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**PAGAN CRITICISM OF CHRISTIANITY :
GREEK RELIGION AND CHRISTIAN FAITH**

To the modern lover of classical antiquity, it is puzzling that the arguments of Greek intellectuals against the early Christian movement were not simply philosophical but also religious. The most noteworthy critics, Celsus, the second century philosopher, Porphyry, the third century scholar, and Julian, the fourth century emperor, were all committed, in varying degrees, to the traditional religion of Greece and Rome. To understand them one must enter not only the world of ancient philosophy, but also the world of Greco-Roman religion, a vocation which has marked the work of Robert Grant¹.

Each of the three critics of Christianity, Celsus, Porphyry, and Julian are known to us almost entirely through the books of Christians written to refute them. Celsus' *True Word* can be reconstructed with some confidence from Origen's *Contra Celsum* and Julian's work *Against the Galilaeans* can be pieced together (with much less confidence) from Cyril of Alexandria's *Contra Julianum*. But Porphyry's work, though the most brilliant of the three, and the one most feared by Christians, can be reconstructed only with difficulty (and much conjecture) from numerous fourth & fifth century Christian writers. This is all the more unfortunate not only because of Porphyry's vast learning and acute mind but also because he wrote at the time when the Christian movement was on the verge of establishing a new relationship with the Roman state. Porphyry was one of the most articulate public voices raised against accommodation by the state to Christianity, and it may be that he was

1. See most recently "The Religion of Emperor Maximian Daia" in Jacob Neusner, ed., *Christianity, Judaism and other Greco-Roman Cults* (Leiden, 1974), 4, 143-166.

asked by the emperor to prepare a defense of the traditional religion and to provide a philosophical basis for the repression of Christianity. How seriously such speculation should be taken rests finally on how one answers the complex and puzzling questions associated with Porphyry's work *Against the Christians*. That he wrote against Christianity is evident from citations of his books by critics; but what he wrote, and whether he wrote one book or several, is still disputed.

Most study of Porphyry as critic of Christianity has focused on his work *Against the Christians* (*Ad Christ.*), but every attempt to reconstruct this work founders on our fragmentary and largely second hand knowledge of it. Fully half of the fragments which allegedly make up the book come from the *Apocritus* of Macarius Magnes with no sure evidence that they actually derive from Porphyry. A recent article by T. Barnes² has raised anew the question of the authenticity of the Macarian fragments. This question has been discussed off and on since the discovery of the *Apocritus* fragments in the nineteenth century, and it is evident that they can be used only with great reservation. Without them, however, any reconstruction of the *Against the Christians* is out of the question.

Some of the citations of Porphyry by Christian authors come not from the *Ad Christ.*, but from the *Philosophy from Oracles* (*Phil. orac.*). This work, an elaborate defense and interpretation of traditional religion based on an appeal to the authority of oracles, is usually considered a youthful work of Porphyry prior to the time he becomes interested in Christianity. Yet Christians who cite it consider it a work hostile to Christianity. Because of the vagaries of scholarship the *Phil. orac.* is usually studied by specialists on Porphyry and it is ignored by those interested in his relation to Christianity. Almost all work on Porphyry as a critic of Christianity concentrates on the presumed work in the fifteen books entitled *Against the Christians*. I wish then to ask what place, if any, the *Philosophy from Oracles* played in Porphyry's criticism of Christianity and whether some of the material usually assigned to *Ad Christ.*, belongs rather to *Phil. orac.*³. In this way it may be possible to

2. T. D. BARNES, "Porphyry Against the Christians: Date and the Attribution of Fragments", *JTS*, n.s. 24 (1973) 424-442.

3. I am indebted to the work of J. J. O'MEARA, *Porphyry's Philosophy from Oracles in Augustine* (Paris, 1959), for calling attention to this aspect of the *Phil. orac.* and showing