

THE RELIGION OF IOANNES LYDOS

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THE RECENT GROWTH OF INTEREST IN LATE ANTIQUITY and its emergence as a more or less coherent discipline has had salutary and far-reaching effects. Archaeologists, philologists, historians, and patristic scholars are now enabled—and required—to situate their work within the context of a discussion broader than that generated by their sub-fields. Also, it has begun to illuminate a period of ancient history neglected by classicists and ancient historians. As “classical” and “late” coalesce it may one day become possible to recover the holistic view of antiquity held by the Byzantines,¹ or indeed by all humanists before Victorian prejudice and German nationalism devised cut-off dates for classical history that are now ideologically obsolete but still widely accepted (roughly Alexander for Greece and Tacitus for Rome).

Yet progress has been distributed unevenly. Whereas some eras still remain in the dark (e.g., the eastern empire after the reign of Arkadios), others have received plenty of attention (e.g., religious controversy in the fourth century or the settlement of the barbarians in the western provinces in the fifth century, which is sometimes known by the project-title “The Transformation of the Roman Empire”). Authors of the sixth century such as Ioannes Lydos have been neglected, as have the cultural dynamics of his age. Part of the reason for this is the rarely discussed fact that few scholars work any longer on untranslated texts. Only one of Lydos’ three treatises has been translated—*On the Magistracies of the Roman State*—and that not until 1971. And this text is still mined as a source of information rather than studied in its own right. Lydos’ two other works, *On Celestial Signs* (lit. *On Signs from Zeus*) and *On the Months*, have not yet been translated and even their latest editions are over a hundred years old.²

Indolence aside, other obstacles have been thrown up by the way in which the field has developed and by its (usually unacknowledged) philosophical commitments. Most scholars of late antiquity are primarily interested in religion and tend to believe that their subjects saw the world largely or entirely in religious terms. This modern interest does not stem from Gibbon’s philosophical skepticism. Once popular, his polemical rationalism has been abandoned in favor of psychology and the analysis of religious pathology. For example, it involves a twofold rejection of reason: scholars no longer aim to refute dogmas and discredit miracles, a positive development; but the role that reason is allowed to play

¹Treadgold 1984: esp. 95–96.

²Lydos *On the Magistracies of the Roman State* (henceforth *Mag.*; ed. and tr. Bandy 1983; previous tr. Carney 1971); *On the Months* (henceforth *Mens.*; ed. Wuensch 1898); *On Celestial Signs* (ed. Wachsmuth 1897). There is only one study that focuses on his cultural context: Maas 1992.

within religious experience is reduced, if not eliminated. It is now considered anachronistic to seek “modern” logic in the patterns of late-antique worship. In fact the less reflexive and self-conscious the attitudes, the more attractive they are to current research, which focuses on “the behavior and feelings of people.”³ Nietzsche has triumphed over the Enlightenment here too. Let me hasten to add that this is a perfectly legitimate approach that has illuminated many aspects of late-antique life that were previously badly understood, but it may be more appropriate to some texts than to others.

This hypertrophy of religious discourse has had other distorting effects. The language and the conceptual apparatus do not now exist with which to discuss men who valued other things more deeply than their faith, for instance their survival or career. It is hardly possible to discuss—in the current jargon of “spirituality” and “the sacred”—men who subordinated religion to political advancement, or to their love-affairs. Nor is it easy for anyone writing in the wake of Peter Brown to discuss even Christians like Vigilantius who tried to moderate the religious enthusiasm of his contemporaries by injecting some reason into what he evidently viewed as a reign of superstition. It is rather the hysteria of Jerome, who answered him, that is a more attractive subject to scholars looking for “meaning and authority.”⁴ Even when such authority figures as Augustine offer cynical perspectives on what are taken to be unquestioned aspects of an alleged late-antique “world-view,” their testimony is sometimes dismissed as though they were modern scholars who missed the point.⁵

Lydos never makes a declaration of faith, never cites the New Testament, and never discusses Christian doctrine. Photios, the Byzantine classicist who later became Patriarch, read his works and drew the following conclusion: “In matters of religion he seems to have been an unbeliever. He respects and venerates Hellenic beliefs; he also venerates our beliefs, without giving the reader any easy way of deciding whether such veneration is genuine or hypocritical.”⁶ Respect for pagan beliefs is patent in *On the Months* and *On Celestial Signs*. There is no passage, however, in the entire corpus of Lydos’ writings that reflects the slightest bit of veneration for—or interest in—Christian beliefs. However, those two works survive in badly mutilated form, mere fragments that have been summarized by a Byzantine editor and whose order is often unclear. The possibility of alterations, omissions, and additions is high. It is likely that in a passage now lost, possibly a preface, Lydos professed his faith in Christ. Indeed, given what Photios says this must have been the case, otherwise he would have had no reason at all to think that Lydos may have been a Christian. But, as Photios knew, profession and belief are different things. Lydos indirectly notes in *On the Magistracies* that one was required “to be initiated in the sacred mysteries of the Orthodox faith” in

³For example, in Van Dam 1985: 1, 195–196.

⁴Van Dam 1985: 138–139.

⁵For example, in MacCormack 1981: 1–2.

⁶Phot. *Bibl.* 180 (tr. Wilson 1994: 170; ed. Henry 1960: 187–188).

order to hold public office, as he did for forty years (3.12). If he did not believe in the doctrines of the Church, he would have had good reason to pretend to, especially as he was publishing a book that showed at least a degree of veneration for paganism.

But the possibility of religious dissimulation seems to have been ruled out by the scholars who have looked at the question of Lydos' religion. Though few, they are prominent, and their views merit close attention. Michael Maas and Averil Cameron have simply assumed that Lydos was a Christian, if perhaps an unconventional one. Maas even dismisses Photios "for not understanding the Justinianic cultural scene."⁷

Still, no proof has been offered in support of the consensus that Lydos was a Christian, which is upheld against all the evidence that strongly indicates the opposite conclusion. Furthermore, the dismissal of Photios' suspicion reflects the prevailing belief that religion in late antiquity was always naïve and sincere. No one is supposed to have dissembled his faith for non-religious reasons, an assumption that facilitates the homogenization of complex cultures into monolithic mentalities and relieves us of the burden and perils of close readings. All individuals, no matter how eccentric, must be typical products of their age, "men of their times." Lydos is assumed to have been a Christian simply because of the time and the place in which he lived. In fact a large number of late-antique writers have been given orthodox political and religious views on *a priori* grounds, often with little regard for what they actually say for themselves. Modern scholarship has created the unity that all the efforts of Justinian could not.

Let us look at these points briefly in reverse order. We know that there were far too many non-Christians around in the sixth century, including Platonists, high officials at court and the administration, and village communities in every region of the empire, to allow the casual assumption that everyone was a Christian. In fact, it is precisely someone with the background, interests, and political views of Lydos who is most at risk for being a "Hellene." This is especially true if he manages to avoid the topic of Christianity as though it did not exist and carefully conceals his own religious beliefs so that they were opaque even to the most erudite Patriarch of Byzantium, who had far better editions of his works than we do. Whatever Photios did or did not understand about the sixth century, his opinion must be allowed to carry some weight in religious matters.

I would in fact argue that at no point in human history has there ever been a homogeneous intellectual culture such as is postulated by much recent scholarship on late antiquity. The notion of totalizing world-views reflects the apogee of nineteenth-century historicism at its most ambitious, but least plausible. The last to attempt it on a grand scale was Lucien Febvre in *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century*, who argued that religious imagery, symbolism, language, doctrine, and practice were so pervasive and deeply rooted that the very possibility

⁷ Maas 1992: 3–4; for Lydos the Christian, see also Stein 1949: 733; Av. Cameron 1996: 246–247.

of skepticism or dissent can be ruled out. Febvre's premises have been thoroughly refuted, as demonstrated by an ever-growing list of exceptions.⁸ Whether in late antiquity, the western Middle Ages, or Byzantium, there was always room for skepticism, eccentricity, and dissent.

Second, religious dissimulation is amply attested in late antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages among non-Christians or heretical ones who wanted to make a career at court or gain some other advantage in an orthodox society. No sooner had Constantine converted than Eusebios noted with disgust that "there was an unspeakable deceit on the part of those who slipped into the Church and adopted the false façade of the Christian name."⁹ Julian, for example, pretended for years after his conversion to Platonism to be a Christian—eleven, by his count—and the historian Ammianus noted that while Julian was Caesar in Gaul "he only pretended to follow the Christian religion" and even went to church.¹⁰ Later in the fourth century, when Christian violence peaked, Libanios warned Theodosios I in a work *On Behalf of the Temples* that those conversions "are apparent, not real. The converts have not really been changed, they only say that they have." He goes on to explain how they "bamboozle" the authorities (τούτους πεφενάκισθαι).¹¹

Many cases are attested in the sixth century. Justinian himself refers in one of his edicts to those who pretended to be Christians in order to hold imperial rank,¹² and the purges he conducted confirmed his suspicions. Prokopios gives many examples of religious dissimulation in the *Secret History*—where he seems to advocate it as a policy—and other texts reveal as much.¹³ Politics or fear were not the only incentives: Ambrose had complained that some pretended to be Christians in order to pick up Christian girls,¹⁴ and the opposite probably also occurred. Photios was on to something and we are wrong to ignore his warning. Perhaps he knew more about religion in late antiquity than we do. So instead of saying that Lydos "formally accepted the Christian faith,"¹⁵ we may say that he at least *professed* it in order to comply with the laws.

According to the historian Sokrates (7.17) it took a miracle for the bishop Paulos of the Novatians to expose a fraudulent Jewish convert. The present writer lacks such means. The evidence about Lydos is perhaps not conclusive beyond a

⁸ Febvre 1982; *contra*: Wootton 1983: esp. 3, 134; Zagorin 1990: esp. 289–330; Rahe 1994.

⁹ Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 4.54 (tr. Av. Cameron and Hall 1999: 174); cf. 3.66 for "dissembling" heretics who returned to the Church.

¹⁰ Julian *Ep.* 47 (434d) to the Alexandrians (tr. Wright); Amm. Marc. 21.2.

¹¹ Lib. *Or.* 30.28–29 (tr. Norman 1977: 124–126).

¹² *CJ* 1.5.18.5 (ed. Krueger 1895).

¹³ For Prokopios and others, see Kaldellis 1999: 238–241.

¹⁴ For this and other complaints, see Ando 1996: 201–205. Yet not every complaint should be treated as a case of non-Christian dissimulation. For example, the author of the *Life of Porphyrios* says that "many who held imperial rank merely pretended to be Christians" (51), but this may mean that they were not as "burning" for the faith as was Kynegios, who agreed to persecute the pagans (Grégoire and Kugener 1930).

¹⁵ Maas 1992: 30.

doubt, but tends to indicate very strongly that he was not a Christian, at least in the matter of his beliefs, which find expression in his three treatises. The complete absence of contrary evidence complements this suspicion.

First, there is the company that Lydos kept. The man who receives the highest praise in *On the Magistracies* is Phokas, praetorian prefect and so Lydos' boss in 532 (3.72–76). Lydos praises his liberality, self-control, compassion, learning, and piety. In fact he uses religious terms more densely here than anywhere else, ascribing Phokas' tenure to divine providence. Well, Phokas was a pagan who came under suspicion on at least two occasions and finally committed suicide in Justinian's anti-pagan purge of 545–546. Lydos even boasts that Phokas "loved me more than the others" (3.73). Maas (1992: 82) rightly concludes that Lydos "chose to associate himself in his book with a man who had fallen from power and died in a most suspect and ignominious fashion," which "revealed a political stance at odds with Justinian's policies."¹⁶ That is candid, but puts it mildly.

It is worth noting that Lydos, who must have known that Phokas was a pagan, goes out of his way to present his rise to the office of praetorian prefect as the work of providence—though without specifying the deity—and to extol his piety. He even notes that Phokas endowed Christian philanthropic institutions and contributed to the construction of Hagia Sophia, which began during his tenure of the prefecture. These are good examples of the sorts of things that pagans in high places must have been doing since Constantine. Too many men have been labeled as Christians on the basis of this kind of evidence in studies of religious change among the aristocracy and in the standard prosopographies. But endowing churches and supporting philanthropic projects have little worth as evidence for religious *belief* in societies with an official religion, and this is true beyond the Christian empire of late antiquity. The eleventh-century historian Michael Attaleiates sneered at the monks of his age, but still he founded a monastic institution, for economic and family reasons.¹⁷ In the early nineteenth century the Ottoman Ali Pasha of Ioannina feigned a conversion to gain Greek support and even built churches.¹⁸ I myself know Greeks who are atheists or who despise the Church but nevertheless build or endow churches, for political or family reasons, or add chapels to their homes in order to claim legal privileges. These problems of course raise questions about what it means to be Christian or Orthodox: social identities may contradict theological beliefs but they are no less important for that reason. I myself am at an utter loss sometimes to give an honest answer when I am asked whether I belong to the Greek Orthodox Church, for many more things fall under that category than just theological belief (including

¹⁶For a good discussion of Phokas, see Maas 1992: 78–82. Cf. *PLRE* 2.881–882. Caimi (1984: 263–266) questioned whether Lydos' idol was the pagan suicide, but has no arguments, and later changed his mind (1988: 214, n. 4); cf. also Maas 1986: 223.

¹⁷For monks, see Michael Attaleiates, *History* 61 (tr. Polemis 1997: 120–123); for foundations, see Lemerle 1977: 65–112.

¹⁸Fleming 1999: 66–69.

cultural and national identity). But in the case of Lydos, belief is all we have access to beyond what we can infer about practice from the laws of his time, and my aim here is to identify the religious affiliation of his works, however idiosyncratic it may be. Besides, the theological views of an important intellectual in an age of such cultural and theological change are not without intrinsic interest. To return to the age of Justinian, that Phokas the pagan should have been the first appointed to direct the construction of Hagia Sophia is an irony that art historians have not noticed, as is the Aristophanic sarcasm with which Prokopios praises the edifice in his *Buildings*.¹⁹

Another man whom Lydos praises and who had a greater effect on him than he lets on initially is Agapios, a Platonist and a student of the great Proklos. In the autobiographical section of *On the Magistracies*, Lydos says that he studied Plato and Aristotle under him in 511. He knows and boasts about his teacher's connection to Proklos (3.26). Agapios had also studied under Proklos' student and biographer Marinos. Though they may have had Christian students—and Agapios, who taught in Constantinople, surely did—Proklos and his students constituted the heart of philosophical resistance to Christianity. Agapios was arrested by the authorities under Zeno, and was personally admired by Damaskios, also a student of Marinos and head of the Platonic Academy in Athens when Justinian moved against it in 529.²⁰ One could not find more anti-Christian circles than these.

Marinos reports in his biography of Proklos that the great man had to leave Athens for a while because of “typhonic” attacks—one of the code words by which Platonists labeled Christians. After all, Athens was a center of anti-Christian thought and Proklos was its most prominent exponent. Marinos tells us that his teacher went to Lydia to practice the Pythagorean maxim, “live unnoticed.” This was around 450.²¹ It seems that one place he stayed was Lydos' native city of Philadelphieia, because the latter notes “with the pride of a provincial” in his treatise *On the Months* (4.58) that “the followers of Proklos call the city ‘little Athens,’ because of the great love that it held for Athens,” and also because of the religious festivals and pagan temples.²² Did he know this fact as a Philadelphieian or a Platonist? Be that as it may, elsewhere in the same treatise he notes in the discussion of the Roman god Janus that “even in my native Philadelphieia a trace of antiquity (ἔτι καὶ νῦν ἵχνος τῆς ἀρχαιότητος) survives down to this day,” as

¹⁹ Cf. Prokop. *Aed.* 1.1.61 with *Ar. Nub.* 225–228. For a new study of Prokopios, see Kaldellis 2004.

²⁰ See Dam. *Isid.* = *The Philosophical History* fr. 107 (ed. and tr. Athanassiadi 1999: 257 and n. 278, whose identification I accept, *pace* Saffrey and Segonds 2001: xxii–xxiii, n. 3). There is considerable uncertainty surrounding the “closing of the Academy” by Justinian: for what may have happened in 529 and 532, see Al. Cameron 1969: 14–30; Hällström 1994: 141–160. For Damaskios as the leader of this group, see Agathias *The Histories* 2.30–31 (ed. Keydell 1967: 80–82).

²¹ Marinos *Proklos or On Happiness* 15 (ed. Saffrey and Segonds 2001: 18); for the code-words, see Saffrey 1975. For the date and context, see Siorvanes 1996: 22.

²² Pride: Caimi 1984: 8; cf. Maas 1992: 30–31: “fondly.”

the god's two-faced statue is still used in processions (4.2). This passage does more than cast light on the religious environment in which he grew up. It is important to note that Lydos' reference to "antiquity" here is in a discussion of religious ritual, for antiquity had for him a normative value. Lydos' antiquarianism was not merely academic but represented a conscious effort to preserve things being threatened by the Christian empire of Justinian. For example, in *On the Magistracies* 3.11 he uses very similar language to grieve for "the extinction of most, perhaps all, of the traces of wise antiquity" (τῶν ἱχνῶν ἀπαλιφέντων τῆς ἔμφορον παλαιότητος), blaming it in the next chapter on the *Daimon*.

On the Months reveals that Agaprios had a profound impact on Lydos. Plato and Aristotle are the most cited authors. A variety of pre-Socratic philosophers are also quoted, as are most of the major Platonist thinkers of late antiquity, above all Proklos, but also Plotinos, Porphyrios, Iamblichos, Ammonios, and Syrianos. Lydos even quotes one of the letters of the emperor Julian, and Maas suspects that he took ideas from Damaskios and his student Simplikios.²³ The only Christian author among the 160 sources listed in the index of Wuensch's edition is Origenes, whom Justinian had just condemned as a heretic. So even Lydos' intellectual world was strictly pagan. He never gives the slightest hint of being interested in Christian theology, though he was no doubt aware of it. Whatever "lofty thoughts" he claims to have had in *On the Magistracies* 3.29, referring to his teaching post at the university of the capital, they probably derived entirely from his interest in Platonic thought. Even in that treatise the political argument is underpinned by Aristotelian ontology, though always within the context of Neoplatonic cosmology.²⁴

On another important philosophical issue Lydos takes a position that cannot easily be reconciled with conventional Christian belief. Following the mainstream of Hellenic thought, especially as it took shape in the attempts by many philosophers to identify and clarify the teaching of Plato's *Timaeus*, Lydos believed that "amorphous matter" predated Creation and was used by God (or the "Demiourgos") to fashion the world. Hence matter itself was not created out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), as virtually all Christians believed.²⁵ In discussing this question it is important to differentiate it from that of the eternity of the world, which was debated between and sometimes within the pagan and Christian camps, though the two issues were obviously closely related.²⁶ Regarding the issue at hand, mainstream Christian thought is reflected in the works of Augustine and the Alexandrian thinker Ioannes Philoponos, Lydos' contemporary, who both defended creation out of nothing. The Platonists, on the other hand, admitted

²³ See Maas 1992: 97–104, *passim*, for a good discussion of Lydos and the philosophers.

²⁴ *Mag.* 2.23, 30; cf. Maas 1992: 88–89, 97–99, suggesting that these philosophical terms represented a deliberate rejection of the traditional language of panegyric restoration.

²⁵ *Mag.* 3.71; cf. 2.23 and *Mens.* 3.1, 3.8.

²⁶ See Sorabji 1983: 196; also Westerink 1962: xvii–xxiii. Debates on the eternity of the world were not all pagan-Christian polemics. Lang and Macro (2001: 1–16) show that Proklos' *On the Eternity of the World* was aimed at other non-Christian thinkers.

that God did not need preexisting matter in order to create the universe, but explicitly denied, often in attacking Christian notions, that anything had been created out of nothing.²⁷

In the remaining fragments of *On the Months* Lydos does not show any sign of self-consciousness or defensiveness in quoting Plato and the Platonists as though they expounded sound doctrine. He casually calls the Demiourgos of Plato "God."²⁸ All things considered, there is every reason to suppose that we are dealing with an author who belonged, at least in his own mind, to those Platonist circles of the sixth century that rejected Christianity. Granted, "Neoplatonism itself is not monolithic but contains many varieties, including views that contradict one another,"²⁹ but I doubt that further research will be able to pinpoint Lydos' loyalties with greater precision, given his eclectic choice of sources and the fragmentary survival of his work. With regard to his religion what is important is his preference for non-Christian teachers and teachings.

Of course it is difficult to know when Lydos is writing as a scholar and citing a variety of views for the sake of thoroughness and when he is writing as an exegete giving his own views. We must presuppose the former to a degree, because he often gives conflicting explanations or etymologies for religious words, practices, and lore. Yet he *never* allows Christian attitudes or doctrines to enter his work, even when he is discussing beliefs that no Christian could accept. This poses a serious problem to those who believe that he was writing for a Christian audience, since they must then argue that *On the Months* does not reflect any of its author's beliefs, just as though it were a handbook on ancient Roman religion written by a modern scholar who might be a Christian in his or her personal convictions. Lydos gives no indication that his work should be taken in such a hypothetical sense, though it survives in fragmentary form and some declaration, perhaps in the preface, must have led Photios to believe that Lydos may have venerated the Christian faith. But the problem remains: when Lydos says in *On the Months* 4.45 that according to the Egyptians Isis is the giver of health just as "we" say the same of Asklepios, who are "we"? Are we Hellenes, or, as Maas would argue, are we post-Hellenic Christians who enjoy the benefit of a classical education? Yet to my knowledge no Christian author of the first six centuries wrote in such a neutral way: all made sure to disclose their theological stance toward the pagan gods and the cults that they were discussing. All of them would have said: "as the Hellenes (wrongly) say about Asklepios."

But the problem is even more complicated, for it is not clear that Lydos ranks himself among the Hellenes here. A different and deeper identity may be at work. Though the text is epitomized and possibly corrupt, the beliefs that it attributes to "us" seem to belong to the realm of philosophical exegesis rather than of popular belief, as the citation of Plutarch's essay *On Isis and Osiris* at the

²⁷ For references and discussion, see Sorabji 1983: 248–249, 268, 313–314.

²⁸ For example, *Mens.* 1.17.

²⁹ Lang and Macro 2001: 12.

end indicates. "We" may be philosophers rather than just Greeks. This accords with Lydos' usage: by Hellenes he always means roughly what modern scholars do, i.e., a people with their own history and religious traditions, on a par with the Egyptians, the Thracians, the Jews, etc. In other words, he does not use "Hellene" as his contemporary Christians did, to signify "pagans."

This interpretation is confirmed by the surviving fragments of *On the Months* 4.159–160, a study on the nature of matter, the elements, and the allegorical exegesis of Greek myth. Lydos cites some beliefs of "the Greeks" regarding the god Dionysos, but then says that those beliefs are deficient because whoever expounded them did not know what philosophy says about the god. Lydos, therefore, does not accept the Christian definition of "Hellene," separates mythographers and poets from philosophers, and assuredly places himself on the side of the latter. This reveals a mentality at odds with his Christian contemporaries and fully in tune with his Neoplatonic mentors.

Whatever the exact proportion of Platonic exegesis and antiquarian research, Lydos makes a number of statements that cannot easily be ascribed to a Christian—such as his implication that matter was not created out of nothing—and sometimes makes them in connection with topics close to his heart. For example, he endorses an oracle given to Romulus and cited by the late-Republican *pontifex* Fonteius Capito, according to which Fortune would desert the Romans when they forgot their native language. He is defensive about quoting it in *On the Magistracies* (2.12, 3.42), but still vouches for its truth, connecting it to the recent abandonment of Latin as the official language of the office of the praetorian prefecture. That was a topic on which Lydos had strong views, and it is telling that he should support them by an oracle given to Romulus and recorded by a Roman priest. He cites the same oracle again in *On the Months* (fr. 7).³⁰

Lydos endorses an even more astonishing oracle in *On the Months* 4.145. He there cites a prophecy by the Sibyl that the Romans would retain their dominion so long as they looked after the *agalmata*, the sacred statues, of their city. Lydos then says in his own voice that this indeed came to pass, for when Avitus ruled (in 455–456) he dared to melt them down and so imperial power departed from Italy. It is important to note that Lydos endorses the truth of this oracle and does not merely cite it out of scholarly curiosity. His position is close to that of Zosimos, who ca 500 wrote a history of the later Roman empire arguing that its decline was due to the neglect of the pagan cults by the Christian emperors. This was precisely the view that Augustine had written his *City of God against the Pagans* to refute. The connection with Zosimos will be pursued further below.

In *On the Months* 4.47 Lydos reproduces the list of the ten Sibyls compiled by his favorite authority, Varro.³¹ Lydos supplements Varro with information found

³⁰ For Fonteius, see Weinstock 1950: 44–49.

³¹ Varro's account (from the *Divine Antiquities*) was also reproduced in Lactant. *Div. Inst.* 1.6. For Lydos' first-hand knowledge and careful use of Varro, see Flintoff 1976: 365–377.

in later sources which identified the first Sibyl, the Persian who predicted the wars of Alexander the Great, with the Hebrew Sambethe, supposedly a descendant of Noah. In particular, a prologue to a collection of Sibylline prophecies written by a Christian around 500 exactly matches Lydos' text here. Its author also had Varro's list, though only at second hand, through Lactantius, whom he cites.³² So Lydos encountered the same information twice. Yet he also dates some of the Sibyls to the age of Judges, which the anonymous prologue does not do, and so probably Lydos had additional sources. Also beyond sources known to us he tries to explain why Sibylline oracles are so vague. Either the "speed-writers" who took them down were not fast enough or they were inadequately trained in philology. In any case, Lydos postulates that this happened through divine "oikonomia," i.e., prudent handling of the matter, since God did not want the many and the unworthy to know the oracles. It is interesting that his explanation for the obscurity of the Sibyls relies on a term used by many Christians to explain God's plan for human salvation.³³ So whether it was his own or based on another source, this argument was written by someone who fully believed the Sibyls to be divinely inspired.

It is here that Lydos makes his only reference to Christ. After listing the nine other Sibyls, he returns to the Jewish one and notes that he found on Cyprus a copy of her book which predicted that God would resurrect a wise man who wrote about the war of the heroes and praised the bravest among them. Lydos took this to be an obvious reference to Homer. The book also foretold the coming of Christ and the events that would happen afterwards down to the end of the world: Antioch would be destroyed by war and Cyprus would sink beneath the waves. The lines that Lydos cites for Antioch and Cyprus survive in *Sibylline Oracle* 4.140–144, which seem to be a Jewish addition to an early Hellenistic work.³⁴ There is no mention anywhere in the extant oracles of the resurrection of Homer or of any pagan figures in Hell.³⁵ Lydos also quotes a verse about the Cross, taken from *Sibylline Oracle* 6.26, which is really not an oracle at all but a hymn to Christ written before 300 A.D., which somehow found its way into the Sibylline texts.³⁶ Lydos ascribes all these predictions to the book he found on Cyprus and says that they were made two thousand years before Christ.

It is not clear what we should make of this section of *On the Months*, which is probably not preserved in its original form, making Lydos as difficult to interpret

³²Text in Geffcken 1902: 1–5; tr. and discussion by J. J. Collins in Charlesworth 1983: 1.327–329; for the Sibyls in general, see 317–324.

³³For a summary of the meanings of *oikonomia*, see A. Papadakis in the *ODB* 1516–17.

³⁴Text in Geffcken 1902: 99; tr. by J. J. Collins in Charlesworth 1983: 381–389. The Antioch verses alone were used later by the (possibly Jewish) author of *Sibylline Oracle* 13.12–126, referring to events of the third century A.D. (*ibid.* 453–458).

³⁵Cf. Trumbower 2001: 52, 94–95. The eleventh-century intellectual Ioannes Mauropous prayed to Christ on behalf of Plato and Plutarch: *Epigram* 43 (de Lagarde 1882: 24).

³⁶Text in Geffcken 1992: 132; tr. by J. J. Collins in Charlesworth 1983: 406–407.

as the Sibyls. It is possible that a Byzantine epitomizer has omitted prophecies ascribed by Lydos to the other Sibyls, leaving only those that referred to Christ and the end of the world. It is not easy to say whether Lydos believed these prophecies, and even if he did it would not be a testament to the purity of his Christian faith. The salvation of Homer and a God who makes predictions about the wars of Troy and Alexander the Great through pagan Sibyls is not exactly the stuff of the Council of Nikaia. And we must always suspect dissimulation on Lydos' part, for he also believed that the pagan Sibyls were genuine, as witnessed by his belief that the western empire fell when the Romans stopped honoring the statues of the gods.³⁷

It is also curious, if one believes that Lydos was a Christian, that he never uses Orthodox sources when discussing the Old Testament. In 4.47 he cites Philo on Moses and the Hebrew language, and the opinions that he cites regarding the nature of the Jewish God in 4.53 are those of the "Egyptians," the "Greeks," as well as (among others) Varro, Livius, Julian (the pagan emperor!), Origenes (the heretic), Porphyrios, and many other Neoplatonists. Not a whiff of what the authoritative Church Fathers had to say.

Like many of the Neoplatonists Lydos believed in oracles. In addition, his work *On Celestial Signs*, which sets out to explain events with little or no reference to divine providence, shows that he believed in astrology as well. Photios admitted that for his part he could not tell the difference between this work and pure "myth." The author of the *Taktika* of the emperor Leo VI reached the same conclusion in the tenth century, dismissing the work as beyond the pale of the Church.³⁸ Perhaps he too "misunderstood" the cultural scene of the sixth century. But even Maas grants that the work's "astrological explanation of the universe" is "pagan in origin."³⁹

In addition, Lydos' comments about certain heroes and historical individuals correspond to nothing in the tradition of Christian discourse. Aeneas, he says in the first chapter of *On the Magistracies*, "the eldest and most honorable of all men," was "believed to be the son of one greater than human on account of the beauty and strength of his soul and body." He shows no theological animus against this belief, which reflects the heroic values of Homer rather than those of the New Testament. Brutus, Lydos reports later without any sign of skepticism or scholarly detachment, sought the advice of the god in Athens on how to expel the Roman kings, and the *daimonion* explained to him exactly what he must do.⁴⁰ Highly

³⁷ *Mens.* 4.145; cf. also 4.8.

³⁸ Leo VI, *Taktika*, epilogue 67 (Migne, PG 107, 1092). For a thinker from Leo's reign whose subversive dissimulation aimed to replace Orthodoxy with esoteric astrology and philosophy, see Magdalino 1997.

³⁹ Maas 1992: 107–108: "He exacts no moral truths. In his scheme of causation, impersonal forces are active." Cf. also Carney 1971: pt. 2, 10–11.

⁴⁰ *Mag.* 1.31. For the use by Agathias, supposedly a Christian, of a story about Artemis to prove his exoteric thesis about divine justice, see *The Histories* 2.10.3; for his philosophical views, see Kaldellis 1999.

striking also is the account in *On the Months* of the emperor Julian's war against Persia. Lydos does not disguise the fact that Julian was deceived (and faults him for not remembering his Herodotos, who tells a like story of self-mutilated double-agents), but nevertheless notes that the emperor fought bravely before the end (4.118: *arista*).

Lydos' view of recent imperial history also shows some affinities with that of Zosimos, another bureaucrat in the capital and author of an anti-Christian history of Roman imperial rule. The two men may even have known each other, as Zosimos' dates are not securely known: his *History* is generally assigned to the second half of the reign of Anastasios, and so nothing precludes the possibility that he was still alive during, say, the Nika riots.⁴¹ Both men were republicans, in that they tended to view monarchy, and especially Roman imperial rule, as potential tyranny.⁴² But Zosimos also blamed Christianity for Rome's fall and accused Constantine in particular of abandoning the rituals that ensured divine favor and of murdering his son and wife. For this stance he was attacked in the late sixth century by the ecclesiastical historian Evagrius as an "accursed and foul Hellene."⁴³ Now Lydos does not of course engage in this kind of religious polemic, though signs of it may be visible in his assent to the oracle which predicted that Rome would fall when the Romans ceased paying respect to the statues of their gods. Yet many of the things that he says about Constantine originate in Zosimos or at least in a very similar tradition. Both authors charge that emperor with demilitarizing the Balkan frontier, allowing the barbarians to plunder freely, and with significantly raising taxes—which Lydos elsewhere takes as a sure sign of tyranny.⁴⁴ Both he and Zosimos were interested in the history of Roman offices and the origin of pagan cults. Perhaps the chief ideological difference between them, namely the absence of overt religious polemic in Lydos, can be explained by the changed circumstances under Justinian and the possibility that Lydos hoped for a broader and more sympathetic audience for his work than the partisan polemic of Zosimos would ever receive in a Christian empire.

Maas notes the connection between Zosimos and Lydos and concedes that the latter "stands at the end of a diminuendo of pagan polemic against Christianity We hear in his political expression the echoes of an angry tradition" (49).⁴⁵ More echoes can perhaps be recovered. Lydos shared with Prokopios an aversion to all "innovation." That is probably the single most important charge leveled against Justinian in the *Secret History*, and in *On the Magistracies* Lydos links innovation to tyranny in his discussion of the emperor Domitian: "he was vainglorious and liked innovations, for it is characteristic of tyrants to

⁴¹ For an exhaustive review, see Paschoud 2000: vii–xx.

⁴² Zos. 1.5, with Paschoud 1975. For an examination of Lydos' politics, see Kaldellis forthcoming.

⁴³ Zos. 2.29–38; Evagrius *HE* 3.40–41 (Whitby 2000: 186–192).

⁴⁴ *Mag.* 2.10, repeated verbatim in 3.31, 3.33, 3.40 (this repetition is taken as a sign of the work's unfinished state); tyranny: 1.4 (in connection with Diocletian); cf. 3.47, praise for Anastasios' reduction of taxes.

⁴⁵ Maas 1992: 86–87 for Constantine; cf. 48–52 for Zosimos.

overturn anciently established customs."⁴⁶ In *On the Months* Lydos asserts that Theodosios II "innovated" when he deleted the Olympiads from the dating system (though it is unclear exactly to which event this refers).⁴⁷ His concern for the preservation of ancient customs is also reflected in his pride that Janus' two-faced statue was still used in processions in his native city Philadelphiea: "a trace of antiquity survives down to this day."⁴⁸ And in his discussion of Domitian he notes that one of that emperor's officials removed the traditional insignia of the prefect, including the vine-switches in honor of the god Dionysos, "who had once been revered"; unfortunately the discussion of this event in *On the Months* is lost.⁴⁹ But it is clear that Lydos reacted negatively to the abolition or alteration of any ancient religious custom. To this extent his work was motivated by concerns similar to those of Proklos' circle and of Zosimos, who were both very conservative when it came to traditional rites. Lydos knew that the antiquity which he upheld was opposed by many Christians, as for instance when he notes that the Church turned people away from the festival of the Brumalia even though its pagan character had already been suppressed.⁵⁰ Significantly, this is the only time that he mentions the Church as an institution, just as it is significant that he mentions Christ only in his discussion of the Sibylline oracles.

In the eastern empire philosophical alternatives to Christianity continued to flourish well into the sixth century. Proklos and his students defined the shape of the Platonic tradition for the next 1300 years, through Psellos, Plethon, Bessarion, and Ficino. In the earlier part of his life, at least, Lydos could have found an extensive circle of men who remained loyal to the older tradition, including Agapios, Zosimos, Damaskios and his students, and the prefect Phokas. There were no doubt others unknown to us, the targets of Justinian's laws against feigned Christianity. The most cultured men of the age, including the jurist Tribonianos and the historian Prokopios, have been suspected of belonging to this group and should now be classified as non-Christians.⁵¹ So too were the historians Agathias of Myrina and Hesychios of Miletos, born in the 520s and 530s. There *was* a pagan intelligentsia in the sixth-century empire and much of it originated or carried on in the traditional centers of Greek philosophy, Athens and the western coast of Asia Minor. These men would have been very receptive to the ideas of Lydos. They were not necessarily hostile to Christianity, though Justinian's reign of terror probably silenced them on this count. Still, there were always ways to get around the authorities, as Prokopios revealed in the *Secret History*, as the emperor

⁴⁶ Prokop. *Anec.* 6.21, 8.26, 11.2, 13.33, 21.24, 26.11, and *passim*; *Mag.* 2.19; for Domitian's innovations, cf. also 1.49; for tyranny, cf. the definition in 1.3.

⁴⁷ *Mens.* 4.103, not addressed by Grumel (1958: 191–192, 211–212).

⁴⁸ *Mens.* 4.2.

⁴⁹ *Mag.* 2.19 (now counted as *Mens.* 1.40).

⁵⁰ *Mens.* 4.158; cf. the discussion in Maas 1992: 64–65.

⁵¹ They will be examined in separate studies (see Kaldellis 2004). For Tribonianos, see the interesting discoveries of Lanata (1984 and 1989).

admitted to his chagrin in his own laws, and as Photios discovered later when he tried to decipher the religion of Lydos.

Recent scholarship has rightly objected against drawing too stark a contrast between pagans and Christians in late antiquity. In some respects these two concepts are too vague and broad to admit of precise identifications, even if saying that they are “not mutually exclusive,” as does Maas, is going too far.⁵² Granted, there was a degree of continuity in religious practice and belief in late antiquity regardless of the particular sect that owned people’s allegiance.⁵³ But unless we assume that Justinian, Damaskios, Simplicios, Zosimos, and Phokas viewed Christianity and philosophical Hellenism as mutually incompatible, we cannot begin to make sense of their actions. Their choices meant *something* to them, especially to the Platonists.⁵⁴ Why else did they not just convert when there were so many incentives to do so, both positive and negative (and especially negative)?

The burden of proof lies entirely upon those who assert that Lydos believed in Christ, and given the evidence it seems unlikely that they can shake it off. To say, with Maas, that he was “a Christian with ambiguous ties to Christianity” is ambiguous indeed, especially as the same scholar says that “we know little about the beliefs of the individuals who worshipped secretly at Constantinople.”⁵⁵ The astrology of *On Celestial Signs* would find readers in any age, Christian or other,⁵⁶ but the presence in Justinian’s Constantinople of such Christians as would be interested in the material that Lydos offers in *On the Months* has yet to be demonstrated. Such a group would certainly not include men like Romanos the Melodos, Kosmas Indikopleustes, or the deacon Agapetos, each in his own way an exponent of Christian empire. We know little about the prefect Gabrielios to whom Lydos dedicated the work, other than that he composed a two-line poem on Eros.⁵⁷ We know nothing of the religious beliefs of the vast majority of the inhabitants of Constantinople, and it seems that even those who have written treatises have not been classified correctly. It was precisely at this time that the official culture of the empire began to abandon classical paradigms and embrace miraculous icons.⁵⁸ But we still cannot even guess how many intellectuals would have embraced the esoteric pagan lore that fascinated Lydos and his friends.

I would like to conclude by drawing attention to an incidental comment that Lydos makes in *On the Magistracies*, which might seem at first to be inconsequential, but which can potentially define his attitude toward religion more powerfully than any direct statement of his on the topic—if only we had the

⁵² Maas 1992: 4.

⁵³ van Uytendanghe 1993, citing previous bibliography.

⁵⁴ Cf. Ando 2001: 373, on the Latin antiquarians.

⁵⁵ Maas 1992: 72.

⁵⁶ See Wachsmuth 1897: xxxix–xlii.

⁵⁷ *PLRE* 3.498; cf. the *Anth. Pal.* 16.208.

⁵⁸ See Av. Cameron 1981. For a reaction against this development by a contemporary, see Kaldellis 2003.

means to decipher its exact cultural significance. Fear of an imminent invasion of Italy by Alexander the Great led the Romans to elect generals and tribunes and to appoint augurs and pontiffs. With regard to the latter Lydos comments: "for those who have recourse to prayers in a time of war clearly expect defeat" (1.38). This snide comment verges on being irreligious, but in any case it entirely contradicts the hope expressed by Justinian in many of his edicts that prayers would bring victory. No one who makes such a comment can belong to the world of late-antique "spirituality" which so fascinates many scholars. It takes a cynical view of prayer and mocks its state-sponsored varieties.

This may be the point at which Christians and some philosophers part ways. The continuum may not hold, and it is attitude that counts, not doctrine. The supreme importance of prayer for military victory is asserted in every Christian discussion of the topic known to me.⁵⁹ But compare Plotinos:

it would not be right for a god to fight in person for the unwarlike; the law says that those who fight bravely, not those who pray, are to come safe out of wars; for, in the same way, it is not those who pray but those who look after their land who are to get in a harvest.⁶⁰

Older scholarship would call this reason. Today we lack a word for it. Common sense perhaps? It is the problem of Vigilantius once more. How are we to integrate these attitudes with oracles, omens, astrology, and Platonic metaphysics? For that would seem to be the religion of Ioannes Lydos.⁶¹

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⁵⁹ Sources in McCormick 1990: 237-252, to which many more can be added.

⁶⁰ Plotinos *Enn.* 3.2.8.36-39 (tr. Armstrong 1967: 3.71). Cf. Pl. *Leg.* 709b-c; Epiktetos *Discourses* 2.16.13-14; Psellos *Chronographia* 6.133.

⁶¹ I wish to thank John Fine, Chris Lillington-Martin, and the journal's two anonymous readers, all of whose suggestions and corrections improved this paper.

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