

Porphyry, An Anti-Christian Plotinian Platonist

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Abstract

Porphyry, the Phoenician polymath, having studied with Plotinus when he was thirty years old, was a well-known Hellenic philosopher, an opponent of Christianity, and was born in Tyre, in the Roman Empire. We know of his anti-Christian ideology and of his defence of traditional Roman religions, by means of a fragment of his *Adversus Christianos*. This work incurred controversy among early Christians. His *Adversus Christianos* has been served as a critique of Christianity and a defence of the worship of the traditional gods, so it is inevitable that his texts involved Biblical culture and religious Hellenism. Augustine, in his *De Civitate Dei* 10. 28, reproves Porphyry for wasting so much time in learning the theurgic arts and rites. This paper does not inquire into whether Porphyry's philosophical monistic theology is shown in Plotinus' *Enneads*, but focuses on his anti-Christian thought through the fragments that we have, particularly Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*.

Keywords: Christianity, demons, neo-Platonist, Porphyry, theurgy

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Hic est Dei cultus, haec vera religio,
haec recta pietas, haec tantum Deo debita
servitus. (Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, X. 3)

Porphyry of Tyre (c. 232-310 A.D.) was the most important anti-Christian Hellenic philosopher in the fourth century of the Roman Empire. Nowadays we know of his anti-Christian thought not only through Augustine's works, such as *De Civitate Dei* and *De Consensu Evangelistarum*, but also by means of his own fragments, albeit his *Adversus Christianos*¹, which was banned and condemned by Emperor Constantine the Great², was burnt by the emperor Theodosius II and Valentinian III in 448 C.E.³ and we can get partial understanding of his anti-Christian thought through the surviving fragments.

The importance of understanding Porphyry's philosophy is that his anti-Christian and anti-Gnostic⁴ stance can both help us to understand Augustinian theology and the crisis of the collapse of the language and literature of Greece⁵ and the traditional Roman religion⁶ that occurred in the fourth century; that is, the uprising of new ideologies was a lethal threat to Paganism or Hellenism in the end of the third century and the early fourth century, thereby his anti-Christianity or his attitude to the new movement not only highlighted the conflicts between Greek and Roman polytheism and Galilean monotheism, but also manifested the failure of the integrity of classical culture into Christianity and the anxiety of cutting off Greek paideia, from which his beliefs and faith sprang. Although he exhausted his ability to defend pagan Greek philosophy, Plato's Academy was finally closed by the emperor Justinian in 529 and his philosophical ideologies were in decline. Classical culture, which was the common property of those who spoke and used the Greek language in the Roman Empire, was permanently replaced by the new movement, and the triumph of Christianity spread across many countries and endured.

1. Porphyry in 'Vita Plotini'

Porphyry, a Neo-Platonist who is almost forgotten by the world, was the Christians' prominent and heavyweight foe. He antagonised them through his defence of Hellenic paideia, though he became a victim himself, as most of that work which challenged and rebutted Christianity has not survived. Although our Porphyrian cup does not

¹ According to Eusebius and Jerome, *Adversus Christianos* comprised fifteen books, which dealt with historical and literary problems in the Bible. Berchman, Robert M. (translated with notes, 2005), *Porphyry against the Christians*, (the Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill) p. 4.

² Anthony Meredith (1980), 'Porphyry and Julian against the Christians' in the ANKW II 23.2, p. 1126.

³ Berchman, Robert M., *Porphyry against the Christians*, p.3; cf. Ibid. Cf. Anthony Meredith (1980), 'Porphyry and Julian against the Christians' in the ANKW II 23.2, p. 1126.

⁴ Porphyry said that 'there were in his time many Christians and others, and sectarians who had abandoned the old philosophy, men of the schools of Adelphius and Aculinus, who possessed a great many treatises of Alexander the Libyan and Philocomus and Demostratus and Lydus, and produced revelations by Zoroaster and Zostrianus and Nicotheus and Allogenes and Messus and other people of the kind, deceived themselves and deceiving many, alleging that Plato had not penetrated to the depths of intelligible reality.' (16. 1-10)

⁵ A lot of educated men, such as Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea and Origen, who spoke Greek, thought that classical culture was their common property. Anthony Meredith, 'Porphyry and Julian against the Christians' in the ANKW II 23.2, p.1139.

⁶ Berchman, Robert M., *Porphyry against the Christians*, p. 11.

overflow with his surviving wisdom, we do at least have the *Sententiae*, the four books on *Abstinence* and principally, ‘Vita Plotini’ in the *Ennead* I and the ‘Vitae Sophistarum’ of Eunapius.⁷

In ‘Vita Plotini’ (4. 5-10, 4. 65) Porphyry told us that he and his friend Antonius of Rhodes left Greece to meet the fifty nine year-old Plotinus, who was writing his treatises, and Porphyry was thirty years old in the tenth year of the emperor Gallienus, so it is probable that he was born in 232 in Tyre.⁸ He studied for six years with Plotinus, who entrusted him to edit his writings, and became his closest friend. (5. 5-60, 7. 50)

Porphyry himself opposed Zoroaster and wrote much to refute his teachings. (16. 10-15)⁹ When in his sixty-eighth year, he once suffered the experience of demonic possession, while this had happened to Plotinus four times. (23. 10-15) Augustine in his *De Civitate Dei* reproves Porphyry for dumbly practising the theurgic arts and rites. (X. ix., xxvii.) The most serious mistake that Porphyry made, as Augustine revealed, was in directing others to the theurgists. (*De Civ. Dei* X. xxvii.) Because of his own theurgic practice he was never able to know Christ, claimed Augustine. (*De Civ. Dei* X. xxviii.) Also, Augustine fulminated that Porphyry’s judgements were wavering between philosophy and superstition or mystic rites. (*De Civ. Dei* X. ix.) From another point of view, the debate between Porphyry and the Christian philosophers, such as Augustine, is the polemics of pagan henotheistic spectrum¹⁰ and Christian monotheistic gamut, i.e. the disputes between pagans and Christians and between Hellenistic paideia and Christian faith.

According to Andrew Smith, Porphyry became a polymath during the time he stayed with Longinus, from whom he learnt philology and turned to promote the ascendancy of philosophy over religion and superstition when he stayed with Plotinus; however, after Plotinus passed away he again devoted himself to superstition.¹¹ It follows that the principle training of Porphyry’s anti-Christian arguments was based upon the Bible and upon literature by Longinus and philosophy by way of Plotinus.

Andrew Smith jumps to Porphyry’s defence over his ideological waywardness by pointing out that the only firm evidence we have of Porphyry ever changing his mind

⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 1125.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ According to William Enfield, Plotinus and Porphyry regarded Zoroaster as a heretic. Amelius and Porphyry have shown by many arguments that the doctrine of Zostrianus was derived from Zoroaster. It implied that prior to the uprising of Christian doctrine in the Roman Empire, the Gnostics spoke against the Grecian philosophy. So at that time the opponents of Neo-Platonists were the Gnostics and the Christians; and their tasks were to defend Platonic doctrine and to preserve the classical paideia. William Enfield (2012), *The History of Philosophy from Earliest Periods: Drawn up from Brucher’s Historia Critica Philosophiae*, p.376 (London: Printed for Thomas Tegg). Cf. Mark Edwards (2006), *Culture and Philosophy in the Age of Plotinus*, p. 147 (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd).

¹⁰ Neo-Platonists, such as Plotinus and Porphyry, hold that the One (to hen) is the supreme deity, which does not exclude the existence of other deities. Plotinus claims that the One is the Father of the nous and of the psychē in the way that the concept of ‘henotheism’ is different from that of ‘monotheism’.

¹¹ Andrew Smith (1945), *Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus – Philosophy and Religion in Neoplatonism*, (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited), p. 722. Cf. Berchman, Robert M. (2005), *Porphyry against the Christians*, pp.114-115.

comes from his own hand, in 'Vita Plotini' 18.¹² He was initially stumped by Plotinus' arguments so wrote a paper in refutation. Only with difficulty did he come to finally understand Plotinus' doctrine and published a further paper to recant. In 'Vita Plotini' 13 he says that he persisted for three days in asking Plotinus about the soul's connection with the body and when a man demanded him to put their discussions into a treatise, he was rejected by Plotinus on the grounds that he was not able to solve Porphyry's difficulties, and was therefore unable to put them into a treatise. Smith suggests that the significance of these two incidents has been overblown in the matter of Porphyry's "apparent dogmatic contradiction". Hence Andrew Smith, in contrast to Porphyry's teacher Longinus (who highlighted a mistake in Porphyry's changeability of views), ('Vita Plotini' 20. 90-95) explains Porphyry's apparent changeability of his philosophical thoughts, and contradictions with these two incidents cannot be founded. In fact, it is by these incidents that Plotinus' meticulous attitude to scholarship and vigorous desire for truth is revealed.

Furthermore, in 'Vita Plotini' 18 Porphyry tried to defend Plotinus, who was accused both of plagiarizing Numenius' views and of despising him as a peddler of drivel. He tells us that Plotinus was slow to make evident his logical coherence of his discourse causing him to be misunderstood. He himself, and along with Longinus¹³, suffered a similar experience when he engaged in philosophical inquiry with him. To expand on the example above, when he disagreed with Plotinus concerning the thesis of whether or not the object of thought existed outside the intellect, he wrote an essay to oppose him. After Amelius¹⁴ (under the demand of Plotinus) read it to him, he asked Amelius to discuss with Porphyry concerning his assertion, since Porphyry misconstrued their conversations. After he comprehended Plotinus' points of view by means of debate with Amelius, he not only renounced his previous consideration, but also believed in the authenticity of Plotinus' writings, and that he did not plagiarise. Thus, Plotinus is to be assured his place in posterity, thanks to the force of his student Porphyry's endorsement.¹⁵

He further tells us that his Greek name is Basileus, which was translated from what in his native language was Malcus (his father's name) by Amelius. His teacher Longinus

¹² Ibid., p. 722.

¹³ According to Porphyry, Longinus, being similar to him, misjudged Plotinus's philosophy and did not make clarification of his misapprehension with Plotinus. Porphyry said that Longinus misjudged Plotinus because he did not really comprehend Plotinus' 'usual manner of expressing himself'. ('Vita Plotini' 20. 5) So he never changed his mind, and from this point of view he was dissimilar to him. ('Vita Plotini' 19-20). Porphyry held that he himself was misunderstood because he imitated Plotinus's philosophical writing style, which might cause his readers to misconstrue his philosophical thoughts. ('Vita Plotini' 21. 15)

¹⁴ Amelius Gerntilianus was the best printer of the time and Plotinus's chief assistant and studied with Plotinus for eighteen years. (Vita Plotini, 1. 10, 4. 5 and footnote 2). According to Porphyry, Amelius spent a lot of time to investigate Numenius' philosophy and collected all his works and learnt most of them by heart. It might reasonably follow that Plotinus asked him to deliberate the controversy with Porphyry. (Vita Plotini, 3. 40-45) It is interesting why Plotinus did not trust in Amelius, who stayed with him longer than Porphyry, as he did in the latter. For further information about him, please refer to 'Vita Plotini', footnote 2, p. 3. Plotinus (1966), *Ennead I: Porphyry on Plotinus*, with an English translation by Armstrong (England/London: Loeb Classical Library).

¹⁵ Christoph Horn (2013), *Philosophie der Antike von den Vorsokratikern bis Augustinus*, S. 99 (Verlag C.H. Beck oHG, München).

(c. 213-272)¹⁶ continued to use his father's name, calling him Malcus. ('Vita Plotini', 17, 10) He also told us that he studied regularly the Platonists Ammonius and Origen for a very long time. ('Vita Plotini' 20.40) And here we have to be careful not to enter the realms of confusion because although we know that Porphyry was educated in, and understood, the core message of Christianity, through the works of Origen the Christian, there is some doubt as to whether this Origen is the same person as his Platonist teacher.¹⁷

2. Porphyry's animadversion upon the Christians

As is shown, Porphyry was 'a considerably influential scholar'¹⁸, especially in his contribution to Plotinus' *Enneads*. We are aware of Porphyry's importance through the impact of his book *Isagoge (Introduction)*, which has been translated into Syriac, Latin, Armenian and Arabic, and which was a students' text book in philosophy.¹⁹ So we cannot neglect his philosophical impression in the world of Arabic logic and philosophy and the development of thought in the Middle Ages.

However, as we have seen above, Porphyry's *Adversus Christianos* was burnt, so we have no unaffected and genuine sources with which to confirm the few fragments of original writings that we have. Porphyry was not the first opponent of early Christianity, he chose to follow in the footsteps of Celsus to attack Christianity with the help of the Bible and from the perspective of classical culture and philosophy.²⁰ The destiny of his persistence in upholding the traditional Greco-Roman beliefs and faiths was doomed to be all disparagement and excoriation. Augustine holds that Porphyry became such a victim because he was ashamed to acknowledge that God, our Christ, is the Principle. He said,

Our Platonist²¹, however, has not acknowledged Him as the Principle; otherwise, he would recognize Him as the purifier, for, certainly, the Principle is neither the flesh nor the human soul in Christ; it is the Word by which all things were made. (*De Civitate Dei*, X, 24)

Augustine insinuates that Porphyry did not admit that he was a sinner, that he did not know Him as the Principle of creatures nor further understood the possibility of resurrection of the tripartite of our spirit, soul and body by means of purification. On the contrary, he, being influenced by Platonic philosophy, thought that only when the soul is completely dispossessed of the body, could it enjoy perfect happiness. (*De*

¹⁶ It is said that Longinus held different philosophical views from that of Plotinus. For further knowledge of him, please refer to 'Vita Plotini', footnote 1, pp. 50-51. Ibid.

¹⁷ Cf. Mark Edwards (2015), 'One Origen or Two?', in the *Symbolae Osloenses: Norwegian Journal of Greek and Latin Studies*, Vol. 89, pp. 81-103. And Eusebius, *Church History*, 6.19.7. http://www.historytimeline.org/docs/eusebius/church_history/book_06.php; cf. Eusebius (1965), *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, translated with an introduction by G.A. Williamson p.259. (England: Penguin Books)

¹⁸ Christoph Horn (2013), *Philosophie der Antike von den Vorsokratikern bis Augustinus*, S. 99.

¹⁹ Jonathan Barnes (trans. & comm., 2003), *Clarendon Later Ancient Philosophers: Porphyry's Introduction*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), p. ix.

²⁰ Anthony Meredith (1980), 'Porphyry and Julian against the Christians' in the ANRW II 23.2, p. 1125. According to William Enfield, Celsus made use of Platonic and Stoic weapons to attack Christianity. William Enfield, *The History of Philosophy from Earliest Periods*, p.372.

²¹ Here Augustine refers the term Platonist to Porphyry, it is interesting that Augustine calls him thus, not a Christian opponent.

Civitate Dei, XXII, 26) In brief, from Augustine's point of view, Porphyry was ignorant about God or Christian paideia; and his criticism of Christianity was out of prejudice and bias, but he did not go so far as to accuse Porphyry of heresy. However, if we are to adopt Augustine's definition of the term 'religio'²², which means 'the worship of God' (cultum Dei, *De Civitate Dei*, X. 1), that is, we collect together to worship God because of our love for Him; (Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, X. 3) Porphyry stands guilty of blasphemy against the God of the Christians, for he himself practised theurgy.

Jerome also says that Porphyry's attack on the Gospel not only showed that he is ignorant but also a criminal, because he, on the one hand, essayed to demonstrate the evangelist Matthew to be guilty of falsehood²³, and that Peter was reprimanded by Paul for not going out immediately to evangelise, on the other.²⁴ Evidently, Jerome holds that Porphyry made illegitimate comment on Scripture, since what he said was not out of truth therein, but out of distortion of its pivotal spirit.

Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Praeparatio Evangelica* says that Porphyry attacked Christians and was an advocate of demons.²⁵ However, Porphyry's anti-Christian attitude is understandable. He not only confronted the perceived threat of rising Christianity, but also endeavoured to retrieve the imminent disintegration of Hellenic paideia and to rescue his practice of theurgy or of divination; that is, he understood both 'demons and sacrifice'²⁶. Thus, he regarded the Christian paideia as a subculture, which was deemed as a threat to Hellenism. So, he held that the god worshipped by Jews was the second god, and that the first god was the Good.²⁷ Furthermore, he minimized Christ and ridiculed Christians, whose God is inferior to the Jewish one,²⁸ since Christ, who was viewed only as a man not (also) as a God, was crucified by the Jews. As for the Christians who believed in Him, he thought that they only blindly worshipped Him, never knowing the truth.²⁹ Obviously, Porphyry was not only anti-Christian, but anti-Christ as well. Augustine politely and gently says that Porphyry was the 'most learned of all philosophers and the better enemy of Christianity', (*De Civitate Dei* 19.22) since he both knew and discoursed on the pivotal values of Christianity. However, Jerome, being not as polite as Augustine, describes Porphyry as a dog, barking against the Christians and Scripture.³⁰ It follows that for some Christian philosophers the name of Porphyry was explicit as the symbol of both anti-Christian thought and the Antichrist itself; Augustine and Jerome in their works use his name to refute and ridicule the attitude of anti-Christian philosophers.

²² The verb 'religio' is 'relegere', instead of 'religare' (to fasten, to tie). See Augustine *De Civitate Dei*, X. 3.

²³ Berchman, Robert M., '73 Commentarii in Danielelem, 1', pp. 157-158. Jerome is an important source for Porphyry's *Adversus Christianos*, see footnote 22, Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., '101 Commentarii in Galat 1:1', p. 169.

²⁵ Ibid., '13 Praeparatio Evangelica, 1.9.20-21' and '15 Praeparatio Evangelica, 5.1.9', pp. 136-137.

²⁶ Andre Nance (2002), 'Porphyry: The Man and His Demons', in *The McGill Journal of Classical Studies*, Vol. II: 37-57, p. 38. According to Andre, the term 'demon' is often used to distinguish 'an intermediary being' from 'evil spirit'. He further points out that Porphyry's "demons" include both intermediaries and evil spirits. Ibid., footnote 4. Andre further points out that sacrifice was beneficial to the Roman State; and Diocletian would rely on sacrifice to seek imperial stability. So during his reign Christians were persecuted. Ibid., p. 49.

²⁷ Berchman, Robert M., '2 Commentarii in Oracula Chaldaica', p. 123.

²⁸ Ibid., '4 De Philosophia ex Oraculis Haurienda', p. 125.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 126-127.

³⁰ Ibid., '97 Commentarii in Matth', p.168.

According to Epiphanius, he was described as a ‘terrible, dreadful snake of Jewish pedigree’³¹. Porphyry, opposing the rise of Christianity, was doomed to be decried as Satan. However, from another point of view, he was blameworthy, since his writings prompted the Emperor Diocletian to take action and persecute the Christians, who were deemed as the obstruction to sacrifice.³² Mark Edwards remarks that Porphyry, whether approving of Diocletian’s policy or not, was of the view that Christians and Greeks were implacably opposed, and could not co-exist under the same laws.³³ It appears that in that time Porphyry had some influence with the emperor on formulating religious laws for the empire. Thus, it was not only a battle between the values of Classical and Christian paideia, but also a political struggle between authority and faith. It follows that Porphyry’s writings in *Adversus Christianos* were inflammatory, so it was appropriately burnt. In brief, for the majority of Christians, Porphyry was both a threat and a heretic. And his role reversed from perpetrator to victim because both parties are deprived of true religious tolerance.

Conclusion

Porphyry had many adversaries, from whom we know his anti-Christ and anti-Christian thoughts. So how profound is the truth of their criticism is still a question. And if we understand Porphyry’s motive of attacking Christianity as a part of his attempted rescue of classical paideia, we will pay due reverence to his desire (Eros) for the preservation of the legacy of ancient paideia with his life.

Augustine and Porphyry, these two influential and contradictory icons in historical philosophy, devoted themselves to different paths, the former to bestow himself as the servant of Christ, and the latter to the by then hopeless defence of Greek paideia. They both contributed themselves to the pursuit of the truth in divergent directions and were responsible for their own achievements. So their philosophical roles have huge differences.

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³¹ Ibid., ‘28 Panarion Haeresium 51.8’, p. 144. In the footnote 28 Berchman says that this fragment that Epiphanius’s criticism is not derived directly from Porphyry’s *Against the Christians*.

³² Andre Nance (2002), ‘Porphyry: The Man and His Demons’, p. 49.

³³ Mark Edwards (2006), *Culture and Philosophy in the Age of Plotinus*, p. 146.

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