BOOK REVIEW

Rethinking the Gods: Philosophical Readings of Religion in the Post-Hellenistic Period. By PETER VAN NUFFELEN. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. viii + 273. Hardcover, £60.00/$99.00. ISBN 978-1-107-01203-5.

We find here "philosophical reflections on religion … as part of the wider tendency of Post-Hellenistic philosophy to open up to external, non-philosophical sources of knowledge and authority" (1). The first thesis, influenced by G. Boys-Stones' *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy* (Oxford, 2001), argues that Post-Hellenistic philosophers sought real truth in "ancient wisdom," in particular in religious texts and rituals, above all, in mystery cults, which they could extract through their particular philosophy, in turn gaining authority for it. The approach contrasts with that of D. Dawson (*Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (Berkeley, 1992), not mentioned by Van Nuffelen), who saw allegorical interpretation as subversive revisionism and domestication of a text. The second major thesis analyzes a structured sense of the universe consisting of a cosmic and divine hierarchy under a highest god. This differs from H. S. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods* (Leiden and Boston, 2011), which sees Graeco-Romans simultaneously entertaining polytheistic and monotheistic views (256–60). In the third part, Van Nuffelen discusses challenges to the concepts: satirical (Lucian), and "outsider" (Epicureans [!], Christians, and Philo of Alexandria).

According to Posidonius, primitive sages with philosophical knowledge created religion, but over time, their wisdom, through moral degeneration, became obscure. One can extract it, though, through philosophy (28–9). Platonists and Stoics alike shared this concept of "ancient wisdom," even before Cornutus, and it explains Varro's ideas about primitive religion (28). Plutarch's *On the Festival of the Images at Plataea* and *On Isis and Osiris* demonstrate that all nations possess this ancient wisdom (60). For the Isis religion, his last interpretation, Middle Platonic allegory, is the "most truthful" for extracting this wisdom (61). Numenius, who did not completely reject religion, also believed that all peoples possessed this ancient wisdom. He insisted, however, that the truth extracted depends entirely on "the philosophy of the interpreter" (78–9). Dio Chrysostom

could even find truth about the cosmos in a barbarian mystery cult (88). Though it is a satirical work, one reading of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* suggests that without philosophy, and thus unable to extract the "truth hidden in an ancient religion," one can easily fall into superstition (97).

Part II treats the increasing sense of a "cosmic and divine hierarchy." Possibly it was due to an increased stress on divine transcendence, the attempt to reconcile polytheism and monotheism, and contemporary political structures. Each is insufficient in itself, but taken together they lead to a solution (101–4). Van Nuffelen traces the idea again to Posidonius, who, in contrast to the Early Stoics, stressed natural inequality (111). Around this time, also, the idea of νόμος ἔμψυχος (the king as the embodiment of "living law") emerges (115). Apuleius and "Stoics like Dio Chrysostom and Epictetus" integrate gods and men into a single, universal hierarchy (119), as do Aelius Aristides, Maximus of Tyre, and Pseudo-Aristotle, *De mundo* (122–46). Dio in two *Kingship Orations* (*First* and *Third*) implicitly and explicitly treats the king as νόμος ἔμψυχος (149) and integrates the ruler within a cosmic hierarchy (151–6). In at least fifteen works, Plutarch also demonstrates his belief in a benevolent hierarchy under the highest god, including a hierarchy of demons (i.e., spiritual beings (*daimones*)) (156–75, esp. 158).

There was opposition. Lucian satirizes both the relation between religion and philosophy and the concept of a cosmic hierarchy (179–99). Though sharing similar premises, Philo challenges Graeco-Roman culture itself (200–16). The Hebrew Scriptures trump Graeco-Roman thought. Relying on "ancient wisdom," he can assert that Judaism is the exclusive source of truth (202–4), while acknowledging a great debt to Greek philosophy (201). Though he believes in the "cosmic hierarchy," his focus is on the Jewish God at the summit (211). For Celsus, Christianity is a sham religion, a superstition. Lacking the credentials of philosophy and traditional worship, it offers neither "ancient wisdom" nor a "divine hierarchy" (219–21). In their defense, Christians turned their rivals' weapons against them (230). An epilogue presents some further reflections and downplays the idea of Middle Platonism as simply a stepping-stone to Neoplatonism (231–41, esp. 236).

Van Nuffelen's presentation of the texts is accurate, and his erudition is tremendous (apparently overlooked, though, are Dawson (cited above), J. Moles' 1987 *JHS* article on Dio, and M. Smith's skepticism about the authenticity of *On Superstition*, while D. Richter's views about *On Isis* (56 n. 48) deserved more discussion (see now his *Cosmopolis* (New York and Oxford, 2011) 207–29)).

Nonetheless, has he drawn the lines too clean? Were Plutarch and some others really searching for truth in foreign religions? Alternatively, were they offering their readers through them, philosophical coherence and a higher morality and spirituality (cf. P. Athanassiadi and C. Macris, "Les mutations religieuses dans l'Empire romain," in C. Bonnet and L. Bricault, eds., *Les mutations religieuses dans l'Empire romain* (Leiden and Boston, 2013, forthcoming))? Was the "divine hierarchy" as neat as Van Nuffelen suggests? Here, he seems to glide without warning between henotheistic and monotheistic descriptions, mostly henotheistic. Sometimes he leaves us in the dark about the "highest god," especially when treating the Stoics and Plutarch. For example (169–70 n. 55), the "highest god" in *On the E at Delphi* (392A-394A) and *On Isis* (383A) seems to be a henotheistic god. But Plutarch surely is describing his Middle Platonic God of which the henotheistic god is but an image. Nonetheless, this is an excellent, insightful, and fascinating study. Even those who are not philosophers will be able to extract much truth.

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