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CRITICISM OF THE PAGAN RELIGION IN PRUDENTIUS' *PERISTEPHANON*

The *Peristephanon*, one of Prudentius' major poetic works, comprises a collection of hymns or *passiones*, the main aim of which is to show the enormous suffering and heroism of the *milites* or *athletae Christi*, the first Christian martyrs¹. A natural consequence of the poet's decision to make the idea of the martyrdom of the Christians the cornerstone of this collection, manifesting it in almost all the component parts in a variety of ways, is the presentation of the opposing force, the persecutors of the Protomartyrs, in the worst possible light. The picture in the *Peristephanon* of the conflict between the followers of Christ and their enemies, whose claim to torture and murder Christians is based on the power of the State, is a reflection of the battle between Christ and Satan, as I have already shown; while each martyr's victory – his/her death – is always Christ's victory. In his presentation of the persecutors Prudentius often appends a criticism of the pagan religion, which he shows as a nursery breeding a hostile attitude towards Christianity. If his main concern is to glorify the Protomartyrs, the purpose of his critical remarks about the traditional religion is to build up a negative evaluation of paganism as a religion inimical to Christianity. Significantly though, the *Peristephanon* is not the only work by Prudentius in which the pagan religion receives unfavourable assessment. There is also severe criticism of the Roman religion in the slightly earlier *Contra Symmachum* (e.g. in I 42 ff.), the whole of which is concerned with the deprecation of pagan polytheism and the formulation of a historic basis for the role of Rome in the dissemination of Christianity².

¹ A detailed analysis of the purpose of the *Peristephanon* in M. P. Cunningham, *The Nature and Purpose of the 'Peristephanon' of Prudentius*, "Sacris Erudiri" 14:1963, p. 40–45; A.-M. Palmer, *Prudentius on the Martyrs*, Oxford 1989, p. 86 ff.

² Cf. S. Döpp, *Prudentius' Gedicht "Contra Symmachum" in der religiösen Auseinandersetzung seiner Zeit*, [in:] *Religiöse Kommunikation-Formen und Praxis vor der Neuzeit*, "Bochumer Altertumswissenschaftliches Colloquium" Bd. 26 (1996), p. 279–299.

Already in *Peristephanon*, the hymn in honour of St. Laurence, Prudentius attributes the Christian victory over paganism to the martyr³:

Antiqua fanorum parens
iam Roma Christo dedita,
Laurentio victrix duce
ritum triumphas barbarum⁴.
(*Perist.* II 1–4)

In this battle against paganism St. Laurence takes the leader's part (*Laurentio duce*), making Rome Christian (*iam Roma Christo dedita*). But he has to redeem the Christian victory in Rome with his own blood, since for the triumph of the faith he professes, the martyr has to shed his own blood and die⁵.

Armata pugnavit fides
proprii cruoris prodiga;
nam morte mortem diruit
ac semet inpendit sibi⁶.
(*Perist.* II 17–20)

Further on in this hymn St. Laurence contrasts the spiritual beauty of the "treasures of the Church", the sick and the disabled of his flock, with the moral decadence and depravity of the souls of the rich pagans (*Perist.* II 225–288), thereby submitting the moral laxity of pagan society to severe criticism. Here is the opening passage of this section:

Nostri per artus debiles
intus decoris integri
sensum venusti innoxium
langoris expertes gerunt,

³ Cf. V. Buchheit, *Christliche Romideologie im Laurentius-Hymnus des Prudentius*, [in:] *Das frühe Christentum im römischen Staat*, Darmstadt 1971, p. 461 f.; cf. also Idem, *Prudentius über Gesittung durch Eroberung und Bekehrung*, „Würzburger Jahrbücher für die Altertumswissenschaft“ N. F. 11:1985, p. 190.

⁴ All the quotations from the *Peristephanon* according to the Cunningham's edition: *Aurelii Prudentii Clementis 'Carmina'*, cura et estudio M. P. Cunningham, Turnholti 1961 (*Corpus Christianorum*, Series Latina CXXVI).

⁵ Cf. M. Kah, „Die Welt der Römer mit der Seele suchend...“ *Die Religiosität des Prudentius im Spannungsfeld zwischen 'pietas Christiana' und 'pietas Romana'*, Bonn 1989, p. 205.

⁶ A philological analysis of the whole introduction to the *Laurentius-Hymn* in: K. Thraede, *Rom und Märtyrer in Prudentius 'Peristephanon' 2, 1–20*, [in:] *Romanitas und Christianitas. Studia J. H. Waszink oblata*, Amsterdam–London 1973, p. 317–327; the author argues against Buchheit's opinions (cf. above n. 3).

Vestros valentes corpore
 interna corrumpit lepra
 errorque mancum claudicat
 et caeca fraus nihil videt".

(*Perist.* II 225–232)

In the following lines Prudentius gives a series of examples of the incurable diseases of the soul which afflict the rich pagans, making up a gallery of evil characters – the product of the pagan religion and culture. They include the arrogant rich man, with a body bloated by dropsy (*hydrops aquosus*); the miser with claw-like, deformed fingers; the lecher defiled with the mud of fornication; the over-ambitious man with an unwholesome craving for high office; then the man who is unable to keep a secret. Next come those who are sick with envy and morbid jealousy. A separate place in this catalogue of pagan sins is reserved for the Roman emperor:

Tute ipse qui Romam regis
 contemptor aeterni Dei,
 dum daemonum sordes colis,
 morbo laboras regio.

(*Perist.* II 262–264)

His chief transgression is that he is a *contemptor aeterni Dei* who has rejected the religion of the eternal God and persists in the worship of demons (*daemonum sordes colis*). The remark that the emperor is suffering from the “royal disease” (*morbo laboras regio*) is open to various interpretations; perhaps what is meant is the “royal” sickness of the soul, pride and refusal to believe in the true God, rather than a physical disease like epilepsy.

The situation of the sick and disabled, sons and daughters of the Church, will change diametrically in the eternal life to come, in contrast to what is in store for the high and mighty of this world, who will be punished for the sins they have committed on earth, while the people of the Church will enjoy eternal bliss (*Perist.* II 265–304). Prudentius launches his main attack against the pagan religion in a further part of this hymn, in St. Laurence's prayer for God's mercy on Rome (*Perist.* II 445–484). He begins it by observing that the roots of the pagan religion, which is still recognised by the Senate of Rome, go back to the false Phrygian cult brought to Italy by the exiles from Troy:

Confundit error Troicus
 adhuc Catonum curiam
 veneratus occultis focis
 Frygum penates exules.

(*Perist.* II 445–448)

Among the gods still worshiped in Rome and acknowledged by the Senate (*colit senatus*), St. Laurence enumerates the Phrygian penates, Janus and Saturn, and finally Jupiter himself (*adulter Iupiter*). Christian Rome, with the two great apostles, St. Peter and St. Paul, as its patrons (*duo apostolorum principes*), can no longer tolerate the presence, let alone the veneration, of those pagan deities⁷. He exhorts Jupiter, the principal deity of the Roman pantheon, to leave Rome:

Discede, adulter Iupiter,
Stupro sororis oblite
relinque Romam liberam
plebemque iam Christi fuge!

Te Paulus hinc exterminat
te sanguis exturbat Petri.
(*Perist.* II 465–470)

While the former, Janus and Saturn, are merely termed *monstra patrum*, monsters officially worshiped by the fathers of the Senate, Jupiter is burdened with unforgivable sins, adultery and incest with his own sister⁸. There can be no place for Jupiter in a Christian Rome, in Rome that has already liberated herself from paganism (*Romam liberam*), whose people already belong to Christ (*plebemque iam Christi*). Jupiter is also responsible for a heinous crime: the death (*sanguis*) of the Apostles Peter and Paul, who died at the hands of Nero, but at the behest or on behalf of Jupiter.

tibi id quod ipse armaveras
factum Neronis officit.
(*Perist.* II 471–472)

St. Laurence's oration in *Peristephanon* II concludes with a vision of the reign of the future Christian emperor (*Perist.* II 473–484), who will not allow Rome to remain in the thralldom of sordid pagan cults (*taetris sacrorum sordibus*). He will have the pagan temples closed down (*templa claudat*) and the ungodly houses condemned (*nefasta damnet limina*); the offering of blood sacrifices will cease, and holy statues will be set up in place of the old pagan idols.

Criticism of the pagan religion comes to the fore in one of the finest pieces in the *Peristephanon*, the *Passio Sancti Vincentii martyris*

⁷ Cf. V. Buchheit, *Prudentius über Gesittung...*, p. 207.

⁸ Cf. M. Kah, op. cit., p. 203.

(*Perist.* V). Already in the opening passage (v. 13–16), Datian, governor of Spain under Diocletian and a persecutor of Christians, is described as a “flunkey of the idol” (*satelles idoli*), who on the grounds of evil laws (*praecinctus atris legibus*) enforces the offering of sacrifices to the pagan gods (*litare divis gentium*) by the sword and imprisonment (*ferro et catenis*)⁹. This kind of coercion on the grounds of imperial edicts is unjust and cruel, a violation of human liberty. Vincent resolutely protests in his reply to Datian’s appeal to him, pursuant to the imperial edict, to venerate the pagan gods¹⁰:

Tibi ista praesint numina,
tu saxa, tu lignum colas,
tu mortuorum mortuus
fias deorum pontifex;

nos lucis auctorem patrem
eiusque Christum filium,
qui solus ac verus deus
Datiane, confitebimur.

(*Persit.* V 33–40)

In a subsequent section *Perist.* (V 85–92) the martyr takes a strong stand against the emperor’s foolish edict (*scitum brutum Caesaris*), which would have the worship of gods (*numina*) fashioned by a sculptor’s hand, fired in a kiln, and bereft of the ability to move, see, or speak. The raising of splendid temples (*sumptuosa delubra*) and the sacrificing of animals to such deities is an evident absurdity. The next lines, 77–92, bring an absolute condemnation of pagan idolatry. Here Vincent refutes Datian’s claim that such effigies are inhabited by spirits (*spiritus*). In his opinion any spirits residing in statues of the pagan gods are sombre demons (*daemones*), which incite their adherents to commit all sorts of crimes, such as the murder of innocent people and the persecution of the followers of Christ. However, the sinister demons realise that the kingdom of Christ is at hand, which means doom for them. His criticism of the traditional religion is thus not limited merely to an attack on idolatry, but also involves censure of the demonological concept in the notion of the pagan deities, from which, according to Vincent, all the instigations to do evil come. Christ, whose power is about to establish itself in the world, will bring an end to the evil demons.

⁹ Cf. S. Stabryła, *Death for Christ as Victory in the Light of Prudentius' 'Peristephanon'*, “*Analecta Cracoviensia*” 33:2001, p. 678 f.

¹⁰ Cf. M. Kah, op. cit., p. 226.

More critical remarks on the pagan religion are to be found in the hymn in honour of St. Romanus (*Peristephanon* X), the longest in the collection¹¹. Already in its opening part, in his dispute with the imperial prefect Asclepiades, Romanus accuses his persecutors of cruelty (*crudelitas*), and calls them servants of idols and demons (*servi idolorum ac daemonum*, v. 101), who are not to enter a Christian church, so as not to pollute it (*ne polluatur purus orandi locus*, v. 103). The main body of the criticism levied against the pagan religion in this hymn comes in Romanus' address to the prefect (v. 141–305). The martyr launches his attack by ridiculing the ambition nurtured by the Roman state officials to hold high offices and enjoy distinctions. He mocks the inane rituals associated with these honours, such as the chicken-feeding conducted as part of the auspices ceremony (v. 141–150). Next he criticises the forms and objects of the religious worship practised by the Roman dignitaries (*togati proceres*). They bring shame on themselves by falling on their knees before altars with oak statues; or by participating barefoot in ritual processions during the festival in honour of Cybele, who is nothing more than a black stone statue (*lapis nigellus*); they turn a blind eye to the crude ceremonies that accompany the Lupercalia. He sums up this part of the discourse by deploring the inanities of the political, moral, and religious life of contemporary Rome:

Miseret tuorum me sacrorum et principum
 morumque, Roma, saeculi summum caput.
 (*Perist. X* 166–167)

Next the martyr passes on to a critique of the pagan beliefs – in open defiance of the injunction laid down by the cruel prefect, who has threatened him with torture and a terrible death. He begins with the general observation that if he were to renounce his faith in Christ, he would be obliged to worship hundreds of gods and goddesses, as commanded by Asclepiades – along with all their innumerable progeny, the fruit of their parents' sordid lechery (*stuprorum sordidum pro sapiam*, v. 180). The overall picture Romanus paints of the pagan gods is of a world of lewdness and adultery, treachery, deceit, jealousy, anger, and hatred:

¹¹ M. Roberts, *Poetry and the Cult of Martyrs. The Liber 'Peristephanon' of Prudentius*, Ann Arbor 1993, p. 54; the author considers *Peristephanon* to be "anti-pagan polemic in the manner of *Contra Symmachum*".

Nubunt puellae, saepe luduntur dolis,
 amasionum conprimuntur fraudibus,
 incesta fervent, furta moechorum calent,
 fallit maritus, odit uxor paelicem,
 deos catenae colligant adulteros.

(*Perist.* X 181–185)

The martyr runs through numerous examples of deities worshiped and offered sumptuous sacrifices by pagans to show that there is not one among them worthy of such veneration by his alleged life and deeds¹². Starting with an allusion to Mars and Venus in v. 185, he continues his enumeration of disreputable gods with Apollo, slayer of his own lover Hyacinthus; the thief Mercury; the lecherous eunuch Attis; the shameless Cybele; the incestuous adulterer Jupiter; the guilty fugitive Saturn hiding from retribution; Mars quarrelling with Vulcan; and Juno who in turn is at war with Hercules. None of these characters, in Romanus' opinion, should hold a place in the pantheon, or be venerated by humans because of the crimes they have committed or because of their vices. He is not convinced by Asclepiades' counter-argument that the wrongdoings of the gods are merely the fiction made up by poets and have no bearing on reality (v. 216). The conclusion that may be drawn is that only the poets believe in what they write about:

Sed sunt et ipsi talibus mysteriis
 tecum dicati quodque describunt colunt.

(*Persit.* X 217–218)

Romanus also asks why the praetor enjoys reading those "poets' fantasies" and why in his presence theatre audiences applaud the performance of plays depicting the immoral episodes from the lives of the gods, such as Jupiter dressing up as the husband of Alkmene, or Venus' grief over the mortally wounded body of her lover Adonis. The dishonest conduct of the gods is immortalised in sculptures depicting their depraved habits and deeds. For instance, images of Jupiter have an eagle as an attribute, for the eagle which is said to have carried off Ganymede; while Ceres is represented as a woman with a blazing beacon, searching for her daughter Proserpina who has been carried off by her iniquitous uncle Pluto. There can be no respect on the part of worshipers for the pantheon of rural deities, such as Faun, Priapus,

¹² B. M. Peeble, *The Poet Prudentius*, New York 1951, p. 91, remarks that the whole poem is "full a statement of the inanity of pagan worship".

or the nymphs, who all lead lives not worthy of a real god. To bring home the ludicrousness of the very idea of the polytheistic religion of the pagans, Romanus ironically suggests that all the diverse cults, both of the Latin as well as of the Egyptian gods – including the “sacred” beasts, such as the monkey, the serpent, the crocodile, the ibis or the dog (v. 250–258), not to mention the vegetables, the leek, onion, and garlic – be accorded exactly the same status.

Next Romanus refutes his persecutor’s claim that anything that can be sculpted is beautiful. The martyr is of the opinion that the statues of the gods, especially those created by the great Greek sculptors like Polycletus or Myro, have become the source of the pagan vision of the divine (*natura vestrum est atque origo caelitem*, v. 270), and that in general art gives rise to a false idea of gods (*ars seminandis efficax erroribus*, v. 271), usually evoking a superstitious awe. The pagans owe the emergence of their gods to the sculptors, who have imposed their own views or ideas on the godhead to those who believe in the pagan religion. Thus the artists are effectively the real makers or genitors of the pagan gods (*fabri deorum vel parentes numinum*, v. 293). While the simple uneducated folk might be forgiven this kind of primitive and inane idolatry, it is totally incomprehensible in the educated and learned, who may be guided by reason but are ignorant of the truth about God, creator and ruler of all things:

Vos eruditos miror et doctos viros.
 perpensa vitae quos gubernat regula,
 nescire vel divina vel mortalia
 quo iure constant, quanta maiestas regat
 quidquid creatum est, quae creavit omnia.
 (*Perist.* X 306–310)

The praise of the Christian virtues in the subsequent part of the hymn brings Romanus to another attack against paganism, which while attempting to stop the growth of Christianity is itself succumbing to obscurity and falsehood, fully absorbed by temporal and mundane matters (v. 366–375). The notion the martyr sees as the height of madness is the belief that gods may be born, like humans, from marital unions. Other pagan practices which he sees as utterly stupid are the building of altars to the forces of nature (*elementa mundi*), the offering up of prayers and sacrifices to man-made statues, and the deliberate veneration (*cum scias*) of the mortal remains of criminals (*reorum*). For Romanus it is sheer folly to treat the created as the creator (*id quod creatum est conditorem credere*, v. 380). He

calls the imposition of such beliefs on brave and free people (*viris fortibus et liberis*) a transgression or offence against religion (*nefas*).

The final passage in the hymn about St. Romanus with a condemnation of the pagan religion comes in its closing section, v. 1009–1090, and concerns the pagan ritual of the sacrificial slaughter of bulls. Romanus presents a true-to-life description of this terrible rite, in order to show the most repugnant aspect of the pagan religion – the ritual sacrifices. However, he does not stop at the slaughter of animals, but goes on to enumerate the rituals during which devotees engage in a range of acts of self-mutilation, doing injury to their bodies or branding themselves or having their limbs or genitalia amputated. Romanus accuses the pagan religion of forcing adherents to indulge in such practices, which he sees as the work of Satan:

Has ferre poenas cogitur gentilitas,
hac di coercent lege cultures suos.
Sic daemonipse ludit hos quos ceperit
docet execrandas ferre contumelias
tormenta inuri mandat infelicibus
(*Persit.* X 1086–1090)

* * *

The above review of the censures of the pagan religion in Prudentius' *Peristephanon* may be summed up by a few general conclusions. The first is that this criticism occupies a substantial amount of space in three of the largest components of the cycle, Hymns II, V, and X. Other hymns contain only incidental mentions of this subject. Secondly, the poet puts all of his critical statements on paganism into the mouths of the martyrs themselves, Laurence, Vincent, and Romanus. It seems that the purpose of his decision to employ this technique was to emphasise the importance of the criticism, as coming from the great saints and martyrs themselves. The severest censure in *Peristephanon* II is levied on the moral defects in society which have come about as a result of the pagan religion and culture. The gallery of evil characters is headed by an image of the emperor himself, who has rejected the true God in favour of worship of foul demons. The pagan deities, above all Jupiter, are guilty of the gravest offences, like adultery and incest. In *Peristephanon* V a sharp attack against pagan

idolatry is combined with the criticism of the demonological concept of the deities, who are the root of all the evil in the world. The criticism of pagan beliefs in *Peristephanon* X leads to the conclusion that the world of the gods is a world of evil, crime, treachery, and the dissolute life. Moreover, the pagan arts – drama, literature, and sculpture – have perpetuated the immoral patterns of behaviour practised by the pagan gods. Not only is the pagan religion evil and immoral, but it is also absurd, and it is highly surprising and well-nigh inexplicable that its followers include educated and intelligent people as well. Paganism is a false and obscure religion, and it encourages its adherents to become engrossed in mundane matters. Finally the diverse ridiculous, cruel and disgusting pagan rituals, especially the sacrificial slaughter of animals, are a particularly repulsive aspect of the pagan religion.

The criticism of the polytheistic pagan religion in Prudentius' *Peristephanon* covers all of its most important aspects: from the very idea of the pagan deities to the rituals. By subjecting the pagan religion to the severest criticism, Prudentius contrasts it with Christianity, in order to show more clearly the latter's infinite superiority, since it is the belief in the one true God¹³.

KRYTYKA RELIGII POGAŃSKIEJ W *PERISTEPHANON* PRUDENCJUSZA

Streszczenie

U podstaw zbioru poematów Prudencjusza pt. *Peristephanon* leży idea męczeństwa, ukazana w różnych przejawach i aspektach. Naturalną konsekwencją przyjęcia przez poetę takiej koncepcji było dążenie do przedstawiania w najgorszym świetle siły opozycyjnej wobec chrześcijaństwa – prześladowców, którzy wyposażeni w potęgę władzy torurowali i zabijali wyznawców Chrystusa. Ukazując postaci prześladowców chrześcijan Prudencjusz wielokrotnie, niejako przy okazji, przeprowadza w *Peristephanon* krytykę religii pogańskiej jako pewnego rodzaju gleby czy gruntu, z którego

¹³ M. Kah, op. cit., p. 248, having analysed the problem of the religion in the *Peristephanon* arrives at the conclusion: "Nicht Iupiter und die heidnische Götterfamilie führen das römische Reich zu seiner Vollendung, sondern das christliche Schöpfergott...Die heidnische Götter existieren nicht und haben nie existiert; sie sind lediglich machtlose, lächerliche Produkte der menschlichen Phantasie".

wyrastała ta wroga chrześcijaństwu postawa. Przegląd krytycznych uwag na temat religii pogańskiej w *Peristephanon* pozwolił stwierdzić, że owa krytyka zajmuje stosunkowo wiele miejsca w trzech najobszerniejszych utworach całego zbioru: w *Peristephanon* II, V i X. Wszystkie wypowiedzi krytyczne odnośnie do religii pogańskiej poeta wkłada w usta samych męczenników – Wawrzyńca, Wincentego i Romana – dla podkreślenia wagi owej krytyki. Bardzo surowo zostały napiętnowane w *Peristephanon* II wady obyczajowe i moralne społeczeństwa – jako produkty religii i kultury pogańskiej, przy czym galerię występnych typów pogan wieńczy wizerunek samego cesarza. Bóstwa pogańskie, a przede wszystkim Jowisz, obarczone są ciężkimi występami, jak cudzołóstwo czy kazirodztwo. W *Peristephanon* V atak na idolatrię pogańską łączy się z krytyką demonologicznej koncepcji bóstw religii tradycyjnej. Wreszcie krytyka wierzeń pogańskich w *Peristephanon* X prowadzi do ogólnego wniosku, że świat bogów to przestrzeń zła, zbrodni, zdrady i rozpusty. W całości religia pogańska została w poemacie Prudentiusza przedstawiona nie tylko jako zła i niemoralna, ale również jako wręcz niedorzeczna. Pogaństwo jest więc religią fałszu i ciemnoty, jej odrażającą stroną są różnego rodzaju bezsensowne, okrutne i obrzydliwe rytuały. Poddając krytyce politeistyczną religię pogańską poeta przeciwstawia ją chrześcijaństwu dla tym silniejszego uwydatnienia jego nieskończonej wyższości jako wiary w jedyne prawdziwego Boga.