

God(s) Contrary to Nature: A Theological Debate between Pagans and Christians

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DURING THE FIRST PHASE (A.D. 257–258) of the persecution under Valerian, bishop Dionysius of Alexandria¹ was summoned to trial before the Roman vice-prefect of Egypt, L. Mussius Aemilianus.² Having admitted that he was a Christian, Dionysius suffered the punishment that Valerian had ordered: he was relegated to exile. Unlike his illustrious contemporaries Cyprian of Carthage and Sixtus of Rome, however, he also managed to survive the second, more stringent phase of the persecution (258–260).³ It was this talent for survival, combined with the fact that he had also fled from the persecution of Decius (249–250),⁴ which provoked an intra-

¹ On his life and writings see A. Harnack, *Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur*² II (Leipzig 1958) 409–427; W. A. Bienert, *Dionysius von Alexandrien* (Berlin 1978); G. W. Clarke, “Two Mid-Third Century Bishops: Cyprian of Carthage and Dionysius of Alexandria,” in T. W. Hillard et al. (eds.), *Ancient History in a Modern University* II (Grand Rapids 1988) 317–328; A. Jakab, “Denys d’Alexandrie: réexamen des données biographiques,” *RecAug* 32 (2001) 3–37, and *Ecclesia alexandrina. Evolution sociale et institutionnelle du christianisme*² (Bern 2004) 227–255.

² For his career see *PLRE* I 23, with the addenda of J. R. Martindale, *Historia* 23 (1974) 246–247; *PIR*² M4757; H.-G. Pflaum, *Les carrières procuratoriennes équestres* II (Paris 1960) 925–927, no. 349; C. Körner, *Philippus Arabs. Ein Soldatenkaiser in der Tradition des antoninisch-severischen Prinzipats* (Berlin 2002) 379–380, no. P39.

³ Cyp. *Ep.* 80; known victims are listed in G. W. Clarke, “Third-Century Christianity,” *CAH* XII (2005) 644–645.

⁴ Dionysius’ flight: Eus. *HE* 6.40.1–3. Other fleeing bishops at this time were Gregory Thaumaturgus in Neocaesarea (Greg. Nys. *V. Greg. Thaum.*, PG

Christian war of words culminating in the text with which we are concerned, Dionysius' letter *Pros Germanon*.⁵ Written for wider circulation, probably between 259 and 262,⁶ it survives in the form of lengthy quotations, not discernibly altered,⁷ in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* (6.40 and 7.11.1–19).⁸ In this letter Dionysius responded to the accusation of an otherwise-unknown Egyptian bishop, Germanus, that he had not shown sufficient boldness as a confessor.⁹ To bolster his case, he pur-

46.944–953) and Cyprian: see H. Montgomery, "Saint Cyprian's Postponed Martyrdom. A Study of Motives," *SymbOslo* 63 (1988) 122–132.

⁵ On the meaning of *pros* here see P. S. Miller, *Studies in Dionysius the Great of Alexandria* (Erlangen 1933) 53; H. Pietras, "Lettera 'pròs Germanòn' di Dionigi Alessandrino: osservazioni e prova di ricostruzione," *Gregorianum* 71 (1990) 573. The letter has been much discussed in studies of Valerian's persecution as well as of Christian martyr acts, which will be cited as relevant below; additional studies specifically on this letter include A. Rousselle, "La persécution des chrétiens à Alexandrie au III^e siècle," *RD* 52 (1974) 222–251; M. Sordi, "Dionisio di Alessandria e le vicende della persecuzione di Valeriano in Egitto," in *Paradoxos politeia. Studi patristici in onore di Giuseppe Lazzati* (Milan 1979) 288–295; Y. Tissot, "Le rapt de Denys d'Alexandrie et la chronologie de ses Lettres festales," *RHPPhR* 77 (1997) 51–65.

⁶ Most scholars opt for 259–260: W. A. Bienert, *Dionysius von Alexandrien. Das erhaltene Werk* (Stuttgart 1972) 108; C. Andresen, "Siegreiche Kirche im Aufstieg des Christentums. Untersuchungen zu Eusebius von Caesarea und Dionysios von Alexandrien," *ANRW* II 23.1 (1979) 427; Pietras, in *Gregorianum* 71 (1990) 583; Jakob, *Ecclesia alexandrina* 231 n.62. G. Lanata, *Gli atti dei martiri come documenti processuali* (Milan 1973) 180, prefers A.D. 262.

⁷ On Eusebius' embedding of primary source documents in his history see now A. J. Carriker, *The Library of Eusebius of Caesarea* (Leiden 2003). Eusebius was certainly capable of misinterpreting, or misdirecting his readers as to, the significance of the documents he uses (as in his much-discussed treatment of the rescript of Hadrian, for example), but in general he seems to have done so without significantly reworking the documents themselves. It is generally accepted that what he preserves here are the words of Dionysius.

⁸ *PG* 20.602–605 and 662–66928 = C. L. Feltoe, *The Letters and Other Remains of Dionysius of Alexandria* (Cambridge 1904) 23–27 and 27–36 = *GCS* N.F. VI.2 596.5–600.1 and 654.8–660.

⁹ On the details of Germanus' accusations see Andresen, *ANRW* II 23.1 (1979) 432 and n.96; J. Molthagen, *Der römische Staat und die Christen im zweiten*

ported to quote directly and at length from the official record of his trial before Aemilianus a few years before (Eus. *HE* 7.11.6–11). This letter and its embedded trial record are thus widely recognized as one of our most valuable and reliable sources for the attitudes both of those Christians who were persecuted, and of those pagans who persecuted them, in the third century.

The *Pros Germanon* has much to tell us about the persecution under Valerian. As many scholars have observed, it testifies to the heightened concern of the Roman authorities about Christianity in the third century, helps to clarify the nature of Valerian's departure from the precedent of Decius by targeting Christians specifically, and provides convincing evidence for Valerian's belief that the pagan gods' continued protection of the Empire could only be secured by forcing those (Christians) who had neglected them to return to their worship.¹⁰ It is generally agreed that the major emphasis of Valerian's persecution was on public conformity or orthopraxy, forcing dissidents to perform a public act of worship which would demonstrate their acknowledgement of the pagan gods.¹¹ This is in line with how

und dritten Jahrhundert (Göttingen 1970) 87, 98; Pietras, in *Gregorianum* 71 (1990) 573.

¹⁰ On these aims and Valerian's persecution see A. Alföldi, "Zu den Christenverfolgungen in der Mitte des 3. Jahrhunderts," *Klio* 31 (1938) 323–348; W. H. C. Frend, "The Failure of the Persecutions in the Roman Empire," *P&P* 16 (1959) 10–30; G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?" *P&P* 26 (1963) 24–28; W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford 1965) 389–439; P. Keresztes, "Two Edicts of the Emperor Valerian," *VigChr* 29 (1975) 81–95; C. J. Haas, "Imperial Religious Policy and Valerian's Persecution of the Church, A.D. 257–260," *ChHist* 52 (1983) 133–144; M. M. Sage, "The Persecution of Valerian and the Peace of Gallienus," *WS* 17 (1983) 137–159; J. E. G. Whitehorne, "P.Oxy. XLIII 3119: A Document of Valerian's Persecution?" *ZPE* 24 (1977) 187–196; K.-H. Schwarte, "Die Christengesetze Valerians," in W. Eck (ed.), *Religion und Gesellschaft in der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Cologne 1989) 103–163; R. Selinger, *The Mid-Third Century Persecutions of Decius and Valerian*² (Frankfurt am Main 2002).

¹¹ E.g. Alföldi, *Klio* 31 (1938) 341; Molthagen, *Der römische Staat* 87–89;

we are used to thinking about Greek and Roman pagan religions, where, so we are often told, the focus was on orthopraxy, not orthodoxy, and so what mattered was not what one believed, but what one did.¹² There is of course much to commend this view. My purpose here, however, is to test the limits of this current ‘orthodoxy’, through a new reading of the concerns of the pagan governor Aemilianus as attested in the trial record of Dionysius. My suggestion is that although Aemilianus does invoke orthopraxy in his dealings with Dionysius, he also makes an issue of orthodoxy, that is, of the correctness of Dionysius’ beliefs and ideas about the divine. What we see in this trial record, therefore, is a priceless glimpse of pagan interest in theological debate with Christians.

To begin, we must consider the extent to which we can use this text as evidence for what was actually said at the trial of Dionysius. I will then identify the theological content of the exchange between governor and bishop, before moving on to propose possible parallels and interpretations. I conclude by exploring the significance of this evidence for pagan interest in, and anxiety about, orthodoxy in the third century.

Frend, *Martyrdom* 423; Haas, *ChHist* 52 (1983) 142–143; J. B. Rives, “The Decree of Decius and the Religion of Empire,” *JRS* 89 (1999) 153; Selinger, *The Mid-Third Century Persecutions* 13. On this emphasis across Rome’s various persecutions of Christians see J. Vogt, “Zur Religiosität der Christenverfolger im Römischen Reich,” *SBHeid* 1962.1 7–30. On the language of Valerian’s orders see F. Heberlein, “Eine philologische Anmerkung zu ‘Romanas caerimonias recognoscere’ (Acta Cypriani 1),” in U. Kindermann et al. (eds.), *Festschrift für Paul Klopsch* (Göppingen 1988) 83–100. The alternative theory of Saumagne, that all Valerian wanted was a polite verbal show of respect for the pagan gods, is not convincing: C. Saumagne, *Saint Cyprien. Evêque de Carthage, “Pape” d’Afrique* (Paris 1975) 131–148, 188–190; cf. the review by J. den Boeft, *VigChr* 33 (1979) 297–299.

¹² See especially M. Linder and J. Scheid, “Quand croire, c’est faire: Le problème de la croyance dans la Rome ancienne,” *ArchSciSocRel* 81 (1993) 47–62; J. Scheid, *Quand faire, c’est croire* (Paris 2005).

Reliability of the evidence

The relevant portion of the *Pros Germanon* runs as follows:¹³

But listen to the actual words which were spoken by both of us just as they are recorded in the official proceedings (ὡς ὑπεμνηματίσθη):

Dionysius, Faustus, Maximus, Marcellus, and Chaeremon having been brought in, Aemilianus, the vice-prefect, said (Αἰμιλιανὸς διέπων τὴν ἡγεμονίαν εἶπεν): “And I also talked with you off the record (ἀγράφως ὑμῖν διελέχθη), discussing the clemency which our emperors have displayed towards you: they have in effect granted you the power to save yourselves, if only you are willing to adopt that which is according to nature, worshipping gods that preserve their empire and abandoning those that are contrary to nature (εἰ βούλοισθε ἐπὶ τὸ κατὰ φύσιν τρέπεσθαι καὶ θεοὺς τοὺς σφύζοντας αὐτῶν τὴν βασιλείαν προσκυνεῖν, ἐπιλαθέσθαι δὲ τῶν παρὰ φύσιν). What, then, is your response to this? I do not imagine that you are going to show yourselves ungrateful for their clemency, seeing that what they are urging you to do is to adopt the better course.”

To this Dionysius replied: “It is not true that all men worship all gods but every group worships certain gods whom they recognize. So in our case there is the one god, the creator of the universe, the one who in fact entrusted the empire into the hands of the most pious Augusti, Valerian and Gallienus. This is the god whom we both venerate and worship and to whom we offer prayers without ceasing for their empire, petitioning that it may continue unshaken.”

Aemilianus, the vice-prefect, said to them: “Well, then, who is stopping you from worshipping him as well, if indeed he is a god, along with the gods that are according to nature? You were ordered to worship gods—gods that everyone knows” (τίς γὰρ ὑμᾶς κωλύει καὶ τοῦτον, εἴπερ ἐστὶν θεός, μετὰ τῶν κατὰ φύσιν θεῶν προσκυνεῖν; θεοὺς γὰρ σέβειν ἐκελεύσθητε, καὶ θεοὺς οὐς πάντες ἴσασι).

Dionysius answered: “We do not worship any other.”

Aemilianus, the vice-prefect, said to them: “I perceive that you are being at once ungrateful and unappreciative of the generosity

¹³ Eus. *HE* 7.11.6–10; transl. Clarke, *CAH* XII 638–639, lightly modified.

of our august emperors. You shall, therefore, no longer stay in this city...”

This is generally accepted (though often with no demonstration) as an accurate, even verbatim, record of what was said at the trial of Dionysius.¹⁴ It was certainly possible to make a copy of a trial record in the Roman world, as various Christian and non-Christian sources attest.¹⁵ Older scholarship tended to take at face value Dionysius’ own claim to be quoting here, a risky move in light of the tendentious character of the *Pros Germanon*. Further caution is called for by the likelihood that those who produced such copies of trial transcripts, either by making their own notes at the time, or by commissioning a copy of the official record after the fact, were free to omit remarks not of interest to them,¹⁶ and, perhaps, to expand or tidy up the re-

¹⁴ E.g. Feltoe, *The Letters* 22; R. Reitzenstein, “Die Nachrichten über den Tod Cyprians: ein philologischer Beitrag zur Geschichte der Märtyrerliteratur,” *SBHeid* 4.14 (1913) 9; H. Delehaye, *Les passions des martyres et les genres littéraires*² (Brussels 1966) 129, 304; Molthagen, *Der römische Staat* 87–88 and n.11; F. Millar, *JThS* 24 (1973) 242 (review of H. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*); Andresen, *ANRW* II 23.1 (1979) 432; Pietras, *Gregorianum* 71 (1990) 574, 582–583 (who argues unconvincingly that the document was added by Eusebius); Clarke, *CAH* XII 638; T. D. Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History* (Tübingen 2010) 56, 48 n.7 (this text “gives the lie direct to the proposition that early Christian hagiographical texts never incorporate authentic court records”).

¹⁵ Esp. *P.Oxy.* XIV 1654 (non-Christian); cf. *Mart.Pion.* 9.1 (Musurillo 146); Asterius Amas. *Hom.* 11 *In laudem S. Euphemiae* (PG 40.336C); *Mart.Tar.* (Ruinart 451); *Mart.Colluthi* in E. A. E. Reymond and J. W. B. Barnes (eds.), *Four Martyrdoms from the Pierpoint Morgan Coptic Codices* (Oxford 1973) 220–222; Tert. *Apol.* 2.20. See further E. Bickermann, “*Testificatio Actorum*: Eine Untersuchung über antike Niederschriften ‘zu Protokoll’,” *Aegyptus* 13 (1933) 333–355; R. A. Coles, *Reports of Proceedings in Papyri* (Brussels 1966) 16–17, 19; Delehaye, *Les passions des martyres* 129–130; Lanata, *Gli atti dei martiri* 15–20; G. A. Bisbee, *Pre-Decian Acts of Martyrs and Commentarii* (Philadelphia 1988) 61.

¹⁶ K. Holl, “Die Vorstellung von Märtyrer und die Märtyrerakte in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung,” *NJbb* 33 (1914) 531; Coles, *Proceedings in Papyri* 16–17.

marks of the figure(s) they supported.¹⁷ We therefore cannot eliminate the possibility that Dionysius massaged his trial record for publication, even if his changes can no longer be traced. However, there are still three good reasons to accept the document as a record of the words exchanged by Aemilianus and Dionysius.

Firstly, the style fits nicely in the third century, and is paralleled in contemporary non-Christian legal documents.¹⁸ Although the text includes dialogue between bishop and governor, the tone is balanced and the exchanges concise. There is no sign of those features which are unlikely to have been included in an official record and which we can read as evidence of embellishment in martyr acts, such as lengthy pro-Christian speeches, references to emotions or crowd reactions, or miracles.¹⁹

Secondly, the document uses the correct and unusual terminology (also attested in contemporary papyri) for Aemilianus' official position at the time of the trial in 257, describing him as *διέπων τὴν ἡγεμονίαν*, a position he no longer held by autumn 259 (by which time he had been made full prefect).²⁰ Such precision of terminology is probably not to be expected of Dionysius if he were concocting the trial record in 259 or later,²¹ and suggests that he is indeed quoting an earlier docu-

¹⁷ Cf. Holl, *NJbb* 33 (1914) 536; Delehay, *Les passions des martyres* 130; Bisbee, *Acts of Martyrs* 83–84; G. W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge 1995) 25–26, 31, 35.

¹⁸ Barnes, *Hagiography* 55–57.

¹⁹ Feltoe, *The Letters* 22; K. Hopkins, *A World Full of Gods* (London 1999) 115.

²⁰ On the meaning and chronology of Aemilianus' titles see especially O. W. Reinmuth, "A Working List of the Prefects of Egypt 30 B.C.–299 A.D.," *BASP* 4 (1967) 119–120; J. R. Rea, "The Date of the Prefecture of Statilius Aemilianus," *ChrEg* 44 (1969) 134–138, and *P.Oxy.* XLIII (1975) p.58; G. Bastianini, "Il prefetto d'Egitto (30 A.C.–297 D.C.)," *ANRW* II 10.1 (1988) 514. *Contra*, A. Stein, *Die Präfekten von Ägypten in der römischen Kaiserzeit* (Bern 1950) 220 n.454 (not generally accepted).

²¹ Note how in the narrative portion of his letter, outside the trial record,

ment.²²

Thirdly, the fact that Dionysius was writing to a contemporary who could also, potentially, have gained access to the official transcript makes it somewhat less likely that he would risk making significant alterations in his copy of it.²³ This point is strengthened when we observe that Dionysius' own account of his behaviour (in the preceding section of the *Pros Germanon*, quoted at Eus. *HE* 7.11.2–5) differs from the trial record in featuring many more allusions to Scripture,²⁴ reflecting a more distinctly Christian perspective,²⁵ and, perhaps, presenting Dionysius himself in a more heroic light.²⁶ We would expect to see more harmony between the two versions if Dionysius had altered the trial record significantly.

More generally, we may ask whether it is plausible that religious debates of this kind would have occurred during trials of Christians. I follow those who accept that some (albeit brief) exchanges would have occurred.²⁷ Their length would no

Dionysius refers to Aemilianus simply as ὁ ἡγοούμενος, as he was at the time of writing (Eus. *HE* 7.11.25).

²² Holl, *NJbb* 33 (1914) 536; L. H. Blumell, "The Date of P.Oxy. XLIII 3119, the Deputy-Prefect Lucius Mussius Aemilianus, and the Persecution of Christians by Valerian and Gallienus," *ZPE* 186 (2013) 113 n.17.

²³ Cf. Lanata, *Gli atti dei martiri* 26–27, 30–32, on the persuasive value of primary documents for beleaguered bishops.

²⁴ G. Bardy, *Eusèbe de Césarée. Histoire ecclésiastique* (Paris 1955) ad loc.

²⁵ Following Molthagen, *Der römische Staat* 93 n.35, this is how I would interpret the difference between Aemilianus' demand, in the trial record, that Dionysius worship the pagan gods as well as the Christian one, and Dionysius' own understanding of this demand, in his narrative, as a command to "stop being a Christian" (7.11.4). Cf. Bowersock, *Martyrdom* 31.

²⁶ Bardy, *Eusèbe* 180 n.13; Delehaye, *Les passions des martyres* 306–308; Lanata, *Gli atti dei martiri* 181–182; Millar, *JThS* 24 (1973) 242. Jakab (*RecAug* 32 [2001] 28–29; *Ecclesia alexandrina* 247) goes so far as to doubt that Dionysius was exposed to danger in any form. This seems excessive: in both his own account and the trial record Dionysius is forthright in articulating his refusal to worship other gods, despite knowing the penalties that such refusal would incur.

²⁷ E.g. Lanata, *Gli atti dei martiri* 183; Bisbee, *Acts of Martyrs* 56; Bowersock,

doubt have varied depending on the interests, stress level, and time constraints of the presiding governor, as well as the mood of the attendant crowd. That many martyr acts allot more time, clarity of thought, and rhetorical effectiveness to their protagonists than they could actually have had in court is evident. However, there was nothing to prevent a governor from engaging in questioning defendants if he so chose, or Christians from shouting out a few catchphrases even when the governor wanted to move on.

In the case of Dionysius and Aemilianus, there are additional reasons to posit an attempt at religious debate. Dionysius was distinguished among his Christian contemporaries by his willingness to engage in dialogue and to understand ‘heterodox’ views.²⁸ He was charitable towards the *lapsi*, sought to act as mediator in the dispute between Cyprian and Stephen on the re-baptism of heretics, and read everything he could get his hands on, ‘heretical’ or no, even against the advice of a more cautious fellow-priest.²⁹ We also know that Dionysius engaged with pagan philosophy specifically, writing a *Peri Phuseôs* (of which only fragments survive) in which he attacked the atomistic doctrines of Democritus and the Epicureans.³⁰ Dionysius,

Martyrdom 25–26, 37. *Contra*: P. A. Brunt, “Marcus Aurelius and the Christians,” in C. Deroux (ed.), *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History* 1 (Brussels 1979) 506–507; Hopkins, *A World Full of Gods* 115.

²⁸ Well illustrated by Clarke, in *Ancient History*, esp. 323–324.

²⁹ H. Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great* (Oxford 2001) 161–165. Reading heretical works: “Letter to Philemon” (Eus. *HE* 7.7.1–3).

³⁰ This might lead us to suspect that the interest Aemilianus shows in *phusis* in our trial record has been influenced by Dionysius’ own interest in nature. Yet surviving fragments of the *Peri Phuseôs* (Feltoe 127–164) do not include the phrases *kata/para phusin*; *phusis* is used to refer to the nature or character of atoms, of the human body, and of created things. The closest we get to Aemilianus’ usage may be Eus. *Praep. Ev.* 14.26.9 (Feltoe 153), where Dionysius writes that *phusis* has been “made a god” by medical experts (ἐξεθείασαν τὴν φύσιν), but even this is not about the nature/essence of the divine itself. It seems likely, therefore, that the phrases *theoi kata/para phusin* did indeed come from Aemilianus rather than Dionysius.

then, was the kind of man who might have been interested in debating theology with a pagan governor. As for Aemilianus, we learn from a career inscription of 247/8³¹ that he was a *Laurens Lavinus*, that is, a member of an equestrian religious *collegium* devoted to the preservation of the rites of Lavinium, according to legend the mother city of Rome. We know little about the responsibilities of the members of this *collegium*, and it may be that only some of its members actually served as priests.³² However, membership still was seen as connected with the religious history and traditions of Rome, and was probably bestowed by the emperor as a mark of favour.³³ Aemilianus, then, was bound to the emperor through religious as well as political ties, and by the time he encountered Dionysius, he had already come into closer contact than many of his contemporaries with rites linked specifically to Roman religion and origins. If Aemilianus was himself of Italian origin, as some scholars suppose,³⁴ this may have further strengthened

³¹ *CIL* VI 1624 = XIV 170 = *ILS* 1433 = *AE* 2010, 0239.

³² Scholars tends to distinguish between those men identified as *sacerdotes Laurentium Lavinatum* and those described simply as *Laurentes Lavinates*, supposing that only the former performed full priestly duties. See Y. Thomas, "L'institution de l'origine. Sacra principiorum populi Romani," in M. Detienne (ed.), *Tracés de fondation* (Louvain/Paris 1990) 165–170; J. Rüpke, *Fasti sacerdotum* I (Stuttgart 2005) 26. *Contra*, G. Wissowa, "Die römischen Staatspriestertümer altlateinischer Gemeindegulte," *Hermes* 50 (1915) 23; C. Saulnier, "Laurens Lavinus. Quelques remarques à propos d'un sacerdoce équestre à Rome," *Latomus* 43 (1984) 530–531. However, all members may have performed at least some rites, and at the very least they would have perceived it as an organization with religious significance: A. Cooley, "Politics and Religion in the Ager Laurens," in *The Epigraphic Landscape of Roman Italy* (London 2000) 179–180; Rüpke I 26.

³³ Holders of this position were noticeably active in honouring the emperor: Cooley, in *The Epigraphic Landscape* 180.

³⁴ The *gentilicium* *Mussius* is thought to be of Italian origin: W. Schulze, *Zur Geschichte lateinischer Eigennamen* (Berlin 1904) 197; O. Sallomies, "Contacts between Italy, Macedonia and Asia Minor during the Principate," in A. D. Rizakis (ed.), *Roman Onomastics in the Greek East: Social and Political Aspects*

his commitment to Roman public religion. In short, Aemilianus may have felt even more pressure than other governors did to defend Roman religious traditions when they were threatened by Christians like Dionysius. Perhaps he was also especially concerned to ensure, through diligent interrogation, that his defendants would mend their ways.

For these reasons, I will use the report as evidence for what was said at the trial of Dionysius. What, then, does it tell us about religious debate in the third century?

The theological content of the debate between Dionysius and Aemilianus

The religious statements of Dionysius are thoroughly in keeping with our evidence for Christian apologetics in this period. He insists on Christian monotheism/exclusivism, echoes passages of Scripture, and insists that Christians are not disloyal to the Roman Empire because they pray unceasingly to their god for the safety and security of the emperors and the state.³⁵ The interest of the exchange, for our purposes, lies in the reaction and words of the pagan governor, Aemilianus. It is true that in many ways he too behaves precisely as we would expect of his co-religionists at this time. He shows an interest in orthopraxy, assuring Dionysius that he can continue to worship his own Christian god so long as he will consent to worship pagan gods as well.³⁶ Aemilianus also seems to see ritual action as what is required to manifest or actualize the demanded recognition of the pagan gods: he asks Dionysius to make an offering

(Athens 1996) 124–125; A. J. S. Spawforth, “Roman Corinth: The Formation of a Colonial Elite,” in *Roman Onomastics* 180.

³⁵ *HE* 7.11.8–9 (echoes of Exodus 20:5, Acts 4:24, 1 Tim. 2:1–2). These Christian responses recur in innumerable martyr acts (including, for Valerian’s persecution, *Acta Proc. Cypr.* 1.2 [*PL* 3.1559 = Musurillo 168], *Mart. Fruct.* 2.4 [Musurillo 178]). See A. Hamman, “La confession de foi dans les premiers actes des martyrs,” in J. Fontaine and C. Kannengiesser (eds.), *Epiktasis. Mélanges patristiques offerts au cardinal Jean Daniélou* (Paris 1972) 99–105; on our passage, Lanata, *Gli atti dei martiri* 178–183.

³⁶ *HE* 7.11.7, 9; Frend, *P&P* 16 (1959) 15; Delehaye, *Les passions des martyres* 306; Molthagen, *Der römische Staat* 88.

(*proskunein*).³⁷ As noted above, this fits with what we know of Valerian's persecution from other sources. In the *Acts of Cyprian*, for example, Valerian is said to have ordered that "those who do not practice Roman religion must observe Roman rites" (*eos qui non romanam religionem colunt, debere romanas caerimonias recognoscere*), and the governor Galerius Maximus reproaches Cyprian for opting out of Roman society by refusing to participate in its worship.³⁸ The emphasis is clearly on ritual action, enforcing correct practice, and thereby re-integrating Christians into Roman society.

Scholars have generally interpreted the debate between Aemilianus and Dionysius in the same way. It is rightly observed that this text demonstrates pagan concern with "obtaining the good will of the gods who had guided and protected Rome throughout its history."³⁹ This trial and that of Cyprian are therefore said to show "les mêmes enjeux religieux et politiques"; "the same stress on public conformity in acceptable ritual action"; and that "it was not the Christianity, *per se*, of Cyprian or Dionysius that was at issue, but rather a failure to give some recognition to the gods of the state. What in fact occurred between the Christians and the pagans was a basic misunderstanding of each other's religious positions."⁴⁰ Clarke's summary is representative: "The official concerns are for worship to be given to known gods (not 'unnatural' ones) who preserve the empire and for public conformity to be dis-

³⁷ See n.11 above.

³⁸ *Acta Proc. Cypr.* 1.1, 3.4, 4.1; the same language (*deos colî*) in *Mart.Fruct.* 2.3.

³⁹ Rives, *JRS* 89 (1999) 142; Jakab, *RecAug* 32 (2001) 27; J. G. Cook, *Roman Attitudes toward the Christians: From Claudius to Hadrian* (Tübingen 2010) 229.

⁴⁰ X. Leveils, *Contra Christianos: La critique sociale et religieuse du christianisme* (Berlin 2007) 242; Clarke, *CAH* XII 640; Sage, *WS* 17 (1983) 141. Similarly J. Hargis, *Against the Christians: The Rise of Anti-Christian Polemics* (New York 1999) 66: "the heart of the matter" between Aemilianus and Dionysius was "Christian exclusivism, expressed in their refusal to give proper honor to the gods."

played as part of the process of winning that preservation of the state (the ‘unnatural’ religious assemblies of Christians are, as a corollary, to be forbidden).”⁴¹

What such analyses do not seem fully to recognize is that Aemilianus does not only talk about orthopraxy: he also makes explicit theological statements about the nature or character of both the pagan and the Christian god(s). We see this at 7.11.7, where he urges Dionysius “to adopt that which is in accordance with nature and to worship the gods that preserve the empire, abandoning those that are contrary to nature.” The implication is that it is the pagan gods who are “natural,” and this is confirmed at 7.11.9 where Aemilianus expostulates, “Well then, who is stopping you from worshipping him [the Christian god] as well, if indeed he is a god, along with the gods that are according to nature?” Few scholars have noticed how unusual this language is, or attempted to explain it. In several translations and summaries, moreover, the theological content is partially obscured, either by translating *tôn para phusin* as a generic singular meaning “what is natural,”⁴² or by transferring Aemilianus’ accusation of “unnaturalness” from the Christian god(s) to the behaviour or activities of their adherents.⁴³ What we have missed is that Aemilianus does not say simply that as long as Christians participate in pagan cult, all will be well. That may have been Valerian’s intention, just as it was the intention of the governors Paternus and Galerius Maximus at the trials of Cyprian. Aemilianus, however, goes one step further than his peers. With his discourse of *theoi kata/para phusin*, he implies that the Christian god is not just one more god among gods: he is an “unnatural” god, a god which is somehow inappropriate. *Pace* Clarke, it is not just the

⁴¹ Clarke, *CAH* XII 639.

⁴² Bienert, *Das erhaltene Werk*, translates “das Widernatürliche.” This translation is possible, but it seems to me more likely that the antecedent of *tôn* is to be understood as the *theous* in the preceding clause.

⁴³ Molthagen, *Der römische Staat* 88 (Christians’ “unnatürliches Verhalten”); Clarke, *CAH* XII 639 (“‘unnatural’ religious assemblies”).

Christian *caeremoniae* which are somehow “offensive to the ‘natural’ gods.”⁴⁴ It is the Christian god himself who is offensive to Aemilianus.⁴⁵

The phrases *theoi kata phusin* and *theoi para phusin* therefore merit further attention as genuine, and understudied, expressions of pagan theology. What did Aemilianus mean by them, and where did they come from?

Parallels and interpretation

Although occurrences of *kata phusin/para phusin* abound in Greek literature, I have found no exact parallels in our surviving pagan, Jewish, or Christian texts, in Greek or Latin, for the phrases “god(s) *kata phusin/secundam naturam*” or “god(s) *para phusin/contra naturam*.”⁴⁶ I have also found no attestations of *theoi phusikoi*. There are two occurrences of *dei naturales*, but, as we shall see, they do not appear to constitute an exact parallel. The uniqueness of Aemilianus’ phraseology may well be significant (see below). Comparison with other texts yields four main possibilities for interpretation.

The first possibility is that Aemilianus is invoking a general valorization of nature that is well attested in Greek and Roman thought, especially in philosophy. The ideal of living “in accordance with nature” (τὸ ζῆν κατὰ φύσιν) is especially familiar to us from Stoicism,⁴⁷ but by the time of Aemilianus *phusis* was

⁴⁴ Clarke, *CAH* XII 640.

⁴⁵ Cf. Lanata, *Gli atti dei martiri* 181–182, who sees Aemilianus as “anzi tollerante nei confronti del credo religioso personale degli imputati” and “senza alcuna animosità anticristiana.”

⁴⁶ No results outside Dionysius’ trial record are generated by searches for these phrases in the singular and plural in the *TLG* and *PGL*, nor for their Latin equivalents in the Brepols *Library of Latin Texts*.

⁴⁷ E.g. Diog. Laert. 7.87–89; Plut. *Comm.not.* 1069E and Alex. Aphrod. *De anima libri mant.* p.162.32, 35 Bruns (Chrysippus); Stob. *Ecl.* 2.83.10 (Antipater); M. Aur. *Med.* 1.17.6. For overviews of the place of ‘nature’ in Stoicism see M. Forschner, *Die stoische Ethik*² (Darmstadt 1995); B. Inwood (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics* (Cambridge 2003); R. Salles (ed.), *God and Cosmos in Stoicism* (Oxford 2009).

widely recognized by philosophers of various affiliations as a potential guide for human conduct. Early Greek philosophical understandings of *physis* as a dangerous force opposed to *nomos* had long since given way, probably via Middle Platonism, to a discourse of the “law of nature” as reflecting divinely-ordained principles for the ordering of the world.⁴⁸ For the Sceptics, though the study of nature could not yield firm conclusions, it enabled the juxtaposition of “equal accounts” and conduced to *ataraxia*, offering one guiding principle by which one might (undogmatically) decide upon everyday conduct.⁴⁹ Amongst the Epicureans, it was only through the examination and study of “natural” phenomena (*phusiologia*) and the acceptance of those desires which were in accordance with the “goal of nature” (τὸ τέλος τῆς φύσεως) that *ataraxia* could be achieved.⁵⁰

Philosophically-inclined non-pagans could also employ this discourse.⁵¹ For Philo, famously, the superiority of the Law of Moses to the laws of all other peoples lay in the fact that Torah was in perfect accord with the “law of nature,” so that “he who observes the [Jewish] laws will gladly accept conformity with/obedience to nature (ἀκολουθία φύσεως) and will live in ac-

⁴⁸ On *physis* up to the fourth century B.C. see H. Patzer, *Physis: Grundlegung zu einer Geschichte des Wortes* (Stuttgart 1993). On Hellenistic *physis* and the “law of nature” see R. A. Horsley, “The Law of Nature in Philo and Cicero,” *HThR* 71 (1978) 35–59; G. Striker, “Origins of the Concept of Natural Law,” in *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics* (New York 1996) 209–220; P. A. Vander Waerdt, “Zeno’s Republic and the Origins of Natural Law,” in *The Socratic Movement* (Ithaca 1994) 272–308.

⁴⁹ Sext. Emp. *Pyr.* 1.18, 23–24; 3.179; *Math.* 11.140.

⁵⁰ Epicurus *Ep.Men.* 127–133; *KD* 11, 12, 25; *Ep.Hdt.* 78–81; Lucr. 3.931–971. See D. Clay, “*De Rerum Natura*: Greek *Physis* and Epicurean *Physiologia*,” *TAPA* 100 (1969) 31–47; A. A. Long, “Lucretius on Nature and the Epicurean Self,” in K. A. Algra et al. (eds.), *Lucretius and his Intellectual Background* (Amsterdam 1997) 125–139; overviews in J. Warren (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism* (Cambridge 2009).

⁵¹ I focus here on similarities; on some of the differences between pagan and Christian attitudes towards nature see W. Nestle, “Die Haupteinwände des antiken Denkens gegen das Christentum,” *ArchRW* 37 (1941/2) 51–100, at 79–80.

cordance with the ordering of the universe (κατὰ τὴν τοῦ ὄλου διάταξιν).⁵² The goal of the best philosophers, τὸ ἀκολουθῶς τῇ φύσει ζῆν, was equated with Abraham's example of following god and his ordinances,⁵³ and it was by the "road according to nature" (ἡ κατὰ φύσιν ὁδός) that the soul arrived at god.⁵⁴ Among Christians, Clement of Alexandria participates in the same tradition, accepting Philo's claim that the pagan philosophers' goal of living in accordance with nature was compatible with his own religion's goal of living in accordance with the purposes of god.⁵⁵ Pagans and Christians alike also invoke the Stoic notion that humans possess a "natural" knowledge of, or affinity for, god and virtue.⁵⁶ Within this discourse, both Jews and Christians could likewise describe sins, pleasures, excessive desires, and the movement away from god and virtue which these were supposed to cause, as "contrary to nature" (*para phusin*).⁵⁷

In general, then, the idea that it was good (in religion as in other aspects of life) to be *kata phusin*, and bad to be *para phusin*,

⁵² Philo *Mos.* 2.12–16, 48; See M. Bockmuehl, "Natural Law in Second Temple Judaism," *VT* 45 (1995) 17–44; H. Najman, "The Law of Nature and the Authority of Mosaic Law," *StudPhilon* 11 (1999) 55–73; J. W. Martens, *One God, One Law: Philo of Alexandria on the Mosaic and Greco-Roman Law* (Boston 2003).

⁵³ Philo *Migr.Abr.* 23.127–131.

⁵⁴ Philo *Quaest. in Exod.* 2 fr.26.

⁵⁵ Clem. Al. *Strom.* 2.100–101, 5.14.94.5–95. On Clement's thinking here see W. Völker, *Der wahre Gnostiker nach Clemens Alexandrinus* (Berlin 1952); on his use of Philo see A. van den Hoek, *Clement of Alexandria and his Use of Philo in the Stromateis* (Leiden 1988).

⁵⁶ E.g. Clem. Al. *Strom.* 1.29.182, 5.13.87; Just. *Dial.* 93; Tert. *Ad Scap.* 2.1; Orig. *C.Cels.* 3.40, *Exh. ad Mart.* 47; cf. Julian. *C. Gal.* 52b. The bibliography on "natural theology" in Christianity is vast: for late antiquity see especially J. Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (New Haven 1993); overviews in R. R. Manning (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology* (Oxford 2012).

⁵⁷ E.g. Philo *De mut. nom.* 112; Eus. *Praep.Ev.* 1.4.6; cf. *Hom.Clem.* 4.19, where pagan learning leads away from that [truth] which is *kata phusin*.

was common currency amongst educated pagans, Jews, and Christians.⁵⁸ The first possibility for understanding Aemilianus' meaning at the trial of Dionysius, therefore, is that he is simply tapping, on a very general level, into this widely-shared discourse. On this reading, Aemilianus would be using the phrases *kata phusin/para phusin* to denote the compatibility/incompatibility of the pagan and Christian god(s) with what is good, right, and in keeping with cosmic order.⁵⁹

A second possible interpretation is that Aemilianus is using *kata/para phusin* to mean something like “philosophical” or “rational,” as opposed to that which is non-philosophical and irrational. This seems to be the reading preferred by Leveils, who states that what Aemilianus puts forward here is “une présentation philosophique d’une communauté universelle où l’accord rationnel entre les hommes et les dieux préside à l’harmonie cosmique.” Although Leveils does not specify further what he thinks Aemilianus has in mind, he suggests else-

⁵⁸ The role of nature in Neoplatonism is rather different, and not, I think, what Aemilianus is invoking here. Plotinus and Porphyry tend to use *kata phusin/para phusin* in their more everyday meaning of what is “natural/essential/characteristic” for humans and other beings. Perhaps the closest parallel to the Hellenistic usages is Plotinus’ statement (*Enn.* 1.7.1) that the good (*agathon*) of the soul, as of other entities, lies in expressing life-force through the natural Act (ἡ κατὰ φύσιν τῆς ζωῆς ἐνέργεια). In general, although the Neoplatonists continue to value Nature, for them it is less than the other incorporeal principles (Intellect and Soul), and represents only the lowest level of reality. (Thus cf. Porph. *Sent.* 32.31: the virtues produced by living *kata phusin* are the lowest kind of virtues.) Though the roots of such ideas lie in earlier forms of Platonism, the Neoplatonists, in deriving physics from metaphysics rather than the other way round, move much further away from the idea of nature as a guide to truth. For them, to describe the gods as *kata phusin* would be an unlikely compliment. See R. Chiaradonna and F. Trabattoni (eds.), *Physics and Philosophy of Nature in Greek Neoplatonism* (Leiden 2009); J. Wilberding and C. Horn (eds.), *Neoplatonism and the Philosophy of Nature* (Oxford 2012).

⁵⁹ Perhaps along the same lines attributed to Simon Magus in *Hom. Clem.* 17.3.2–3: the fear-inspiring image of god taught by Peter harms that in the soul which is “in accordance with nature” ([ἡ ψυχῆ] πλάνω δὲ διδασκαλία εἰς φοβερὸν θεὸν ἀποβλέπουσα τῶν κατὰ φύσιν ἐκβαθρεύεται).

where that pagans of the third and fourth centuries believed that “celui ou celle qui ne reconnaissait pas les dieux de l’Empire se retrouvait de fait dans un univers irrationnel, hors du cadre codifié et rationalisé de la *religio*”; the corollary was that Christianity was incompatible with “l’axiome rationnel de l’hellénisme.”⁶⁰ Leveils deserves credit for noticing the philosophical ring to Aemilianus’ remarks, and I find his suggestion plausible so far as it goes. Christians’ alleged “irrationality” was a staple of anti-Christian polemic, as many studies have shown.⁶¹ Christian stories about Jesus and miracles could be described as “myths” or “old women’s fairy tales” (thereby invoking the common opposition in pagan thought between the unreliable *to muthikon* and the rational, philosophical *to phusikon*).⁶² The Christian willingness to give up one’s current life in the hope of a better afterlife, even to the point of voluntary martyrdom, was seen as unreasoning foolishness.⁶³ So, too, was the alleged willingness of Christians to accept doctrines on the basis of faith rather than philosophical demonstration and argument.⁶⁴ Such perceptions probably underlie the less specific,

⁶⁰ Leveils, *Contra Christianos* 242, 250, 274.

⁶¹ On pagan attitudes to Christians see especially H. Leclercq, “Accusations contre les chrétiens,” *DACL* 1.1 (1924) 265–307; P. De Labriolle, *La réaction païenne. Etude sur la polémique antichrétienne du I^{er} au VI^e siècle* (Paris 1934); Nestle, *ArchRW* 37 (1941/2) 51–100; R. L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven 1984); Hargis, *Against the Christians*; M. B. Simmons, “Graeco-Roman Philosophical Opposition,” in P. F. Esler (ed.), *The Early Christian World I* (London 2000) 840–868; Leveils, *Contra Christianos*; Cook, *Roman Attitudes*.

⁶² E.g. Min. Fel. 11.2; Orig. *C.Cels.* 4.48, 51; Lactant. *Inst.* 5.2.7).

⁶³ M. Aur. *Med.* 11.3 (if genuine); *Passio S. Symphorosae* 1.4 (Ruinart 70); Tert. *Apol.* 1.27.2; 1.50.4, 10.

⁶⁴ Epict. *Diss.* 4.7.5–6; Gal. *De pulsuum diff.* 2.4 (VIII 579 K.), *Eis to prôton kinoun akinêton* 15 (Arabic fr. R. Walzer, *Galen on Christians and Jews* (Oxford 1949)]; Lucian *De mort. Peregr.* 13; Porph. *C.Christ.* fr.1.17–18 and fr.73 Harnack. See J. Bregman, “*Logismos* and *Pistis*,” in R. C. Smith and J. Lounibos (eds.), *Pagan and Christian Anxiety* (Lanham 1984) 217–231. On the various meanings of *pistis* and *fides* in the Roman world see now T. Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith* (Oxford 2015).

but oft-repeated, pagan complaint that Christians were simply out of their minds.⁶⁵

It thus seems reasonable to suppose that such ideas may also have factored into Aemilianus' estimation of Christian doctrines as *para phusin*. One advantage of this reading is that it brings Aemilianus' remarks into line with one of the overarching strategies of pagan polemic against Christianity, especially in the third century: the argument that Christianity was not a philosophy.⁶⁶ We could thus see Aemilianus as adopting the same strategy which Hargis documents so clearly for Celsus: the strategy of "creating rhetorical difference" between pagans and Christians through a "totalizing discourse" of "radical exclusion" which presented Christianity as antithetical to pagan culture.

However, I believe that we can and should go further than this, for three reasons. The first is that to take Aemilianus' *kata/para phusin* as the equivalent of "rational/irrational" still does not explain fully why Aemilianus would describe the gods themselves, rather than Christian doctrines or behaviour, as "natural" or "unnatural." The second reason is that although we can understand readily enough how Christian "irrationality" might have seemed unnatural to pagans, these particular aspects of Christianity tend not to be described with the phrases *kata/para phusin* or the vocabulary of *phusis/natura*. It therefore seems preferable to see whether we can detect a more specific meaning in Aemilianus' focus on the concept of nature. The third reason to look beyond a simple equation between *theoi kata phusin* and "philosophical/rational gods" in our text is that we have an exact equivalent for "philosophical gods" in Latin, *dei naturales*, which seems to mean something more

⁶⁵ Christians as lacking *bona mens*: *Acta Scill.* 1 (Musurillo 86); *Acta Proc. Cypr.* 4; *AE* 1988, 1046 (Maximinus Daia); Lactant. *De mort. pers.* 34 (Galerius). As suffering from *dementia/amentia/anoësia/insipientia/alogia/aponia*: Plin. *Ep.* 10.96; *Acta Scill.* 8 (Musurillo 88); Orig. *C. Cels.* 8.65; *Acta Maximi* 2 (Ruinart 204); Julian. *Ep.* 46 (404c), 61c (424b).

⁶⁶ On this polemic see Hargis, *Against the Christians*.

specific and, potentially, at odds with the goals of Valerian's persecution.

These *dei naturales* occur in Augustine's attempted demolition of Varro's categorization of the gods in the latter's (now-lost) *Antiquitates*.⁶⁷ Varro appears to have proposed (or, alternatively, to have drawn on a pre-existing doctrine, perhaps to be credited to the pontifex Scaevola) that there were three kinds of *rationis quae de diis explicatur*: the *genus mythicon*, the *genus physicon*, and the *genus civile*.⁶⁸ Of these, the *genus physicon* was that of the philosophers, and could also be referred to as the *genus naturale*. The gods as understood by each kind of thinking are therefore described by Augustine⁶⁹ as the gods of poets, the *dei naturales* (the Greek translation would presumably be *theoi phusikoî*) of philosophers, and the *dei civiles* of priests and cities.⁷⁰ These *dei*

⁶⁷ Varro *Ant. fr.* 7–10 Cardauns = August. *De civ. D.* 6.5.

⁶⁸ On the debated origins and significance of the theory of *tria genera theologiae*, and the relationship between Scaevola's view and Varro's, see J. Pépin, "La théologie tripartite de Varron. Essai de reconstitution et recherche des sources," *REAug* 2 (1956) 265–294; G. Lieberg, "Die Theologia tripartita als Formprinzip antiken Denkens," *RhM* 125 (1982) 25–53; J. Rüpke, "Varro's *Tria Genera Theologiae*: Religious Thinking in the Late Republic," *Ordia Prima* 4 (2005) 107–129; T. Baier, "Myth and Politics in Varro's Historical Writings," *EMC* 18 (1999) 351–367; Y. Lehmann, "Religion romaine et témoignage chrétien," in G. Abbamonte et al. (eds.), *L'ultima parola. L'analisi dei testi: teorie e pratiche nell'antichità greca e latina* (Naples 2004) 203–214; P. van Nuffelen, "Varro's *Divine Antiquities*: Roman Religion as an Image of Truth," *CP* 105 (2010) 162–188; J. A. North, "The Limits of the 'Religious' in the Late Roman Republic," *History of Religions* 53 (2014) 225–245.

⁶⁹ It is not clear whether this terminology was used by Varro himself, since it occurs only in Augustine's rhetorical address to him. However, Scaevola is said to have spoken of *tria genera tradita deorum*, which may suggest that the idea of describing the gods themselves with these adjectives was not unique to Augustine (*De civ. D.* 4.27.1–3). Tertullian took Varro himself to mean that there were three *genera deorum* (although this may be an erroneous conflation of Scaevola's theory with Varro's): Tert. *Ad nat.* 2.1.8–11. On early Christian receptions of the *tria genera theologiae* see especially J. Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie* (Paris 1958) 308–351.

⁷⁰ *De civ. D.* 6.6.13–14: *naturales deos colere cupis, civiles cogere*; 6.6.21–24:

naturales seem as close as we can get in Greek or Latin to “gods that are philosophical/compatible with philosophy.”

What is interesting is that Augustine seems to think (and claims that Varro also thought) that the *dei naturales* and the *dei civiles* were two different things: that is, that the understanding of the gods which emerged from civic cult and the understanding produced by philosophy were not (or at least, not without higher insight) identical.⁷¹ Yet the primary goal of Valerian’s persecution, as we saw above, was to reintegrate Christians in the “Roman” public *cultus* (*romanas caerimonias*), the worship of those gods which, as Aemilianus puts it, “preserve the empire” and which “everyone knows.” In the terms of Scaevola/Varro/Augustine, these seem more likely to have been the *dei civiles* than the rarified *dei naturales* of the philosophers, and this would seem to be confirmed by other Christian allusions to the *tria genera theologiae*. For Eusebius, it was not the *phusikon* but the *politikon* which was “enforced by the laws and preserved in each city and place”;⁷² for Arnobius and Lactantius, the reasoning of the *theologi/philosophi* differed from that which pagans practiced in public worship (*in ritibus; qui deos colunt*).⁷³ What can we make of this apparent difference between Aemilianus’ *theoi kata phusin* and the philosophers’ *dei naturales*? Three possible solutions lie open to us, none provable in the absence of further evidence:

- 1) Aemilianus’ *theoi kata phusin* and the *dei naturales* do not actually mean the same thing. This would suggest that to understand *kata phusin* in our text as meaning “philosophical” is inadequate.
- 2) They do mean the same thing, but Aemilianus differed from Scaevola, possibly from Varro, and definitely from the Christian reception of the *tria genera* theory, in seeing no conflict

quanto liberius subtilius que ista diuideres, dicens alios esse deos naturales, alios ab hominibus institutos, sed de institutis aliud habere litteras poetarum, aliud sacerdotum.

⁷¹ On the possible compatibility in Varro’s eyes between civic and philosophical theology see van Nuffelen, *CP* 105 (2010) 162–188.

⁷² Eus. *Praep. Ev.* 4.1.2.

⁷³ Arn. *Adv. nat.* 3.11; Lactant. *De ira* 11.16.

between the *dei naturales* and the *dei civiles*. This would be an interesting and unusual theological claim, possibly following in Varro's footsteps.

3) Aemilianus here betrays priorities and interests somewhat different from those of Valerian and the official remit of Valerian's persecution. He looks beyond his assigned task of enforcing worship of the *dei civiles*, to reproach Christians for their neglect of the *dei naturales* as well.

Though we may not know which answer is correct, all three suggest that Aemilianus was using the expressions *kata/para phusin* to denote something more specific than pagan rationality/Christian irrationality.

What, then, might Aemilianus mean by invoking *phusis* specifically? The third possible interpretation of his meaning, and I think the strongest, is that our pagan governor is drawing on a different strand of anti-Christian polemic of the second-to-third centuries: the argument that god in the Christian conception did not stand in the correct relation to the natural order, and behaved in a way which was "contrary to nature." This argument was levelled by philosophically-minded pagans against such Christian doctrines as the incarnation, the resurrection of the dead, and God's creation of the world by fiat, as Nestle and Wilken have shown.⁷⁴ The fundamental clash was between the Jewish-Christian notion that "everything is possible for god" and the pagan doctrine that god would not, indeed could not, contravene the natural order. Thus in Galen, "we say that certain things are impossible by nature (ἀδύνατα φύσει) and that God does not even attempt such things at all but that he chooses the best out of the possibilities of becoming."⁷⁵ Celsus likewise insists that "neither indeed can God do what is shame-

⁷⁴ Nestle, *ArchRW* 37 (1941/2) 80–84; Wilken, *The Christians* 68–93, 102–104, 161, 203.

⁷⁵ Gal. *De usu part.* 11.14 (III 905–906 K. = II 158.2 Helmreich), transl. Wilken. For other perspectives on Galen's theology and attitudes towards "nature" see J. Barnes and J. Jouanna (eds.), *Galen et la philosophie* (Geneva 2003).

ful nor does He desire what is contrary to nature (οὔτι γε τὰ αἰσχροῦ ὁ θεὸς δύναται οὐδὲ τὰ παρὰ φύσιν βούλεται) ... God is the author of what is naturally just and right (τῆς ὀρθῆς καὶ δικαίας φύσεως ὁ θεός ἐστιν ἀρχηγέτης).⁷⁶ The same argument recurs in the pagan criticisms preserved by Macarius Magnes.⁷⁷ As Wilken shows, this specific line of argument is not simply the result of a Platonic aversion to the notion that god would dirty his hands through direct engagement with matter.⁷⁸ More fundamentally, it reflects a worldview which insisted that it was irrational to suppose that god would ever do anything which was “contrary to nature,” for it was impossible that he would want so to overturn the rules of the cosmos; nor, indeed, was he capable of doing so even if he so desired. Thus to pagan thinkers such as Galen and Celsus “the Christian God appeared capricious, arbitrary, even whimsical, subject to no laws other than his own will, and beyond the bounds of nature, a rule unto himself.”⁷⁹

This, I think, is the closest we can get in the available evidence to Aemilianus’ notion that the Christian god is “contrary to nature.” There is still a difference, in that Galen, Celsus, and Macarius’ pagan do not say explicitly that the Christian god is

⁷⁶ Orig. *C.Cels.* 5.14, transl. Chadwick.

⁷⁷ Porph. *C.Christ.* fr.94 Harnack (Mac. Magn. *Apocrit.* 4.24, p.204 Blondel): God, being good, cannot change his nature (οὐδὲ ἀγαθὸς ὦν τὴν φύσιν ἀμαρτῆσαι δύναται ἄν); fr.35 (*Apocrit.* 4.2, p.159): *Physis* has allotted a proper sphere to all things, and the divine Logos would not alter this, for he acts not according to his ability but in order to preserve *akolouthia* and the “law of right order” (οὐ γὰρ καθ’ ὃ δύναται πράττει τι καὶ θέλει, ἀλλὰ, καθ’ ὃ τὴν ἀκολουθίαν σώζει τὰ πράγματα, τὸν τῆς εὐταξίας φυλάττει νόμον). Macarius’ remarks were once treated as fragments of Porphyry’s *Contra Christianos*, but he seems to have used other sources and to have reworked them heavily, so although he may reflect the tenor of Porphyry’s arguments, we cannot assume that these were Porphyry’s words. See R. Berchman, *Porphyry Against the Christians* (Leiden 2005) 192–193 n.44; M. Becker, *Porphyrios, ‘Contra Christianos’* (Berlin 2016) 103–105.

⁷⁸ Cf. De Labriolle, *La réaction païenne* 168; Hargis, *Against the Christians* 48–51.

⁷⁹ Wilken, *The Christians* 93.

himself *para phusin*. But by employing the vocabulary of *phusis* and *para phusin*, they come nearest to Aemilianus' words. On this reading, the exchange between Aemilianus and Dionysius would count as additional evidence for the importance to pagans of the idea of what was "natural/unnatural" for god(s). It is interesting to note that Christians in third-century Alexandria were not insensible to this line of attack: Origen responds by insisting that "if such things happen according to the word and will of God, we must at once necessarily hold that they are not contrary to nature. Therefore things which are done by God, although they may be, or may appear to some to be incredible, are not contrary to nature."⁸⁰ Aemilianus' use of the theme thus adds to our evidence that the idea of what was natural or unnatural for god had power in inter-religious debate, and was cultural currency for thinkers on both sides.

A fourth and final possibility for interpretation is that Aemilianus is genuinely idiosyncratic in his use of the phrases *theoi kata/para phusin*. This may be somewhat less satisfying for us, since his precise meaning would remain unrecoverable in the absence of other evidence. However, it would also remain interesting evidence for the ability of pagans to engage in highly-individualized theological thinking. That such thinking did take place is confirmed by a dedication (*AE* 1968, 227) made in Spain in the late second century by the procurator P. Aelius Hilarianus, to "the gods and goddesses whom it is right and proper to supplicate in the pantheon," *dis deabusque quos ius fasque est precari in panth{e}o*. Rives observes that this definition of the "gods and goddesses" as those which may properly be worshipped in a shrine to all the gods (*dis deabusque* plus the relative clause with its reference to a "pantheon") is unique in the epigraphic record. Rives suggests that this phraseology reflects Hilarianus' own attempt to define which gods were

⁸⁰ *C. Cels.* 5.23: εἰ δὲ τὰ κατὰ λόγον θεοῦ καὶ βούλησιν αὐτοῦ γινόμενα, ἀναγκαῖον εὐθέως εἶναι μὴ παρὰ φύσιν· οὐ <γὰρ> παρὰ φύσιν τὰ πραττόμενα ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ, κἂν παράδοξα ἢ ἢ δοκοῦντά τισι παράδοξα (transl. Chadwick).

proper recipients of worship, and which were not. On this reading, Hilarianus “was not content merely to follow the conventions of the day, but instead gave serious thought to religious questions and worked out his own particular opinions.”⁸¹ Given the uniqueness of Aemilianus’ phraseology, it may be that he, too, was using individualistic language to convey his assessment of the appropriateness of (in this case) the Christian god. It is especially tantalizing to recall that in the trial record Aemilianus refers to a previous “unwritten” discussion with Dionysius (καὶ ἀγράφως ὑμῖν διελέχθην).⁸² Had such theological issues already come up between them there? If so, perhaps Aemilianus had already explained what he meant by *theoi kata phusin* and *theoi para phusin*, an explanation now lost to us. Whatever the precise significance of Hilarianus’ and Aemilianus’ gods, however, the behaviour of both confirms that Roman officials could and did engage in their own theological thinking, perhaps especially in reaction to the rival theologies of others such as Christians. The precise content of Aemilianus’ theology may have been unusual, but Aemilianus as governor-cum-theologian was not alone in the Roman world.

Significance

I have argued for a theological reading of Aemilianus’ statements at the trial of Dionysius. If this reading is correct, then what we have is a pagan governor engaging in individual theological reasoning about the nature of both the Christians’ god(s) and his own. He drew on the cultural currency of “nature” as ideal and guide, currency shared at this time between pagans, Jews, and Christians. He may also have invoked the shared inter-religious discourse of what was “natural/unnatural” for god to do or be. Although the exact content of his theological views may have been unusual, the example of the procurator Hilarianus, and the theological objections to Christianity raised

⁸¹ J. B. Rives, “The Piety of a Persecutor,” *J ECS* 4 (1996) 1–25, at 17.

⁸² Eus. *HE* 7.11.6. The exact meaning of *agraphōs* here is debated: cf. Feltoe, *The Letters* 30 n.4; Bardy, *Eusèbe* 180 n.14; Lanata, *Gli atti dei martiri* 178; Saumagne, *Saint Cyprien* 137; Clarke, *CAH* XII 638.

by Galen, Celsus, and others, demonstrate that Aemilianus was not alone in his conviction that the Christian god was somehow incorrect or inappropriate.

The most important point is that Aemilianus was interested in more than just ritual. He had thought about the Christian conception of god, and found it wanting. (That he had made some effort to acquaint himself with Christianity is confirmed elsewhere in the trial record by his use of the Christian word *koimêtêrion*,⁸³ and in this light, even his reference to the “gods” (plural) of the Christians, read by Feltoe as a sign of his ignorance of Christianity,⁸⁴ may be better interpreted as a sly dig at the doctrine of the Trinity.) Aemilianus, then, does not focus simply on cultic observance. Rather, he tries, very cleverly, to engage with his Christian opponent on the theological level. This may not be surprising in the carefully-composed literary works of a Galen or a Celsus, but it is striking to see a governor formulating such arguments in the heat of a trial. It may be worthwhile for future work to look afresh for pagan attempts to ‘do theology’ in other trials of Christians.⁸⁵

Aemilianus thus appears to have gone beyond his official remit (of enforcing cult practice) to pursue his own theological concerns. This is compatible with current models of pagan persecution of Christians as both ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’, and of governors and those who brought prosecutions as operating with a large degree of autonomy in deciding how, when, and why to persecute.⁸⁶ In many ways, then, Aemili-

⁸³ Bardy, *Eusèbe* 181 n.16.

⁸⁴ Feltoe, *The Letters* 30; similarly Delchaye, *Les passions des martyres* 306.

⁸⁵ As one suggestion I offer *Mart.Fruct.* 2.4 (Musurillo 178): there is a theological ring to the governor’s question, *scis esse deos?*, and Fructuosus’ reply, *nescio*.

⁸⁶ See G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, “Aspects of the ‘Great’ Persecution,” *HThR* 47 (1954) 88–90, 100, 103–105; A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire* I (Oxford 1964) 406–410 (on law enforcement in general, including religion); T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1981) 21; R. MacMullen, “Religious Toleration around the Year 313,” *JECs* 22 (2014) 499–517.

anus' behaviour should come as no surprise to us. Where it does challenge our current understanding is in suggesting that we have accepted for too long the early Christians' claim to be separated from the pagan 'Other' by a theological boundary, with Christians as the theologians and pagans as the ritualists. Some scholars still assert that pagan governors knew little about the religion they were persecuting,⁸⁷ or even that pagans fundamentally misunderstood Christianity. Stroumsa's lapidary formulation is representative: "[i]n a nutshell, the Christians were incapable of understanding the idea of civic religion, and the pagans that of religious truth."⁸⁸ The religious debate between Dionysius of Alexandria and L. Mussius Aemilianus urges a re-evaluation of such generalizations. It shows us that for some pagans, persecution was about more than just orthopraxy. It also gave pagans the opportunity to engage Christians on the very ground they claimed to have made their own: the ground of orthodoxy.⁸⁹

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⁸⁷ E.g. R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (London 1986) 421–422; Selinger, *The Mid-Third Century Persecutions* 64 n.262: "In reality, Roman officials knew hardly anything about the Christian doctrine or different Christian sects."

⁸⁸ G. Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice. Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity* (Chicago 2009) 104.

⁸⁹ This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and by the Fondation Hardt pour l'étude de l'antiquité classique. Earlier versions of this paper were delivered at the annual meeting of the Pacific Northwest Region of the AAR, SBL & ASOR (Portland 2015) and at the SAMR conference "Religious Convergence in the Ancient Mediterranean" (Palermo 2016), and I would like to thank the audiences at both events for their generous feedback. Finally, my thanks to the anonymous readers of *GRBS* for their very helpful comments.