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Conceptions and Images:
Hellenistic Philosophical Theology and Traditional
Religion

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INTRODUCTION: PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION IN ANTIQUITY.

In 1666 the Amsterdam physician Lodewijk Meyer, a friend of Spinoza's, anonymously published a treatise entitled *Philosophia S. Scripturae Interpres*. At the time the contents of the book were truly sensational and they provoked a major uproar, not only in the Netherlands, but also abroad.¹ Of course the relation between philosophy and the revealed truths of Scripture had been on the philosophical agenda for many centuries.² Meyer's book, however, was particularly radical, in that it altogether denied any independent claims to truth on the part of revealed religion and insisted that the only way to extract truths from the intrinsic obscurities of the Old and New Testament was through philosophy. By arguing that Scripture's allegories and its stumbling approaches to truth could in the end be aligned with the truths of philosophy it effectively merged theology into philosophy.

The publication of Meyer's book, however spectacular, constitutes just one example from the long and varied history of the relation between the potentially conflicting world views of philosophy and Christian theology or religion. Also in pagan antiquity religion and philosophy offered differ-

¹ On this book, its authorship, interpretation and impact, see Israel (2001) 197-217; Verbeek (2005).

² In the seventeenth century context of the Dutch Republic roughly two different views were defended. Orthodox Calvinists like Voetius claimed full authority for the Bible, using philosophy merely as a tool to structure and clarify theology, thus giving the latter the form of a *scientia* in the Aristotelian sense, with the revealed truths of scripture as the starting points needing no further justification. Alternatively there were those (especially Cartesians) who, like the followers of Averroes in the Middle Ages, limited the authority of Scripture by arguing that philosophy and the revelations of the Bible represent two distinct domains of truth – the one conveying knowledge of the world, the other of salvation and morality – and that in the case of conflict between the truths of revelation and philosophy, the presumed clarity of philosophy should prevail over the metaphorical and often confused texts of Scripture.

ent and to some extent competing world views, and attempts to assess religion from the point of view of philosophy, or to explain its existence and origins, go back at least to the period of the Sophists. Nevertheless, there are some important differences between the ancient debate and its early modern counterpart in which Meyer participated. To Meyer, living and working within the context of Dutch protestant culture, religion was tantamount to reading and interpreting the contents of Scripture, which were at the basis of a more or less coherent theology (including more or less well-defined conceptions of creation, sin and salvation). The main body of Graeco-Roman religion, by contrast, was constituted by cult and ritual on the one hand and a rather diffuse corpus of myths on the other. The relation between the two was complex and cannot be reduced to a simple pattern³, although representations of the gods in cult often owed much to the way they had been depicted in myth or in the early poets.⁴ There was no clearly recognizable dogmatic core, and there was no central sacred text, let alone a revealed one.⁵ The fact that Graeco-Roman religion was such a broad and flexible amalgam of cult practices and myths may help to explain why we find no exact ancient counterpart to Meyer's position – i.e. no radical attempt to re-interpret *all* of the religious tradition in terms of philosophy.⁶ On the contrary, throughout the tradition of ancient philosophy we encounter a persistent tendency towards religious conservatism, in

³ Although there has been a time – one may think of Jane Harrison and the Cambridge ritualists – where many scholars believed that myth had as a rule grown out of – or that it had at least developed in close connection with – cult, it is now generally believed that this picture is too simple to cover the interrelation between these polymorphous phenomena. For a salutary sceptical approach see Kirk (1970) 1-41; an informative and comprehensive overview of the *status quaestionis* is provided by Versnel (1994) 15-88.

⁴ For an example, see below, 40

⁵ Things started to be different in Neoplatonism, where often not only the ancient *theologoi* (on which see the next note) but also such texts as the Chaldaean oracles and the texts of Plato were accorded a sacred position; however, even here the sacred texts could not boast a greater claim to truth than (Neoplatonic) philosophy itself; see Dillon (1991) on the evidence in Proclus.

⁶ A further concomitant of the practical, non-dogmatic character of Graeco-Roman religion was that there was no such thing as an institutionalized form of theology outside philosophy. From Aristotle onward the term *theologoi* was primarily used to refer to the ancient poets who had (really or supposedly) recounted the stories (i.e. myths) about the gods: Hesiod, Orpheus, Musaeus. See LSJ *s.v.*. Another thing to be noted is that there was no church or institutionalized priesthood, which means that the only institutional obstacle which philosophical theology might in principle encounter was the state, which had a vested interest in keeping traditional religion intact. Yet in practice neither the early Greek city states, nor the larger Hellenistic states, nor again the Roman empire appear to have been (or to have been able to be) very restrictive in this respect. In general people were

the sense of leaving at least large parts of the religious tradition intact while treating religion more or less as a domain *sui generis*. However, in so far as ancient philosophers claimed to be able to pronounce themselves authoritatively on the world, and particularly on the nature of the gods and came up with what we might call a philosophical theology, the question of the relation between this ‘natural’ theology and the complex edifice of the tradition was bound to arise in various ways.⁷

This question can be rephrased in terms of what has become known as ‘*theologia tripertita*’, a concept usually connected with the name of the Roman 1st century BC antiquarian M. Terentius Varro. In his *De civitate dei* Augustine provides a paraphrase of Varro’s argument, which claims that there are basically three kinds of theology (featuring to some extent different types of gods): the theology of the city, i.e. of traditional cult, the theology of myth, i.e. the traditional stories, and the theology of the philosophers:

They call the theology that is used chiefly by poets ‘mythical’. that used by philosophers ‘physical’, and that used by city-states ‘civil’ (Augustine *Civ. Dei* VI, 5).

Although Varro has become the eponymous hero of this tripartition, the idea itself was not original with him. A number of sources – some of them going back at least to early Hellenistic times – testify to the currency of this distinction, which seems to a large extent to have reflected an acknowledged division of territory between myth, cult and philosophy.⁸

In principle there are three ways in which the philosophical part of the *theologia tripertita* – i.e. ‘physical’ or philosophical theology – could position itself vis-à-vis traditional religion (i.e. ‘mythical’ and ‘civil’ theology):

- (1) by providing a rational, independent, alternative to the conceptions of the gods that can be found in myth or cult, without explicitly criticizing the tradition; or
- (2) by explicitly criticizing (aspects of) the conceptions of the gods that can be found in myth or cult; or

more or less free to philosophize about the gods as they pleased, as long as they did not altogether deny their existence or otherwise frustrate the practices of traditional religion, and as a rule new religions were integrated without too many problems. On the social and institutional context of Greek *polis* religion, see Burkert (1985) 216-275; Bremmer (1994) 1-10; Sourvinou-Inwood (2000). On the notion of intellectual freedom, see Dover (1976) 135-158.

⁷ On the use of the term ‘natural’ theology in this connection, see Algra (2004) 173, n. 1.

⁸ On the concept of the *theologia tripertita* in Varro and in the preceding tradition see Lieberg (1982).

- (3) by appropriating or re-interpreting, and thus to a greater or lesser extent taking over, the conceptions of the gods that can be found in myth or cult.

These approaches differ in virtue of the various kinds of connection they establish between philosophical theology and the tradition: no explicit connection (as in case (1)), a negative connection (case (2)), or a positive connection (case (3)). Some of the earliest Ionian philosophers appear to exemplify (1). They used the concept of the divine in a cosmological context in a way which was altogether different from the ways of myth or polis cult, yet, or at least for all we know (the evidence is scrappy), without explicitly disparaging these more traditional views.⁹ Aristotle may provide a case in point too, in so far as he seems to have believed to be able to combine his philosophical conception of god as a first unmoved mover with a positive commitment to the cult of the traditional gods.¹⁰ Xenophanes' attacks on anthropomorphic conceptions of the gods and Heraclitus' critique of various aspects of traditional cult and worship, such as the habit of praying to cult statues, exemplify approach (2). An early example of approach (3) is Heraclitus' re-interpretation of some rituals connected with the cult of Dionysus, which he appears to explain, by means of etymologization, as intimating the identity of Dionysus and Hades, i.e. presumably of life and death.¹¹ Another early example of this approach is provided by the Derveni papyrus in which some Orphic ritual practices and an Orphic poem are interpreted in a wider, physical or cosmological, context.¹² The papyrus itself probably dates from the second half of the fourth century BC, but its contents may well be older.¹³

⁹ Whether or not the earliest Greek thinkers can be said to have worked out anything we might legitimately call a philosophical theology, is a controversial point. The 'theological' aspect of early Greek thought has perhaps been over-emphasised in the past by scholars like Cornford and Jaeger. More recently, on the contrary, Broadie (1999) has argued that the label 'theology' should not be applied to the earliest Ionians at all, because they fail to thematize the notion of the divine, but only apply it to label their physical principles. However, even the latter procedure involves a new, non-traditional conception of the divine, which allows us at least to speak of an 'implicit' theology in this case.

¹⁰ On the 'unresolved tension' in Aristotle between convictions based on reason and convictions based on the tradition, see Verdenius (1960). The discussion on Aristotle's theology has been revived recently by Bodéüs (1992), who argues (unconvincingly to my mind) that Aristotle's endorsements of traditional polytheism reflect his 'true' theology.

¹¹ See fr. DK 22 B 15. On Heraclitus and religion, see Osborne (1997), and Adomenas (1999).

¹² For text, translation, commentary and an extensive study of the religious and philosophical aspects, see now Betegh (2004), esp. 349-372 on the status of the text as a 'commentary'.

The above classification of approaches may serve as a useful analytical framework, but it should as such not hide the complexities of historical reality. For one thing, as the example of Heraclitus (but also, as we shall see, that of Stoicism) shows, one and the same author could in principle combine the appropriation of some elements of traditional religion with the outright rejection of others. For another thing, the forces of the tradition were overall strong. Ancient philosophers often claimed that philosophical truth and religious tradition could and should co-exist peacefully: a philosopher – whatever his views on god or the gods may be – should respect the religious conventions of his country.¹⁴ As a result, critique of the religious tradition did not always imply *rejection* of that tradition, and a proposed philosophical alternative or re-interpretation was sometimes explicitly designed for the philosophical elite alone, with the suggestion that *hoi polloi* could be allowed to stick to the tradition.¹⁵ This overall tendency towards conservatism also means that in the practice of everyday piety the proponents of the three different approaches outlined above may often have been indistinguishable. They would have differed in what they thought, not in what they did.

So much, by way of a first introduction, for the relation between ancient philosophy and traditional religion in general. The present essay will ‘zoom in’ on the two main ‘dogmatic’ schools in the Hellenistic period: the school of Epicurus and the Stoa. In the Hellenistic period the debate on the relation between the three divisions of the *theologia tripertita* appears to have intensified. In part this may have been due to the fact that philosophers now had a larger audience – in Cicero’s days, for example, many members of the Roman elite claimed allegiance to one of the philosophical schools – and that philosophy itself was seen more and more as an all-

¹³ I do not think there is compelling evidence to support the suggestion, made by Brisson (2006), that the text of the papyrus reveals traces of Stoicism or may even derive from Stoic circles.

¹⁴ See Socrates *ap.* Xenophon *Mem.* I, 3, 1 and IV, 3, 16; [Plato] *Epin.* 985 c-d; Theophrastus fr. 584d FHS&G; Epictetus *Ench.* 31, 5. In accordance with the cult-centered nature of Graeco-Roman religion, what has been labeled ‘theoretical’ atheism (doubting or denying the existence of god or gods without further specification) seems to have been a less dangerous strategy than ‘practical’ atheism: denying the gods of the cult of the city or state. See Drachmann (1922) 5-14. For some general aspects of atheism in pagan antiquity see also Winiarczyk (1984) and (1990).

¹⁵ One may think in this connection of the two different views of the legitimacy of animal sacrifice taken in Porphyry’s *De abstinentia*: allowed for the common man, whereas the true philosopher should steer clear of performing animal sacrifices altogether; on which see Bruit Zaidman (2001) 201-210.

encompassing ‘way of life’ available to every educated citizen, rather than as an ‘arm-chair’ pastime for specialists.¹⁶ The Stoic Chrysippus seems to have warned explicitly against opting for a *bios scholastikos*, i.e. a life of quiet intellectual activity, as just an intellectual exercise or pastime.¹⁷ On such a view, practicing philosophy involved adopting a new world view and a new view of the self which inevitably at some points clashed with the implicit or explicit presuppositions of traditional religion. Epicureanism, for its part, openly advertised itself as liberating people from various fears, including religious fears, and Lucretius’ almost proverbial phrase ‘so potent was religion in persuading to evil deeds’ (*tantum religio potuit suadere malorum*, *DRN*, 101) suggests a professed tension between Epicurean philosophy and at least certain aspects of the religious tradition. Accordingly, the question of how to combine these philosophical world views with the concepts, rites and duties involved in traditional religion must have become more pressing, especially in a Roman context, where the relation between Greek philosophy and the indigenous *mos maiorum* had been a controversial issue from the start.¹⁸ At any rate, we can see that one of the recurrent issues in the polemics between Stoics and Epicureans in the first century BC, to which both Cicero’s *philosophica* and the surviving fragments of Philodemus’ works testify, is the extent to which each of these schools could be supposed to be able to make sense of, or to salvage, the tradition – socio-political or religious.¹⁹

This is one reason why it makes sense to discuss Stoic and Epicurean attitudes in one and the same context, as I have chosen to do here. We are dealing with the main parties in a lively theological debate in the Hellenistic and early Imperial period. Another reason is that both philosophies had their theories about the gods backed up by an appeal to supposedly

¹⁶ Cf. Sedley (1989); Hadot ((1993) 291-304).

¹⁷ See Chrysippus *ap.* Plutarch *SR* 1033 c-d (*SVF* III, 702).

¹⁸ On the tension between Greek philosophy and the *mos maiorum* in Rome, the tendency to subordinate the former to the latter, and the notorious expulsions of philosophers in 161 and (probably) 154 BC, see Lévy (1996) 14-15.

¹⁹ See e.g. Philodemus *Piet.* col. 10 line 8-col. 11 line 5 (ed. Henrichs (1974) 20-21), where the Stoics are accused of acknowledging only one god, if any god at all, and ‘not leaving us those gods of the form like that in which they are universally worshipped’, whereas the Epicureans themselves claim to allow ‘as many gods as the Hellenic people affirm, but also many more’. See on this passage Obbink (2002) 209-210, and my comments in Algra (2003b) 78-80. See also the remains of Philodemus’ *De Stoicis*, where one of the points being debated is which of the two schools, Stoicism or Epicureanism, manages to stay closer to conventional morality, and where Philodemus replies to attacks on Epicurean hedonism, and its allegedly scandalous and anti-social consequences, by pointing at the equally shocking quasi-cynicism of Zeno’s *Politeia*.

reliable common conceptions or preconceptions (*prolēpseis*), which provides their otherwise very different theologies with a significant common ground.²⁰

This epistemological background indeed constitutes one of the two strands that interweave in the present essay. Although Stoic and Epicurean dealings with the religious tradition were by no means always exclusively or directly connected with their theory of preconceptions, their view of what the 'natural' concept of god did or did not include, and of how it could have become perverted in the course of time, was relevant to their assessment of the positive and negative sides of the tradition. The other strand concerns the evidence of philosophical critique or interpretation of the religious tradition, i.e. of myth and cult, on the part of Stoics and Epicureans. Since Stoic and Epicurean attitudes to myth have been relatively well studied,²¹ I have chosen to focus instead on the relatively neglected subject of Stoic and Epicurean attitudes towards cult. The cult-centered nature of ancient religion did not involve a particularly strong or coherent conceptual or dogmatic core. Yet of course every cult has *some* conceptual content,²² and it is this explicit or implicit conceptual content which Stoics and Epicureans drew out and confronted with their own philosophical theology. I shall single out one subject for special scrutiny: the philosophical assessment of the use of cult statues or other sculpted, graven or painted images of the gods.²³ The basic questions addressed in this connection

²⁰ On the role of preconception as a criterion in Stoicism and Epicureanism, see Striker (1974); Asmis (1999) 276-2283; Frede (1999) 316-321.

²¹ On myths in the Epicurean tradition see e.g. Gale (1994); Gigandet (1998); on the interpretation of myth (and the ancient poets) in Stoicism, see Most (1989); Long (1992); Algra (2001).

²² For a rather extreme claim in this respect, compare Plutarch who claimed that 'nothing does more to reveal what was in the mind of the ancients than the rites of initiation and the ritual acts that are performed in religious services with symbolic intent' (fr. 157, 23-25 Sandbach). The only Stoic who explicitly makes a comparably strong claim on the conceptual content of rites and rituals is Chaeremon, on which see below, n. 113.

²³ From the point of view of archaeology and the history of religion the use of cult statues presents us with many questions: the Greek terminology for images presents problems of its own, it is not clear whether we are dealing with a unitary phenomenon, nor whether cult statues are even a category in their own right (rather than just a species of the genus of iconic and aniconic representations of the gods), and we know very little about what was done in and near temples. See Donohue (1997); for some examples of iconic versus aniconic representations, see Neutsch (1990). However, such questions need not detain us here, our only objective being to lay bare philosophical attempts to assess the merits or demerits of having, and venerating, visual representations of the gods. A survey of Greek views on the cult of images, focusing on the second century AD, in Clerc (1915).

were whether anthropomorphic images of the gods are philosophically acceptable, *qua* representations of the divine nature, and to what extent the cult of images could be part of a philosophically reformed religion.

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The Hellenistic theological debate acquired an additional dimension, as it became embedded within the more general epistemological controversies between Academic and Neo-pyrrhonian sceptics on the one hand and the dogmatic schools of Epicureans and Stoics on the other. Whereas the sceptics thought they could show that rational philosophical theology was an impossibility,²⁴ and that we should instead plump for traditional religion, simply because it was traditional or convenient, but without claiming to be able to offer any rational foundation to that choice,²⁵ Stoics as well as Epicureans offered a foundationalist epistemology which allowed them to claim certainty for at least the outlines of their theological views. Indeed what makes Stoic or Epicurean philosophical theology philosophical is precisely its rational foundation, which includes the supposedly secure and evident starting point of our natural preconception (*prolēpsis*) of god, which in principle any human being was thought to be capable of forming on the basis (directly or indirectly) of experience. According to both Stoics and Epicureans such preconceptions had a criterial function: they were a measure by which philosophical claims or theories were to be judged.

According to the Stoics the natural conception of god was formed in the minds of men, by some kind of unconscious inference, on the basis of

²⁴ In the case of the Academics (see Cicero *ND* III): because the arguments of their chosen opponents (mainly the Stoics) could be shown to be inconclusive; in the case of Neopyrrhonist scepticism (see Sextus *M* IX, 1-191): because *all* attempts to arrive at a rational defense of either the existence or the non-existence of god or gods could be shown to be inconclusive, so that a general *epochē* should result.

²⁵ See Cicero *ND* III, 6 where the Academic spokesman Cotta is made to say: 'You [i.e. the Stoic Balbus] are a philosopher, and I ought to receive from you a rational account of your religion, whereas I must believe the word of our ancestors even without any rational account (*nulla ratione reddita*)'. For the Neopyrrhonist counterpart to this position, see Sextus *M* IX, 49 'For perhaps the Sceptic, as compared with philosophers of other views, will be found in a safer position, since in conformity with his ancestral customs and the laws, he declares that the gods exist, and performs everything which contributes to their worship and veneration, but, so far as regards philosophical investigation (ὄσον ἐπὶ τῇ φιλοσόφῳ ζητήσῃ) he declines to commit himself rashly'.

their experience of the world around them and its rational structure, more particularly as a result of a feeling of awe *vis-à-vis* celestial phenomena or a feeling of gratitude for the good things in life.²⁶ This natural conception involved a god who was emphatically non-human in shape, but nevertheless rational and providential. It is perhaps not too bold to assume that the contents of the preconception of god according to the Stoics can be summarized by the brief description provided by Diogenes Laertius in his *Lives of the Philosophers* (VII, 147): ‘an immortal living being, rational, perfect and thinking in happiness, unreceptive of anything bad and provident with regard to the cosmos and the things therein’.²⁷ According to the Epicureans, on the other hand, gods could be, and had indeed been, encountered in visions, especially in dreams, which according to Epicurean epistemology must have their origin in the external world (hence cannot be explained away as mere psychological phenomena).²⁸ In their view it was on the basis of such visions that people had developed the natural conception of god as anthropomorphic and blessed, and hence as unbothered by any concerns for mankind or for the world.

However, both Stoics and Epicureans claimed this was not the whole story. On the Stoic line of thought our preconception provides only the basic characteristics of god and is in need of further, philosophical, articu-

²⁶ On the aetiology of man’s conception of god or gods, see Cleanthes *ap.* Cicero *ND* II, 13-15 (= *SVF*I, 528); Aetius I, 6 (= *SVF* II, 1009); and Dio Chrysostomus *Or.* XII, discussed below, 39ff. See also Algra (2003a) 158 on Persaeus’ re-interpretation of Prodicus’ suggestion that the men of old considered as gods those who had discovered what was useful and beneficial.

²⁷ Diog. Laert. VII, 147: Θεὸν δ’ εἶναι ζῶιον ἀθάνατον, λογικόν, τέλειον καὶ νοερὸν ἐν εὐδαιμονίᾳ, κακοῦ πάντος ἀνεπίδεκτον, προνοητικὸν κόσμου τε καὶ τῶν ἐν κόσμῳ.

²⁸ The reconstruction of the details of Epicurean theology, especially in so far as the ontological status of the Epicurean gods is concerned (numerically identical or not, real or just thought constructs), is controversial. I certainly do not believe the Epicurean gods should be conceived of as mere ‘thought constructs’ (it would be odd for Epicurus to refer to such a view by the words θεοὶ μὲν γὰρ εἰσιν· ἐναργῆς γὰρ αὐτῶν ἔστιν ἡ γνῶσις, *Ep. Men.* 123; and it would be hard to see how, on such a view, the *prolēpsis* of god could secure its own criterial status), but I cannot discuss the matter in any detail within the context of this essay. For reviews of the various positions that have been defended, see Lemke (1973); Mansfeld (1993); Babut (2005). Note that such texts as I shall be discussing here, which stress the importance of entertaining the right thoughts about the gods, cannot be used to prove that the gods are *mere* thought constructs.

lation.²⁹ It does not tell us, for example, where precisely this god is to be found, how exactly his rationality works or how his providence relates to the world. Moreover in the course of one's lifetime – and indeed in the course of the history of mankind – the right preconception is in danger of becoming blurred or partly blotted out by the intrusion of mistaken beliefs. This is why we need philosophical theology with its various proofs concerning the existence and nature of the gods – proofs which confirm, strengthen and further articulate our original preconception.³⁰ For example, the Stoic versions of what we call the 'argument from design' may be seen as attempts to lay out explicitly the kind of implicit argument that is supposed to have been constitutive of our preconception.

The Epicureans as well believed that our original and natural preconceptions were capable of being spoiled or even obliterated by external influences, such as irrational fears or wrongheaded opinions. As an example Lucretius mentions the people of old who, faced with all kinds of natural phenomena they did not understand, wrongly ascribed these phenomena to the gods.³¹ As this example indicates, such corruptions of the preconception of god were thought to have taken place already at the very earliest stages of human civilization, so that it made little sense, according to the Epicureans, to look for pristine wisdom in ancient texts. Indeed they by and large rejected the whole corpus of Greek mythology.³² On the other hand, the Epicureans were like the Stoics in believing that it was up to philosophy to strengthen and work out our basic preconception of god. Thus the Epicurean spokesman in Cicero's *De natura deorum* (*ND*) claims that the preconceptions themselves are sufficient to ground a pious religion,

²⁹ Stoicism speaks of the philosophical articulation of original concepts (διάρθρωσις τῶν ἐννοιῶν). The catalogue of Chrysippus' ethical writings contains a special section devoted to the articulation of ethical concepts (Diog. Laert. vii, 199-200), including not only books on definition, logical division, genera and species etc., but also on etymology, proverbs and the interpretation of poetry. On the underlying view of the relation between poetry, myth, etymology and proverbs on the one hand and philosophical method on the other, see Tieleman (1996) 229-233 and 264-273.

³⁰ On the Stoic 'proofs' in relation to preconception, see Schofield (1980) 305.

³¹ See Lucretius *DRN* v, 1161-1225, which first describes the origins of preconceptions, and then the origins of subsequent distortions. See Epicurus *Ep. Men.* 124 on such wrong-headed, but often popular, conceptions of the gods being not προλήψεις but ὑπολήψεις ψευδεῖς.

³² It is true that Lucretius uses, and recycles, some myths or traditional views of the gods and the underworld, but he invariably endows them with a new meaning, and never assumes that they teach us anything about the nature of the gods. To that extent he may be said to 'de-theologize' myth.

but that ‘the mind strives to strengthen this belief by trying to discover the form of god, the mode of his activity, and the operation of his intelligence’ (*ND*_I, 45).

These observations may allow us to clear away a potential misunderstanding. The foundationalist epistemology behind both Stoic and Epicurean theology can be – and has indeed often been – contrasted with the approach of Plato and the Platonic tradition. Plato’s Socrates had claimed, in the *Phaedrus* (246 c-d), that a divine attribute like immortality is something we basically just make up (πλάττομεν) and ascribe to the gods without any sound reasoning (οὐδ’ ἐξ ἑνὸς λόγου λελογισμένου) – the idea behind this being that no sound and solid knowledge of god is possible for humans.³³ This quasi-scepticism *in theologicis* was taken up by later so-called Middle Platonists, who often claimed that the nature of god was inaccessible.³⁴ Yet the contrast should not be over-emphasized, and the claim that ‘Stoics and Epicureans argue with confidence about the nature of god (or the gods)’ is in need of qualification.³⁵ The confidence of both schools merely concerns the main characteristics of god or gods. The further job of articulating these basic features into a full-blown philosophical theology was believed to be a hard one: the Stoics conceived of theology as a kind of initiation in the mysteries, to be put at the end of the philosophical curriculum, and on the Epicurean side Philodemus *explicitly* acknowledges the limitations of Epicurean theology, arguing that no-one has as yet been able to offer absolute certainty about the nature of the gods.³⁶ Neither the Stoics nor, for that matter, the Epicureans seem to have believed that complete knowledge of the divine nature had in fact been, or could easily be, achieved. Both Stoic (early as well as later) and Epicurean theology thus combine what one might call epistemological optimism on the one hand and epistemological modesty on the other.³⁷

On the basis of their criterial preconceptions, both Stoics and Epicure-

³³ Compare Plato’s famous claim, *Tim.* 28c, that ‘to discover the maker and father of this universe were a task indeed; and having discovered him, to declare him unto all men were a thing impossible’.

³⁴ See Runia (2002).

³⁵ The claim is to be found in Runia (2002) 283.

³⁶ Philodemus *Piet.* col. 23 Obbink. For the Stoic conception of the theology as ‘initiation’, see Plutarch *SR* 1035 A-B (on Chrysippus); Epiphanius *Adv. Her.* III, 2, 9 (*SVF* I, 538, on Cleanthes); Etym. Magn. s.v. τελετή (*SVF* II, 1008).

³⁷ Note that, in the case of Stoicism, this means that expressions of quasi-scepticism or epistemological modesty in such later Stoics as Seneca need not automatically be ascribed, as has often been done, to the influence of Platonism.

ans claimed they could offer a philosophical theology as being in some way an alternative to traditional religion (approach (1) outlined in the previous section), criticize those aspects of traditional religion that were supposedly at odds with the relevant preconception (approach (2)), and show at the same time that this tradition contained elements of truth which could be philosophically elaborated or interpreted (approach (3)), in which case, *pace* the Sceptics, a connection could be made between tradition and philosophical truth, with the latter being used to give a new meaning to, or even to clarify the inherent meaning of, the former.

EPICUREANISM AND TRADITIONAL CULT

Let us first have a look at some instances of adaptation and critique of traditional cult in the Epicurean tradition. Here our most important sources are the papyrus fragments – some of which quote Epicurus himself – of Philodemus’ *On Piety* (Greek title: Περὶ εὐσεβείας; Latin: *De pietate*, abbrev. *Piet.*) written in the first century BC. What appears to have been the first part of this work contained an exposition and defense of the Epicurean position. The second part was devoted to an extensive critical survey of the wrongheaded ideas of earlier poets and philosophers, winding up with a critique of Stoic theology.³⁸ The first part of the *On Piety* is to a large extent apologetic in character, defending Epicurus against polemical attacks launched primarily by the Stoics. Philodemus first refutes the allegation that Epicurus effectively denied the existence of the gods in so far as he failed to name them among the first principles and failed to show how they can really be eternal, and denies that Epicurus propounded his theology for reasons of social convenience.³⁹ He goes on to offer examples of Epicurus or other Epicureans themselves engaging in cult practices or advocating such behaviour in their writings, thus apparently countering the

³⁸ For the fragments from the first part I have used the edition of Obbink (1996); for the fragments presenting the Epicurean critique of the Stoic position we still have to rely on the edition of Henrichs (1974).

³⁹ If that had been the case, Philodemus argues, Epicurus would not have attacked atheists like Diagoras, Prodicus, Critias. Weaknesses in his account of the gods, on the other hand, should not lead to the charge of atheism either: in that case everyone could be labeled an atheist, for no one has conclusively proved the gods’ existence or established the nature of their being (col. 23). For a summary of the argument, see Obbink (1996) 279–283. On philosophical elaborations (or proofs) as opposed to preconceptions, see above, 14–15.

additional charge that being an adherent of Epicurean theology would be incompatible with adopting a positive attitude towards traditional cult.

Let us first consider the important passage in which Philodemus suggests that Epicurus took this position not just for reasons of social convenience:

Furthermore, it will appear that Epicurus loyally observed all the forms of worship and enjoined upon his friends to observe them, not only on account of the laws, but for natural reasons (διὰ φυσικὰς [αἰτίας]) as well. For in his *On Lives* he says that to pray is appropriate for us, not because the gods would be hostile if we did not pray, but in order that, thanks to the understanding of beings surpassing in power and excellence, we may recognize both our fulfilments and social conformity with the laws.⁴⁰

By ‘natural reasons’ (i.e. if the supplement αἰτίας is correct) Philodemus is probably referring to reasons that have to do with (what is salutary to) human nature, as opposed to merely conventional reasons (i.e. the laws).⁴¹ The rest of the quotation makes clear what these ‘natural’ considerations are: the relevant forms of traditional worship would allow the Epicurean not only to comply with conventions but also to contemplate the paradigmatic excellence of the gods as conceived by his philosophy.⁴² Other fragments from the first part of the *On Piety* allow us to flesh out the Epicurean position and to put the contents of this first fragment in perspective. Let me single out some striking features.

First of all, what the Epicurean philosopher or sage is asked to do seems

⁴⁰ Philodemus *Piet.* col. 26, 730-750 Obbink: [ὁ δ'] Ἐπίκουρος φανή[σεται] καὶ τετηρηκῶς [ἄπαν]τα καὶ τοῖς φί[λοις τ]ηρεῖν παρεγ[γυηκ]ῶς, οὐ μόνον [διὰ τ]οὺς νόμους ἀλλὰ διὰ φυσικὰς [αἰτίας] προσεὔχεσθαι γὰρ ἐν τῷ Περὶ [βιῶν] οἰκεῖον εἶναι [ἡμεῖ]ν φησιν, οὐχ ὡς [δυσ]μενῶν τῶν [θεῶν] εἰ μὴ ποιη[σομεν], ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὴν ἐπίνοιαν τῶν [ὑπερβ]αλλουσῶν [δυνά]μει καὶ σπου[δαιότ]ητι φύσεων [ἵνα τάς τε τελί]ε[ό]τητας] γιγνώσκω[μεν καὶ] τοῖς νόμοις [συμπερ]ιφοράς. Text and translation (with some slight modifications) as in Obbink (1996) 156-157. Note that the text of the end of this quotation has been heavily restored – Obbink here takes over some conjectures made by Diels – and is basically uncertain. However, that the first part of the quotation makes the distinction between convention (*nomos*) and nature (*phusis*, which in this case appears to include psychological factors) is certain.

⁴¹ See Philodemus *De Musica* (PHerc. 1497), col. 4: τὰ δὲ τοσαῦτα λεγέσθω καὶ νῦν ὅτι τὸ δαιμόνιον μὲν οὐ προσδεῖ[τ]αί τινος τιμῆς, ἡμῖν δὲ φυσικόν ἐστιν αὐτὸ τιμᾶν, μάλιστα μὲ[ν] ὅσαις ὑπολήψεσιν, ἔπειτα δὲ καὶ τοῖς κατὰ τὸ πάτριον παραδεδομένοις [ἐ]κᾶσται τῶν {μουσικῶν} κατὰ μέρος, μουσική δ' οὐ[κ] ἐ[ν]τέ[τ]ακται. Text according to the edition of J. Kemke, Philodemus: *De musica librorum quae exstant*, Leipzig 1884, although Kemke did not print the deleted {μουσικῶν}.

⁴² See also the Epicurean text of POxy. 215, Col. 1, 16-23 in the edition of Obbink (1992) on the contemplation of the beauty and excellence of the gods.

to be ‘going through the motions’ of traditional cult, while ‘holding the right opinions’ – i.e. while thinking thoughts different from those of ordinary worshippers.⁴³ In col. 31 Philodemus quotes what is probably Epicurus himself as saying:

Let us sacrifice to the gods devoutly and fittingly on the proper days, and let us fittingly perform all the acts of worship in accordance with the laws, in no way disturbing ourselves⁴⁴ with opinions in matters concerning the most excellent and august of beings.

As Obbink observes in his commentary *ad loc.*, the construction translated here as ‘in no way disturbing’ (μ[η]θῆ[ν] ... διαταράσσοντε[ς]) should be read as conveying prohibitive or conditional force, so that we might also translate ‘as long as we do not disturb ourselves with opinions etc.’.⁴⁵

The same idea (the importance of entertaining the right thoughts while worshipping the gods) appears to be present in an Epicurean text on a papyrus from Oxyrhynchus (POxy 215) which dates from the late second century BC. The text itself may of course be older and may even stem from Epicurus himself.⁴⁶ Having advocated participation in cult, the papyrus text adds: ‘but only make sure that you do not bring in fear of the gods, nor the supposition that in doing all this you are procuring their favour’.⁴⁷ We may compare Lucretius, who claims that unless you have the right conception of the gods, you will be unable to visit their shrines ‘with a calm heart’.⁴⁸

⁴³ One may compare the position of the Jesuits criticized by Pascal in his fourth Lettre provinciale: apparently they condoned their followers worshipping pagan idols in China, as long as they held a crucifix under their garment and made sure to direct their prayers to it.

⁴⁴ On the reading of α[ὐ]τοὺς (reflexive pronoun) first proposed by Usener and taken over by Diels, see Obbink (1996) 438-439. The alternative reading α[ὐ]τοὺς (personal pronoun) would naturally involve taking ‘the gods’ (mentioned six lines earlier) as antecedent. In that case the idea would have to be that we should not disturb our *conception* of the gods (since the gods themselves cannot be disturbed), which would in all relevant respects be equivalent *ad sententiam* to the first reading.

⁴⁵ See Obbink (1996) 437.

⁴⁶ On the question of the authorship of this text, see the introduction of Obbink (1992).

⁴⁷ In the version printed by Obbink (1992) 172-174: δέος δὲ μὴ πρόσα[γε] ἐνταῦθα μῆδ’ ὑπόληψιν χαριτωνίας θεοῖς, ὅτι ταῦτα πράττεις. I suspect an alternative translation for ὑπόληψιν χαριτωνίας θεοῖς might be: ‘the supposition that you are doing the gods a favour’.

⁴⁸ Lucretius *DRN* VI, 75: ‘nec delubra deum placido cum pectore adibis’.

Secondly, the compliance with traditional forms of which Philodemus speaks not only includes participation in religious festivals (col. 62), sacrifices (col. 31), prayer (col. 26), and the veneration of statues (col. 32),⁴⁹ but also using oaths, traditional expressions such as ‘if the gods are friendly’, and various terms traditionally referring to the relation between the gods and us (‘affinity’, ‘alienation’, cols. 37-39; ‘benefits’ and ‘harm’, cols. 40-41 and 81). In the latter case it is clear that the Epicurean is supposed to invest these terms with a new meaning: ‘the person who sees also that the good and ill that come from god (τὰς ἐξ αὐτοῦ παρασκε[υὰς] τῶν ἀ[γα]θῶν κα[ὶ] τῶ[ν κακ]ῶν) come without any unhealthy anger or benevolence, declares that god has no need of human things’ (col. 40, lines 1141-1150 Obbink).⁵⁰ Philodemus even adds that other philosophers offer similar re-interpretations: ‘for virtually none of the philosophers who have said that the gods do good and harm represented that good and harm as similar to base conceptions’ (col. 42, line 1180-1182 Obbink). We may presume that comparable re-interpretations were, or at least could be, proposed for such other elements of the religious tradition as Philodemus discusses.⁵¹

This brings me to a third point. It appears that the words ‘all the forms of worship’ in the above quotation are something of an overstatement, for elsewhere in this work Philodemus claims that every person must observe the laws and the customs ‘as long as they do not command any element of impiety’ (col. 48 Obbink); in view of the evidence discussed thus far it

⁴⁹ In this case, however, the state in which the text has been preserved makes restoration and reconstruction hazardous. Thus, on the reconstruction of col. 32, lines 910-911 in Obbink (1996) 169, the text claims that ‘statues of the gods he says he reveres’, whereas the reconstruction of the column by Diels (rendered by Obbink (1996) 443-444), reconstructs the same lines as meaning ‘yet he thinks it is ridiculous to revere the fraud of the statues of the gods’. Obbink’s reconstruction, according to which Philodemus is here condoning an element of traditional cult, rather than criticizing it, seems to be more in line with the general gist of this part of the *On Piety*.

⁵⁰ Obbink’s own translation ‘sent us by god’ for ἐξ αὐτοῦ is perhaps slightly unfortunate in so far as it may be taken to presuppose an intentional act on the part of (the) god(s).

⁵¹ For example: in column 33 Philodemus quotes two instances of Epicurus using the traditional expression θεῶν ἴλεων ὄντων (‘if the gods are friendly’) in his letters. Unfortunately the text does not indicate how exactly, or why exactly, Epicurus thought this could be done. It is conceivable that he just thought that such standard expressions had lost their literal and original meaning. It is also possible that he believed the phrase at issue made sense even when taken at face value, provided one took the genitive absolute not in the conditional sense (‘if the gods are friendly’), but as an assertion (‘since the gods are friendly’). Of course the friendliness of the gods does not manifest itself in special favours, but merely in their harmless and genial exemplary nature. Note in this connection that Diogenes of Oenoanda claims that images of the gods should be ἰλαρά (see below, 21), using a term which is more or less synonymous to ἴλαος (or ἴλεως).

seems appropriate to conclude that this must mean: as long as they can in fact be interpreted in a way which preserves Epicurean philosophical piety, i.e. entertaining the right conception of the gods.

Finally, all this might lead us to think that Epicureanism merely offers its followers a way of coping with all kinds of traditional practices which they have to accept for external, social, reasons anyway, but which are themselves without merit. However, the relation between Epicurean philosophy and traditional religion appears to be rather more complex. In at least one case we are told that traditional religion has something to offer to philosophy as well. In col. 27 of *On Piety* Philodemus explicitly claims that religious festivals actually *help* the Epicurean believer in strengthening his conception of the gods:

it is particularly at festivals that he, progressing to an understanding of it, through having its name the whole time on his lips, embraces with conviction more seriously ... (*words missing*)' (col. 27, line 761-770 Obbink).

Apparently hymns, repetitious incantations and the like could serve as an aid to the kind of contemplation of the gods which Epicureans advocated.⁵²

In addition to such elements of cult as prayer, sacrifice, festivals and mysteries Philodemus also mentions statues of the gods. Unfortunately, what he has to say about them remains obscure due to the fragmentary state of the relevant column of the papyrus (col. 32).⁵³ We do, however, have an interesting fragment from the philosophical inscription of Diogenes of Oenoanda which deals with this subject (*NF* 115 = fr. 19 Smith). It was only discovered in 1981, but part of its contents can be connected with fr. 17 Smith, which had been known since the 1897 edition of Heberdey and Kalinka.

Of the first column of fr. 19 Smith only the last words of each line have been preserved, so that the rest had to be supplied by Smith and others. It is clear, however, that it deals with representations of the gods which are wrongheaded: the gods are represented (apparently by the $\delta\eta\mu\iota\upsilon\rho\gamma\omicron\iota$

⁵² On the phenomenon of meditation in the Epicurean tradition, see Erler (1997). A slightly more mundane, but true-blue Epicurean rationale for participating in religious ceremonies and festivals in general is provided by POxy 215, col. II,1-6 in the edition of Obbink (1992) 172: such activities provide pleasure.

⁵³ See note 51 above. It is therefore a bit odd that Clay (2000) 84 claims that 'this passage is crucial to a fuller understanding of what Diogenes (sc. of Oenoanda, in the fragment we are about to examine, KA) has to say about cult statues of the gods'. Actually it is Diogenes who offers the more explicit information.

mentioned in 1. 10), as lame (χωλούς, line 6) or as shooting arrows ([β]άλλει, line 12) or wielding a bow (τόξον, line 13). The well-preserved second column then goes on as follows:

like Heracles in Homer; others are attended by a body-guard of wild beasts; yet others are angry with the prosperous, like Nemesis according to popular opinion; whereas we ought to make statues of the gods genial (ίλαρά) and smiling, so that we may smile back at them rather than be afraid of them (fr. 19, II Smith).⁵⁴

As noted, this fragment may be connected with the first legible lines (II. 8-13) of the third column of fr. 17 Smith, which read:

in [a chariot], making Triptolemus mount one and providing him with the most wretched toils (πό[νους]) (fr. 17, III, 9-13 Smith)⁵⁵

As Diskin Clay has shown, Diogenes must here be referring to Triptolemos, represented as mounted on a chariot, on his way to disseminate the art of cultivating grain.⁵⁶ In fr. 19 Smith, on the other hand, we are dealing with Heracles tending a bow (as he is represented in Homer's *Odyssey* 11, 601-614), gods like Cybele (attended by wild animals), and Nemesis (displaying her wrath towards those who have been fortunate). Here, in other words, we are dealing with gods being represented as fearful. In the case of Triptolemus it is rather his supposed toiling which appears to be anathema to Diogenes. In all cases, however, we are confronted with representations of the gods that do not match the preconception of god as a being that is perfectly happy, free of toil, and as such not to be feared. I think, therefore, that Clay's final diagnosis, viz. that 'Diogenes is following the polemical aim of Xenophanes of Colophon, who criticized the Homeric gods and said, notoriously, that if brute beasts were able to paint, they would depict their gods in their own image and likeness', rather misses the point.⁵⁷ We are not dealing with a general criticism of anthropomorphism – after all, the Epicureans themselves subscribed to the belief that the gods look like men – but with a critique of the attribution to the gods of certain characteristics (their performing tasks, carrying tools, being dreadful or punishing humans) that do not fit our criterial preconception of what it is to be a god.

⁵⁴ Translation from Smith (1992) 376

⁵⁵ Text and translation according to Smith (1992), i.e. following Smith's reconstruction ἐν ὀ[χίματι] in line 8 and πό[νους] in line 13.

⁵⁶ Clay (2000) 82.

⁵⁷ Clay (2000) 82.

Here, then, we appear to be faced with the effects of the injunction, reported by Philodemus, to accept only what does not lead to impiety, i.e. what can be interpreted along the lines of Epicurean rational theology. Apparently, Diogenes believed that these wrongheaded attributes in poetical or visual representations of the gods were beyond rationalizing and could no longer be interpreted away.⁵⁸ Of course we may recall that Epicurus himself had implied that there was a considerable rift between Epicurean philosophical theology and mainstream traditional religion. After all, his *Letter to Menoeceus* claims that impiety consists in ‘attributing to the gods what the many think of them’ (*Ep. Men.* 123).

The interesting alternative which Diogenes advocates consists in the fashioning of statues that do in fact match the preconception of god as blessed and undisturbed, by showing the gods as ‘genial and smiling’. What is more, he suggests that such statues will have a salutary influence on human piety. In a way he is thus taking up a motif we also found in Philodemus: also according to Philodemus certain aspects of cult may foster the piety of an Epicurean. But Diogenes is going one step further in suggesting that the proper kind of cult statues will not merely help us to maintain the right conception of the gods, but also to react in the proper way by trying to emulate them. For they will induce us to ‘smile back at them’ – not of course in the trivial sense of ‘interacting’ with them, but in the sense of imitating their main characteristic: unperturbed happiness. Such statues, in other words, will induce a specific, and very direct, instance of what in general Epicurean theology is supposed to effect in us. In the words of Philodemus:

[...] those who believe our oracles about the gods will first wish to imitate their blessedness in so far as mortals can, so that, since it was seen to come from doing no harm to anyone, they will endeavour most of all to make themselves harmless to everyone as far as is within their power (col. 71, LL. 2041-2060 Obbink; transl. Obbink).

⁵⁸ At first sight Diogenes’ rejection of the traditional representation of Cybele may seem to be at odds with the way in which Lucretius deals with the cult of Cybele in *DRN* II, 600-660. After all Lucretius does in fact allow using Cybele for poetical purposes as a symbol of mother earth, just as one may use Ceres for corn and Bacchus for the vine. However, he also makes it quite clear that such allegorizations tell us nothing about the nature of any of the gods. In other words, the relevant elements of the traditions do in fact allow of *some* kind of interpretation in terms of an underlying meaning. But it is a physical, not a theological interpretation: the stories or rites at issue should not be taken as offering what is in any way a proper representation of a god. Cf. Lucretius’ re-interpretations of some of the myths about the underworld in *DRN* V, 392-415 and, I would add, his use of Venus in the poem to book I.

It may be hazardous to draw conclusions on the basis of the fragmentary evidence that is available. Yet, the surviving texts do suggest that, despite its overall tendency towards conservatism, the Epicurean attitude towards cult was mixed. To be sure, a follower of Epicurus was required to accept those aspects that could be made to fit the Epicurean preconception of god. In such cases, apparently, cult was even thought to be able to help philosophy. Central to the discussion of Epicurean piety in Philodemus is the idea of ‘right thinking’ about the gods.⁵⁹ It is the correct conception (*epinoia*), or preconception (*prolēpsis*) of god that determines how the Epicurean should re-interpret the various elements of cult.⁶⁰ Those aspects, however, that cannot be re-interpreted so as to make them square with the correct conception should be rejected. We saw that this general attitude was exemplified by the texts dealing with cult statues as well. Nothing indicates that Epicureans balked at anthropomorphic images, as indeed they were hardly likely to, given their own conception of the gods. Apparently an adequate visual representation of a god was in principle thought to be possible, and even useful for psychagogical purposes. But Diogenes of Oenoanda objects against such representations that are at odds with the central element of what Epicureans believed was our natural preconception of god: his happiness, being a form of *ataraxia* or unperturbedness. This means that statues showing the gods with paraphernalia indicating activity, or depicting the gods in a particularly menacing way are to be rejected.

STOIC CONSERVATISM AND ITS LIMITATIONS

I shall now move on to the Stoics.⁶¹ How did they assess the merits and demerits of traditional religion given their philosophical views about god and gods? In an article basically devoted to the Cynics M.-O. Goulet-Cazé

⁵⁹ See Obbink (1996) 84, who designates this as one of the main themes of the treatise, next to the theme of (social and psychological) ‘harm’.

⁶⁰ The *πρόληψις* of god is invoked in col. 45; the right *ἐπίνοια* of god is referred to in general terms in cols. 28 and 32, and introduced more specifically in connection with (the Epicurean assessment of) prayer (col. 26) and festivals (cols. 27 and 36).

⁶¹ My general policy in referring to fragments of the early Stoics has been to refer directly to the sources, and to add the fragment numbers of Von Arnim’s *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* (*SVF*) only in those cases where these sources are relatively inaccessible.

has characterized the early Stoic attitude, as exemplified by Chrysippus,⁶² as ‘extremely conservative’, thus opposing it to the straightforward rejection of traditional religion by at least some Cynics.⁶³ And it is true that some sources suggest that at least in some contexts some Stoics were prepared to talk about philosophy and traditional religion as two separate realms, with the implication that the former could leave the latter completely intact. As an example we may adduce Epictetus’ *Handbook* (*Encheiridion*), which having laid out the essence of true, philosophical, piety – consisting in having the right opinions about god and gods and submitting oneself to everything that happens – continues as follows:

But it is always appropriate to make libations, and sacrifices, and to give of the firstfruits after the manner of our fathers (κατὰ τὰ πατέρα), and to do all this with purity, and not in a slovenly or careless fashion, nor, indeed, in a niggardly way, nor yet beyond our means (*Ench* 31, 5).

As we shall see, also Seneca in some contexts claims that the elements of philosophical truth on the one hand and the tradition on the other (i.e. what he calls *res* and *mos*) should co-exist. We may compare the Stoic Balbus in Cicero’s *De natura deorum*, who claims that ‘it is our duty to revere and worship these gods under the names which custom has bestowed upon them’ (*ND* II, 71). This is an attitude familiar from other ancient philosophers: overall, as I noted in my introduction, the religious tradition was strong and influential, and few people were prepared to question its value openly or explicitly. Yet the nature and extent of this Stoic conservatism should, I think, be further specified. The following observations may help to draw in some finer shades.

First of all, the evidence on which Goulet-Cazé bases her claims does not straightforwardly vindicate Chrysippus’ (or in general the early Stoics’) acceptance of traditional religion in its traditional appearance. She adduces some fragments which claim that the sage will be a true priest, truly pious etc. These statements, however, are specimina of a larger group

⁶² Cf. Goulet-Cazé (1996) 67. Strictly speaking, the texts on which she bases her claim – the common Stoic accounts of Stoic ethics in Stobaeus, probably derived from Arius Didymus (*SVF* III, 604) and Diogenes Laertius (*SVF* III, 608) – contain no name-label and hence cannot securely be ascribed specifically to Chrysippus, although their contents may in fact well go back to him.

⁶³ Perhaps Antisthenes fr. A 181 Giannantoni comes close to formulating what we might call the mainstream Cynic attitude: ‘god is not known through an image, is not seen with the eyes, resembles nothing’; and ‘according to tradition there are many gods, but according to nature there is only one’.

of so-called *paradoxa* about the Stoic sage – *only* the sage is *truly* free, truly king etc. – which claim that in virtue of his perfect rationality the sage is the only one who can in the strict sense lay claim to these labels. Accordingly, what the remark about the sage as priest suggests is not that the sage will in the relevant respects perform the actions of ordinary priests, but that, being the only one who is capable of true piety (piety being defined as ‘knowledge of how to worship the gods’, ἐπιστήμη θεῶν θεραπείας),⁶⁴ he alone will be able to act as a *true* priest, i.e. presumably by performing prayers and rites with the proper rational attitude. In other words, these fragments rather suggest a specific way in which traditional religion may be interpreted and cultivated by the sage, or even by the Stoic philosopher in general, which means that they are indicative of what one might call a two-tier theory (implying a different attitude on the part of ordinary people on the one hand, and of the philosophical elite on the other) of the kind we find in some later philosophers like Porphyry, not of an unqualified conservatism.⁶⁵

Secondly, although Epictetus’ suggestion of a peaceful *Nebeneinander* of philosophical theology and conventional religion may have worked for all practical purposes in most circumstances, we should not think that the Stoics altogether refrained from linking the two domains at a theoretical level. In fact we find examples of both philosophical appropriation and of philosophical critique of elements of the traditions of myth, popular belief and cult.

In principle Stoic philosophical appropriation of elements of the tradition could be accounted for by reference to the very same epistemological basis which supported Stoic philosophical theology. After all, the preconception of god was thought to be natural, acquired on the basis of ordinary experience, and thus in principle available to anyone, including those who had been responsible for constructing the religious tradition. Pre-philosophical rationality appears to have been conceived of as having such preconceptions as its material, and this applies both to the human individual and to mankind as a whole. True, one would certainly like to have more explicit information on how exactly the theory of preconceptions connects with the Stoic practice of appropriating certain elements from the tradi-

⁶⁴ For the definition see e.g. Sextus *MIX*, 123 (*SVF* II, 1017); see also the texts printed as *SVF* III, 264; 273; and 604.

⁶⁵ Compare the two different views of the legitimacy of animal sacrifice taken in Porphyry’s *De abstinentia*: allowed for the common man, whereas the true philosopher should steer clear of performing animal sacrifices altogether; on which see Bruit Zaidman (2001) 201–210

tion. But there is no reason to doubt that there actually was a connection, and that this connection was at least part of the *rationale* behind the Stoic preoccupation with (wholly or partially correct) views of primitive man as embedded in myth and early poetry.⁶⁶ The truth inherent in these views could be brought out by means of what is usually called the allegorical interpretation of myths and through etymologizations of divine names.⁶⁷ This explains the many early Stoic attempts – continued on a larger and more systematic scale in Cornutus, who presents himself as explaining what he calls a ‘pristine theology’ (*palaia theologia*) – to salvage aspects of cosmological or theological myth, as found in Hesiod in particular.⁶⁸

An intriguing question which arises in this connection is exactly what kind of knowledge or insight the Stoics assumed had existed among the

⁶⁶ Explicit, i.e. non-circumstantial, evidence for the connection between preconceptions and (aspects) of traditional belief: Cicero *ND* II, 5: ‘quod nisi cognitum comprehensumque animis haberemus, non tam stabilis opinio permaneret nec confirmaretur diuturnitate temporis nec una cum saeculis aetatibusque hominum inueterari posset [...] opinionis enim commenta delet dies, naturae iudicia confirmat’; see also Dio Chrysostomus *Or.* XII, 39-48 on the *emphutos ennoia* on the one hand, and myth, religious customs and laws and visual images on the other as its three (intrinsically vaguer) ‘interpreters’, on which see further below, 39ff; and Strabo’s claim (x, 3, 23) that πᾶς δὲ ὁ περὶ θεῶν λόγος ἀρχαίας ἐξετάζει δόξας καὶ μύθους, αἰνιττομένων τῶν παλαιῶν ἃς εἶχον ἐννοίας φυσικᾶς (as so much in Strabo a Stoicizing passage, but with no explicit reference to the Stoics). See also Frede (1989) 2088-2089.

⁶⁷ As Long (1992) has argued, this does not imply that the Stoics thought of early poetry as being self-consciously allegorical. They rather thought of myth, the subject of much early poetry, as being by its own nature a primitive expression of truths that could be phrased in a more articulate way by philosophy. Allegorical interpretation thus turns out to be not so much a matter of laying bare the hidden meaning intended by the poet, but a translation of the inevitably rude, plastic and inarticulate language of early mankind into the more sophisticated language of philosophy. I here largely follow this view, because I believe it is accurate for the early Stoics at least. Yet the overall picture appears to be less neat. In criticizing Chrysippus’ etymologizations Seneca (whose critical attitude in this respect seems to be unique among Stoics) seems to presuppose that it was the poet (Hesiod, in this case) who was thought to have imposed the relevant names. And Chaeremon (test. 12 in Van der Horst(1984)), on whom see below, n. 113, claims that allegories and myths were devised by the early Egyptian priests to reveal their wisdom to the uninitiated. In both cases the implication is that the use of etymologically significant names or allegory is a device that has been consciously applied. For some further theorizing about what may and may not count as allegory, see now Goulet (2005).

⁶⁸ Zeno’s interpretations of Hesiod were probably provided in the context of his physical or cosmological treatise *On the Whole*, on which see Algra (2001); Philodemus and Cicero provide evidence of a similar procedure being adopted in Chrysippus’ theological *On Gods* (see below, n. 79). But of course in Stoicism the line between physics *stricto sensu* and theology (the latter being part of physics *sensu lato*) is hard to draw.

people of old. The Stoic *Kulturentstehungslehre*, the details of which are controversial, seems to have included the idea of some kind of original moral and intellectual corruption, subsequently to be remedied by philosophy. But a corruption of what? A summary of Posidonius' view in Seneca's 90th *Letters* speaks of a second phase, after an initial Golden Age, when vice crept in (*subrepentibus vitiis*), implying that there was no vice in the original condition (*Ep.* 90, 6). In his *Against the Mathematicians* (*M*) Sextus Empiricus speaks of 'some of the later Stoics' (he may be referring to Posidonius' view) who declared that the first men (the γηγενεῖς) greatly surpassed the men of today in comprehension (συνέσει) and that the keenness of their intelligence (ὀξύτης τῆς διανοίας) served as some kind of sixth sense by means of which they easily perceived the divine (*M* ix, 27-28). Should this be taken to imply that the earliest people were comparable to Stoic sages, with full and perfect rationality? On closer view even Posidonius does not appear to have assumed that the earliest phase was one in which the *logos* was present in its purest form and completely.⁶⁹ At any rate, he seems to have reserved the term 'wise' exclusively for the first inventors and lawgivers, not for early people in general.⁷⁰ Seneca objects even to this: the inventions of the mechanical arts should not be ascribed to philosophy, and in general the period when men were 'fresh from the gods' (*recentes a diis*, *Ep.* 90, 44) was not a period of sages. Instead he claims that the first humans, even if they may have been without vice, displayed what were merely approximations of virtue, and hence of philosophy in the true sense (*omnibus his virtutibus habebat similia quaedam rudis vita*, *Ep.* 90, 46). None of these sources, in other words, implies the existence of complete knowledge or philosophical wisdom among early mankind. The idea rather seems to have been that the natural preconceptions of the people of old, though in themselves correct and as yet uncorrupted, were still waiting, so to speak, to be further articulated and inserted into the larger and coherent framework of (Stoic) philosophy.⁷¹ Accordingly, we should not expect the Stoics to claim that what underlied myth or early cult practices

⁶⁹ *Contra Most* (1989) 2020.

⁷⁰ Frede (1989) suggests that Posidonius introduced a more loose, non-technical, sense of 'philosophy' to describe the kind of wisdom that was to be found in the early period of human history, and that it is thanks to this changed concept of philosophy that Chaeremon could argue in the first century AD that early Egyptian priests had been philosophers.

⁷¹ On the Stoic notion of a philosophical articulation of original concepts (διάρθρωσις τῶν ἐννοιῶν), see above, n. 29.

was a *complete* wisdom, or a *complete* philosophy-plus-theology on the part of the people of old.⁷²

Also the practice of criticizing the tradition could to some extent be linked with the theory of preconceptions. The mere fact that preconceptions were thought to be natural did not in itself imply that they were also thought to be fully and universally shared. Like the Epicureans, the Stoics seem to have believed that the natural conception of god could be, and had indeed been, contaminated with strange and wrongheaded extras that could be found even in the very same early poets who also transmitted some correct mythical conceptions.⁷³ This means that there were also parts of the tradition which had to be repudiated, because they reflected not so much a pristine unadulterated rationality, but the influence of external irrational and corrupting factors.⁷⁴ Cicero's Stoic spokesman in the *De natura deorum* vividly describes this process:

Do you see [...] how from a true and valuable philosophy of nature has been evolved this imaginary and fanciful pantheon? The perversion has been a fruitful source of false beliefs, crazy errors and superstitions hardly above the level of old wives' tales. We know what the gods look like and how old they are, their dress and their equipment, and also their genealogies, marriages and relationships and all about them is distorted into the likeness of human frailty (*ND* II, 70).

⁷² Boys-Stones (2001) appears to me to be rather unclear about the question whether or not the Stoics claimed (as I think they did not) that the people of old had a complete philosophy at their disposal.

⁷³ On such early forms of corruption in Hesiod, see Cornutus *Epidr.* 31, 12-17: ἀλλὰ τῆς μὲν Ἡσιόδου τελειότερα ποτ' ἂν ἐξήγησις σοι γένοιτο, τὰ μὲν τινα, ὡς οἶμαι, παρὰ τῶν ἀρχαιότερων αὐτοῦ παρεληφότος, τὰ δὲ μυθικώτερον ἀφ' αὐτοῦ προσθέντος, ᾧ τρόπῳ καὶ πλεῖστα τῆς παλαιᾶς θεολογίας διεφθάρη. Of course the kind of corruption the Stoics had in mind need not be complete. Thus the second century BC Stoic Antipater of Tarsus claimed (*ap. Plutarch SR* 1052b) that philosophers who divest the gods of beneficence are in *partial* (ἀπὸ μέρους) conflict with our preconception of them

⁷⁴ At first sight we might think that this idea of corruption does not sit comfortably with the Stoic commitment to general providence. However, we should bear in mind, first, that according to the Stoics providence concerns the gift of reason as such, not the use we make of it; secondly, that reason, when not yet stabilized in the form of the knowledge (*epistēmē*) of the sage, is fickle and easily led astray. In the pre-rational stages of our life we are all the more prone to forming wrongheaded value-judgements based on pleasure and pain (or fear) which may disturb the natural process of *oikeiōsis*. For a discussion of such sources of corruption in the treatment of young children, see Vegetti (1983).

Apparently one of the problems with such mistaken beliefs is that once they had been formed, they were likely to keep misleading people, in so far as they had become ‘canonized’ in the traditions of myth and cult. At *ND* II, 45 Balbus points out that the fact that people distort their original preconception of god is largely due to their daily experience of the culture that surrounds them. It is the ‘habituation of the eyes’ (*consuetudo oculorum*) that tends to mislead them. As A.S. Pease notes in his extensive commentary (*ad loc.*), ‘the *consuetudo oculorum* is, naturally, the daily sight of anthropomorphic images of the gods’.

All in all, it appears that mainstream Stoicism was committed to an interesting combination of primitivism (the ‘natural’ world view of the people of old inevitably got corrupted), and progressivism (the subsequent development of philosophy can remedy this, and show us what can and cannot be salvaged). Accordingly, with regard to religion there was no desire either to defend or to reject the tradition as such or *in toto*.⁷⁵ The Stoic Balbus in Cicero’s *De natura deorum* in this connection explicitly advocates differentiating between superstition and religion (*ND* II, 69-72), and in general the desire, on the Stoics’ part, to merge traditional polytheism and philosophical monotheism seems to have had its limits.⁷⁶ The evidence suggests that the Stoics were selective in what they adopted. For example, and as I have shown elsewhere, Zeno’s interpretations of Hesiod focused primarily if not exclusively on the cosmogonical myths in the first part of the *Theogony*.⁷⁷

In this connection it is worth pointing out that the term used by our sources to indicate the interpretative procedure applied by the Stoics was ‘appropriation’,⁷⁸ which suggests that they used and adopted some elements of myth to support their philosophy – especially their cosmo-theology – rather than the other way round. The starting point, in other words, was their own physico-theology, not the tradition as such or in its entirety.

⁷⁵ That the Stoics’ were not merely prepared to accept (parts of) the tradition, but actively tried to defend it, has been suggested by Zeller, whose views are discussed and rejected by Most (1989) 2020.

⁷⁶ *Contra* Brisson (2004) 54, who speaks of the ‘acceptance of the existence of all traditional divinities and the allegorical interpretation of their nature’

⁷⁷ See Algra (2001).

⁷⁸ Philodemus *Piet.* φηερσ. 1428, col. vi, 16-26 (text in Henrichs (1974) 17) uses the term συνοικειούν to refer to Chrysippus’ practice in the second book of his *On the Gods*; Cicero *ND* I, 41 (probably going back to the same source) uses *accommodare* in the same connection: ‘in secundo [scil. libro] autem volt Orphei Musaei Hesiodi Homerique fabellas accommodare ad ea quae ipse primo libro de deis immortalibus dixerat’.

This, however, raises a further question: Why did the Stoics use the evidence from the tradition at all in cases where they could defend their position by proper philosophical arguments as well? The outlines of an answer have been provided by Teun Tieleman in his study of Chrysippus' use of traditional material (poetry, proverbs etc.) in the argument of his *On the Soul*.⁷⁹ There is evidence to suggest that at least Chrysippus allowed the use of what are merely persuasive arguments (πιθανά) on both sides in dialectical discussions; and the catalogue of Chrysippus' writings, partly preserved in Diogenes Laertius, contains a title 'Persuasive Arguments for our Dogmata' (πιθανὰ λήμματα εἰς τὰ δόγματα, Diog. Laert. vii, 199) which indicates that the merely persuasive was in fact used to underpin Stoic philosophy. The underlying idea seems to have been that the true cognitions (*katalêpsis*) of the non-sage (unlike true knowledge or *epistêmê*) are still capable of being overturned, and should accordingly be further strengthened not just by straightforwardly 'apodeictic' philosophical arguments (which, moreover, may not always be available), but also by adducing what is merely 'persuasive' (πιθανόν), though not clinching, evidence. This evidence includes those traditional notions embedded in myth which – though in themselves relatively vague and inarticulate and in need of interpretation – are based on the right preconceptions and as such point in the same direction as Stoic philosophy.

STOICS ON CULT

Now that we have qualified the nature and extent of Stoic conservatism, we may turn to the Stoic practice of critique and appropriation of cult and cult practices. As we did in the case of the Epicureans, we shall focus on one aspect of cult in particular: the representation of the gods in the form of statues and other images. Here as well we encounter a combination of critique and adaptation. Let us first turn to the critique, and start with the founder of the school, Zeno of Citium. His *Politeia* describes a utopian 'city of sages'. In this city, we are told by various sources, there should be no temples for the gods. One of our sources, Clement of Alexandria's *Stromateis*, renders Zeno's own reasons:

There will be no need at all to build sanctuaries. For a sanctuary that is not worth much at all should not be regarded as sacred. But the work of craftsmen

⁷⁹ See Tieleman (1996) 264-287.

and mechanics is not worth much and not sacred (Clement *Strom.* v, 12, 76; *SVF*₁, 264).

In his *De Stoicorum repugnantibus* Plutarch interprets Zeno's words as meaning that no temples should exist at all, and characteristically constructs a contradiction between this part of Stoic teaching and Stoic practice:

The Stoics, while applauding this [i.e. Zeno's words] as correct, attend the mysteries in temples, go up to the Acropolis, do reverence to statues, and place wreaths upon the shrines, though these are works of builders and mechanics. Yet they think that the Epicureans are confuted by the fact that they sacrifice to the gods, whereas they are themselves worse confuted by sacrificing at altars and temples which they hold should not exist and should not be built (Plutarch *SR* 1034 B-C; transl. Cherniss, slightly modified).

We may note that, strictly speaking, Zeno's words imply no such thing. There is no need to take them as a straightforward and general prohibition: Zeno is merely claiming that building sanctuaries is superfluous in a city of sages – presumably: given the other means available to these people to honour the gods. We may perhaps connect this text with the repeated claim of such later Stoics as Seneca and Epictetus that the only proper way to honour the gods is by our own spiritual attitude, i.e. by imitating them through becoming virtuous.⁸⁰ Even so, Zeno's words are perfectly compatible with a view that condones traditional cult in everyday life.

Another instance of a critical attitude towards certain elements of cult can be found in two Stoic fragments preserved in Philodemus' *On Piety*. In the first one Philodemus quotes Chrysippus' *On Gods*. In the course of an argument purporting to show how various gods from the Greek pantheon are in reality aspects of the one cosmic Zeus, Chrysippus makes two significant remarks. First, he points out that the gods, just like cities or virtues, are neither male nor female, but that they have only been given male or female names.⁸¹ He then goes on to claim that it is childish (παιδαριωδῶς) to speak of the gods, or to paint or sculpt them as if they were human in

⁸⁰ Cf. Epictetus *Ench.* 31, 1: 'in piety towards the gods [...] the chief element is this, to have the right opinions about them [...] and to have set yourself to obey them and to submit to everything that happens'. Seneca claims that we do not honour the gods by bloody offerings, but by our right and virtuous intention (*Benef*₁, 6, 3). God seeks no servants, and the proper cult of god is to know him, and to imitate him (*Ep.* 95, 47 and 95, 50).

⁸¹ Philodemus *Piet.* col. v, 8-14 Henrichs.

form, just as it is childish to do so in the case of cities, rivers, or places.⁸² Similar remarks are made by Chrysippus' pupil Diogenes of Babylon, in a passage also quoted by Philodemus in the same context.⁸³

Nevertheless it looks as if Chrysippus did not offer this critique in an unqualified form, as something that should lead to an absolute prohibition of making anthropomorphic cult images. Several sources inform us of his mentioning a picture – variously located at Argos or in Samos – in which Hera and Zeus were depicted as involved in a sexual act; and one of these sources, Origenes *Cels.* iv, 48 (*SVF* II, 1074) claims that according to Chrysippus this picture should be interpreted as a representation of how the divine *spermatikoi logoi* fertilize matter, i.e. as an interpretation of what was traditionally known as the 'holy marriage' (*hieros gamos*) between Zeus and Hera.⁸⁴ Apparently in some contexts even anthropomorphic depictions of the gods, however inadequate and 'childish' they may otherwise have been, could be seen as conveying some relevant conceptual information on the gods and their nature.⁸⁵

Seneca appears to have been more elaborate and explicit in his dealings with traditional cult than any other Stoic we know. In the sixth book of the *De civitate dei* Augustine quotes from his lost treatise *De superstitione*.⁸⁶ In this work Seneca – apparently partly influenced by Varro (on whom more below) – attacked representations of the gods ('images of the cheapest inert material'),⁸⁷ which in many cases would be regarded as monsters,

⁸² Philodemus *Piet.* col. v, 28-35 Henrichs (*SVF* II 1076): κα[ι] πα[ι]δαριωδῶς λέγεσ[θαι] [κ]α[ι] γράφε[σ]θαι κα[ι] πλάτ[τε]σθαι [θε]οὺς ἀνθρω[ποειδεῖς], ὃν τρόπον καὶ π[ό]λεις καὶ ποταμοὺς καὶ τόπους κτλ.

⁸³ Philodemus *Piet.* col. vii, 24-28 Henrichs (*SVF* II, Diog. Bab. 33): [καὶ] παιδα[ρι]ῶδες εἶν[αι] θεοὺς ἀ[ν]θρωποει[σ]τεῖς λ[έ]γειν καὶ ἀδύνατον.

⁸⁴ The evidence is printed as *SVF* II, 1071-1074. It is not unlikely, by the way, that the original picture of Zeus and Hera was based on the story as told in *Iliad* xiv, 153-353. On the influence of Homer's depiction of the *hieros gamos*, and on artistic representations of the scene in the Heraion of Samos and elsewhere, see Burkert (1985) 132.

⁸⁵ There is some additional evidence to show that for this particular purpose gods could be described as male or female, according to their supposed active or passive role: Servius *In Aen.* iv, 638 (*SVF* II, 1070) claims this as the Stoic position and adds as an example a Virgilian (and meteorological: what now descends is rain) version of the *hieros gamos* in *Georg.* II, 326 ('coniugis in gremium laetae descendit'); see also Cicero *ND* II 66 (*SVF* II, 1075): 'effeminarunt autem eum [scil. aera] Iunonique tribuerunt, quod nihil est eo mollius'.

⁸⁶ Augustine, *Civ. Dei* vi, 10: 'nam in eo libro quem contra superstitiones condidit multo copiosius atque vehementius reprehendit ipse civilam istam et urbanam theologian quam Varro theatricam atque fabulosam'.

⁸⁷ Augustinus *Civ. Dei* vi, 10: 'sacros immortales in materia vilissima atque immobili dedicant'.

should they be suddenly brought to life. In addition, he chastised the ritual practices connected with the veneration of Jupiter in the very Capitol in Rome:

One servant informs Jupiter of the names of his worshippers, another announces the hours; one is his bather, another his anointer, that is, he gestures with empty hands to imitate the act of anointing. There are women who are hairdressers for Juno and Minerva; while standing far away from the temple as well as from the image they move the fingers as if they were dressing the hair, and there are others who hold a mirror. There are men who summon the gods to give bonds for them, and some who offer them lawyers' briefs and explain their case. An expert leading actor in the mimes, now a decrepit old man, used to act a mime each day in the Capitol – as if the gods would enjoy the performance of a player when men had ceased to do so. Every kind of artisan is there to devote his time to the immortal gods (Seneca *ap.* Augustine *Civ. Dei* vi, 10).

If Seneca is here critical of an overly anthropomorphic conception of god and of the childish rituals to which it gives rise, he does not believe that the Stoic should straightforwardly advocate their abolishment.⁸⁸ Although the sage should not regard such rites as part of his personal worship, he should 'go through the motions of feigned conformity' (*in animi religione non habeat, sed in actibus fingat*):

For he says: 'the wise man will observe all these rites as being enjoined by the laws, not as being pleasing to the gods' (Seneca *ap.* Augustine *Civ. Dei* vi, 10).⁸⁹

With regard to what Augustine, possibly quoting Seneca himself, calls 'this obscure throng of gods, assembled through long years by ancient superstition' Seneca claims that 'we shall invoke them, but with the reservation in mind that their worship belongs rather to custom than to truth' (*adorabimus ut meminerimus cultum eius magis ad morem quam ad rem pertinere*). The position taken here by Seneca – with its distinction between *religio animi* and *actus*, and between *mos* and *res*, implying a rigid separation between the various elements of the *theologia tripertita* – calls for some further comment. The notion of a *religio animi* reminds us of what Seneca's 41th *Letter* has to say about true, i.e. philosophical, religion:

⁸⁸ On the dressing, feeding, bathing etc. of cult images in the earlier Greek tradition, see bald Romano (1988).

⁸⁹ Augustine *Civ. Dei* vi, 10: 'quae omnia sapiens servabit tamquam legibus iussa, non tamquam deis grata'.

It is foolish to pray for this (i.e. a *bona mens*), if you can acquire it from yourself. We do not need to lift our hands up towards heaven, or beg the keeper of a temple to let us approach the ear of the idol [...] God is near you, he is with you, he is within you (*Ep.* 41, 1)

In this respect also his 95th *Letter* offers some quotable jewels: ‘god is worshipped by those who know him’ (*deum colit qui novit, Ep.* 95, 47); ‘god seeks no servants’ (*non quaerit ministros deus, ibid.*); ‘whoever imitates the gods, worships them sufficiently’ (*satis illos coluit, quisquis imitatus est, Ep.* 95, 50). In the passages quoted above, Seneca seems to entertain the idea that this properly Stoic religion can be combined with a general adherence to the religious customs of the state. These passages, in other words, represent a blend of philosophical elitism (in stressing the importance of the *religio animi*), criticism (in putting *res* above *mos*) and general conservatism (in nevertheless leaving room for *mos*). It is to be noted, however, that elsewhere, most notably in the 95th *Letter* from which we just quoted, we find Seneca taking a decidedly more negative position towards the tradition:

Precepts are commonly given as to how the gods should be worshipped. But let us forbid lamps to be lighted on the Sabbath, since the gods do not need light, neither do men take pleasure in soot. Let us forbid men to offer morning salutation and to throng the doors of temples; mortal ambitions are attracted by such ceremonies, but God is worshipped by those who truly know Him. Let us forbid bringing towels and flesh-scrapers to Jupiter, and proffering mirrors to Juno; for God seeks no servants. Of course not; he himself does service to mankind, everywhere and to all he is at hand to help (*Ep.* 95, 47).

Seneca’s position, we may conclude, does not appear to be fully consistent. As is more often the case in his writings, different contexts may have given rise to different emphases.⁹⁰ *Letter* 95, which focuses on the difference between *praecepta* and *decreta*, offers religious precepts as an example of *praecepta* that may lead us astray and that are incompatible with the true *decreta* of Stoic philosophy. Its perspective is predominantly philosophical and moral and hence it takes the stricter view. On the other hand, the treatise *De superstitione* apparently had to discuss the question of how in practice one should deal with the ingrained superstitions of traditional cult,

⁹⁰ On different views, on Seneca’s part, taken in different contexts on the question of afterlife and immortality of the soul, see Hoven (1971) 108-126; on different views on the feasibility of prayer, see Richards (1964).

and in such a context a more conciliatory position may have been called for. Anyway, Seneca does appear to remain within the boundaries set by the earlier Stoic philosophical tradition: like Zeno and Chrysippus he is predominantly critical of traditional cult, including the use of cult statues, but, as in their case critique does not necessarily imply radical rejection.

In his *De superstitione* Seneca was indebted to Varro's *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*, published shortly before 45 BC.⁹¹ Our source Augustine tells us, moreover, that Seneca was more critical of the *urbana theologia* than Varro had been,⁹² which is understandable, given the fact that Varro wrote as an antiquarian, professedly aiming to strengthen traditional religion, whereas Seneca wrote as a philosopher for whom protecting or reviving the religious tradition was not a goal in itself. Varro was, of course, not a Stoic himself: he appears to have been a follower of Antiochus of Ascalon. Yet the fragments show that his theology was at least indebted to Stoicism, no doubt via Antiochus. This, as well as his influence on Seneca, warrants his inclusion in this brief overview.

Varro claimed, we are told, that if he were to found the city anew, he would 'consecrate the gods and give them names according to the principles of nature, rather than as they are now'.⁹³ In other words, and in the terms of his own tripartite theology, he would replace the religion of the city by the religion of the philosophers, for 'the only ones who have discovered what god really is are those who have adopted the view that he is the soul which governs the world by a movement that accords with reason' – surely a Stoic-sounding claim.⁹⁴ Yet, since he is living in an old country, 'he says that he must keep the traditional account of the names and surnames, and that the object of his writing and research is to persuade the people to worship rather than disregard these'. He thus adds the conservative slant we are familiar with by now, while in passing revealing his own agenda, i.e.

⁹¹ That Varro's work was available in 45 is clear from Cicero (*Acad. Post.* 8 ff.). The work was dedicated to Caesar as pontifex maximus; on its probable date of publication, see further Cardauns (1978) 86. The fragments of the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* have been collected in Cardauns (1976).

⁹² Augustine *Civ. Dei* vi, 10: 'Libertas sane quae huic (sc. Varroni) defuit, ne istam urbanam theologiam theatrae simillimam aperte sicut illam reprehendere auderet, Annaeus Senecae [...] non quidem ex toto verum ex aliqua parte non defuit'.

⁹³ Varro ap. Augustine *Civ. Dei* iv, 3 (= fr. 12 Cardauns): '[...] si eam civitatem novam constitueret, ex naturae potius formula deos nominaque eorum se fuisse dedicaturum'.

⁹⁴ Varro ap. Augustine *Civ. Dei* iv, 31 (= fr. 13 Cardauns): 'hi soli ei videantur animadvertisse quid esset deus qui crediderint eum esse animam motu ac ratione mundum gubernantem'.

his ambition to strengthen and revive traditional religion.⁹⁵

When it comes to the question of the legitimacy of having (anthropomorphic) images of the gods (*Civ. Dei* IV, 31), Varro praises the early Romans for having worshipped the gods without any image for more than hundred and seventy years. If this usage had continued to his own days, he adds, our worship of the gods would be more devout (*castius dii observarentur*). In this sense those who first set up images did religion no favour: they ‘diminished reverence and added error’ (*et metum dempsisse et errorem addidisse*), since gods in the shape of senseless images might easily inspire contempt (*existimans deos facile posse in simulacrorum stoliditate contemni*). Yet also in this case Varro’s critique is not unqualified. He appears to have been capable of a more positive attitude elsewhere. In the seventh book of the *De civitate Dei* Augustine refers to Varro again, this time as defending the physical, i.e. philosophical, interpretations (*interpretationes physicas*) of the representations of gods in the form of images. According to Varro the ancients designed the images, attributes and ornaments of the gods ‘so that men who had approached the mysteries of the doctrine, when they considered these visible things, might gain mental insight into the world and its parts, that is, the true gods’.⁹⁶ In addition, Varro also has something to say about the anthropomorphic shape of the cult statues as such. The basically inadequate human shapes of these images, he claims, were called forth by the consideration that ‘the mortal mind that is in the human body is very much like the immortal mind’.⁹⁷ The latter consideration – an anthropomorphic image of a god, though as such misleading, may indirectly represent an important and true aspect of god, viz. his rationality – was shared by two later authors, a Stoic and a half-Stoic: Epictetus and Dio Chrysostomus.⁹⁸ It seems to constitute the background to their remarkably positive assess-

⁹⁵ Varro *ap.* Augustine *Civ. Dei* IV, 31 (= fr. 13 Cardauns); ‘acceptam ab antiquis nominum et cognominum historiam tenere, ut tradita est, debere se dicit, et ad eum finem illa scribere ac perscrutari ut potius eos magis colere quam despiciere vulgus velit’.

⁹⁶ Varro *ap.* Augustine *Civ. Dei* VII, 5 (= fr. 225 Cardauns): ‘antiquos simulacra deorum et insignia ornatusque finxisse, quae cum oculis animadvertissent hi qui adissent doctrinae mysteria possent animam mundi et partes eius, id est deos veros, animo videre’. Such claims concerning the attributes of cult statues, remind one of Porphyry’s interpretation of the iconography of these statues in his *On Images*, the fragments of which have been edited by Bidez (1913). One may also compare the Stoic Chaeremon, as quoted below, n. 113, with whose work, incidentally, Porphyry was acquainted.

⁹⁷ Varro *ap.* Augustine *Civ. Dei* VII, 5 (= fr. 225 Cardauns): ‘qui simulacra specie hominis fecerunt, hoc videri secutos quod mortalium animus, qui est in corpore humano, similimus est immortalis animi’.

ments of one particular and very famous cult statue: the statue of Zeus in Olympia by Pheidias.

TWO STOICS ON PHEIDIAS' ZEUS

The critical attitude with regard to the fashioning and use of anthropomorphic images of the gods which we find – though, as we saw, not in an unqualified form – in Chrysippus, Diogenes of Babylon, Seneca and Varro is no doubt consistent with what we might call the pantheistic aspect of Stoicism, which sees god as the formative force within the cosmos, a force not confined to any shape (apart perhaps from the spherical shape of the cosmos as a whole), let alone to a human shape.⁹⁹ Yet as we have seen, even from the pantheistic perspective aspects of god could in some contexts be described in an anthropomorphic way: despite his own general injunctions against anthropomorphism Chrysippus allowed the representation of a male Zeus and female Hera in a cosmological context (referring to their active and passive roles); in another context, moreover, he appears to have been prepared to compare god (this time conceived as identical with the cosmos) to a human being in so far as he has both body and soul (god's providence, to which god 'retires' at the event of a conflagration, being the soul of the cosmos).¹⁰⁰

In addition, however, Stoic theology contains a more clearly theistic strand as well. The cosmic god is not *eo ipso* an impersonal god. On the contrary, seen as an immanent formative principle, god could be labeled, as Zeno put it, not just 'craftsmanlike', but actually 'a craftsman',¹⁰¹ or even a 'father'.¹⁰² Indeed precisely because god's rationality – or, for that matter, the rationality of the cosmos – was thought not to differ in kind

⁹⁸ For a recent assessment of Dio's work, see the essays in Swain (2000). Apart from Stoic elements, Dio also shows traces of Cynicism and he carries his philosophical convictions lightly. In the present case (*Or.* xii, 8), however, it is clearly Stoicism, not Cynicism, which provides the philosophical background.

⁹⁹ See Diog. Laert. vii, 147; Aetius i, 6; with my remarks in Algra (2003a) 166. See also Lactantius *De ira* 18 (*SVF* II, 1057).

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Plutarch *Comm. Not.* 1077 d (*SVF* II, 1064); Diogenes of Babylon *ap.* Philodemus (*SVF* III, Diog. Bab. 33).

¹⁰¹ Cicero *ND* 11, 58: 'ipsius vero mundi, qui omnia complexu suo coerctet et continet, natura non artificiosa solum, sed plane artifex ab eodem Zenone dicitur'. Cf. Diog. Laert. vii, 137: δημιουργός τῆς διακοσμήσεως, and vii, 147, quoted in the next note.

¹⁰² Cf. Diog. Laert. vii, 147: εἶναι δὲ τὸν μὴν δημιουργὸν τῶν ὄλων καὶ ὡσπερ πατέρα πάντων.

from human rationality, god *qua* rational and providential governing principle, could be viewed as a ‘person’ with purposes and intentions: providence could be identified as ‘the will of Zeus’.¹⁰³ So although the Stoic god should not be conceived anthropomorphically in any *physical* sense related to his shape, he does resemble humans in so far as his providential rationality and its various qualities are concerned. He is virtuous and happy and as such an example to be followed.¹⁰⁴ That this may involve a degree of anthropomorphism in our descriptions may be illustrated by a quotation from Chrysippus’ *On Nature*:

as it befits Zeus to glory in himself and in his way of life and to be haughty and, if it should be said this way, to carry his head high and plume himself, and to boast since he lives in a way worth boasting about, so does this befit all good men, since they are in no way surpassed by Zeus (Chrysippus *ap.* Plutarch *SR* 1038c).

The structural resemblance between human and divine rationality not only allows a certain form of personalistic theism in thinking and speaking about god, it also provides the basis for the claim that the sage leads a life in which what the Stoics call ‘the god inside’, our own *daimôn*, is in agreement with the ‘will of the orderer of the universe’ and has thus become ‘like god’.¹⁰⁵ It is against this background that we should explain Epictetus’ at first sight perhaps somewhat surprising reference to Pheidias’ statue of Zeus in Olympia. In *Discourse* II, 8 he is considering the case of a student who still lacks confidence in what he has learned and agreed to, i.e. who has not completely internalized the Stoic teachings and is still working on his own self. This process is compared to the polishing and finishing of a statue:

When the statue is finished and polished I will show it to you. What do you think of it? A lofty air, say you? Certainly not. For the Zeus in Olympia does not show a proud look, does he? No, but his gaze is steady, as befits one who is about to

¹⁰³ See Diog. Laert. VII, 147. On providence as the will of Zeus, cf. Calcidius *In Tim.* 144 (= *SVF* II, 933). For a comparison between the *anima mundi* and ourselves in this connection, see Cicero *ND* II, 58.

¹⁰⁴ On god’s wisdom being comparable to that of the sage, see Plutarch, *Comm. Not.* 1076a (= *SVF* III, 246): ὠφελείσθαι τε γὰρ ὁμοίως ὑπ’ ἀλλήλων τὸν Δία καὶ τὸν Δίωνα, σοφοῦς ὄντας, ὅταν ἕτερος θατέρου τυγχάνῃ κινουμένου. On his happiness, see Stobaeus *Ecl.* II, 98, 17 ff Wachsmuth (= part of *SVF* III, 54).

¹⁰⁵ Diog. Laert. VII, 88: εἶναι δ’ αὐτὸ τοῦτο τὴν τοῦ εὐδαίμονος ἀρετὴν καὶ εὐροίαν βίου, ὅταν πάντα πράττηται κατὰ τὴν συμφωνίαν τοῦ παρ’ ἐκάστῳ δαίμονος πρὸς τὴν τοῦ <τῶν> ὄλων δοικητοῦ βούλησιν.

say ‘No word of mine can be revoked or proved untrue [Homer, *Iliad* 1, 526]’. Of such character will I show myself to you – faithful, reverent, noble, unperturbed (Epictetus, *Diss.* 11, 8, 25-27; transl. based on Oldfather).

The metaphor of the self as a statue to be polished is of course what induces the comparison with the fashioning of Pheidias’ Zeus – we are dealing, so to speak, with a plastic way of describing the process of ‘becoming like god’.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless it provides us with yet another instance of a Stoic assessment of an anthropomorphic cult statue as being more than just ‘childish’: the way in which Pheidias has managed to convey the moral, exemplary aspect of Zeus, apparently compensates for the fact that the Stoic Zeus strictly speaking does not look like a man.

Epictetus’ contemporary Dio of Prusa, later also known as Dio Chrysostomus, devotes a whole speech to this same statue in Olympia, which at the time enjoyed great fame.¹⁰⁷ The central question of Dio’s Olympian speech (*Oratio* 11), apparently triggered by the presence of the statue itself, is: What is it that is capable of moulding and forming man’s conception of the deity (*Or.* 11, 26)? The answer is rather complex (*Or.* 11, 39-47), but basically isolates four factors that may be at work:

- (1) the natural preconception of god (the terms used are ἔμφυτος ἐπίνοια and ἔννοια, *Or.* 11, 27; 39-40);¹⁰⁸
- (2) myth and custom (*Or.* 11, 40);
- (3) the laws (*Or.* 11, 40); and
- (4) painted and sculpted images of the gods (*Or.* 11, 44).¹⁰⁹

In the end, Dio claims, it falls to philosophy to interpret the data provided by these various sources (*Or.* 11, 47). He thus ranges himself squarely in the Stoic tradition which assumes, as we saw, that philosophy can not

¹⁰⁶On the idea of godlikeness, see Sedley (1999). The comparison of the inner self with a statue to be polished may be traditional; it recurs e.g. in Plotinus 1, 6, 9.

¹⁰⁷Dio himself calls it ‘the most beautiful and the most dear to the gods’ (*Or.* 11, 25), and Epictetus claims that ‘you travel to Olympia to behold the work of Pheidias, and each of you regards it as a misfortune to die without seeing such sights’ (*Diss.* 1, 6, 23-24). See also the descriptions in Pausanias v, 11, 1-11 and Strabo viii, 3, 30.

¹⁰⁸The word ἔμφυτος here means ‘natural’, or ‘growing naturally’, not ‘innate’, as is made clear in the various passages where the ἐπίνοια is claimed to originate from experience; see e.g. 11, 39: ἔμφυτον ... ἐπίνοιαν, ἐξ αὐτῶν γιγνομένην τῶν ἔργων καὶ ἀληθοῦς.

¹⁰⁹Here we may compare the remark of Cicero’s Stoic spokesman Balbus in *ND* 11 on the *consuetudo oculorum*, on which see above, 28-29.

only strengthen and systematize preconceptions (factor (1)), but also (with the help of these same preconceptions as a criterion), criticize or adapt aspects of myth (factor (2)) and cult (factor (3)), including images (factor (4)). Dio also pronounces himself on the way these various sources interrelate. Factors (2) and (3) – roughly covering what according to the *theologia tripertita* are the gods of the poets and the gods of the city – are said to be ultimately based on factor (1), but at the same time to be lacking in clarity. Apparently the purity of the original preconception is almost inevitably compromised in the transmission through myth and cult (*Or.* XII, 41-43). In its turn factor (4) is presented as rooted in factor (2): the poets' image making is said to have been the earlier (*Or.* XII, 45-46), and later on Pheidias himself is made to claim that he drew the conception of his statue from Homer's poetry (*Or.* XII, 62; 73-74), selecting from the many beautiful images of the gods to be found in his epics one that is not dreadful, but 'peaceful and gentle'.

Dio's story – which is by and large built up from Stoic elements – thus has it that the original preconceptions are blurred in the theology of the city and in the theology of the poets, and *a fortiori* in the derived theology of the sculptor – cult images are, if I may use a Platonic formula, at various removes from the truth. Even so, they as well, according to Dio, can contain an adumbration of theological truth. In order to show how, he introduces the *persona* of Pheidias himself who, after having been praised for his beautiful statue, is asked to account for the method he adopted in fashioning it. Pheidias' 'defense' is a rather complex set piece which I cannot fully paraphrase or analyse here.¹¹⁰ For our present purpose we may just single out two reasons which he adduces for the anthropomorphic shape of his Zeus. One of them concerns our inability to portray the god's rationality otherwise than in a human body – a point, we may recall, that was already made by Varro:

For mind and intelligence in and of themselves no statuary or painter will ever be able to represent; for all men are utterly incapable of observing such attributes with their eyes or of learning them by inquiry. But as for that in which this intelligence manifests itself, men, having no mere inkling thereof but actual

¹¹⁰ Note, for example, that the Zeus which is here being spoken of appears to be a kind of hybrid between the Zeus of the traditional Greek pantheon and the cosmic Zeus of the Stoics. But the overall setting of the speech makes it quite clear that for Dio it is the philosophical question whether and to what extent the statue can be said to represent the Stoic Zeus that is at the focus of attention.

knowledge, fly to it for refuge, attributing to god a human body as a vessel to contain intelligence and rationality in their lack of a better illustration, and in their perplexity seeking to indicate that which is invisible and unportrayable by means of something portrayable and visible, using the function of a symbol and doing so better than certain barbarians, who are said to represent the divine by animals [...] (Dio Chrysostomus *Or.* XII, 59).

Secondly,

[...] certainly no one would maintain that it had been better that no statue or picture of gods should have been exhibited among men, on the ground that we should look only at the heavens. For although the intelligent man does indeed reverence all those objects, believing them to be blessed gods that he sees from a great distance, yet on account of our belief in the divine all men have a strong yearning to honour and worship the deity from close at hand, approaching and laying hold of him with persuasion by offering sacrifice and crowning him with garlands (Dio Chrysostomus *Or.* XII, 60).

Dio compares the latter attitude to that of children wanting to be close to their parents, thus unwittingly giving a positive twist to Chrysippus' claim that the use of statues is 'childish'. However that may be, each of his two defences of the anthropomorphic character of Pheidias' statue links up with the theistic side of Stoic theology: god's rationality is like human rationality, and we want to conceive of him as an object of worship near to us (rather than as a remote astral or cosmic god) and as a father. According to Dio, this is why we are allowed to depict him in human form.

CONCLUSION: THE TWO SCHOOLS COMPARED

It is time to draw some conclusions. The Stoic attitude towards the religious tradition was neither one of radical rejection, nor one of unqualified conservatism. On the one hand the Stoics felt free to criticize aspects of the tradition; on the other, they were prepared to argue, presumably on the basis of their theory of preconceptions, that both the narrative elements of myth and the visual representations of cult could be thought to contain

adumbrations of theological truth.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, as Dio Chrysostomus explicitly points out, but as other Stoics must have believed as well, both myth and visual representations remain inferior to the preconception itself in clarity and truthfulness; in its turn, as we have seen, the preconception itself should be at the basis of a further articulation by means of philosophical arguments. Yet even partly mistaken representations of myth and cult could be regarded as useful in so far as they might otherwise correctly convey some aspects of god or gods (one may think of the anthropomorphic traits of Pheidias' Zeus as assessed by Epictetus and Dio Chrysostomus, or of Zeus and Hera in the picture condoned and explained by Chrysippus). It is perhaps not too far-fetched to assume that the Stoics accorded to such aspects of visual images the same status of pedagogically or psychagogically useful 'persuasive' evidence on the real nature of god as was given to their selection of quotations from early poets, myths and proverbs.¹¹²

Even in those cases where no similar justification could be given, the Stoics seem to have displayed a certain tolerance towards the tradition. Seneca's 'let us forbid' (*Ep.* 95, 47; quoted above, n. 34) is an exception, even within the context of his own work. One would like to have more explicit information about the reasons behind this apparent *laissez-faire*. Perhaps a properly philosophical justification was given, for example by labeling participation in cult as essentially morally indifferent: what merely counts is our rational and philosophically pious attitude. Or perhaps we are simply dealing with a concession to convention, an instance of the wide-spread conservatism we encounter in other philosophers as well.

At any rate we know that the Stoics criticized their Epicurean opponents precisely for defending a theology that demolished the basic presuppositions of the tradition, arguing that the Epicureans made traditional cult a pointless exercise in so far as they claimed that the gods have no dealings with our world, nor, in fact, with the universe at large. Thus those Epicure-

¹¹¹ The later Stoic Chaeremon, a contemporary of Seneca and himself an Egyptian priest (*hierogrammateus*, or sacred scribe), though no doubt Hellenized and possibly even of Greek origin, even speaks of the *rites* and *rituals* performed in connection with cult statues as indicative of some allegorical truth: ὧν ἕκαστον οὐ τῷ φος ἦν, ἀλλὰ τινος ἔνδειξις φυσικοῦ λόγου (Porphyry *De Abstemtia* iv, 6; = Chaeremon fr. 10 in the edition of Van der Horst (1984)). But I have not encountered this view among other Stoics, and as we have seen, Seneca clearly expresses a much more negative view on the various aspects of traditional cult associated with the veneration of cult statues.

¹¹² As we saw, the pedagogical usefulness of cult statues was emphasised by Dio Chrysostomus. The pedagogical purpose of myths and allegories for the uninitiated was stressed by Chaeremon (test. 12 in the edition of Van der Horst (1984)).

ans who did pray, sacrifice etc., were said to refute their own philosophy.¹¹³ Posidonius even claimed that Epicurus was, if not professedly, at least in actual fact an atheist (Cicero *ND* 1, 123). Philodemus' *On Piety* is basically a defensive work, trying to provide an Epicurean answer to these and similar allegations by giving new meanings to various aspects (prayer, sacrifice, religious language) of traditional cult. As we saw, Epicureans could even give a new meaning to the veneration of cult statues, using them as instrumental to an Epicurean form of philosophical contemplation.

On the Stoic side we do not find such detailed re-interpretations of elements of cult, at least not on a similar scale or in a way that is comparable to the Stoic practice of interpreting myth.¹¹⁴ The difference may be explained by the fact that the Epicureans, with their conception of non-interfering gods, and the concomitant need to fend off charges of atheism, needed a re-interpretation of cult at a deeper level than the Stoics, who after all boasted a god who was an active force in the world and who could well manifest himself in ways which allowed him to be identified with at least a number of the gods of traditional myth and cult. Despite some *caveats* concerning all-too-human conceptions of god, and concerning an all-too-human conception of the *do-ut-des* relation between gods and men and the childish rituals to which this had given rise, the Stoics apparently thought to be able to make sense of at least part of traditional cult in its actual form. For the rest, both the Epicurean re-interpretations and the Stoic practice of *laissez-faire* testify to the cult-centered nature of the religious tradition and to its strength: from the point of view of the tradition it was doing the right things that mattered, rather than thinking the right thoughts. For the philosophers it was generally the other way round; hence severe clashes could be avoided.

¹¹³ See Plutarch *SR* 1034 c, quoted in the text above, 31.

¹¹⁴ On what appears to be a Stoic re-interpretation of what is at stake in petitionary prayer, see Algra (2003a) 174-177.

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