

IAMBlichus, THE FIRST PHILOSOPHER OF RELIGION?

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El *de mysteriis* de Jámblico marca la primera aparición en la Antigüedad de lo que podríamos denominar filosofía de la religión en el sentido de una indagación del fenómeno de la religión. Más específicamente muestra una conciencia de la necesidad de identificar los modos del discurso apropiados para las declaraciones teológicas y las prácticas rituales. Aunque los filósofos griegos desde Tales habían criticado las visiones tradicionales de los dioses y habían establecido los cimientos de la teología natural, vistas en su clímax en el motor inmóvil de Aristóteles, la piedad ritual tendió a ser aceptada sin dudas sobre su naturaleza o *modus operandi* hasta la época helenística. Sólo con Jámblico se desarrollan una serie de formulaciones que distinguen el discurso filosófico, teológico y sacramental (teúrgico) mientras que al mismo tiempo explican su relación con la razón discursiva.

The *de mysteriis* of Iamblichus marks the first appearance in antiquity of what we could term philosophy of religion in the sense of an enquiry into the phenomena of religion. More specifically he shows an awareness of the need to identify the modes of discourse appropriate to theological statements and ritual practices. Although Greek philosophers since Thales had criticized traditional views of the gods and had laid the foundations of natural theology seen at its climax in Aristotle's unmoved mover, ritual piety tended to be accepted without any question about its nature or *modus operandi* until the Hellenistic age. Only with Iamblichus is a series of formulations developed which both distinguish philosophical, theological and sacramental (theurgical) discourse whilst at the same time explaining their relationship to discursive reason.

Is there such a thing in the ancient pagan world as philosophy of religion? Of course there is theology, in the sense both of what we might call traditional theology as found, e.g. in the Orphic poems, and natural theology, the preserve of philosophers. The latter is traditionally traced from the very beginnings of Greek philosophy with the Presocratics and is seen both negatively in their criticism of traditional beliefs and theology and positively in the assertion of a supreme deity which acts as cause or source of all phenomena. This tradition reaches its high point with the unmoved mover of book 12 of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. But theology is not religion or is at least only one aspect of it. There remains the whole area of interaction and relationship between gods and men as expressed usually in ritual form. If we take Plato as an example we will find adequate material to present his views on the operation of transcendent causes, views well developed in both a positive and critical mode, whereas his attitude to ritual is one of acceptance of traditional rites and practices with no attempt to question or explain what might be happening in them. With some exceptions, largely of a critical kind, it would appear that a sophisticated metaphysical view of the world and its divine causes could be held side by side with an unquestioning view of traditional religious ritual as socially necessary and, in some way, spiritually effective.

It is not until the fourth century A.D. that we come across what I would describe as a genuine expression of philosophy of religion. It is to be found in the *de mysteriis* of Iamblichus, a work which has not yet been accorded the importance it deserves as a central document in the history of the philosophy of religion. It has, unfortunately, been long regarded with some suspicion by scholars of late Greek philosophy who have generally accused Iamblichus of gross irrationality and seen *de mysteriis* as a disconnected, long-winded ragbag of superstitious nonsense. A more sympathetic and attentive reading of the text would suggest that Iamblichus is trying to grapple for the first time with the apparent paradoxes raised by a range of religious phenomena whose genuineness he accepts. The work, it must be stressed from the outset, is not a systematic treatise on the role of discursive thought in religious matters, but an attempted answer to a 'letter' of Porphyry addressed to the priest Anebo in which Porphyry raises a number of serious problems which a philosopher encounters when considering religious phenomena. Of course the very concept of philosophy of religion is open to a number of interpretations and emphases. I am not using it here in the sense of 'religious philosophy' which suggests the actual treatment of 'religious' themes and phenomena in a philosophical framework. Philosophy of religion, in its most general sense, I take to be an *enquiry* into the phenomena of religion, whether the phenomena are conceptual (beliefs), verbal, ritual or manifestations of divine power or presence. This definition may include the sociology and history of religion. A narrower concern, however, but one of central importance is the enquiry into the modes of discourse which are appropriate when dealing with religious phenomena. It is precisely here that Iamblichus takes an important step. For whilst he does not deny that discursi-

ve reason is the only basic tool available to human beings for religious or any kind of discourse, he, nonetheless, makes a sharp distinction between three different modes of discourse: purely discursive, theological and what he terms theurgical.

As we have already mentioned, the context of Iamblichus' remarks is limited and almost accidental. He did not set out to write a formal treatise on the relationship of philosophy to religion but was stimulated to incorporate some of his thoughts on the topic in his reply to Porphyry. We are unfortunately unable to say when Porphyry wrote his 'letter' and whether the addressee, an Egyptian priest named Anebo, really existed. It may well be the case that Iamblichus' 'reply' came many years later. Of some interest, but not precisely relevant to the present argument, is the nature and tone of Porphyry's original composition, whose fragmentary text can be reconstructed only with difficulty and much guess work, largely from the text of Iamblichus himself. Although Porphyry's point of departure has often been regarded as deeply sceptical and critical of religious rituals, I have recently argued that it was not meant as an attack but was rather a search for answers to a large number of problems that may have exercised his mind throughout his life¹. In some cases he even attempts to provide solutions to the problems he raises, one of them being very similar to a suggestion of Plutarch who was also faced with criticisms, in his case of the Delphic oracle, with the advent of a less accepting age². Iamblichus, however, demands a more radical approach. Porphyry's problems, he argues, are due to his confusing different objects of discourse, each of which is subject to its own particular discipline. Philosophy, i.e. the use of demonstrative argument in the domain of *logos* or reason, must be distinguished from theology and both from theurgy. Theology would seem to be different from the transcendent world of Neoplatonic metaphysics in which the One, Nous and Soul can, of course, be described as gods; but what Iamblichus here describes as theology is rather that area of discourse which tries to relate the different levels of gods and divine beings (daemones, heroes etc) to each other under specific names. Theurgy is for our purposes more interesting; it would appear to include the whole of what we might term the ritual aspect of religion, the very phenomena that had been largely unquestioned and had certainly not received the kind of rational reinterpretation accorded to the nature of god himself in the philosophical tradition.

It is true that what exercised Porphyry most, even in the limited area of ritual, was the notion of theurgy, which was a ritual of salvation that had been developed since the second century AD. The ritual and its attendant theology were much influenced by Platonism and for this reason came very much to the attention of philosophers like Porphyry and Iamblichus. Although the origins of theurgy in the

¹ A. Smith, "Porphyry and Pagan Religious Practice", J. Cleary (ed.), *The Perennial tradition of Neoplatonism* (Leuven 1997) 29-35.

² Plutarch, *On the oracles of the Delphic priestess* 20; Porphyry in Iamblichus *de mysteriis* 145.4-150.5.

Chaldaean Oracles are obscure it is clear that the very mixture of philosophy and ritual within an atmosphere of what often looked very much like magic appealed to an elite. But in fact the philosophical issues raised by theurgy were at base no different from those raised by any mystery religion which promised salvation or, in the end, from any rite which in some way suggested that it could assist the mediation between man and god. Hence the discussion in both the ‘letter’ and *de mysteriis* ranges more widely to include mantic and sacrifice. The central philosophical problem was: how can a human being through the performance of a ritual act or word affect a god in such a way as to secure his intervention? Does this not imply that the human being in some way controls god or has influence over him? I do not think that it would be misleading to use the word ‘sacramental’ as an equivalent of ‘theurgical’, for the same problem of divine presence or working occurs in Christian sacramental theology. As far as I have been able to discern the sort of questions raised by Porphyry and Iamblichus’ interpretation and attempted solution of them were not expressed by early Christian theologians, and sacramental theology remained comparatively undeveloped until a later age when philosophical issues presented themselves. This makes Iamblichus’ views all the more interesting. Moreover, whilst I would not wish to press the parallel too far, since the theological basis of Christian sacraments (as opposed to attempted explanations of their operation) are based on quite different spiritual premises from their pagan counterpart, it may help us to look on theurgy with a little more sympathy and less dismissiveness than has formerly been the case.

The triple distinction of philosophy, theology and theurgy is made almost at the beginning of the work and sets the necessary conditions on which the discussion with Porphyry can take place³:

“In each case we will give you an answer that is appropriate and fitting; in theological matters we will reply theologically, in theurgical theurgically and philosophical matters we will examine with you philosophically”.

Let us now turn to a passage (*de mysteriis* II.11.95,15-98,15) in which he invokes these distinctions. It will be useful to cite the passage as a whole since it breaks new ground in the ways in which it attempts to refuse rational objections to the perceived workings of ritual:

“The following questions in which you think that ignorance and deception in these matters are impiety and impurity and you exhort us to the true tradition in them, not only admit of no doubt but are a matter of common agreement as you

³ *de mysteriis* 7.2-6. For a full discussion of this text and further details on some of the other topics in this article see A. Smith, “Iamblichus’ views on the relationship of philosophy to religion in *de mysteriis*”, H. J. Blumenthal-E. G. Clark (edd.), *The Divine Iamblichus: Philosopher and Man of Gods* (London 1993) 74-86

- see. For who would not agree that knowledge which attains to Being is most
 5 appropriate to the gods and the ignorance which tends towards Not- being falls
 furthest from the divine cause of the true Forms? But since that is not an ade-
 quate statement I will add what is missing and because the defence is made in
 a philosophical way using reason rather than according to the active art of the
 priests, I think I must say something about these things in a more theurgical
 10 manner. For we can allow that ignorance and deception are error and impiety,
 but they do not for that reason make false what is properly offered to the gods
 and the divine acts; for it is not thought that connects the theurgist with the
 gods. For if that were so, what prevents those who philosophize theoretically
 from having theurgic union with the gods? But this is not in fact the case.
 15 Rather the efficacy of the ineffable acts which operate divinely beyond all
 thought and the power of the symbols which are understood by the gods effect
 theurgic union. This is why we do not set these acts in train by thinking; for if
 this were the case their activity would be intellectual and determined by us; but
 neither of these is true; for, without our thinking, the symbols themselves and
 20 of themselves effect their own operation; and the ineffable power of the gods,
 to whom they refer, itself and of itself recognises its own images, but not by
 being roused by our thinking. For it is not natural that what encompasses be
 moved by what is encompassed or what is perfect by the imperfect or wholes
 by parts. Hence the divine causes are not called forth into activity primarily by
 25 our thoughts; but whilst these and all the best dispositions of soul and our purity
 must be there as a sort of accessory cause, what primarily arouses the divine
 will are the divine symbols themselves. And in this way the divine is itself
 aroused by itself without receiving into itself any starting point for its own
 activity through any of the things below it.
- 30 I have explained this at such length precisely that you might not think that the
 entire efficacy of the activity of theurgic rites depends on us and that you might
 not suppose that their true operation is also put into proper effect when our
 thoughts are in a true state and into false effect when they are deceptive. For
 not even if we know the specific characteristics attending each kind [of god]
 35 will we then automatically attain the truth of their operations. But whilst active
 union never comes without that knowledge, it is not identical with it. And so
 the divine purity does not come through correct knowledge as bodily purity
 comes through chastity, but is rather established in a unity and purity even
 beyond knowing. Nor does anything else exist in us as humans which contri-
 40 butes anything to the achieving of the divine activities”.

This passage constitutes the most detailed explanation that Iamblichus gives of the operation of ritual. Whatever the shortcomings as an explanation, the intentions are clear. We note from the start that Iamblichus says that he will give a ‘more theurgic’ explanation; the comparative suggests that a logical or discursive element forms a legitimate part of his explanation. This is borne out by the use of the technical distinction of causes as primary or accessory. In fact the application of philosophical categories to religious phenomena is widely recommended by Iambli-

chus, as long as we realise that they are being used in a restricted sense. Here the use of the causal language of metaphysics will take us so far and point us towards the possibility of resolving the inevitable paradoxes of a level of reality to which full access is closed for us. In fact three further parallels are introduced (97.9-11, lines 22-23):

“what encompasses is not to be moved by what is encompassed”
 “the perfect is not to be moved by what is imperfect”
 “wholes are not to be moved by parts”

All of these can be found as standard metaphysical principles in Proclus⁴. But let us return to what is the key philosophical concept employed by Iamblichus in his interpretation of the ritual, the causal, for throughout *de mysteriis* Iamblichus is at pains to point out that the gods are not forced or influenced by men. This is one of the central problems that exercised Porphyry’s mind both in the *Letter to Anebo* and in *Philosophy from Oracles*. This issue Iamblichus attempts to solve by using the distinction of primary and accessory causes. The distinction goes back to Plato⁵ and may be found also in Aristotle⁶. In Iamblichus it is used to distinguish two levels of ‘causality’. We note that Proclus similarly formalises the Platonic concept by applying it to two levels of reality. In *El.Theol.* prop. 75 the proper causes ‘transcend’ the accessory causes⁷. On the primary level, according to Iamblichus, we may locate:

1. ritual acts
2. the divine symbols
3. the power of the gods to recognise them

On the level of accessory causes he gives us:

1. our thoughts
2. excellent dispositions of the soul
3. purity

Our ‘thoughts’ seems to refer to our knowledge and understanding of the divine. Are the accessory causes necessary but not sufficient or neither necessary nor sufficient? In our passage lines 10f (96.11f) might give the impression that he

⁴ Proclus, *El.Theol.* prop. 66 p. 62.28-29

⁵ Cf. *Phaedo* 99A; *Polit.* 281D; *Tim.* 46D

⁶ e.g. cf. Aristotle *an.* 416a14 where ἀπλῶς αἴτιον is distinguished from συναίτιον which is equated with the material cause

⁷ See Proclus in *Tim.* 1.2.1f; in *Parm.* 1059.11f where the proper causes are the final, paradigmatic and efficient, the accessory causes are the formal and material. To the latter may also be added the instrumental (in *Tim.* 1.261.15; 163.21).

thinks the latter (that thought is not necessary), but it becomes quite clear from later in the passage that our understanding is necessary but is not a primary causal factor. Thus equally our ignorance or deceptiveness have no direct causal effect, but the ritual would still be ineffective under these conditions. Iamblichus subsequently makes it quite clear that the accessory causes are necessary. At line 19 (97.5) I take the phrase $\mu\eta\ \nu\sigma\omicron\upsilon\lambda\tau\omega\nu\ \eta\mu\acute{\omega}\nu$ to indicate not that thought or understanding is unnecessary but that its (main) causal effect is excluded. This is confirmed both at lines 25-26 (97.14-15) and with the phrase ‘without that knowledge’ at line 36 (98.8). We should note that the notion of accessory **causes** is not introduced specifically until line 26 (97.15) where it is also qualified ($\acute{\alpha}\tau\tau\alpha$ ‘a sort of’) and only after he has firmly established the full causal status of the higher levels. But what is the content of these ‘thoughts’? Most likely it is the kind of theological knowledge with which the first book of *de mysteriis* deals, the distinction of different levels of divinities. But could they include knowledge of ritual too? It is traditional Stoic teaching that piety is knowledge of the divine and this includes ritual. This is surely a definition which has its roots in traditional piety’s emphasis on correct ritual and naming of divinities. Yes, Iamblichus clearly includes ritual in the primary causes when he refers to the ‘ineffable acts’ (line 15). As for the other accessory causes, ‘the excellent dispositions of the soul’ probably refers to our ethical state and ‘purity’ to ritual purity. Iamblichus is making the important point that the religious practitioner must be morally virtuous, something which both Plotinus and Porphyry had doubts about⁸.

But what is then the precise status and role of ritual actions and words? These, according to Iamblichus, have direct causal force, but at the same time are not dependent on our thoughts. For clearly the $\sigma\upsilon\nu\theta\eta\mu\alpha\tau\alpha$ mentioned in this passage are to be located at the higher level as true causes, although they are also different from the gods themselves who are said to recognise in them their own images. Both the $\sigma\upsilon\nu\theta\eta\mu\alpha\tau\alpha$ and the power of the gods are seen as self-moving causes, self-moving not only in that they are not moved by humans, but also in that they operate independently of each other since the gods recognise the symbols on their own initiative even though the symbols may be said to arouse the divine will (line 26-27.97.16). At 184.2 in making a distinction between two levels of theurgy, he speaks of the lower level more generally as dependent on us as ‘human beings’ whereas the higher level is ‘empowered’ by the divine symbols. It is possible, then, that the concept of ‘human thoughts’ includes more than concepts and stands, in a sense, for that thinking element which makes us human beings. This passage goes on to suggest that the theurgist clothes himself or somehow makes his own the divine power when the higher level of theurgy is put into effect, becomes in a sense more than man, whilst nevertheless remaining a human being in his rational aspect; for both are necessary in the theurgic process.

⁸ Cf. A. Smith, *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition* (The Hague 1974) 134-5.

It is difficult to imagine that Iamblichus thought that the ritual and symbols in their physical manifestation had a causal effect on the gods. In his discussion of sacrifices in book V the same recourse to a distinction of levels is adduced to override the apparent contradiction involved in the gods savouring the sacrificial odour of meat whose enjoyment is forbidden to mortals. It is clear here (199.13) that the gods because of their transcendence are not directly affected by sacrificial odours, i.e. by their physical nature. Whilst one cannot detect in Iamblichus a clear distinction between outward sign and inner power, he does speak in our passage (17f) of the 'power' of the symbols; and in the parallel phrase referring to the ritual actions he mentions the 'efficacy' of the actions, which suggests something different from the actions themselves⁹.

These passages, and particularly II.11, represent a remarkable attempt to reconcile the effective contribution of the human and divine element in ritual, whatever their shortcomings as an explanation. But Iamblichus was not attempting to explain, for he makes it clear that explanations belong to the realm of reason. It is sufficient to show how contradictions may be resolved. For example, he does not think it necessary to prove how evil can occur so long as we show that god cannot be its source¹⁰. We should employ reason and rational argument¹¹ whilst being aware of their limitations¹². We must recognise that what may present a contradiction in the physical world may be reconciled at a higher level¹³. There is in fact a transcendent logic to govern relations amongst transcendent realities¹⁴. Perhaps the most important characteristic of this transcendent logic is the way in which it operates by analogy¹⁵, for in this way demonstrative arguments and discursive concepts can be used to 'indicate' the nature of a higher level, i.e. to predicate without maintaining every implication of the predicates. Finally we may note how Iamblichus frequently emphasises the inadequacy of philosophical discourse for theological and theurgical matters by moving to a form of discourse that employs a different vocabulary, e.g. the use of the term $\Phi\lambda\lambda\alpha$ (love) to describe the relationship of the transcendent and immanent in religious contexts¹⁶.

Here in *de mysteriis* we encounter for the first time in antiquity an extended attempt to come to terms with the different modes of discourse employed in philosophical and religious discussions. What Iamblichus gives us is not merely a defence of the reality and genuineness of certain religious phenomena nor simply an explanation of how they occur, but a theory of the ways in which and the extent to which

⁹ LSJ gives this meaning to $\tau\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\sigma\iota\omicron\upsilon\rho\gamma\acute{\iota}\alpha$, thus taking the accompanying genitive phrase as subjective, as opposed to objective which would suggest the meaning 'completion'.

¹⁰ *de mysteriis* 4.6

¹¹ *de mysteriis* 180.12

¹² *de mysteriis* 147.4f

¹³ *de mysteriis* 200.17-19

¹⁴ Simplicius in *Cat.* 2.13; 116.25f cf. *de mysteriis* 11.2f

¹⁵ *de mysteriis* 14.17

¹⁶ *de mysteriis* 5.9.200.11f

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verbal discourse and philosophical distinctions may be legitimately applied to them. He also supplies us with examples of the application of his method. It is a mark of the interest and importance of this work that many of the issues he raises still remain as focal points for those engaged in the philosophy of religion.