
Mandatory retirement: Ideas in the study of Christian origins whose time has come to go

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Summary: Historians of ancient Christianity routinely describe its social and religious environment by relying on certain common-sense academic terms. In this essay, the author argues that four of these terms—conversion, nationalism, *religio licita* (“legit cult”) and monotheism—in fact import anachronism and distortion into historical descriptions of the cultural context of Christianity and its origins, in the end obscuring precisely the evidence that they are mobilized to illumine. In making the argument that these terms be dropped, the author also presents a synthetic reconstruction of the ways that Jews, Christians and pagans interacted during the formative centuries of the new movement.

Résumé : Les historiens du christianisme ancien décrivent habituellement l’environnement social et religieux de cette époque en s’appuyant sur certains termes académiques usuels. Dans cet essai, l’auteure soutient que quatre de ces termes — conversion, nationalisme, *religio licita* (« culte permis ») et monothéisme — sont anachroniques. Leur utilisation génère une distorsion dans les descriptions historiques du contexte culturel du christianisme et de ses origines, obscurcissant ainsi ce qu’ils veulent éclairer. Tout en proposant que ces termes soient abandonnés, l’auteure présente une reconstruction synthétique des interactions entre Juifs, Chrétiens et païens interagissaient durant les siècles de formation du nouveau mouvement.

I would like to propose the speedy retirement of four much-used terms that routinely appear in scholarship on Christian origins. These terms serve scholars of ancient Christianity both as a kind of academic short-hand and as interpretive concepts. Their use affects historical reconstruction in similar

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ways. They lead us down the path of anachronism and abstraction, ultimately obscuring the lives and concerns of the ancient people whom we seek to understand. In exploring how this is so, I will of course be venturing my own descriptions of religious life in the ancient Mediterranean. I constructed these descriptions in the course of thinking through what description itself is like once we try to avoid using these terms. And this effort was inspired in part by my realization that continuing to think with these terms was making it progressively harder to work with what primary evidence we have.

Before I begin, then, let me confess openly what I have just implied: every error of judgment, every distortion of the historical environment, every inadvertent anachronism that I am about to sketch, I have gone into print with myself. I would like to thank the Society, then, not only for its gracious invitation to speak at its annual meeting, and not only for its conferring on me the very special privilege of offering this lecture to honor the memory of Peter Craigie, but also for giving me this opportunity for public repentance. I need it.

I begin by offering some ideas to hold in mind while I present my arguments. These are generalizations that I find helpful to think with when looking at the ancient Mediterranean and tracking the interrelations of its two main populations, gods and humans. In Antiquity:

- gods run in the blood;
- cult is an ethnic designation/ethnicity is a cultic designation;
- cult makes gods happy;
- unhappy gods make for unhappy humans.

With these ideas in mind, I come to my first term: *conversion*. In the field of New Testament studies, the question has especially been debated whether this term can properly be applied to the apostle Paul. Earlier scholarship, which had seen the first generation of the Christian movement as a community already distinct (indeed, self-consciously distinct) from Judaism, had no problem either with this term or with its application to Paul: after all, Paul had rejected Judaism in favor of Christianity, and he had condemned his former allegiance as servitude to the "works of the Law." This scholarly understanding both of Paul the convert and of the term "conversion" cohered easily with a classic definition, on display in A.D. Nock's great study, which held that conversion is "a deliberate turning ... which implies that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right" (Nock 1933: 7).

A generation later, Krister Stendahl, among others, urged that scholars adopt the term that Paul himself had used to describe his shift of allegiance toward the *ekklēsia*: not "conversion," but "call" (Stendahl 1976). Seeing Paul's transformation as his call to be an apostle to the Gentiles, argued the advocates of this position, had a double benefit. It was both truer to Paul and truer to Paul's historical context. Besides the advantage of this term's being

anchored in Paul's own text (Gal. 1:15: *theos ... kalesas*), "call" did not suggest, as "conversion" did, the idea of a rupture with Judaism. Rather, it placed Paul and his idea of himself within a trajectory of Israel's continuing prophetic role vis-à-vis the nations. In other words, "call" had the virtue of implying or presupposing no sharp contrast between the native religion of Paul, or of the first apostles, and the makeup of the movement which they dedicated themselves to spreading in the Diaspora. "Conversion" too readily facilitated imagining the Jesus movement *circa* 34 as already something other than Judaism; "call" more readily allowed imagining the Jesus movement as a *type* of Judaism.

Against this view, indeed perhaps in response to it, other scholars more recently have brought arguments urging that "convert," after all, be kept. These scholars emphasize the benefits of using modern methodologies (whether derived from social science or psychology or cultural anthropology) when reconstructing ancient figures. Thus, though they do regard earliest Christianity as a species of late Second Temple Judaism, they emphasize the contrast—sociologically or psychologically or behaviorally—between Paul as a persecuting outsider and Paul as a committed, indeed as a missionizing, insider. The virtue of the term "convert," these scholars claim, is not historical so much as *functional*: only "conversion" seems adequately to express the degree of difference between Paul's old life and his new one. The term's analytic utility, in this view, offsets any supposed problem with descriptive anachronism. Besides (as these scholars rightly point out), historians routinely rely upon words developed well beyond the time-frame of the phenomena that they analyze. If economic historians, for example, can speak without anguish of "inflation" in the 3rd century, why should New Testament historians not speak without anguish of Paul's "conversion" (Gager 1983: 209–11; 2004; Segal 1990)?

I have never been persuaded by these last arguments. This is in part because I routinely work on another ancient figure, namely Augustine, who really does conform much more readily to the definition of a "convert" than does Paul (whom Augustine recasts as his own theological model of a convert). "Conversion" necessarily implies something about the person's environment as much as about his mental state: a convert goes from A to B. In 386, for example, Augustine converted *from* something (Manichaean Christianity) *to* something else (that is, to Catholic Christianity). But if B cannot be said to exist yet in any way that would distinguish it in telling ways from A, we have a problem. Thus, while Augustine does indeed "convert" to Catholicism, can we say similarly of Luther? Does he "convert" to Protestantism? And if not, then for that same reason, can we speak of Paul "the convert" (Fredriksen 1986)?

The problems with using the word "conversion" for this first generation of the Christian movement become even more confounding when it describes a seemingly much less controversial case: not that of Paul himself,

but that of Paul's Gentiles. These folk are routinely identified as Paul's "converts." Here is a genuine and clear case of a move from A to B, namely from the worship of traditional or native gods with all their pomps and ways—that is, with all their cult and images—to the aniconic worship of the god of Israel, who in the Diaspora, in principle, received no offerings. What could possibly be the problem with using "convert" to describe these people?

The problem, once again, is confusion leading to anachronism. Both Paul (certainly) and his apostolic colleagues (probably; cf. Gal. 2:7) conceived their universe as composed of two religious communities: Israel, and everybody else, that is, "the nations" (Hebrew, *goyim*; Greek, *ta ethnê*; cf. Galatians' division of humanity into *tês peritomâs* or *tês akrobustias*). These apostles expected the return of Jesus and the establishment of God's kingdom within their own lifetimes: they were not establishing institutions for the *longue durée*. The convenient distinction between "pagan" and "Gentile" had not yet occurred to anyone. So firmly is Paul set within this dual-option universe that he is reduced, when scolding his Gentiles in Corinth, to telling them that they are acting worse than Gentiles (1 Cor. 5:1; some English translations strive to create wiggle-room here by translating *ethnê* as "heathen," but this simply imports back into the mid-1st century the Gentile/pagan distinction, using the idea "pagan" but not the word).

Recall now Paul's argument in his letter to the Galatians. In that letter, Paul rails against other Christian missionaries who attempt to persuade his Gentiles-in-Christ to receive circumcision. If the Galatian Gentiles do so, he warns, they will be responsible for the whole Law (Gal. 5:3). Circumcision, and then keeping the Law, is thus tantamount to saying that these Gentiles would "become" Jews; that is, they would convert. (I will discuss conversion to Judaism in antiquity shortly.) But what distinguishes Paul's mission from that of these other apostles—quite precisely—is that he in principle *opposes* "conversion." His Gentiles are to stay Gentiles. True, they must cease the worship of their own gods and instead worship only the god of Israel. But, insists Paul, they are *not* to convert, and therefore they must not consent to circumcision. In other words, the only potential Christian "converts" in the Diaspora scenario presupposed by the letter to the Galatians are those Gentiles who heed Paul's rivals. And in that case, they would be converts to *Judaism*, motivated to become such by their commitment to Christ.

The point about Paul's Gentiles—the ones, that is, of whom he still approves—is precisely that they are *not* converts. If we slip into calling them "converts"—as I, alas, have routinely done—then we confuse the very situation that we are trying to describe. The term "converts" entangles us in anachronism, letting in by the back door the idea that "Christianity" is somehow already a *tertium quid*, something that exists for these people to convert to. (For precisely this reason, Gager [2002: 64] insists that the words "Christian" and "Christianity" must not be used for this first generation: "There was no Christianity as such in Paul's time." This conviction does not, alas, prevent

him from the no less anachronistic use of the term “convert” of Paul, but that usage is driven by Gager’s perduring attachment to the psychological model of “transvaluation experiences,” e.g., Gager 1981, and frequently thereafter.) But would the participants in this moment of the movement, whether they were Jews or Gentiles, think of Christianity as anything other than the true form of Judaism, or as the right way to read the Jewish scriptures, or as the latest and best revelation from Israel’s god in keeping with his ancient promises to his people? (This list of identifiers is of course a paraphrase of Romans 15.) In short, if Paul insists that his Gentiles *not* convert to Judaism, then, *circa* 50, there is nothing else for them to convert to. Paul, in other words, was working with a different idea. So should we.

Using “convert” or “conversion” to describe either Paul or his Gentiles implicitly but necessarily posits that Christianity was already something other than Judaism. It thus pulls our analysis into a future that, whether in *circa* 34 for Paul or *circa* 50 for his Gentiles, does not yet exist. Before continuing on this topic, however, it might be well to look at the way that other ancients spoke about “conversion to Judaism,” that is, about Gentiles becoming ex-Gentiles by “becoming” Jews.

This was not that coherent a thought. The disapproving descriptions that we find in Greek and Roman authors who refer to what we call “conversion to Judaism” attest first of all to a fundamental construction of the relation of ancient gods and their humans. For majority culture as for Jewish culture, gods and their humans formed kinship groups. Phrased somewhat differently: kinship groups in Mediterranean antiquity were organized around the worship of that family’s god(s). We see this idea stated both early and late. Specifically, Herodotos, in *History* 8.144.2, defines “Greekness” (*hellenismos*) in terms of shared blood (*homaimon*), language (*homoglōssa*), sanctuaries and cult (*theôn hidrumata koina kai thusiai*) and customs (*êthea homotropa*). Mid-1st century, Paul in Romans 9:4–5 presents “Jewishness” similarly: his *suggenoi* (a “blood” term) share sonship, sanctuary (*doxa*, a reference both to the Jewish god and to his temple in Jerusalem), laws and cult (*latreia*). (For obvious reasons, *homoglōssa* cannot indicate “Jewishness” for Paul in the way that it could indicate “Greekness” for Herodotos.)

In ancient Mediterranean culture, ethnicity and antiquity indexed proper religion, the correct attitude toward which—for the members of whatever group—was “piety.” “Piety” meant observing acknowledged and inherited protocols of enacting respect, first of all for one’s own tradition. Put slightly differently, what we think of as religion, ancient people, whether Jews or non-Jews, identified as “ancestral custom”: *mos maiorum*, *religiones patriis*, *ta nomima*, *paradosis patrikôn* (Gal. 1:14). Please note: One did not “believe” or “believe in” these customs; one “respected” them, meaning that one kept them and (perhaps just as important) that one was seen to keep them. One might also, of course, show respect to the gods of others too; and in many circumstances—situations calling for political politesse; military

or diplomatic engagements; visions of or visitations from divinities other than one's own—such a show of respect was a simple matter of courtesy and common sense (Fredriksen 2003: 44–45). After all, any god is more powerful than any human.

Showing respect to the gods of others—a commonplace concern and a commonplace occurrence in a world so filled with gods—did not under normal circumstances require ceasing to show respect to one's own gods. We have evidence in antiquity of Jews “showing respect” to foreign gods, while identifying and being identified as Jews (more on this below). And we have complementary evidence of Gentiles, whether as tourists to Jerusalem's famous temple or as interested outsiders in Diaspora synagogues, present in Jewish communities and showing respect to the Jews' god. In both cases, arrangements were voluntary and ad hoc. And particularly in the instance of those Gentiles who chose to participate in Jewish assemblies, such people were under no obligation to make a unique commitment to Israel's god. Indeed, we know from various donor inscriptions that some of these interested Gentiles, often designated as “godfearers,” were also very active publicly in their own native cults: Julia Severa, the Roman lady who built a *proseuchê* in Acmona, was also a priestess of the imperial cult; the nine “godfearers” who sponsored the Jews' fund-raiser in Aphrodisias were also, as members of the town council, highly identified pagans and so on. To whatever degree these people chose to participate in synagogue functions, they participated as pagans (Levine 2000: 271–75, 350, 480–82).

In the instance of “conversion” to Judaism, however, this situation becomes more complicated, because of the Jewish avoidance of foreign cult. (I will speak more of this in a moment, though, when I ruminate on the difficulties with “monotheism” in this context.) The act of this extreme form of affiliation, given the normal ethnicity of religious groups, was most often and most easily expressed in terms of forging a political alliance: Gentiles become members of the Jews' *politeia* (e.g., Philo, *Special Laws* 4.34.178; see Cohen 1999: 125–39, 156–74). Hostile pagans complained that these people thereby disowned their own families. Their abandonment of native obligations was seen as disrespect and disloyalty, spurning one's own laws for foreign laws (thus Juvenal *Satires* 14). Or as something akin to treason (Tacitus, *Histories* 5.1–2). Or as atheism *and* treason (thus Domitian's response to members of the ruling class who assumed foreign customs, the *ethê tôn Ioudaiôn*, Dio. 67.14.1–2).

Paul's Gentiles, and obviously other Gentiles in the Jesus movement in the 1st century such as those at Rome, fit neither category. They are certainly not “converts” (at least, according to Paul, they better not be!). But neither, surely, are they godfearers: if they were, Paul would not be so insistent that they cease worshipping their native deities. (Again, synagogues made no such demand of interested Gentiles. Probably, though, this first wave of Gentiles joining the *ekklêsia* had been godfearers before contact with Paul or

other apostles, otherwise they would not have understood the biblical building-blocks of the *euangelion*. This prior and less demanding degree of affiliation might also have contributed to their confusions when, after Pauline baptism, some resumed worship of their own gods; 1 Cor. 5:11). When Paul describes what Gentiles-in-Christ are doing, he uses two other images: that of “turning,” and that of being adopted.

“Turning” is a good biblical and post-biblical prophetic locution. According to an articulate stream of apocalyptic tradition, “turning” is what the Gentiles will do once God’s kingdom comes. “Turn (*epistraphate*) to me!” (Isa. 45:22 LXX, “addressed” to the nations). “All the nations will turn (*epistrepsousin*) in fear to the Lord God...and will bury their idols” (Tobit 14:6; frequently elsewhere). Eschatological Gentiles (not quotidian ones) will turn from the images of their own gods and turn to Israel’s god (Fredriksen 1991: 544–48). However, in part because of the accidents of translation (Greek into Latin into English), this idea becomes garbled. The notes at the bottom of the RSV for Tobit, at 14:6, for example, comment that, in this passage, post-exilic Jews expressed the belief that at the end of days Gentiles will “turn” (a *-strephô* word) to “Judaism.” Not quite. “Turning to” the god of the universe is not the same thing as “turning to” the *paradosis patrikôn* of Israel; worshipping Israel’s god is not the same thing as “becoming” a Jew. So also Paul in 1 Thessalonians 1:9: “You turned *to God* from idols, to worship the true and living God” (*epestrepasate* in the text).

Alas, all these *strephô* words come into Latin as *converso* words (thus, 1 Thes. 1:9 is *conversi estis*); and *converso* words come into English as “convert” and “conversion.” But, again, these Gentiles do not “convert.” They do not turn to “Judaism”; they turn to Israel’s god. They do not assume responsibility for ancestral Jewish customs. Israel is not their family, and they are not so obligated (Fredriksen 1991).

According to Paul, however, the Holy Spirit does effect a fictive family connection for these people. Here Paul uses a very Roman idea: adoption. Roman adoption was both a legal and a “religious” act. Since entering a new family entailed taking on obligations to new gods and new ancestors (much as “conversion” to Judaism did) the protocols effecting adoption were superintended by a *pontifex* (Beard 1990: 38 and n. 55). Paul’s pneumatic adoptees, however, are less encumbered than Roman ones. They are *not* responsible for patriarchal *paradosis*. Nonetheless, they count as “sons”: they can inherit, and they can cry, “Abba: Father,” (Rom. 8:15; cf. Gal. 4:6, where the spirit of Jesus effects the adoption). The “father” whom they invoke, however, is neither Abraham (the primal patriarch of Israel) nor Moses (through whom God gave Israel the Law). “Abba” in early Christian proclamation, whether for Jesus or for his adopted Gentiles siblings, is the god of Israel, thus the god of the universe.

This is the context within which we should try to understand Paul’s statements on Jewish observance, especially circumcision. And this brings me,

briefly, to another word and concept that I would like to retire: *nationalism* (and its derivative derogatory adjectival form, "nationalistic"). I shall leave to one side for now the ways that "nationalism" cannot help but conjure Bismarck, nation-states and the other political formations that the modern period has been heir to. Those connotations glimmer in some New Testament scholars' discussions of Jesus and the Temple (see especially N.T. Wright 1996: 398–403, 405–28, who sees Jesus' program as essentially motivated by "anti-nationalism"). Scholars who look at Paul sometimes explain his aversion to Gentile circumcision as his renouncing of "ethnic boundary markers." This seems to me simply to put a social-anthropological spin on the same idea of Jewish ancestral custom as "too Jewish" (e.g., Dunn 1991: 124–39). But Paul thinks that being Jewish is terrific (Rom. 3:1–2), and he also thinks that he is a terrific Jew (Phil. 3:4–6).

To say that Paul rejects Jewish practices for his Gentiles because he is opposed to Jewish nationalism or to ethnic superiority or to ethnic distinctions of any sort (often by appeal to Gal. 3:28) begins again to blur our picture. Cult in his period is an ethnic designation. Ancient gods run in the blood. A *genos* or *natio* is precisely a birth connection (Paul's *suggenoi* in Romans become *cognati* in Latin). To claim that Paul condemns his Jewish ancestral practices as too "national" or as "nationalistic" can only mean, in his historical context, that he condemns them as "too Jewish." But in a world where cult, tradition and deities are ethnic, this is nonsense. And Israel's god is no exception to this rule. He may be the master of the whole universe, but he is not a generic divinity (such as, for instance, the high god of middle and late Platonism). He is the lord of Jewish history and the god of "the fathers," Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Rom. 15:8).

To sum up: Paul insists that his Gentiles-in-Christ act as if they were "eschatological" Gentiles (which, given his convictions, they are). They should eschew the worship of their native deities and the practice of their own ancestral traditions. They should turn away from their own gods and turn to Israel's god. This is because, through the Spirit, they live in a proleptically eschatological state, in the brief wrinkle in time between the Resurrection and the Parousia. They have been swept up, through Christ, into Israel's redemptive history. They are included in that redemption, but they are not thereby turned into Jews: they are saved as Gentiles. Both this Gentile redemption and the redemption of Israel, however, are known (and correctly understood by Paul, Paul says) according to God's promises to Jewish patriarchs and to Jewish prophets as preserved in Jewish books (Rom. 15:4–9). Is this "nationalism" or "anti-nationalism"? How can this concept possibly help us here?

These thoughts lead me to a third term that I would like to see retired: *religio licita*, "legal religion." This phrase usually appears in scholarly discussions of pagan anti-Christian persecutions, where it supposedly describes a statutory distinction between Christianity and Judaism. Rome (so goes the argument) legally "recognized" Judaism; it did not so recognize Christianity.

There are several problems with *religio licita*. The first, and perhaps the least significant, is the false impression it gives (because rendered in Latin) of actually being a term of Roman law. Its origins, rather, trace back no further than to the late 2nd/early 3rd century CE, and not to Roman law, but to that great ecclesiastical sound-bite meister, Tertullian. In his *Apology*, Tertullian complains that pagans say of Christians, “Non licet esse vos!,” “You’re not legit!” (*Apology* 4.4). By contrast, the Jewish religion is “certe licita” (*Apology* 21.1). From these slight beginnings, *religio licita* has grown into a mighty academic *idée fixe*, invoked to explain why the Empire went after the church or did not go after the synagogue (e.g., Frend 1965: 220, 429; Simon 1996 [1946]: 115). From there, historians chase after the wild goose of trying to figure out why Christianity was *not* a “legal” religion, when we have no record of any laws that render it specifically illegal—nor any record of any laws, of course, that identify any “religion” as specifically legal.

Apart from (only implicitly) in Tertullian, *religio licita* is nowhere attested in any ancient source. But its usefulness as a term of historical analysis is compromised not because of this slight attestation, but because of its utter wrong-headedness in obscuring the essential connection in antiquity between cult and ethnicity. Thus, to begin with the issue of pagan anti-Christian persecution, we note first that the main cause of such aggression was the anxiety felt by those of majority culture when the Tiber overflowed or the Nile did not (Tertullian again; *Apology* 40.2). Offering to the gods was important for public security, for the maintenance of the *pax deorum*, the concordat between heaven and earth that guaranteed the well-being of city and empire (Barnes 1968; Millar 1973).

The problem, then, in the view of majority culture, was not that Gentile Christians were “Christians.” The problem was that, whatever religious practices these people chose to assume, they were still, nonetheless, “Gentiles,” that is, members of their native *genos* or *natio*, with standing obligations to their own gods, who were the gods of the majority. From roughly the end of the 1st century until 250 CE, these Gentile Christians could be the object of local resentments and anxieties precisely because they were not honoring the gods upon whom their city’s prosperity depended. (Recall: cult makes gods happy. If deprived of cult, gods can grow resentful, then angry. Unhappy gods make for unhappy humans.) But *Jewish* Christians were not so persecuted, because as Jews their exemption from public cult was ancient, traditional and protected by long precedent. Ancestral obligation, not legal status, is what is at stake here (Linder 1986; Pucci ben Zeev 1996).

Popular fear of this strange new group fed also on rumor, which attributed terrible anti-social crimes to Christians—infanticide, cannibalism, incestuous intercourse—all accusations that the different Christian sects also made against each other, and that Greco-Roman proto-racist thought routinely attributed to outsiders (Isaac 2004). Such stories about Christians eventually lost their force: courts discounted and disproved them (e.g., Pliny, *Letter* 10). Once a Christian stood before the governor, the matter turned

upon showing respect both for imperial authority and for the *mos Romanorum*. Would the accused defer to the governor's request? Would he honor the emperor's image? Would she eat meat offered to the gods? Many Christians complied; others refused. The stalwart might end their days in the arena, robed as characters from classical mythology, sacrificed in spectacles recalling the stories of the same gods whom these Christians had refused more conventionally to honor (Coleman 1990; Potter 1993).

This first phase of anti-Christian persecution was random, sporadic and local. The contributing role of social factors seems clear, though the actual charges that brought Christians to trial remain foggy. Evidence of significant freedom of movement—Christians visiting and supporting those arrested in jail (such as we see in the case of Perpetua), or Christians in custody visiting churches despite having been arrested (as we see in the case of Ignatius of Antioch)—implies what the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan clearly states: simply *being* a Christian did not suffice to have action brought. The admiring many, who recorded and preserved acts of the martyrs, surely outnumbered the heroic, and perhaps voluntary, few.¹

With Decius, in the mid-3rd century, both the issues and the evidence are clearer. In response to the decades of turmoil that had gripped the empire, Decius mandated that all citizens participate in public cult. The protocols most especially emphasized blood sacrifices and honoring the emperor (Rives 1999). The emperor did not forbid the practice of Christianity. Rather, he ordered that gentile Christians, whatever their peculiar practices, also observe those rites that ensured the gods' good will. His goal was not universal religious uniformity, much less persecution of Christianity, but the preservation of the commonwealth. Once again, Jews—and thus Jewish Christians—were exempt.² Their exemption makes the point that ethnic or ancestral obligation—not “religious affiliation”—was what mattered. If Christianity itself were *illicita*, Decius would not have given Jewish Christians a pass.

The chief problem with the term *religio licita*, then, is not merely that it misdescribes Judaism and, by extension, Christianity, and not merely that it conjures chimerical “explanations” for pagan anti-Christian activity. The essential problem is that it beclouds our view of what we think of as “religions,” and how these were commonly constituted, in antiquity. *All subject peoples within both the Hellenistic empires and the later Roman Empire normally had the right to observe and preserve their ancestral customs* (on this last point, most recently, Isaac 2004: 449). “Religions” (various ancestral practices) simply existed, because their subject peoples did. Ancient empire meant the greatest number of peoples, and thus the greatest number of gods, beneath the umbrella of imperial authority. Rome was not “tolerant”—another anachronistic term, drawn from our own liberal political context. Religious pluralism was simply the native and normal condition of ancient society. As long as frontiers were quiet, internal peace maintained and taxes and tribute col-

lected, as far as the imperial government was concerned, all was well. And as a final consideration—and a practical one in a culture where any god was presumed to be more powerful than any human—Rome had little reason to want to alienate the gods of its subjects.³

Let me restate this last point: in antiquity, all gods exist. And this observation brings me to the fourth and final term on my list of words that I wish would go: *monotheism*. This word, and this concept, are enjoying something of a scholarly vogue just now. Big books and long articles have appeared analyzing the sudden and early development of high christological claims by imputing an austere and exclusive monotheism to late Second Temple Judaism (e.g., Bauckham 1998; Hurtado 2003; cf. Stuckenbruck and North 2004). Jews are distinguished from pagan contemporaries on the basis of their cultic exclusivism, a consequence of this monotheism. The persecution of Gentile Christians in turn is explained in terms of their commitment, inherited from Judaism, to this sort of monotheism. Meanwhile, the higher the Christological claims, the more ingenious the various scholarly reassurances that these claims do not in fact compromise monotheism.

All this raises the question, what do we mean by “monotheism”? In its modern context of origin, the word denotes belief in a single god who is the only god. When modern scholars transpose the term to antiquity, the definition remains constant. And that is a large part of the problem.

Ancient “monotheism” spoke to the imagined architecture of the cosmos, not to its absolute population. Ancient monotheism means “one god on top,” with other gods ranged beneath, lower than and in some sense subordinate to the high god. People of sufficient education who thought philosophically about relations between levels of divinity might see these lower gods as ontologically contingent on the high god; less philosophical monotheists were content simply to assert that their own god was the biggest or the most powerful or the best god. The Bible itself, prime textual residence of the god of Israel, of course acknowledges frequently the existence of other gods, who are the deities of “the nations.” “All the peoples walk, each in the name of its god,” says the prophet Micah, “but we will walk in the name of the Lord *our* god forever and ever” (4:5; and frequently elsewhere, especially in Psalms). Exodus 22:28 LXX taught that Israel was not to revile *tous theous*, “the gods.”

That these other gods existed was a matter of experience, not a question of “belief.” Paul, for example—often identified as an “exclusive” monotheist—complains about the lesser divinities who try to frustrate his mission (2 Cor. 4:4, the *theos tou kosmou toutou*). The divinities formerly worshipped by his congregations in Galatia are not gods by nature, he tells them, but mere *stoicheia*, cosmic light-weights unworthy of fear or of worship (Gal. 4: 8–9; note that Paul only demeans the cosmic status of these beings, but does not deny their existence). “Indeed, there are many gods and many lords,” he says to his Gentiles in Corinth; but they are to worship only the god of Israel

through his son (1 Cor. 8:5–6). These lower cosmic powers whom the nations worship through cultic acts performed before idols will themselves acknowledge the superior authority of the god of Israel once Christ returns to defeat them and to establish his father's kingdom (1 Cor. 15:24–27). They too will bend their knees to Jesus (Phil. 2:10). Through Christ, in brief, Paul's Gentiles have been spared *two* sorts of divine wrath: that of their native deities, whose anger at now being neglected cannot harm the Gentile-in-Christ; and that of the god of Israel, whose wrath they have averted by turning from the images ("idols") of these lower divinities (1 Thess. 1:9–10). Note: Paul certainly "believes in" these other gods, meaning that he knows that they exist and that they can have and have had real effects.⁴ He just does not worship them. Neither, he insists, should his Gentiles.

Second-century Gentile intellectuals who joined the Christian movement—Valentinus, Marcion, Justin—twined together two originally separate strands of monotheism. From the pagan side, they brought the monotheist principles of *paideia*, influenced by Platonism (see Athanassiadi and Frede 1999). From the Jewish side they took over biblical monotheism, whether through the LXX or through Paul's letters and the gospels or from both. This double heritage, and their shared commitment to the idea that the high god had revealed himself through Christ his son, nonetheless still left broad scope for disagreement.

All three theologians concurred that the busy god described as making the material world in Genesis *ipso facto* could not be the high god. According to their philosophical principles, the high god does not "create": he is instead radically stable, because both perfect and changeless. The work of organizing matter was relegated to a lower deity, the *kosmokrator* or *demiurge*. To anyone of decent philosophical education, that was clearly the figure described in the opening chapters of the LXX. Valentinus and Marcion both held that this lower deity, the creator god, was the god of the Jews. He was also the opponent of Christ and of his father, the high god. Justin also held that the *heteros theos* of the Septuagint's theophanies was properly the god of the Jews (*Dialogue with Trypho* 56). But Justin identified this god not as Christ's opponent, but rather as Christ himself, the *logos* or messenger (*angelos*) of the high god his father. (The role of the opponent passed to yet lower divine personalities, those fallen messengers who inspired pagan pantheons; see most recently Reed 2005.) All three theologians have one single high god, whom they see as uniquely revealed in Jesus. And all three envisage a cosmos thick with multitudes of other divine personalities, to whom they refer as *theoi*, "gods" (cf. Philo, another ancient, philosophically sophisticated biblical monotheist, who quite unselfconsciously designated the heavenly firmament as "the most holy dwelling-place *theôn emphanôn te kai aisthêtôn*, of the manifest and visible gods," *On the Creation of the World* 7.27). My point, quite simply, is that ancient monotheists were polytheists.

Some scholars rightly note that (a) Jews were monotheists, and (b) some Christian Jews, such as Paul or the author of the Gospel of John, imputed

divinity to Jesus. The correct inference from these observations is not, I think, the tortured Chalcedonianism *avant la lettre* that we now see assigned to 1st-century figures, who supposedly “identified” Christ with the Father in some unique, binitarian way. Multiple divine personalities are native to ancient monotheism. John could (and did) designate Christ as *theos* and still be an ancient monotheist, because of the hierarchical arrangement of his heaven: *logos* is subordinate to *ho theos*, just as “son” is to “father.” As long as one god reigned supreme at the peak of the theo-ontological pyramid, the base could be as broad as needed. (The Christian Basilides conjectured 365 divine entities; other Christian thinkers made do with fewer.) And the theologians of the generation of Chalcedon (451 CE), who complicated Christian monotheism to the point of paradox with their creed, still thought easily in terms of multiple lesser gods. After all, in their period, the emperor too was divine (Bowersock 1997; Fredriksen 2006).⁵

Our unthinking dependence on the word “monotheism” confuses not only our view of ancient Christians, but also our view of ancient Jews. Pagan complaints of Jews as “unsociable” (*akoinonetoí*) or “separate” (living an *amixia bios*) are interpreted as reinforcing anachronistic ideas of Jews as “exclusive monotheists.” Consequently, we have no place to put all our evidence for Jews who did show respect for foreign gods, whether in manumission inscriptions or through funding or participating in dedicated games or through building temples to emperors (Fredriksen 2003). For that matter, the Jewish mastery of the Hellenistic curriculum measures precisely the penetration of Jews into the polytheistic universe of the gymnasium. Every time we find a Jewish ephebe, a Jewish town councilor, a Jewish soldier or a Jewish actor or a Jewish athlete, we find a Jew identified as a Jew who also obviously spent part of his work day demonstrating courtesy toward gods not his (Gruen 2002).

Scholars of an earlier generation came up with the term “henotheism” in order to accommodate all this evidence of a comfortable polytheism that is found within ancient texts or populations habitually regarded as “monotheist.” But what henotheism describes is really just normal ancient monotheism. Modern monotheism—belief that only one god exists—arose only with the disenchantment of the universe in the modern period. Modern science swept away a lot of cosmic clutter, reducing radically the number of divine personalities needed earlier to account for the way the world worked. As a result, the god of modern monotheist imagination is a lonely punctum in a relatively underpopulated metaphysical heaven. The ancient world, by contrast, was filled with gods, and the people who lived in it—even members of Jewish and of Christian communities—knew this to be the case. They encountered these lower gods, and felt their effects fairly often. They developed techniques and ritual protocols to cope with this fact. We would cope with it better, too, if “monotheism” were retired as a term of art for thinking about ancient religion.

Conversion; nationalism; *religio licita*; monotheism. That is my list of terms that I think ripe for retirement. The problem with these terms, as I hope I have demonstrated, is that they obscure more than they clarify, usually by inviting us along the path of anachronism. They too easily permit or even encourage us to project our own thoughts and values onto ancient people. But the ancient dead are radically independent of us, and they lived in a world different from ours. We understand them better by respecting that difference.

About a decade ago, at another meeting of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, I closed my remarks by invoking a beautiful thought by Peter Brown on the "patina of the obvious that encrusts human actions," and the ways that that represents "the first and last enemy of the historian." He continued, looking toward the people of antiquity, by saying that "the historian meets the gap between himself and others at its most sharp and uncompromising. The dead are irreducible" (Brown 1972: 20). I mention this not because I always have to end a lecture at the CSBS with this quotation from Brown (not that that would be a bad tradition). I mention Brown now to segue to the place where I would like to conclude our evening together: by speaking, not of the study of ancient religions, but, albeit briefly, of Peter Craigie.

I never knew Professor Craigie. But I have come to that point in my own life where I too must number close friends among the dead. And though the dead are absolutely absent, in this phase of my own life I have been struck by the ways that memory and affection have the power to conjure them, to enable them to touch us, somehow, yet again. I would like to thank the CSBS for giving me this opportunity this evening to offer these thoughts, however inadequate, to the memory of your beloved friend. He must have been a wonderful companion and colleague and mentor, and I am warmed by having made his acquaintance here among you tonight. Allow me to close, then, by borrowing language from our inscriptions. *En eirênê hê koimêsis autou; zichro le-bracha*. In peace his sleep, and may his memory be for a blessing.

Notes

- 1 Shortly before Decius attempted to mandate universal homage to the gods of Rome, Origen claimed that "few, whose number could easily be counted, have died occasionally for the sake of the Christian religion," *Against Celsus* 3.8.
- 2 Thus Eusebius' story of about the Gentile Christian who contemplated conversion to Judaism in order to avoid such harassment, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.12, 1.
- 3 Roman respect for foreign deities informed their practice of *evocatio deorum*, promising cult to those gods in exchange for their support when Roman armies went up against those gods' humans. Recently, J.S. Kloppenborg (2005: 419-50, especially 442-44) has argued that Josephus and the Gospel of Mark preserve traces of evidence suggesting that Titus performed such a ritual when conquering Jerusalem.
- 4 If by *archontes tou aiônes toutou* Paul meant astral powers (1 Cor. 2:8), then these lesser gods had crucified the son of Israel's god.

- 5 Hence the confusions of the those Gentile Christians named in the canons of the Council of Elvira *circa* 303, who continued to function in public as *flamines* in the imperial cult, processing and sponsoring gladiatorial matches (see nos. 2, 3, 4). The problem was not the divinity of the emperor, but, *circa* 303, the emperor's religious allegiances. Once Constantine sponsored the church, the cult of the (Christian) emperor, minus blood offerings, continued.

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