

The Problems of Religious Identity and Tolerance in Late Antiquity and their Modern Repercussions

27 Febbraio 2020
Dimitar Dimitrov

Abstract

The questions of religious identity and tolerance were strongly debated in the Roman fourth century. Especially prominent were the positions of three persons shortly discussed.

One of them was the Emperor Julian, who considered himself as a follower of completely tolerant policy, but his predominantly Christian opponents treated his ideas and deeds as scandalous. Themistius, the famous orator, philosopher and politician, who was moreover a “pagan”, preferred to treat religions in the context of ethnicity and what we call nowadays the methods of cultural anthropology. What Themistius was trying to create as a concept was the universe of ‘philanthropy’, a very complex notion of the Hellenistic thought. Synesius of Cyrene, a Christian bishop, is the third example of that line. His idea of tolerance was dictated by his idea of civilization. Out of the civilized Graeco-Roman world, where official Christianity and Hellenistic “paganism” were cozy disposed, the heretics, ascetics, Cynics and all other uncivilized and barbarian groups were excluded and strongly castigated.

Culture and religion were intrinsically interconnected according to the way of thinking of the apologists of Hellenism in Late Antiquity. Most of the anti-Christian invectives at that period used to circulate around that main topic, namely the role of culture and tradition.

Julian, Emperor from 361 to 363, was not an exclusion of that line of intellectual behavior [1].

Feeling free to act in whatever manner he had considered of being right, after becoming Emperor Julian discarded Christianity, **proclaiming the new era of tolerance for the beloved cults of the past.** Christian bishops from different denominations were accepted by the Emperor who announced the right of all the streams in Christianity to exist. Christians, however, did not accept this as an act of freedom, but rather as an attempt for destruction.

According to the historian Ammianus Marcellinus, generally an admirer of Julian, this step was politically intentional in order to allow the Christians from the different camps to destroy themselves like “wild beasts” (Res Gestae, XXII, 5). Following the mission to stop Christianity, the young Emperor tried, too, to install a strict control over the educational sphere. A law was issued forbidding the Christians to teach in public schools, but just in their catechetical schools. This law was repulsed by many, Christians and ‘pagans’ alike, insofar as it contradicted to the generally free educational curriculum, which was far from the ideological pressure of the modern times.

Even Ammianus, otherwise a pagan, proclaimed the law as a one “worthy of oblivion” (Res Gestae, XXII, 10, 7; XXV, 4, 20). **Julian was moving, however, from the primal concept of tolerance towards the idea that universal empire did required a universal religion, too. Christianity was not fit for this, being a local doctrine of fishermen and other ordinary Jews from Galilaea, as it was developed by Julian in his famous treatise *Against the Galileans*, which we could only partly piece together nowadays.** Different nations used to develop different cults, philosophical Hellenism being the most sophisticated and elevated expression of the role and action of the Divinity in the universe. Neither Jews, nor the Christians should pretend of being unique and exclusive towards the others. **The theories of the Emperor were even put into action by his intention of creating a universal Hellenist “Church”, using silently or not the model of the Christians.**

Thus, the predisposed tolerance in the religious sphere was substituted by an obvious attempt to exclude the most vibrant and victorious religion, claiming traditional counterrevolution with certain signs of innovation in a more universalistic and therefore intolerant manner. Only the premature death of Julian during the Persian campaign in 363 put the end to his ideas, giving the Christians an opportunity for relief.

Themistius was a pagan orator and philosopher who was also usually included into the group of the hated ones because of his active participation in the creation of what we could style as “the new Constantinopolitan order”. Themistius was considered as a conformist, a renegade and a parvenu by some of his, mostly pagan, contemporaries. During the Byzantine Middle Ages, however, he was rated among the most illustrious orators and philosophers, as one of the best connoisseurs of Aristotle.

Emperor Julian was one of those who demonstrated cool attitude towards Themistius' activity and views. Notwithstanding the mutual hints of courtesy (Themistius even called Julian the greatest philosopher among the emperors in his Oration VII 99d), Julian's letter to Themistius emphasized the difference between them and also the incompatibility of their political views (Letter to Themistius, 253a-267b). **Julian was the hero and the symbol of the 'political' conservative trend in the intellectual paganism, while Themistius was the representative of the more liberal and tolerant approach, illustrating the possibility for the Roman/Late Hellenistic elite to pass beyond the barrier of religious and confessional differences.** This was to be done with a clear sight ahead, uniting two main tasks: protection of the Empire as a universal political unity and preservation of the cultural values of the ancient world, especially those of Hellenism cherished zealously by our philosopher, orator and *arbiter morum*.

For Themistius, moreover, philosophy and politics were two sides of a coin. Being supporter of a rather practical philosophy, Themistius was eager to share it with many educated people, not just with the closed elite of chosen ones. The philosopher should, furthermore, interfere into politics and thus use his knowledge for the prosperity of the society and the state. Themistius' deep cognition of Aristotle added perhaps to such a pro-active approach, partly at odds with main trends in the Neoplatonic circles of the day, which preferred certain rather elitarian isolationism. In his dispute, direct or not, with Julian, **Themistius defended openly the political activity as proper pursuits for an intellectual man, while the young Augustus was rather pleading in favor of the contemplative life, dedicated to science and the gods [2].** Themistius remained a pagan until the end of his days, although serving exclusively Christian emperors. Christianity knew even less than Porphyry and Julian, the famous enemies of the new religion, but probably better than the majority of the pagans. His religious views were a rather interesting symbiosis in the mainstream of the transitional Hellenism, stretched between Antiquity and what we define as Byzantine Middle Ages.

The religious approach of Themistius was a phenomenon in itself, defined by religious and philosophical tolerance, quite exceptional of the age. In his portentous speech dedicated to Emperor Jovian (363-364), our orator defended the right of being different.

Difference guarantees the existence of competition and progress in return (Oration V, 67b-70c). Views like that, expressed in this speech, sound strikingly modern and familiar to us. Further, the religious and philosophical doctrines of his age, that is, the fourth century AD, Themistius did connect with the main ethno-cultural groups of the Eastern Empire. Hellenism was inseparable part of the Greco-Roman civilization, presupposing certain rich philosophical inheritance along with cults, mythology, and literature. Christianity, along with Judaism, was a part of the religious culture of the "Syrians". By "Egyptians" were meant not so much the native population of Egypt, but rather the followers of the Egyptian Hermetism, if not even some trends in Gnosticism, or the mystical cults in general. In order to escape from the dangerous vortex of fanaticism, the clever orator and philosopher preferred to speak about ethnoses and cultures.

Thus, religion was given meaning with the language of the cultural anthropology. **The religious cults do not, neither they did exist, for itself, but were the function of the *politeiai* – a complicated definition, which includes the civilized city-life, religious practice and theory, and ethnical/linguistic appurtenance altogether.** The *politeiai* of the Hellenes, Syrians and Egyptians represented then the main cultural domains of the Empire [3].

Otherwise, the Neoplatonic language and concepts were visible in the writings of Themistius, too. The Supreme God is One, but the people used to call him with different names and to pay homage to different emanations, or avatars of him, deified and thus treated as gods. They do this according to their race, culture, language, traditions. Such ideas we could decipher in Julian as well (especially in his oration *To the king of gods Helios*). The Emperor is obliged, therefore, to defend the civilization in its diversity, being the unique, and unifying, image of God here-it. This tolerant addition was more of the world-view of Themistius, than of Julian. **Themistius did re-develop the old Hellenistic idea of *philanthropia*, using it as defining the love and dutifulness of the ruler, toward his subjects, but also as expression of the religious and cultural tolerance.** This tolerance, moreover, Themistius broadened to the extent of accepting Goths and other barbarians into the imperial universe as wolves who had been successfully transferred into sheep, their weapons – into ploughs. To destroy ‘barbarians’ meant to deprive nature of one of its main constituents [4].

From the universe of *philanthropia*, then, Themistius excluded only fanaticism, black magic and the popular superstitions.

The conservative pagans disliked and disbelieved Themistius because of his proximity to the Christian Emperors and their clique. The humanists of the Renaissance were filled with admiration for him in his employ of philosopher and commentator of Aristotle, rather than as pre-humanist in a sense. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola mentioned him in his famous *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, also in the context of philosophical and mystical thought [5].

G. Dagron was searching some parallels with M. de Montaigne (189). Themistius was close to that spirit, although in the realities of the Late Empire, embedded into the culture of Hellenism. He was brave and sober enough to criticize the extremes of Christianization, when they did not respond to his ideas of religious freedom, even in front of Christian Emperors. In a speech to the Roman senators, many of them still pagans, Themistius advertised his pagan affiliation, stating that “**Thanks to You, Fathers, gods have not left the world yet**” (Oration 13, 178a). According to the good old traditions of Hellenism, Themistius defended under the shadow of the Capitoline hill the beauty of the cosmos against those who were prone to refute it. The note was addressed to all those who blasphemously called this world the dwelling of Evil, envisaging probably different groups altogether, from the Cynics through the Gnostic sects up to the extremes of certain monastic communities. In the fourth century the boundary between both groups was still not very clear. In the case of Themistius the thesis of the ascetics was turned vice versa: it is really not possible to love the world beyond if you don’t appreciate the world here-it.

Synesius of Cyrene (ca. 370-ca. 413) was one of the famous late antique Greek-speaking intellectuals, from Cyrene in North Africa (modern Libya), and also a bishop of Ptolemais in his later years. In the quite extensive literature on him during the last two centuries there is generally an uncertainty concerning his religious views – was he really a Christian or rather a pagan philosopher to become bishop? Nowadays it is quite clear that he was a Christian, but faithful to his Hellenistic *paideia* and the Neoplatonic philosophy.

His political views were shaped out of his education and intellectual endeavor. Although Synesius defended, as Julian had done before, the contemplative philosophical attitude, he had to agree, along with Themistius, that philosophy and politics should in certain conditions go together [6]. In his notorious letter 105 Synesius expressed clearly his doubts and uncertainties before accepting bishopric, but also stressed on the need of duties to be fulfilled. If, called by God and the conditions, the highly educated person is summoned to rule, he should do it as a real philosopher on the throne, in a very Platonic way. This is generally the quintessence of Synesius' political doctrine: escape the agora, but when a ruler on a certain level, be a real philosopher-ruler, without giving up any of your principles. It is to be sure, moreover, that Synesius was a staunch elitarian, and according to him only very few could be called by fate and God to deal with both philosophy and politics. It is a real chance to follow life absorbed in philosophy and literature. The love and feeling of duty towards your city, province, and state (the three main levels of patriotism in the Late Roman times) should move you, however, from your comfort, being anyway part of the philosophical employ. Before accepting bishopric around 410, Synesius reasoned in the same way the civil duties (*leitourgiai, munera*) are a God-will choice in a sense and are to be followed (letters 105, 96,11).

Julian and Synesius might be compared according to their reflective framework, betraying conservatism, certain xenophobia and the phanatical zeal for the Hellenistic *paideia* and Neoplatonic philosophy. One of them was a militant pagan, the other – Christian bishop, but both of them stood firmly at the one side of the dividing *limes* between conservatism and what we could define as modernity in the fourth century. Themistius, however, stood rather at the other side. It is to be noticed, that many boundaries existed at that time inside the intellectual and political elite of the Late Roman Empire, the division Christianity-paganism being just one of them, not always as important. Synesius based himself on Neoplatonism and conservative Hellenistic models to such an extent, that many scholars were ready to recognize him rather as a pagan, or crypto-pagan, than as a Christian.

In letter 105 he announced to Theophilus, the Patriarch of Antioch, his views and principles, which divided him from the “popular” Christianity, but this was not an impediment for the otherwise rigorous Patriarch to inaugurate himself on the ecclesiastical post. **The Church itself was trying at the time to gain over the able members of the urban elite, often closing eyes for some differences, which we consider important, but looking anachronistically from the point of view of Medieval or Reformist Europe.** The realities of the Late Roman Empire were different and the divisions between Christians and the pagan elite were not the main problem, as we are sometimes pushed to believe by some very ‘loud’ Christian authors and proponents of a more intolerant approach. They were, however, credited more in the later centuries.

Synesius became very popular in the late Byzantine intellectual tradition. Writers and humanists like Nicephorus Gregoras and Theodore Metochites adored him, although the latter was complaining because of the difficult language and style. From the falling Byzantine Empire the texts of Synesius were transferred to Italy and far away in Renaissance and humanist Europe. The first printed edition of his letters appeared as early as 1499 in Venice, in the printing house of Aldo Manuzio.

Three editions of his writings saw the light of the day in Paris during the 16th century (1553, 1568, 1586), especially important being that of the hymns, done by F. Portus. Synesius was inspiring intrinsically not only the Renaissance humanists, but also Catholic counter-reformists, like D. Pétau. For the first group he was a curious man, a kind of a ‘pagan’ erudite, liberal in the means of religion, and moreover wise philosopher and hermetic, while for the second group he was the real prototype of the highly intellectual Christian bishop and fighter for the true faith, a “proto-Jesuit” in a sense [7].

The historical Synesius, rather than his later image accepted in Europe, was rather a practical man of the age, fighting with the challenges of the time. In his famous writings *De regno* and *De providentia* he expressed his political views along with what I define as the new Roman/*Rhomeian* patriotism. Together with his elder contemporary, Themistius, they followed cultural models from the past, including the authority of authors like Dio Chrysostomus and Aelius Aristides from the first two imperial centuries. **Both the narrative “statue” of the ideal ruler and the importance of the Greco-Roman symbiosis for reaching cultural completeness and perfection were the cornerstones of that late Hellenism and Romanism, so typical for the Late Antiquity.** The new Empire of Constantinople was the stronghold of hopes for preserving an ancient culture and philosophy and alien influence was snobbishly ignored or let inside, but only with certain reservations [8].

Concerning “barbarians”, Synesius was keeping to the strongly anti-Gothic line of argumentation both in *De regno* and *De providentia*. His anti-barbarian attitude had different overtones. He was politically against the enrollment of Germans and other barbarians into the army and administration, as it was the practice at that time. Secondly, he was looking with suspicion the beliefs of those barbarians, especially Arianism among the Goths, but also among some native people in his homeland Cyrenaica. **Further, Synesius was afraid for the future of the Greco-Roman culture, and civilization, as it came to be obvious from his *Dio*, or how to live according to his ideal. In this program pamphlet Synesius was defending the right to live as a free intellectual notwithstanding his different duties.** In connection with this Synesius was not shy in attacking openly his enemies. Thus, we came to know that what Synesius considered barbarian were not only the Goths and Huns, but also the “internal” barbarians, like different heretics, ascetics, or pretentious pedants and corrupted lawyers [9].

Late Antiquity could offer us differing views concerning religion, outsiders and the very concept of civilization. During the Reformation and the religious wars in Europe these questions were open again, just to enter later into both political and academic circulation.

Discussions on Julian, but also on Themistius and Synesius, bring often at the surface the views of the author, or speaker, the modern academic circles not to be excluded from the trend. **The recent discussions concerning the edicts of Serdica and Milan, for example, divided the opinions on the verge of a ‘political’ confrontation [10]. This is just an example of the Marc Bloch’s concept of the “past in function of the present and the present in the function of the past”.** Thus, the complex political and religious situation of the Roman fourth century echo through the times of Reformation and Enlightenment up to the modern academic era, obviously not immunized itself by the threats and heated debates of the past.

Contributo selezionato da Filodiritto tra quelli pubblicati nei Proceedings “2nd Southeast Europe: History, Culture, Politics and Economy - 2019”

Per acquistare i Proceedings clicca [qui](#).

Contribution selected by Filodiritto among those published in the Proceedings “2nd Southeast Europe: History, Culture, Politics and Economy - 2019”

To buy the Proceedings click [here](#).

TAG: *Late Antiquity, Christianity, proceedings*

Avvertenza

La pubblicazione di contributi, approfondimenti, articoli e in genere di tutte le opere dottrinarie e di commento (ivi comprese le news) presenti su Filodiritto è stata concessa (e richiesta) dai rispettivi autori, titolari di tutti i diritti morali e patrimoniali ai sensi della legge sul diritto d'autore e sui diritti connessi (Legge 633/1941). La riproduzione ed ogni altra forma di diffusione al pubblico delle predette opere

(anche in parte), in difetto di autorizzazione dell'autore, è punita a norma degli articoli 171, 171-bis, 171-ter, 174-bis e 174-ter della menzionata Legge 633/1941. È consentito scaricare, prendere visione, estrarre copia o stampare i documenti pubblicati su Filodiritto nella sezione Dottrina per ragioni esclusivamente personali, a scopo informativo-culturale e non commerciale, esclusa ogni modifica o alterazione. Sono parimenti consentite le citazioni a titolo di cronaca, studio, critica o recensione, purché accompagnate dal nome dell'autore dell'articolo e dall'indicazione della fonte, ad esempio: Luca Martini, La discrezionalità del sanitario nella qualificazione di reato perseguibile d'ufficio ai fini dell'obbligo di referto ex. art 365 cod. pen., in "Filodiritto" (<https://www.filodiritto.com>), con relativo collegamento ipertestuale. Se l'autore non è altrimenti indicato i diritti sono di Inforomatica S.r.l. e la riproduzione è vietata senza il consenso esplicito della stessa. È sempre gradita la comunicazione del testo, telematico o cartaceo, ove è avvenuta la citazione.