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BARBARIANS, GREEKS, AND CHRISTIANS.  
RETHINKING PORPHYRY'S ATTITUDE  
TOWARDS THE RELIGIOUS GROUPS  
OF HIS TIME

Firmicus Maternus, before his conversion to Christianity, was a fervent admirer of Porphyry's so much so that he called him "our Porphyry", seeing him as a representative of the Greek esoteric tradition, along with Orpheus, Plato and Pythagoras:<sup>1</sup>

When Orpheus showed to strangers the ceremonies of his mysteries, he required nothing of them at the beginning of the initiation (*ab his quos initiabat in primo vestibulo*), but the oath (*nisi iurisiurandi necessitatem*) backed by the fearful authority of religion, that the religious secrets he had once discovered and gathered would not be betrayed to profane ears (*profanis auribus*). But Plato, too, [... was concerned] that the venerable contents of the secret talks (*secretarum disputationum veneranda commenta*) should not be revealed to profane ears (*inperitis... auribus*) [...] Pythagoras, too, and our Porphyry (*noster Porphyrius*) believe that our mind becomes divine through religious silence (*religioso silentio consecrari*).

Firmicus is here referring to the first verse of the Orphic *hieros logos*: Φθέγχομαι οἷς θέμις ἐστί· θύρας δ' ἐπίθεσθε, βέβηλοι: "I will speak to those who lawfully may hear; close the ears, you profane."<sup>2</sup> Following in the steps of Plato, Pythagoras and Porphyry, Firmicus repeats in turn the

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1. FIRMICUS, *Math.* VII,1,1. The text is seriously corrupt: see W. KROLL, F. SKUTSCH, *Iulii Firmici Materni Matheseos libri VIII*, II, Leipzig, 1913, p. 208, and P. MONAT, *Firmicus Maternus. Mathesis*, t. III, Paris, CUF, série latine, 341, 1997, p. 150. Translation is mine, but see also J. RHYS BRAM, *Ancient Astrology. Theory and Practice. Matheseos libri VIII by Firmicus Maternus*, Park Ridge (NJ), 1975, p. 233.

2. See A. BERNABÉ, *Poetae Epici Graeci. Testimonia et fragmenta. Pars II: Orphicorum et Orphicis similium testimonia et fragmenta. Fasciculus I*, Munich – Leipzig, "Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana", 2004, p. 2, fr. 1b.

Orphic *prorrhesis* in his work on astrology: *ne haec veneranda commenta profanis vel imperitis auribus intimentur*.<sup>3</sup>

But in his polemical anti-pagan pamphlet entitled *The Error of the Pagan Religions* he calls Porphyry “the defender of the pagan cults, enemy of God, foe of the truth, teacher of the arts of wickedness”.<sup>4</sup> Firmicus appeals here to Porphyry as a witness to the fact that the victims and the blood outpoured from the incessant slaughter of animals during the sacrifices in honour of the statues of the gods, bring no effect save that the substance of demons who are procreated by the devil is nourished by that blood:

Sed et in ipso simulacro sicut in ceteris ex assiduus sacrificiis immundi daemonum spiritus colliguntur. Nihil enim operantur victimae et cruor ex assidua pecorum caede profusus nisi ut daemonum substantia qui diaboli procreatione generantur, ex isto sanguine nutriatur. Nam ita esse Porphyrius, defensor sacrorum, hostis dei, veritatis inimicus, sceleratarum artium magister, manifestis nobis probationibus prodidit.

And he continues:

In his books entitled *On the Philosophy according to the Oracles*, while he acclaimed Serapis’s power (*maiestatem eius praedicans*) he really acknowledged his weakness. For in the first part of his work, i. e. in the very beginning (*In primis enim librorum partibus, id est in ipsis auspiciis positus*), he said: “Serapis being invoked and being translated into a human body, gave the following response” [...] We are grateful to your books, Porphyry: you have revealed to us the essence of your gods. Thanks to you we have learnt how your gods are slaves at the bidding of men. Your Serapis is invoked by a man, comes, and immediately upon arrival is materialized by a command, and the necessity to speak is perhaps enjoined upon him against his will.

This page of Firmicus’s contains in a few words the complete description of the contents of the first section of the *Philosophy according to the Oracles* (henceforth the *Philosophy*). Unfortunately, it has been so far ignored or in any case underestimated. According to Firmicus, the first

3. FIRMICUS, *Math.* VII,1,3.

4. FIRMICUS, *Err. Prof. Rel.* 13,4-5, ed. K. ZIEGLER, *Iuli Firmici Materni VC de errore profanarum religionum*, Leipzig, 1907, p. 33. See also R. TURCAN, *Firmicus Maternus. L’erreur des religions païennes*, Paris, CUF, série latine, 256, 1982, p. 106-107, with French translation. Engl. tr. by C. A. FORBES, *Firmicus Maternus. The Error of the Pagan Religions*, New York (NY) – Ramsey (NJ), “Ancient Christian Writers”, 37, 1970, p. 71-72, slightly modified.