interested in the Stoics’ arguments, say, and comes to believe in the Stoic account of God. Then he becomes caught up in sceptical counter-arguments to this, and ends up suspending judgement about this (and ultimately *any* philosophical claims about God). He has gone through the sceptical trajectory. What has he lost that he originally had before becoming interested in theology? He cannot now commit himself to any universal, cross-cultural claim about the existence and nature of God. But this is not something he did in the first place. Accepting that the divine is whatever it is that enables us to understand different religions is not a matter of intellectual commitment. It is just what arises in a pluralist pagan context, where ordinary life forces you to recognize several different religions, even if you have no intellectual interest in the divine, and thus no *dogmata* about it.

Scepticism about God does not, then, undermine anything on which pagan religious belief rested in the first place. It takes us through philosophical argument

back to ordinary life without undermining that. This is, of course, something which is true for Sextus' pagan audience. It is unlikely to be true for us (hence, perhaps, Bailey's response). Sextus' claim that scepticism in this area leaves you with ordinary life has, it seems, no application to the two most likely modern replacements for the ancient pagan.

One such is the modern secular person. This is the person who simply has neither religious nor theological beliefs. Either she has acquired no religious beliefs in her upbringing, or she has, but has successfully discarded them. And either she has acquired no theological beliefs in her upbringing, or she has but has successfully discarded them. Such a person is simply not troubled by anything which will propel her to start the sceptical trajectory in the first place. In the ancient world, this kind of secularism was unknown. It could be generally assumed that every society had *some* gods, and that every person took part in *some* form of worship. Indeed, ancient pagan society lacked our notion of *successfully* discarding religious and theological beliefs, since for them neither kind was problematic for living a good life in the way which they have often been felt to be in modern societies.

The other kind of person is the modern religious believer—at least if she belongs to one of the three major monotheistic religions. (Matters are more complicated for religions such as Hinduism, which I cannot consider here.) For these religions, religious beliefs directly imply theological beliefs, in (at least) two ways. One is that they all have a sacred text, which is central to the religion and whose status is based on its being divinely inspired. The other is that they are all credal. Religious observance involves making statements of belief in specific theological matters, and commitment to these statements and creeds defines the religious community. In these religions, if I take part in these observances and thus make statements of religious belief, these will commit me to specific theological beliefs—in particular, accepting specific claims about the existence and nature of God. These claims are universal and cross-cultural; hence these religions are exclusive. If I accept that one is true, I have to believe that all others are false, since they make conflicting theological claims. Because of this feature, adopting one of these religions requires renouncing any other religion that one has; in stark contrast to the case of Praetextatus, in the case of these religions, adding requires subtraction.

With these religions it is clear that suspending judgement on theological matters will make a direct impact on religious beliefs, and hence on religious observances. You cannot continue to live an ordinary religious life, going along with religious observances and beliefs, if these explicitly involve a commitment to specific theological beliefs which you no longer accept. Suspending judgement on beliefs about God, where these are universal and cross-cultural, does deprive particular religious beliefs and observances of support which they explicitly claim. In this situation, the religious life does become emptied out, leaving the person merely going through the motions. And if those motions include making statements of commitment to creeds, then the person would seem to be involved in Bailey's 'hypocrisy and dissimulation'. The

believer in these religions has difficulty in thinking of herself as living without *dogmata* in Sextus' sense.²⁴

Sextus, then, seems to be right about the effects of his arguments on his own audience. A modern audience would need a different approach—at least to be persuaded that scepticism about God would leave them living an ordinary life.²⁵ This is not surprising if we reflect on the difference between ancient pagan religion and modern versions of monotheism. We do not expect Sextus' arguments against ancient scientific concepts to work against modern science either.

There is, however, a complicating factor within Sextus' approach. As he begins the arguments for and against the existence of the divine in the *M* passage, he comments, as already noted, that the sceptic will carry on with his religious life but make no premature commitments in philosophical investigation. As he finishes the section on the divine, however, he concludes with a rather unexpected addition at 191–3. The sceptic will suspend judgement, he says, 'especially since there is added the disagreement (*anomalía*) about the gods from everyday life (*apo tou koinou biou*)'. Different people, he says, have different conceptions of the gods, and they cannot all be true, because they conflict, nor can a particular one be true, because they balance out to equipollence. This sort of thing is also confirmed by the mythologizing of people who tell about the gods (*theologoi*) and the poets, for this is full of all kinds of impiety. Sextus then presents us with Xenophanes' criticism of Homer and Hesiod: they have ascribed to the gods everything shameful among humans—stealing, adultery, and deceiving one another.

This passage is puzzling, because this kind of consideration has been entirely absent from Sextus' arguments. These have all been abstract philosophical arguments about the divine being material or not, finite or not, and so on. Even arguments about the divine having virtue have been abstract Stoic arguments centring on the unity of virtue (152–170).²⁶ It is also puzzling because outside philosophical argument, dissatisfaction with the immorality rampant in myths about the pagan gods was in fact a source of worry about the gods. In Euripides' play *Heracles*, we find Heracles saying: 'I do not think, have never believed, and will never be convinced that the gods have

²⁴ Sihvola (2006) emphasises the point that in Jewish and Christian thought there is a tradition of taking religious belief to be quite independent of metaphysical thought (including theological thought). In this tradition, religious faith requires the believer to have 'a world-view in which there is a place for God and the existence of God can be proved in the light of natural reason for those who doubt it. The religious faith itself is, however, quite distinct from believing that God exists' (p. 97). Such a distinction is not distinctively modern, but can be found in Aquinas, for example. I am not sure, however, that this kind of tradition is sufficiently robust for religious belief to be sustained in the face of sceptical assault on all available theological beliefs. This would seem to require some radical form of fideism. This is an important and intriguing issue, which I cannot enter into here.

²⁵ Assuming that contemporary Jews and Christians were unlikely to be part of Sextus' audience. I have no scope to follow up the fascinating story, documented by Richard Popkin, of the use made of Sextus' rediscovered arguments in Catholic–Protestant debates in the seventeenth century, and its degree of success.

²⁶ In the corresponding passage in *PH* III there is an argument leading to problems for any view that the gods are provident, creating problems for the sceptic who still says that the gods are provident (9–12; cf. 2). The argument, however, is a theological one; we have an analogous fragment ascribed to the Epicureans from the third book of Cicero's *The Nature of the Gods* (Lactantius, *De Ira Dei*, 13.20–21).

illicit love affairs or bind each other with chains, or that one is master of another. A god, if he is truly a god, needs nothing. These are the wretched tales of the poets.²⁷ Here we find worry about the nature of the gods arising directly from the myths which form part of religious beliefs, rather than from philosophical worries about materiality and finitude. Sextus throws this in as though it were a final determining point, but it actually draws attention to the restricted nature of the arguments which he has been using. It also raises the issue of the force that this kind of consideration in fact has.

Everyday pagan worries about the gods come from this source, which one might call the problem of gods behaving badly. These are not philosophical worries about divine causality, materiality, or finitude, but more everyday worries about whether we should worship the gods even if we think them ethically inferior to humans. These worries are discussed in tragedies such as *Heracles* and *Hippolytus*, and not surprisingly there is no clear or easy answer to them. The bad behaviour of the gods in popular stores about them is another way in which ancient pagan religion differs from modern religions, which begin from a moralized conception of the divine.²⁸ Everyday pagan religious life may, then, contain a source of worry, but it is ethical, not theological; if it creates a problem for living the sceptical life, the source of the problem is not the nature of the gods but ethical worries which also occur elsewhere.

This is not the only place in Sextus where we find this kind of material about the gods. He includes quite a lot of it elsewhere in his works, but not under the heading of God. The examples turn up in the Tenth Mode of Aenesidemus (in *PH* I) and in a passage in the ethical section of *PH* III, which shares much of its material with the Tenth Mode and has no corresponding section in the ethical part of the longer work, *M* XI.

The Tenth Mode (*PH* I 145–163) ‘is especially concerned with ethics’. Sextus takes five factors: lifestyle, law, custom, belief in myth, and dogmatic supposition, and plays them off against one another.²⁹ Some of the examples use the ethical unacceptability of myths about the gods: thus it conflicts with our customs that Cronus ate his children (154) and that Heracles did feminine things (157); it conflicts with our laws that the gods commit adultery and have homosexual sex (159); it conflicts with dogmatic supposition that Zeus had sex with mortal women and wept for Sarpedon (162). We also find that Epicurus’ dogmatic supposition that the gods pay no attention to us conflicts with our custom of asking the gods for good things (155).

The material in the Mode is not used, however, to persuade the reader to suspend judgement as to what is good or bad *in myths about the gods*. The conclusion is that we shall not be able to say what each thing is like ‘in its nature, but only how it appears

²⁷ *Heracles* 1341–1346, translation by Kovacs.

²⁸ There are problems in reconciling a moralized conception of the divine with passages in sacred texts where God is represented as destructive, angry, and so on; but although these problems are arguably theologically more profound (since sacred texts have a status within the religion that ancient myths did not have) they are, for the modern worshipper, more recondite, and easier to avoid.

²⁹ I use Annas and Barnes (1985).

relative to a given lifestyle or law or custom, and so on'. (163). The conflicts in the Modes thus do not lead us to criticize the mythical material, or even to regard it as one side of a conflict that leads us to suspend judgement on its goodness or badness. We are merely reminded that *the gods* commit adultery *in the myths*, but that if *we* do so it is *against the law*. And why should this lead to a critical attitude to the myths about the gods? Who are we to say that our laws should apply to the gods? Thus the Tenth Mode touches on material that is ethically worrisome about the gods, but does not use it to undermine religious belief. The stated overall concern of the Mode is ethical value.

The ethical part of *PH* contains a section (179–234) which retails the arguments of 'some people' to show that nothing is by nature good, bad, or indifferent. Fire naturally heats everyone in the same way; but nothing claimed to be good (and so on) affects everyone in the same way. One section of this passage (197–234), like the Tenth Mode, plays off differences between different factors such as customs and ways of life; and it adds (235–8) that the sceptic who suspends judgement on things being naturally good or bad in this way will live following ordinary life without beliefs (*hepetai de adoxastos tei biotikei teresei*, 235). What we find, it is claimed, is a great deal of disagreement (*anomalía*) about what should and should not be done. Among conflicting beliefs about sex, tattooing, cannibalism, and so on, we find conflicting claims about the gods and piety (218–28). Most people think that there are gods, while some deny it.³⁰ Some believe in the traditional gods; others hold a variety of philosophical theories about the nature of the divine. Some think that there is one god, others many, and they differ about their form—some even thinking that they take the form of animals. Sacrificial usages differ widely, as do dietary restrictions and taboos, and ways of disposing of the dead. So we conclude that nothing is holy (*hosion*) or unholy by nature.

Two things are striking about the way Sextus uses this material. First, in both cases it is used to persuade us that nothing is holy 'by nature'. We are all right as long as we remember that sacrificing a pig *to Heracles* is all right, but not sacrificing one *to Sarapis* (220), and so on. It is difficult to see what sceptical force this material is supposed to have, since no worshipper of Heracles thought that worshippers of Sarapis ought to do exactly what he did. The points about ancient pagan religion which I stressed at the outset show quite adequately why the sceptical force of this material is weak or outright bogus. (I pass over this here, since I do not have the scope to deal with it—whether this is a problem with material that can be regarded as 'Aenesideman'.³¹)

Second, this passage is collecting material to persuade the audience to be led to a sceptical attitude about *value*. Piety and religious observances enter not in their own

³⁰ It is revealingly difficult to find real atheists about the traditional pagan gods. Of those cited here, the only good example is Diagoras of Melos, who denied the existence of the traditional gods on ethical grounds (they failed to punish a perjurer). Theodorus of Cyrene is often invoked, on hazier grounds. Critias is cited for a debunking speech in a play. Cicero, at *De Natura Deorum* 2, cites Diagoras, Theodorus, and Protagoras, who is (misleadingly) cited for the agnostic opening of his work on the gods. Sextus at *MIX* 51ff. implausibly claims that there are 'lots' of others.

³¹ See Bett (1997) introduction, (2000) chapter 4, (2009), and (forthcoming).

right but as examples of things that we consider that we should do, because doing them is a good thing. As with the Tenth Mode, these are just examples of different ways of doing things, and considering them is supposed to lead us to suspend judgement about anything's being good 'by nature'.

Still, what are we to make of the collection of beliefs about the gods (218–19)? Here we find conflict between the philosophers' claims about the divine, as in *PH* III and *M* IX, but also between these and ordinary people's beliefs about their traditional gods. We also find alleged atheists who claim that the traditional gods do not exist, as opposed to most people who think that they do. These are exactly the kinds of conflict which we have not seen so far in Sextus, and which we might expect to lead to suspension of belief about religious and not just theological beliefs, and thus lead to destabilizing the ordinary religious life, raising worries as to whether it really can continue undisturbed when the sceptic's work is done.

Yet that is not the role which they play here. The section ends with the claim that the sceptic's life will be different and improved because he will lack the belief that things are really good or bad *by nature*. To fit into the overall strategy of this passage, the material must lead us to suspend judgement on things being what they are by nature. So the claims here will not lead to suspension of judgement about the traditional gods. Rather, we are shown ways in which different views of the gods are held by different sets of people, and this is supposed to lead us to suspend judgement on whether any of them show us what the gods are 'by nature'—presumably, universally and cross-culturally. Suppose that this succeeds. We have already seen that this does not make much, if any, impact on ordinary pagan religion. If I think that Athena, Zeus, and so on, exist, and am then, as here, confronted by, on the one hand Egyptian animal gods, and on the other, Aristotle's Unmoved Mover, the Stoics' divine reason and so on, what does this show me? It shows me that different people have different kinds of gods, and that philosophers produce specific theories about what lies behind all religions. But none of this is news. It is perfectly familiar that there are different views about the gods among Greeks and Egyptians on the one hand, and on the other, between all popular religion and the philosophers. If this leads us to see that none of them have discovered what the gods are like 'by nature', this may be discomfiting to the philosophers, but is hardly going to worry the Greeks or Egyptians. They did not think, in the first place, that their gods were the only gods, or that they would be worshipped universally. Nor, for reasons already explained, does this undermine their worship of their respective gods.³²

We find, therefore, a slightly odd situation in Sextus, where sceptical arguments about the gods are concerned. In the two passages where the gods are his official concern, he takes account only of intellectual sources of trouble about theological beliefs, discussing philosophers' disagreements about a universal, cross-cultural account

³² Diagoras—the only convincing example of an atheist about the traditional gods—objected to them on ethical grounds. But this shows only that *these* gods should not be worshipped, not that there can be *no* gods at all.

of the divine. He claims that suspending judgement about these disagreements will leave the ordinary worshipper of the gods with an ordinary religious life, and we have seen that he is entitled to claim this: pagan religious beliefs are not *dogmata* in the sense that worries Sextus, and lacking them does not leave the pagan religious life empty nor hypocritical.

Elsewhere, Sextus sees problems about the gods as part of the topic of scepticism about value. Much of this material lacks sceptical force, at least against pagans, since it concerns cross-cultural claims about the natures of things—claims to which ordinary pagans are not committed by anything in their religious life. Ethical worries about the traditional gods are dealt with under this heading, of value, but Sextus does not seem aware of any potential which they have for attacking the ordinary person's religious beliefs. As we have seen, he throws in at the end of the *M* passage a claim about the immorality of the gods in the myths, but this is unconnected with the arguments that he has actually used there.

Why does Sextus not make more use, when arguing about the gods, of this ethical material which might destabilize ordinary religious belief—material which does produce some problems about the traditional gods of ancient worship? Perhaps he himself had a very intellectual approach to religious issues, so that he concentrates on philosophical arguments about the divine, being uninterested in ordinary religious life except as a source of intriguing diversities of practice. (This is arguably Cicero's view, except that he takes traditional Roman religious practice seriously for its cultural and political resonances.) Or perhaps by Sextus' time ordinary religious practice and belief could continue unworried by stories about gods behaving badly. There had, after all, been centuries to become accustomed to this type of criticism, and mythical materials could by this point be generally regarded as an imaginative resource for poets and dramatists, rather than as a significant part of religious belief and practice. If so, then both the worshippers and the philosophers thinking about the gods could safely ignore them.

Thus Sextus' approach to religion in the sceptical life may reflect a fact about Sextus or a fact about his audience (or, of course, both). And given the state of our information about both Sextus and his audience, this turns out to be, as so often with Sextus, a matter on which we finally suspend judgement.

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