The Emperor Julian, Against the Cynic Heraclius (Oration 7): A Polemic about Myths

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The Emperor Julian, *Against the Cynic Heraclius* (*Oration* 7): A Polemic about Myths

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From its earliest beginnings onwards, Greek philosophy was a highly competitive enterprise. Greek philosophers thought of themselves as partaking in a contest (*agôn*) and of their fellow-philosophers as opponents to be bested. Within this context, exchanges between philosophers tended to take the shape of polemics – that is, aggressive attacks on both the position and the person of the opponent – rather than of constructive dialogues. Good illustrations of this point are the early Presocratics Xenophanes and Heraclitus, who both vehemently attack such figures of note as Homer, Hesiod, and Pythagoras in an attempt to make a name for themselves.[1] Philosophical polemic gained extra momentum from the

[1] For Heraclitus as an early polemicist, cf. for example H. Stauffer, "Polemik," in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, vol. 6, Must–Pop, ed. Gert Ueding (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003), 1403–15, here 1405. For Heraclitus's sharp criticism of other Greek poets and intellectuals, see, for example, Heraclitus Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1964[11]) 22 B 42: "Heraclitus said that Homer deserved it to be driven out of the competitions (*ek tôn agônôn*) and beaten and Archilochus likewise"; and further A 22 (against Homer); 22 B40 (against Hesiod, Pythagoras, Xenophanes, and Hecataeus); B57 (against Hesiod); and B129 (against Pythagoras). On the public competition (*agôn*) between Xenophanes and Homer and Hesiod, see, for example, Glenn W. Most, "The Poetics of Early Greek Philosophy," in

Hellenistic period onwards, when philosophers began to organise themselves into schools that competed with each other for pupils. Polemics proved a useful tool for self-promotion and hence for luring potential students away from other schools. Somewhat paradoxically, given its importance, the ancients did not theorise about polemical discourse. It is not discussed, for example, in the many ancient treatises about rhetoric. Even though the modern word polemic is derived from the ancient Greek words *polemos* ("war") and *polemikos* ("related to war"), these words are hardly ever used in ancient texts to denote polemics.[2] A student of ancient polemical texts thus has to take recourse to modern literary theories about polemics. In the present contribution, I intend to discuss the oration of the emperor Julian (*Oration* 7) against the Cynic Heraclius on myths, with the help of a model of polemical discourse that has been developed by Jürgen Stenzel,[3] and to which André Laks has recently drawn the attention of students of ancient philosophy in a stimulating essay introducing a volume about the role of polemics in ancient philosophy.[4]

Julian's speech is a response to another speech that was delivered in the spring of 362 in Constantinople by the aforementioned Cynic philosopher Heraclius before an audience that consisted of Julian and other members of the imperial court. If we are to believe Julian's no doubt biased summary of the

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The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy, ed. A.A. Long, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 332–62, here 352–53.

[2] For the absence of the concept of polemic in antiquity, see Stauffer, "Polemik," 1403–06. André Laks ("The Continuation of Philosophy by Other Means?" in *Strategies of Polemics in Greek and Roman Philosophy*, ed. Sharon Weisser and Naly Thaler [Leiden: Brill, 2016], 16–30, here 17) likewise observes that the Greek words *polemos* and *polemikos* hardly ever apply to literary or philosophical polemics. As an exception, he quotes Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 14.8.10, in which Carneades is said to be fighting (*prospolemein*) against the other philosophers. Laks adds, however, that this is specifically linked to Carneades's sceptic position, and therefore does not exactly correspond to the general phenomenon that we call "polemics." Note, however, that Numenius Fr. 25 ed. Des Places, a fragment from *On the Dissension of the Academics towards Plato* that is quoted by Eusebius in *Preparation for the Gospel* (14.5.10–6.14), portrays the polemical exchange between the Academic Arcesilaus and the Stoic Zeno as a Homeric battle. Below, we shall find a similar comparison to Homeric battles in descriptions of polemical situations. Admittedly, Arcesilaus is another sceptic philosopher. In the same fragment, however, Numenius compares the polemics of Cephisodorus, a pupil of Isocrates, against Aristotle with warfare. Cephisodrus got angry with Aristotle because the latter had criticised his master, Isocrates. Cephisodorus, however, mixed up Aristotle's philosophy with that of Plato. As a result, "he did not fight (*machomenos*) with the person against whom he waged war/polemicized (*epolemei*), but fought (*emacheto*) against whom he did not wish to wage war/polemicize (*polemein*)."

[3] Jürgen Stenzel, "Rhetorischer Manichäismus. Vorschläge zu einer Theorie der Polemik," in *Formen und Formgeschichte des Streitens. Der Literaturstreit*, ed. Franz J. Worstbrock and Helmut Koopman (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1986), 3–11.

[4] Laks, "The Continuation of Philosophy."

speech – which itself has not been preserved – it revolved around a myth of Heraclius's own making about Zeus and Pan. To his public, it must have been clear that in this myth, Zeus represented Heraclius himself, whereas Pan stood for the emperor Julian. There must have been more than a slight hint of mockery involved. Julian, now that he had become the sole ruler of the Roman world, tried to undo the politics of his uncle Constantine and Constantine's successor, Constantius, which had made Christianity the official religion of the empire at the expense of the traditional Graeco-Roman pagan cult. In the context of his programme of pagan restoration, Julian presented himself both as a scion of the sun-god, King Helios, and as a Neo-Platonic philosopher – in particular, as a follower of Iamblichus of Apamea and his version of Neo-Platonism, which combined philosophy with pagan religious rituals. As part of this self-fashioning, Julian sported a philosophical beard, which attracted a lot of attention and ridicule. Heraclius's speech is unfortunately lost to us. By presenting Julian as Pan – the least attractive god in the classical pantheon, because he combined the looks of a human being with those of a hairy goat – Heraclius presumably intended to poke fun at both Julian's claims about his divine ancestry and his unkempt appearance.[5]

Julian's extremely hostile response may have come as a surprise to both Julian's public and to Heraclius in particular. The traditional role of the Cynic philosopher was that of the court jester to the high and mighty. One has only to think of the famous anecdote about the Cynic Diogenes asking Alexander the Great to stand out of his sunlight. The person at the receiving end of Cynic mockery was supposed to take it graciously, as in fact Alexander reportedly did. Such restraint would reflect well on him. I assume that Heraclius intended to play the role of Diogenes, thus indirectly comparing Julian to Alexander. The fact that, as Julian mentions (*Oration* 7.224a–225a), Heraclius and other Cynics who came to the imperial court expected to be rewarded for their frankness suggests

[5] Susanna Elm (*Sons of Hellenism, Fathers of the Church: Emperor Julian, Gregory of Nazianzus, and the Vision of Rome*, Transformation of the Classical Heritage 49 [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012], 109–12) argues that Heraclius compared Julian to Pan as an allusion to Julian's rather restricted sex life. After the death of his wife in 360, Julian remained ostensibly unmarried in order to devote himself to the administration of the empire. Pan was the god who had reputedly invented masturbation, a practice highly valued by Cynics as an easy way to satisfy natural urges. There is, to my mind, little direct evidence for this titillating suggestion.

as much. Julian, however, lashes out violently at Heraclius, accusing him of being a fake Cynic, no better than Christian wandering monks. He takes particular issue with Heraclius's mythmaking, which he claims is offensive to the gods, and goes on to describe in some detail when and how philosophers should compose myths. He concludes his speech with a myth of his own making, in which he presents himself as a man on a divine mission.

In his model of polemics, which can be presented as a pyramid (see figure 1), Jürgen Stenzel distinguishes between four elements: (1) the polemical subject, who aggressively attacks (2) a polemical object on (3) a polemical theme in front of (4) an audience (which Stenzel refers to as *polemische Instanz*).[6] The intention of the polemical subject is to persuade the audience of the importance of the polemical theme and hence to share in the subject's dislike of and aggression against the polemical object.

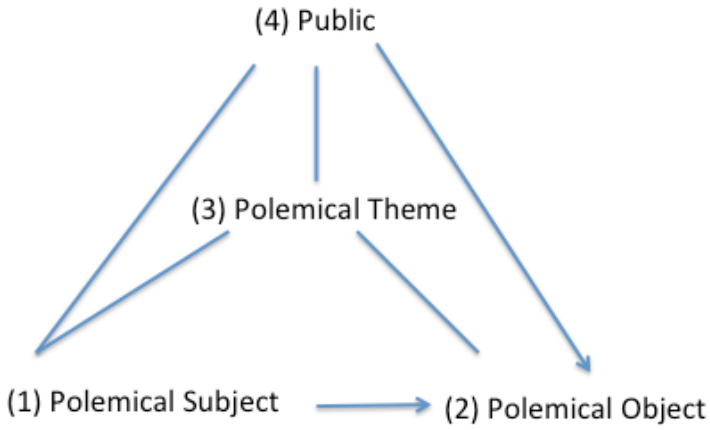

Fig. 1: The Polemical Pyramid (arrows indicate hostility)

In the present case, this corresponds to (1) Julian, who attacks (2) Heraclius about (3) the issue of the (ab)use of myths in front of (4) an audience of courtiers, whom he hopes to convince of the importance of the correct use of myths and hence of the need to resist people like Heraclius. Below, I shall discuss these four elements in this order.

[6] Stenzel, "Rhetorischer Manichäismus," 5.

Stenzel quite rightly stresses both the aggressive and the public nature of polemics: the goal of the polemical subject is to destroy the polemical object and his position – hence the title of Stenzel's essay, "Rhetorischer Manichaïsmus." In a recent paper, André Laks raises the intriguing question of whether, if such is the nature of polemics, there can be something like a philosophical polemic at all.[7] While such polemics resemble a heated boxing match, fought out in front of an audience and aimed at the destruction of one's opponent, philosophy is about exchanging arguments with others in a shared effort to uncover the truth. In this contribution, I shall argue that the problematic nature of philosophical polemics plays an important role in Julian's oration. Julian uses the public nature of polemics as a suitable platform to advertise his own religious-philosophical program. However, in doing so, he lays himself bare to the accusation that he is not a real philosopher, precisely because he engages in polemics. My suggestion is that Julian is actually engaged in two polemics: one with the Cynic Heraclius about myths, and a second with his Christian enemies about the polemical nature of Greek philosophy.

1. The Polemical Subject: Julian

Since there is something intrinsically problematic about philosophical polemics, the subject of a philosophical polemic may feel the need to justify his undertaking at the outset. In this section, I suggest that, in the Platonic tradition, there was some sort of format for how to do this, and that Julian here follows that format. I shall demonstrate this by comparing Julian's opening passages to two other examples of Platonic polemics: one from Plutarch's *Against Colotes*, and another from Porhyry's *Life of Plotinus*.

1.1 Passage 1: Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 1107f–1108a

The first passage concerns the opening of the treatise of Plutarch of Chaeroneia, *Against Colotes*. Colotes (ca. 320–after 268 BCE) had been a student of Epicurus and was infamous for his harsh polemical treatises, in which he sought to establish the superiority of Epicurus's philosophy by attacking any other great philosopher – Socrates, Plato, and Parmenides included. Some three centuries

[7] Laks, "The Continuation of Philosophy."

later, Plutarch thought it necessary to write a reply to Colotes. In the introduction to this work, he informs his readers how this came about. One day, Plutarch and his friends were listening to one of Colotes's books being read aloud:

> While the book was being read not long ago, one of our company, Aristodemus of Aegium (you know the man: no mere thyrsus-bearer of Academic doctrine, but a most fervent devotee of Plato), with unusual patience somehow managed to hold his peace and listen properly to the end. When the reading was over he said: "Very well; whom do we appoint our champion to defend the philosophers against this man? For I hardly admire Nestor's plan of leaving the matter to the chance of the lot when the thing to do was to choose the best of the nine." "But you observe," said I, "that he also appointed himself to cast the lots, so that the selection should take place under the direction of the most prudent of the company, and
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> *Out of the helmet leapt the lot of Ajax, that all desired.* (*Iliad* 7.182–181)
>
> But since you direct that a choice shall be made,
>
> *How could I then forget godlike Odysseus?* (*Iliad* 10.43/*Odyssey* 1.65)
>
> Look to it then and consider what defence you will make against the man." Aristodemus replied: "But you know how Plato, when incensed at his servant, did not beat him personally but told Speusippus to do it, saying that he himself was angry; do you too then take the fellow in hand and chastise him as you please, since I am angry." (Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 1107f–1108a)[8]

Aristodemus is clearly the most senior member of this group of Platonists ("no mere thyrsus-bearer of Academic doctrine"). He calls for an appropriate response to Colotes's irreverent attack on the founding fathers of the Academy. He urges his comrades to choose a champion of the Platonic cause to reply to

[8] Plutarch, *Moralia*, *Volume XIV: That Epicurus Actually Makes a Pleasant Life Impossible. Reply to Colotes in Defence of the Other Philosophers. Is "Live Unknown" a Wise Precept? On Music*, trans. Benedict Einarson and Phillip H. De Lacy, Loeb Classical Library 428 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).

Colotes, rather than to appoint one by lot, as had happened in the *Iliad*, when Hector challenged the Greeks to decide the war by means of a duel between himself and a Greek champion. On the advice of Nestor, the most prominent among the Greek heroes cast lots to decide who would be that champion. This turns out to be Ajax (cf. *Iliad* 7.170–181). Plutarch then reminds Aristodemus that Nestor, who oversaw the lottery, was the most prudent of men, thus suggesting that Nestor somehow ensured the desired outcome ("the lot of Ajax, that all desired"). On the other hand, if Aristodemus insists on choosing a champion rather than selecting one by lot, Plutarch suggests that Aristodemus might best do the job himself. In that case, Aristodemus would play the role of Odysseus, another Greek hero reputed for his wisdom and, in the Platonic tradition, often interpreted as a proto-Platonist.

Aristodemus elegantly declines Plutarch's invitation to do so, citing his anger as an excuse. Plutarch describes how Aristodemus becomes infuriated when listening to Colotes's slander of Plato, yet with great effort manages to restrain himself and listen to the reading of Colotes's text until the end. From a Platonic view, Aristodemus's anger is quite justifiable. Colotes shows no respect for Plato and his divinely inspired philosophy, as can only be expected from an Epicurean who was, whether he admitted it or not, for all intents and purposes an immoral atheist, and whose goal in life was pleasure rather than truth. While he and his fellow Epicureans claim to be the only true philosophers, in the eyes of a Platonist, they are fake philosophers, since they completely dissociate themselves from the entire philosophical tradition. Although justifiable, Aristodemus's anger rules him out as a candidate to reply to Colotes, since such a reply requires a cool head. He reminds his audience of the story of how Plato himself, when he got angry with a slave, asked his nephew Speusippus to punish him in his stead, precisely because he was in the grip of his emotions. It is thus that he passes the job of refuting Colotes on to Plutarch. This assignment suits Plutarch. As an instrument of Aristodemus's anger, he is made to play the part of Speusippus, which elevates him to the rank of number two in the pecking order of the group. After all, Speusippus was Plato's nephew and was to succeed the latter as head of the Academy. It is especially relevant in this context that we are dealing here with a public reading of Colotes's text: there are others present to

witness Plutarch's election to this position of prominence. The public aspect is also underscored by the Homeric colouring of the passage. In the *Iliad*, the duel between Hector and Ajax is fought with the entire Trojan and Greek armies present as spectators. Since Aristodemus declines Plutarch's second option – that is, Aristodemus/Odysseus taking on Colotes/Hector himself – we are now back at the first option, that of Aristodemus/Nestor assigning the role of champion to Ajax. This makes Plutarch the Platonist Ajax, fighting a very public duel.[9]

1.2 Passage 2: Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* c. 15

We see a similar pattern in an episode taken from Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*. Porphyry, who had edited the works of his master, Plotinus, added a biography of Plotinus by way of introduction to his edition. Porphyry uses this opportunity to position himself as Plotinus's favourite pupil – his Speusippus, if you like – at various places, including in the following passage:

> The rhetorician Diophanes read a defence of Alcibiades in Plato's *Banquet* in which he asserted that a pupil for the sake of advancing in the study of virtue should submit himself to carnal intercourse with his master if the master desired it. Plotinus repeatedly started up to leave the meeting, but restrained himself, and after the end of the lecture gave me, Porphyry, the task of writing a refutation. Diophanes refused to lend me his manuscript, and I depended in writing my refutation on my memory of his arguments. When I read it before the same assembled hearers I pleased Plotinus so much that he kept on quoting during the meeting, "*So strike and be a light to men*" (*Iliad* 8.282). (Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* c. 15)[10]

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[9] Pierre-Marie Morel and Francesco Verde ("Le Contre Colotès de Plutarque et son Prologue," *Aitia* 3 [2013]: http://aitia.revues.org/602, here 15), in their instructive analysis of the present passage, identify Plutarch with both Nestor and Ajax, but that seems to me less likely. Rather, since Plutarch suggests that Nestor somehow influences the lottery, I take it that Plutarch here tacitly encourages Aristodemus to play the role of Nestor and to select him, Plutarch, to be the Ajax of the Platonists.

[10] Plotinus, *Ennead, Volume I: Porphyry on the Life of Plotinus. Ennead I*, trans. A.H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library 440 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969).

Plotinus's anger is, once again, quite understandable. Diophanes uses the divine Plato to justify debauchery. That much is perhaps to be expected from a rhetorician. As any reader of Plato knows, these rhetoricians and sophists are fake philosophers. Diophanes, like the Epicurean Colotes, uses philosophy to legitimate his pursuit of bodily pleasures. Plotinus, however, being a genuine philosopher, does not allow anger to get the better of him. He restrains himself and leaves it to Porphyry to deal with Diophanes, an indication of the special position Porphyry holds within the school. Once again, the public character of the accession guarantees that Plotinus's preference for Porphyry is noted by many. The verse (*Iliad* 8.282) with which Plotinus encourages Porphyry is taken from a passage in which Teuce fights the Trojans and thus casts Porphyry, like Plutarch before him, in the role of a Homeric champion defending the Greeks – that is, Platonism.

1.3 Passage 3: Julian, *To the Cynic Heraclius* 204a–c

Let us now look at the beginning of Julian's speech against the Cynic Heraclius.

> "*Truly with the lapse of time many things come to pass!*" This verse I have heard in a comedy and the other day I was tempted to proclaim it aloud, when by invitation we attended the lecture of a Cynic whose barking was neither distinct nor noble; but he was crooning myths as nurses do, and even these he did not compose in any profitable fashion. For a moment my impulse was to rise and break up the meeting. But though I had to listen as one does when Heracles and Dionysus are being caricatured in the theatre by comic poets, I bore it to the end, not for the speaker's sake but for the sake of the audience, or rather, if I may presume to say so, it was still more for my own sake, so that I might not seem to be moved by superstition rather than by a pious and rational sentiment and to be scared into flight by his miserable words like a timid dove. So I stayed and repeated to myself the famous line "*Be patient my heart, you have put up with worse things in the past.*" Endure

> for the brief fraction of a day even a babbling Cynic! (Julian, *Oration* 7.204a–c)[11]

Once again, we are dealing here with a public occasion. Julian takes great care to explain to his audience that his decision to engage in a polemical exchange with Heraclius is prompted by the sort of emotions that befit a philosopher. He is angry with Heraclius for the right reasons: by telling a sort of comical myth about Zeus and Pan, Heraclius commits an act of blasphemy that cannot fail to enrage the pious Julian. At the same time, he manages to control his anger: he sits through the entire event and only replies later, thus demonstrating that his misgivings about the speech are pious and rational. He places himself in the role of a Homeric warrior by quoting the words that Odysseus speaks to himself in the *Odyssey* (20.18). As we shall see in the next section on the polemical subject, Heraclius – like Colotes and Diophanes – is framed as the sort of fake philosopher who uses philosophy as a pretext to pursue financial gain.

In one further respect, Julian's case differs from those of Plutarch and Porphyry. The latter act at the instigation of the leaders of their groups, thus marking them out as the trusted lieutenants of the masters themselves. Here, such a master-figure is missing. Julian appears to be acting on his own initiative. In a way, this raises questions about Julian's philosophical attitude. As we have seen, the reason philosophical masters appointed someone to punish a wrongdoer was precisely because they did not want to do so themselves in an angry state of mind. As we shall see, however, when we come to discuss the audience of the oration, Julian also acts on the instruction of a master – albeit a divine one.

2. The Polemical Object: Cynics and Christians

Who is or are the polemical object(s)? Heraclius is obviously Julian's prime target. It has been suggested, however, that this oration is also directed against Julian's archenemies, the Christians. In fact, as we shall see shortly, Heraclius is even explicitly compared to a Christian wandering monk. We should not,

[11] Julian, *The Works of the Emperor Julian, Volume II*, trans. (adapted) Wilmer Cave Wright, Loeb Classical Library 29 (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1913).

however, too readily conclude from this that Julian does not differentiate between Cynics and Christians.[12] I suggest that the situation is somewhat more complex. As we noted, polemics were a traditional tool used by ancient philosophers for self-presentation and self-promotion. As I shall explain below, this is precisely the purpose of Julian's oration. Nevertheless, in Julian's time, polemics – however useful they might once have been in the competition between various philosophical schools – had become a liability. Christian authors exploited the polemical activities of pagan philosophical schools in their own polemics against their pagan opponents. The disagreements (*diaphônia*) among pagan philosophers, which they themselves had so enthusiastically underscored in their public polemical exchanges, compared unfavourably to the harmony among Christians in doctrinal matters – or so the Christian authors claimed. Eusebius of Caesarea, to give but one example, compares the quarrelsome pagan philosophers to "boxers who eagerly exchange blows as on a stage before the spectators" and to warriors who strike and are struck "by the spears and various weapons of their wordy war." The latter image evokes the duels of Homeric warriors, which were fought with spears. Thus Eusebius, no doubt quite consciously, evokes the language in which Platonic polemicists – such as Numenius, Plutarch, and Porphyry – had described the polemical confrontations between Greek philosophical schools. [13]

Julian, as an experienced combatant in pagan-Christian polemical warfare, knew this anti-pagan line only too well. He must have realised that, in attacking a philosopher from another pagan school of thought, he made himself vulnerable to his Christian critics, especially against the background of the longstanding feud between Platonists and Cynics. I suggest that the way in which he portrays his opponent, Heraclius, is meant to forestall this move. First, Julian establishes

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[12] For an argument against the suggestion that Heraclius was a covert Christian, see J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, "Julian's *Hymn to the Mother of the Gods*: The Revival and Justification of Traditional Religion," in *Emperor and Author: The Writings of Julian the Apostate*, edited by Nicholas Barker-Brian and Sean Toughers (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2003), 213–27, here 218–19.

[13] Eusebius*, Preparation for the Gospel* 14.2.1-3.5 (I borrow this example from Sharon Weisser and Naly Thaler, eds, *Strategies of Polemics in Greek and Roman Philosophy*. [Leiden: Brill, 2016], 1–2). One of Eusebius's sources of inspiration is no doubt Numenius Fr. 25 (=*Preparation for the Gospel* 14.5.10–6.14), discussed in note 2 above, in which the polemical dissent between Greek philosophers is compared to Homeric warfare. On the argument against pagan philosophers from *diaphônia* in Christian auteurs, see, for example, Sébastien Morlet, *Christianisme et philosophie. Les premières confrontations (I^er^-VI^e^ siècle)* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2014), 37–42.

that Heraclius is not a real Cynic, but an imposter who is only playing the part of a true Cynic philosopher:

> What strenuous discipline have you ever embraced? What have you ever done to make you worthy of the staff of Diogenes or still more of Zeus, of his freedom of speech? Do you really think it so great an achievement to carry a staff and let your hair grow, and haunt cities and camps uttering calumnies against the noblest of men, and flattering the vilest? (Julian, *Oration* 7.223c–d)[14]

Thus far, Julian, by exposing his polemical object as a fake philosopher, follows the pattern we found in other polemics. Moreover, in distinguishing between true, ancient Cynics (like Diogenes) and their fake, latter-day namesakes, he follows in the footsteps of other ancient authors – such as the satirist Lucian of Samosata, who in various works pokes fun at these modern cynics, even while he greatly admires the original ones. Next, however, Julian throws those fake cynics together with Christian hermits who lived on alms, the so-called *apotaktikai*:

> Long ago I gave you a nickname and now I think I will write it down. It is *apotaktitai*, a name applied to certain persons by the impious Galilaeans. They are for the most part men who by making small sacrifices gain much or rather everything from all sources, and in addition secure honour, crowds of attendants and flattery. (Julian, *Oration* 7.224a–b)[15]

While the comparison of Heraclius to these wandering monks is clearly meant as an insult, I suggest that it serves yet another purpose in the present polemical context. As we have seen, in the hands of Christian polemicists, the inter-pagan

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[14] Julian (*The Works, Volume II*), trans. Wright, 121.

[15] Julian (*The Works, Volume II*), trans. Wright, 123. Elm (*Sons of Hellenism,* 110) argues that Julian compares Heraclius to these Christian *apotaktikai* (renunciators) because both rejected the gods and the laws of society. In his speech, however, Julian does accuse Heraclius of rejecting the gods. Neither does he do so here. The point of comparison between the Christian *apotaktikai* and Cynics like Heraclius is that they both renounced personal possessions in exchange for other, more attractive benefits.

polemics had become a dangerous weapon. Julian here seeks to disarm them. His polemics with Heraclius is not a duel between two pagan philosophers, but one between a champion of the Greek philosophical tradition and someone who, like the Christians, has placed himself outside of that tradition in order to make a quick buck. At the same time, Julian stresses the harmony within the pagan camp. He even tries to turn Diogenes – somewhat unconvincingly, one feels – into a respectful worshipper of the pagan gods. Why else, Julian asks rhetorically (Oration 7.213c–d), would Diogenes have left Athens, where he clearly preferred to live, and gone to Olympia, if not to worship Zeus?

3. The Polemical Theme: Myth

One does not begin a polemic on just any odd theme. As Jürgen Stenzel puts it in his analysis of polemics, a polemical theme "has to be controversial and an abundant source of energy for aggression, so it has to be able to activate intensely held values."[16] Likewise, André Laks, in his meditation on philosophical polemics, stresses the role of values in philosophical polemics:

> "Philosophical polemics" (as distinct from philosophical argumentation) enter the philosophical scene when ultimate convictions are at stake. Under these circumstances, it is fully understandable that individuals come under attack. For values are always embodied in certain individuals or groups of individuals, and what is at stake is not only the preservation of *one*'s life but, even, especially in the Christian world, the salvation of *one*'s soul. These are topics where dispassionate critical argumentation reaches its limits, where minds divide and you have to choose your camp.[17]

Julian responds so aggressively to Heraclius – and believes that he is justified in doing so – because, for him, something truly essential is at stake. Heraclius may have intended to criticise Julian's own pompous self-presentation as a self-styled philosopher and a son of Helios. Julian, however, frames Heraclius's oration as an

[16] Stenzel, "Rhetorischer Manichäismus," 6 ("muss kontrovers sein und eine ausgiebige Energiequelle für Aggressionen, es muss also intensive Wertgefühle aktievieren können").
[17] Laks, "The Continuation of Philosophy," 26.

attack on the pagan gods that undercuts Julian's crusade against Christianity. Let me elaborate.

Julian's problem with Heraclius's myth particularly concerns the fact that he applies divine names – those of Zeus and Pan – to human beings: "What need to speak of Phaeton instead of So-and-So? What need to sacrilegiously profane the title of King Helios? Who among men that walk here below is worthy to be called Pan or Zeus, as though we would ascribe to these gods our human understanding?" (Julian, *Oration* 7.208b–c).[18] Later on in his oration, Julian goes on to prove that reverence for divine names was common among all Greek philosophers, citing in support not just Pythagoras and Plato, but even Aristotle (cf. Julian, *Oration* 7.236d–d). In Julian's mind, a lack of respect for divine names is bound up with what he sees as the great problem of his time – the replacement of ancient paganism with Christianity.

For Julian and his followers, Christianity is synonymous with atheism. The issue of atheism is discussed by one Salustius in his treatise *On the Gods and the Cosmos*. This Salustius was a fervent supporter of Julian's pagan restoration. In fact, Julian explicitly mentions him as one of his friends, who was present when both Heraclius and Julian delivered their orations (223b). Salustius explains the rise of atheism – that is, of Christianity – as follows: "Furthermore, it is not unlikely that atheism is a sort of punishment. For it is reasonable that people who knew the gods and spurned them will be deprived of that knowledge in a next life. And justice demanded that those who honoured their own kings as gods became unaware of the gods themselves" (Salustius, *On the Gods* 18.3). Salustius here hints at the theory of the (pagan) author Euhemerus of Messene (third to fourth century BCE), who had suggested that the gods of old were divinised human rulers.[19] Christian authors had a field day with this well-known theory, pointing out that even the pagans themselves admitted that their gods were not gods after all.[20] Salustius here kills two birds with one stone. On the one hand, he

[18] Julian (*The Works, Volume II*), trans. Wright, 83.
[19] Arthur Darby Nock (*Sallustius: Concerning the Gods and the Universe. Edited with Prolegomena & Translation* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926], lxxxix) picks up the critique of euhemerism in this passage. He does not, however, connect it to the role that euhemerism plays in the pagan-Christian polemics of late antiquity. On this topic, see, for example, Morlet, *Christianisme et philosophie*, 85–87.
[20] On Euhemerus fostering atheism, cf., for example, Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* c. 11 and 23.

"demonstrates" that Euhemerus's blasphemous views are wrong, as is evident in the punishment inflicted upon him and his followers by the gods. On the other hand, Salustius turns the tables on his Christian critics. The impious Euhemerus and his followers were not part of the pagan community at all; they were in fact future Christians. In this context, it is understandable why divine names are a thing of value for Julian and his pagan friends. It is one thing to claim to be a mortal descendent of the immortal gods, as Julian did; it is quite another thing to identify oneself with the immortal gods when one is merely human. It is precisely this error that has caused – in Julian's analysis, at least – the decline of paganism and hence the sorry state in which the Roman world presently finds itself.

4. The Polemical Audience: Julian's Court

Let me finally turn to the audience of the oration. As Stenzel put it, polemic is a form of Manichean rhetoric, aimed at persuading the public to join the polemicist in his fight against the forces of darkness. But what exactly does Julian's audience need to be persuaded of? And who counts as his public, anyway? Let us reflect on these issues on the basis of the myth that Julian himself crafts towards the end of the oration (227e–234c) as a substitute for Heraclius's flawed one. The myth starts in the style of a New Testament parable, about a "certain rich man" who made his fortune by hook or by crook, since he did not think much of the gods. Upon his death, his many children, who had not been taught virtue, each wanted to be the sole inheritor of their father's fortune and started killing each other. At the same time, they started demolishing the ancestral pagan temples and replacing them with sepulchres. (One assumes that here Julian is referring to the Christian veneration of the relics of saints and martyrs.) The chaos becomes such that the (pagan) gods decide to interfere. Zeus instructs Helios and Athena to care for a young cousin of the rich man. This young man then finds himself at a deserted spot, wondering what path to take in life. This situation alludes to the famous myth of the young Heracles at the crossroads – one of the myths that Julian had previously held up to Heraclius as an example of a good myth, as opposed to Heraclius's own blasphemous story. Whereas Heracles is made to choose between two ladies, Vice and Virtue, the young man in Julian's myth is

guided towards Mount Olympus by Hermes himself, where he meets Helios and Athena. They explain to him that his mission in life is to put the house of the rich man in good order again. They warn him to choose his friends carefully and not to be taken in by flatterers, especially not very cunning flatterers "who assume the frankness (*parrhêsia*) of a friend." His true friends, however, the young man should treat as equals, not as mere servants or slaves. Above all, the young man should venerate the gods, who, in their turn, will be his friends and benefactors (233a–d).

Julian ends his story (234c) with the somewhat puzzling remark that he does not know whether this is a true story (*alêthês logos*) or a myth (*mythos*). It is quite clear to us, as it must have been to Julian's audience, that the rich man refers to Constantine, and that his young cousin is none other than Julian himself. Surely, Julian must have known whether he had ever had a *tête-à-tête* with the gods. One Italian scholar, Maria Carmen De Vita, recently described this myth of Julian's as a Platonic "noble lie."[21] This would help make sense of the question Julian leaves dangling in the air regarding the truth of this story. As is well known, in the *Republic* (414b–415d), Plato defends the idea that the state may tell lies in the public interest. Such tales are false, in the sense that they never happened, yet they resemble the truth in that they contain valuable moral lessons. Julian's learned public will no doubt have picked up the allusion and worked out for themselves that even though the event as such did not take place, the story supposedly contained some truth.

In Plato, the function of the noble myth is to make the population of Plato's ideal state accept its rather undemocratic arrangement. Julian's myth appears to have a similar purpose. Julian clearly believes that he is on a divine mission to cleanse the house of Constantine. In the passage on the polemical subject above, we found that there exists a certain pattern in philosophical polemics – the most senior member of a school assigns the polemical task to a more junior member of the school, who is thus raised to a place of prominence within the school. We noted that, by contrast, Julian seemed to engage in a polemical encounter on his own initiative. With this myth, Julian suggests that this was not the case. His

[21] Maria Carmen De Vita, "Giuliano e l'arte della 'nobile menzogna' (*Or. 7, Contro il Cinico Eraclio*)," in *L'imperatore Giuliano. Realtà storica e rappresentazione*, ed. Arnaldo Marcone (Firenze: Le Monnier, 2015), 119–48.

polemics against Heraclius are part of his divine assignment, which, at the same time, indicates his position as a favourite of the gods.

With this attack on the Cynic Heraclius, Julian addresses the fence-sitters at court, rather than hard-core Cynics and Christians. These members of the imperial court are urged to pick sides in a Manichean battle between pagan light and Christian darkness. Are they willing to join Julian's campaign, not just for a pagan restoration, but indeed for a wholesale reformation of classical culture along the lines that Plato prescribes in his *Republic*? As is well known, Plato had argued that, in a well-run sate, literature had to be brought under state control because of its potentially corruptive influence on the young. It is no coincidence that the Homeric verse Julian quotes at the beginning of the oration – "Be patient my heart, you have put up with worse things in the past" – is also quoted by Plato (*Republic* 390d) as an example of good, healthy poetry. The emperor warns the members of his entourage – the intellectuals and the orators in particular – that it will not suffice merely to pay lip service to some version of Greek philosophy and pagan mythology to win his favour, as Heraclius may have hoped. Instead, they should aim for a purified version of Greek literature and philosophy. If not, they are no better than the Christians, with whom Julian associates Heraclius. He is the cunning flatterer "who assumes the frankness (*parrhêsia*) of a friend," against whom the gods warned Julian. To wholehearted supporters of his politics, however, Julian promises a friendship of equals. I like to think that when he spoke those words, he looked in Salustius's direction.

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