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APULEIUS, PUDENTILLA, AND CHRISTIANITY

BY

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In 1968 P.G. Walsh for the first time suggested that Apuleius' novel *Metamorphoses* (*Met.*) was composed in response to contemporaneous Christianity, an idea he has recently repeated: 'this fervid recommendation of the religion of Isis may represent a counterblast to the meteoric spread of Christianity in Africa in the later second century'.¹ Whereas Walsh himself has not added further evidence to support his theory, an elaborate defence of it was lately undertaken by V. Schmidt.² By closely examining the crucial passage 9,14 in the *Met.*,³ Schmidt showed that characters in Apuleius' novel use terminology current in religious confrontations between Christians and pagans, which seems an indication that the novel was actually also intended as a reaction to Christianity.

Schmidt wisely warns us at the end of his article that, given the complex narratological situation in the novel, we should not regard the Isis religion of the *Met.* as an ideological *alternative* that was fully endorsed by Apuleius himself. Two points, I would suggest, now seem established beyond reasonable doubt: not only was Apuleius aware of the existence of Christianity, but he did not feel much sympathy for it either. Neither point, however, is immediately clear from Apuleius' extant writings, since they contain no mention of the new religion.

We can now extend the scope to Apuleius' minor works.⁴ It may be

¹ P.G. Walsh, Lucius Madaurensis, *Phoenix* 12 (1968) 151-153. Apuleius, *The golden ass*, translated with introduction and explanatory notes by P.G. Walsh (Oxford 1994) xxxvii-xxxviii.

² Victor Schmidt, Reaktionen auf das Christentum in den Metamorphosen des Apuleius, *Vigiliae Christianae* 51 (1997) 51-71.

³ In another recent study, this passage on the miller's woman is interpreted without further discussion as being anti-Christian. See: Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Early Christian women and pagan opinion. The power of the hysterical woman* (Cambridge 1996) 67-73. This interpretation is, indeed, probable, but not an established fact, as MacDonald seems to present it. For further discussion and literature see Schmidt (above, note 2).

⁴ For clarity's sake I have called them 'minor works'. But this epithet should be taken

worthwhile to examine whether there are any further anti-Christian traces in his philosophical treatises and speeches. This is what I propose to do in this article, intended as a sequel to Schmidt's study.

Philosophy

Starting with the philosophical writings, we are immediately confronted with great problems. First, there is no scholarly agreement on the authenticity of works attributed to Apuleius; and second, their relative chronology remains uncertain, although most scholars would now agree in postulating dates earlier than the *Met.* For the purpose of the present inquiry, however, we may leave these matters undecided and just examine the relevant texts.⁵

They provide little or nothing which seems to come anywhere near the invective of the *Met.* Nowhere in the bookish treatise *De dogmate Platonis* on the life and teachings of Plato, nor in the scientific works on cosmology and logic, *De mundo* and *De interpretatione*, do we find any reference to Christianity, either directly or indirectly.

This may be explained by their possibly early dates of composition, but above all by their genre and special nature. Although literary embellishments are not completely missing, all three works serve a rather modest aim, compared to the rest: they explain and summarize Greek philosophical theory from the classical age, focusing on Plato and Aristotle. Indeed, *De Mundo* and *De interpretatione* are Latin translations from Greek originals which may date back to a much earlier period, when Christianity was still in its infancy or did not even exist.⁶

Similar remarks apply to the Hermetic *Asclepius*, but here the Greek original dates from a much later, Christian period.⁷ At least some elements

to refer only to their length and their importance in scholarship, not to their intrinsic interest.

⁵ For a brief survey of the problems see: Apuleius of Madauros, *Pro se de magia* (*Apoloogia*), edited with a commentary by Vincent Hunink (Amsterdam 1997) vol. 1, 20-22.

⁶ On Apuleius' translation technique in *De Mundo*, see e.g. A. Marchetta, Apuleio traduttore, in: *La langue Latine, langue de la philosophie*, actes du colloque organisé par l'École Française de Rome 1 (Roma 1992) 203-218.

⁷ For bibliography on the Latin *Asclepius*, traditionally attributed to Apuleius but generally declared spurious, see: Vincent Hunink, Apuleius and the 'Asclepius', *Vigiliae Christianae* 50 (1996) 288-308. In this contribution I attempted to reopen the debate on the authenticity of the work and adduced arguments in favour of Apuleian authorship.

in it have been interpreted as a rejection of Christianity. The most important passage is *Ascl.* 24-26, an apocalyptic complaint on the decline of Egypt: for instance, it is prophesied that the land will be full of tombs and corpses instead of temples and gods, that people will prefer shadows to light and despise all doctrines about the soul, and that the gods will withdraw from mankind. Such elements easily lend themselves to an anti-Christian interpretation; already Augustine took the entire section as a prediction by 'Hermes' of the final defeat of pagan religion (cf. Augustine *C.D.* 8, 23).⁸ However, these references can be explained from the Egyptian Hermetic tradition, and on the whole they are so vague and ambivalent as to be unconvincing. In his recent Dutch translation of the *Asclepius*, G. Quispel plainly states that there is nothing in the treatise that would suggest real knowledge of Christian teaching.⁹

Flowering paganism

In the *Florida*, a collection of 23 extracts of speeches by Apuleius, and in the philosophical discourse *De Deo Socratis*¹⁰ we also find no manifest allusions to Christianity in particular, but there is a decidedly pagan sensibility pervading these pieces. The opening section of the *Florida* presents a warmly religious picture, which is worth quoting in full:

Vt ferme religiosus uiantium moris est, cum aliqui lucus aut aliqui locus sanctus in uia oblatum est, uotum postulare, pomum adponere, paulisper adsidere: ita mihi ingresso sanctissimam istam ciuitatem, quanquam oppido festinem, praefanda uenia et habenda oratio et inhienda properatio est.

Neque enim iustius religiosam moram uiatori obiecerit aut ara floribus redimita aut spelunca frondibus inumbrata aut quercus cornibus onerata aut fagus pelibus coronata, uel enim colliculus sepimine consecratus uel truncus dolamine effigiatus uel cespes libamine umigatus uel lapis unguine delibutus. Parua haec

⁸ For further references see: Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica, The Greek corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius, in a new English translation with notes and introduction* (Cambridge 1992) esp. 241-242; Copenhaver seems to leave open the possibility of anti-Christian sentiments in the text.

⁹ *Asclepius, de volkomen openbaring van Hermes Trismegistus, ingeleid, vertaald en toegelicht door G. Quispel* (Amsterdam 1996) 282.

¹⁰ On the nature of the *Florida* and its possible origins, see B.L. Hijmans jr., Apuleius orator: "Pro se de Magia" and "Florida", *ANRW* 2, 34, 2 (1994) 1708-1784, esp. 1719-1724. Much material on *De Deo Socratis* can be found in: Lucius Apuleius von Madaura, *De Deo Socratis, der Schutzgeist des Sokrates*, übersetzt, eingeleitet und mit Anmerkungen versehen von Michael Bingenheimer (Frankfurt am Main 1993).

quippe et quanquam paucis percontantibus adorata, tamen ignorantibus transcurra.

It is a common custom with religious travellers, when they come upon some grove or sacred place, to beseech favour, offer up prayers, and sit down a while; in like manner, now that I have entered this most hallowed city, though I am in great haste, I must entreat favour, make oration, and check my hurry. For the traveller can find no fitter motives for a religious pause in an altar decked with flowers, or a dell shaded with foliage, or an oak loaded with horns, or a beech festooned with skins, or even a consecrated and enclosed hillock, or a trunk chiselled into the form of an image, or a turf redolent of libation, or a stone bedewed with ointment. These are small things indeed, and though adored by the few who scrutinise them, are passed unnoticed by those who are not aware of them.¹¹

The general atmosphere is clearly religious from the start. We know nothing for sure about the context of the fragment, but the speaker is obviously addressing an audience while entering an important town, possibly Oea.¹² Here, he says, he must pause and deliver a speech; this is presented as an almost sacred task, which is literally compared to the religious duty inspired by typical elements of pagan religion.

Apuleius specifies no less than eight of them, in a piece of exquisite writing. All elements show the same syntactical pattern and word order: a noun followed by a participle with an adjunct in the ablative (*ara floribus redimita*). The words seem carefully chosen to impress the audience by their very sound; for example, the first four elements have female endings (*redimita, inumbrata, onerata, coronata*), whereas the second group of four has male endings (*consecratus, effigiatus, umigatus, delibutus*). The ensuing 'homoeoptoton'

¹¹ *Fl.* 1. Translation: [Anonymous] *The Works of Apuleius*, (George Bell and Sons) (London/New York 1893) 374. Translations of the *Florida* in English are scarce; the latest one being that by of H.E. Butler, *The Apologia and Florida of Apuleius of Madaura* (Oxford 1909) (repr. Westport, Connecticut 1970). A new English translation of *Apology, Florida* and *De Deo Socratis* is currently being prepared by a team led by Dr. Stephen Harrison.

¹² One might think of Carthago, since this city is mentioned or celebrated at several places in the *Florida*: 9; 16; 17; 18; 20. On the other hand, the speaker says he is in a hurry and he seems to be just passing by, heading for another destination. This would rather suggest some provincial town as the place of *Fl.* 1. Oea seems a good candidate: in *Apol.* 72 Apuleius tells of a journey to Alexandria, during which he had to stop at Oea (here he met the woman who was to become his wife, Pudentilla). In addition, the religious imagery of *Fl.* 1 may well have found special favour in Oea: from *Apol.* 55,10-11 we know Apuleius once delivered a speech there about Asclepius, which was favourably received by the inhabitants of Oea, explicitly called *religiosi*.

creates a deliberate jingle, while further complex sound patterns are produced by additional internal correspondence in rhythm, number of syllables, and sound (e.g. *sepimine, dolamine, libamine, unguine*).¹³

The speaker clearly delights in elaborating such religious details, which are not strictly necessary for his argument. They are presented largely for their own sake, and consciously celebrate concrete expressions of Roman religion. The repeated word *religiosus* drives home the point.

This 'pagan miniature' can be confronted with a passage in the Christian apologist Minucius Felix, probably also an African by birth. At the beginning of his *Octavius*, he pictures himself walking on the shore near Ostia, accompanied by his friend Caecilius and the Christian Octavius. On passing a statue of Serapis, Caecilius makes a devout gesture: he brings his hand to his lips. For this common expression of reverence he is then indirectly criticized by Octavius. The Christian admonishes Minucius:

Non boni uiri est, Marce frater, hominem domi forisque lateri tuo inhaerentem sic in hac imperitiæ vulgaris caecitate deserere, ut tam luculento die in lapides eum pateris impingere, effigiatos sane et unctos et coronatos, cum scias huius erroris non minorem ad te quam ad ipsum infamiam redundare.

With a friend who indoors and out clings to your side, no good man, brother Marcus, has the right to leave him in the thick darkness of vulgar ignorance, and allow him in broad daylight to wreck himself on stones, however carved and anointed and garlanded they may be, when you know that the shame of his error redounds no less to your discredit than to his.¹⁴

This incident then leads to the discussion which takes up the rest of the work.

Interestingly, there is a close parallel to Apuleius' text.¹⁵ We may compare the words *lapides . . . effigiatos . . . et unctos et coronatos*, with Apuleius' *truncus dolamine effigiat, lapides unguine delibutus*, and *fagus pellibus coronata*. In another Apuleian passage (*Apology* 56,6), to which we will return shortly,

¹³ To these few examples of the stylistic bravura in *Fl.* 1 many others might be added. Cf. e.g. Mariateresa Scotti, *Religiosis viantium: nota ad Apuleio, Florida 1*, in: N. Horsfall (ed.), *Vir bonus dicendi peritus, studies in celebration of Otto Skutsch's eightieth birthday* (London 1988) 126-7. The 'flowery' style which is evident in this piece may well explain the title *Florida*.

¹⁴ Min.Fel. 3,1. The translation by Gerald H. Rendall is quoted from: Tertullian, *Apology; De spectaculis*; Minucius Felix, Loeb Classical Library nr. 250, pp. 317-319.

¹⁵ Jean Beaujeu, who is well known for his Apuleian studies and editions, briefly noticed the parallel in his 1964 Budé edition of Minucius Felix (p. 73), and suggested Minucius may echo the Apuleian passage; more possible echoes are listed on page xxxiv.

Apuleius refers to the religious elements *lapidem unctum aut ramum coronatum*.

The custom of anointing stones was considered typical of pagan religion, or in the Christian view, *idolatria*.¹⁶ We also see it in Lucian's satirical work on the false prophet Alexander:

If he but saw anywhere a stone smeared with holy oil or adorned with a wreath, he would fall on his face forthwith, kiss his hand, and stand beside it for a long time making vows and craving blessings from it.¹⁷

This, it may be added, should not be read as a thorough criticism of the custom as such; Lucian merely puts scorn on Alexander who pretends piety and exaggerates his gestures.

Given these parallels, what is so striking about the Apuleian passage is not that it refers to the custom, but that it actually *celebrates* it. It seems to defy any possible criticism and proudly brings pagan piety to the foreground. Admittedly, Minucius Felix is dated later than Apuleius, at around 195 AD,¹⁸ but the distance in years is not immense, since the pieces in the *Florida* must be dated to 160-170 AD. It is not impossible, I would suggest, that Apuleius is partly writing in response to Christian attacks on Roman religion.

Demons

Support for this suggestion may be found in other parts of the *Florida*. In *Fl.* 10 we are presented with a whole range of divine powers connected to celestial bodies: Sol and Luna, Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Saturn, and Mars. There are also *mediae deum potestates*, the speaker continues, like Amor and other invisible spirits.

Here we see how Apuleius touches on what appears to be one of his primary interests, the various classes of *demons*. This originally Platonic concept is mentioned several times in his works,¹⁹ and is even the basic theme

¹⁶ Cf. e.g. Arnob. *Adv.nat.* 1,39 and Aug. *C.D.* 16,38.

¹⁷ Lucian, *Alexander* 30. The translation by A.M. Harmon is quoted from: Lucian, volume IV, Loeb Classical Library nr. 162, p. 317.

¹⁸ There is some doubt about the date of the *Octavius*, but it must have been written after 160. If it is later than Tertullian's *Apologeticum*, as many scholars would now argue, it must be dated *after* 197; see Michael Von Albrecht, *Geschichte der römischen Literatur* (München 1994) 1231-1232.

¹⁹ Apuleius' demonology has been given comparatively much attention by scholars. Two recent contributions are: Wolfgang Bernard, *Zur Dämonologie des Apuleius von*

of the discourse *De Deo Socratis*, which mentions many more gods (1-3), and defines and groups the various demons (7-18). Not all these 'demons' are frightening, but many of them are salutary and helpful and must hence be honoured and cultivated, like Socrates did with his private *daimon*.

It is hardly surprising that Christians fiercely combatted this Platonic demonology. The most famous example is Augustine's extensive discussion on Apuleius' discourse in *C.D.* 8,²⁰ but there is evidence of much earlier discussion. Already Tertullian, writing only one generation after Apuleius in Africa, can be seen refuting pagan ideas on demons.²¹ So here again, it would seem probable that Apuleius' conscious treatment of the theme reflects contemporaneous discussions, which are likely to have gained new relevance by the surge of Christianity.²²

It is possible to interpret other elements in the *Florida* along these lines, but this would lead us into the field of speculation. What does emerge from a reading of *Florida* and *De Deo Socratis*, is an overall picture of profoundly pagan sympathies. Given the notion that Apuleius must have been aware of Christianity and disliked it, would it not be natural to call this a *consciously non-Christian* attitude?

Execution

Proud, pagan religiosity may also be found in the last work of Apuleius which I will now consider, his defensive speech *Apolo* (Pro Se De Magia).

The chronology of Apuleius' works may involve many problems, but the *Apolo* can at least be dated with a fair degree of certainty. The mention of Claudius Maximus, the judge presiding over the trial, allows us to fix the year at 158/159 AD. So the *Apolo* is earlier than the *Florida*, and probably much earlier than the *Met.*,²³ and one may raise the question

Madaura, *RhM* 137 (1994) 358-373, and Hans Münstermann, *Apuleius: Metamorphosen literarischer Vorlagen. Untersuchung dreier Episoden des Romans unter Berücksichtigung der Philosophie und Theologie des Apuleius* (Stuttgart/Leipzig 1995) 175-185.

²⁰ On this polemic, see e.g. C. Moreschini, La polemica di Agostino contro la demonologia di Apuleio, *ASNP* 3, 2 (1972) 583-96.

²¹ E.g. Tert. *Apol.* 22 ff.; cf. also Min.Fel. 26-28.

²² Interestingly, *De Deo Socratis* ends with an elaborate eulogy on Socrates (21-23), whom we are invited to follow as a model in caring for one's demon. A similar exhortation to follow Socrates can be found in the defence of paganism by Caecilius in Min.Fel. 13. But the parallel is not exact, and Socrates is, after all, a fairly natural and common example in general.

²³ Cf. also Schmidt (above, note 2), 64.

whether traces of Christianity or anti-Christian attitudes are likely to be found here at all.

Although the rapid growth of Christianity in Africa must be dated somewhat later than 158, it did not occur unexpectedly and the new religion must have started spreading earlier. Moreover, Apuleius may well have experienced it during his stays abroad. We know he travelled and studied at least in Athens, Samos, Phrygia, and Rome,²⁴ that is, in places where Christianity was visible and posed problems to intellectuals and authorities at a much earlier date than in Africa.

Apuleius was a provincial intellectual of broad interests, a man eager to pursue his studies in the centres of the ancient world, a disciple willing to learn the wisdom of Greek and Roman culture, to master both Greek and Latin (neither being his native tongue), and a man with profound religious and occult interests, as he indicates himself in the speech:

Sacrorum pleraque initia in Graecia participavi. Eorum quaedam signa et monumenta tradita mihi a sacerdotibus sedulo conseruo. Nihil insolitum, nihil incognitum dico. Vel unius Liberi patris mystae qui adestis, scitis quid domi conditum celetis et absque omnibus profanis tacite ueneremini. At ego, ut dixi, multiuiga sacra et plurimos ritus et uarias cerimonias studio ueri et officio erga deos didici.

I participated in several sacred rites in Greece. I keep certain tokens and objects of these rites which the priests gave to me. I claim nothing unusual, nothing unknown. Even you, initiates of the one father Liber, who are here know what you keep hidden at home and honor silently, away from all non-initiates. Certainly I, as I was saying, have learned manifold rituals, numerous rites, and various ceremonies out of an eagerness for truth and service to the gods.²⁵

²⁴ Several other cities and regions are sometimes mentioned by scholars in this context, such as Alexandria, Corinth, and Thessaly, but of these we cannot be sure. Names mentioned in the *Met.*, a fictional tale, cannot simply be interpreted as representative of Apuleius' own biography. For Apuleius' stay in Rome *Met.* 11 is also often adduced. Here it is told how Lucius, after his retransformation from ass to man, worked as a lawyer in Rome to earn money for his expensive initiations into the religion of Isis. Again, it is methodically dangerous to take this as biographical fact. However, the fact that Apuleius actually was in Rome is proved by his statement in *Florida* 17.4, where he claims to have cultivated the *bonae artes* both in Africa and 'with friends in Rome.' (. . . *eamque existimationem morum ac studiorum cum in prouincia nostra tum etiam Romae penes amicos tuos quaesisse me tute ipse locupletissimus testis es*).

²⁵ *Apol.* 55, 8-9. The translation is quoted (with two small changes) from a draft translation prepared in the course of a 1996 seminar led by Prof. James O'Donnell at the University of Pennsylvania. The text was made available on the Internet.

Surely, in Rome too Apuleius must have been studying, attending teachers, looking for new philosophical and religious ideas, and participating in discussions. Given the intellectual climate in Rome at around 150 AD, it is quite inconceivable that he would *not* have come across Christians. Schmidt (above, note 2; p. 60) already pointed out that in Rome Apuleius is likely to have met his fellow African Fronto, a generation older than himself and a famous author, who is known to have openly fought Christianity at this early stage, in a speech against the Christian eucharist.²⁶

There is a small, but significant detail in the *Apology* that also points in this direction. At the beginning (2,11), Apuleius mentions the city prefect of Rome, Lollius Urbicus, who in an earlier case passed sentence on Apuleius' opponent Aemilianus, and had nearly put him to death. This Lollius Urbicus, who may have been present at Apuleius' trial (the text of 3,1 is unclear here), and who is referred to with great respect by Apuleius, is best known from a rather different source, a famous Christian text written in Rome at the time. In Justin's *Second Apology*, the author, faced with increasing public outcries against Christians and the threat of persecution, sharply protests against the execution of three Christians. These executions, which took place at about 152 AD, had been ordered by this same Lollius Urbicus who is so kindly addressed by Apuleius in 158.²⁷ It is more than likely that the two met in Rome, and so, inevitably, Apuleius must have been well aware of the whole affair. Nonetheless, Apuleius remains entirely silent, both on this affair and on Christianity as such.

Impious and uncivilized behaviour

What should we infer from this? If we discard the untenable idea that Apuleius had Christian sympathies himself, a wild theory advanced some decades ago by L. Herrmann,²⁸ there remains only one possibility: that

²⁶ Cf. Min.Fel. 9,6-7.

²⁷ This parallel has remained unnoticed for a long time. In fact, it was only first noticed by Barry Baldwin, Apuleius and the Christians, *LCM* 14 (1989) 55. Schmidt (above, note 2) does mention this article and Justin's text in his notes (5, 33, 35) but fails to refer to the occurrence of Lollius Urbicus in Apuleius' *Apology*.

²⁸ Léon Herrmann, Le procès d'Apulée fut-il un procès de christianisme?, *Revue de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles* 4 (1952) 339-350; Idem, Le dieu-roi d'Apulée, *Latomus* 18 (1959) 110-116. This theory was rejected with good arguments by Raoul Mortley, Apuleius and Platonic theology, *American Journal of Philology* 93 (1972) 584-590 and Marcel Simon, Apulée et le christianisme, *Mélanges d'histoire des religions offerts à Henri-Charles Puech* (Paris 1974) 299-305.

already by this early date Apuleius felt unsympathetic towards Christians.

Throughout the speech, Apuleius poses as a champion of pagan culture and religion, a devout devotee of the gods, and a pious worshipper who even keeps cult objects and worships them in private (e.g. *Apol.* 53-56 and 61-65).

What a difference, so he suggests, with his opponent Aemilianus! Shortly after his religious self-portrait quoted above, we learn more about the private life of the accuser:

Atque ego scio nonnullos et cum primis Aemilianum istum facetiae sibi habere res diuinas deridere. Nam, ut audio partim Oeensium qui istum nouere, nulli deo ad hoc aevi supplicauit, nullum templum frequentauit, si fanum aliquod praetereat, nefas habet adorandi gratia manum labris admouere. Iste uero nec dis rurationis, qui eum pascunt ac uestiunt, segetis ulla aut uitis aut gregis primitias impertit. Nullum in uilla eius delubrum situm, nullus locus aut lucus consecratus. Ecquid ego de luco et delubro loquor? Negant uidisse se qui fuere unum saltem in finibus eius aut lapidem unctum aut ramum coronatum. Igitur adgnomenta ei duo indita: Charon, ut iam dixi, ob oris et animi diritatem, sed alterum, quod libentius audit, ob deorum contemptum, Mezentius.

Still I know some people, and prominent among them that Aemilianus, who think they are witty when they make fun of religion. For, as I hear from some people in Oea who know him, he has never up to this point in his life offered a prayer to any god, he hasn't visited any temple, and if he should happen to pass some consecrated place, he thinks it's a crime to bring his hand to his lips out of reverence. In addition, the man has never shared any of the first harvest or the pick of the vine or flock with the gods of the countryside who nourish and clothe him, there is no cleansing shrine in his villa, no sacred grove or place. Why should I speak of sacred groves and shrines? Those who have been on his property say they haven't seen a single anointed stone or wreathed bough there. So he has been given two nicknames: Charon, as I already mentioned, on account of the frightfulness of his face and his soul, and the other, which he acknowledges readily on account of his contempt for the gods, is Mezentius.²⁹

This is, as a whole, a devastating picture. In an attempt to disparage his accuser, Apuleius delivers a fullblown attack *ad hominem*. As such, invective techniques were quite common and accepted in Roman courts. But here the picture contains remarkable details. Aemilianus is not just generally labeled as impious and godless, he is a real enemy and *opponent* of Roman religion, carefully avoiding temples and having no sacred spots at home.

²⁹ *Apol.* 56, 3-7. Translation as in the earlier quotation from the *Apology* (again with small changes).

Worse, he does not bring any sacrifices to the gods, he refuses to make the reverent gesture of kissing one's hand in passing a sacred place, he does not possess a *lapidem unctum aut ramum coronatum*, he despises the gods, and feels proud of being called Mezentius, the Vergilian archetype of one who scorns and denies the Roman gods.³⁰

But anyone pushing his resistance to Roman religion so far could easily be taken for a Christian. The details seem carefully selected to make exactly this impression: in Minucius Felix' dialogue we already met with the typically pagan elements of reverently kissing the hand and worshipping anointed stones and wreaths. In this earlier Apuleian text, we see these elements combined with signs of an active refusal to conform to the Roman religious customs. A Roman who felt insensitive to religion would be pictured as indifferent or negligent at worst; but such behaviour as Aemilianus is credited with, especially where sacrifice and worship is concerned, is typical for early Christians.

The suggestion, first raised by Emanuele Grisetti,³¹ that in Apuleius' counter-attack Aemilianus is subtly pictured as a Christian, received a rather lukewarm reception by scholars,³² much like Walsh's idea on the *Met.* But given all the evidence gathered so far, much is to be said for it.

Other elements from Apuleius' torrent of abuse and invective now fall into place. For instance, he consistently describes Aemilianus as one who attacks only indirectly, secretly, lurking and hiding in the dark, whereas he himself stands out in the light for all to see. Aemilianus, he says, is in fact invisible, hiding in his humble state and fleeing the light (*humilitate abdita et lucifuga*, 16,13). Now the rare *lucifugus* can be an epithet of insects (e.g. Verg. *G.* 4,243) or a term of abuse for people, but is it merely a coincidence that the word returns in anti-Christian polemics? In Minucius Felix we see the Christians described by Caecilius as persons who secretly gather during night-time, a *latebrosa et lucifuga natio* (8,4),³³ despising temples and

³⁰ Cf. e.g. G. Thome, *Vorstellungen vom Bösen in der lateinischen Literatur. Begriffe, Motive, Gestalten* (Stuttgart 1993) 455-456. On 'atheist' as a keyword in polemics between pagans and Christians, see ample material adduced by Schmidt (above, note 2; pp. 56-58).

³¹ Emanuele Grisetti, *Un cristiano di Sabratha*, *RSC* 5 (1957) 35-39.

³² One of the few exceptions is: Stephen Benko, *Pagan Rome and the early Christians* (London 1985) 105, who suggests the same, apparently not knowing Grisetti's article. Schmidt restricts himself to mentioning Benko's suggestion in his note 1.

³³ The word *lucifugus* was to retain this special nuance even much later. See a comment on the island of Capraria from the 5th century: Rut.Nam. *De reditu suo* 440 *squalet lucifugis insula plena viris*. See the commentary of Doblhofer a.l.

gods and laughing at ceremonies. Aemilianus is also incessantly mocked and insulted for being poor, illiterate, lacking all culture and refinement, and being a proper rustic. Such insults were also hurled at Christians.

Jesus and Moses

One other passage of the *Apology* may be briefly mentioned here. In 90,6 Apuleius daringly and even provokingly gives a list of magicians, in response to the claim of magic. If the opponents can point to anything relevant at all, so he bluffs,

ego ille sim Carmendas uel Damigeron uel † his † Moses uel Iohannes uel Apollobex uel ipse Dardanus uel quicumque alius post Zoroastren et Hostanen inter magos celebratus est.

I'd be a Carmendas or a Damigeron or . . . Moses or John or Apollobex or Dardanus himself or whatever other celebrated magicians there were after Zoroaster and Hostanes.³⁴

Now ". . ." corresponds to the Latin reading *his*. This is often emended to *is*, *hic*, or *iste* ('this' or 'that'), but alternatively, another name may have been lost here. The most intriguing reconstruction is *uel Iesus <uel> Moses*, based on a conjecture of Bosscha. The name of Jesus could originally have been written as *Hisus* or in its abbreviated form as *IHS*. Without doubt, among non-Christians Jesus, like Moses, had the reputation of a magician.³⁵ A combination of Jesus and Moses, two Jewish names,³⁶ would seem quite natural in this context and add to the evidence of anti-Christian sentiments collected up till now.

³⁴ *Apol.* 90,6; translation as in earlier quotations (again with small changes).

³⁵ For Moses, cf. references in L.H. Feldman, *Jew and gentile in the ancient world* (Princeton NJ 1993) 285-287. For Jesus, cf. e.g. Cels. *Contra Chr.* [ap.Orig. *Contra Cels.*] 1,6b and 2,48-49 (cf. also 1,28; 1,68 and 1,71); Arnob. *Adv.Nat.* 1,43; see further M. Smith, *Jesus the magician* (London 1978) 45-67; Benko (above, note 34), 103-139; G. Anderson, *Sage, saint and sophist. Holy men and their associates in the Early Roman Empire* (London/New York 1994). For the suggestion to read *Jesus* in *Apol.* 90, see also Benko, 108; and D. Tripp, *The baker's wife and her confidante in Apuleius, Met. IX,14f.* Some liturgical [sic] considerations, *Emerita* 56 (1988) 245-254, esp. 251.

³⁶ The fact that Christians were often considered to be a Jewish sect could well explain the occurrence of both names together.

Silence

So was Aemilianus a Christian? This question must at least remain unanswered, as we have only Apuleius' biased and one-sided defence to go by. It seems unlikely, on the whole, that a real Christian would sue a famous orator for magic, a charge to which he could easily have been liable himself, given the general prejudices against Christians. At this point, I would not venture to go so far as Griset and others did.

But in the end, *truth* is not what matters to Apuleius in his speech: all he wants is to persuade the judge and win his case. He employs every possible means to blacken and deprecate his opponents. Part of his strategy is to picture Aemilianus as an enemy of Roman religion, much along the lines of anti-Christian polemics as we know them from the apologists. On the other hand, he proudly presents himself as a devotee of the pagan religion which plays such a major role in all his works, including the *Met.* In both rhetorical strategies, I would argue, he shows a reaction to Christianity, which must have been 'in the air' in Africa by the time of his defence.

This does not mean, however, that in Apuleius' eyes Christianity was to be taken entirely seriously. To an established orator and scholar like Apuleius, steeped in Roman culture, Christianity cannot have counted as a relevant school of thought worthy of academic discussion, or as something to be openly combatted or even to be mentioned in public: it was no more than a despicable sect and so a convenient target for satire and rhetorically effective insinuations.

This would imply an important corrective to the theory that the Isis religion of the *Met.* was presented as an *alternative* for paganism. Given all these indications, Christianity cannot have been entirely unknown to the speaker, the officials, and the attending audience. But it is Apuleius' silence in the *Apology* and other works which is the most telling: as he does not mention the Christians by name, they remain outside his direct focus. They are simply not considered 'salonfähig'. Whatever is ridiculed is not taken seriously.

In consequence, Apuleius does not seem to present a proper alternative, although he may well have felt inspired to underscore pagan religious elements more strongly. But it is merely traditional religion which he presents, not the alternative to a new religion.

Surveying this material, one may confirm the theory on anti-Christian sentiments in the *Met.* by extending it to Apuleius' other works, notably the *Apology*. On the other hand, Apuleius' silence and his satirical and

scornful attitude suggest that he does not take the new religion very seriously, but, at best, as a useful target to make clever insinuations against his opponents.

In this Apuleius would be completely in harmony with the attitude of much of the male Roman elite in the first centuries throughout the Empire. As in many other areas, he seems to be an exponent of the traditional ancient culture which would prove so slow to change into a Christian culture.

The case of Pudentilla

Considering Apuleius as an exponent of the 'male' elite, one is tempted to consider for a moment Apuleius' wife, Pudentilla. In the *Apology*, Apuleius pictures her in various ways, dependent upon his rhetorical aim of the moment. She in turn appears as a sensible housewife and a rational landowner, an unattractive woman madly in love, and suffering from disease, or as a literary model of wisdom.³⁷ But some elements in her portrait must have been beyond doubt: she is an extremely rich widow, who has lived chastely for more than ten years after her husband had died and who marries Apuleius for good, medical reasons. She knows Greek, is even able to write it, and devotes part of her time to studying. She also lavishly donates money to the people on the occasion of her son's wedding, but she herself remarries secretly in a country house, partly to avoid all the obligatory visits and meetings (87,11). By ancient standards, the last element is a remarkable expression of unsociable behaviour.

This rich and cultured woman is bound to have been interested in religion, given the social and intellectual climate of her age. But conversely, she might also have been an interesting woman for the young Christian church. Especially in late antiquity, many rich widows were known as supporters of the church.³⁸ Pudentilla would, for one thing, perfectly fit the profile of the decent female benefactor.

However, by remarrying in the first place, and by choosing a non-Christian husband of a lower social rank in an attempt to safeguard her freedom and financial interests, Pudentilla can hardly qualify as a celibate

³⁷ On the various images of Pudentilla, see: Vincent Hunink, *The enigmatic Lady Pudentilla*, *AJP* 119 (1998) 275-291.

³⁸ For further references and literature, see: Jan Bremmer, *Pauper or patroness. The widow in the Early Christian Church*, in: Jan Bremmer, Lourens van den Brink (edd.), *Between poverty and the pyre. Moments in the history of widowhood* (London/New York 1995) 31-57; J.-U. Krause, *Witwen und Waisen IV* (Stuttgart 1994).

Christian widow. In fact, she seems to break about every rule set out by Tertullian for Christian widows in his *Ad uxorem*, composed only two generations after Apuleius in Africa.³⁹ In this interesting treatise on the position and moral duties of Christian widows, women like Pudentilla seem quite out of place in the African church. At best she could be regarded as the model of a rich pagan woman *not* attracted by the church: *sordent talibus ecclesiae* (2,8,3).

More importantly, there is simply no evidence in Apuleius' text to assume that Pudentilla held any Christian sympathies. On the contrary, in a letter to her son which is paraphrased in the text (70,5-8), she says her son is fit for marriage 'by the will of the gods': *deum voluntate* (70,7). This may only be a conventional expression, but even then, the reference to more than one God seems to exclude any thought of Christianity.

For the later Christian author Sidonius Apollinaris (5th cent.), Pudentilla does not seem to be a special case. In a letter to a friend, in which he advises him to read incessantly, he adds:

Neque patiaris ut te ab hoc proposito propediem coniunx domum feliciter ducenda deflectat, sisque oppido meminens quod olim Marcia Hortensio, Terentia Tullio, Calpurnia Plinio, Pudentilla Apuleio, Rusticiana Symmacho legentibus meditantibusque candelas et candelabra tenuerunt.

You must not allow the thought that you will soon be happily married to turn you from this determination, ever remembering that in the old times of Marcia and Hortensius, Terentia and Tullius, Calpurnia and Pliny, Pudentilla and Apuleius, Rusticiana and Symmachus, the wives held candles and candlesticks for their husbands whilst they read and composed.⁴⁰

Thus we see Pudentilla presented as an example of the loyal wife of a famous writer. But a Christian woman holding candlesticks for her openly pagan husband, who freely wrote on Roman Gods and demons, to say nothing of magic and sex? That seems quite inconceivable.⁴¹

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³⁹ See: Tertullien, *A son épouse*, introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes de Charles Munier (Paris 1980) (Sources Chrétiennes 273). On p. 9 the date of composition is discussed; scholars place it between 193 and 206 AD.

⁴⁰ Sid.Ap. *Epist.* 2,10,5. The translation by W.B. Anderson is quoted from: Sidonius, Poems and letters, Loeb Classical Library nr. 296, p. 317.

⁴¹ I thank dr. V. Schmidt (Groningen) and prof.dr. Jan Bremmer (Groningen) for their useful comments on earlier versions of this article.