

Sacrifice and Pagan Belief in Fifth- and Sixth-Century Byzantium

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SACRIFICE AND PAGAN BELIEF IN FIFTH- AND SIXTH-CENTURY BYZANTIUM*

The emperor Theodosius I (379-95), impelled by a mixture of piety and political calculation, banned public and private sacrifices and ordered the closing of pagan temples in three edicts issued during 391-2. Along with blood sacrifices — long offensive to Christians — such pagan devotions as sprinkling incense on altars, hanging sacred fillets on trees and raising turf altars were classified as acts of high treason punishable by death and confiscation of property.¹ There was no mistaking the intent of Theodosius' laws: henceforth Nicene Christianity was the official religion of the empire.

The edicts of Theodosius abolished neither sacrifices nor pagans. Each of his successors from Arcadius (395-408) to Justinian (527-65) felt obliged to re-enact the ban against sacrifices.² Although Theodosius II (408-50) expressed the sanguine hope that his empire was thoroughly Christian, many pagans, despite the harsh legislation backed by sporadic persecutions, continued their sacrificial devotions.³ The persistence of pagans in sacrificing to the gods is astonish-

* With special thanks to George L. Bernstein, Peter Brown and Keith Hopkins for their criticisms and suggestions.

¹ *Codex Theodosianus* (hereafter *Cod. Theod.*), xiv.10.10, xiv.10.11, xiv.10.12. See also K. G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Domination in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1982), p. 20.

² *Cod. Theod.*, xvi.10.22 (A.D. 423). For laws of Arcadius, see *Cod. Theod.*, xvi.10.13 (A.D. 395), xvi.10.14 (A.D. 396); for laws of Theodosius II, *Cod. Theod.*, xvi.10.22 (A.D. 423), xvi.10.23-4 (A.D. 423), xvi.10.25 (A.D. 435); cf. C. Lubiheid, "Theodosius II and Heresy", *Jl. Eccles. Hist.*, xvi (1965), pp. 36-8. For the law under Marcian, see *Codex Justinianus* (hereafter *Cod. Just.*), i.11.7 (A.D. 451); for law of Leo I, *Cod. Just.*, i.11.8 (A.D. 455); for law issued between the reigns of Leo I and Anastasius, *Cod. Just.*, i.9.10. For the laws of Justinian, see *Cod. Just.*, xi.10 (c. A.D. 528-9); *Novellae*, xxxvii.6 (A.D. 535); see discussion in T. Honoré, *Tribonian* (London, 1978), p. 46.

³ For the fourth and fifth centuries, see G. Fowden, "Bishops and Temples in the Eastern Roman Empire", *Jl. Theol. Studies*, new ser., xxix (1978), pp. 53-78; A. Frantz, "From Paganism to Christianity in the Temples of Athens", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, xix (1965), pp. 185-205. For the sixth century, see D. Claude, *Die byzantinische Stadt im 6. Jahrhundert* (Byzantinisches Archiv, xiii, Munich, 1969), pp. 69-74. For a list of temples converted into churches in the fourth to sixth centuries, see F. W. Deichmann, "Frühchristliche Kirchen in antiken Heiligtümern", *Jahrbuch des deutschen archäologischen Instituts*, liv (1939), pp. 115-36. Contrast the opinion of N. Q. King, "The Theodosian Code as a Source for the Religious Policies of the

(cont. on p. 8)

ing and perplexing. Far too often the last generations of pagans have been dismissed as curious survivals, or the defenders of a hopeless cause. This approach has obscured an important chapter in the transformation of religion and society in late antiquity.⁴ What has often been missed is that sacrifice always had been central to pagan worship, and belief in the efficacy of sacrifice gained new emphasis in the fourth century as the Roman monarchy embraced the new faith and moved steadily against the cults. Therefore, even though the imperial ban on sacrifices in 391-2 might have represented the climax of a struggle between the Christian court of Constantinople and the pagan senators of Rome, most pagans after 392 saw little reason to renounce the gods of their forefathers.

Pagans had stressed the efficacy of sacrifice in inspiring belief and as the appropriate means of achieving contact with the divine long before the conversion of the Roman monarchy to Christianity. Even Stoic intellectuals such as Dio Chrysostom of Prusa, who on the eve of the second century A.D. questioned the precise role of sacrifice and ritual, none the less upheld its efficacy as a means of human expression of belief in the gods.⁵ Many in the philosophical school shared his opinion.⁶ In the age before Constantine, sacrifice was the climax to the spiritual drama of most civic religious celebrations. Christian refusal to participate in such ceremonial and their denial of the efficacy of sacrifice (and thus of belief in the gods) provoked the persecutions, the aim of which was not to execute Christians, but rather to compel them to sacrifice.⁷

(n. 3 cont.)

First Byzantine Emperors", *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies*, vi (1962), pp. 16-17; N. Q. King, *The Emperor Theodosius and the Establishment of Christianity* (London, 1961), p. 82.

⁴ J. O'Donnell, "The Demise of Paganism", *Traditio*, xxxv (1979), pp. 83-7. See also W. E. Kaegi, "The Fifth-Century Twilight of Byzantine Paganism", *Classica et Mediaevalia*, xxvii (1966), pp. 268-70; D. J. Constantelos, "Paganism and State in the Age of Justinian", *Catholic Hist. Rev.*, xiii (1968), pp. 372-7.

⁵ Dio Chrysostom, *Orationes*, xxxi.15.

⁶ H. W. Attridge, "The Philosophical Critique of Religion under the Early Empire", *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, ii.16.1 (1978), pp. 45-73; D. Babut, *La religion des philosophes grecs de Thalès aux Stoïciens* (Paris, 1974), pp. 165-7. For the Pythagorean opinion, see Iamblichus, *De vita Pythagorica*, lxxxii; cf. W. Burkert, *Love and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, trans. E. L. Minar Jr. (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), pp. 180-3. For Epicureans, see Philodemus, *De pietate*, col. 108 (ed. T. Gomperz, *Philodem über Frömmigkeit*, Herculaneum Studien, ii, Leipzig, 1866, p. 126).

⁷ Pliny, *Epistolae*, x.96.5-6; cf. the *libelli* in P. Kerestzes, "The Decian *libelli* and Contemporary Literature", *Latomus*, xxxiv (1975), pp. 761-81. See G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, "Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?", *Past and Present*, no. 26 (Nov. 1963), pp. 6-38; F. Millar, "The Imperial Cult and the Persecutions", in W. den Boer (ed.), *Le culte des souverains dans l'empire romain* (Fondation Hardt, Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique, xix, Paris, 1973), pp. 145-65.

Through their respective approaches to the spiritual and social sides of pagan ritual, Peter Brown and Ramsay MacMullen have offered new insights into the richness and diversity of pagan religious experiences in the Roman Empire.⁸ Other historians, drawing upon anthropological studies of the role of ceremonial in traditional societies, have shown how the ritual of sacrifice, with its own symbols, theatre and drama, was a dynamic religious experience binding members of the community in a common participation with the divine.⁹ Even the imperial cult, often regarded as no more than an expression of political allegiance fostered by the Romanized provincial aristocrats, centred on the same kinds of sacrifices, processions and "mysteries" common to pagan worship as a whole. Greek-speaking provincials rather than the emperor himself instituted the rituals and temples dedicated to the worship of the divine emperor.¹⁰

Rituals of sacrifice and the accompanying banquets were major social and convivial occasions for a city, but during the Roman peace sacrifice was also the central act of piety in civic worship. Public sacrifices and the subsequent banquets of the Hellenistic and Roman ages are too often dismissed as pretexts for merriment and feasting bearing little or no religious significance; feasting after sacrifices, however, had been an integral part of Greek religious practices since Homer's day. In the Roman age, the ruling élites of cities institutionalized civic sacrifices, distributions and banquets on a wide scale through their endowments and private philanthropy. These actions hardly signalled the decline of sacrifice into secular feasting; instead such public feasting remained intimately bound to sacrifice and ritual.

Epigraphic dedications by the aristocracy of Stratonicea at the

⁸ P. Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978); R. MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven, 1981); R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100-400)* (New Haven, 1984). See also R. L. Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (London, 1986), pp. 27-264.

⁹ See R. von Heine-Geldern, "Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia", *Far Eastern Quart.*, ii (1942), pp. 15-30; C. Geertz, *Negara: The Theater State in Nineteenth Century Bali* (Chicago, 1980), pp. 3-25, 98-136. For the role of sacrifice, see J. P. Vernant, "Théorie générale du sacrifice et mise à mort dans la *thvoia* grecque", in J. Rudhart and O. Reverdin (eds.), *Le sacrifice dans l'antiquité* (Fondation Hardt, Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique, xxvii, Geneva, 1981), pp. 1-21; R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. P. Gregory (Baltimore, 1978), pp. 1-67; E. R. Leach, *Culture and Communication* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 81-93; H. Hubert, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*, trans. E. E. Evans-Pritchard (Chicago, 1964); R. Money-Kyle, *The Meaning of Sacrifice* (London, 1930), pp. 4-49.

¹⁰ S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 7-22, 229-31.

Carian shrines of Panamara and Lagina reveal that civic sacrifices and celebrations were vastly expanded from the early second century on, and there is every reason to believe that these dedications record pious sentiments towards the tutelary divinities Zeus and Hecate Sotereia. Even more impressive at Stratonicea is the survival into the early fourth century of traditional ritual unbroken by the political and economic upheavals of the third century.¹¹ The vitality of this city's pagan worship has led Peter Brown to remark that "The third century, as we know it, does not appear to have happened in Stratonikeia".¹² Locally-minted bronze coins of the Roman east, with their profusion of types featuring religious symbols, cult statues, altars and festivals, offer additional testimony to the extent and depth of pagan civic worship during the troubled late second and third centuries.¹³

The solemn drama of a slaying during high holidays must have evoked powerful emotions among spectators and participants before they partook of a ritual meal.¹⁴ Such ritual was hardly endangered by the emergence of so-called mystery or oriental cults: rather the ceremonials of these cults conformed perfectly well with those for traditional civic deities.¹⁵ It is hazardous to argue that prior to the conversion of Constantine the rigid formality of pagan worship, especially its public sacrifices and rituals, sapped the spirit of the ancient cults, enabling Christianity to fill the resulting spiritual void. Our difficulty in understanding the enduring belief in the efficacy of sacrifice and the spiritual power of pagan cults springs largely from our own conception that genuine religious belief emanates from personal, introspective experience of the divine. Anything less is often regarded as outward conformity. Yet personal introspective

¹¹ A. Laumonier, *Les cultes indigènes de la Carie* (Paris, 1958), pp. 232-4, 250-76, 288-333, 390-406.

¹² Brown, *Making of Late Antiquity*, p. 51.

¹³ K. W. Harl, *Civic Coins and Civic Politics in the Roman East, 180-275 A.D.* (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 52-94.

¹⁴ R. M. Ogilvie, *The Romans and their Gods* (London, 1969), pp. 50-2; W. Burkert, *Homo necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (Berkeley, 1982), pp. 1-3, 22-9, 45-8; cf. W. Burkert, "Glaube und Verhalten: Zeichengehalt und Wirkungsmarch von Opferritualen", in Rudhart and Reverdin (eds.), *Sacrifice dans l'antiquité*, pp. 91-125.

¹⁵ MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, pp. 112-30; cf. W. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987). For the limited impact of specific cults, see R. Merkelbach, *Mithras* (Hain, 1984), pp. 75-6, 146-89; R. Duthoy, *The Taurobolium: Its Evolution and Terminology* (Leiden, 1964), pp. 112-21; M. Malaise, *Les conditions de pénétration et de diffusion des cultes égyptiens en Italie* (Leiden, 1972), pp. 71-82, 101 ff.

belief detached from sacrifice was virtually unknown among pagans. Porphyry was a rare exception, concluding that "He who practises wisdom practises the knowledge of god, not he who is always entreating and sacrificing, for rather through deeds one practises piety to god", but this definition of piety even puzzled Christians: the ecclesiastical historian Socrates inferred that Porphyry was a Christian apostate.¹⁶

Sacrifice in veneration of cult statues was the most important act of piety common to the diverse cults of the Roman world that are lumped under the term "paganism". In the fourth century pagans, even more than their forefathers during the heyday of the Roman peace, stressed the efficacy of sacrifice in face of Christian criticism and imperial legislation. To restore paganism, the emperor Julian (360-3) jubilantly decreed that "the temples be opened, the victims brought to the altars, and worship of the gods restored".¹⁷ Perhaps for pagans, Julian scored one of his strongest points against the Christians when he complained that the "Galileans" were apostate Jews who had abandoned the animal sacrifice of Judaism. Hence he ordered the restoration of the temple in Jerusalem so that Jews could once more offer proper libations to Yahweh as a vindication of the efficacy of all sacrifice and a denial of the Christian message.¹⁸

As Christian emperors in the fourth century legislated against sacrifices, pagans did not substitute other ways of expressing piety and belief. Instead they articulated the belief that the pious individual might sacrifice on behalf of the community. Julian, while commanding the western army in Gaul, clandestinely offered sacrifices to secure victory.¹⁹ In a letter to Eutherius, he noted that a single pious individual could sacrifice as a surrogate for the entire community of "Hellenes", by which term Julian meant all true believers in the gods.²⁰ The notion of sacrifice by a pious proxy inevitably gained

¹⁶ Porphyry, *Ad Marcellam*, xvii; cf. Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica*, iii.23.27. See A. Smith, *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition* (The Hague, 1974), pp. 81-150; Porphyry's criticisms collected in J. Bidez, *La vie de Porphyre* (Paris, 1913), pp. 27*-31*, 33*-36*.

¹⁷ Ammianus Marcellinus, xxii.5.2. Cf. Libanius, *Orationes*, xviii.12C; Julian's comments in *Juliani epistulae et leges*, ed. J. Bidez and F. Cumont (Paris, 1922), no. 42.

¹⁸ Julian, *Contra Galilaeos*, 305D-306B, cf. 351D; cf. *Juliani epistulae et leges*, ed. Bidez and Cumont, no. 51. See S. P. Brock, "A Letter of Cyril of Jerusalem on the Rebuilding of the Temple", *Bull. School of Oriental and African Studies*, xl (1977), p. 267.

¹⁹ Ammianus Marcellinus, xxi.2.3; cf. Eunapius, *Vitae Sophistarum*, vii.3.8; Zosimus, iii.1-2.

²⁰ *Juliani epistulae et leges*, ed. Bidez and Cumont, no. 29.

popularity when pagans faced the choice between sacrificing to the gods in violation of imperial edict or denying the gods true worship. Later in the fourth century the pagan orator Themistius, when he pleaded with Christian emperors that belief and observance of rites should be a matter of individual choice, premised his argument upon the same notion that pious individuals could save the community by proper veneration of the gods.²¹ Zosimus, the last pagan historian, writing perhaps at the opening of the sixth century, records an anecdote to the effect that, during the joint reign of Valentinian I and Valens, Athens escaped the ravages of earthquakes because an elderly hierophant had by a clever ruse personally ensured the sacrifices to the hero Achilles on behalf of the entire Athenian people.²²

This concept of sacrifice might have received further impetus among educated circles from the Neoplatonists of Athens, who stressed the occult art of theurgy whereby the enlightened individual invoked the gods by ancestral rites interpreted as Platonic symbols. The practice of theurgy by later Neoplatonists is unsettling to most modern authors, who find it baffling and mildly distasteful that otherwise intelligent men such as Julian or the scholar Proclus of Athens (c. 410-85) should descend to the level of what seems little more than magic.²³ To dismiss theurgy as a sign of the intellectual decline of Plato's heirs is a view that stems from a Christian prejudice best expressed by St. Augustine as "that which they call either by the more despicable name of goetic magic or by the more honourable one of theurgy".²⁴

Theurgy played a powerful role in late Platonic thought from Iamblichus of Chalcis (c. 250-325) onwards, and it implied a pagan version of grace because the theurgist, through sacred symbols revealed by appropriate sacrifices and rituals, achieved communion with the divine. Iamblichus developed his systematic explanation of theurgy in reaction to the transcendental, intellectual paganism of Porphyry,

²¹ Themistius, *Orationes*, v.67C-D, 68B, 70A. See also G. Dagron, "L'empire d'orient au IV siècle et les traditions politiques d'hellénisme: le témoignage de Thémistios", *Travaux et Mémoires*, iii (1968), pp. 160-2, 180-6, 191-5.

²² Zosimus, iv.18.2-4.

²³ See E. R. Dodds, "Theurgy and Its Relationship to Neoplatonism", *Jl. Roman Studies*, xxxvii (1947), pp. 55-69, repr. in E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, 1951), pp. 283-311; A. A. Barb, "The Survival of Magic Arts", in A. Momigliano (ed.), *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 102, 105; G. Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), pp. 29-30; J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (Oxford, 1979), p. 234 n. 7.

²⁴ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, x.9.

who had minimized the role of ritual in the purification of the soul and the attainment of the divine. In Iamblichus' opinion, denial of the efficacy of ritual denied accessibility to the divine and hence any true belief and worship of the gods. By rejecting the philosophical opinions of his master Porphyry, Iamblichus voiced what most pagans intuitively believed: "This doctrine [of Porphyry] spells the ruin of all holy ritual and all communion between gods and men achieved by rites, by placing the physical presence of superior beings outside this earth. For it amounts to saying: the divine is set at a distance from the earth and cannot mingle with men; this lower region is a desert, without gods".²⁵

Most educated pagans of late antiquity shared the belief in access to the divine through sacrifice, and they, like Iamblichus, drew a sharp distinction between magic, premised on the so-called sympathies, and pious theurgic rites. The emperor Julian and his most notable intellectual heir, the scholar Proclus, stressed that sacrifices and ceremonial acted as the best means to achieve union with the noetic realm.²⁶ Bregman has summed up the role of theurgy in late antiquity as follows: "Theurgy implied a real religious commitment, which included a mystical notion that Greco-Roman civilization would collapse if the old gods, cults, and mysteries were abandoned".²⁷ Thus theurgic prayer, because it was activated by sacrifice, is best seen as a variant of traditional sacrifice supplicating divine power rather than as a magical spell summoning and bending a supernatural power into servitude to human will.

Despite the centrality of sacrifice in fourth-century pagan worship, Byzantine pagans mounted no effective resistance to imperial legislation in 391-2. Although leading pagan senators rallied to the western usurper Eugenius in 392-4, the general Arbogast, a pagan and a

²⁵ Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, i.8 (ed. E. des Places, *Jamblique: les mystères d'Égypte*, Paris, 1966); for translation, see Brown, *Making of Late Antiquity*, pp. 100-1. See discussion in R. T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism* (New York, 1972), pp. 118-23; E. des Places, "La religion de Jamblique", in H. Dörrie (ed.), *De Jamblique à Proclus* (Fondation Hardt, Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique, xxi, Geneva, 1975), pp. 78-90.

²⁶ Iamblichus, *De anima*, 370-5; Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, iii.26-7; see R. De Witt, "Iamblichus as a Forerunner of Julian", in Dörrie (ed.), *Jamblique à Proclus*, pp. 45-8. For Proclus' practice of theurgy, see Marinus, *Vita Procli*, xix; cf. J. Trouillard, *L'un et l'autre selon Proclus* (Paris, 1972), pp. 171-89; H. Dörrie, "Die Religiosität des Platonismus im 4 und 5 Jahrhundert nach Christus", in Dörrie (ed.), *Jamblique à Proclus*, pp. 276-81.

²⁷ J. Bregman, *Synesius of Cyrene: Philosopher-Bishop* (Berkeley, 1982), p. 47. See discussion in A. Sheppard, "Proclus' Attitude to Theurgy", *Classical Quart.*, new ser., xxxi (1982), pp. 212-24; G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 126-50.

Frank, did not master-mind the revolt as an attempt to restore the old gods. Pagan failure to react in 392 has been regarded as marking the demise of paganism as a political and spiritual force. Pagans, because they silently endured later re-enactments of the ban on sacrifices and persecutions, are viewed as acknowledging defeat and sealing their fate.

There were several reasons for the lack of action to restore the cults on the part of the pagans of the fifth and sixth centuries. By no means the least was the inability of most pagans to comprehend a conflict of religions. Imperial success in closing a number of celebrated shrines, such as the Serapeum of Alexandria, and the victory of Theodosius under Christian standards over the Western insurgents in 394, vindicated in the eyes of many the power of the Christian God. It has generally been argued that either imperial toleration tempered the letter of the law or that paganism quickly lost its spiritual force. The first of these is at best a partial explanation, while the second, in my opinion, is at odds with much of the evidence. The failure of pagans to rise against their Christian oppressors might have been a political failure, but it need not have marked a spiritual decline.

Imperial toleration is suggested by the fact that the prohibition of sacrifices was widely disobeyed in the fifth and sixth centuries. Ancient shrines such Heliopolis (Baalbek) and Carrhae (Harran) are reported to have operated throughout the fifth and sixth centuries despite repeated imperial efforts to suppress these cults. Even in most Christian Edessa, "the blessed city", organized communities of pagans were still sacrificing to Zeus-Hadad in the last quarter of the sixth century.²⁸ Frequent re-enactments of the ban on sacrifices

²⁸ For efforts of Theodosius I to Christianize the shrine at Heliopolis, see *Chronicon Paschale* (ed. L. A. Dindorf, 2 vols., Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae [hereafter C.S.H.B.], Bonn, 1832, i, p. 561); cf. Deichmann, "Früchrichtliche Kirchen in antiken Heiligtümern", pp. 115-16, no. 6. For efforts of Justinian, see Zacharias of Mytilene, *Chronicon*, viii.4 (trans. F. J. Hamilton and E. W. Brooks, *The Syriac Chronicle known as that of Zachariah of Mytilene*, London, 1899, pp. 204-5); Pseudo-Dionysius of Tell Mahre, preserving the account of John of Ephesus, in F. Nau, "Analyse de la seconde partie inédite de l'histoire ecclésiastique de Jean d'Asie, patriarche jacobite de Constantinople (+585)", *Revue de l'orient chrétien*, ii (1897), pp. 490-1; Michael the Syrian, *Chronicon*, ix.16 (ed. J.-B. Chabot, *Le chronique de Michel le Syrien . . . 1166-1199*, 4 vols., Paris, 1899-1910, ii, p. 179). For Carrhae, see Theodoret, *Historia ecclesiastica*, iv.18; Procopius, *De bello Persico*, ii.13.7; cf. Michael the Syrian, *Chronicon*, ix.33 (ed. Chabot, ii, p. 270). For Edessa, see Michael the Syrian, *Chronicon*, x.12 (ed. Chabot, ii, p. 318); John of Ephesus, *Historia ecclesiastica*, iii.3.28 (ed. and trans. E. W. Brooks, *Historiae ecclesiasticae pars tertia*, Corpus scriptorum christ. orient. [hereafter C.S.C.O.], Script. Syr., iii. 3, Louvain, 1935-6, pp. 115-16); cf. J. B. Segal, *Edessa, "the Blessed City"* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 106-8.

indicate that the legislation fell far short of its aims. For several reasons, emperors may have chosen not to convert the religious conformity prescribed in their edicts into a social reality.

It can be argued that pagans were tolerated because of their sheer numbers. The best current estimate reckons that well over half of the population of the entire Roman world was pagan at the death of Theodosius I.²⁹ Even in the more Christianized east, communities with large pagan majorities were scattered throughout the Balkans, Anatolia, Syria and the Nile valley. The emperor Arcadius vacillated when the bishop Porphyry requested permission to dismantle the temple of Maranas at Gaza because of the numbers and wealth of her pagan population. He yielded on the intercession of his pious wife, Eudoxia. The incident is almost certainly a piece of hagiographic fiction, but it none the less has the air of the historical reality of the fifth century.³⁰

It has also been argued that Christian emperors were inclined towards toleration because they had to staff so many of the lower echelons of the central administration with men of curial origin, who included many pagans. Although the senate of the New Rome was founded as a Christian body, it included pagans throughout the late fourth century.³¹ Pagans also filled the teaching professions as grammarians, philosophers and lawyers, and when the university was opened at Constantinople in 425 there is no report of discrimination against scholars based on their pagan beliefs.³² Pagans such as the

²⁹ MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, p. 65 n. 16; cf. A. H. M. Jones, "The Social Background of the Struggle between Paganism and Christianity", in Mamigliano (ed.), *Conflict between Paganism and Christianity*, p. 26. See evidence collected in F. R. Trombley, "The Survival of Paganism in the Byzantine Empire during the Pre-Iconoclastic Period (540-727)" (Univ. of Michigan Ph.D. thesis, 1981). Contrast statistics offered by Kaegi, "Fifth-Century Twilight of Byzantine Paganism", p. 249; W. E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Decline of Rome* (Princeton, 1968), pp. 61-2 nn. 8-9.

³⁰ Marcus Diaconus, *Vita Porphyrii*, 35-50, 63-5, 69-70; cf. Jerome, *Commentarii in Isaiam*, vii.17 (Patrologiae cursus completus, ed. J.-P. Migne, ser. lat., xxiv, Paris, 1845, p. 241). For the incident as hagiography, see MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, p. 158; cf. *Vie de Porphyre, évêque de Gaza*, ed. and trans. H. Grégoire and M. Kugener (Paris, 1930), pp. vii-xli, P. Peeters, "Le vie géorgienne de saint Porphyre de Gaza", *Analecta Bollandiana*, xix (1941), pp. 78-84, 98.

³¹ G. Dagron, *Naissance d'une capitale: Constantinople et ses institutions 330 à 451* (Paris, 1974), pp. 139-40, 377-8; cf. P. Petit, "Les sénateurs de Constantinople dans l'oeuvre de Libanius", *Antiquité classique*, xxvi (1927), pp. 347-82; E. Stein, *Histoire du bas-empire*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1949), i, p. 480 n. 194. For recruitment of *curiales*, see Dagron, *Naissance d'une capitale*, pp. 64-8; cf. A. H. M. Jones, *The Greek City from Alexander to Justinian* (Oxford, 1960), pp. 197-200, 207-10; R. MacMullen, "Social Mobility and the Theodosian Code", *Jl. Roman Studies*, liv (1964), pp. 49-53.

³² *Cod. Theod.*, xiv.9.3 = *Cod. Just.*, xi.19.1 (27 Feb. 425). See P. Lemerle, *Le*
(cont. on p. 16)

grammarian Pamprepius of Panopolis, the philosopher Isocasius or the physician Asclepiodotus of Alexandria were, it seems, free to pursue distinguished careers provided they exercised discretion in offering sacrifices to the gods.

On the other hand, Christian emperors of the fifth and sixth centuries made clear their preference for Christian civil servants. After the collapse of the revolt of Eugenius in Italy, the highest posts, especially the prefecturate of Constantinople, were reserved for loyal Christians.³³ In 415 the pious empress Pulcheria legally closed the imperial administration and military commands to pagans.³⁴ Therefore, even though the imperial government might at times have had pragmatic reasons for not enforcing the ban on sacrifices, Christian emperors over the course of the fifth century steadily freed themselves of the need for pagan civil servants. Imperial law and patronage forced educated Byzantine pagans, despite their numbers and cultural contributions, to yield primacy to Christians: first in imperial government, and then in arts and letters. Ineffective enforcement of the bans on sacrifice may have assisted in the survival of paganism, but it alone hardly explains why the pagans so long persisted in sacrificing to the gods.

The long twilight of Byzantine paganism is also explained as a gradual transmutation of belief in the gods into a reverence for a cultural heritage. In the visual arts, pagan and Christian aristocrats shared so many aesthetic tastes that many mythological motifs in decorative arts of the fourth and fifth centuries are best regarded as good taste rather than expressions of religious belief.³⁵ Similarly, at least since the mid-fourth century, educated pagans and Christians had equal claim to the classical literary tradition.³⁶ When the emperor

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premier humanisme byzantin (Paris, 1971), pp. 63-4. Contrast sceptical view of P. Speck, *Die kaiserliche Universität von Konstantinopel: Präzisierungen zur Frage des höheren Schulwesens in Byzanz im 9 und 10 Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1974). See careers in A. H. M. Jones *et al.*, *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1971-80), ii, pp. 126-7, 161-2, 633-4, 825-8.

³³ R. Haehling, *Die Religionszugehörigkeit der hohen Amsträger des römischen Reiches seit Constantine I: Alleinherrschaft bis zum Ende der theodosianischen Dynastie (324-450 bzw. 455 n. Chr.)* (Bonn, 1978), pp. 611-19; Dagron, *Naissance d'une capitale*, pp. 224-74.

³⁴ *Cod. Theod.*, xvi. 10.21; cf. O. Seeck, *Regesten der Kaiser und Päpste* (Stuttgart, 1919), p. 371. See also Holum, *Theodosian Emperresses*, pp. 100, 188.

³⁵ See G. Fowden, "Between Pagans and Christians", *Jl. Roman Studies*, lxxviii (1988), pp. 180-1; cf. K. Weitzmann, "The Survival of Mythological Representations in Early Christian and Byzantine Art and their Impact on Christian Iconography", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, xiv (1960), pp. 44-69; K. Shelton, "The Esquiline Treasure", *Amer. Jl. Archaeol.*, lxxxix (1955), pp. 147-55.

³⁶ See W. Jaeger, *Early Christianity and the Greek Paideia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1939), p. 17.
(cont. on p. 17)

Julian attempted to deny Christians a proper classical training, even Ammianus Marcellinus remarked on the unreasonableness of the law.³⁷

Late pagan religious feeling has sometimes been considered as a tolerant attitude or approach to religious experience rather than the expression of deeply felt belief. Support for such a view is adduced from the reputedly tepid religious tone of the *Histories* of Ammianus Marcellinus or the letters of Symmachus at the close of the fourth century.³⁸ Once pagan sacrifices were outlawed in 391-2, Hellenic intellectuals such as Synesius of Cyrene ceased sacrificial devotions to the gods and easily accommodated their love of classical letters and aesthetics to the Christian faith.³⁹ These Neoplatonic henotheists were crossing an intellectual bridge to Christianity which Porphyry had unknowingly constructed at the end of the third century when he minimized the efficacy of sacrifice and ceremonial. Simultaneously at Rome the grandsons of the fourth-century pagan spokesmen Praetextatus and Symmachus were reconciling their *Romanitas* with Christianity. Even though some prominent aristocratic ladies rejected the classical heritage in favour of the Christian ascetic ideal, most Roman senators drifted into a respectable Christianity, leaving little trace of how they transformed themselves into Christianized aristocrats.⁴⁰

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1961), pp. 72-102; M. L. Laistner, *Christianity and Pagan Culture in the Later Roman Empire* (Ithaca, 1951), pp. 49-73; H. Marrou, *L'histoire de l'éducation dans l'antiquité*, 6th edn. (Paris, 1965), pp. 421-47; A. Cameron, "Paganism and Literature in Late Fourth-Century Rome", in M. Fuhrmann (ed.), *Christianisme et formes littéraires de l'antiquité tardive en occident* (Fondation Hardt, Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique, xxiii, Geneva, 1977), pp. 1-30. For the fifth and sixth centuries, see C. Diehl, *Justinien et la civilisation byzantine au VI^e siècle* (Paris, 1901), pp. 547-8; J. A. S. Evans, "The Attitudes of Secular Historians in the Age of Justinian towards the Christian Past", *Traditio*, xxxii (1976), pp. 753-8.

³⁷ *Cod. Theod.*, xiii.3.5 (A.D. 362); Ammianus Marcellinus, xxii.10.7, xxv.4.20. See R. Markus, "Paganism, Christianity, and the Latin Classics in the Fourth Century", in J. W. Binns (ed.), *Latin Literature of the Fourth Century* (London, 1974), pp. 3-4.

³⁸ O'Donnell, "Demise of Paganism", pp. 51-8; cf. remarks of J. F. Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and the Imperial Court, A.D. 364-425* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 1-31. Contrast views of R. L. Rike, *Apex omnium: Religion in the Res Gestae of Ammianus* (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 8-36; S. d'Elia, "Ammiano Marcellino e il cristianesimo", *Studies in Religion*, x (1962), pp. 372-90.

³⁹ Bregman, *Synesius of Cyrene*, pp. 124-54.

⁴⁰ P. Brown, "Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy", *Jl. Roman Studies*, li (1961), pp. 1-11, repr. in P. Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (London, 1972), pp. 161-82; cf. A. Yarbrough, "Christianization in the Fourth Century: The Example of Roman Women", *Church Hist.*, xlv (1976), pp. 149-65. See examples in A. Chastagnol, "Le sénateur Volusien et la conversion d'une famille de l'aristocratie romaine au bas-empire", *Revue des études anciennes*, lviii (1956), pp. 241-53; A. Chastagnol, "La famille de Caecina Lolliana, grande dame païenne du IV^e siècle après J.C.", *Latomus*, xx (1971), pp. 744-58; J. Matthews, "Continuity in a Roman Family: The Rufii Festi of Volsinii", *Historia*, xvi (1967), pp. 484-509.

Similar quiet conversions to respectable Christianity were also taking place among aristocrats in the east, especially at Constantinople, where the civic centres and ceremonial of the Greek city of Byzantium had been largely Christianized, and most pagan aristocrats were recent arrivals of curial origin dependent on the favour of the emperor.

In spite of all the cultural bridges joining pagan and Christian upper classes, for over a century and half after the laws of Theodosius I many pagans in the east still did not take the final step of conversion. For them the efficacy of sacrifice and belief in the gods was ultimately a stronger pull than cultural values shared with their Christian peers. Pagan literary life in the east during the fifth and early sixth centuries betrays little hint of a decline of belief in the gods. In his writings, the theurgic Neoplatonist Olympiodorus of Thebes stressed the efficacy of sacrifices and cult statues, despite the remote possibility of their legal restoration.⁴¹ Even after Christian emperors ended open discussion by refusing to entertain literary appeals on behalf of the sanctity of sacrifices and temples, pagan apologists such as Eunapius of Sardes and Zosimus still circulated among a pagan readership variations of the old twofold argument: when properly revered the gods had protected Rome, but neglect of the sacrificial rites had brought down divine retribution upon the community.⁴² While none of the last defenders of the old gods offered anything approaching the vision of Julian's reform of the cults, they and their readers must nevertheless have viewed the old argument as vindicated, because they interpreted the rapid deterioration of Roman power in the west as a sign of the gods' disfavour.

The survival of so many pagans in the Theodosian and Justinianic ages cannot be explained simply as the result of a grudging imperial toleration of pagan servants, a reverence for a cultural legacy by pagan aristocrats, or even the inertia of a huge conservative peasantry. Belief explains their survival: belief centred on ceremonials and sacrifices — the very forms of worship imperial laws outlawed. By the very provisions of their laws and their efforts at enforcement,

⁴¹ Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Decline of Rome*, pp. 59-145. See the views on cult statues of Olympiodorus, *Historia*, frag. 28, in *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire*, ed. and trans. R. C. Blockley, 2 vols. (Liverpool, 1981-3), ii, pp. 192-3. See also E. A. Thompson, "Olympiodorus of Thebes", *Classical Quart.*, xxxviii (1944), pp. 43-4; J. F. Matthews, "Olympiodorus of Thebes and the History of the West (A.D. 407-425)", *Jl. Roman Studies*, lx (1970), pp. 95-6.

⁴² Zosimus, ii.6-7; iv.18-23, 36-8, 59; v.5.5-6, 23.4-5. See R. T. Riley, "Zosimus the Historian", *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, lxxv (1972), pp. 284-5; contrast Julian's view, in P. Athanassiadi-Fowden, *Julian and Hellenism* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 161-91.

emperors in the fifth and sixth centuries acknowledged the stubborn piety of their pagan subjects.

Christians had long recognized how pagan sacrificial rites activated contact between the human and the spiritual in a relationship often described as *do ut des* (I do that you may do), but they differed from pagans on the nature of the supernatural power approached. Christians universally condemned such sacrifices as magic and demonology rather than as a true demonstration of religious power. An old Egyptian ascetic in the Thebaid during the fourth century recollected that "I was the son of a pagan priest. Therefore, inasmuch as I was small, I sat still and I saw my father often enter and offer sacrifices to his idol. Once without his knowledge I entered behind him, and I saw Satan and his entire army standing around him, and lo and behold one of Satan's archons advanced and adored him".⁴³

Christian emperors were just as fearful of the demonic powers animated by pagan sacrifice. The emperors Constans (337-50) and Constantius II (337-61) at first only outlawed public and nocturnal sacrifices, but their ban was extended during the fourth century to cover sacrifices for divination, thereby linking ancestral sacrifice with the darker arts of magic and astrology.⁴⁴ By his edicts of 391-2 Theodosius I gave the imperial government the legal right and administrative means to implement a policy against all forms of pagan sacrifice and all pagan shrines.

In the course of the fifth and sixth centuries, emperors took a variety of measures as part of a widespread effort to halt pagan sacrifices and thereby end paganism. Peasants were frequently compelled to submit to conversion by violence. Some rare glimpses of the process come from reports of clashes between Christian zealots and pagans in the Nile valley.⁴⁵ Monks and bishops, with the sanction of imperial law, halted sacrifices, destroyed cult statues and closed temples, but they must have often encountered strong resistance. In c. 455, when Bishop Macairus employed these tactics to convert the

⁴³ F. Nau, "Histoires des solitaires égyptiens", *Revue de l'orient chrétien*, xiii (1908), p. 275, ch. 191; see discussion in Brown, *Making of Late Antiquity*, pp. 18-24, 64-5, 67-70.

⁴⁴ See, against public sacrifices, *Cod. Theod.*, xvi.10.2 (A.D. 341), xvi.10.4 (A.D. 342), xvi.10.5 (A.D. 353), xvi.10.4 (A.D. 356); against nocturnal sacrifices, *ibid.*, xvi.4.5 (A.D. 353). Cf. Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, ii.45; Firmicus, *De errore*, xvi.4; see discussion in Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, pp. 671-2. See bans on sacrifices for divination, in *Cod. Theod.*, ix.16.9 (A.D. 371), xvi.10 (A.D. 381), xvi.12 (A.D. 385).

⁴⁵ R. Rémondon, "L'Égypte et la suprême résistance au christianisme (VIe-VIIe siècle)", *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire*, li (1952), pp. 63-78.

villagers of Tkoou, recalcitrant pagans fled into the desert with their cult statues and continued their sacrifices.⁴⁶

Justinian's efforts in Asia Minor were even more repressive. Justinian recruited the zealous Monophysite monk John of Amida, who was nurtured on the traditions of Syriac holy men long famed for their direct methods in dealing with pagan sacrifices and cult statues. As bishop of Ephesus, John claims to have halted the performance of sacrifices, razed temples, and constructed ninety-six churches and twelve monasteries in western Asia Minor. Michael the Syrian credits John "of Ephesus" with the conversion of sixty thousand souls in the single year 542, but John himself apparently claimed that his conversion of "thousands" stretched over the course of thirty-five years.⁴⁷ Such reports suggest that the process of the conversion of Asia Minor during the sixth century was a gradual and uneven one. It is significant that John claims to have converted so many pagans in rural regions thought to have been long exposed to intensive Christian evangelizing.⁴⁸

Although they were unable to mount a sustained persecution against all pagan centres, Christian emperors after 392 ever more frequently ordered the closing of celebrated shrines and oracles. Renowned temples were demolished; altars destroyed; cult statues cast down or removed from sight so as to deny pagans sacred settings for their sacrifices. Following in the tradition of Constantine, Theodosius I plundered Hellenic shrines of sculptural masterpieces more as an attempt to end sacrifices than as a means to beautify his Christian

⁴⁶ Dioscurus of Alexandria, *Panegyrique de Macaire de Thoou*, in *Monuments pour servir à l'histoire de l'Égypte chrétienne aux IV^e et V^e siècles*, ed. and trans. E. Amélineau (Paris, 1894), pp. 111-17. Cf. the tactics of Shenoute, in J. Leipoldt, *Scheneute von Atripe und die Entstehung des national-ägyptischen Christentums* (Leipzig, 1903), pp. 27-9, 93.

⁴⁷ John of Ephesus, *Historia ecclesiastica*, iii.2.44, 3.36 (ed. Brooks, pp. 80, 125-6); Michael the Syrian, *Chronicon*, ix.26, 33 (ed. Chabot, ii, pp. 207-8, 270-1). Cf. variant reports of John of Ephesus, in *Lives of Eastern Saints*, ed. and trans. E. W. Brooks, 3 pts. (*Patrologia orientalis*, xvii.1, xviii.4, xix.2, Paris, 1923-5), ii, p. 681, ch. 47; Pseudo-Dionysius of Tell Mahre, in Nau, "Analyse", p. 482. See F. R. Trombley, "Paganism in the Byzantine Empire: The Case of Rural Anatolia and Greece", *Harvard Theol. Rev.*, lxxviii (1985), pp. 330-1.

⁴⁸ Montanists are credited with the early conversion of Phrygia: see evidence in A. Strobel, *Das heilige Land der Montanisten* (Berlin, 1980); see also arguments of W. H. C. Frend, who overstates the case: W. H. C. Frend, "Winning the Country-side", *Jl. Eccles. Hist.*, xviii (1967), pp. 2-3, 9-10; W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (London, 1984), pp. 444-5. The epigraphic evidence is too slight to support Frend's argument: see E. Gibson, *The "Christians for Christians" Inscriptions of Phrygia* (Missoula, 1978), pp. 125-44; cf. Trombley, "Paganism in the Byzantine Empire", pp. 327-39.

capital.⁴⁹ Justinian implemented the same policy when he marked for destruction the temple of Isis at Philae and the oracle of Zeus Ammon at the Auglia oasis, which previously had been left undisturbed because useful barbarian allies sacrificed at each shrine. Some time between 535 and 539 Justinian ordered Narses, commander in the Thebaid, to halt sacrifices to Isis and to ship her cult statues to Constantinople, thereby removing the central symbol wherein the goddess resided. Since sacrifice animated the god resident within the cult statue, its removal eliminated all meaning from future sacrifices because the symbolic and real presence of Isis was gone. Only after this symbolic and real presence of the goddess had been removed could Justinian have expected his missionaries to convert the Blemmyes.⁵⁰ Similar measures transformed the oracular shrine of Zeus Ammon in Libya into a Christian church dedicated to Mary, mother of God.⁵¹

With tacit imperial approval Christian bishops, monks and mobs assailed famous shrines, destroying the cult statues along with the power of the resident god, and thereby demonstrating the superiority of the Christian God. In the terms of modern anthropological theory, pagan sacrifice and ceremonial lost their efficacy as soon as the divine theatre and symbols — temples and statues — were eliminated. Denied their proper, decorous setting, pagan rites could with some plausibility be condemned by Christians as magic and superstition.

Christian emperors and missionaries were by no means insensitive to how forcible conversions disoriented the newly converted, and they offered their own ceremonials in their stead. Bishops and holy men, once they took possession of the pagan shrines, effected the Christianization of the religious geography of both towns and countryside in the Roman east. As pagan sacrifices were outlawed and temples closed in the fourth and fifth centuries, the Christian hierarchy implemented widespread construction of churches around which they reoriented and Christianized civic ceremonial. Christian worship steadily gained ground among peasants as the land was filled with

⁴⁹ Dagron, *Naissance d'une capitale*, pp. 375-6; J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 2 vols. (London, 1899), i, p. 370.

⁵⁰ Procopius, *De bello Persico*, i.19; see Stein, *Histoire du bas-empire*, ii, pp. 300-1; for a date, *ibid.*, ii, p. 301 n. 1. For missionaries, see John of Ephesus, *Historia ecclesiastica*, iii.4.6 (ed. Brooks, pp. 136-8). See also W. H. C. Frend, "The Missions of the Early Church, 180-700 A.D.", *Miscellanea historiae ecclesiasticae*, iii (1970), pp. 17-18. But there may have been a reversion to paganism: see J. Maspero, *Papyrus grecque d'époque byzantine*, 3 vols. (Cairo, 1911-16), i, no. 67004.

⁵¹ Procopius, *De aedificiis*, vi.2.15-18.

the tombs and sepulchres of saints. Christian shrines, with their attendant ceremonial, played a crucial role in enriching and retaining the faith of the newly converted.⁵²

Christian emperors also regarded with more than a little apprehension intellectuals and the officials whom they suspected of secretly violating the bans on sacrifices. The Christian hierarchy, which still felt a need to refute the polemics of the pagan heirs of Celsus, likewise must have urged action. Theodosius II, out of his own religious sensibilities as well as to please the episcopate, ordered that the writings of Porphyry and other pagan critics be burned along with the heretical works of Nestorius.⁵³ If emperors of the fifth century failed to move decisively against crypto-pagans in the capital and the Neoplatonists in Athens and Alexandria, they did so in large part because these pagans could be safely ignored. Crypto-pagan bureaucrats were, after all, members of a mandarin class whose social rank and privilege depended on imperial favour. The major instance of forced conversion during the fifth century occurred after the notorious intellectuals Pamprepus and Asclepiodotus rallied pagan support in 484-8 for the rebels Leontius and Illus. The emperor Zeno (474-91) and the patriarch Peter Mongus of Alexandria seized upon reports of sacrifices on behalf of the rebels as a pretext to compel the pagan intellectuals Horapollon, Ammonius and Gesius of Petra to embrace Christianity.⁵⁴

Justinian ruthlessly applied the laws against crypto-pagans in his court and administration.⁵⁵ Even before he published his first *Codex*

⁵² A. Cameron, "Images of Authority: Elites and Icons in Late Sixth-Century Byzantium", *Past and Present*, no. 84 (Aug. 1979), pp. 15-19; Claude, *Byzantinische Stadt*, pp. 85-100; G. Dagron, "Le Christianisme dans la ville byzantine", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, xxxi (1977), pp. 11-19. Compare this process to that described in T. Ranger, "Taking Hold of the Land: Holy Places and Pilgrimage in Twentieth-Century Zimbabwe", *Past and Present*, no. 117 (Aug. 1987), pp. 156-94. For role of holy men, see P. Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity", *Jl. Roman Studies*, lxi (1971), pp. 94-5.

⁵³ *Cod. Just.*, i.1.3 (A.D. 448).

⁵⁴ See discussion, with full documentation, in Stein, *Histoire du bas-empire*, ii, pp. 23-4; E. Geffcken, *The Last Days of Greco-Roman Paganism*, trans. S. MacCormack (Amsterdam, 1967), ch. 3. For forced conversions, see discussion of sources in Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Decline of Rome*, p. 95; Kaegi, "Fifth-Century Twilight of Byzantine Paganism", pp. 253-4; cf. J. Maspero, "Horapollon et la fin de paganisme égyptien", *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire*, xi (1914), pp. 178-81; H.-D. Saffrey, "Le chrétien Jean Philopon et la survivance de l'école d'Alexandrie au VI siècle", *Revue des études grecques*, lxxvii (1954), pp. 396-410.

⁵⁵ *Cod. Just.*, i.11.9-10; see Procopius, *Anecdota*, xi; John Malalas, *Chronographia*, xviii (ed. L. A. Dindorf, C.S.H.B., Bonn, 1831, p. 449); Theophanes, *Chronographia*, i, a. 6022 (ed. C. de Boor, 2 vols., Leipzig, 1883-5, i, p. 180); *ibid.* (ed. J. Classen,

in 528-9, Justinian removed from high office all officials tainted with pagan or heretical beliefs. Performance of pagan sacrifices carried the death penalty, and the emperor further ruled that all bequests to support any pagan practices were null and void. There followed investigations of imperial officials and teachers who received state salaries. A second set of regulations, embodied in *Codex Justinianus* xi.11.10, denied pagans and heretics imperial office and the right to succeed to an estate. Individual conversions without the conversion of the family resulted in forfeiture of property and office on the grounds of insincerity. Apostasy was punishable by death. Failure to comply with these laws within three months left offenders at the mercy of the full letter of the law.

When Justinian's agents first probed into the beliefs of his high officials, they discovered that a number of prominent men had performed pagan rites. Transgressors included the former prefect, Asclepiodotus; Thomas, the emperor's quaestor; and Phocas, son of Craterus, a patrician and probably a member of the first law commission.⁵⁶ Although the ex-prefect Asclepiodotus preferred voluntary death to conversion, Procopius reports no executions, so apparently other officials converted and received pardons.

Imperial legislation did not end secret sacrifices. In 546 Justinian turned to John of Ephesus, who headed a second investigation that uncovered many unrepentant pagan senators, grammarians, lawyers and physicians. Among the denounced were many who had professed Christianity in 529, most notably Phocas, son of Craterus, who committed suicide knowing that his relapse carried the death penalty.⁵⁷ Even then Justinian had not stamped out pagan practices in his Christian capital, because Michael the Syrian reports a third investigation late in the reign, probably in 562.⁵⁸

The officials caught in Justinian's investigations might be dismissed

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2 vols., C.S.H.B., Bonn, 1838-41, i, p. 276); Georgius Cedrenus, i. (ed. I. Bekker, 2 vols., C.S.H.B., Bonn, 1838-9, i, p. 642). I have followed the chronology of Honoré, *Tribonian*, pp. 46-7, 106 nn. 551-65. See discussion in Diehl, *Justinien*, pp. 553-4; Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, ii, pp. 364-5; W. S. Thurman, "How Justinian I Sought to Handle the Problem of Religious Dissent", *Greek Orthodox Theol. Rev.*, xiii (1968), pp. 115-40.

⁵⁶ For Phocas as a member of the first legal commission, see Honoré, *Tribonian*, pp. 23, 47.

⁵⁷ Procopius, *Anecdota*, xi; Michael the Syrian, *Chronicon*, ix.24 (ed. Chabot, ii, p. 207); Pseudo-Dionysius of Tell Mahre, in Nau, "Analyse", pp. 481-2.

⁵⁸ Malalas, *Chronographia*, xviii (ed. Dindorf, p. 491); Michael the Syrian, *Chronicon*, ix.33 (ed. Chabot, ii, p. 271); for date of 562, see Stein, *Histoire du bas-empire*, ii, pp. 799-800.

as bored aristocrats dabbling in illicit black arts or indulging in the thrill of the illegal. Charges of magic were also frequently combined with accusations of pagan sacrifices as convenient pretexts to remove corrupt or suspect officials.⁵⁹ Procopius, however, notes that those caught in the first two investigations had offered up libations and sacrifices repeatedly; this detail suggests sincere belief. This inference is also supported by the actions taken in the third investigation. Five priests of the great shrines of Athens, Antioch and Heliopolis (Baalbek); who officiated over clandestine sacrifices, were arrested, and two thousand cult statues and sacred writings were consigned to the flames. Even though Justinian's pagan senators, bureaucrats and scholars did not leave any record of their beliefs, they were the direct heirs of pagan apologists of the fourth and fifth centuries. Belief in sacrifice by the individual on behalf of the community and belief in theurgic prayer best explain why members of the upper classes in Constantinople persisted in sacrificing to the gods. Sincere pagan senators, bureaucrats and scholars who offered secret sacrifice or conducted theurgic mysteries always risked denunciation by Christians as practitioners of magic and demonology. Pagans accused by Justinian's investigators thus fell prey to stock charges, just as Pamprepus, an outspoken pagan grammarian, had been charged on the grounds not only of his pagan beliefs, but also of sorcery against the emperor Zeno and empress Verina.⁶⁰

The few details reported about the most prominent figures caught in the first two investigations also suggest a deep conviction in the efficacy of sacrifice. Phocas, ambitious and politically astute, risked his life and career by practising pagan rites. From the descriptions given by John Lydus and Procopius, the prefect Phocas would seem to have been a man who, with little concern, might change faiths to preserve his office in 529.⁶¹ Yet in 546 Phocas was once again denounced for sacrificing to the gods. After two violations of the law, Phocas, with little hope of reprieve, might have committed suicide out of desperation. Perhaps the same was true for both the prefect

⁵⁹ Ammianus Marcellinus, xix. 12 (A.D. 359), xxix. 1.4-5 (A.D. 371-2); see F. Martroye, "La répression de la magie et le culte des gentils au IV^e siècle", *Revue historique de droit français et étranger*, 4th ser., ix (1930), pp. 669-701. For the use of these charges to remove prefects in the fifth century, see Dagron, *Naissance d'une capitale*, pp. 224-74.

⁶⁰ Malchus, *Historia*, frag. 23, in *Fragmentary Classicising Historians*, ed. and trans. Blockley, ii, pp. 452-3; Theophanes, *Chronographia*, i, a. 5972 (ed. de Boor, i, p. 128).

⁶¹ John Lydus, *De magistratibus*, iii.72A; Procopius, *Anecdota*, xxi.6-7.

Asclepiodotus, denounced in 528-9, and the vice-prefect Rufinus, who was denounced for officiating over nocturnal sacrifices to Zeus-Hadad of Edessa during the investigation which Tiberius II ordered of his officials at Antioch and Edessa.⁶² Asclepiodotus, Phocas and Rufinus, however, might have declared their faith in defiance of the law. They were, in a fashion, heirs to the Stoic senatorial martyrs of the first century whose deaths condemned the *princeps* turned tyrant.⁶³

Justinian, like all Christian emperors, could not but view as a challenge the erudite Neoplatonic philosophers who sacrificed to the gods even after the closure of the great Athenian shrines. Their writings and lives bore witness to the power of the old gods.⁶⁴ Comfortably distant from the throne, Proclus and his associates in the fifth century had lived in a self-contained world; they were free to meditate on the meaning of ancient rites and to compile tedious commentaries explaining the emanations of the One. As the direct heirs of the theurgic traditions of Iamblichus of Chalcis and the emperor Julian, the last Neoplatonists of Athens possessed a cogent philosophical explanation of traditional sacrifices and mysteries as vehicles for human contact with the gods.

It is uncertain precisely what actions Justinian took against the theurgic Neoplatonists; he almost certainly did not officially close the academy in Athens in 529. In c. 532, according to Agathias, the last known scholar, Damascius, along with Simplicius, Priscian and four other philosophers otherwise unattested in the sources, sought refuge at the Sassanian court to avoid compliance with the laws enforcing religious conformity.⁶⁵ Damascius and his colleagues might well have chosen voluntary exile in imitation of the philosophers of the principate whose withdrawal from public life had implicitly criticized intolerable regimes.⁶⁶ Although Shah Chosroes I secured

⁶² Theophanes, *Chronographia*, i, a. 6022 (ed. de Boor, i, p. 180; ed. Classen, i, p. 276); John of Ephesus, *Historia ecclesiastica*, iii. 3.28 (ed. Brooks, pp. 115-16); Michael the Syrian, *Chronicon*, x.12 (ed. Chabot, ii, p. 318).

⁶³ R. MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), pp. 65-7, 310 n. 23.

⁶⁴ Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, ed. and trans. E. R. Dodds, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1963), pp. xxii-xxvi; A. Cameron, "The Last Days of the Academy at Athens", *Proc. Cambridge Philological Soc.*, xv (1969), pp. 11-12, 25-8. For their role in society, cf. G. Fowden, "The Pagan Holy Man in Late Antiquity", *Jl. Hellenic Studies*, cii (1982), pp. 44, 48-51; Frantz, "Paganism to Christianity", pp. 190-4.

⁶⁵ Agathias, *Historiae*, ii.30-1; cf. Damascius, *Vita Isidori*, frag. 351 (ed. C. Zintzen, *Vitae Isidori reliquiae*, Bibliotheca graeca et latina suppletoria, Hildesheim, 1967, p. 287). See Cameron, "Last Days of the Academy", pp. 11-15, 25-9, superseding earlier opinions.

⁶⁶ Cf. Seneca, *Epistolae*, xiv.9.1: "quae quis fugit damnat". See Cameron, "Last Days of the Academy", pp. 17-18.

their return and freedom of worship for the Athenian exiles, they failed to leave any intellectual heirs.

Therefore, by legislation and harassment of pagans throughout the fifth and sixth centuries, the imperial government furthered Christianity in the eastern Roman world, but even the measures of Justinian failed to eliminate all pagans. The emperors Tiberius II (578-82) and Maurice Tiberius (582-602) each faced a dangerous revolt among pagans outraged by the termination of sacrifices at their shrines, and each conducted purges of crypto-pagans in the imperial administration.⁶⁷ In the course of the fifth and sixth centuries, Christian emperors must have grown ever more exasperated with obstinate pagans. They reissued stern laws and ordered persecutions, but many times they must have acted out of a sense of frustration and weakness. When Christian emperors failed to implement their laws against sacrifices, they were acknowledging the practical limits of their power, rather than pursuing a policy calculated to appease pagan subjects. Their actions resulted largely from the corrupt and inefficient workings of their own administration.⁶⁸

There is no evidence to support the view that the imperial government intended its ban on public and private sacrifices to be anything other than the outlawing of belief in the gods. Neither Christians nor pagans distinguished participation in rites from personal belief in the gods. Toleration in its modern sense did not exist, even if Procopius and some ecclesiastical historians such as Evagrius deplored the persecution of pagans and heretics.⁶⁹ Only in a moment of political weakness in 423 did Theodosius II consent to a law urging his Christian subjects to leave undisturbed pagans and Jews who dwelt in peace. The law, however, ignited such an uproar among the monks of Syria — Symeon Stylites atop his pillar even invoked the wrath of God — that Theodosius recovered his senses and withdrew the legislation in 425.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ For revolt at Heliopolis (A.D. 578/9), see John of Ephesus, *Historia ecclesiastica*, iii.3.27-9 (ed. Brooks, pp. 114-17); Michael the Syrian, *Chronicon*, x.12 (ed. Chabot, ii, pp. 319-21). For revolt at Carrhae, see *Anonymi auctoris chronicon ad annum Christi 1234 pertinet*, ed. and trans. J.-B. Chabot (C.S.C.O., Script. Syr., lvi, Louvain, 1953), p. 165. For measures against crypto-pagans, see John of Ephesus, *Historia ecclesiastica*, iii.3.34 (ed. Brooks, p. 124); cf. I. Rochew, "Die Heidenprozesse unter den Kaisern Tiberios II. Konstantinos und Maurikros", in H. Kúpstein and F. Winkelmann (eds.), *Studien zum 7 Jahrhundert in Byzanz* (Berlin, 1976), pp. 120-30.

⁶⁸ R. MacMullen, *Corruption and the Decline of Rome* (New Haven, 1988), pp. 171-97.

⁶⁹ Procopius, *De bello Gothico*, i.3.6; cf. *ibid.*, i.13.9-10; Procopius, *Anecdota*, xiii.7. See A. Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (Berkeley, 1985), pp. 119-20; P. Allen, *Evagrius Scholasticus, the Church Historian* (Louvain, 1981), p. 80.

⁷⁰ *Cod. Theod.*, xvi.5.60, xvi.8.27, xvi.10.23-4. See Holum, *Theodosian Emperresses*,

Based on the reports in Christian sources, it is easy to overlook the reverence paid to the gods in sacrifices, so that the last Byzantine pagans inevitably emerge as nostalgic antiquarians or, far worse, practitioners of the black arts. Their worship was, however, active; it was not just an attitude towards religion, a reverence for the classics or even just stubborn conservatism. It was premised upon the conviction that the world was filled with the divine, and that proper sacrifice brought the human into intimate communion with the divine. Sallustius, who might have been a Neoplatonist writing in the fourth century, puts it simply: "Prayers divorced from sacrifices are only words, prayers with sacrifices are animated words, the word giving power to life and life animation to the word".⁷¹

Underestimating the central role of sacrifice in late pagan worship has led to some misunderstanding of imperial policy during the fifth and sixth centuries. Imperial laws passed between the reigns of Theodosius I and Justinian outlawed all devotional acts, in private and in public, offered to the gods. This provision alone, if enforced, was sufficient to destroy worship and belief in the gods, because pagans could not properly revere and commune with the divine without sacrifices. Thus after nearly one hundred and forty years of legislation and haphazard enforcement, Justinian determined to translate the letter of the law into reality by mobilizing the full coercive and missionary resources of the Byzantine state and church to eradicate paganism. In so doing, he broke no unspoken compromise of toleration between court and the pagan aristocrats. Coercion, directed by that most orthodox of emperors, Justinian, was intended to halt sacrifices to the gods and to bring about the final conversion of pagans. Justinian was only partly successful in this mission; his successors Tiberius II and Maurice Tiberius repeated his measures. Yet, even in their final hours of defeat, pagans still venerated the gods as the protectors of the Roman order, and they defied their imperial persecutors by offering the gods their due sacrifices and libations.

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pp. 124-5. For reaction in Syria, see *Vita Symonis Stylitae*, 130-1 (ed. H. Leitzmann, *Das Leben des heiligen Symeon Stylites*, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der alichristlichen Literatur, xxxii.4, Leipzig, 1906, pp. 174-5).

⁷¹ Sallustius, *De deis et universo*, xvi; translation from Sallustius, *On the Gods and the Universe*, ed. and trans. A. D. Nock (Oxford, 1925), p. 29. On the question of the author's identity, see R. Étienne, "Flavius Sallustius et Secundus Salutius", *Revue des études anciennes*, lxx (1963), pp. 104-13; Athanassiadi-Fowden, *Julian and Hellenism*, p. 68 n. 74.