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GIULIANO MORI

History Ad maiorem Dei gloriam
Ancient Theology in the Seventeenth-Century
Jesuit Environment





III - LA CIVILTÀ DEL BAROCCO E LE DECLINAZIONI DELLA HISTORIA

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Collana Alti Studi sull'Età e la Cultura del Barocco

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Con il terzo volume della collana di pubblicazioni digitali Alti Studi sull'Età e la Cultura del Barocco, che raccoglie gli esiti delle ricerche svolte nell'ambito della terza edizione del Bando per borse di Alti Studi sul Barocco, la Fondazione 1563 vede consolidarsi la propria missione di promozione e di sostegno della ricerca in campo umanistico, rivolta particolarmente ai giovani.

Con soddisfazione possiamo affermare che le borse della Fondazione 1563, assegnate attraverso un bando annuale e giunto ad oggi alla quinta edizione, rappresentano un'opportunità di prestigio per la prosecuzione post-lauream delle attività di studio e ricerca per i giovani studiosi italiani e stranieri. Attraverso una rigorosa procedura di selezione dei candidati, l'affiancamento di tutor specializzati e la messa a disposizione di strumenti e di risorse per lo svolgimento delle ricerche, la Fondazione si è accreditata nel tempo ottenendo l'attenzione di università, accademie, scuole di dottorato e di specializzazione e istituti culturali italiani e stranieri, che indirizzano i loro migliori allievi alla partecipazione.

Attraverso l'erogazione di borse, la promozione di seminari di studio e ricerca, l'organizzazione di convegni e l'edizione di pubblicazioni che raccolgono i risultati di tutti questi tasselli dell'ampio Programma di Alti Studi sul Barocco, quella che vediamo formata oggi intorno alla Fondazione 1563 è una vera e propria comunità scientifica internazionale e intergenerazionale che coniuga il valore delle conoscenze specialistiche alla fruttuosità del confronto interdisciplinare. Tutto questo è stato possibile grazie alla competenza e alla partecipazione attiva e propositiva di tutti gli studiosi via via coinvolti e alla lungimiranza del direttore scientifico del progetto, Michela di Macco, alla quale va un ringraziamento particolare.

Le tre ricerche oggetto di questa edizione sono state svolte nell'ambito del tema *La civiltà del Barocco e le declinazioni della "Historia"* e si occupano del momento di significativo rilievo culturale della Historia tra il Seicento e la prima metà del Settecento analizzando le strategie di elaborazione culturale nella messa a fuoco di personalità, di relazioni, della produzione artistica, letteraria e filosofica del tempo. Attraverso questi volumi individuali in forma digitale perseguiamo lo scopo di mettere a disposizione della comunità scientifica i risultati di percorsi di ricerca originali e di alto livello, e di premiare queste ricerche con un titolo che possa arricchire il curriculum dei giovani ricercatori con l'auspicio di vederli proseguire nel loro percorso professionale.

Il Presidente
Rosaria Cigliano

GIULIANO MORI

History Ad maiorem Dei gloriam
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Prefazione
GUIDO GIGLIONI



GIULIANO MORI

Dopo avere ricevuto il titolo di dottore di ricerca nel 2015, Giuliano Mori ha condotto le sue ricerche presso la Fondazione 1563 per l'Arte e la Cultura (2016), l'Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton (2016-2017), e Villa I Tatti, The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, Firenze (2017-2018). Giuliano Mori è l'autore di *I geroglifici e la croce. Athanasius Kircher tra Egitto e Roma* (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2016) e di *Le tracce della verità. Metodo scientifico e retorica digressiva nell'età di Francis Bacon* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2017). Giuliano Mori ha anche pubblicato numerosi articoli riguardanti la storia della filosofia e delle idee tra Rinascimento ed età moderna.

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Prefazione

La nozione rinascimentale di *prisca theologia*, secondo cui, al momento della creazione dell'umanità, Dio avrebbe istituito un nucleo originario di conoscenze e principi morali di per sé universali e accessibili ad ogni essere umano, è al centro della ricerca di Giuliano Mori. Mori argomenta in modo convincente come durante i secoli XVII e XVIII diversi teologi della Compagnia di Gesù (o teologi vicini a questo ordine) ridefinissero e trasformassero radicalmente l'idea rinascimentale di una saggezza teologica primordiale e universale, così come essa era stata articolata soprattutto da Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) e Agostino Steuco (1497-1548). Fin da subito, questa visione aveva manifestato uno straordinario potenziale ermeneutico ed euristico, veicolando importanti idee, come la tesi di un'originaria unità della rivelazione cristiana, una visione sincretica (e quindi più tollerante) della fede religiosa e la credenza in una corrispondenza simbolica tra aspetti appartenenti a culture diverse, sia temporalmente che spazialmente. Nella sua ricerca, Mori si sofferma ad esaminare le conseguenze più propriamente culturali di questa dottrina. In questo senso, il suo è un tentativo, molto originale, di dimostrare come diversi pensatori cattolici del XVII e XVIII secolo avessero reinterpretato la nozione platonica di *prisca theologia* in varie direzioni (storiografiche, etnografiche e soteriologiche), utilizzando gli strumenti messi a punto nei due secoli precedenti dagli umanisti nei campi della filologia, ermeneutica biblica, allegoresi platonica ed erudizione antiquaria.

Nonostante l'enfasi posta sugli aspetti filosofici della questione, l'analisi di Mori si distingue per l'attenzione prestata al contesto storico. La pace di Vestfalia e i trattati di Münster e di Osnabrück, ad esempio, vengono presentati come dei momenti decisivi nell'evoluzione del pensiero teologico. È infatti in quegli anni che si viene a stabilire una chiara demarcazione tra la sfera politica e quella spirituale, mentre le gerarchie ecclesiastiche cattoliche giungono a riconoscere come l'unità religiosa dell'Europa si sia ormai irrimediabilmente infranta. Si tratta di eventi storici che contribuirono anche ad imprimere una svolta decisiva nel modo in cui la Chiesa cattolica si relazionava ad un mondo in rapida trasformazione ed espansione. Da questo punto di vista, come giustamente sottolineato da Mori, la nozione di *prisca theologia* si carica di un significato più ampio e di nuove funzioni apologetiche. Mentre nel primo Rinascimento le figure di Ermete, Mosè, Zoroastro e Orfeo erano state utilizzate per ribadire le origini comuni di ermetismo, giudaismo, cristianesimo, magia e paganesimo, ora lo studio degli sviluppi storici e filosofici di questa sapienza originaria aveva il fine di combattere le degenerazioni idolatriche diffuse in tutto il mondo e ritenute discendere dal ramo camitico del genere umano. Questa nuova interpretazione della *prisca theologia* poteva quindi essere assunta come la base per una visione globalizzante della diffusione della fede cattolica. Al concetto di un'unità primordiale della sapienza divina sottesa alla creazione dell'umanità faceva perciò riscontro un concetto di unità geografica e spaziale della rivelazione cristiana così come essa si veniva dispiegando nei processi contemporanei di evangelizzazione nel Nuovo Mondo e in Estremo Oriente. Si trattava anche di una strategia intellettuale più inclusiva, in cui tutti i popoli della terra erano chiamati a riconoscere la loro origine comune.

Gli autori esaminati da Mori, corrispondenti ai tre capitoli di cui si compone il testo qui presentato, sono Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680), alcuni esponenti seicenteschi e settecenteschi della missione gesuita in Cina fondata da Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), e Pierre-Daniel Huet (1630-1721).

Nel primo capitolo, Mori avanza una tesi interpretativa assai stimolante secondo cui gli studi egittologici di Kircher, dal *Prodromus Coptus* (1636) alla *Turris Babel* (1679), possono essere letti come documenti testimonianti una nuova strategia argomentativa da parte della Chiesa cattolica, la quale rispondeva alle minacce di incipiente secolarizzazione e divisioni confessionali in Europa allargando il raggio della sua influenza a popoli e tradizioni extra-europee. Mentre un'opera come gli *Annales ecclesiastici* (1588-1607) di Cesare Baronio aveva riconfermato la continuità e organicità della tradizione cattolica dalle origini alla sua riorganizzazione controriformistica, gli scritti di Kircher presupponevano una visione globale dei processi storici tale per cui la rivelazione della vera fede e le tendenze idolatriche si erano diffuse più o meno simultaneamente in ogni parte del mondo, seguendo le linee di una caratteristica dialettica di sapienza mosaica e degenerazioni camitiche (sorta di *prisca theologia* al negativo).

Il modello di adattamento, selezione e appropriazione culturali elaborato dagli intellettuali gesuiti ed evidente nel caso di Kircher, diventa ancor più chiaro nell'opera di Matteo Ricci. Il secondo capitolo è dedicato all'attività di vari missionari gesuiti in Cina. Mori vi sostiene due idee guida molto interessanti: il processo di adattamento culturale a cui vennero sottoposte le tradizioni religiose di confucianesimo, buddismo e taoismo e soprattutto la figura di Confucio (rappresentato come un tipico risultato di ibridizzazione religiosa, tra razionalismo teologico e naturalizzazione dell'antica sapienza cristiana) e la progressiva riduzione della nozione di *theologia naturalis* o *theologia rationalis* a una forma di *prisca theologia* aggiornata in base alla nuova realtà delle scoperte geografiche e commerci transoceanici. Il capitolo prende in esame un ampio numero di autori e opere, tra cui l'importante traduzione latina di tre dei Quattro Libri del confucianesimo, il *Confucius Sinarum philosophus*, pubblicato nel 1687. L'opera, che fu il prodotto di un lavoro di equipe supervisionato da Prospero Intorcetta, Philippe Couplet, Christian Wolfgang Herdrich e François de Rougemont, contribuì a diffondere tra gli Europei l'immagine di un Confucio come esempio di altissima sapienza umana, a metà strada tra saggezza divina e teologia naturale. Eppure anche in questo contesto di adattamenti culturali, Mori dimostra come il modello interpretativo della *prisca theologia* mantenesse una notevole forza di persistenza tra i missionari gesuiti in Cina, e anzi, nelle mani dei cosiddetti «figuristi», fra cui soprattutto il francese Joachim Bouvet (1656-1730), l'idea di una sapienza primordiale legata alla creazione stessa del mondo si fuse con il desiderio di ritrovare nei documenti della più antica saggezza cinese (si veda ad esempio *I Ching*) la presenza di originarie verità cristiane. Il rischio, come Mori sottolinea in questo capitolo, era che i riscoperti classici della filosofia e religione cinesi potessero risultare ancor più primordiali dei documenti della saggezza biblica. Non a caso, la condanna ufficiale dei riti cinesi nel 1707 da parte del legato papale Charles-Thomas Maillard de Tournon segna la fine dell'approccio gesuita all'insegna dell'*accommodatio* culturale e il declino inarrestabile della missione in Cina.

Lo studio di Mori si conclude con un terzo capitolo dedicato a Pierre-Daniel Huet, in cui si mostra come l'apparato concettuale ed ermeneutico della *prisca theologia* andasse incontro ad un ulteriore processo di trasformazione e aggiornamento dopo essere stato chiamato a combattere le minacce crescenti di cartesianesimo, spinozismo e deismo. Reagendo alle letture storicistiche della Bibbia, Huet dichiarò Mosè unico e genuino autore del Pentateuco, descritto come il vero e autentico *priscus theologus*. Il resto degli insigni teologi della più antica sapienza divina divenivano così delle rappresentazioni più o meno mitiche e paganeggianti dell'unico

teologo divino, Mosè. Con Huet diviene evidente come i principi della *prisca theologia* potessero essere usati a scopo apologetico, per controbattere, una volta adattati al nuovo panorama intellettuale, le minacce che continuavano ad essere rappresentate da movimenti atei, pagani e protestanti. In opere come *Censura philosophiae Cartesianae* (1689), *Alnetanae quaestiones de concordia rationis et fidei* (1690) e *Traité philosophique de la foiblesse de l'esprit humain* (1723), Huet poneva così le basi di quello che Mori definisce «fideismo epistemico», vale a dire, un atteggiamento metodologico improntato agli ideali dello scetticismo. Questo approccio viene a chiarirsi ulteriormente nella *Demonstratio evangelica* (1679). In quest'opera, Huet reinterpreta il rapporto tra «certezza morale» e «certezza matematica» – tema centrale nella filosofia di Descartes e Spinoza – a tutto favore del primo tipo di certezza, apprezzato per il raggio di conoscenze più estese che è in grado di offrire rispetto alla ragione sterilmente solipsistica e introspettiva del metodo matematico, nonché per il suo fare affidamento sulle discipline storiche, viste come un modello di sapere che deriva da un'esperienza reale del mondo umano e del mondo naturale. L'unico modo di oltrepassare le secche del dubbio cartesiano è dunque quello di abbracciare la certezza della fede (sia essa intersoggettiva, storica o religiosa). Su queste basi Huet rovescia la tesi avanzata da Spinoza nel *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, secondo cui Mosè non poteva essere l'autore dei primi cinque libri della Bibbia, e ripristina invece il primato storico ed epistemologico di Mosè, descritto ora come una sorta di archetipo profetico alla base della rivelazione biblica. In questo modo i *prisci teologi* potevano essere «storicizzati» e reinterpretati come differenti incarnazioni – in differenti culture, differenti aree geografiche e differenti epoche – dell'originaria figura di Mosè, profeta per eccellenza e fondamento di ogni antica teologia che volesse presentarsi come immune da derive idolatriche o indebite appropriazioni libertine (Mori chiama questa universalizzazione della figura di Mosè «panmosaismo»). Con Huet giungono quindi a maturazione (maturazione che quindi sembra dare il via al parallelo declino) due importanti componenti del dibattito moderno relativo ai rapporti tra filosofia e teologia: la teologia naturale e la *prisca theologia*. È soprattutto nel terzo capitolo che Mori dimostra come, verso la fine del XVII secolo, l'assimilazione di motivi tipici della *prisca theologia*, specialmente in Francia, avesse dato luogo ad una sorta di competizione intellettuale per il legittimo possesso dei temi caratteristici dell'antica sapienza, dopo che vari esponenti di correnti libertine e deistiche avevano usato la ripresa di elementi della filosofia e teologia degli antichi come un mezzo per contrabbandare idee care a tradizioni scettiche ed eterodosse. In questo senso, il carattere squisitamente religioso dello scetticismo di Huet nasceva dall'esigenza di rispondere alla parallela ripresa della teologia naturale e l'antica sapienza pagana da parte di varie correnti libertine e deistiche.

Dalla lettura del testo di Mori emergono alcuni risultati che di certo forniranno un importante contributo a future ricerche nel campo in questione. In primo luogo, Mori propone un'originale revisione della tesi (per molti versi ancora prevalente tra gli studiosi di storia della metafisica moderna), secondo cui i principi ontologici sottesi alla teologia gesuita erano di natura monoliticamente aristotelica. Il caso di Kircher, ad esempio, rivela la presenza di decisive linee di pensiero platonico all'interno della speculazione filosofica e teologica, e dimostra come queste linee avessero rivelato una loro vitalità nel promuovere un generale ripensamento di categorie e approcci intellettuali in risposta alla mutata realtà politica e sociale dell'Europa moderna. Analogamente, Mori pone in evidenza come il concetto platonico di sapienza originaria venne messo a frutto da missionari gesuiti in Cina nel loro tentativo di assimilare alcuni testi canonici della teologia e spiritualità cinese. Tutto ciò contribuirà ad una

migliore comprensione del modo in cui varie correnti all'interno della tradizione platonica continuarono ad influire sull'evoluzione del pensiero moderno ben oltre la prima metà del XVII secolo. Il tema dell'originaria sapienza teologica può essere così collegato in modo storicamente appropriato e consapevole alla mutata realtà geografica e politica della cultura Seicentesca. Con la crescente enfasi posta sulle dimensioni extra-europee della rivelazione, la *prisca theologia* in un certo senso si spazializza, e da manifestazione temporale della verità (manifestazione che si sviluppa nei secoli) assume piuttosto la forma di un'espansione geografica e multiculturale.

In secondo luogo, il testo di Mori offre una ricostruzione storicamente accurata di come la teologia naturale e il deismo settecenteschi contenessero ancora in sé elementi caratteristici del razionalismo teologico che in ultima analisi derivavano dall'armamentario concettuale della *prisca theologia*. La differenza tra la sapienza originaria degli antichi e l'idea della religione come una delle «nozioni comuni» naturalmente possedute dall'umanità nel suo insieme crebbe di tensione via via che la religione naturale dei deisti sembrava mettere a rischio il radicale universalismo storicistico di autori come Kircher e Huet. In particolare, l'esempio della ricezione ricciana di Confucio dimostra come l'uso di categorie filosofiche quali storia, natura e ragione universale potessero condurre ad esiti deisti e perfino libertino-eruditi. In questo senso, la storia dell'evoluzione della nozione di *prisca theologia* si iscrive in una parabola storica più ampia, in cui l'idea di ragione universale entra in crescente conflitto con una visione della verità come forza che si rivela nel tempo.

Infine, dalla lettura di Mori emerge un nuovo e diverso apprezzamento del valore critico e demitologizzante dell'erudizione filologica e antiquaria, in un arco cronologico e concettuale che va dalla riscoperta della tradizione classica tipica dell'umanesimo all'enciclopedismo illuministico e proto-illuministico. Il testo di Mori contribuirà dunque a dimostrare come l'immagine di una pretesa evoluzione da un ermetismo ingenuo e credulo tipico del primo Rinascimento al libertinismo erudito dei razionalisti seicenteschi e settecenteschi sia troppo semplice e caratterizzata da seri pregiudizi ideologici. In questo senso, si segnala l'analisi assai sofisticata che Mori ha fornito del pensiero di Huet, secondo cui la *prisca theologia* trovava un fondamento storico e filologico nel Pentateuco mosaico, visto come un autentico documento letterario da cui si sarebbe poi originariamente irradiata in tutto il mondo la sapienza giudeo-cristiana.

GUIDO GIGLIONI

HISTORY *AD MAIOREM DEI GLORIAM*

ANCIENT THEOLOGY
IN THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY
JESUIT ENVIRONMENT

1. Athanasius Kircher: Ancient Theology at the Roman College

1.1 Introduction

Amongst those who, at any rate, share some interest in the early modern period and in its cultural milieu, nobody probably will be found who has never heard of Athanasius Kircher. Kircher's name and his works regularly make an appearance in the writings of almost all seventeenth-century authors, nor do many scholars in the early modern period fail to cite Kircher at some point. Kircher's ubiquitousness in these texts is due to a series of reasons, primary among them, a rather contingent one, namely that he was not only very learned, but also very influential, therefore qualifying as a valuable contact or correspondent. Besides, Kircher's works virtually cover all imaginable fields of early modern learning, making him a terrifically quotable author, both for the present and the seventeenth-century scholar. Yet, the interest in Kircher has mostly spread in a 'horizontal' manner, rather than implying an in-depth study of his works. This is of course natural: one does not need to read the *Summa theologia* from the first to the last word in order to cite it, nor should one need spend months in reading Kircher in order to mention his works. However, while reading the *Summa theologia* in excerpts is certainly useful and might be even connatural to the genre to which it belongs, reading Kircher in excerpts might be equally useful, but it certainly is much riskier. Due to the all-embracing and cohesive nature of Kircher's thinking, the individual meaning of a single page of one of his works is secondary, if not misleading, when compared to its meaning in the general context. Kircher has no memorable pages: if he is at any rate memorable, he is so only in the whole.

This caveat is relevant to our work inasmuch as the reason why Kircher often has been considered a sort of intellectual fossil, always attempting to rekindle some sort of Renaissance-style Platonic-Hermetic philosophy, is largely dependent on such excerpts-based reading of his works. As I will try to show, instead, as much as Kircher's philosophy is Platonic and Hermetic, it is in no way similar to that of his Renaissance predecessors, such as Patrizi, with whom he often has been compared. Indeed, the elements of analogy that may lead one to group together Kircher and thinkers such as Patrizi (not last the use of *prisca theologia*) are fashioned in Kircher after a characteristically seventeenth-century mindset and are made to obey characteristically seventeenth-century preoccupations. First and foremost, that which concerned the need of the Roman Church to formulate a new historiographical paradigm, which could replace the then obsolete sixteenth-century Baronian one.

1.2 Pre-Westphalian and Post-Westphalian Historiography

Baronius' *Annales Ecclesiastici* had served the Catholic Church well in responding to the Magdeburg Centuries by providing a demonstration of the historical continuity that allegedly linked the modern papacy to the Church of the early centuries. Adopting the weapon of his adversaries, that is the quest for purity, Baronius showed that the original doctrine of Christ, through the mediation of Paul, had been handed down to the present and flourished in post-tridentine culture. He thus succeeded in completely reversing the thesis advocated by the centuriators, whereby Luther would have restored the *forma Ecclesiae* of the first century,

which deteriorated so much in the modern time that the very devil got to reign over Rome in the person of the pope.¹

Such an argumentative strategy had lost much of its power in the historical and political context which followed the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. The treaties of Münster and Osnabrück had choked off all universalistic aspirations of the Empire, which had been obliged to accept a nearly full independence of faith on the part of the regional princes. At the same time, the Peace of Westphalia also had forced the Catholic Church to downgrade its political aspirations in accord with its new role in the European equilibrium. After 1648, the only form of supremacy to which the Church could aspire to was merely spiritual. Appeals to the temporal power were becoming anachronistic and all possibilities to make up for the loss in secular power rested on a defence of the geographical extension of the Church's spiritual influence. It was necessary to demonstrate that, although the Protestant corpus had won its battle on the European ground, Catholics held sway over the whole world. And this dominance came not by use of force, but rather in accord with the design of divine providence, which endowed the Church and its missionaries with the duty not just to convert but to recall idolatrous peoples to the original knowledge of the true God which they had forgotten.

Baronius' history had been required to be Catholic in the most specific sense of the term, and only inasmuch as it needed to provide the Roman Church with a historical legitimation strong enough to oppose the Lutheran claims. After the Peace of Westphalia this was no longer enough. Whilst in Baronius' project all roads led to Rome, it was now necessary to show that from Rome all roads had departed. Saint Francis Xavier was to be substituted for saint Philipp Neri, in other words, a new 'Catholic' history, in the Greek sense of the term, was to be written, one that could affirm the Church's primacy by presenting the whole world as pertaining by right and nature to the Catholic oecumene.

The political and historical developments which set apart Baronius and Kircher did not obviously forbid the persistence of some traits of affinity between the two. Indeed, Baronius' intents, unlike his argumentative strategies, were still a point at issue towards the later-half of the seventeenth century. By the same token, the option to use the historiographical debate as a weapon in the battle against the reformed Church still appealed to the culture to which Kircher belonged. The core difference between Kircher's and Baronius' historical programmes was that, while the latter aimed at excluding Protestants from the historical process that from the Christian martyrs of the early centuries led to the modern papacy, Kircher needed instead to include the whole world and all nations into the process that had been started by Christ. Whilst Baronius' paramount critical instrument was the same as the centuriators, that is, the quest for purity, Kircher on the contrary embraced principles of extension and contamination.

Such syncretic, or better yet, synthetic strategy was the only means that could allow for a readaptation of Baronius' project to the seventeenth-century cultural and political context. A truly Catholic history, that is, a universal history, would have qualified as the paramount weapon in the Church's battle to affirm its spiritual supremacy, which gained historical justification from the need to restore to its unblemished state the knowledge of the true God, which the so-called idolatrous peoples had embraced in their distant past. This very design

¹ Cf. NORELLI 1982, p. 265.

lies behind the majority of Kircher's writings, from the *Turris Babel* to the *Polygraphia nova*, and from his Egyptological to his Sinological studies. All these works cooperate in providing a demonstration of the universality of history by tracing all cultures, languages, and religions back to their common divine origin.² There is no such thing as an inherent difference between orthodoxy and idolatry, Kircher believes. On the contrary, all deviations from the original purity of the divine message can be imputed to a varnish of corruption that, while only sparing the tradition that culminated in the Catholic Church, had bastardised all the other ones in the same way that the geographical and chronological spread makes unrecognisable languages belonging to the same family.³

This general axiom alone suffices to grasp the universalising potential that was offered by some traditionally Neo-Platonic demonstrative strategies and especially by the doctrine of ancient theology. According to this tradition, the original message of God had been available to all people thanks to the wisdom handed down by the *prisci theologi*, a series of semi-mythological figures such as Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, and Linus, who had in turn received it from Adam and the Patriarchs. A failure on the Church's part to see such an opportunity would have been inexcusable, regardless of the incontestable role that Aristotelianism and Thomism in particular played in the traditional framework of the Church's authority and doctrine in general. Besides, Platonist tendencies such as Kircher's were utterly different from the soon-censored philosophical Platonic exclusivism espoused by Patrizi. And not only because after the peace of Westphalia Platonism in general acquired a political and strategic value which it did not have before, but especially because philosophical views such as Kircher's were constitutively purposed to carry out a political and strategic function. Kircher's Platonism is hence a much 'domesticated' form of Platonism which cares little about the contrast between Plato and Aristotle and preaches philosophical concordism when it cannot evade the question.

Furthermore, even in Francesco Patrizi's time, the proverbial anti-Platonism of the Roman curia was less pronounced than what is generally believed, and a tolerant attitude was to be gradually reinforced in the years leading to the Peace of Westphalia. Indeed, Tommaso Campanella was not too far from the truth when, in the *Commentaria* to the *Poemata* by Urban VIII, he included the pope amongst those who had wisely embraced Platonic stances.⁴ It soon would be clear to Campanella, however, that Urban VIII's Platonism must have concerned a private philosophical conviction rather than implying any public endorsement. On the contrary, the cultural environment surrounding the papal court was much less restrained by the bonds of the traditional allegiance to Aristotelianism, as it clearly results upon considering the career of someone like Lukas Holste, whose Platonic positions did not impede him from being elected as Barberinian librarian first, and Vatican librarian under Innocent X.⁵

In light of this, the commonplace critical paradigm regarding the Jesuit order's alleged Aristotelianism of strict observance needs to be revised. In fact, the Jesuit cultural policy, like the Church's, was more concerned with censoring criticism against Aristotelianism, than it was

² Cf. PASTINE 1978, pp. 34-35, 39. With this regard, cf. also: EVANS 1979, p. 433; STOLZENBERG 2001^b, p. 134.

³ Cf. FRIGO 2007, p. 95.

⁴ Cf. GUERRINI 2007, p. 141.

⁵ Concerning Holste, cf.: HERKLOTZ 2007, p. 147; RIETBERGEN 2006, pp. 265-266, 274, 290-291.

with enforcing Aristotelianism altogether. The *Ratio Studiorum* itself, published at the turn of the seventeenth century as a vade mecum for Jesuit pedagogy, is a clear example of this tension. On the one hand, the *Ratio* prescribed that the chair of Theology should be occupied only by those who “*erga S. Thomam bene affecti fuerunt*”, so that “*sequantur [...] omnino in scholastica Theologia doctrinam Sancti Thomae*”, on the other, in philosophical matters, it proved much more flexible, limiting itself to discouraging the Provincial Superior from appointing to the chair in philosophy scholars “*ad novitates proni, aut ingenij nimis liberi*” – scholars who certainly did not quite represent an isolated case in the Society if the *Ratio* took care to mention them.⁶

In fact, the whole *Ratio studiorum* rested on a principle of elasticity which was perfectly embodied by the role of the Provincial Superior, whose responsibility it was to discretionally adapt the general scheme of the *Ratio* to individual cases. In all these instances, as it is often stated in the *Ratio*, it was possible for the Provincial Superior to make exceptions to the general rules inasmuch as these were justified *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* and, in the political and cultural context to which Kircher belonged, nothing was more excusable *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* than his political version of universalistic Platonism.

1.3 Universalism in the Seventeenth-Century Roman Milieu

The universalistic drive of Kircher’s programme of course was not unprecedented in the history of Christian thought. In fact, Kircher followed a well-established tradition whose original model could be found in the Christian apologetic writers of the early centuries, such as Justinus, and in many of the early Fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria, who developed Justinus’ approach to paganism and, later, in Minucius Felix, Eusebius, and Lactantius, amongst others.⁷ More importantly, however, the universalistic orientation of Kircher’s project was perfectly in line with the ecclesiastical and missionary politics espoused by the Roman curia of the seventeenth century, which were mirrored by a growing interest in the lesser known eastern languages and exotic cultures. In 1622 Gregory XV founded the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* with its polyglot typography, whose very birth had been made possible by the flourishing, in previous years, of a number of linguistic academies in Rome. Most of these academies, devoted to the study of the eastern languages, had been founded under Gregory XIII in an environment that was often close if not identical to that of the Society of Jesus.⁸

In this cultural context, and especially in the ’30s, a central role was played by two figures which proved extremely important for Kircher’s career: the cardinal Francesco Barberini and the French humanist Nicholas-Claude-Fabri de Peiresc. As Kircher recalled in the introduction to his *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, it was in fact Peiresc, with whom he had met in Avignon, that made possible his transfer to Rome while discouraging at the same time his relocation to

⁶ *Ratio* 1616, fol. 2^v, 4.

⁷ By way of example, let us remind here the works of Justin, whom Kircher often quotes along with Lactantius: cf. JUSTIN *Apol. I*, 46.3; JUSTIN *Apol. II*, 10.2, 13.2-5; LACTANT. *Div. inst.* 4.14.1-3. Cf. also: MARENBOON 2015, pp. 21-22.

⁸ Cf. STOLZENBERG 2013, p. 107.

Wien.⁹ In Rome, as Peiresc rightly foresaw, Kircher could have contributed amply to the Barberini cultural and political programme which, under the influence of Peiresc himself, was greatly interested in the study of the eastern languages and in the publication of vocabularies, lexicons, and anthologies of relevant texts.¹⁰

This renewed interest in languages and linguistic studies was not only characteristic of the Barberini circle, but of all the major seventeenth-century pontificates, from that of Urban VIII to those of Innocent X and Alexander VII. Traces of this cultural involvement can be found in the spread of a literary phenomenon which has been usually, yet incorrectly, considered one of the fruits of the baroque predilection for bizarreries. This genre, which consists of the accumulation of usually eulogistic pieces written in all the languages whose knowledge had reached Rome, made its first appearance in 1627, in honour of the late wife of Pietro della Valle and, on a similar occasion, one year later, for Francesco Barberini's epicedium, written by Peiresc.¹¹

Eight years later, upon publishing the *Prodromus Coptus*, which followed the tradition of studies initiated by Peiresc and Della Valle, Kircher decided to open his volume with ten propitiatory poems in Syriac, Arabic, Aramaic, Samaritan, Armenian, Hebrew, and Amharic. Some of these pieces had been composed by scholars belonging to the Barberini circle, such as Giovanni Battista Jona, professor of Hebrew at Urban's college *De Propaganda Fide*, and Abraham Echellensis, professor of Arabic and Syriac at the Maronite College. However, the ten pieces which opened the *Prodromus Coptus* were nothing in comparison to the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, which Kircher started off with 56 in-folio pages of eulogies for Ferdinand III in Latin, Greek, Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, English, German, Hungarian, Czech, Illyrian, Turkish, Serbian, Old Church Slavonic, Hebrew, Arabic, Syriac, Aramaic, Armenian, Persian, Coptic, Amharic, Samaritan, 'Brahmanic Indian', Chinese, Japanese, and even 'Hieroglyphic Egyptian'.

In none of these cases had these pieces been composed for the purpose of a simple yet erudite game of flattery. Kircher's intent was instead a political and cultural one. The linguistic studies which had flourished under the aegis of the Barberini circle, so much as to allow for these apparently absurd accumulations of polyglot pieces, were in the first instance a means to propel the missionary expansion so as to ultimately show that the Church had indeed conquered the whole world.¹²

The linguistic interests of the Barberini circle, however, did not respond only to the much felt desire to win distant nations to Catholicism. Amongst the languages chosen by Kircher for his polyglot composition, many were languages whose distance from the seventeenth-century Rome was not in space, but in time. The geographical expansion of the Church's cultural scope of interest was paralleled by a similar chronological expansion. While Protestant historiography tended to underline the differences between the present and the past, Catholic historians were mostly concerned with the quest for a historical continuity that could have

⁹ KIRCHER 1652-1654, 1:[Propylaeum Agonisticum].

¹⁰ RIETBERGEN 2006, pp. 387, 396-397.

¹¹ Cf. DU CREST 2007, p. 482; RIETBERGEN 2006, p. 417.

¹² Cf. STRASSER 1999, pp. 156-157.

been used as an argument for the 'Christianisation' of the past.¹³ In the wake of this, on the side of its linguistic researches, the Barberini circle also conducted enquiries concerning ancient religions, which were usually interpreted allegorically so as to reduce polytheistic cults, the Egyptian one in particular, to embryonic forms monotheism.¹⁴

The desire to assimilate the Egyptian tradition in the bosom of Christendom was not new to the Church. One of the late-fifteenth-century mosaics decorating the floor of the Siena cathedral depicts Hermes Trismegistus, "contemporaneus Moysi", in the act of presenting two men with a book inscribed with the admonition "suscipite o licteras et leges Egiptii". Roughly a century later, Sixtus V launched a large-scale project of restoration and repositioning of the Egyptian obelisks in Rome. In 1589 Michele Mercati, a Roman antiquarian, wrote with implicit reference to Sixtus V that "molti pontefici di animo grande, e generoso mossi dall'ammirabile grandezza e dalla magnificenza de gli Obelischi, hebbero gia pensiero di rilevarli dalle ruine e drizzarli ne i luoghi nobili, e apparenti di Roma".¹⁵ In particular, he added, "nell'anno del Salvatore MDLXXXV, che fu il primo del felicissimo Pontificato di Nostro Signore Sisto Quinto fu dato ordine da sua Santità, e fatto apparecchio per la nuova erettione de gli Obelischi".¹⁶

Thanks to the policies embraced by Sixtus V and by other "pontefici di animo grande, e generoso", the members of the Barberini circle found rather fertile ground for their cultural programme which was carried out, however, in a way that Sixtus V would not have foreseen. In Sixtus' time, which is also the time of Mercati and Baronius, the rationale for "rizzare gli Obelischi innanzi alle Chiese principali di Roma" was far from Kircher's syncretic attempt to assimilate the ancient Egyptian cult to Christianity. The sixteenth-century re-erection of the Egyptian obelisks rather obeyed the Church's desire to develop a grandiose image of itself and of its power. The Egyptian obelisks "già due volte [...] consacrati alli falsi Dei de gli Gentili da due popoli: prima da gli Egittij, e di poi da i Romani" had been "per giusta vendetta del vero Iddio, già due volte [...] gittati a terra". Now, "drizzati la terza volta in honore del vero Iddio", that is, in order to adorn the panorama of the Roman churches and basilicas, "non si havrebbero più a ruinare".¹⁷ Fifty years later, the forest of obelisks erected in front of the Roman churches by Sixtus V was no longer perceived as a foreign body, resembling the spectacle of the impaled heads of defeated soldiers. On the contrary, in Kircher's time the obelisks were perceived to be in perfect harmony with the forecourt of the churches, where they were erected: the ancient monuments through which the Egyptians had prefigured the advent of the true religion were positioned where the very same true religion was being worshipped.

This change in mentality is proved, under Innocent X and Alexander VII, by the erection of two obelisks, in piazza Navona and piazza di Santa Maria sopra Minerva, respectively. Both projects were the result of the collaboration between Kircher and Gian Lorenzo Bernini, possibly the most prominent case of intellectual partnership in baroque Rome. The difference between these cases and Sixtus V's attitude is clear. Informed by Kircher of the alleged meaning of the obelisk of piazza Navona, Bernini's project for the erection of the Agonal obelisk

¹³ Cf. FRIGO 2007, p. 96.

¹⁴ Cf. STOLZENBERG 2013, p. 112.

¹⁵ MERCATI 1589, p. 340.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 346.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

perfectly mirrored the universalistic aspirations of the seventeenth-century Church. The obelisk, whose hieroglyphs according to Kircher alluded to the “Triunius Numinis, sive Animae mundi universalis Triformis [...] tum intrinsecas, tum extrinsecas operationes”, that is to the manifestations of the Trinity in the Egyptian world, was sustained by four fountains inspired by the Danube, the Nile, the Ganges, and the Rio de la Plata, respectively.¹⁸ The four cardinal points converged in a single centre which emblematised the never completely forgotten true religion that was once prefigured by the Egyptian and was now championed by the Catholic Church, which also undertook the task of spreading the word of God eastwards and westwards, northwards and southwards.¹⁹

The set of symbols and allegories employed by Kircher and Bernini for the erection of the Minerva obelisk (or Elephant obelisk) under Alexander VII was not too different in purpose from that of the Agonal obelisk. Mounted on the back of an elephant symbolising the Christian virtues of the pope, in this case too the four sides of the obelisk were oriented so as to face the four cardinal directions and the four areas of the world.

1.4 Inclusivism vs. Exclusivism

The project of a universal history on which Kircher was embarking did not only suit the seventeenth-century interests and needs of the Catholic culture, but also offered the Church the possibility to engage the Protestant world once again in a contest which, as in Baronius' case, was to be disputed on the battlefield of history. Kircher's works, and in particular the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, could be read as a counterbalance to the *historiae gentilium* that were produced in the coeval Protestant environment by scholars such as Georg Horn and Gerhard Johann Voss in the Netherlands and Thomas Stanley in England. As in Baronius' case, Kircher too deployed critical instruments, methodologies, and materials extremely similar to his Protestant counterparts, yet greatly different from theirs in purpose.

Kircher and the coeval Protestant scholars unsurprisingly disagreed on the very concept of history to begin with. Horn, Voss, and Stanley distinguished between two separate traditions in the bosom of *historia philosophica*: Greek and Latin philosophy, on the one hand, later perfected by Western mediaeval and modern thinkers, witnesses to the revelation of Christ; and the ancient wisdom of the eastern nations, on the other, which was to inform modern idolatries, so providing the subject of the *historia gentilium*. Such a perspective was clearly in contrast with the Church's universalistic political agenda, the same agenda that led Kircher to demonstrate that the *historia gentilium* could not be set apart from the Christian history with which, instead, it needed to be integrated. Unlike Protestant historians, Kircher was principally interested in the non-pagan features of the history of the gentiles. While Voss and Horn analysed idolatrous systems of thought in their specificity, Kircher aimed at showing that the *historia gentilium* bore a striking resemblance to Western Christian tradition, with which it was intrinsically bonded.

Kircher utterly agrees with Cusanus with regard to what the “Verbum” says in response to the “Graecus” in the *De pace fidei*, namely that “non potest esse nisi una sapientia. Si enim

¹⁸ KIRCHER 1650, p. 395.

¹⁹ FAGIOLO 1990, 53 ff.

possibile foret plures esse sapientias, illas ab una esse necesse esset".²⁰ Besides, for both Kircher and Cusanus, the original unity of all wisdom, just as the dependence of all cults from one source, could be advocated on the basis of the Platonic principle whereby "ante [...] omnem pluralitatem est unitas".²¹ This assumption, which was to influence virtually all areas of Kircher's research, could not but entail a conception of the history of religion as a unitary yet variegated process. Such a notion was clearly incompatible with the perspective adopted by Stanley, Voss, and Horn, the latter of whom rejected in clear words any concordist position, regardless of its Cusanian or Pichian formulation.²² According to Protestant historians, it was absolutely impossible to bridge the gap between Christian and pagan history: in fact, all attempts to do so through syncretism or concordism were deemed to sound blasphemous, as, according to Horn, was the case with some Neo-Platonic philosophers.²³

This general anti-Platonism on the part of Protestant historians could be explained by their conception of *historia gentilium* and, more generally, in an argumentative context which did not share any of Kircher's political purposes. This does not mean that Protestant *historiae gentilium* should not have at least partially adopted some doctrines that were traditionally linked to Platonism, such as ancient theology. In the *De philosophia et philosophorum sectis*, Voss expressed a conviction whose centrality for Kircher's thought is undoubted, namely that, despite the fact that God never 'wasted' miracles in order to convert atheists, he "multa edidit ad convertendos idolatras" since "ad cognoscendum verum Dei cultum non sufficit naturae lumen".²⁴ The 'light of nature' can only hint at the knowledge of the "universitatis parentem et opificem", however, this knowledge needs to be brought to perfection by the *traditio perpetua*, that is, thanks to the persistence of the often corrupt memory of the original message of God, handed down by Adam to his progeny.²⁵

According to Voss, although God had certainly bestowed on the sons of Abraham a *singulare beneficium*, he had not removed other peoples from his grace. Instead, even in the most exotic nations, he conserved "quorundam notitiam: ut quo Deo esset, et mundum administraret, et colendum esset".²⁶ Such a notion was extremely common: even Horn, who was much less inclined than Voss to extend the tradition of ancient theology to the gentiles, believed that the Adamic knowledge had been handed down "velut hereditario jure", to be later spread by Isaac "exemplo patris in Cananea et Aegypto".²⁷ That said, the moderate use of *prisca theologia* in Protestant *historiae gentilium* was something quite different from Kircher's case. Scholars such as Voss or Stanley saw ancient theology as a means to demonstrate the historical continuity which linked Christianity as a revealed religion to the time of the Patriarchs. Rather differently,

²⁰ CUSANUS 1959, p. 11.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Concerning Stanley's and Voss' critiques against Platonism, cf. SANTINELLO 1993, pp. 187, 229.

²³ Cf. HORN 1655, pp. 271-272. Cf. also: SANTINELLO 1993, p. 251.

²⁴ VOSS 1658, p. 142.

²⁵ Cf. VOSS 1641, p. 9, 30.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁷ HORN 1655, p. 114.

Kircher aimed at projecting *prisca theologia* onto peoples that were traditionally considered idolatrous, whether they be ancient or modern, that is, whether they preceded or followed the revelation.

The best example of Kircher's conception of ancient theology is offered by his theories about Egyptian history and culture. As a matter of fact, hieroglyphs themselves had to be interpreted as an attempt to express the sacred knowledge which the Egyptians had received from God through the mediation of Hermes Trismegistus and Moses. Most importantly, this line of continuity between God and Ancient Egypt was parallel to another similar line: Egyptian culture was not only connected to Adam via the teachings of Hermes and Moses, but also, and in a different manner, via Cham.

It was traditionally believed that after the deluge Noah's sons divided up the world between them so as to repopulate it: "in hac itaque prima filiorum Noë distinctione, sicuti Semo Asia, Europa Iapheto; ita Africa, cuius veluti vestibulum Aegyptus est, Chamo in portionem obtigit".²⁸ While this tradition was generally held by Protestant culture to be of little consequence, it often was interpreted by Catholics as a historical explanation for the birth of idolatry. Cham, who had been cursed by Noah for having seen his nudity, seemed to perfectly represent the figure of the corruptor, and in fact it was so cited by many of the authors used by Kircher as sources. In the *Obeliscus pamphilius*, for instance, reference is made to Annius of Viterbo's much discussed *Antiquitates*, where Cham was called an "infamis et impudicus" disseminator of lies, similar to Zoroaster in being always "magicae et veneficae studens".²⁹ More generally, Cham is described in all Kircher's Egyptological works as an idolater, a poisoner of the true doctrine of God. "Famae apud posteros propagandae studiosissimus", Cham would have communicated to Egypt the knowledge of those "rerum [...] curiosarum" which he had experienced before the deluge, that is, of the magic and venomous arts already mentioned by Annius. Besides, he would have arrogated to himself the "gloriosa nomina priorum Patriarchum", presenting himself as a Hermes redivivus "cum vero doctrinam a [...] Mercurio traditam in maximos abusus et impias superstitiones traduxisset". Thus, the "perversam Chami doctrinam longe lateque serpentem et animos mortalium miserrima superstitionum labe depravantem" began to circulate in the world in place of the "sinceram doctrinam a primis Patribus traditam".³⁰

Egypt thus appears in Kircher's works as the repository of a twofold tradition: on the one hand it is the original recipient of the divine knowledge handed down by Hermes and Moses; on the other it had also received Cham's legacy, which substituted mischievous arts and idolatrous cults for the true knowledge of God.³¹ This twofold cultural history explains the two fundamental theses upon which the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* is based: namely that the hieroglyphic writing was devised in order to communicate an occult Christian wisdom and that, at the same time, the entire history of the Egyptian civilisation can be interpreted as the history

²⁸ KIRCHER 1652-1654, 1:84.

²⁹ Cf. [Annio da Viterbo] 1512, fols. cxv^v-cxvi^r; KIRCHER, 1650, pp. 13, 16.

³⁰ KIRCHER 1650, pp. 45-46.

³¹ Cf. KIRCHER 1652-1654, 1:241.

of the clash between the Christian truth transmitted by the *prisci theologi* and Cham's blasphemous lies.³² In accord with this double perspective, whilst the first part of the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* is aimed at exposing the results of Cham's devilish actions, the second part is concerned with the analysis of the hieroglyphic writing and the quest for elements that could demonstrate the close relationship between Egypt and a prefigured Christian faith.

A huge difference from the Protestant conception of *historia gentilium* is hence made evident. Unlike Voss, Horn, and Stanley, Kircher is not interested in developing his history along two separate lines, so setting Christians and gentiles apart, and assigning each nation to the former or to the latter. On the contrary, Kircher believes, all peoples belong to the very same providential tradition. At the same time, however, all nations are exposed in different measure to the idolatrous legacy of Cham. These two parallel lines must always be distinguished from one another, yet not in the Protestant fashion, that is, assuming each of them to be embodied at full by a certain people in a certain time. On the contrary, orthodoxy and idolatry must be traced simultaneously in the bosom of the same cultural context. Indeed, idolatry is merely the result of the corruption undergone by the original core of the true knowledge bequeathed by the *prisci theologi* on mankind. That is to say that all idolatrous and blasphemous cults can be stripped naked of their layers of Hamitic corruption, so being restored to their original purity. On the one hand, all that is good in the history of the gentiles can be traced back to Adam and to the *prisci theologi*, and on the other, all that is bad and blasphemous comes down to Cham.

Kircher's version of the *historia gentilium* is clearly not a history of the gentiles in the strict sense. Rather, it is a history of the Hamitic idolatry and of the way it corrupted the culture of the gentile nations, whose nature is nonetheless inherently Christian. Just as there is only one true religion whose various flavours, as Cusanus had claimed, are only due to minor and extrinsic differences, there is only one form of idolatry too, and its characteristic features can only vary to a certain extent. This is proved, for instance, by the universal diffusion of the same blasphemous doctrine concerning the cult of the fire, which, deriving "a Chami progenie", can be considered the true mark of oriental paganism, as in the case of the *Brachmanum instituta*, the Indian idolatry discussed in the third part of the *China illustrata*.³³

1.5 Kircher and His Sources

By providing a global explanation for the spread of idolatry, and for the parallel propagation of true faith, Kircher succeeded in tailoring the *historia idolatriae* or *historia gentilium* to the needs of the post-Westphalian Catholic Church. However, it must be underlined that although Kircher made extensive use of typically Platonic argumentative strategies in order to found a Catholic, universal historiographical model, he did so while at the same time preserving the interpretative apparatus that rendered truly 'modern' the Protestant *historiae gentilium*. The philological, linguistic, comparative, and ethnological intent in accord to which Kircher modelled his Platonism was incomparable with the ahistorical perspective of the Renaissance and projected him onto the background of the seventeenth-century cultural environment.

³² Cf. EVANS 1981, pp. 435, 440.

³³ KIRCHER 1652-1654, 1:252. Cf. also: *ibid.*, 1:424.

Kircher's perspective is typical of the archaeologist in that he wishes to restore the image of the past to its real historical dimension.³⁴ In spite of appearance, the authenticity of historical data (which does not automatically imply interpretative accuracy) is fundamental for Kircher and, as much as his Egyptological enquiries were not restricted to the archaeological point of view, he was convinced that it was essential to analyse the actual culture of the Egyptians in its historical specificity, hence abandoning the methodological perspective exemplified by Renaissance Egyptomania.³⁵ If the importance that Kircher attaches to philological, archaeological, and antiquarian methods is enough to differentiate him from the Renaissance, the way that he conceives of these methods also differentiates him from his Protestant counterparts. According to Stanley, Horn, and especially Voss, philology implied a certain degree of impartiality on the part of the scholar, who should have refrained from expressing any judgement on the analysed materials.³⁶ In Kircher's case, on the contrary, philology becomes instrumental in the defence of a particular thesis.

It does not come as a surprise, then, that Kircher's political aims should have influenced to a certain extent even his greatest philological contribution to modern Egyptology, namely, the discovery of the relationship between Coptic and Egyptian. The question concerning the language spoken by the Egyptians had to be addressed prior to embarking on the journey to hieroglyphic learning (*sapientia hieroglyphica*). Accordingly, by identifying the language spoken by the Egyptians with Coptic, Kircher's first Egyptological works, the *Prodromus Coptus* and the *Lingua Aegyptiaca Restituta*, for the first time allowed for an analysis of the Egyptian culture based on its very language.

Ancillary, yet parallel to this project was another, more subtle, intention that one can sense in the subtitle of the *Lingua Aegyptiaca*, which reads: "Quo Linguae Coptae sive idiomatis illius primaevi Aegyptiorum Pharaonici, vetustate temporum paene collapsi, ex abstrusis Arabum monumentis, plena Instauratio continetur".³⁷ The prudent caveat contained in the *Prodromus*, that Coptic should not be considered perfectly identical to the language spoken by the Ancient Egyptians seems to have been put aside. By identifying Coptic and Egyptian altogether, Kircher was implying something that he could not have stated openly, at least before the publication of the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*. Namely, that Ancient Egyptians themselves could have used all the words contained in the Coptic-Latin-Arabic dictionary published under the title of *Lingua Aegyptiaca*. It is hence significant that we should find terms in the *Lingua Aegyptiaca* translated as: *adventus Domini, angelus, baptismus, benedictio, blasphemia, Christus, Creator, Creatio mundi, crucifigere, cultus Dei, cultus idolorum, Dei generatrix, Deus, Devotio, Diabolus, ecclesia, episcopus, Filius hominis, Gratia, Iesus, infernus, libera me, loquentes de Deo, Nativitas, Nazarenus, Novum Testamentum, Pater noster, peccatum, peccator, sanctus, sanctitas, Servus Christi*, etc. Clearly Kircher was referring to a post-pharaonic Coptic lexicon, one that he put together analysing Christian Coptic texts. Obviously, he would not affirm that words such as 'Novum

³⁴ Cf. MARRONE 2002, p. 45; STOLZENBERG 2013, p. 178.

³⁵ LEOSPO 1986, p. 322; MAZZA 2001, p. 140.

³⁶ Cf. SANTINELLO 1993, pp. 174, 210, 223-224.

³⁷ Cf. KIRCHER 1644.

Testamentum' might have belonged to the original Egyptian language, yet he left the obviousness of such consideration to the reader alone, so obliquely alluding to a Christian Egypt which he would have depicted through the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*.

Such an attitude on Kircher's part might of course reinforce the convictions of those amongst Kircher's critics who do not see any interest in philology on Kircher's part. However, it must be underlined that, although Kircher did certainly have a political agenda, his methods were, strictly speaking, philological. And they were so not only with reference to the discovery of the relationship between Coptic and Egyptian, but even from the point of view of the sources chosen by Kircher, Hermetic and Neo-Platonic texts included. Introducing his works, Kircher often provides lengthy lists of *auctoritates*, which can be divided roughly into four classes.³⁸ First, is the array of Coptic, Arabic, Hebrew and generally Oriental sources which were a must-read for any author interested in the history of religion and idolatry. Second, are the early Fathers and theologians (Tertullian, Origen, Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Arnobius, Lactantius, Fermin, Eusebius, Cyril, Athanasius, Augustine etc.), who often are cited for the information they provide about Egypt. Such information is sought for in the third class of sources cited by Kircher as well: Greek and Latin historians and geographers (Herodotus, Strabo, Tacitus, Diodorus Siculus, and Plutarch especially). Fourth and last, are the Neo-Platonic philosophers (Numenius, Philo of Alexandria, Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus, etc.) and the *Hermetica*.

This last class of sources often aroused doubts concerning Kircher's philological approach. However, not only were these texts used in the sixteenth and seventeenth century by uncontestedly philologically oriented authors, but their relevance to Egypt could have been justified on the grounds of a literary *topos* which had been inaugurated by the Greek historians themselves.³⁹ From Herodotus to Diodorus and to Plutarch, consensus had always existed about the idea that the wisest men in Greece, starting with Pythagoras and Plato, had served their apprenticeship in Egypt.⁴⁰ The sixteenth and seventeenth century accepted this notion rather unconditionally, and we can find it ratified not only in the works of Kircher, Huet, and Mercati, but even by Stanley, who wrote that Thales had travelled to Egypt "to conferre [...] with Priests and Astronomers", not unlike Plato some years after, whose aim was "to fetch Astrology from thence [...] and to be instructed in the rites of the Prophets", from whom "he learn'd the Immortality of the Soul, [...] as likewise the transmigration thereof into severall bodies".⁴¹ The tradition established by Herodotus' Greek-Egyptian syncretism was further enriched by Plutarch, who equalled Greek and Egyptian mentality on the grounds of an allegedly common tendency towards allegorical reasoning.⁴² Plutarch's analysis was extremely significant for the modern reader, not only inasmuch as it provided further proof of the cultural debt that Greece owed Egypt, but in particular because it allowed for an (erroneous) interpretation of the Egyptian mentality as a symbolic one. This notion, which was undoubtedly cherished by

³⁸ Cf. KIRCHER 1650, s.p. [Epistola Paraenetica]; KIRCHER 1652-1654, 1:[Propylaeum Agonisticum], 3:558.

³⁹ Cf. MERCATI 1589, p. 125; VOSS 1657, p. 16.

⁴⁰ Cf. DIOD. SIC. 1.69.2; 1.69.2-5; 1.96.1-6; PLUT. *De Is. et Os.*, 354D-F. Cf. HARTOG 1996, p. 72.

⁴¹ STANLEY 1656, 1:4, 5:9. By way of example, cf. also: KIRCHER 1650, s.p. [Epistola Paraenetica]; KIRCHER 1652-1654, 2.1:157; HUET 1679, p. 44; MERCATI 1589, p. 119.

⁴² Cf. PLUT. *De Is. et Os.*, 354F-355B; 363D. Cf. also: CIAMPINI 2013, p. 53.

Kircher, was not only documented and proved by the *Hermetica*, but it could be interpreted in turn as proof of the Egyptian authenticity of the *Corpus Hermeticum* itself.

1.6 The Egyptian Writing System between Esoteric and Exoteric Traditions

The depiction of Egypt which Kircher obtained from his sources was characterised by the insistence on the furthest antiquity of the country, upon which notion virtually all Greek and Latin historians had agreed, starting with Herodotus, who believed that Egyptians had existed “ἐξ οὗ ἀνθρώπων γένος ἐγένετο”.⁴³ Accordingly, in the *Turris Babel*, Kircher traces back the origins of the Egyptian kingdom to the year 1984 after the Deluge, when the first diaspora began, following the destruction of the Babel Tower.⁴⁴ Similar analyses were common in early modern chronological studies, particularly so in the Catholic milieu.⁴⁵ As much as there could have been some variance according to the precise year of the foundation of their kingdom, Egyptians were invariably indicated as one of the most antique and mysterious peoples if not the most antique and mysterious altogether.

The antiquity and mystery associated with the Egyptian culture undoubtedly played in favour of Kircher, in that they provided him a historical justification to proceed with an allegorical interpretation of Egypt, indeed the only type of interpretation which could have led to a Christian reading of the Egyptian hieroglyphs. Yet, again, this choice for allegory was not perceived as something foreign to the Egyptian mind-set. On the contrary, Kircher often reminds the reader that, “teste Clemente Alexandrino”, “arcana sublimioris doctrinae veteres per modum occultationis, qui est vere divinus [...], abscondere solebant in adyto veritatis”.⁴⁶ Silence was hence the true mark of the Egyptian priests who, in order to represent wisdom, used to portray a “puerum digito silentium suadentem”, so obeying the same principle according to which sphinxes were erected in front of the temples.⁴⁷

The Egyptian preoccupation with secrecy and concealment could explain the idiosyncratic character of the Egyptian writing system, as it was described by ancient authors.⁴⁸ Diodorus was the first to assert that the Egyptians used two distinct ‘alphabets’: “τὰ μὲν δημόδια [...], τὰ δ’ ἱερὰ καλούμενα” – one to be learnt by everybody, the other to be kept secret and transmitted by the priests from father to son.⁴⁹ Clement, Kircher’s principal source with regard to the Egyptian writing system, was even more precise. In the fifth book of the *Stromata*, while maintaining the general distinction between a common, everyday alphabet “τὴν ἐπιστολογραφικὴν” and a sacred, secret one, he further distinguished the latter into “τὴν ἱερατικὴν” and “τὴν ἱερογλυφικὴν”.⁵⁰ Not only was hieroglyphic writing considered to be much more enigmatic

⁴³ Hdt. 2.15.

⁴⁴ Cf. KIRCHER 1679, 216.

⁴⁵ Cf. [ANNIO DA VITERBO] 1512, fols. cix^r; cxlvi^r; CAUSSIN 1618, p. 12; MERCATI 1589, p. 14.

⁴⁶ KIRCHER 1652-1654, 2.1:128.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 3:574, 3:454.

⁴⁸ Concerning the Greek tradition on Egyptian writing systems, see: BOSTICCO 2012.

⁴⁹ DIOD. SIC., 3.3.4-5. Cf. also: *ibid.*, 1.81.1-6.

⁵⁰ Cf. CLEM. AL. *Strom.*, 5.4.20-1; MARRONE 2007, p. 835. This description is strikingly accurate: even the term ‘ἐπιστολογραφικὴν’ is a literal translation from the Egyptian *sš n šš.t*, that is ‘letter writing’ (demotic). Besides, it is

and allegorical in nature than hieratic, but – as reminded by a number of the early Fathers – it was the only means of expression through which the Egyptian priests could convey the arcana of their wisdom, shielding at the same time that very wisdom from profane masses.

According to Clement, the Egyptians had devised a cryptic and allegorical writing for the very purpose of granting access “ἐν τῷ ἀδύτῳ τῆς ἀληθείας” only to the worthy few, in the fashion of the Jews.⁵¹ John Tzetzes agreed: hieroglyphs had been used wisely in order to “κρύπτειν τὸν περὶ θεῶν φυσικὸν λόγον”.⁵² From Kircher’s point of view, the reason why hieroglyphs had been invented by the Egyptian priests, or indeed taught them, could have been found in the *Hermetica* themselves. Having understood all things, and willing to reveal his knowledge, Hermes engraved it, and by engraving it he hid it (ἐχάραξε καὶ χαράξας ἔκρυψε).⁵³ By bringing together the patristic and the hermetic tradition, Kircher achieved a double result. On the one hand, he could confirm the Egyptian authenticity of the Hermetic texts, which Hermes had first written in hieroglyphs, that is, engraved and hid. On the other, the cryptic nature of hieroglyphic writing was per se a proof of the value of the *arcana hieroglyphica*, too important and venerable to be corrupted by the hollow words that were so often criticised by Hermes.⁵⁴

While the cryptic nature of Egyptian hieroglyphs was hence particularly suited for the arcane wisdom contained in the *Hermetica*, it would have proved absolutely inadequate for everyday purposes.⁵⁵ The usefulness of demotic, that is, Clement’s ‘epistolographic’ writing, was clear. Such twofold distinction in the bosom of the Egyptian writing system further confirmed Kircher’s conviction that all traditions in the history of all peoples encompassed an esoteric side along with the exoteric one. The former, which is always closer to the truth, must be concealed from the masses of ignorant people, who would corrupt its meaning due to their lack of intellectual preparation.⁵⁶ As Pythagoras well understood, maybe because he had studied under the Egyptian priests, “secreta [...] philosophiae non omnibus sunt divulganda”.⁵⁷ In fact, the Patriarchs themselves had foreseen the dangers of divulging their wisdom “ignarae rerum plebi, et inertibus ingenijs” and, accordingly, they hid “inexhaustos aeternae felicitatis thesauros” by means of “symbolicis [...] tegumentis”.⁵⁸ Endowed with the same divine wisdom, Egyptian sages and ancient theologians, Hermes in particular, had followed the Patriarchs’ example.⁵⁹ Through hieroglyphs they communicated their secrets in such a way as to automatically exclude the uninitiated. The sage alone would have been able to see through the veil of appearance and interpret the hieroglyphic characters allegorically, while the ignorant would

also true that, during the Hellenistic period, the demotic alphabet, the Egyptian κοινή, coexisted with both hieratic (aniconic) and hieroglyphic (iconic) writing.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 5.4.19. Cf. also: *ibid.*, 5.7.41-42.

⁵² TZETZ. *Exegesis in Homeri Iliadem*, 97.30. Cf., with this regard: VAN DER HORST 1982, p. 116.

⁵³ Cf. *Corpus Hermeticum*, Fr. 23.4-6.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.1-2.

⁵⁵ Cf. KIRCHER 1636, p. 123.

⁵⁶ GODWIN 1979, p. 15.

⁵⁷ KIRCHER 1652-1654, 3:579.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.1:127.

⁵⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 2.2:500. Cf. also: *Corpus Hermeticum*, 4.3-4; 1.26.

have believed hieroglyphs to be mimetic representations of common objects, bearing equally common meanings.

The twofold tradition which from Egypt spread throughout the world, and through which Moses' divine message and Cham's idolatrous lies were divulged at the same time, was hence paralleled by the twofold response of the Egyptian public to hieroglyphs. Idolatry was mirrored by the masses' ignorance or misinterpretation of the hieroglyphic writing, and true religion was mirrored by the sages' allegorical reading of the sacred script. Besides, while the project to decipher hieroglyphs in order to grasp their true meaning was clearly quite challenging, a partial solution, or at least a hint, was provided by the notion of allegorical hieroglyphic writing itself. Indeed, Kircher believed that he possessed the key to hieroglyphical interpretation before he even ventured into it. And the key was a rather logical piece of reasoning: namely, that if the Egyptian priests had communicated the knowledge which they had received from the ancient theologians and from the Patriarchs through hieroglyphs, it was therefore evident that any translation of hieroglyphic texts had to be consistent with such true knowledge of God.

1.7 Egyptian Cosmology and Theology

Equipped as he was with a very precise idea of what hieroglyphs *had to be* and *had to mean*, Kircher only needed to find some hieroglyphic text whose interpretation could be used to demonstrate his theories about the history of religion. In this regard, the Bembine Tablet was a perfect specimen.⁶⁰ A damascened bronze table manufactured in the 'Egyptian style', probably produced in the environment of the Iseum Campense, in Rome,⁶¹ the tablet would have provided Kircher with a perfect pseudo-hieroglyphic text upon which to test his method of deciphering.

The figure of an anthropomorphic scarab in the lower part of the tablet especially attracted Kircher's attention. According to his analysis, the figure needed to be understood as an indication of the quadripartite cosmological system adopted by the Egyptian priests. First, is the *mundus archetypus*, or *mundus causae causarum*, as it is called in the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*. This world, which clearly shows a Hermetic and Neo-Platonic influence, is directly associated to the divine mind and, like God, it is infinite, immutable, eternal, and incorporeal, containing all the archetypes of the other worlds.⁶² The second position is occupied by the *mundus intellectualis sive angelicus*. According to Christian theology, Kircher observes, this world can be described as the first act of God's creative power; it is the world which the Jews have called עולם יצירה ('World of Formation') or עולם המלאכים ('World of Angels') and which the Egyptians thought to be coeternal with the divine intelligence.⁶³ This is followed by the *mundus sidereus*, or עולם הגלגלים ('World of Wheels') in cabalistic terms, which "nihil aliud est, quam totius

⁶⁰ See: MORI 2015, pp. 125-138. The Bembine Tablet (75,5 x 125,5 cm) is now conserved at the Egyptian Museum in Turin.

⁶¹ Cf. IVERSEN 1993, p. 53; MAZZA 2001, p. 136.

⁶² KIRCHER 1652-1654, 2.2:404.

⁶³ Cf. *ibid.*, 2.2:405-411.

machinae e coelis constitutae compages".⁶⁴ The sphere of the Sun, separates the *mundus sidereus* from the last of the four worlds, the *mundus elementaris*, which comprises the spheres of the moon, fire, air, water, and earth, with their respective daemons.⁶⁵

Kircher's religious syncretism brings together cabalistic, Neo-Platonic, and orthodoxly Christian doctrines. The Egyptian system of worlds, whose knowledge the priests had obviously acquired from the ancient theologians, is hence shown to accord with both Christian theology and Hebrew Kabbalah. Even the sephirotic system can be fitted into the Egyptian conception of the universe. Like the ten sephirot,⁶⁶ the four worlds are part of a diversified unity, which, in Platonic terms, emanates "ex unitate archetipa".⁶⁷ A simultaneously ascending and descending ladder traverses them, so that they are linked to one another "unumque in altero intuerentur",⁶⁸ as Iamblichus had it in the *De Mysteriis*.⁶⁹

The Egyptian cosmological system could be interpreted in light of the doctrines of the Neo-Platonic philosophers who agreed on a general hypostatic scheme according to which the Intellect (Νοῦς), the Soul (Ψυχή), and the material world gradually emanate from the One (Ἐνός), that is, from the first transcendent principle which can be equated with God and with the אֵין סוּף.⁷⁰ Such a general doctrine was available to Kircher not only through the works of Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus, but also, in slightly different forms, through some Florentine Platonists such as Ficino and Pico, who had envisaged a quadripartite cosmological system in his *Heptaplus*.⁷¹

However, the Bembine Table did not serve Kircher only to extract and expound his doctrine concerning Egyptian cosmology. On the contrary, its central figures seemed to represent some of the Egyptian deities, and especially Isis. This was extremely significant to Kircher, not only because he might have thought to have found with the Bembine Tablet the key to Egyptian cosmology and theology at the same time, but also because, in light of his sources, Plutarch in particular, he assumed that Isis, together with Osiris, Typhon, and Horus, had occupied a central position in the Egyptian religion.

Thanks to Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride* Kircher could 'philologically' legitimise his identification of the central figures of the Tablet. At the same time, Plutarch's analysis of the Egyptian religion also provided Kircher with an analogical method of interpretation according to which the principal deities of the Egyptian pantheon could have been considered not only *sub specie theologiae*, but also as a series of natural, physical, and astronomical allegories (Isis sym-

⁶⁴ KIRCHER 1652-1654, 2.2:405. Cf. also KIRCHER 1650, pp. 242-243.

⁶⁵ KIRCHER 1652-1654, 2.2:429.

⁶⁶ The אֵין סוּף is assigned to the *mundus archetipus*, the first three 'intellectual' sephirot (כתר, חכמה, בינה) to the *mundus angelicus*, the sixth sephirah (תפארת) to the *mundus sidereus*, and the last four (מלכות, יסוד, הוד, נצה) to the *mundus elementaris*. Cf. *ibid.*, 2.1:328.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.2:510.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 3:151.

⁶⁹ IAMBL. *Myst.*, 8.2-3.

⁷⁰ This doctrine first appears in Plotinus and is later adopted in partially different forms by Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus, whose works Kircher had read.

⁷¹ Cf. FICINO 2003, pp. 21, 47; PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA, 1490, fols. 8^r-10^r.

bolises the land of Egypt, the Moon, and earth; Osiris the Nile, the Sun, and water; and Typhon the sea, etc.).⁷² This doctrine was rather common in the antiquity. Diodorus had written that the Egyptians had alluded to the Moon and the Sun through their two principal gods, Isis and Osiris – an opinion which was later to be espoused by Diogenes Laërtius and Eusebius, who cited Manetho on this matter.⁷³ Amongst Kircher's contemporaries, even Horn, who was certainly quite foreign to Kircher's universalising projects, admitted that in all idolatrous cults "sub Solis numine omnes Deos mares cultos, sub Lunae feminas".⁷⁴

Kircher unsurprisingly embraced this theory, and he did not hesitate to extend it anagogically, following Plutarch's example. In the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* he wrote that "historiam Osiridis, Isidis, Hori, Typhonis, varios sensus involuisse".⁷⁵ The myth concerning Isis and Osiris does not hence merely allude to the Moon and the Sun. On the contrary, the Egyptian sages had shaped it into a universal allegory whereby allusions were made to all fields of Egyptian wisdom. To grasp all the allegorical meanings implied by the myth was hence the best way, according to Kircher, to access the whole spectrum of the *sapientia aegyptiaca*.

The whole of Egyptian wisdom was contained in the myth of Isis and Osiris, whose paramount theme is the clash between order and disorder, love and discord, unity and multiplicity. By analysing this allegorical fable, the prudent interpreter could penetrate the secrets of Egyptian culture, from the most arcane ones, regarding the cult of the true God, to the mundane ones, that concern the so-called 'Egyptian philosophy', which Kircher distinguishes into ethics, economics, and politics, following Aristotle. So, for instance, Osiris, Isis, Horus, and Typhon's *historia* can be read as a "speculum [...] moralis disciplinae", aimed at educating men on what they should love or scorn.⁷⁶ Furthermore, just like the harmony between the Sun and the Moon, which brings order to the inferior elements, the myth of Isis and Osiris implies the necessity to seek order and harmony in all the aspects of life and human interaction – between sovereign and subjects, between husband and wife, between intellect and will in the rational soul, etc. Typhon hence becomes a universal emblem of discord, the Egyptian analogue of figures such as Cham, Esau, Nimrod, and Ahab. He is responsible for rebellions in the empire, but also for suspicion between spouses, and misuse of reason.⁷⁷

This line of interpretation was absolutely central to Kircher's demonstration in that it implicitly provided the premise for any piece of hieroglyphic decipherment. If the symbols engraved upon obelisks and Egyptian artefacts had to revolve around the heart of the Egyptian wisdom, which was the sole topic that could have justified the use of the hieroglyphic script, it was evident that they alluded to the same wisdom that Kircher had extracted from the myth of Isis and Osiris and from the Bembine Table. In other words, the obelisks which Kircher aimed to decipher *had to* contain a compendium of the Egyptian theology and cosmology combined; they *had to* provide a description of the "scientiam theoreticam et practicam de Deo,

⁷² Cf. DIECKMANN 1957, p. 308.

⁷³ Cf. MANETHO, Fr. 82-83 [in: Diog. Laert., Proem. 10; Euseb. *Praep. evang.*, 3.2].

⁷⁴ HORN 1655, 45. Cf. also: DIOD. SIC., 1.11.1-6.

⁷⁵ KIRCHER 1652-1654, 2.2:394. Cf. also: KIRCHER 1650, p. 253.

⁷⁶ KIRCHER 1652-1654, 1:144.

⁷⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 1:130, 1:144, 1:223; KIRCHER 1650, pp. 205-207.

divinisque ordinibus Mundorum Praesidibus, ex quorum concatenato influxu omnia in Mundorum oeconomia administrarentur".⁷⁸ Moreover, such purpose evidently resulted from the very shape of the obelisks. According to Kircher, and to a number of contemporary scholars such as Goropius Becanus and Mercati, the four sides of the obelisk and their pyramidal pinnacle alluded to the beams that descend from the Sun in order to illuminate all things.⁷⁹

It does not come as a surprise that Kircher should integrate this observation with his theory concerning the four Egyptian worlds, so bringing together Egyptian cosmology and theology. The four sides of the obelisks were hence made to represent the four worlds through which the 'rays' of Isis and Osiris emanated.⁸⁰ The same myth could be adapted to each world, leading to different interpretations. With regard to the *mundus archetypus*, it was to be read as an allegory of the religious arcana which the Egyptians derived from Moses and Hermes; with regard to the *mundus intellectualis*, its meaning involved instead the functioning of the rational soul; with reference to the *mundus sidereus*, Isis and Osiris were assimilated to the Moon and the Sun; and, with regard to the *mundus elementaris*, the myth concerned the teachings of Egyptian moral philosophy. In light of this, Kircher formulated a laconic universal explanation for the meaning of *all* obelisks: "finis [...] principalis, quem Aegyptij in obeliscorum habebant, erat, ut Osiridem et Isidem [...] in his figuris veluti mystica quadam radiorum repraesentatione colerent".⁸¹ To put it differently, *all* obelisks expressed in different hieroglyphic forms the same doctrine, the same *arcana sapientia* – that which was allegorised through the myth of Isis and Osiris, with its various interpretations, according to each one of the four worlds.

1.8 Apparent Polytheism and Cryptic Christianity

By analysing allegorically all the principal deities of the Egyptian pantheon, Kircher succeeded in reducing the Egyptian religion to a merely apparent polytheism. Egyptians did not truly worship a multitude of gods; on the contrary, the various deities which compose the Egyptian pantheon were simply allegorical representations aimed at describing the various ways in which the central message of the *sapientia aegyptiaca* was adapted to each world and to each field of knowledge. In order to accomplish his ultimate objective, namely the Christianisation of the Egyptian cult, Kircher was still to demonstrate that all the deities to which the Egyptian priests allegorically referred were nothing but specific manifestations of the unique and superior God whose knowledge the Egyptians had received from Moses and Hermes. The universalistic drive that motivated Kircher's analysis of the Bembine Table was to be corroborated by an interpretative strategy that could turn an apparent polytheism into a form of cryptic Christianity, predating the Revelation.

Kircher derived his principal weapon in this second stage of his *reductio ad unum* of the Egyptian and antique deities from the Greek tradition concerning the translatability of divine names. The topic had been much discussed throughout the Renaissance, particularly so with

⁷⁸ Cf. KIRCHER 1652-1654, 3:564.

⁷⁹ Cf. GOROPUS BECANUS 1680, 153; MERCATI 1589, 1-2, 59, 63, 68. Cf. also: MARQUET 1987, p. 236.

⁸⁰ Cf. KIRCHER 1652-1654, 2.2:113-114.

⁸¹ KIRCHER 1650, p. 161. Cf. also: KIRCHER 1666, p. 21.

reference to Plato's *Cratylus* and to the works of Neo-Platonic philosophers. In its original formulation, the doctrine was highly syncretic in nature, aiming to assimilate different deities based on common attributes and functions. Apparently, the practice of translating divine names made its first appearance in Mesopotamian and Sumerian glossaries such as the *Anu ša ameli*, where a description of the attributes of each deity was followed by its Sumerian name, alongside with the Akkadian 'translation'.⁸² Translations of divine names became extremely popular amongst the Greek historians that Kircher used as sources: Herodotus was the first to imply that Greek deities were merely translations of the Egyptian ones, and the same notion was later expounded and perfected by Diodorus, Plutarch, and the Neo-Platonists.⁸³

From Kircher's perspective, this meant that distinct figures such as Isis, Osiris, and Horus could be interpreted as a manifestation of the same one Godhead under different names. As it is clearly stated in the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, Isis "tam diversis nominibus [...] non alia de causa insignita est, nisi ut diversitas et varietas effectuum, quos in Mundo operatur, significetur".⁸⁴ Besides, a monotheistic rendition of the Egyptian cult was further facilitated by Kircher's conception of Egyptian cosmology. It was plausible, in fact, that the one Godhead should have received different names according to its different manifestations in each world.

This theory was apparently supported by all of Kircher's sources. In hiding the true God under a variety of different names, Egyptian priests had obeyed Plotinus' maxim according to which the Godhead should never be reduced to a single entity, but rather shown in its multiple manifestations.⁸⁵ To know the "δύναμιν θεοῦ" is to know the multiple forms that God may acquire, although always preserving his unity.⁸⁶ All gods, Plotinus believed, are messengers of the One: unity does not exclude multiplicity nor does multiplicity exclude unity.⁸⁷ A similar doctrine was held by Kircher as the sweetest fruit of the wisdom of the ancients. Through its readaptation in the works of the later Neo-Platonists, especially Iamblichus and Proclus, it became even easier to force Plotinus' original doctrine into the use which Kircher had purposed. The multiplication of the hypostases substituted the logical rigour of the *Enneads* with a more complex conception of the universe, perhaps a less orderly one, yet certainly one that was more apt to mirror a reality (and a theological system) whose character could not be merely theoretical. In the *De mysteriis* the supreme unity, the principle which Plotinus had hypostasise into duality and hence into a form of 'controlled' multiplicity, burst into an array of intermediate entities that Iamblichus allegorically considered deities, demigods, daemons, and genii.

Proclus' *Theologia platonica* further reinforced the tendency to multiply the hypostases by forcing Plotinus' Henology into a theogonic narrative. Plotinus' One was equated to the first

⁸² Cf. ASSMANN 1997, pp. 45-46; SMITH 2008, p. 42.

⁸³ Cf. HDT., 2.4; 2.42-43; DIOD. SIC., 1.13.3-5; PLUT. *De Is. et Os.*, 362A-B; PORPH. *Περὶ ἀγαλμάτων*, 9. Cf. also: TAIT 2003, p. 36.

⁸⁴ KIRCHER 1652-1654, 1:188. It should be noted that Kircher might have found a contemporary model for this sort of interpretative strategy in Girolamo Aleandro's *Antiquae Tabulae Marmorae Solis effige, symbolisque exculptae accurata explicatio* (1614) (cf. ALEANDER 1614, pp. 11; 48-49).

⁸⁵ Cf. PLOTINUS, *Enn.*, 2.9.9.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 6.4.4.

God, “ὁ πρῶτος [...] θεός”, also called King (βασιλεὺς). Like the הוה in Hebrew Kabbalah, this is the unitary and utterly transcendent principle from whence all natural and intellectual order originates or descends.⁸⁸ Before it hypostasise into the Νοῦς, Proclus’ One emanates into the divine *henads*, which are unitary, although not in the absolute sense, like the first God. The superior deities are hence produced, and can be distinguished into superessential, supervital, and superintellectual ones. In addition to these, in the sphere of the second hypostasis, Plotinus’ Intellect, Proclus’ divine principle is further multiplied so as to produce the intelligible gods, the intelligible-intellectual gods, and the intellectual gods, which Proclus identifies with the deities of the Greek pantheon. These are followed, at last, by the hypercosmic, encosmic, and celestial gods, which further hypostasise, under the sphere of the moon, into sublunar deities, daemons, genii, and heroes.⁸⁹

As complex as Proclus’ system might have appeared, it allowed for an interpretation that reduced the multiplicity of deities that populated the polytheistic pantheon into numerous manifestations of the progressive hypostatic process of the first and sole God. It was hence in accord with Proclus’ theogonic system that Kircher accomplished his Christianised interpretation of the Egyptian religion, whose supreme Godhead, the “unum [...] Deum, naturam naturantem, seu essentiam essentiantem, principium et finem rerum omnium”, he believed to have ‘hypostasised’ into different manifestations corresponding to each of the subsequent worlds he had postulated, so producing the whole Egyptian pantheon.⁹⁰

Having demonstrated the allegoric character of the Egyptian deities, and their subordination to a supreme divine being which could have been identified with the God of the Old Testament, the knowledge of whom had been handed down by the Patriarchs and the ancient theologians, Kircher could consider his political programme essentially concluded. The universal extension of the spiritual influence of the Church, and hence the legitimacy of its missionary expansion had been sufficiently proved. However, in addition to this, Kircher did not hesitate to list some further elements that, belonging to the ancient crypto-Christian cults, could be considered *bona fide* prefigurations of revealed Christianity. This is the case, for instance, of the suggested relationship between Isis and the Virgin, with whom the former shared a number of traditional attributes (a statue of Isis stood for centuries in Notre-Dame, in Paris, mistaken for an image of the Virgin).⁹¹ Besides, Egyptian priests had even alluded to the Cross, and the Trinity, which according to Kircher was prefigured in the depiction of the winged sun disk with snakes, a symbol of “illa trina unitas, quam [...] Aegyptij *Hemphtha* dicebant”.⁹² Indeed, for the prudent and intelligent interpreter, viz. for Kircher himself, even the Egyptian cryptic Christianity was not that cryptic after all.

⁸⁸ Cf. PROCL. *Plat. Theol.*, 2.54-55; 3.30.

⁸⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 2.66-73.

⁹⁰ KIRCHER 1650, p. 209. The same passage is also available in: KIRCHER 1652-1654, 1:48.

⁹¹ Cf. CASTELLI 1979, pp. 20-21; FAGIOLO 1990, p. 40. With regard to the traditional identification of Isis with the Virgin, cf. BEROALDUS 1501, fol. O iv^r.

⁹² KIRCHER 1652-1654, 2.2:10, 2.2:399. Amongst those who wrote about the *crux hermetica* in modern times, cf. FICINO 1989, p. 334; MERCATI 1589, p. 349.

2. The Jesuit China Mission. The Most Exotic Flavour of Ancient Theology

2.1 Introduction

Kircher's example was clearly emblematic of a specific, Roman, Catholic, and Jesuit cultural milieu whose prime and most urgent interest was in the development of a new historiographical model, global in its normative character, although European (and Eurocentric) in its perspective and purpose. The integration of foreign nations into the Catholic oecumene, which in itself represented the core of Kircher's own programme, implied however a whole new set of problems when considered from the practical perspective of the missionaries, who were separated from Rome and the Roman College by months of perilous navigation. While the reference to *prisca theologia* remained a central instrument of universalisation in the Chinese Mission, ancient theology was soon to be developed in ways much less theoretical, and therefore much less 'pure', than Kircher's. The Chinese millennial historical, philosophical, and religious tradition called for a semantic extension of the concept of *priscus theologus*, which was often paralleled by a relativisation of its Platonic overtones.

Platonism offered however an excellent lens through which to look at Chinese traditions and politics in order to have Europeans not only understand, but even sympathise with them. In his *China illustrata* of 1667, Kircher himself had exploited a set of alleged similarities between Plato's monarchy and the Chinese empire, as it was described by the missionaries. The Chinese empire could be presented as a bona fide political model in which sovereignty, piety, and religion were harmonised. Not unlike the Egyptian priests, Chinese Mandarins (*Literati*), holding the most influential posts in Chinese politics and responding directly to the imperial court, seemed to emblematised Plato's ideal government ruled by philosophers.¹ Their 'sect', "in hoc regno antiquissima", "Rempublicam gubernat, pluribus libris abundat, et supra coeteros laudatur".²

The description of a pious and just empire, which characterised Kircher's *China illustrata*, did not differ much from the description of Egypt provided in the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*. A parallelism which was further enhanced by Kircher's rhetoric: while in the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* the reader was informed that "inter coetera Mundi nationes et populos nulla unquam gens inventa fuit, quae maiori cura et vigilantia, quam Aegyptia in recte beateque instituentae Reipublicae ratione incubuerit", the *China illustrata* insisted that "[s]i ulla unquam in mundo Monarchia secundum politica principia rectaeque rationis dictamen constituta fuit, illam sane *Sinarum* esse ausim dicere".³ In brief, aside from the Chinese rather than Egyptian reference, the only major difference between the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* and the *China illustrata* was the dedicatee of the volume, who, in 1667, could not but be Leopold I, who had succeeded Ferdinand III as Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 1658.

¹ Cf. FINDLEN 2004, p. 306.

² KIRCHER 1667, pp. 131, 398.

³ KIRCHER 1652-1654, 1:102; KIRCHER 1667, p. 115.

2.2 Introducing China to Europe

The many advantages of presenting the Chinese empire as a political model did not escape the early missionaries in China: not only could such a parallel provide a familiar interpretative tool for Europeans to acquire information about China, but, as a consequence, it also fostered the European interest in missionary work, which was to be perceived as something useful not only for the idolaters whose salvation was now at hand, but also for Europe itself. This became particularly true towards the mid-seventeenth century, when the Jesuit allegiance was shifted from Portugal and Spain to the French court, which proved particularly interested in the establishment of a 'Chinese connexion'.⁴ Regardless of his paganism, the figure of the Kangxi Emperor, whose leadership had granted China a new stability, was a rather fitting analogue for Louis XIV, whose political aspirations also included the reunification of Europe under a Catholic reign.⁵

Of course, this was not to say that Luis XIV should have considered the Kangxi Emperor a peer, and much less was Kangxi inclined to do the same. However such Jesuit flavour of 'elective affinity' established by the missionaries between the two monarchs resulted in a series of remarkable literary and rhetorical attitudes. In the first instance, virtually all the major works published in Latin or French by members of the China Mission were dedicated to Luis XIV, and often incorporated what can be read as the largely fantastic record of the actually almost nonexistent diplomatic relationship between the two kingdoms. On the one hand, in China, the Kangxi Emperor was presented with 'homages from the French prince' (homages that also included the Jesuits themselves), which the emperor admired more for their exoticism than for their regal origin. On the other, in France, Luis XIV was assured of the utmost admiration and respect paid to him by the Chinese emperor: "il a receu le vostre avec des marques d'estime que estonnérent toute sa Cour" – we read in an introduction dedicated to Luis XIV – "et je puis dire, que [...] un Empereur de la Chine sentit pour la premiere fois, qu'il y avoit plus d'un Souverain dans le monde".⁶

In this context a 'new' genre was born, one that was explicitly devoted to the biography of the Chinese emperor which, for instance, was recounted somewhat hagiographically in Joachim Bouvet's *Portrait historique de l'empereur de la Chine présenté au roy* (1697), partially republished in the second edition of Leibniz's *Novissima sinica* (1699). Nothing particularly worth mentioning can be found in these works except the fact that they represent the culmination of a century-long tradition of ennobling descriptions of the Chinese empire. Since the time of Matteo Ricci, the Chinese empire had been described in highly eulogistic terms that clearly provided a model for Kircher's Platonic depiction of it. "Tutto il regno si governa per letterati" Ricci wrote, adding that among the Chinese nothing is held in higher esteem than science and philosophy: "certo, pare a loro, che un letterato può dare buon giudizio di tutte le cose, anco di quelle che mai professò. [...] Ai maestri fanno molto più onore che noi, et solo un giorno che fu uno maestro di qualsivoglia scientia et arte, tutta la sua vita lo chiamano maestro".⁷ This notion was to prove fundamental in the European debate about China, and as such it

⁴ HO-FUNG 2003, pp. 257-259.

⁵ MEYNARD 2011, p. 67.

⁶ LE COMTE 1697, s.p. [Au Roy].

⁷ RICCI 2000, pp. 38, 51, 76.

was endlessly repeated and amplified even by those who had never even set foot in China, as in the case of Daniello Bartoli, who especially admired the Chinese procedures for the elections of Mandarins, who had to pass various examinations in history and philosophy.⁸

Such insistence on China's millennial philosophical and erudite tradition was greatly significant for the European audience as it helped categorise the people of China. After nearly three decades spent in the West Indies, where the first missionaries had debated for years about whether the local population pertained to mankind or not, José de Acosta sailed back to Spain and published the *De procuranda indorum salute* (1588) and the *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (1590), in which he classified 'barbarians' into three categories. The lowest one comprised barely human peoples, "homines sylvestres, feris similes", who lived in the state of nature, without law, without rule, and, more importantly, without trace of literacy. The second set of savages, included Incas, Aztecs, and Mayas and was characterised by a governmental apparatus, although lacking a fully developed writing system, which was, instead, the peculiar mark of the most civilised kind of 'barbarians' who could actually be called barbarians only due to their paganism.⁹

Acosta's categorisation remained an implicit reference for all the Jesuit missionaries who wrote about China in the seventeenth century and, as a consequence, literacy came to be presented as the most important aspect of the Chinese culture: the true mark of China's relative affinity with Europe. In Álvaro Semedo's terms, thanks to literacy and wit, a perfect parallelism could be drawn between China and Europe: "no se les puede negar una singularissima agudeza, que mercedamente les puede apropiarse el loor que Aristoteles liberalmente concedió a los de la Asia, diciendo, que en ingenio llevaba ella a Europa la ventaja, que Europa le llevaba a ella en el esfuerzo".¹⁰ It was clear, besides, that the extraordinary intellectual virtues of the Chinese people could not but foster their moral virtues as well. The Chinese were not "inclinados a la virtud" because of their simplicity, like some of the Americans; quite to the contrary, their virtues stemmed from a right use of reason, which had developed in them an inclination for honesty, chastity, piety, charity, compassion, and obedience.¹¹ In accord with these principles, the Chinese had formalised a list of commandments (*mandamientos*), which "corresponden a los nuestros; como no matar, no hurtar, no mentir, honrar padres".¹² In brief, so civilised were the Chinese that, upon considering the advanced culture of the Mexican and Peruvian peoples, a diffusionist like Georg Horn would have referred to a Chinese origin as the only possible cause of civilisation.¹³ Even the elements that resembled Christianity in the Mexican and Peruvian religions were then to be traced back to the Chinese commandments.¹⁴

⁸ Cf. BARTOLI 1663, pp. 78-84, 97-98.

⁹ Cf. LANDUCCI 1972, pp. 98-99; MARCOCCI 2015, pp. 163-164; PAGDEN 1986, pp. 162-163.

¹⁰ SEMEDO 1642, p. 43. Cf. also: BARTOLI 1663, pp. 67-68.

¹¹ SEMEDO 1642, pp. 192-194.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 194.

¹³ Cf. HORN 1652, pp. 223-224, 255-256, 266-267. Cf. also: GLIOZZI 1977, p. 504.

¹⁴ Cf. GLIOZZI 1977, pp. 505-506.

2.3 Introducing Christianity into China

Indeed, the only blemish which could be imputed to the Chinese was their pride, which was however a by-product of their intellectual and moral excellence. Pride, both in its intellectual and chauvinistic flavour, was the great obstacle which the Jesuits had to overcome in order to mix in with the “*sospettosa nazione ch’è la Cinese*”.¹⁵ And it was not without some calculated flattery that one of the first Chinese works by Ricci, the *Mappamondo*, or *Yudi shanghai quantu*, was illustrated with a map of the world in which China occupied the centre.¹⁶ However, it was not enough to pay homage to the Chinese notion of geographical and political centrality. A form of historical chauvinism had to be taken into account as well, and Ricci soon understood that the demonstration of the antiquity of an idea alone would have established the authority for its acceptance by contemporary Chinese.¹⁷

Precedents were in China the prime criterion for judgement in political or cultural matters, and even the notion of a true religion as opposed to a false one would have seemed absurd unless it was phrased in terms of religions authorised by tradition versus new doctrines.¹⁸ It was clear that, in order to introduce Christianity into China, it was necessary to have it considered as a genuinely Chinese and possibly ancient tradition. From an historical perspective, a first option was offered by the classic doctrine concerning the repopulation of the world after the Flood. Descending from Noah’s progeny, the Chinese would have been included in a universal tradition, through which Judeo-Christianity could have entered China at the very beginning of its history. Besides, this theory could also benefit from the traditional association between Oriental peoples and Shem, who, unlike Cham, had remained faithful to his father’s divine teachings. However, much as the Noahic argument was convincing and familiar for a European audience that was accustomed to think about peoples in terms of genealogies, it resulted rather weak in China, due to its intrinsic Eurocentric and Bibliocentric character.¹⁹ Regardless of the Chinese chronicles reporting a great flood, Chinese intellectuals would not have felt obliged to accept any of the Biblical premises implied by the genealogical argument, including the historicity of Noah.²⁰ Some other strategy was called for in order to establish an authoritative precedent for Christianity in China. One that had to prove that Christianity did indeed belong to the most ancient Chinese tradition.

Upon looking for traces of documented Christian rites in China, Ricci himself had been made aware of a Chinese Christian enclave that had reportedly flourished in the northern regions and which he thought to have originated from St. Thomas the Apostle’s preaching in the East.²¹ However, it was only in 1625, fifteen years after his death, that the alleged historical evidence of China’s Christian past and of St. Thomas’ Chinese apostolate was discovered in the form of an ancient tablet. Found in the province of Xi’an, and written in Chinese, it con-

¹⁵ BARTOLI 1663, s.p. [A’ lettori].

¹⁶ Cf. RICCI 2000, 144*n.*, p. 299.

¹⁷ Cf. MUNGELLO 1989, p. 64.

¹⁸ Cf. GERNET 1982, pp. 95, 147-148.

¹⁹ Cf. BOUVET BNF Fr. 17240, fols. 18^v, 21^v; COLLANI 1990, pp. 45-47; Leslie 1984, pp. 404; RYAN 1981, p. 532.

²⁰ Cf. *inter alia*: MARTINI 1658, p. 3.

²¹ Cf. RICCI 2000, pp. 92, 99.

tained a clear description of some Christian dogmas, including “plura de primi hominis creatione, [de] Incarnatione Salvatoris et conditione Christi et Apostolorum, [de] Religionis Christianae excellentia”.²² The tablet, which had been produced in the environment of the Christian Nestorian Church and erected in 781, was applauded by Jesuits as a sign of the providence of God, whose intention was to procure them the ultimate weapon for establishing the authority of Christianity in China.²³ As Semedo, put it: “finalmente consta con evidencia, desta venerable antigualla, que la Religion Christiana se plantó en la China [...] desde el año 631 del Nacimiento de nuestro Redentor”.²⁴

By the mid-seventeenth century the inscription of the Xi'an tablet had been translated into Latin, French, Spanish, and Italian. And while in Europe its providential discovery was believed to vouch for the missionary expansion in the East, in China, it also seemed to confirm the validity of the method adopted by the Jesuits, in the wake of Ricci's policy of accommodation to the Chinese sensibility. The implicit connexion between Christianity and ancient China established by the tablet also suggested a solution to the main problem encountered by the China missionaries, namely that “ea quae maxime offendunt et irritant animos Sinensium non tam esse fidei Christianae leges et instituta; quam quod omnes sectae [...] damnentur ab una Religione Christiana”.²⁵ In other words, in having the tablet found, not only had God blessed the missionary action, but he had also expressed his preference for Jesuit accommodation over Franciscan and Dominican intransigency.

God's blessing aside, although intransigent conversion strategies perfectly worked in America, they proved totally inconclusive in China. In stark opposition to the Franciscan practice, which is best exemplified by the surprise of a Franciscan missionary, who remarked that upon arriving in China he had seen nothing but crosses, even the doctrine of the crucifix was reserved by the Jesuits for converts, and was not treated in depth in the *credo minimum* promoted amongst the masses, since it generally appeared a little too gory to the Chinese public, as Ricci himself had learnt by experience.²⁶ By the same token, Ricci had soon understood that preaching humility in China was best done in silk robes, since the Chinese did not associate austerity and exterior humility with virtue, but on the contrary, they were used to connect wisdom to wealth.²⁷

Past a short initial period, in which Ricci and his confrères were perceived by the Chinese as some sort of Buddhist monks, since they shaved their beard and trimmed their hair, wore

²² SPIZELIUS 1660, p. 160.

²³ Cf. KIRCHER 1667, pp. 8-9, 53, 92; KIRCHER 1636, p. 86. Cf. also, in this regard: DUNNE 1962, p. 195; GLIOZZI 1993, p. 230; SZCZESNIAK, pp. 395-396.

²⁴ SEMEDO 1642, pp. 216-217.

²⁵ INTORCETTA *et al.* 1687, p. cxii. Cf. also: PINOT 1932^a, pp. 74-75, 91-92.

²⁶ “Quello che [...] diede maggior travaglio ai nostri, fu ritrovare fra le nostre Cose un molto bello crucifisso in legno e pinto col sangue [...]. Il Padre Matteo, per una parte non voleva dire che questo era il nostro Dio, parendogli difficile tra quella gente ignorante et in quel tempo dichiarare sì alto misterio [...]. Per questo cominciò puoco a puoco a dichiarare al *Pinpitao* et altri [...] esser quello un grande santo di nostra terra [...]; questo noi lo pingevamo e sculpivamo di quel modo per tenerlo sempre avanti gli occhi [...]. Con tutto questo, disse il *Pinpitao*, non par bene tenere quel huomo di quella guisa” (RICCI 2000, p. 343). Cf. also, in this regard: MIGNINI 2000, p. xvi; ROWBOTHAM 1966, p. 125.

²⁷ Cf. PINOT 1932^a, p. 73.

a simple habit, prayed together in ‘churches’ and did not get married, “avvisò il P. Valignano che pareva totalmente necessario lasciarsi i nostri crescer la barba et anco i capelli. [...] Oltre di questo avvisò che era necessario avere i nostri un vestito proprio, di seta [...]”.²⁸ By the year 1595, Jesuits had started to dress themselves as the *Literati* (Confucians) did and in 1596 Ricci revised his *Catechism*, eliminating any association between the Fathers and the Buddhist monks: “fece il P. Matteo un altro Catechismo [...], più copioso di quello che si fece prima, il quale, oltre l’esser breve, era fatto al modo e stato in che allora stavano i Padri, nominandosi i nostri in esso con nome simile agli *Osciami*. Per questo si diede ordine che si rompessero le tavole [...]”.²⁹

Such huge difference in perspective, which set Jesuits apart from Franciscans and Dominicans, and allowed them to carry out numberless conversions while maintaining a cordial relationship with the *Literati* and, later, with the imperial court, was not only due to Ricci’s acumen, or to the Jesuits’ greater and more diversified culture when compared to Dominicans and Franciscans in particular. Indeed the accommodation strategy was somehow connatural to the Jesuit order and, so to speak, it had been laid out well before the China Mission was founded. Addressing the Jesuit legate at the Council of Trent, Ignatius of Loyola, the then Father General and founder of the Society, advised them to be reflective and not to insist too much on the points that separated Catholics from Protestants.³⁰ The very *Ratio studiorum*, issued in 1599, formalised a practice that would have inspired Chinese accommodation strategy and that had been in use for the past fifty years at least. Rather than banning pagan books from Jesuit colleges and classes altogether, the golden rule was to discern in them the good from the bad. In 1553 Juan Polanco wrote to Hannibal de Coudret: “si procura qui in Roma acconciare detti authori in questo modo: de Martiale et Horatio et simili, si leva quello che è disonesto, et si lassa il resto col suo nome, etc. Il libello d’otto partibus si stampa senza nominar Erasmo, perché non l’ha composto lui. Si fa etiam una copia più breve in versi, dove si contiene il buono di Erasmi, et sic de aliis [...]”.³¹ Soon Jerónimo Nadal ratified: “Oratio se limpie y se imprima, y Marcial, y con él lo que fuere limpio de Catullo y Tibullo y Gallo; y el P. Cypriano irá purgando todos los libros”.³²

Such purging of books was even more urgent when something to the benefit of Christianity could be found in them. As the professor of Holy Scriptures was reminded in the *Ratio*: “si quid sit in hebraeorum rabbinis, quod vel pro latina editione vulgata, vel pro catholicis dogmatibus utiliter possit afferri, id ita afferat”.³³ Upon this point, Possevino’s *Bibliotheca selecta* was even clearer: “Rabbinorum argumenta illa, quae ad Iudaeos confutandos spectant, ad proprium commodum, et causae Christianae propugnationem usurpanda sunt”.³⁴ After all, having displayed for some three thousand pages an array of suspiciously heretic materials, Kircher himself would have concluded the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* with a reworking of the Jesuit

²⁸ RICCI 2000, p. 230.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 259-260. Cf. also: BARTOLI 1663, pp. 266-267.

³⁰ Cf. FERLAN 2015, p. 51.

³¹ LUKÁCS 1965-1992, 1:439.

³² *Ibid.*, 3:56-57.

³³ *Ibid.*, 5:8.

³⁴ POSSEVINUS 1593, p. 568.

motto, “Omnia ad maiorem Dei gloriam, et Orthodoxae Ecclesiae, nec non Reipublicae Literariae emolumentum”.³⁵

2.4 Ricci and the Sect of the *Literati*

When Ricci and Ruggeri were urged to adopt an honorific name, the latter chose to be called *Fuchū*, “The Restorer”.³⁶ And indeed innovation disguised as restoration was the only kind of innovation that the Chinese would have accepted. This applied both to the way in which Christian doctrines were to be presented and to the way in which the Jesuits had to present themselves. In light of this, the restyling of the image of the Jesuits in a Confucian direction was a fundamental aspect of Ricci’s accommodation strategy, not only because the *Literati* were politically much more influential than the Buddhists, but also because, unlike Buddhism, Confucianism was perceived as a genuinely Chinese and hence more authoritative doctrine. Rather than abolishing Confucianism, the ultimate aim of Ricci’s accommodation theory was then to ‘perfect’ Confucianism through Christianity, since the sect of the *Literati* “nel suo essenziale non contiene niente contra l’essentia della fede Catholica; né la fede Catholica impedisce niente, anzi agiuta molto alla quiete e pace della repubblica, che i suoi libri pretendono”.³⁷

Even the names by which Confucians referred to their ‘God’ – *T’ien* and *Shangdi* (literally ‘Heaven’ and ‘Supreme Deity’) – needed not be substituted by *Deus* or by some Chinese neologism, since they did not imply anything that was contrary to the true notion of God. *T’ien* and *Shangdi* were thus to become the customary terms which Jesuits (and Jesuits only) used to preach to the Chinese, nor was this practice discontinued until the early-eighteenth century, when in Europe the burgeoning anti-Jesuit bias joined forces with the ‘Question of the Rites’, pointing to the use of the Chinese names of God as the most conspicuous of the Jesuit concessions to irreligion and heresy.³⁸

Of course Jesuits were not short of arguments to defend their use of the Chinese names of God: in the first instance, not even *Deus*, or the Tetragram, could be considered God’s true name, since “Dieu n’a point de nom propre, et [...] on ne le connoît que par des attributs”.³⁹ What is more, even the Chinese Jewish enclave worshipped God under the name of *T’ian*, which clearly would have been inconceivable were such a name idolatrous in any way.⁴⁰ However, the Jesuit use of the Chinese names for God was not only part of the accommodation strategy, but it also served to prove the original purity of the Confucian faith. As Bartoli put it: “trovati per istituzione antica, e per uso corrente, due nomi, che, [...] nulla si traggono

³⁵ Cf. STOLZENBERG 2001, p. 11.

³⁶ Cf. RICCI 2000, 154*n*.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

³⁸ Cf. MARTINI 1658, p. 35; INTORCETTA *et al.* 1687, pp. xxv, lxxxix, xciii; PRÉMARE 1878, 55 ff.; BNF Fr. 15195, fol. 9^v.

³⁹ DU HALDE 1819, 11:475 [Prémare au Pere ***, 1724].

⁴⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 10:28-29. In spite of all assurances, the Chinese did not in any way distinguish material sky from spiritual Heaven in the notion of *T’ien*. This probably played in favour of the Jesuits, who preached God and lectured on European astronomy at the same time, hence displaying the utmost knowledge of *T’ien*, however understood (cf. GERNET 1982, p. 265).

dietro per conseguente, che non istia ottimamente a Dio, il P. Matteo Ricci [...] giudicò bastevolmente provato [...] gli antichi cinesi haver conosciuto il vero Iddio, senon altramente, scorti dal lume del natural discorso".⁴¹

Partly due to its intrinsic character and partly thanks to the Jesuit method of interpretation of pagan texts, Confucianism, and specifically early Confucianism, could be shown to display significant affinities with Christianity. This Confucian-Christian blending became an interpretative tool of paramount importance: not only did it render Christian dogmas more acceptable in the East, but it also funnelled the flow of information about China in Europe.⁴² Ricci remarked that "di tutte le gentilità venute a notizia della nostra Europa non so di nessuna che avesse manco errori intorno alle cose della religione di quello che ebbe la Cina nella sua prima antichità".⁴³ Concerning the sect of the *Literati*, that is, the Confucian entourage, he added that "in questa legge si parla del castigo divino e del premio che hanno da ricevere i Cattivi et i buoni [...]". Besides, although Confucians were somewhat unclear on the notion of afterlife, "hanno molto espresso in tutti i loro libri il 2° Precetto della Carità, che fare ad altri quello che vogliamo che gli altri ci facciano a noi. E ingrandiscono molto la obedientia de' figliuoli a suo Padre e Madre [...]".⁴⁴

With the relatively uninfluential exception of Niccolò Longobardo, Ricci's favourable account on the Confucian sect was shared by virtually all of his successors.⁴⁵ Confucians were nearly Christians *in pectore*, and, the impression conveyed by Ricci or Bartoli, is that the Jesuits would have converted a number of Confucians beyond imagination, were it not for some 'minor blemishes' (always minimised by Ricci) such as polygamy, sodomy, and a tendency to political atheism.⁴⁶ Yet, even these darker aspect of Confucianism were not to be regarded as 'truly' and 'originally' Confucian. While modern Confucians might have been led astray by the interpreters of the classic texts who wrote during the Tang dynasty (618-907), the Confucians' most obvious deviances from their virtuous standard were to be traced back to the mischievous influence of the other two Chinese sects, Buddhism, and Taoism.⁴⁷

In spite of his early interest towards Buddhism, once adopted the Confucian habit, Ricci convinced himself of the completely idolatrous and sacrilegious nature of the Buddhist rites. Such aversion was to be harshened by Ricci's successors and by those who divulged information about China in Europe. Some fifty years after Ricci's death, Bartoli clearly stated that the Buddhist sect was "contraria in tutto a questa de' Letterati [...] peroche hanno idoli [...], e assai di loro, con laida, e mostruosa apparenza". Similarly, Kircher spoke of the "*Bonziorum*

⁴¹ BARTOLI 1663, p. 118. Cf. also: *ibid.*, pp. 116-117.

⁴² Cf. MUNGELLO 1989, p. 14.

⁴³ RICCI 2000, p. 90.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁴⁵ Cf. SEMEDO 1642, pp. 118-119; Bartoli 1663, p. 124; Kircher 1667, p. 99. Concerning Longobardo, cf. *inter alia*: KORS 1990, pp. 161-162; WITEK 1994, pp. 201-202.

⁴⁶ Cf. RICCI 2000, p. 84; BARTOLI 1663, p. 383.

⁴⁷ Cf. RICCI 2000, p. 94; INTORCETTA *et al.* 1687, p. lxi. Cf. also: MUNGELLO 1989, p. 61. The critical bias against Tang dynasty interpreters was not abandoned by Ricci's successors; cf., *inter alia*: INTORCETTA *et al.* 1687, pp. lix-lx; LUNDBAEK 1983, p. 19.

idolomaniam, id est, monstruosorum Numinum cultum".⁴⁸ The *Confucius sinarum philosophus*, probably the most important work ever produced in the environment of the Jesuit China Mission, opened with a severe critique of the Buddhist sect, which combined the worst atheism with the worst superstition and, in 1699, Joseph Henri de Prémare, in a letter from Canton, referred to the bonzes as "les prêtres de Satan".⁴⁹

Unlike Buddhism, the third sect was indigenously Chinese and had originated from the teachings of Laozi, who was roughly contemporary with Confucius.⁵⁰ In comparison to Confucianism and even to Buddhism, Jesuits paid relatively little attention to Daoism, often misinterpreting its principles. On the one hand, it seemed to display some elements of affinity to Christianity, such as, according to Ricci, the notion of Paradise. These elements, however, and even the Taoist use of the term *Shangdi*, were channelled in a completely unchristian direction.⁵¹ In addition to this, Taoist alchemy, which was at the same time spiritual and material and whose prime purpose was the quest for immortality, was perceived as a patent mark of paganism, so that Taoists were often described as sorcerers or scammers: "essi [...] per la maggior parte son que' vagabondi alchimisti, delle cui frodolenze, e prestigi, tanto in aggirar gli huomini, quanto in falsare i metalli, si è ragionato in suo luogo".⁵²

Most of the critiques the Jesuits directed at the Buddhists and Taoists alike were clearly motivated by the desire to single out Confucianism as the outpost of virtue in China, under constant attack from the other sects, which were responsible for the infiltration of superstitious and heretic elements in an otherwise pure and virtuous doctrine. Such perspective is best exemplified by the authors of the *Confucius sinarum philosophus* who provided an historical account according to which, after a golden age of virtue that culminated in Confucius' philosophical production, idolatry had been introduced into China at the hands of Laozi's initiates, only to be further advanced by the Buddhist sect.⁵³

The notion of an ancient virtuous China, emblematised by Confucius and continued, although somehow imperfectly, by modern Confucians, as opposed to the idolatry of Buddhists and Taoists, was not too different from Kircher's Egyptian twofold tradition. The solution implicitly suggested by both doctrines was exactly the same. Kircher's works aimed at restoring an original godly tradition by identifying and eliminating the Hamitic elements of corruption which had contaminated it and, in the same way, the Chinese missionaries should have brought back into life an original nearly Christian form of Confucianism by censuring the aspects of contemporary Confucianism which were perceived as being unchristian and were therefore imputed to the mischievous influence of the other sects. In brief, it was necessary to restore Confucianism to its original purity – to teach the Chinese what 'true Confucianism' was supposed to be.

⁴⁸ BARTOLI 1663, p. 125; KIRCHER 1667, p. 113.

⁴⁹ Cf. INTORCETTA *et al.* 1687, p. xxvii; DU HALDE 1819, 9:227 [Prémare à François d'Aix de La Chaise, 17.II.1699].

⁵⁰ Cf. *inter alia*: RICCI 2000, p. 102; SEMEDO 1642, pp. 119-120; KIRCHER 1667, p. 133; Intorcetta *et al.* 1687, xxiv.

⁵¹ Cf. RICCI 2000, p. 104; CORRADINI 2000, p. xxxv.

⁵² BARTOLI 1663, p. 132.

⁵³ Cf. INTORCETTA *et al.* 1687, p. xvi. This theory was also embraced by Le Comte in his *Nouveaux mémoires sur l'état présent de la Chine*: cf. LE COMTE 1696-1697, 2:148, 2:183-184.

As Ricci admitted, “procurò molto di tirare alla nostra opinione il Principale della setta de’ letterati, che è il Confutio”.⁵⁴ His *Four Books*, which together with the *Five Classics* were by far the most important texts for the Confucian sect and for Mandarins in particular, could be read as a quasi-Christian collection of moral essays in the style of Cicero, especially once restored to their ‘original meaning’ and stripped naked of the abstruse metaphysics and apparent atheism which the late interpreters had allegedly projected onto them.⁵⁵ Far from being speculative in character, Confucius’ teachings, according to Ricci’s interpretation, were grounded in natural reason. Accordingly, rather than being a prophet, Confucius was a great philosopher, possibly even greater than some Greek and Latin thinkers: “in quello che disse e nel suo buon modo di vivere conforme alla natura, non è inferiore ai nostri antichi filosofi excedendo a molti”.⁵⁶

The Christian-like elements that could be found in the *Four Books* hence did not depend upon a Chinese revelation. On the contrary, they were to be explained as the product of a virtuous use of the law of reason and nature that, according to Paul (and in particular to the early modern interpretation of Paul), had been impressed by God on men and constituted an alternative route to salvation, although less perfect than revelation.⁵⁷ In utter accord with Paul’s description of virtuous paganism, early Confucians “fecero sempre molto caso di seguire in tutte le loro opere il dettame della ragione che dicevano avere ricevuta dal Cielo, e mai credettero del Re del Cielo e degli altri spiriti, suoi ministri, cose tanto sconcie, quanto credettero i nostri Romani, i Greci, gli Egittij e altre strane nationi. Di dove, si può sperare della Immensa bontà del signore, che molti di quegli antichi si salvassero nella legge naturale”.⁵⁸

Ricci’s explanation is perfectly in line with the many works in natural theology published during the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth century: although divine truth shines most intesely in revealed law, it is also embedded in (created) nature and can be perceived through natural reason. Early Confucians might hence have attained salvation by obeying the dictates of this natural faculty, which, being divine in origin, can never contradict revealed truths. Yet, natural theology did not merely provide an explanation for the rectitude that characterised early Confucians. Given the Confucian propensity for the right use of reason, their conversion was best undertaken through a perfected version of a Confucian strategy, that is, through the use of natural theology such as it was developed in the wake of Thomas Aquinas. Natural reason and the authority of ancient Confucian texts, which were grounded upon it, became Ricci’s paramount weapons in the attempt to convert Confucians to Catholicism.⁵⁹ As recounted by Bartoli with regard to Ricci’s *Catechism*, “il lavoro di quest’opera, è quanto il piu far si puo, ridotto al puro lume della diritta ragion naturale”.⁶⁰ Such rational colouring was requested “essendo que’ Letterati non puramente ignoranti del vero, ma per istudio confermati nel

⁵⁴ RICCI 2000, p. 455.

⁵⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 28-29. Cf. also: LUNDBAEK 1983, pp. 22-25; MEYNARD 2011, p. 25.

⁵⁶ RICCI 2000, pp. 28-29. Cf. also: MARENBNON 2015, pp. 260, 276.

⁵⁷ Cf. ROM, 1:18-21; 2:12-15.

⁵⁸ RICCI 2000, p. 90. Cf. also: *ibid.*, p. 98.

⁵⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 95, 301. Concerning Ricci’s rational method for conversion, cf. CORRADINI 2000, p. xxxiii; MUNGELLO 1989, pp. 72-73.

⁶⁰ BARTOLI 1663, p. 520.

falso, era necessario vincerli con ragioni, e prima in quelle verità, che la Natura stessa direttamente filosofando, non solo approva, ma [...] nel giungervi col discorso le sembra trovar' ella da sé quel che altri illuminandola, le discuoopre".⁶¹

2.5 Confucius on the Way to Becoming a Prophet

Although Ricci's emphasis on a rational method for conversion was shared by virtually all of his successors, not long after his death the attitude towards Confucius started to change, both in China and in Europe. While Ricci had always focused in particular on Confucius' teachings and on the early Confucian tradition, Martini, Spitzel, and Bartoli, who all wrote in the late-1650s and early 1660s, began to transfer special attention to the historical figure of Confucius, more or less consciously initiating a process of near canonisation which would have reached its climax in 1687, with the publication of the *Confucius sinarum philosophus*.

The parallelism drawn by Ricci between Confucius and the Greek and Latin philosophers catalysed such a process of near canonisation.⁶² Some elements that were traditionally associated with the doctrine of ancient theology gradually began to infiltrate the Chinese discourse.⁶³ While agreeing with Ricci that Confucius was comparable to Socrates, Plato or Aristotle, Martini added that he had not only acted according to the natural law, but had even prophesied "verbum carnem futurum".⁶⁴ Confucius was thus a great philosopher and a great prophet at the same time, hence qualifying as a bona fide *priscus theologus*. In order not to give rise to theological absurdities concerning a Chinese revelation independent from the Judeo-Christian one, it was necessary however to demonstrate that Confucius' prophetic knowledge had been handed down to him from the time of Noah. In other words, it was relatively safe to extend the line of the *prisci theologi* to include eastern figures as well, granted that these figures could be located in the unique tradition outlined by Biblical history. This necessity suffices to explain Martini's attempt to unify Chinese and Biblical chronology, that is, to find in the Chinese chronicles some analogues of the events recorded in the Bible, such as the Deluge.⁶⁵

This cultural shift, which was gradually shifting the discussion on Confucius from the area of natural theology to that of ancient theology, was not only due to somewhat accidental features, such as the comparison with ancient Greek and Latin thinkers. Approaching the middle of the seventeenth century, another, more impelling reason encouraged such change in perspective. Libertines of all flavours and Deists in particular were rapidly burgeoning in France and England, threatening the Catholic and Protestant establishments alike. Since the years of Mersenne's and Garasse's anti-libertine production, it had become increasingly clear that perhaps the most important argument for the deist doctrine was their revolutionary interpretation of natural theology in a naturalistic sense. From the time of Thomas Aquinas onwards, *theologia naturalis* had always been considered synonymous with *theologia rationalis*, in that it

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁶² Cf. RICCI 2000, p. 29; MUNGELLO 1989, p. 56.

⁶³ Cf. BARTOLI 1663, p. 116.

⁶⁴ MARTINI 1658, p. 131. Cf. in this regard: CHANG 1995, p. 147; COLLANI 1995, p. 249.

⁶⁵ Cf. MARTINI 1658, pp. 60-61; PINOT 1932^a, p. 290.

described the process through which men could use their reason (created and hence divine in origin) in order to achieve some knowledge of God through the analysis of his creation (nature). Conversely, seventeenth-century Deists began to interpret the word 'natural' in 'natural theology' in the way that was to become commonplace in the eighteenth century, that is as concerning a purely human aspect. As a consequence, the features of the early Confucian culture that in Ricci were more or less indisputably an indication that the pagans had imperfectly known God thanks to the law of reason and nature, risked becoming, in the deist interpretation, an example of the preposterous character of established religions and of their unnecessary role in the advancement of morality (as in Bayle's argument). And indeed, accounts about China, which in most cases had been produced in the Jesuit environment, would have provided Deists with one of the most important sources of materials, unwantedly fostering the libertine interest in China at the same time.⁶⁶

If, in Voss' terms, classic explanations of the Christian-like elements in pagan cultures could be drawn "partim traditione perpetua, partim e rerum natura", in order to counter the deist expansion it was necessary to minimise the latter option while insisting on the former.⁶⁷ References to the natural law of reason, albeit utterly orthodox in principle, had to be kept to a minimum and, on the contrary, the role of divine inspiration, be it direct or mediated through tradition, had to be emphasised.⁶⁸ During the mid-seventeenth century, such strategic necessity was shared by Catholics and Protestants alike. And, while Protestants such as Horn would oppose polygenetic theories about the origin of exotic people through diffusionism, Catholic thinkers were often more inclined to revive the notion of *prisca theologia*. For a brief period of time, the role of ancient theology was magnified in Europe's Catholic milieu. Authors such as Kircher, Beurrier, Thomassin, and Huet, all adopted ancient theology as their paramount tool, regardless of their rather different cultural agendas. What is more, they all considered carefully the Chinese example in light of the works by early seventeenth century China missionaries, so gaining a new perspective, which was to prove in turn extremely influential for late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century Jesuits.

Paul Beurrier in particular was amongst the first in Europe to introduce the Chinese to the ranks of ancient theologians by considering Fu Xi, the legendary founder of China, as one of the descendants of Noah: "neque mirum si in Imperio Sinico tot verae Religionis prae-notiones cernuntur, cum fuerit a sanctis Patriarchis fundatum, et toto hoc tempore ab idolatria immune servatum fuerit [...] usque ad annum post Christum natum sexagesimum quintum: quo anno variae Sectae haereseon, et idolatriae ex India in Sinas allatae sunt".⁶⁹ The foremost source for Beurrier's *Perpetuitas Fidei* (1672) is clearly Martini, whose theory concerning the prophetic knowledge of the Chinese Beurrier adopted and expanded by stating that Confucius would have prophesied that the Saint had to be expected from the West, that is – Beurrier interprets – from Jerusalem and Rome.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Cf. DAVIES 1992, p. 12; GLIOZZI 1993, pp. 224-225; HO-FUNG 2003, p. 261; PINOT 1932^a, p. 292; ROWBOTHAM 1992, p. 471; ZOLI 1989, pp. 15, 52, 60.

⁶⁷ VOSS 1641, p. 9.

⁶⁸ Cf. GLIOZZI 1993, pp. 232-233.

⁶⁹ BEURRIER 1672, p. 163. Cf. PINOT 1932^a, p. 290; Walker 1972, pp. 206-208.

⁷⁰ Cf. PINOT 1932^a, pp. 291-292.

Another important stage in the shift from natural theology to ancient theology was marked, as noted by Walker, by Louis Thomassin's influential volumes on *La méthode d'étudier et d'enseigner chrétiennement et solidement la philosophie par rapport à la religion chrétienne et aux Ecritures*. In this work, "tout ce qu'il y avoit de bon dans la Sagesse" of the pagans, including the Chinese, was justified as being "sorti de Noé et de ses enfans", rather than being due to natural reason alone.⁷¹ In fact, "la philosophie profane a appelé Sages ou Philosophes ceux que l'Écriture nomme prophètes", and, conversely, those who were held as sages and philosophers by pagans could often be called prophets by the standard of the Bible.⁷²

2.6 The *Confucius sinarum philosophus*

This cultural process was to culminate in 1687 with the publication of the *Confucius sinarum philosophus*, a group effort that involved at least seventeen European Jesuits belonging to the China Mission.⁷³ This collective work continued Ricci's accommodation strategy, and even shared his criticism towards neo-Confucian interpreters who had spoiled with atheism an originally pure doctrine, not unlike Deists, who had spoiled with atheism orthodox natural theology.⁷⁴ Confronted with these two vectors of corruption, the authors of the *Sinarum philosophus* devised two completely different methods. While on the one hand Confucian purity might have been restored 'philologically', that is, by focusing on the most ancient version of Confucius' *Four Books*, as suggested by Ricci himself, on the other, to embrace an exotic version of ancient theology seemed much safer than appealing to the orthodox models of Ricci's natural theology. The *Sinarum philosophus* thus finalised the process of canonisation that had been started off in the time of Martini. As remarked by Meynard, the volume presents Confucius not only as the 'philosopher of China', but also as 'our Chinese philosopher' in the same way that the expression 'our Seneca' implied an image of Seneca as a Christian philosopher *in pectore*, and in the same way also that 'our' were all of the *prisci theologi* as well.⁷⁵ According to the authors of the *Sinarum philosophus*, as already suggested by Beurrier, Confucius had announced the coming of Jesus, hence qualifying as a true, Chinese prophet.⁷⁶

This being said, the *Sinarum philosophus* is not a completely homogeneous work and, precisely for this reason, it can be read as a document of the cultural shift that was substituting *prisca theologia* for natural theology and of its various stages. In spite of its general attitude, the *Sinarum philosophus*, and in particular its *Proemialis declaratio*, co-written by Prospero Intorcetta and Philippe Couplet, preserves some Riccian features that occasionally collide with a new perspective based on ancient theology, as in the case of Intorcetta's description of Confucius' books as "intermicantes rectae rationis scintillas".⁷⁷ Indeed, Intorcetta's outlook – which informs the first part of the *Proemialis declaratio* – seems in general much less modern than Couplet's, while

⁷¹ THOMASSIN 1693, p. 107. Cf. also: *ibid.*, pp. 21, 36, 107-108.

⁷² THOMASSIN 1693, p. 61. Cf. PINOT 1932^a, p. 349.

⁷³ Cf. MUNGELLO 1989, p. 249.

⁷⁴ Cf. INTORCETTA *et al.* 1687, p. lviii. Cf. also: MUNGELLO 1989, p. 248.

⁷⁵ Cf. MEYNARD 2011, p. 68.

⁷⁶ Cf. MEYNARD 2015, p. 62.

⁷⁷ Cf. INTORCETTA *et al.* 1687, p. xiii.

being closer to the perspective adopted by the Sicilian Jesuit in his past works, starting with the *Sapientia sinica*, a partial translation of Confucius' *Analecets* published in 1662 under Intorcetta's and Da Costa's names.⁷⁸ This first, short translation of part of the *Four Books* also included a two-page long biography of Confucius, in which he was presented in a Riccian fashion, as a pagan philosopher who had been so enlightened by natural reason that "ab omni idolatria specie fuisse immunem".⁷⁹ Roughly the same perspective was adopted in Intorcetta's *Sinarum scientia politico-moralis* (1669). Confucius, who had divulged in China a "saniolem doctrinam", was not to be criticised inasmuch as condemning Confucius would have been tantamount to condemning natural reason itself, which of course would have been absurd since natural reason is a mirror of revealed truth: "dum forte contemnimus aut condemnamus eum, qui tam consentanea rationi docuit, [...] videamur nos Europaei, Sinis saltem, non tam cum Magistro ipsorum, quam cum ratione ipsa pugnare velle [...]".⁸⁰

Intorcetta's inclination toward natural theology was reversed in the second part of the *Proemialis declaratio* by Couplet, who clearly had embraced a more 'innovative' (or timely) style of interpretation, grounded in ancient theology. Such interpretation would have provided the guideline for the whole *Confucius sinarum philosophus*, as is significantly hinted by the very title of the book, which for the first time focused the attention on the figure of Confucius rather than on his teachings, as it was the case with Intorcetta's *Sapientia sinica*, and *Sinarum scientia politico-moralis*.⁸¹ In the style of Martini, Couplet's prime interest was in chronology, and in particular in demonstrating that the nation of China had been founded by Shem "200 circiter post diluvium annis vivente etiamnum Noëmo".⁸² In what was a somehow circular argument, such early foundation of China proved and was further proven by the fact that China undoubtedly belonged to the tradition of ancient theology: "ex alia nulla orbis natione, Sinarum leges, scientias, et pleraque instituta proficisci potuisse, praeterquam ab ipso Patriarcha Noëmo, aut filiis ejusdem, aut nepotibus".⁸³

In an anti-deist fashion, Couplet's chronology purposed to demonstrate that the Chinese had participated in the primitive revelation of God's law at the hands of Noah's progeny. Not too differently from Judaism, although in a less perfect manner, early Confucianism was a precursor of Christianity and its Christian-like elements were ascribable to the Noahic tradition.⁸⁴ The present corruption of Chinese philosophy was due, as understood by Ricci, to Tang dynasty interpretations, which had brought to an end what Couplet believes to have been the Chinese version of Lactantius' golden age.⁸⁵ Early Confucianism, emblematised by the *Four Books*, could not have been any purer or more distant from idolatry. Something that appeared especially true given that Couplet had edited Intorcetta's text so as to eliminate any reference

⁷⁸ Cf. MEYNARD 2015, pp. 10-11; MUNGELLO 1989, p. 250.

⁷⁹ INTORCETTA, DA COSTA 1662, s.p.

⁸⁰ INTORCETTA 1669, fols. 48^r, 50^v.

⁸¹ Cf. MEYNARD 2011, p. 17.

⁸² INTORCETTA *et al.* 1687, p. lxxiv.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Cf. PINOT 1932^a, pp. 300-301; ZOLI 1989, p. 183.

⁸⁵ On the influence of Lactantius on Couplet, cf. COLLANI 1990, pp. 42-43. Cf. also: INTORCETTA *et al.* 1687, p. lxxv.

to blemishes in the early Confucian culture, which was thus turned into a universal example of virtue: “si tu in alia orbis gente [...], si in Hispaniae, aut Germaniae antiquissimis monumentis haec, aut his consimilia [...] invenisses, qualia de primis suis aetatibus habet China, quid obsecro, sentires? Quid diceres? quas ederes exclamationes ac plausus? quibus encomiis res omnes singulasque istius aevi non celebrares”.⁸⁶

The canonisation of Confucius as a *priscus theologus* had reached its full development. Like the pagan philosophers who “de Deo multa recte senserunt”, such as “inter Aegyptios Trismegistus, et apud Graecos Socrates, Pythagoras, Plato, Epictetus; et apud Latinos, Varro, Tullius, Seneca aliiqui Philosophi”, Confucius too had worked into his *Four Books* the pristine knowledge of God that he had derived from the Chinese branch of the Noahic tradition.⁸⁷ Indeed, Confucius himself had admitted in his *Analects* (*Lunyu*) “praeco sum, seu relator, et non author doctrinae, quam palam facio. Credo, et amo antiquitatem, ex qua studiose sufforor, et excerpo quae ad rem meam sunt”.⁸⁸

Couplet’s interpretation of Confucius as a *priscus theologus* was extremely influential. In the year following the publication of the *Sinarum philosophus*, two other works were published in France, making Confucian philosophy available to the larger public.⁸⁹ What is remarkable, however, is that upon abridging and translating into French some passages of the *Sinarum philosophus*, both authors of these works accepted and even exaggerated Couplet’s Christianising perspective based upon ancient theology. Of course, this was partly due to the need to translate Chinese philosophy into terms that had to be comprehensible for a Christian general public. However, it was certainly meaningful that the choice of Confucius’ passages nearly always obeyed to a principle of comparability to the Bible and to the Gospels in particular. Confucius’ wisdom, as it is presented by Simon Foucher and by the author of *La morale de Confucius* (Jean de la Brune?), is the same “à laquelle Jesus-Christ lui même semble rapporter toute sa Morale”.⁹⁰ This can be explained not only by Confucius being “une espèce de prophète”, but also by the fact that the two doctrines share one single origin.⁹¹

In light of this, Foucher could push Couplet’s chronology even further, making its implications explicit: “Confucius [...] disait les [ses maximes] avoir reçues des anciens comme par tradition: de sorte que l’on pourrait non seulement les rapporter à Noé (un de ses fils s’étant établi dans l’Orient) mais encore aux patriarches avant le déluge; et enfin au premier homme, pour ne pas dire à Dieu même qui est le père de toutes les lumières”.⁹² The reader would not have been surprised, therefore, upon discovering that, apparently, Confucius’ maxims were close to a Chinese translation of the Gospels: “un pauvre content de son état vaut mieux qu’un riche arrogant [...]. Les vraies richesses viennent du Ciel. Les choses extérieures n’enrichissent

⁸⁶ INTORCETTA *et al.* 1687, p. lxxxi. Concerning Couplet’s ‘editorial policies’, cf., by way of example: PINOT 1932^a, pp. 156-157.

⁸⁷ INTORCETTA *et al.* 1687, p. lxxvii.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, lib. 3, pars 4.36. Original: “子曰：述而不作，信而好古，竊比於我老彭” (*Analects*, 7.1).

⁸⁹ Cf. MEYNARD 2015, 84 ff.

⁹⁰ DE LA BRUNE 1688, 56.

⁹¹ FOUCHER 1688, 28.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 2.

point, mais seulement la bonne disposition d'esprit".⁹³ Indeed, at times, one could nearly draw textual parallels between the *Four Books* and the four Gospels, as in the case of Confucius' sayings concerning the principle of humanity (*ren*), which even in the *Sinarum philosophus* had received a tinge that was highly remindful of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians.⁹⁴

2.7 Towards Figurism

During the same years that led to the publication of the *Sinarum philosophus* and consequently to the near canonisation of Confucius a second line of enquiry gradually developed in the China Mission in the wake of a burgeoning interest in the ancient *Five Classics* and, especially, in the *Book of Changes* (*I Ching*). These works had been considered with some suspicion by early Jesuits in China, such as Ricci, who had barely mentioned the *I Ching* in his diaries. Martini himself, who had made abundant use of the *Five Classics* for his reconstruction of ancient Chinese history, harboured some mixed feelings about the *I Ching*. In his *Sinicae historiae* he wrote: "mihi quaedam philosophia mystica videtur esse Pythagoricaeque persimilis [...]. Multa sunt in eo libro de generatione et corruptione, de fato, de astrologia judiciaria, de quibusdam principijs naturalibus. Sed ea jejune disputantur et exiliter, absque causis ac definitione rerum".⁹⁵

Another element of suspicion concerning the *I Ching* involved its modern use for the purpose of divination, something that, according to Martini, did not correspond at all to the original intentions of the legendary author of the book, Fu Xi.⁹⁶ On the contrary, Fu Xi, who was placed amongst the "primi mortalium apud Sinas" for his alleged antiquity, could not but have written the *I Ching* in order to give a normative status to some basilar principles concerning the "rectam reipublicae administrationem et morum disciplinam".⁹⁷ Such nuanced reading of the *I Ching* was to be embraced by the authors of the *Sinarum philosophus* too, who retained a certain degree of scepticism towards a book which they praised for its utmost antiquity and for its foundational role in Chinese culture, although considering it overly obscure and enigmatical.⁹⁸ Rather than its original message, the main problem with the *I Ching* concerned then its impenetrable obscurity, which, in Le Comte's terms, had "donné lieu à plusieurs superstitions", from divinatory practices to the neo-Confucian interpretations of the *Four Books*, which the authors of the *Sinarum philosophus* had linked to the *Book of Changes*.⁹⁹

That being said, the *I Ching*, which had been greatly commended by Confucius himself, could be read as the repository of some Christian-like notions.¹⁰⁰ Martini, upon projecting

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 17.

⁹⁴ Cf. INTORCETTA *et al.* 1687, lib. 3, pars 1.15; lib. 3, pars 2.2; lib. 3, pars 3.34-35; DE LA BRUNE 1688, p. 88; FOUCHER 1688, p. 22. See for comparison: 1 Cor, 1:13.

⁹⁵ MARTINI 1658, 6. Cf. also: SPIZELIUS 1660, pp. 56, 86.

⁹⁶ Cf. MARTINI 1658, p. 6.

⁹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 6, 11.

⁹⁸ Cf. INTORCETTA *et al.* 1687, xviii. Cf. also: MUNGELLO 1989, p. 263.

⁹⁹ LE COMTE 1696-1697, 1:321. Cf. also: INTORCETTA *et al.* 1687, p. xxxviii; MUNGELLO 1989, p. 263.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. LUNDBAEK 1983, p. 29; PINOT 1932^a, pp. 154-155.

Biblical chronology on Chinese history, had made a first attempt in this direction by identifying Noah with the virtuous Yao, the fourth of the five mythical emperors of China who reigned after the three legendary sovereigns, the first of whom was Fu Xi himself.¹⁰¹ Beurrier, who was much less concerned than Martini with chronological precision, went even further and had the Chinese and the European versions about the foundation of China coincide. Fu Xi, who was born “anno ante Christum, iuxta Chronologiam nostram, 2952”, could be identified with Shem himself, whose name, according to Beurrier’s iffy appeals to Christian Kabbalah, was parallel to that of Fu Xi: “*Sem enim interpretatur nomen, et saepe pro tetragrammato, seu יהוה ponitur, continetque eandem litteram formatricem nominis Iesu, seu Messia, sicut Fohius*”.¹⁰² Fu Xi’s writings thus could be regarded as a vestigial (and rather obscure) proof of the Chinese having embraced since their utmost antiquity “easdem [...] veritates de Mundi creatione, de productione primi hominis, eiusque casu, de Diluvio, de Trinitate, de Redemptione humana, de Angelis et Daemonibus, de Purgatorio, de aeterna remuneratione Iustorum, et impiorum poena, et alias quas sancti Patriarchae tenuerunt”.¹⁰³

Far from being limited to a restricted group of enthusiasts, during the second half of the seventeenth century the identification of Fu Xi with one of the early Patriarchs became, although due to different reasons and political agendas, an item of commonplace historiography. Even Protestant scholars agreed with such an interpretation, as in the case of Georg Horn, whose *Arca Noae* put forward an (anti-Spanish) interpretation of world history in which Fu Xi was identified with Adam himself, Shennong (the second of the three sovereigns) with Cain, Huángdì (Shennong’s successor) with Enoch, and Yao with Noah.¹⁰⁴

The growing interest in the *Five Classics* and in the *I Ching* especially, together with the tendency to find Biblical analogues of the Chinese mythological sovereigns and emperors, was to reach its climax with the group of the so-called Jesuit ‘Figurists’ of the late-seventeenth and early eighteenth century, which prominently included men such as Joachim Bouvet, Joseph Henri de Prémare, and Jean-François Foucquet.¹⁰⁵ In spite of the lack of a perfect accord upon the doctrines espoused by each of the Figurists, and although, singularly taken, their doctrines appeared quite wild even to their contemporaries, all the members of this group agreed upon the intent to focus their attention on the books that the Chinese held as the most sacred, that is the *Five Classics* and the *I Ching* in particular, whose authority was even greater than that of Confucius’ *Four Books*.¹⁰⁶

This attitude did not only develop as a result of the gradual growth of the interest in the *I Ching* from Martini onwards, but it was also fostered by the new status of the Jesuits in Chinese society towards the end of the seventeenth century. Unlike Ricci, who had never even

¹⁰¹ Cf. MARTINI 1658, pp. 25, 27.

¹⁰² BEURRIER 1672, pp. 158-159. Cf. also: PINOT 1932^a, pp. 290-291.

¹⁰³ BEURRIER 1672, p. 160.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. HORN 1666, pp. 12-17.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. MUNGELLO 1989, p. 308; ROWBOTHAM 1956, pp. 475-476; WITEK 1982, p. 143.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. COLLANI 1985, pp. 125-126.

met the emperor in person, Bouvet spent thirty-seven years in the Chinese court, holding frequent conversations with the emperor about the most diverse topics.¹⁰⁷ While Ricci lived among the Mandarins and adopted their point of view on the Imperial court, Bouvet “saw China through Manchu imperial eyes”.¹⁰⁸ By the same token, while for Ricci the emperor always remained a somewhat abstract entity, Bouvet described him familiarly as an enlightened sovereign who was always ready to share his opinions with the Jesuits and even to listen to their advice.¹⁰⁹ As Prémare recounted in one of his letters, “le père Bouvet vint nous joindre. Il étoit dans une galère presque aussi longue que notre frégate. Il avoit toutes les marques de distinction qu’ont coutume d’avoir dans cet empire les *King-Tchais* (envoyés de la cour)”.¹¹⁰

Ricci’s and Bouvet’s outlooks on China were close to opposite: while the former befriended Mandarins, also sharing with them a certain suspicion concerning the often immoral behaviour of the members of the court, the latter considered himself as part of the emperor’s entourage, looking down on lower-ranking Mandarins with a certain conceitedness. This shift in perspective not only influenced the perceived affinity to specific classes in the Chinese society, but also affected the Jesuits’ cultural choices and trends. Ricci’s accommodation strategy was suited to the Chinese *Literati* who, aside from being mostly Confucian themselves, were required to pass state examinations that were largely based on Confucius’ *Four Books*.¹¹¹ Conversely, the Kangxi Emperor’s relationship to Confucianism was more complex and, although he embraced and enforced the principles of the *Four Books*, he probably felt closer to the narrative of the *Five Classics* and in particular of the *I Ching*, in which the history of China was recounted through the succession of early emperors.¹¹²

2.8 Figurist China, before and after Confucius

Due to social, political, and cultural reasons, Figurists constituted a rather distinctive minority in the Jesuit environment. However, their doctrines were not completely novel, but rather resulted from the radicalisation of intellectual attitudes which had always been part of the missionary vade mecum. In choosing the *I Ching* as their central reference, and in reading it as a Chinese account of the Biblical narrative, which also included Chinese ‘translations’ for the main Biblical events and figures, Figurists seemed to bring together two well-established Jesuit traditions. While embracing Copley’s anti-deist programme for the introduction of China into the ranks of ancient theology, they did so in a somewhat Kircherian fashion, that

¹⁰⁷ Cf. BOUVET 1697, p. 129; MUNGELLO 1989, p. 300. Ricci’s account of his ‘encounter’ with the emperor is quite significant in this regard: “e perché, molti anni sono che egli [the emperor] né agli mandarini della Cina si lascia vedere, né a nessuno altro se non ai suoi eunuchi e donne che stanno dentro del Palazzo, non osò a fargli entrar [Ricci and Diego de Pantoja] dentro dell’ultimo muro, ma gli fece entrare nell’alloggiamento dove stanno i loro pintori, e gli fece pingere al naturale ambedua con tutto il corpo intiero, e se fece portar dentro il ritratto che stava fatto molto al vivo da’ migliori pintori del suo palazzo” (RICCI 2000, p. 351).

¹⁰⁸ MUNGELLO 1989, p.p. 18-19, 300.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. BOUVET 1697, p. 23.

¹¹⁰ DU HALDE 1819, 9:223 [Prémare à François d’Aix de La Chaise, 17.II.1699].

¹¹¹ Cf. MUNGELLO 1989, pp. 248-249; SPENCE 1990, p. 60.

¹¹² SPENCE 1974, pp. 44, 59; SPENCE 1990, pp. 59-60, 63.

is, seeking a common cultural ground in an extreme and mystical antiquity, rather than referring to the relatively modern Confucian mediation.

Ricci's statements concerning the harmony between Confucian and Christian principles were transferred by Bouvet and the other Figurists to the field of the most ancient Chinese philosophy, as contained in the *I Ching*. In a letter to Jean-Paul Bignon, Bouvet stated in clear terms that the ancient philosophy of China "si on l'entend comme il faut, ne renferme rien de contraire a la loy Chretienne" and that "le livre appellé *ye-kim* par les Chinois, est le sommaire d'une tres saine doctrine".¹¹³ In the *Idea generalis doctrinae libri Ye Kim* he went even further declaring that the *cosmopoeia* of the *I Ching* was "longe praestantiorem platonica, ac mosaicae Cosmopoeiae simillimam".¹¹⁴ Citing extensively from all of the *Five Classics* Bouvet went on arguing that Chinese culture had contained from its utmost antiquity a set of notions that were remindful of the Judeo-Christian God, and even prefigured the Holy Trinity.¹¹⁵ Far from being explicable as the product of natural reason alone, the mystic religious message of the *Five Classics* was explained, as Bouvet wrote to Leibniz in 1700, by the very antiquity of the Chinese books, which had conserved "autant de précieux restes du débris de la plus ancienne et plus excellente Philosophie enseignée par les premiers Patriarches du monde à leur descendans, et ensuite corrompue et presqu'entièrement obscurcie par la suite des tems".¹¹⁶

China, "une des plus anciennes nations du monde; et [...] celle, qui de tout temps a montré le plus d'attachement et de respect pour l'antiquité" was the repository of the *prisca sapientia* handed down by the early Patriarchs and, Bouvet thought, such knowledge was conserved in the ancient Chinese books in a particularly genuine form. Indeed, so genuine that it made Bouvet's stances appear dangerously close to heresy, since they risked inducing an unwanted comparison between the antiquity of the Bible and that of the *Five Classics*.¹¹⁷ Utmost antiquity did not however correspond to similar degree of clarity. As in the case of Kircher's Egypt, the divine message contained in ancient Chinese philosophy was not immediately comprehensible. "Comme celle des anciens mages et des Patriarches (pour rien dire de celle de Pythagore de Platon et des anciens Egyptiens)", Chinese theology too conformed to a somewhat Kircherian style of encryption, based upon "les principes de la theorie des nombres, de l'Astrologie, et des autres parties des mathematiques", that is, on a mathematical system which, according to Bouvet, was best exemplified by the hexagrams of the *I Ching*.¹¹⁸

With the notable exception of Leibniz, perhaps the most illustrious amongst Bouvet's correspondents, the numerological interpretation of the *I Ching* did not encounter much favour. Even Prémare, who had started his studies at the Kangxi Emperor's court, under the guidance of Bouvet, soon distanced himself from the position of his elder confrère.¹¹⁹ This was not to say, of course, that he rejected the basic figurist principles, which concerned the pristine

¹¹³ BOUVET BNF Fr. 17240, fol. 18^r.

¹¹⁴ BOUVET BNF Fr. 17239, fol. 36^r.

¹¹⁵ Cf. MUNGELLO 1988, pp. 46-47; MUNGELLO 1989, p. 325; WITEK 1982, pp. 151-152.

¹¹⁶ WIDMAIER 1990, p. 123 [Bouvet to Charles Le Gobien for Leibniz, 8.XI.1700].

¹¹⁷ BOUVET BNF Fr. 17240, fol. 19^r. Cf. also: MUNGELLO 1989, p. 314.

¹¹⁸ BOUVET BNF Fr. 17240, fol. 18^r. With regard to Bouvet's numerology, see: WIDMAIER 1990. Cf. also, *inter alia*: WALKER 1972, pp. 224-225; WITEK 1982, p. 153.

¹¹⁹ Cf. COLLANI 1985, p. 127.

knowledge of God and of the Saviour on the part of the Chinese sages.¹²⁰ On the contrary, not only did the ancient histories of China make clear reference to the object of Christian worship, but even paralleled, at least to a certain extent, the Biblical and Evangelical narrative. The story of the rebel angels, the fall of man, the idea of heaven and redemption and even the notion of Immaculate Conception were all foreshadowed in the *Five Classics*.¹²¹ In particular, Prémare was much clearer than Bouvet in stating that the ancient Chinese had foreseen the eventual advent of Christ, which was prophesied in the *I Ching*: “le livre *Y-king* dit: ‘Par la justice d’un seul homme tout l’univers est ramené à la droiture’. Et ailleurs: ‘Les peuples de tout l’univers se soutiennent sur la vertu et les bienfaits d’un seul homme’”.¹²²

Following Bouvet’s analysis, Prémare too was convinced that the remarkable degree of accuracy that characterised the Chinese version of *prisca sapientia* had to be explained as a result of its chronological vicinity to the original model. “Nous ne connaissons pas qu’il existe dans l’univers entier aucun monument plus ancien que ces livres conservés par le peuple chinois” – Prémare wrote in his *Vestiges des principaux dogmes chrétiens tirés des anciens livres chinois*. As he suggested in the *Notitia linguae sinicae*, Chinese history and culture started off at the highest level of excellence and only later were gradually corrupted. Even such varnish of corruption, however, was not imputable in full to the influence of Buddhist, Taoist, and neo-Confucian interpretations, which, according to Prémare, contained some vestiges of the true religion themselves.¹²³

Prémare’s unique outlook on the cultural trends that were usually considered by the Jesuits as a vehicle for corruption was probably one of the reasons why he did not feel as inclined as some of his confrères, Figurists included, to criticise the modern state of the Chinese people in comparison to their past glory.¹²⁴ Such favourable approach was best expressed in Prémare’s *Lettre sur le monothéisme des Chinois*, whose first part was entirely devoted to an analysis of neo-Confucian cosmology. Here, the intellectual atheism that Ricci had denounced in some of the *Literati* was shown to be nothing but a chimera.¹²⁵ Besides, all charges of atheism or idolatry were to be rejected not only with reference to the *Literati*, but also with concern to the whole Chinese people, which “n’est pas différent des Lettrés dans l’idée que tous les hommes ont de la Divinité”.¹²⁶

This doctrine provided the subject matter for what was to be perhaps the most relevant dispute amongst the Figurists. While Prémare and, to a certain extent, even Bouvet, aimed to defend the modern Chinese from accusations of atheism, Fouquet caused some embarrassment in the Society for his conviction that the modern Chinese, having corrupted their ancient prophetic wisdom, had irremediably become idolaters.¹²⁷ In reply to a letter by Prémare in which he had put forward his theories concerning the modern Chinese, Fouquet clarified his

¹²⁰ Cf. PRÉMARE 1878, pp. 51-52; PINOT 1932^a, 352n.

¹²¹ Cf. ROWBOTHAM 1956, p. 479.

¹²² PRÉMARE 1878, pp. 188-189.

¹²³ Cf. LUNDBAEK 1991, p. 133.

¹²⁴ Cf. MUNGELLO 1976, p. 398.

¹²⁵ Cf. LUNDBAEK 1991, pp. 104-105.

¹²⁶ PRÉMARE 1861, p. 50. Cf. also: *ibid.*, p. 52.

¹²⁷ Cf. PINOT 1932^a, p. 352; ROWBOTHAM 1966, p. 123.

critique.¹²⁸ While modern Chinese had indisputably understood that the *I Ching* contained prophetic statements concerning the advent of a Messiah, their error was in referring such statements to the Chinese nation. In this way, they had interpreted the *I Ching* too literally, and ended up transforming into bona fide Chinese heroes the figures which in the *I Ching* were used allegorically as a prefiguration of Christ.¹²⁹

Contrary to Foucquet, Prémare's stance was grounded upon Suárez's doctrine on pagan salvation and emblematised to perfection the ultimate principle of Ricci's accommodation strategy: modern Chinese could be considered idolaters for having mystified a set of allegorical figures that served originally to prefigure the Messiah since to do so would have been tantamount to punishing them regardless of their *invincible ignorance*. In a Suárezian fashion, although the modern Chinese had not witnessed the coming of the actual Messiah prophesied in the *I Ching*, the very prophetic knowledge contained in the *Five Classics* was enough to grant that their faith in Christ was, as required, explicit, although only *in voto*, something that Intorcetta had already implied in stating that Confucius himself "siquidem vixisset aetate nostra, primum fuisse futurum qui ad Christi legem transijisset".¹³⁰

2.9 A Kircherian Style of Interpretation

In a time when the upsurge of deist doctrines had rendered all references to natural theology extremely dangerous, the Figurists' insistence on the connexion between Chinese pre-history and Biblical narrative became one of the safest means to demonstrate that, in Augustine's terms, the Chinese not only *credebant Deum* (believed in the existence of God), but also *credebant Deo* and even *in Deum*. In other words, they were truly Christian, although it was the missionaries' task to turn their faith *in voto* into 'actual' faith.¹³¹ In this cultural milieu, even the Figurists' heterodox preference for the *Five Classics* over the *Four Books* was in principle not to be discouraged. By bringing together Chinese and Biblical history and by showing their profound uniformity, the figurist explanation of Chinese latent Christianity appealed to a kind of *prisca theologia* that was even more orthodox than Couplet's. Unlike the authors of the *Sinarum philosophus*, the Figurists did not aim primarily to include a Chinese historical figure, that is, Confucius, in the line of *prisci theologi*, and hence did not need to devise an historical theory which could explain the material transmission of knowledge from the Patriarchs to Confucius – something that Couplet did only with some reluctance himself. On the contrary, the Figurists' programme was more straightforward and, in a Kircherian fashion, purposed to show that the semi-mythical characters belonging to Chinese ancient history were nothing but 'translations' of Biblical figures, Patriarchs included.

¹²⁸ See: PRÉMARE BNF Fr. 12209, fols. 39-40.

¹²⁹ Cf. FOUCQUET BNF Fr. 12209, fols. 47^{r-v}; 48^v-49^r.

¹³⁰ INTORCETTA 1669, fol. 48^v. Explicit faith *in voto* is defined by Suárez in the following terms: "[...] nihilominus dicendum est fidem explicitam Christi, per se loquendo, esse necessariam omnibus et singulis in statu legis evangelicae, ad utramque salutem. Unde etiam dici potest medium necessarium, quamvis non semper in re, sed vel in re, vel in voto" (SUÁREZ 1858, 357). Concerning the theological principles involved in this discussion, cf. AQUINAS ST, IIa-IIae, q.2, a.5; IIa-IIae, q.2, a.8; AQUINAS QDV, q.14, a.11; SUÁREZ 1858, pp. 344-346, 348-349, 351, 353, 357.

¹³¹ Concerning the difference between *credere Deum*, *credere Deo*, and *credere in Deo*, cf. AQUINAS ST, IIa-IIae, q.2, a.2; KORS 1990, pp. 44-45; SCHMITT 1981, pp. 337-361.

Interestingly enough, in carrying out their Kircherian project, the Figurists also adopted a somehow Kircherian technique, which was based on the postulate that utmost antiquity was always met with mystical obscurity. Both the Catholic and the Protestant seventeenth-century milieux were rather inclined to emphasise the cultural propinquity between Egypt and China, which was especially clear upon considering that, just as the Egyptians did, the Chinese too had expressed their wisdom hieroglyphically, in a non-discursive fashion.¹³² As Bouvet observed with regard to the hexagrams of the *I Ching*, “Quelle que puisse estre la clef [...] des caracteres chinois, je ne doute point que nous ne parvenions à en faire un jour l’analyse parfaite, et à les reduire peut estre aux caracteres Jeroglyphiques des Egyptiens; et qu’on démontre que les uns et les autres estoit l’écriture usitée parmi les savans avant le déluge”.

The idea that Egyptian hieroglyphs and Chinese ideograms were to be considered as different versions of the same mode of expression was highly characteristic of the Figurists, who, like Kircher, were sure that in order to attain true knowledge they had to recover the hidden meaning of the Chinese script. “Chaque Caractere est un Jeroglyphe, chaque Jeroglyphe peut estre Regardé comme un Ennemi qui se defend et qui vend cherement sa defaite”.¹³³ Not unlike Kircher’s Egyptian hieroglyphs, Chinese ideograms, according to the Figurists, were a sacred script that had been devised in order to conceal its message from profane eyes.¹³⁴

Besides, like Kircher’s hieroglyphs, Chinese ideograms too conveyed two types of meaning at the same time: a literal and altogether vulgar one, and a symbolical and mystical one.¹³⁵ By allowing for a reading that was not restricted to the literal sense and to explicitly Chinese referents, the symbolic style of interpretation adopted by the Figurists became a paramount tool in the demonstration of the Christian character of the ancient Chinese books, which had escaped most modern Chinese interpreters due to their insistence upon the literal sense alone. As Bouvet remarked, “si on juge du fond des livres chinois, et de leur philosophie, seulement par les ouvrages des Auteurs modernes, qui ne vont qu’à la surface de la doctrine; et qui ne passent pas la connoissance corticale de leur Caracteres” no reason will be found for the Catholic author to delve into the Chinese books. However, “si on en juge par le sens symbolique des caracteres jeroglyphiques, et par le sens intime et figuré [...] a quoy il est impossible d’arriver sans le secours des principes des sciences et sur tout de la vraie Religion”, the study of the ancient Chinese classics will appear as the easiest way to the conversion of the Chinese.¹³⁶

Indeed, the prophetic wisdom of the *Five Classics* was not only enclosed in the macrostructure of the texts, but was also conveyed by the microstructure of some ideograms.¹³⁷ As Prémare put it in his *Notitia linguae sinicae*, the most important rhetorical feature which the interpreter of the *I Ching* had to understand was *Yu Yen*, that is, the encryption of hidden meanings

¹³² Cf. HORN 1666, p. 53; BOUVET BNF Fr. 17240, fol. 21^r; DU HALDE 1819, 12:268, 12:272, 12:279 [Dominique Parnin à Dorotus de Mairan, 20.IX.1740].

¹³³ FOUQUET, BNF Fr. 12209, fols. 34^v-35^r.

¹³⁴ Cf. LUNDBAEK 1991, p. 112; PINOT 1932^b, pp. 11, 17-18 [Foucquet to Etienne Fourmont, 28.VIII.1722; Foucquet to Charles d’Orléans de Rothelin, 15.XII.1729]; PRÉMARE 1878, p. 46.

¹³⁵ Cf. *inter alia*: PINOT 1932^a, p. 253.

¹³⁶ BOUVET BNF Fr. 17240, fol. 17^{r-v}. Cf. also: PRÉMARE 1878, p. 43.

¹³⁷ Cf. PRÉMARE 1878, p. 225. Cf. also: LUNDBAEK 1991, p. 112.

in certain words or sentences.¹³⁸ These hidden meanings conveyed the most profound message of the Chinese books, whose “doctrine sublime [...] est cachée sous des figure variées et sous des dehors symboliques qui la recouvrent comme d’une écorce”.¹³⁹ It does not surprise, upon this premise, that the interpretative method used by the Figurists to uncover the hidden and profound meaning of each ideogram should have been perfectly conformable to Kircher’s hieroglyphical method, which produced symbolical readings of each trait of a given character, later recomposed into a unified allegorical picture.¹⁴⁰ By the same token the Figurists could interpret symbolically the radicals that composed each ideogram, so providing each character with a secondary, more profound meaning. This is the case, for instance, with Prémare’s prophetic interpretation of the character *Tsin*, which, being composed by the representation of the sky, of a cross, of the wood used in building such cross, and of two hands raised in front of it, could not but refer to the land of Judea, where the crucifixion of Jesus had been carried out.¹⁴¹

It should be noted, at this point, that this Kircherian method of decipherment, which was aimed at uncovering the most recondite meaning, seemed to work not *in spite* of the fact that, unlike Kircher, the Figurists could read and understand the Chinese ‘hieroglyphs’, but precisely *because* of the Jesuits’ knowledge of the Chinese language and writing. Far from preventing the Figurists from venturing into fantastic interpretations of the ideograms, their Chinese learning actually fostered such a practice. From the very beginning of their linguistic apprenticeship, in order to memorise a large number of ideograms, the Jesuits and the Chinese alike were taught to symbolically interpret each of the radicals composing an ideogram, first singularly and then in the whole (e.g., the ideogram for family is composed by the radical ‘pig’ under the radical ‘roof’; while the symbol for ‘good’ is composed by the radical ‘woman’ next to the radical ‘child’).

This cultural premise was far from being inconsequential. On the negative side, it was probably the reason why Ricci’s adaptation of Western *ars memoriae* in China, the *Xiguo Jifa*, turned out to be totally unsuccessful. Chinese characters were inherently figurative and so was the way the Chinese were used to thinking about concepts. The Western advice to translate into images the notions that one needed to remember was thus completely tautological.¹⁴² For instance, Ricci would propose to visualise a man leaning against a tree in order to remember the concept of ‘resting’. Yet this piece of advice was utterly useless for someone who could already write and read in Chinese, and hence did not need to remember that the concept of ‘resting’ (休) is composed by a man (亻) leaning against a tree (木).¹⁴³ Ricci’s advice hence was good in order to memorise how to write but, from the Chinese point of view it did not make any sense as a device for memorising concepts and discourses, nor did it add anything to normal thinking processes. However, while this propensity to think figuratively and symbolically about the components of each ideogram was probably the cause of the failure of the

¹³⁸ Cf. LUNDBAEK 1991, pp. 100-101.

¹³⁹ PRÉMARE 1878, p. 43.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. COLLANI 1985, p. 133; LUNDBAEK 1991, p. 14.

¹⁴¹ Cf. PRÉMARE 1878, pp. 400-401. Cf. also, by way of example: FOUQUET BNF Fr. 12209, fols. 14^v-15^r; 17^r.

¹⁴² Cf. LACKNER 1996, p. 205.

¹⁴³ Cf. RICCI 1986, p. 44.

Xiguo Jifa, it was also a determinant in the success of the Figurists' allegorical reading of the *Five Classics*, which nearly always was carried out through a more 'profound' reading of the connexion between radicals that would have resulted in a more 'profound' understanding of the hieroglyphic sense at large.

2.10 Figures

This method of interpretation was to prove particularly fruitful in expounding the allegorical meaning of the figures that belonged to the narrative of the *Five Classics*, such as Fu Xi, Yao, and Huángdì. While these could be interpreted superficially as historical figures (as most Chinese did), their hidden (and true) meaning was allegorical and the Figurists believed they were able to grasp it since they could understand a series of symbolical connexions which the Chinese did not suspect at all. This is the case, for instance, with the paramount figure of Fu Xi, the legendary author the *I Ching*, and founder of the Chinese Empire. In this case too, the figurist interpretation was somehow remindful of Kircher.

Fu Xi, who was considered by the Chinese as the inventor of ideograms, could be easily identified thanks to his traditional attributes: "la plus part des choses que l'on rapporte de tant du temps où il a vescu, que de celles, qu'il a faites sont telles qu'il est aisé de juger, par la conformité presqu'entiere que tout cela a avec ce que nos anciens Auteurs, et ceux du levant ont rapporté de Zoroastre, de Mercure Trismegiste, ou mesme d'Enoch, que Fo-hii n'a esté autre que quelqu'un de ces grandes personnages".¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, Fu Xi's name itself, in its 'hieroglyphic form', could be interpreted as a proof of his identity with Hermes Trismegistus, "car le 1^{er} jeroglyphe Fo est composé de deux autres caracteres savoir gin (homo) et Kiuen (canis), comme qui diroit homo-canis, [...] aussi bien que Mercure Trismegiste, que les auteurs des jeroglyphes emblemiques ont représenté avec une teste de chien sur un corps humaine".¹⁴⁵ However, Bouvet and his successors were also sure that Hermes could be identified with the Patriarch Enoch, as Kircher had proposed before them.¹⁴⁶ Transitively, Fu Xi could not but be a Chinese allegorical and hieroglyphical translation of Enoch who, according to Fouquet, had lived in the same time in which Fu Xi was reported to have lived.¹⁴⁷ In a rather Kircherian fashion, Fu Xi himself was to be considered as a case of 'translatibility' of the divine name of Enoch, who had been called in many ways by a multitude of peoples: not only Hermes Trismegistus by the Greeks and Fu Xi by the Chinese, but also That by the Egyptians, Edris by the Arabs, Esus by the Gauls, etc.¹⁴⁸

The identification of Fu Xi with Enoch was clearly of paramount importance for the Christianising ends pursued by the Figurists. Enoch, who had been "illustré d'une façon prophetique, de tous les dogmes et veritez, qui concernent l'Incarnation du fils de Dieu, et de

¹⁴⁴ WIDMAIER 1990, p. 154 [Bouvet to Leibniz, 4.XI.1701].

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 155 [Bouvet to Leibniz, 4.XI.1701]. The same explanation is put forward by Bouvet, with greater precision, in his *Lettre à l'abbé Bignon (Pekin, 15.IX.1704)*: cf. BOUVET BNF Fr. 17240, fol. 20^r. Cf. also FOUQUET BNF Fr. 12209, fols. 8^v-9^r.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. COLLANI 1985, pp. 122, 134-135; WALKER 1972, p. 226.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. FOUQUET BNF Fr. 12209, fol. 10^v; PINOT 1932, pp. 257-8.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. FOUQUET BNF Fr. 12209, fol. 10^{r-v}. Cf. also: BOUVET BNF Fr. 17240, fols. 18^v; 19^v-20^r; PRÉMARE 1878, p. 27.

toute l'économie de cet incompréhensible mystère", and for this reason was "choisi spécialement de Dieu [...] pour être le maître des siècles à venir", could finally provide an explanation for the Christian-like nature of the Chinese classics and for their excellence in comparison to the Egyptian *arcana sapientia*, which, unlike the pure Chinese tradition that linked Enoch to Noah to Shem, had been corrupted by the mischievous influence of Cham.¹⁴⁹ The Chinese classics, allegedly authored by Fu Xi, thus could be identified with the much discussed lost books by Enoch, who had first put the wisdom of Adam in writing, using – according to the tradition – a mysterious script of some sort.¹⁵⁰ The mystery behind this script was solved, however, by the Figurists. Indeed, it was nothing but the set of ideograms and hexagrams contained in the *Five Classics* and in the *I Ching* especially, which belonged to a form of expression that had been commonplace amongst the *prisci theologi* since it mirrored the type of immediate knowledge which God had inspired in Adam upon ordering him to name all the animals.¹⁵¹

In light of this, and in the wake of Fu Xi's identification with Enoch, the Figurists could proceed with their unmasking of the allegorical figures that belonged to the tradition of the *Five Classics*. Not unlike Fu Xi, these too had always been honoured by the modern Chinese who, due to invincible ignorance, could not grasp their allegorical referent, and considered them as cultural heroes: "l'origine des honneurs divins rendus en orient et en occident aux prétendues héros de l'une et l'autre mythologie, est [...] que tous ces divins personnages dans le sens primitif de la fiction sacrée, ayant été institués pour représenter quelque action ou vertu particulière du verbe divin [...] servoient dans la loi naturelle à honorer toutes les perfections et les divins exploits du Rédempteur".¹⁵² Besides, not only could Chinese heroes be interpreted as individual emblems of certain divine attributes, but, following Martini's example, they also could be read as a Chinese analogue of the major Biblical figures.

Starting with Genesis, for instance, Bouvet was positive that the first *kua* (trigram) of the *I Ching* was an allegorical representation of the narrative concerning the rebellion of Lucifer.¹⁵³ Prémare agreed on the grounds of a complex symbolical demonstration, which also called into the equation the Saviour and even the Archangel Michael.¹⁵⁴ Besides, Adam himself, according to Bouvet, was allegorically represented by at least three of the ancient Chinese heroes, while Prémare cites no less than five passages from the *I Ching* which allegedly referred to the protoplast.¹⁵⁵

The greatest interpretative effort, however, was aimed at demonstrating that the *Five Classics* and the *I Ching* in particular contained clear hieroglyphical prophecies concerning the Saviour, the Virgin, and a whole set of Evangelical notions such as the Incarnation of God in the Son, and the Immaculate Conception.¹⁵⁶ A central reference, in this regard, was Yu the Great, one of

¹⁴⁹ BOUVET BNF Fr. 17240, fols. 22^v, 25^v. Cf. also: *ibid.*, fol. 21^v.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. BOUVET BNF Fr. 12209, fols. 12^v-13^r; 18^v-19^r; COLLANI 1985, 130-131; PINOT 1932^a, 256-257.

¹⁵¹ Cf. BOUVET BNF Fr. 17240, fol. 22^v.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, fol. 20^v.

¹⁵³ Cf. COLLANI 1985, p. 151.

¹⁵⁴ PRÉMARE 1878, pp. 142-145.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. COLLANI 1985, pp. 153-154; PRÉMARE 1878, pp. 158-163.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. BOUVET BNF Fr. 17239, fol. 37^r; LUNDBAEK 1991, pp. 121-122; 131.

the early emperors of China and a descendant of Huángdì. As soon perceived by Bouvet, Yu was a perfect analogue of the Messiah, and indeed, the Chinese tradition itself often referred to him as a saviour for having brought to an end the devastations which had begun with the great deluge in the time of Yao (often identified with Noah).¹⁵⁷ Yet the extraordinary virtues of Christ could not be conveyed fully through a single allegorical figure. The author of the *Five Classics* thus “avisa de [...] proposer le Messie ce Divin Modele de toutes les vertus, sous l’idée historique d’une longue suite de Saints Empereurs et de heros accomplis en toute sorte de vertus; entre les quels il partagea les divers ministeres et les actions divinement heroïques de l’histoire du Messie”.¹⁵⁸ What is more, Christ was prophesied in the Chinese classics by means of the same metaphors that were used in the Gospels and in the Evangelical tradition (e.g., the *door*, the *vine*, the *lamb*, the *lion*, the *cornerstone*, the *orient*, the *light of the world*).¹⁵⁹

Some fifty years before the Figurists, Kircher’s *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* had made clear that, once demonstrated that an apparently idolatrous culture had in fact cherished the notion of God and a prophetic revelation about his Son, it would have become much easier to add to the picture other elements that mirrored specific Christian dogmas, such as the narrative concerning the Virgin, or the notion of Holy Trinity. This same interpretative process was to characterise the works by the Figurists, who based themselves upon their identification of the Messiah in the Chinese classics in order to extend their analysis to other Evangelical characters. A prefiguration of the Virgin and of the notion of Immaculate Conception was provided, for instance, by the accounts concerning the birth of Houji, whom the Figurists associated with Christ since, together with Yu, he was responsible for the restoration of the Chinese empire after the great deluge. Besides, according to the *Shijing* (*Classic of Poetry*), Jiang Yuan, Houji’s mother, had been stirred to pregnancy by the will of God and, having begotten her son, she left him in the forest, where an ox and a sheep sheltered him from the winter cold.¹⁶⁰

As in Kircher’s case, the figurist reinterpretation of Chinese ancient theology culminated in a Trinitarian reading of the *Five Classics* and of the *I Ching* especially. Such interpretation had been inaugurated by Bouvet, and was defended by later Figurists with particular concern to the system of broken and unbroken lines that characterised the *I Ching*.¹⁶¹ Even the most mysterious and cryptic of the Chinese modes of expression, the hexagrams of the *I Ching*, could be deciphered by the Figurists since, thanks to their ‘actual’ faith, they could ‘recognise’ at once the secret message conveyed by the Chinese classics under a veil of obscurity. This was possible, of course, because, like Kircher, the Figurists too had developed a priori a clear understanding of what the ultimate universal message contained in Chinese *prisca sapientia* had to be: “tous les veritables jeroglyphes [...] sont comme autant d’enigmes, ou d’emblemes intellectuelles des veritez de la Religion”, and, accordingly, “tous les Kings contiennent selon elle la même doctrine”.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁷ Cf. COLLANI 1985, pp. 160-161.

¹⁵⁸ BOUVET BNF Fr. 17240, fol. 23^v.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. PRÉMARE 1878, 308.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 203-204; LUNDBAEK 1991, pp. 134-135; FOUQUET BNF Fr. 12209, fol. 23^{r-v}.

¹⁶¹ Cf. WIDMAIER 1990, pp. 156-157 [Bouvet to Leibniz, 4.XI.1701]. As an example of the Figurist attitude towards the Trinitarian interpretation of *I Ching*, cf. *inter alia*: PRÉMARE 1878, pp. 75-78.

¹⁶² BOUVET BNF Fr. 17240, fol. 26^v; FOUQUET BNF Fr. 12209, fol. 4^r.

3. *Pierre-Daniel Huet. Ancient Theology and New Philosophies*

3.1 Introduction

During the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, while the Chinese adaptation of ancient theology was reaching its pinnacle thanks to the Figurists, a different version of the same doctrine was being discussed in France in the wake of Pierre-Daniel Huet's works. Huet's *Demonstratio Evangelica* of 1679 featured an extensive use of *prisca theologia*, perhaps even more so than the Figurists', although apparently in less heterodox fashion. While the Figurists had adopted Kircher's style of interpretation, Huet had inherited Kircher's Eurocentric concern. However, while in the 1650s Kircher could still think about the possibility of restoring the Church to a nearly pre-Westphalian state, in the 1680s, and particularly so in France, it would have been inevitable for the theologian and for the scholar to confront a new set of doctrines that can be grouped under the vague category of proto-Enlightenment. Much as both Kircher and Huet were Eurocentric in their concerns, the reasons of their concerns could not have been more different. Spinoza, 'the atheist', had entered the picture, and so had the ranks of Cartesian philosophers, who infiltrated all aspects of modern culture, from science and philosophy up to theology.

A further element which sets Huet and Kircher apart is that, although Huet had been educated by the Jesuits and had always worked in close proximity to them and even spent the last twenty years of his life in the Jesuit House in Paris, he was not a Jesuit himself. Rather than sharing the global concerns of the Society of Jesus, Huet's work needs to be understood against the background of the European republic of letters, whose character was international but not supranational.¹ Even Huet's extraordinary erudition, which could parallel Kircher's in extending to the most diverse authors – ancient and modern, exotic and familiar – found expression in an intellectual debate whose content belonged to a characteristically French tradition.

3.2 Libertines and Anti-Libertines

In order to better understand the cultural base that constitutes Huet's principal reference, it shall be useful to briefly analyse the works of Pierre Charron, perhaps one of the most influential authors of the French seventeenth century. Just like Huet, Charron had reportedly begun to write in order to counter the upsurge of disbelief and atheism.² The three truths after

¹ As shown in detail by April G. Shelford, Huet's work and position in the seventeenth-century French intellectual society cannot be fully understood without considering the dense network that linked him to some of the most prominent exponents of the republic of letters. Under the mentorship of the Jesuit Pierre Mambrun (1601-1661) and, later, thanks to his network, Huet was influenced by other intellectuals belonging to the Jesuit order, such as François Vavasseur (1605-1681), Denis Pétau (1583-1652), and René Rapin (1621-1687), but also by lay scholars who were close to the Jesuit milieu, such as Henri-Louis Habert de Montmor (1600-1679). Huet's contacts also encompassed Protestant historians and antiquarians, including Samuel Bochart (1599-1667), whom Huet followed to Sweden and whose ethnographical study of the history of religions he held as a model of scholarship and erudition, and also Daniel (1580-1655) and Nicolaas (1620-1681) Heinsius, and Gerhard (1577-1649) and Isaac (1618-1689) Voss. Cf. SHELFORD 2007, p. 28.

² Cf. KOGEL 1972, p. 81; CHARRON 1635^b, p. 7.

which *Les trois veritez* (1593) was named were: first, “qu’il doit y avoir, et y a religion recevable par obligation de tous”, against the “Atheistes et irreligieux”; second, “que de tant de religions qu’il y a au monde [...] la Chrestienne est la seule vraye”; and third, “que de toutes le creances [...] la Catholique est la meilleure”.³ The order of these points was not only logical but also reflected a moral hierarchy: atheists were the greatest threat to true faith and the most urgent enemy to be fought, followed by the gentiles and ultimately by Protestants who had tried themselves to battle the first two categories of impiety, although, according to Charron, in an impious way, as in the case of Duplessis-Mornay’s *Traité de l’Eglise*.⁴

Even more influential than *Les trois veritez* was Charron’s *La sagesse* (1601). In this work, Charron addressed the problem of irreligion from a broader perspective. *La sagesse* was aimed at instructing men in the best way to live their lives, so that they might steer clear of the vices that could have led to impiety. And if atheists were the symbol par excellence of such vices, Protestants and even Catholics needed to be dissuaded from a set of errant attitudes, the first of which was the injudicious excess in one’s liberty of judgement. High-minded people in particular were prone to this risk: “usant si hardiment de sa liberté par tout, sans s’asservir à rien il vient à secouer aisément les opinions communes et toutes regles”.⁵ As Montaigne had well understood, due to the power of their reason the most intelligent people often become irrational and fall into the error of believing that thanks to reason alone and to the free use of it they could discover all sorts of truths, which are attainable, in fact, only through revelation.⁶ Echoing the *Apologie de Raimond Sebond*, Charron would remind his reader that rather than praising himself, the wise (*le sage*) should remember that “il n’y a rien dit, tenu, creu en un temp et lieu qui ne soit pareillement dit, tenu, creu, et aussi contredit, reprouvé, condamné ailleurs”.⁷ The senses, which may appear as our safest source of information, are often at fault, and even more often does men’s reason err: “si l’homme est foible à la vertu, il l’est ancores plus à la verité, soit elle eternelle et divine, ou temporelle et humaine”.⁸

Man’s intellectual complexion itself is hence sufficient proof of his inability to grasp the divine through reason. “Les veritez divines” that have been revealed to men must be received “simplement avec toute humilité et submission, sans entrer en division ny discussion”.⁹ In brief, the sage is to adopt a form of preliminary scepticism: he is to comprehend the vanity of all sciences and opinions, so to fully embrace faith, which is the sole source of truth, the sole guarantee of undisputable knowledge: “rendu les hommes comme Academiciens et Pyrrhoniens, faut proposer les principes de la Chrestianité, comme envoyez du ciel”.¹⁰

Such Christian flavour of scepticism, which was to become a central feature of Huet’s thought, would have determined Charron’s controversial fame in the seventeenth century. In spite of its original message, which was ultimately aimed at curbing the claims of human

³ CHARRON 1635^b, p. 2.

⁴ Cf. CHARRON 1960, pp. 87, 91; GOUHIER 1987, p. 32.

⁵ CHARRON 1635^a, 1:56. Cf. also: *ibid.*, 1:57; 2:17.

⁶ Cf. POPKIN 2003, pp. 57, 59.

⁷ CHARRON 1635^a, 2:25.

⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 1:35, 1:118.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:12. Cf. also: *ibid.*, 2:10; 3:75.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:22.

reason, *La sagesse* became a must-read for Libertines such as Gabriel Naudé, who held Charron, rather partially, as an advocate of free judgement and a demolisher of established opinions.¹¹ In the late 1620s, the interpretation of Charron's *Sagesse* had become an example of the partisan reading of natural theology that was to cause Jesuits in China to shift their analyses towards ancient theology. A growing number of Deists and Libertines got into the habit of extolling some of Charron's statements, such as "la doctrine de tous les Sages porte que bien vivre, c'est vivre selon nature [...], entendant par nature l'équité et la raison universelle qui lui en nous".¹² In most cases, however, Libertines and Deists were careful to neglect that 'nature' was defined by Charron in clearly Christian terms: "tout le monde suit nature, la regle premiere et universelle, que son autheur y a mis et estably, sinon l'homme seul qui trouble la police et l'estat du monde, avec son gentil esprit, et son liberal arbitre, c'est le seul deregulé ennemy de nature".¹³

Charron's status in the seventeenth-century anti-deistic debate became as a consequence problematic to say the least. In their appraisals of *La sagesse* both Mersenne and Garasse insisted on the problem of Charron's misuse by the Libertines, regardless of Charron's original intentions: "il faut donc remarquer que les Deistes tirent de pernicieuses conclusions du livre de Charron, contre son intention".¹⁴ The original intention is indeed what differentiated Charron from a Giordano Bruno or a Giulio Cesare Vannini – while the latter are irremediably harmful, a judicious and pious student can read Charron without putting his faith at risk. *La sagesse* "ne laisse pas d'estre dangereux pour les esprits foibles, tels que sont les libertins, et les Deistes, encore qu'un esprit fort, bien fait, et qui a la crainte de Dieu empreinte bien avant dedans son ame, en puisse faire son profit".¹⁵

Such mixed attitude towards Charron is also a proof of the complexity of the problem posed by Libertinism in the 1620s. The anti-libertine polemic, which was inflamed in 1626 by the simultaneous publication of Garasse's *La doctrine curieuse* and Mersenne's *L'impiété des Déistes, Athées, et Libertins*, was aggravated by the fact that a clear definition of Libertinism was still lacking, if one ever was to be found. Garasse used *libertin* as an all-purpose injurious term, which could be applied to all sorts of deviations from the Catholic norm, Protestants included.¹⁶ During the years in which Théophile de Viau, one of the forefathers of Libertinism, was sentenced to be burnt at the stake, Mersenne and Garasse had to fight an array of different and often contradictory doctrines whose origins were as diverse as they could be, ranging

¹¹ Cf. BOSCO 1987, pp. 66-75; CHARRON 1960, p. 24; KOGEL 1972, pp. 48-49, 144, 259.

¹² CHARRON 1635^a, 2:37.

¹³ CHARRON 1635^a, 2:39. It may be interesting to note that Charron's controversial fortune in the seventeenth century is mirrored, in the twentieth century, by some critical appraisals of his works. Tullio Gregory, for instance, has often insisted on the alleged insincere character of the Christian and fideistic aspect of Charron's philosophy (cf. GREGORY 1986, pp. 86-87). I frankly do not find this theory particularly convincing. Besides, it seems to me that the risk of supposing a degree of duplicity in works such as Montaigne's or Charron's, even when no decisive proof can validate such an interpretation, is that of giving rise to Straussian readings which tend to emphasise a contradictory aspect of Charron or Montaigne which is not really there.

¹⁴ MERSENNE 1624^a, p. 202. Cf. also: *ibid.*, pp. 182-183, 202-203; GARASSUS 1624, pp. 21, 27-31; BOSCO 1987, p. 67; KOGEL 1972, p. 147.

¹⁵ MERSENNE 1624^a, p. 197. Cf. also: *ibid.*, pp. 186-187, 210-211.

¹⁶ Cf. LACHEVRE 1909, 1:147-149.

from Dutch Arminianism to classical atheism, and from absolute scepticism to Bruno's cosmology.¹⁷

The only characteristic that seemed to be shared by all these different currents was "une liberté servile et domageable" which resulted in an abuse of human reason.¹⁸ Holding reason to be all-powerful, Libertines would exercise it as a universal criterion of truth, even daring to challenge the revealed doctrines of religion by means of conniving subtleties. According to Mersenne, Garasse and virtually the whole set of anti-libertine French authors of the seventeenth century, atheists, Deists, Epicureans, radical Pyrrhonists, in short, all flavours of impiety were guilty of misunderstanding the role of human reason which, far from being human in origin, was given to men as a gift from God in order to serve them as a guide to Faith, not as a substitute for it.¹⁹

3.3 The Risks of Cartesianism

Provided that the problem of Libertinism was linked to an abuse of reason, which in turn produced an allegedly infallible criterion of truth, it is clear why, in the age of Descartes, Libertines seemed to lurk around every corner. Descartes himself was to be considered the forefather of all *esprits forts*, and his doctrines the source of many errors in faith. One could only identify matter with extension at the expense of the theory of transubstantiation; besides, mechanical philosophy seemed to incline people to atheistic materialism, and the exclusion of teleological causes from the physical world was in contrast with the notion of Providence.²⁰ The most dangerous doctrine, however, concerned the relationship between reason and faith, and between rational knowledge and revealed truth. Descartes opened the door to the possibility that one might judge by reason what was traditionally considered 'above reason', and while he never explicitly extended the principle of clarity and distinction beyond the traditional realm of reason (i.e., to God), it was feared that Cartesian philosophers would explore all the possibilities raised by Cartesianism, including the most irreligious ones.²¹

¹⁷ See: GARASSUS 1624; MERSENNE 1623; MERSENNE 1624^a; MERSENNE 1624^b.

¹⁸ GARASSUS 1624, p. 223. Cf. also: MERSENNE 1624^b, ff. E,ii^v-E,iii^r.

¹⁹ It should be briefly remarked here that, during the years in which Mersenne, Garasse, and their successors were fighting their battle against Libertinism, many English writers and theologians denounced an upsurge of irreligion in England as well. Latitudinarianism (identified with Socinianism and Arminianism) was often considered as one of the principal vectors of impiety, but the peak of irreligion was apparently to be reached with the works of authors such as Herbert, Blount, Toland, and Collins, who were to push the boundaries of Latitudinarianism way beyond its traditional limits (cf., *inter alia*: SULLIVAN 1982, pp. 66, 71, 219). In this context, some of the accusations levelled at these 'new thinkers' closely seemed to parallel the French position: "Vain, wretched Creature, how art thou misled / To think thy Wit these God-like Notions bred! / These Truths are not the product of thy Mind, / But dropt from Heaven, and of a Nobler kind. / *Reveal'd Religion* first inform'd thy Sight, / And Reason saw not, till *Faith* sprung the Light" (DRYDEN 1682, p. 5). Although Dryden's critiques were close to those of his French counterparts, the solution adopted by most English thinkers turned out to be quite the opposite of that which was to be espoused in France. Instead of developing an antirationalistic attitude, reason was to become, thanks to the Cambridge Platonists, the prime instrument for opposing atheists and Deists in a way that could remind of orthodox natural theology (cf. *inter alia*: BEISER 1996, pp. 140-142, 149, 223; SINA 1976, p. 117).

²⁰ Cf. DINI 1986, p. 233.

²¹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 233-234; LENNON 2008, pp. 236-237; PAGANINI 2008, p. 257; SCIACCA 1968, pp. 32, 103.

The risks Cartesianism entailed did not escape those who, like Bossuet and Huet, had initially approved of Cartesian philosophy. In the late-seventeenth century, the libertine use of Descartes had become too prominent not to be noticed and censured, together with its original source of inspiration.²² In 1687 Bossuet wrote: “je vois [...] un grand combat se préparer contre l’Eglise sous le nom de la philosophie cartésienne. Je vois naître de son sein et de ses principes, à mon avis mal entendus, plus d’une hérésie; et je prévois que les conséquences qu’on en tire contre les dogmes que nos pères ont tenus, la vont rendre odieuse”.²³ Huet could not have agreed more with Bossuet, with whom he had worked for years, tutoring the Dauphine. Malebranche’s *Recherche de la vérité*, published in the mid-Seventies, was a clear example of the heresies which according to Bossuet were developing from Cartesianism. And Huet’s condemnation of it was ferocious.²⁴

Yet Malebranche, like Descartes himself, is mainly a symbol that Huet uses in order to attack the whole lot of libertine thinkers and rationalistic ‘new philosophers’. Even the *Censura philosophiae cartesianae*, which Huet writes as a manifesto of his anti-Cartesianism, is published under a sibylline title which the reader soon understands to concern the followers of Descartes even more than Descartes himself.²⁵ Yet, Huet’s critique is not merely philosophical. Pride, the main vice which Huet believes to characterise both Descartes and his followers, together with the ranks of Libertines, atheists, and Deists which he aims to oppose, is an intellectual and moral blemish at the same time. In Charron’s terms, “ceste presumption se doit considerer en tous sens, haut, bas, et à costé dedans et dehors, pour le regard de Dieu: choses hautes et celestes, basses, des bestes, de l’homme son compaignon, de soy mesme: et tout revient à deux choses, s’estimer trop, et n’estimer pas assez autrui”.²⁶

Echoing the tradition of the French Moralists, Huet considers human pride to be the mother of all vices. As Montaigne and Charron had written, just to mention Huet’s most immediate references, pride is “nostre maladie naturelle et originelle”, “la plus essentielle et propre qualité de l’humaine nature”.²⁷ However, perhaps even more importantly, pride is also the principal vector of intellectual impiety. Due to pride, a doctrine that would be honest in principle, such as Descartes’, becomes utterly heretic and terribly dangerous. In light of this, pride becomes a central issue in Bossuet’s writings as well, where it is often defined as “une présomption qui allait à s’attribuer à soi-même le don de Dieu” – a gift from God which must be understood to refer, in Bossuet and Huet alike, to reason.²⁸

It is hence natural that the *pharmakon* that Huet prepares against Descartes’ presumptuous reason should be based upon an intellectual attitude contrary to pride. This solution is put forward by Huet in three works, written roughly in the same period: the *Censura philosophiae cartesianae* (1689); the *Alnetanae quaestiones* (1690), and the *Traité philosophique de la foiblesse de*

²² LENNON 2008, 150-151; SCIACCA 1968, 89-90, 107.

²³ BOSSUET 1863, 266. Cf. also: RAPETTI 1999, 108n.; SCIACCA 1968, 112.

²⁴ Cf. LENNON 2003, 152, 155.

²⁵ Cf. BORGHIERO 1983, 180; COHEN ROSENFELD 1957, 14-15; LENNON 2003, 157, 159.

²⁶ CHARRON 1635^a, 1:138.

²⁷ MONTAIGNE 1969, 2:118; CHARRON 1635^a, 1:109.

²⁸ BOSSUET 1961, 833. Cf. also: VAUCHERET 1980, 217, 232.

l'esprit humain (1723, but probably written in 1689-90).²⁹ In these volumes Huet lays out an intellectual programme which, departing from a preliminary abasement of reason through a correct use of doubt, eventually resolves in epistemic fideism.

The first notion that Huet needed to insist upon was that of the weakness of human reason. In spite of Descartes's *regulae* and criteria of truth, Huet is sure that "l'homme ne peut connoître la Vérité par la Raison, avec un parfaite Certitude".³⁰ And, if due to the imperfection of our senses and to the "continuel changement" of things man cannot even grasp natural truths with certainty, then much less can he uncover divine truths by the use of reason alone.³¹ It follows that it is not only presumptuous, but plain illogical to have reason judge upon matters that pertain to faith alone. The principles of faith do not need to agree with reason in order to be true while, on the contrary, the notions produced by reason must be held false when they do not agree with faith.³² In brief, Descartes' conclusions are to be reversed: "veritatem enim tam Rationis suae propriam facit Cartesius, quam propria Fidei est; tamque Rationem suam Fidei normam facit, quam Rationis norma Fides est".³³

Descartes' system of thought is to be condemned, according to Huet, for neglecting to distinguish clearly between the realm of thought and that of revelation, between physics and metaphysics.³⁴ At the expense of clarity, Descartes continuously shifts the object of his discourse and, in doing so, opens the door to positions that are irreligious and illogical at the same time, such as the very notion of criteria of truth in the first place.³⁵ It is absurd, Huet believes, to try and solve the problem of the weakness of human reason through the invention of a criterion of truth that is produced by the same weak human reason that it is supposed to assist. Clarity and distinction are everything but a valid norm. Not only may there be falsehood in clarity and truth in obscurity, but the very notion that "nihil esse pro vero admittendum, nisi quod certo et evidenter verum esse cognoscitur" is circular reasoning, a *petitio principii*.³⁶

Besides, in order to find truth one needs a criterion of truth; yet, in order to find the criterion of truth, one has to be able to distinguish between truth and falsehood: in brief, "il faut donc avoir trouvé la Vérité avant que de pouvoir trouver la le *Criterionum*; et il faut avoir trouvé le *Criterionum* avant que de pouvoir trouver la Vérité; et puisque nous n'avons trouvé ni la Vérité ni le *Criterionum*, il s'ensuit qu'on ne peut trouver ni l'un ni l'autre".³⁷ Instead of providing a solution to methodological doubt, Descartes' quest for a criterion of truth is thus a further proof of the weakness of human mind and, therefore, of the necessity of doubt.³⁸ Doubt is indeed, according to Huet, the clearest mark of the incoherence of Cartesianism.³⁹ While Descartes had

²⁹ Cf. HUET 1723, p. vii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

³¹ HUET 1723, p. 59. Cf. also: HUET 1690, p. 8.

³² HUET 1689, pp. 177-8.

³³ HUET 1690, p. 51.

³⁴ BORGHERO 1998, p. 15; RAPETTI 1999, p. 104.

³⁵ Cf. *inter alia*: HUET 1689, pp. 51-52.

³⁶ Cf. HUET 1689, pp. 58, 64.

³⁷ HUET 1723, p. 73.

³⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 52-53; 69, 89.

³⁹ Cf. Borghero 1998, 20-21.

chosen a good starting point for his philosophy, he should not have turned doubt into certainty by means of petty arguments and inconclusive criteria of truth: “miramini porro inconstantiam Cartesij. Dubitandum esse statuit de rebus omnibus, etiam de iis quae nobis per se lumine naturali nota sunt [...]. Mox tamen [...] [c]ertissimum et sine ulla dubitatione fatendum esse definit, se esse, quia cogitat; hoc uno argumento, *quo repugnet id quod cogitat, tum cum cogitat, non esse*. Quid aliud vero est *repugnare*, quam adversari lumini naturali [...]?”⁴⁰

3.4 Huet’s Solution to Cartesianism

In order to rectify Descartes and to avoid all risks for religion, it was hence necessary to rectify the method of doubt, reviving an “art de douter correctement”.⁴¹ Far from being unsuitable for the Christian philosopher, doubt had to be reformed as the very basis of all Christian philosophies against the presumptuous claims of human reason. It is fundamental, however, to understand that, as implied by the very rationale of doubt, doubt itself cannot be overcome in any rational way, but only through the submission of reason to faith.⁴² The lack of understanding of this central principle is the main flaw in Descartes’ system of thought and the main vector of irreligion amongst the Libertines.⁴³

Aiming to fight the Libertines by means of their own philosophy, Huet bends Descartes premises in an anti-Cartesian direction. The *Traité philosophique de la foiblesse de l’esprit humain* and *Alnetanae quaestiones* thus propose a philosophical programme which, through the correct use of doubt, envisions a twofold objective, “l’une prochaine, et l’autre éloignée”: namely, to have men shun pride and intellectual arrogance, and to prepare themselves to receive faith, which is the only certain source of truth.⁴⁴ Faith alone can ratify or disallow the conclusions that men provisionally draw thanks to the use of reason. In light of this, faith must be accepted as the greatest gift that God in his infinite goodness has given men, so as to offset the limited powers of their weak understanding.⁴⁵

The status of the Christian sceptic thus can be considered through a comparison with that of pre-Christian philosophers, who could only count upon reason to achieve knowledge, and hence inevitably ended up embracing a form of universal scepticism, as in the case of “Socratem, totamque Academiam, et celeberrimorum cohortes Philosophorum, qui Ratione ipsa ducti agnoverunt infirmitatem, tenuitatem, inconstantiam Rationis, et a dubitatione capi jusserunt exordia Philosophiae”.⁴⁶ With the advent of Christ, however, God opened a safe

⁴⁰ HUET 1689, pp. 16-17. Cf. also: *ibid.*, pp. 27, 45-46.

⁴¹ Cf. *inter alia*: HUET 1723, pp. 122-123; PIAIA, SANTINELLO 2011, p. 141.

⁴² Cf. HUET 1723, pp. 86-87.

⁴³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 85-86; 234-235; LENNON 2008, pp. 49-50.

⁴⁴ Cf. HUET 1723, p. 209; BERTELLI 1955, p. 438; DINI 1986, p. 239; JUNQUEIRA SMITH 2009, pp. 181-182; RAPETTI 1999, p. 33; SCIACCA 1968, p. 122.

⁴⁵ Cf. HUET 1690, 18; HUET 1723, pp. 182, 212.

⁴⁶ HUET 1690, pp. 29-30.

route to knowledge which, unlike the “*obscura illa, aiceps et fallax*” that was based upon reason, could finally remove all doubts.⁴⁷ In other words, the revelation changed the epistemological function of doubt and scepticism, which could be adopted by Christian philosophers only inasmuch as they concerned the impossibility of the human intellect to formulate certainly true statements, without implying the impossibility to achieve truth in some other way. The classical sceptic is turned into the fideist or Christian sceptic, that is, into a thinker whose scepticism is only provisional and can be resolved thanks to the submission to faith.⁴⁸

Therefore, while reason is never to be exercised with concern to matters pertaining to the domain of faith, faith can and should be exercised upon those objects that were traditionally assigned to the domain of reason, in order to perfect knowledge with the certainty that faith alone can grant.⁴⁹ This is not to say, however, that reason should be substituted by faith altogether, and much less should it be considered useless. In the first instance, everyday life hardly ever necessitates absolute certainty and in most occasions men can direct their actions in accord with a notion of plausibility (*vraisemblable*), attained through reason.⁵⁰ Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, even though faith enjoys undisputable axiological primacy, reason is granted a ‘chronological’ precedence in that it was bestowed by God on men in order to prepare them to receive faith: “*inter Fidem jam susceptam, et Fidem suscipiendam, mediam se interponit Ratio*”.⁵¹

These notions were of course not completely novel, even though Huet’s anti-Cartesian use of them was quite innovative. Huet himself was well aware of the long history that his approach had continued and developed. Indeed, he was convinced that something similar to a *traditio perpetua* of scepticism could be outlined by the scholar, and that this tradition would have been found to be equivalent to the history of philosophy itself: with the exception of “*un fort petit nombre*” of authors, doubt is the common thread through all philosophers and the measure of their greatness.⁵² Yet, even though, according to Huet, all great philosophers had shared some sort of scepticism, the most immediate model of a Christian use of doubt could be found, ironically, in some of the authors who had been most influential for the Libertines, such as Montaigne and Charron.

In a much clearer way than Renaissance authors such as Agrippa von Nettesheim and Henri Estienne, in his *Apologie de Raimond Sebond* Montaigne had famously expounded upon a system of thought which was sceptic, erudite, and Christian at the same time.⁵³ Prefiguring Huet’s stances, Montaigne too had criticised the delirious pretensions of human reason.⁵⁴ Men’s “*cervelles philosophiques*” are completely incapable of achieving truth by rational means, not only because their senses and reason do not mirror reality as it is, but also because men can never gain a universal perspective higher than their particular point of view. As a

⁴⁷ Cf. HUET 1679, p. 4.

⁴⁸ Cf. PENELHUM 1983, pp. 15-16; SCIACCA 1968, p. 162.

⁴⁹ Cf. HUET 1690, pp. 7, 20, 37, 89; HUET 1723, p. 187.

⁵⁰ Cf. HUET 1723, p. 205.

⁵¹ HUET 1690, p. 34. Cf. also: *ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

⁵² Cf. HUET 1723, p. 99. Cf. also: PIAIA, SANTINELLO 2011, p. 143.

⁵³ Cf. *inter alia*: POPKIN 2003, p. 53; POPKIN 1996, p. 12; VERDAN 1973, p. 422.

⁵⁴ Cf. TARANTO 1994, p. 26.

consequence, the only option to attain certain knowledge is to have reason submit to Christian faith, that is, to trust God to carry out the “divine et miraculeuse métamorphose” by which man “s’eslevera, abandonnant et renonçant à ses propres moyens”.⁵⁵

Before Huet, Montaigne’s sceptical fideism had been famously embraced by Charron, who adopted it in a rather pure form, formalising some of its aspects according to the rhetorical and demonstrative standards of theological writing. Besides, a similar doctrine was espoused by some authors whose works Huet probably did not approve of completely, though for different reasons. Pascal had embraced sceptical fideism as a means to oppose atheists and Deists, and even some authors who have been held – although, I believe, not too correctly – to conceal some atheist tendencies, such as La Mothe le Vayer and Gassendi, agreed upon considering scepticism the most suited of all philosophies to be reworked into a Christian doctrine, “une philosophie favorable à la foi”.⁵⁶

Although Pyrrho was certainly damned, La Mothe le Vayer has it in *De la vertu des païens*, “cette philosophie”, that is, scepticism, “n’ait besoin d’être purgée comme les autres de beaucoup de défauts même à l’égard de son impiété qui demande une bien rigoureuse circoncision, je pense qu’on peut dire aussi que, ce retranchement fait, elle est possible l’une des moins contraires au christianisme”.⁵⁷ What is more, Huet might have derived some inspiration for his epistemological doctrine from Gassendi, who, while embracing Montaigne’s and Charron’s philosophical stances, demonstrated that it was possible nonetheless to develop a form of probable knowledge that was good enough for non-metaphysical issues, although being unsuitable for higher speculation and ultimately uncertain.⁵⁸

3.5 Spinoza and Spinozians: the Worst Possible Outcome of Rationalism

Much as sceptical fideism could represent a feasible solution to the problem of Cartesian rationalism, it could not suffice alone in order to counter all forms of irreligion that Huet thought to have departed from the seventeenth-century rationalistic trend. In particular, Spinoza and some thinkers belonging to his entourage had carried to extremes the most obnoxious implications of Cartesian rationalism or, at least, so it seemed to Huet and to many of his contemporaries to whom some aspects of Spinoza’s thought appeared as a heretical radicalisation and (undesired) clarification of some of Descartes’ passages.

Such was the case, for instance, with the central issue of the non-revealed knowledge of God, which, according to Huet, had been explained in a rather irreligious way by Descartes himself. Yet, Spinoza’s account of it was much worse. In Spinoza’s terms, it is possible to achieve adequate, that is, perfect and exhaustive knowledge “aeternae, et infinitae essentiae Dei”.⁵⁹ Unlike Descartes’ clear and distinct knowledge of God, which is certain and true, albeit

⁵⁵ Cf. MONTAIGNE 1969, 2:107-108; 2:182, 2:268. Not unlike Charron’s, Montaigne fideism too has been the object of some critical debate, cf., in this regard: CARDOSO 2009, pp. 71-82.

⁵⁶ Cf. LA MOTHE LE VAYER 2004, p. 129; PASCAL 1954, p. 1189; PENELHUM 1983, p. 69; POPKIN 2003, pp. 85-56; VERDAN 1973, pp. 423-424.

⁵⁷ LA MOTHE LE VAYER 2004, p. 128. Cf. also: *ibid.*, p. 129.

⁵⁸ Cf. *inter alia*: BORGHERO 1983, pp. 54, 186; GREGORY 1961, pp. 70, 121, 125-126.

⁵⁹ SPINOZA 1925^c, p. 128.

lacking a full comprehension of all the possibilities implied by the infinite, Spinoza's adequate knowledge of God attains a perfect comprehension of all the properties of the infinite, therefore equalling divine knowledge itself.⁶⁰ While Descartes, according to Huet, tended not to distinguish clearly enough between the field of reason and that of revelation, Spinoza had unequivocally denied any difference between God's and man's ideas, provided that the latter were 'adequate'.

While Descartes at least in principle considered the possibility of doubting clear and distinct ideas, to doubt adequate ideas would have been for Spinoza utterly nonsensical: "sequitur, nos non posse veras ideas in dubium vocare ex eo, quod forte aliquis Deus deceptor existat, qui vel in maxime certis nos fallit, nisi quamdiu nullam habemus claram et distinctam Dei ideam, hoc est, si attendamus ad cognitionem, quam de origine omnium rerum habemus, et nihil invenimus, quod nos doceat, eum non esse deceptorem eadem illa cognitione, qua, cum attendimus ad naturam trianguli, invenimus eius tres angulos aequales esse duobus rectis".⁶¹ In light of this, from a point of view similar to Huet's, even the fact that Spinoza's highest degree of adequate knowledge was 'intuitive' rather than strictly speaking 'rational' did not make Spinozian rationalism less contemptible. Not only was Spinoza's second type of knowledge, that is, purely 'rational' knowledge, held to produce absolutely true notions, but even intuitive adequate knowledge was, in a sense, rational, in that, although revolving around the perfect knowledge of some of God's attributes, it was not revealed, originating instead from within the mind of man.⁶²

The role of revelation and faith in the quest for truth was obviously endangered by Spinozian speculation. As it was clearly stated in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, it is absurd to say that men do not need to 'rationally understand' (*intelligere*) notions such as God's attributes, but must instead "omnino simpliciter, absque demonstratione credere", since "res invisibiles [...] nullis aliis oculis videri possunt, quam per demonstrationes".⁶³ Although revelation itself was not denied by Spinoza, in order to be considered valid it was required to agree with natural reason – something that would have been utterly absurd from a perspective such as Huet's. And, indeed, Huet's perspective was a good example of one of the philosophical stances ridiculed in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*: "pietas, proh Deus immortalis, et Religio in absurdis arcanis consistit, et qui rationem prorsus contemnunt, et intellectum tanquam natura corruptum rejiciunt, et aversantur, isti profecto, quod iniquissimum est, divinum lumen habere creduntur".⁶⁴

The distance between the message of Spinoza's *Tractatus* and that of Huet's philosophy was evident starting with the very reason that Spinoza and Huet cited as a rationale for writing. While Huet composed his works in order to demolish the claims of human reason, that was instead to be submitted to faith, Spinoza set about writing his treatise in order to counteract a common inclination to "lumen naturale non tantum contemni, sed a multis tanquam

⁶⁰ Cf. SCRIBANO 2008, pp. 67, 85.

⁶¹ SPINOZA 1925^b, p. 30. Cf. also: BIASUTTI 1990, p. 121; MIGNINI 1995, pp. 97-98, 179.

⁶² Cf. SPINOZA 1925^c, pp. 122-123; SPINOZA 1925^a, pp. 54-56; SPINOZA 1925^b, p. 10; MIGNINI 1990, pp. 62-63; MIGNINI 1995, pp. 100, 102.

⁶³ SPINOZA 1925^d, p. 170.

⁶⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 8. Cf. also: BIASUTTI 1990, pp. 119-120.

impietatis fontem damnari".⁶⁵ In pursuing this aim in the *Tractatus*, Spinoza turned into exegetical practices all the notions that he had treated from a theoretical point of view in his other works. The notion that revelation had to agree with natural reason produced, for instance, not only the idea that all the allegorical interpretations of the passages of the Bible that seemed to contradict the *lumen naturale* had to be wrong, but also Spinoza's general critique of miracles.⁶⁶ By the same token, the principle regarding the unity of human and divine knowledge was mirrored by the paramount assumption of the *Tractatus* that the method for interpreting nature should not have differed from the method for interpreting Scripture. While the former must draw its materials from nature alone, the latter must explain the Sacred Texts through the Sacred Texts themselves, even though all conclusions must be consentaneous to reason.⁶⁷

Obviously Huet could not accept an exegetical method centred upon the notion that the Scriptures had to be read through Scripture alone, that is, avoiding all references to faith and revealed truths. In particular he would not have accepted the many irreligious consequences which this method implied, first of all the fact that the Sacred Texts would have been considered to be exposed to the same risks which endangered all profane books. Maintaining the exceptionality of Biblical textual history was essential for orthodox Christianity, whose preservation was grounded upon the notion that its fundamental texts perfectly expressed the will of God, which he had conveyed through the words of the Prophets and the Apostles.⁶⁸ This perfect correspondence between the ideal message of God and its written report in the Sacred texts was completely destroyed by Spinozian interpretation, which implied that, although God's message was in fact contained in the Bible, the text itself was not divine in nature: it had been authored by a group of diverse people who had expressed their diverse sensibilities in their writings. Besides, like all classics, these texts as well had been corrupted by time: some parts had been lost, others had been altered in later times, and nearly none of them had been actually written by the author they were traditionally associated with.

Besides, as in the case of Descartes, Spinoza too was perceived by Huet as a symbol rather than as the sole person responsible for a particularly obnoxious type of irreligion. In writing the *Demonstratio Evangelica*, Huet certainly did aim to oppose the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, but by opposing it, he also purposed to criticise the whole set of atheists and Libertines who were developing heretic doctrines and threatening Christianity by appealing to philology and critical exegesis.⁶⁹ According to Huet, Spinozism and Cartesianism were nothing but different aspects of the same blasphemous attitude since a critical, rational interpretation of the Biblical text would have been unconceivable if the claims of absolute rationalism had not been accepted. In light of this, by the same way that Cartesians dared to exercise human reason upon revealed truths, Spinozians dared to doubt and criticise the very text of the Bible.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ SPINOZA 1925^d, p. 9.

⁶⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 172.

⁶⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 98-99, 182. It is interesting to note, here, that, as remarked by Amoroso, not only Spinoza applies these same principles to his *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*, but, in this work especially, he also tends to subordinate the Biblical text to his rational construction (cf. AMOROSO 2004, p. 47).

⁶⁸ Cf. VERNIÈRE 1954, p. 126.

⁶⁹ Cf. LAGRÉE 1991, p. 51; SCIACCA 1968, p. 94.

⁷⁰ Cf. BERTELLI 1973, p. 326.

Clearly Huet was not too far from the truth. The relationship between Spinozism and Cartesianism that he suspected could be confirmed, for instance, by a work such as the *Philosophia Sacrae Scripturae interpres* by Lodewijk Meyer, who went even further than Spinoza in denying the Scriptures any ontological autonomy from philosophy. Meyer, who had always worked in close proximity to Spinoza, was a perfect example of the most heretic use of Descartes, that is, of the theological adaptation of “*felicissima illa praestantissimaque Methodus, qua nobilissimus ac incomparabilis Vir Renatus Des-Cartes [...] Philosophiam ab ipsis restauravit fundamentis*”.⁷¹ Nothing for Meyer is ‘above reason’ and, as a consequence, the principles of clarity and distinction can be applied to revelation as well. Besides, since there is only one truth, when revealed notions do not conform to the clear and distinct truths of philosophy, the former must be necessarily wrong. According to Meyer, not only did the set of norms and *regulae* developed by Cartesian philosophy enable man to distinguish between truth and falsehood within the traditional domain of reason, as in Descartes, but the same norms can also be applied to revelation, producing the same effect.⁷² Philosophy, conceived as the Cartesian analysis carried out through criteria of truth, is the “*normam certam, ac minime fallacem, tam sacros Libros explicandi, quam illorum explicationes explorandi. Atque hoc sensu Exercitationis nostrae Titulum intellectum volumus; quo etiam ab Evangelicis Theologis Scriptura et sui ipsius interpres, et controversiarum Theologicarum iudex perhibetur, hoc est, interpretandi ac iudicandi norma ac regula*”.⁷³

3.6 On Certitude

In facing the threats posed by Spinozism, Huet had to go beyond the traditional appeal to the submission of reason to faith. Spinozian exegesis had to be countered by another exegetical system, one that must aim specifically at demolishing the lines of argumentation devised in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. Huet set about this work with a polemical disquisition on the orders of certitude (*ordines certitudinis*) and, in particular, on the relationship between moral certitude (*certitudo moralis*) and mathematical certitude (*certitudo mathematica*).

Huet’s stance, as it was expressed in the *Demonstratio evangelica*, was exactly the reverse of the theorisation in the *Tractatus*. Although they could both turn out to be true, for Spinoza moral certitude is far less certain than mathematical certitude. While the latter is utterly undisputable and self-evident, the former is the kind of certitude, shared by the Prophets, that is characterised by its origin ‘from signs’, and is thus ‘believable’, but ultimately indemonstrable.⁷⁴

In opposing this view, Huet deals with many of the points that had been treated in the *Logic of Port-Royal*.⁷⁵ The volume was published anonymously in 1662 by Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, who, like Huet, believed that it was impossible to rationally demonstrate the ‘above-rational’ truth of Christianity, and that if it had been, there would be no use for faith,

⁷¹ MEIJER 1666, s.p. [Prologus].

⁷² Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 33, 42, 44-45; LAGRÉE, MOREAU 1989, pp. 101-102, 111-112.

⁷³ MEIJER 1666, p. 40.

⁷⁴ Cf. SPINOZA 1925^d, pp. 31-32; BIASUTTI 1990, pp. 19-20.

⁷⁵ Cf. SHELFORD 2002, p. 609.

which God explicitly intended to be a bridge between men and the divine.⁷⁶ Huet's response to Spinoza in the *Demonstratio*, however, does not agree completely with the doctrine of the Port-Royal logicians. According to Arnauld and Nicole, mathematical or geometrical principles are absolutely certain, but the geometrical method of demonstration cannot be applied to religious issues, which need to be proved 'morally' and 'historically'.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, even 'moral' or 'historical' demonstrations hold some degree of certainty, particularly when they are affirmed by universal consensus. Unlike geometrical certainty, however, moral or historical truths may in principle be undermined by new information, in the absence of which moral truths that are consensually accepted should always be believed.⁷⁸

In contrast, Huet believed that moral certitude is by no means inferior to mathematical certitude, which, far from being innate, is itself abstracted from sensorial experiences, and thus depends on the same kind of information that gives rise to moral or historical certitude.⁷⁹ Moral certitude is also guaranteed by consensus, that is, by the authority of a large and generally consistent number of confirmed experiences. In other words, we all know "que deux corps qui sont égaux à un troisième, sont égaux entre eux", but we also know, with the same degree of certainty, that Constantinople is situated upon the Bosphorus, although we have never been there, and that Augustus was once emperor of Rome, although nobody who is alive has ever seen him. As Huet suggests, "Digitum admotum igni adustum iri, nemo homo est tam stipes aut bardus, nemo tam opiniosus et pertinax, qui non fateri malit, quam experiri".⁸⁰

While the reliability of moral and mathematical certainty is thus the same, according to Huet the former is preferable to the latter.⁸¹ Mathematical and geometrical demonstrations are often obscure, as in the notion of non-dimensional point, which men "verbis [...] sane dicunt, mente [...] neutiquam percipiunt". Moral certitude, on the contrary, is always and universally clear (a non-mathematical audience may doubt the notion of non-dimensional point, but nobody would doubt that fire would burn one's finger).⁸² One can hence praise mathematics and geometry for the certainty of their demonstrations, as Spinoza and Descartes did, but, by the same token, one must also praise history (that is, historical erudition) and authority (that is, tradition) for providing an exactly comparable kind of certitude.

What is more, given that the principles behind mathematical and moral certitude are derived from the same source, it is possible to satisfy those who want religion to be demonstrated mathematically. While issues concerning religion cannot be proved rationally by mathematical certitude, it is possible to demonstrate religious truth by applying a mathemat-

⁷⁶ Cf. MCKENNA 1990, pp. 208-210.

⁷⁷ Cf. SHELFORD 2002, p. 599.

⁷⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 608-609.

⁷⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 613.

⁸⁰ HUET 1679, 3. Cf. also: HUET 1723, p. 18.

⁸¹ Cf. HUET 1679, p. 4.

⁸² Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 3, 7-8.

ical/geometrical method to principles of moral or historical certitude. In other words, the rigorous and certain deductive process of demonstration that is usually applied to principles that are mathematically certain can also be applied to morally certain notions.⁸³

The attempt to write an apology for Christianity in a geometrical, deductive manner was not only motivated, for Huet, by the seventeenth-century debate on the subject, but also by the highly respectable precedents such as Eusebius' *Demonstratio evangelica*. The result, in Huet's *Demonstratio evangelica*, is the formulation of a series of axioms that overturn the doctrine expounded in Spinoza's *Tractatus*. After laying the foundations for his apology for the Christian faith, Huet demonstrates geometrically, that is, in a way that even Spinoza would consider certain, the certainty of moral/historical truths and of the consequences drawn by them.

The first premise or axiom that one must accept is thus that "omnis historia est verax, quae res gestas ita narrant, uti narrantur in multis libris coetaneis, vel aetati proximis quae res gestae sunt".⁸⁴ While it would be fruitless to try to apply to history the criteria of clearness and distinctness, the philosopher and the historian should conceive of consensus in tradition as an incontrovertible mark of truth. Authority in itself does not sufficiently guarantee the truthfulness of any notion, but a series of consistent authorities provides the foundation of moral certitude. This is exactly the kind of moral certitude that is necessary to prove the veracity of the Biblical text and its canon.

The geometrical demonstration of moral certitude in the first part of the *Demonstratio* constituted, according to Huet, a paramount strategic move. At the same time, it allowed him to checkmate – at least so he believed – both Spinoza's critique of moral certitude and Descartes' assumptions about the merely probable status of historical knowledge, that is, of the category of knowledge to which the Gospels belonged. According to Huet, both Descartes and Spinoza had put forward erroneous theories concerning historical knowledge because of the excessive pride they took in human reason, but their errors were not the same, and neither were the consequences. While Descartes' rejection of historical certainty reflected a frivolous lack of interest in history, Spinoza's position was more dangerous because it funnelled irreligion into philosophical discourse.⁸⁵ For this reason, instead of concentrating on Descartes, Huet developed the axioms in the *Demonstratio* in an explicitly anti-Spinozian fashion.

3.7 The Philological Dispute on the Pentateuch

Huet's rehabilitation of moral certitude first aimed to demolish Spinoza's heterodox argument about prophecies. In the *Demonstratio*, the truthfulness of prophecies was proven by moral certitude and, more precisely, by an adaptation of Huet's argument about historical truth to prophetic narration. Prophecies were to be held true when they had predicted events that eventually had taken place (and were recorded with historical/moral certitude), as in the case of the prophecies of the Messiah in the Old Testament. Indeed, the very notion of moral

⁸³ Cf. MCKENNA 1990, p. 325; SHELFORD 2002, pp. 613-614.

⁸⁴ HUET 1679, p. 12.

⁸⁵ Cf. BORGHIERO 1983, p. 24; NIDERST 1994, p. 78; RAPETTI 1999, p. 11.

certitude, as presented by Huet, should have sufficed to nullify Spinoza's doctrine on prophecies, which was based entirely on the assumption that inasmuch as it belonged to the field of moral certitude, prophetic conviction could not really be considered certain, even though it reportedly depended on God's inspiration on the imagination of the prophets.⁸⁶

The same applies to miracles, which Huet defends by the same means through which he defends prophecies, regardless of Spinoza's claims that his treatment of prophecies differed from his treatment of miracles.⁸⁷ According to the *Tractatus*, while prophecies were at least morally certain, miracles were to be considered simply false, because reason teaches that nothing can escape the laws of nature. It would be absurd for God to violate the natural rules that he himself had imposed.⁸⁸ At best, the miracles recorded in the Scriptures could be interpreted as figures of speech, yet, at times, they were merely the products of the vulgar tendency to neglect the study of natural causes and even to disparage natural philosophy.⁸⁹

From Huet's point of view, this polemic is an impious digression from the point at stake. It is not necessary to discuss natural laws and the fact that God, although he authored them, could conceivably violate them in exceptional cases (i.e., miracles). Moral certitude, Huet thinks, is more than sufficient to prove the veracity of miracles, which are recounted with a great degree of consensus by a large number of authors, not least the evangelists.⁹⁰ The narrative of the Gospels is, in fact, the best example of that "verax [...] historia [...] quae res gestas ita narrant, uti narrantur in multi libris coetaneis, vel aetati proximis, qua res gestae sunt". Not only were the evangelists roughly coeval, but their narrations also aligned with, the great majority of pagan accounts.⁹¹

After opposing Spinoza's arguments on prophecies and miracles, Huet polemicises against the central argument of the *Tractatus*, which concerns the actual authorship and critical history

⁸⁶ Cf. DUPRONT 1930, p. 55.

⁸⁷ Cf. SPINOZA 1925^d, p. 99.

⁸⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 81-84.

⁸⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 81, 91.

⁹⁰ Cf. *inter alia*: HUET 1679, pp. 24-25, 32. In this regard too, Huet's account is strikingly similar to Stillingfleet's discussion on miracles and consensus: cf. STILLINGFLEET 1662, p. 253.

⁹¹ HUET 1679, p. 24. Huet's interpretation strikingly resembles, among his contemporaries, that of Edward Stillingfleet, who, in his *A Letter to a Deist* wrote: "if the common consent of Mankind signifie any thing as to the acknowledgement of a Deity, why should not the Testimony of the Christian Church, so circumstantiated as it is, be of sufficient strength to receive the Matters of Fact delivered by it? which is all I at present desire. Do we question any of the Stories delivered by the common consent of *Greek* or *Latin Historians*, although we have only the bare Testimony of those Historians for them? And yet your Objections would lye against every one of them: How do we know the great prevalency of the Roman Empire? was it not delivered by those who belonged to it, and were concerned to make the best of it? What know we, but *thousands* of *Histories* have been lost, that confuted all that we now have concerning the greatness of *Rome*?" (STILLINGFLEET 1677, pp. 16-17). In his 1930 monograph on Huet's exegetical method Dupront proposed Stillingfleet amongst the possible sources used by Huet (cf. DUPRONT 1930, p. 107). We know now that Huet was in fact interested in Stillingfleet's works and in particular in his *Origines sacrae*, a copy of which he had received from his correspondent at Oxford, Edward Bernard (cf. in this regard: SHELFORD 2007, p. 158). In 1677, shortly after receiving Stillingfleet's work, Huet replied to Bernard: "For a long time, now, I have been having in my hands Stillingfleet's *Origines sacrae*, however, due to my ignorance of the English language, I have not benefited from it. I thus send it [back] to you, without having been made more learned by it. I would be most grateful, if I could get to know and admire such work in its entirety thanks to some specimen of it of your choosing, translated by yourself into Latin" (BNF Lat. 11432, fol. 198^v).

of each book of the Bible and the paternity and reliability of the Biblical canon at large. Huet's strategy remains unaltered as he proceeds to demonstrate, against Spinoza, the veracity of the Biblical canon and of the authorial status of the books of the Old Testament, as it was traditionally conceived. And indeed, the fact that certain figures were 'traditionally conceived' to be the true authors of the Biblical books becomes for Huet, somewhat circularly, a first proof by consensus of the veracity of traditional attribution of the Biblical books. In order to make this argument more convincing and to reinforce the moral certitude of the traditional account of the history of the Bible, Huet attempts to demonstrate consensus by referring to varied sources, including traditional authorities.

Huet's method becomes particularly evident in light of the dispute on the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. In order to counter Spinoza's notion that Moses could not have authored the first books of the Bible, Huet could employ two strategies. First, he could oppose Spinoza's philological arguments with philological arguments of an opposite nature. Second, in the wake of his theory of historical truth, he could demonstrate the authority of Moses through the consensus of the narratives in "in multis libris coetaneis, vel aetati proximis" – indeed in the greatest possible number of contemporary books.⁹²

The first strategy, which Huet deployed through the greatest part of the *Demonstratio evangelica*, was clearly the safest one from an orthodox point of view because it did not compare Biblical narrative to non-Biblical or even pagan analogues.⁹³ Rather than referring to a series of more or less heterodox authorities, it countered Spinoza's arguments with contrary demonstrations. For instance, the assumption that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch because in Deuteronomy he is often referred to in the third person could be nullified by considering perspective in the Sacred Writings as a whole: "*moris Scripturae sacrae est, inquit Gregorius Magnus, ut ipsi qui scribant, sic de se in illa quasi de aliis loquantur*".⁹⁴ Through similar logic, the objection that, because he never Crossed the Jordan River, Moses could not have written "*haec sunt verba quae locutus est Moses ad omnem Israhel trans Iordanem*" (אָלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן), could be invalidated by the fact that *בְּעֵבֶר* actually meant both 'on this side' (*citeriora*) and 'on the further side' (*ulteriora*).⁹⁵

However, although it was safer than appealing to extensive consensus among the ancient nations, Huet's philological strategy did not solve the problem of Spinozism completely. While it might have opposed some of Spinoza's arguments, taken singularly, it did not tackle Spinoza's general argument concerning the Pentateuch and its textual history. It was even possible to produce anti-Spinozian philological exegetical programmes that were contemptible from the point of view of orthodox Christianity, as in the case of Richard Simon's *Histoire*

⁹² Cf. HUET 1679, p. 42; VERNIERE 1954, p. 129.

⁹³ Cf. VERNIERE 1954, pp. 129-131. The reference to a large number of consistent Christian and pagan sources, was amongst the classic weapons adopted by Christian apologists, from Justin Martyr to Philippe Duplessis-Mornay. In some cases, however, an excessive degree of consistency of Christian and pagan sources caused doubts to arise concerning the authenticity of the alleged pagan narratives (cf. SHELFORD 2002, p. 616).

⁹⁴ HUET 1679, p. 143.

⁹⁵ Deut 1:1 (italics mine). Cf. HUET 1679, p. 140; SPINOZA 1925^d, p. 118; VERNIERE 1954, p. 129.

critique du Vieux Testament (1678), whose copies were immediately burnt on Bossuet's suggestion.⁹⁶

Huet's criticism of Simon is significant with regard to the general deficiencies of a purely philological strategy: although Simon had written meritoriously against Spinoza, and although his philological method was in principle quite sound, he often advanced unproven or sketchy conjectures; he was at times careless in his historical reconstruction; and, mostly due to intellectual pride, he could end up supplying an irreligious defence of a position that was not too different from Spinoza's, even though it rejected many of Spinoza's specific points.⁹⁷

As Huet noted in his copy of the *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*, "son amour propre et sa presumption luy ont fait traiter avec mépris les Auteurs qu'il a appellez a sa censure, dont la plus part valent mieux que luy; sans esgard mesme pour les SS. Peres, et sans respect pour l'Écriture Sainte, qu'il a tasché de dispoüiller de toute son autorité. Affirmatif sans preuves, decisif sans raison, et ne donnant pour argument que des opinions [...] a meritè que tout le monde l'ait blasmè".⁹⁸ Simon's work thus demonstrated that philological method, albeit explicitly directed against Spinoza, could only contribute partially to the solution of the problems posed by Spinozian exegesis.

A more general and decisive solution had to be devised, and Huet thought that demonstrating Moses' authorship by consensus would prove the best way to solve the question once and for all. Moral certitude was to be established, minimising, as a consequence, the importance of philological issues. However, to demonstrate Moses' authorship by consensus, that is, to apply Huet's theory of historical truth and moral certitude to the Pentateuch, could not be done carelessly. In providing a list of authorities that, in ancient times, had recorded some aspects of the wisdom in the Pentateuch and had acknowledged the role of Moses as its author, Huet had to face at least two sets of difficulties.

In the first place, the number of ancient accounts that explicitly mentioned Moses was exceedingly scarce, much scarcer than the number of accounts that contained, more or less obscurely, some Biblical notions. Second, it was vital not to advance arguments that might have been used by Deists, who during the same years were insisting on the principle of 'common notions', that is, of universal truths inherent to man's reason or conscience. As a consequence, while examining a set of ancient doctrines reminiscent of the Bible, it was necessary to emphasise that these notions were not autonomously put forward by all cultures, but instead could be explained as a clear product of Biblical influence and tradition.

⁹⁶ Cf. RAPETTI 1999, pp. 6-4; WOODBRIDGE 1989, pp. 193-206. Even though the *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament* appeared when the *Demonstratio evangelica* was already in press, Huet's reaction to the works is rather significant. Huet owned and annotated one of the rare extant copies of the 1678 edition. His underlines mark the passages in Simon which he would have less agreed about, in particular those which concerned the status of the 'inspired scribes' and the corruption of the Biblical texts due to later copyists, as if it were a common profane book (cf. SIMON 1678, pp. 3-5, 7, 10, 19-20, 28, 45, 105, 234, 382).

⁹⁷ Cf. SIMON 1678, pp. 19, 105, 234, 382 [Huet's handwritten annotations]. Cf. also, in this regard: SHELFORD 2007, p. 156.

⁹⁸ SIMON 1678, n.p. [Huet's handwritten annotation on the last page of the volume].

3.8 Huet's Anti-Spinozian Adaptation of Ancient Theology

In order to circumvent these difficulties, Huet developed in his *Demonstratio evangelica* a special kind of demonstration by consensus that was based largely upon a characteristic interpretation of the tradition of *prisca theologia*. Unlike most of his contemporaries, for instance Athanasius Kircher, Huet was not primarily interested in demonstrating the spread of God's message in the pre-Christian world, which was generally understood through a set of principles that were preserved in esoteric philosophy. Rather, he aimed to reveal an unexpectedly large degree of consensus to establish the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch as an instance of truth that was morally or historically certain. To this end, it was not enough to insist on the divine nature of the message conveyed by the *prisci theologi*, but it was necessary to link its divine message to the specific content of the Pentateuch and to the figure of Moses as its author.

Unlike Kircher, who sought to prove that the worthiest aspects of all cultures testified to a golden age in which everyone worshipped the true God, and that all nations were thus to a certain extent Christian, at least *in voto*, Huet aimed to demonstrate that all cultures had been exposed to the message of God precisely because of the circulation of the Pentateuch, whose author, Moses, was remembered and honoured by pagan nations under a variety of names.

The semi-mythical figures who had been traditionally considered *prisci theologi* were thus 'historicised' and shown to be descriptions of Moses by foreign peoples: "ostendemus Mosem ipsum, ac res ab eo gestas et literis proditas, unicum fere fontem fuisse, unde universae prope modum per orbem gentes Deos suos, Heroas, et auctores, totamque theologiam suam haurerunt; Phoenices dico, Aegyptios, Persas, Indos, Thraces, Germanos, Gallos, Britannos, Hispanos, ipsos etiam Americanos; praecipue vero Graecos, et Romanos".⁹⁹

The Mosaic tradition, however, was not preserved among these nations exactly as it was presented in the Pentateuch. In a somewhat Kircherian fashion, it had undergone a partial corruption during its diffusion throughout the world. This corruption was, of course, responsible for the general lack of awareness of the potential consensus on Moses' authorship of the Pentateuch. However, also in a Kircherian fashion, it was possible to reverse the process of corruption by re-establishing the original unity among Moses' various 'exemplar imagines' through a culturally transitive method.¹⁰⁰

Moses, that is, the Phoenicians' Taut, was the same as Thot among the Egyptians, who was translated by the Greeks as Bacchus/Dionysus, but also as Apollo. Apollo was also the analogue of Osiris and Hermes, the latter of whom was called Zoroaster among the Persians.¹⁰¹ Moses could also be identified with Thammuz, Apis, Serapis, Horus, Anubis, Vulcan, Typhon, Mercury, Priapus, Aesculapius, Prometheus, Minos, Rhadamanthus, Proteus, Perseus, Aristeus, Museus, Orpheus, Linus, Tiresias, Janus, Vertumnus, Faunus, Evander, and other

⁹⁹ HUET 1679, p. 38. Cf. also: *ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 38, 85.

¹⁰¹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 58-61, 72-73.

figures.¹⁰² In brief, all the gods and heroes worshipped by the ancients were versions of Moses, who had been duly, although imperfectly, honoured as the propagator of God's wisdom, which he had recorded in the Pentateuch.

Provided, thus, that various peoples had received the Pentateuch and alluded to its author, Moses, under a variety of different names, the degree of consensus about Moses' authorship could be shown to be much greater than expected.¹⁰³ Moral certitude concerning this point was guaranteed not only by the consensus among pagan nations on the attribution of the Pentateuchal knowledge to one of the figures that represented Moses, but also by the ancient authors who reported such attribution, authors who included Homer, Hesiod, Thales, Solon, Pythagoras, Anaxagoras, Socrates, Theopompus, Plato, Aristotle, Eudoxus, Berosus, Manetho, Strabo, Galen, Apuleius, Tacitus, Pliny, Lucian, Numenius, Longinus, Porphyry, and Iamblichus, among others.¹⁰⁴

By insisting that the *prisci theologi* were not individual conveyors of the message of God among the pagan nations, but rather linguistic entities, that is, pagan 'translations' of the name of Moses, Huet averted – or so he thought – the principal risk posed by the traditional interpretation of ancient theology. A narrative such as Kircher's could have fostered the heretical notion that, if somewhat imperfectly, the pagan nations had developed religious traditions based on the true knowledge of God that they had received from the *prisci theologi*. Although they originated from the same source, that is, from God himself, these traditions were thus independent from the main line along which Judeo-Christianity historically developed.

This independent status, which was of course problematic from the orthodox point of view, had no place in Huet's Mosaic interpretation of ancient theology, in which the pagan knowledge of God was utterly dependent on Moses, that is, on the main line along which Judeo-Christianity developed. Even the godly aspects of pagan doctrines were thus subordinated to the Mosaic tradition, which was both logically and chronologically prior to them. This assumption, which distanced Huet's version of ancient theology from the traditional interpretation, also explains Huet's reaction to an observation by Daniel de Saint-Joseph (1601-1666). With concern to the *Demonstratio*, Père Daniel wrote that Huet had come to 'mettre en balance' paganism and Christianity. Huet corrected: 'mettre en parallèle'. As discussed by Maia Neto, the first expression implies a relationship of equipollency between the terms of comparison – something very foreign to Huet's doctrine, which always implied a highly hierarchical relationship between the Judeo-Christian tradition and the godly aspects of pagan traditions.¹⁰⁵

In brief, Huet's universalisation of Moses, or *Panmosaism* as I shall call it hereafter, increased the distance between the doctrine presented in the *Demonstratio* and more traditional interpretations of ancient theology. But Panmosaism was not the most innovative element in Huet's analysis. Similar theories had been developed within the Renaissance and early-modern discussion on *prisca theologia*. Yet, rather than Moses – whom Huet evidently chose to

¹⁰² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 115. By the same token, all the female divinities of the ancient pantheons were to be identified with Moses' wife, Sephora (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 117-118, 120).

¹⁰³ Cf. MCKENNA 1990, p. 327.

¹⁰⁴ HUET 1679, p. 42.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. BNF Fr. 11911, fol. 250; MAIA NETO 2008, pp. 216-217.

oppose the arguments of Spinoza's *Tractatus* – Noah had usually been the object of universalisation, as in the case of Guillaume Postel's, Otto Hernius', and Gerard Voss' works, which Huet certainly knew.¹⁰⁶ The main difference between these authors and Huet, which is also the foremost element of novelty in Huet's doctrine, was not in the Biblical figure he chose to universalise, but in the historical narrative that he proposed as the vector of universalisation. Unlike his predecessors, who referred only to oral tradition, Huet was the first to present the material transmission of texts, and in particular of Moses' writings, as a means of universalisation: "perpetua, jam inde a Mosis aevo, et certa libris ejus constiterit auctoritas; quam si externis jam confirmare libet testimoniis, et aliorum auctorum asciscere auxilia, qui vel Mosis ipsius, vel Mosaicarum scriptorum aliqua se notitia imbutos fuisse prodiderunt, a proximis Mosi temporibus, ad confirmatum jam in orbe Christianismum, clarius etiam propositionis huius veritas eluscet".¹⁰⁷

A further difference between Huet and the Renaissance authors who explained the spread of ancient theology through the general fame of the *prisci theologi* was Huet's markedly documentary perspective, which led him to look for an historical explanation for the circulation of Moses' writings. Huet derived this explanation from the doctrines developed by Samuel Bochart, whom he followed to the court of Queen Christina of Sweden.¹⁰⁸ In his *Geographia sacra* (1647) Bochart had proposed an innovative theory according to which Jewish culture had been spread throughout the ancient world by the Phoenician people, who "in orbem totum colonias emisit e suo sinu".¹⁰⁹

According to Huet, the connection between the Jews and the Phoenicians was even closer than Bochart had supposed: "ipsi etiam Phoenices se e mari quondam Rubro in Phoeniciam fuisse transgressos commemorabant; quod de Judaeis audiverant, ad se pertinere existimantes".¹¹⁰ The diffusion of the Mosaic tradition was further accelerated by the Egyptians, who had witnessed Moses' miracles and preaching. After it was adopted by Egyptians and Phoenicians, the Mosaic tradition was handed on to Grecians, Romans, Arabs, Persians, Assyrians, Sumerians, and even Indians.¹¹¹

3.9 Against Deism

Huet's Panmosaism, it is clear, constituted the ultimate proof by consensus of Moses' authorship of the Pentateuch, a truth that was established with moral certainty against Spinoza's philological analysis of the Scriptures. However, the fundamental importance of Huet's Panmosaism was not simply due to its anti-Spinozian character, but also to its possible use, in the battle against Deism, as a means of demonstrating that all knowledge of God originates in the Bible, rather than emerging from universal aspects of human nature.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. POSTEL 1554, p. 261; HERNIUS 1619, pp. 13-14; VOSS 1641, p. 118.

¹⁰⁷ HUET 1679, p. 42. Cf. also: *ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁰⁸ Cf., *inter alia*: SHELFORD 2007, p. 28.

¹⁰⁹ BOCHART 1692, p. 351. Cf. also: MCCALLA 2006, p. 43.

¹¹⁰ HUET 1679, p. 57.

¹¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 57, 80.

Such possible use of Huet's doctrine must be analysed against the cultural milieu of the Christian late-seventeenth century, in which the need to counter libertine and deistic doctrines, which had become increasingly influential in the previous fifty years and were perceived as the true essence of Spinozism, seemed more urgent than ever.¹¹² Christian thinkers aimed to oppose the irreligious notion that the common features of all religions and traditions could be explained as the products of original 'common notions' that had always been shared by all men, constituting the true core of human nature.

This doctrine likely spread in the wake of Herbert of Cherbury's *De veritate* (1624), which provoked significant interest in continental Europe, especially after the French translation of 1639, presumably rendered by Marin Mersenne.¹¹³ Common notions, as presented by Herbert and held, roughly, in a cultural environment much more varied than that of Herbert's direct influence, are universal truths that, being drawn by men from their primary faculty, that is, from natural instinct, are "in ipsa mente coelitus descriptae, nullisque Traditionibus sive scriptis, sive non scriptis obnoxiae". These common notions include the existence of God, the central role of morals in the divine cult, and faith in a principle of remuneration or punishment in the afterlife.¹¹⁴ According to Herbert, common notions constitute the core of all revealed and unrevealed religion alike and are the only principles that men must invariably accept as true in the sacred writings of all faiths.¹¹⁵ On the contrary, the aspects of established and revealed religion that seem to conflict with these universal truths should be rejected as useless accretions and sophistications.¹¹⁶ In other words, true religion can be defined as the universal and natural accord about common notions among human beings.¹¹⁷

Given the completely human character of these common notions, it was evident that the role of revelation was greatly diminished, even though Herbert did not overtly state it.¹¹⁸ Among the revelations that, according to Herbert, distinguished religions from one another, some were consistent with the common notions, at the very best, while others were plainly false and preposterous.¹¹⁹ This attitude towards revealed religion and hence towards established religious power can perhaps explain the most distinctive element of Huet's Panmosaism, namely the implicit refutation of the idea of 'common notions' that results from Huet's attempt to trace back all sparks of religiosity or quasi-Christianity, across cultures and creeds, to the revealed tradition of Moses. The similarities that pagan cults shared with the Judeo-Christian tradition did not indicate the 'natural' character of those cults, but offered proof that, thanks to Moses, the revelation had been known to all cultures. For example, the fact that Hesiod's and Ovid's writings "non valde certe a Mose discrepant" could be explained only by the fact that both

¹¹² Cf. VERNIÈRE 1954, p. 212.

¹¹³ Cf. SERJEANTSON 2001, pp. 218-219.

¹¹⁴ Cf. HERBERT OF CHERBURY 1944, pp. 89-90; HERBERT OF CHERBURY 1639, pp. 271-272, 275, 278, 281, 284.

¹¹⁵ Cf. HERBERT OF CHERBURY 1944, pp. 98-100, 120. Cf. also: ZOLI 1989, p. 72.

¹¹⁶ Cf. HUTCHESON 1944, p. 45; ZOLI 1989, p. 141.

¹¹⁷ HERBERT OF CHERBURY 1639, p. 57.

¹¹⁸ SINA 1976, pp. 157-158; ZOLI 1989, p. 79.

¹¹⁹ Cf. HERBERT OF CHERBURY 1639, p. 290.

Hesiod and Ovid were aware of the Pentateuch and of its author (although they called him by a different name).¹²⁰

Revelation, thus, becomes in the *Demonstratio* the primary guarantee of universalism and, in turn, Huet's version of ancient theology becomes, perhaps, the most clearly revealed form of *prisca theologia* ever developed. In light of this, Huet's Panmosaism can be considered part of a larger cultural programme that, in the late 1670s, was best exemplified by Bossuet's *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* (1681), which, like Huet's *Demonstratio evangelica*, was directed against both Spinoza and the Deists.¹²¹ Bossuet was convinced that in order to counter burgeoning irreligion, it was necessary to demonstrate the providential and universal character of Judeo-Christian history, according to which God had shaped the particular histories of every nation: "tous les grands empires que nous avons vus sur la terre ont concouru par divers moyens au bien de la religion et à la gloire de Dieu, comme Dieu même l'a déclaré par ses prophètes".¹²² In other words, history is one and universal, because it is unified by the providence of God, who "tient du plus haut des cieux les rênes de tous les royaumes" and "avait dessein de se servir des divers empires pour châtier, ou pour exercer, ou pour étendre, ou pour protéger son peuple".¹²³

The same message is conveyed by Huet's Panmosaism, which unites all traditions into one, supporting Bossuet's Judeo-Christianocentric view not only through the notion of Providence but through the historical account of the universal diffusion of the Mosaic culture.¹²⁴ The teachings of the Pentateuch were thus acknowledged as the universal source of religiousness, in all peoples and in all times. Not only could all cultures be seen as belonging to a general tradition, but it was also possible to demonstrate that they had originated from the Mosaic revelation and hence had nothing to do with natural religion in the deistic sense.

In response to the deistic abuse of natural theology, which had been irreligiously (that is, naturalistically) interpreted, Huet was as clear as possible about the historical character of the Mosaic revelation. Rather than tracing revelation back to the primordial and somehow nebulous time of the initial dissemination of Adam's message, as in the standard version of *prisca theologia*, Huet identified universal revelation with a reportedly documentable historical fact, that is, with the spread of Moses' writings throughout the world. This shift in perspective involved two important changes that affected the deistic discourse. First, it was no longer possible to equate a pristine universal revelation with the essential nature of human beings, as one could by interpreting figuratively the role of Adam. Second, by tracing back all forms of religiousness to Moses, revelation itself became unified, and the risk of unintentionally implying the existence of parallel revelations could be avoided.¹²⁵

In line with Bossuet, it becomes clear in Huet that the Judeo-Christian tradition is the only one that received the revelation directly from God, unlike other nations, which became aware of the revelation indirectly, through the cultural influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition and

¹²⁰ Cf. HUET 1679, p. 122; POPKIN 2003, pp. 278-279.

¹²¹ Cf. BERTELLI 1973, p. 311; VERNIERE 1954, pp. 116-117.

¹²² BOSSUET 1961, p. 951. Cf. also: VEKLAT 1961, p. xix.

¹²³ BOSSUET 1961, pp. 1025, 951. Cf. also: *ibid.*, pp. 948, 952, 990.

¹²⁴ Cf. RAPETTI 1999, pp. 39, 221-222.

¹²⁵ Cf. HUET 1679, p. 75.

specifically through the diffusion of Moses' writings. Even the prophecies that were produced among idolatrous traditions were 'true', according to Huet, precisely because they were not foreign and autonomous in character but could instead be interpreted as the foreign translation of the prophecies in the Pentateuch: "Ethnici a Judaeis, Judeorumve Libris sacris edocti Messiam praenoverunt et expectarunt".¹²⁶

3.10 *Prisca theologia* and *Theologia naturalis*

The effectiveness of Huet's argument in the anti-deistic polemic can be considered in light of the violent attack delivered by John Toland on Huet's doctrine and method. This is, for instance, the case of Toland's critique of Huet's use of Strabo, who is listed among the sources that proved Moses to be the archetype of all religious wisdom.¹²⁷ According to Toland's *Origines Judaicae* (1709), Strabo's observations about Moses could be interpreted the other way around, as an indication of the Egyptian origin of the Mosaic law and, more specifically, as a proof of the heterodox nature of Moses' teachings, which Toland thought were pantheistic or proto-Spinozian in character.¹²⁸

From Huet's point of view, the critique expressed in the *Origines Judaicae* was far from being truly problematic because it could be easily neutralised, although perhaps too superficially, by considering it the abhorrent, if inconsequential, rumbling of an atheist who falsely attributed pantheistical opinions to Moses.¹²⁹ However, Huet could not overlook the growing scepticism that his Panmosaism elicited among Catholics. In spite of the formal approbation issued at the time of the publication of the *Demonstratio evangelica*, Huet's fears that he might be misunderstood or misinterpreted were soon confirmed.¹³⁰

Although confident of Huet's righteous intentions, Bossuet suggested to his friend and colleague that he should be more prudent in his choice of words and in his argumentative strategies.¹³¹ Instead of debunking deistic doctrines altogether, as Huet had hoped, his Panmosaism ran the risk of being perceived as a double-edged sword. Atheist and Deists such as Toland could reverse the chronological account outlined by Huet in order to demonstrate that the figure of Moses and his teachings only reiterated earlier legends and fables, such as those listed by Huet as a product of the diffusion of the Pentateuch.¹³² In these terms, Huet's lists of

¹²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 326.

¹²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 53.

¹²⁸ Cf. Toland 1709, pp. 103-106. Cf. also: CHAMPION 2003, pp. 173-176; GIUNTINI 1979, pp. 303, 430; SINA 1976, p. 485. The contrast between Huet's and Toland's thought was clearly not limited to this aspect, but encompassed the whole philosophical perspective espoused by the two authors, starting with Toland's absolute rationalism, so as it was outlined in his *Christianity Not Mysteriorous*, which denied the possibility of all truths 'above reason' (cf. TOLAND 1696, pp. 6, 25, 37, 46, 139; BEISER 1996, pp. 253-254; GIUNTINI 1974, p. 13).

¹²⁹ Cf. CHAMPION 2003, pp. 178-179.

¹³⁰ Cf. SCIACCA 1968, pp. 10-11.

¹³¹ Cf. DUPRONT 1930, p. 15. Bossuet was not the only person in Huet's entourage to express some doubts about the argumentative strategy deployed in the *Demonstratio* and, more generally, in Huet's works (cf. *inter alia*: MAIA NETO 2008, p. 211; POPKIN 2003, pp. 280, 282).

¹³² Cf. RAPETTI 1999, p. 49.

authorities and his catalogue of pagan figures who resemble Moses could be reworked in support of naturalistic attacks against religion, in general, and Christianity in particular.

The late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century practice of a particular kind of anti-Christian writings, studied today under the label of 'clandestine philosophy', is more than sufficient testimony to the possible unorthodox uses of the materials that Huet had arrayed for a conflicting purpose.¹³³ The milieu in which these writings originated can also explain why, towards the end of the seventeenth century and, more pronouncedly, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, ancient theology started to become increasingly problematic from the point of view of Christian orthodoxy. In spite of its utility for emphasising the necessity of revealed knowledge, ancient theology gradually became unreliable even as an anti-deistic substitute for natural theology. And just as the latter had been compromised, beginning in the early-seventeenth century, by the upsurge of deistically-tinged doctrines, which tended to interpret natural theology in light of actual, physical nature, rather than (as it was originally meant) with regard to the rational faculty infused in man's nature by God, ancient theology suffered the same sort of decline, with a delay of a few decades and especially in the second half of the seventeenth century.

In this cultural context, rather than following Bossuet's advice by moderating his Panmosaic stances and refraining from such arguments, Huet adopted a riskier course of action, one so risky that it has baffled many scholars who have written about Huet.¹³⁴ In the *Demonstratio evangelica* Huet had tried to fight Spinozists and Deists with their own weapons. Erudition, philology, ethnography, comparativism – in brief, all the distinctive traits of erudite libertinism were employed by Huet to support an orthodox view of the role of Moses as the author of the Pentateuch and of the nature of the Bible altogether.¹³⁵ Huet radicalised his use of the argumentative weapons of his enemies during the last twenty years of the seventeenth century. Instead of retreating to the boundaries of traditional orthodoxy, as Bossuet had implicitly suggested, Huet opposed his adversaries by showing that even natural theology, which they had illegitimately used to their own ends, could prove them wrong when its original understanding was restored.

In undertaking this demonstration, Huet does not appear to have wavered in his faith or orthodoxy. On the contrary, he seems to suggest that the orthodox thinker should subscribe to doctrines that are in principle sound, such as that of natural theology, instead of rejecting them because of their illegitimate use by Deists and atheists. In this light, the *Alnetanae quaestiones* marks the culmination of the intellectual and religious programme that Huet started with the *Demonstratio evangelica*. While the *Demonstratio* fought Deists and Spinozists by demonstrating that a correct use of philology and ethnography could confirm a set of orthodox stances, the *Alnetanae quaestiones* seek to show that even if, for the sake of the argument, one should put revelation and ancient theology aside, the same orthodox positions would be confirmed through reference to natural reason alone, provided that it is interpreted in the

¹³³ Cf. *inter alia*: MCKENNA 1990, p. 738; PINTARD 1983, pp. 563-564.

¹³⁴ Cf. *inter alia*: WALKER 1972, p. 214.

¹³⁵ Cf. RAPETTI, RAPETTI 1999, pp. 6, 72.

correct way, that is, not in a purely naturalistic and human fashion. In other words, Christianity is not only a revealed religion, but – just like Philippe Duplessis-Mornay stated some years earlier – also a ‘reasonable’ one.¹³⁶

In the *Censura philosophiae cartesianae* and in the *Traité philosophique de la foiblesse de l’esprit humain* Huet aimed to demonstrate that human reason cannot challenge revealed truths. On the contrary, God gave men reason to prepare them to receive faith. As a consequence, while any apparent contradictions between reason and faith could be attributed to an abuse of reason, all instances of agreement between natural reason and faith must be taken as proof of revealed religion’s incontestable status. In accord with this principle, Huet aimed to controvert the deistic doctrine by applying the notion of moral certitude to the tradition of natural theology. Even if some of the laudable features of the pagan cults originated independently from the revelation and from the diffusion of Moses’ writings, the existence of quasi-Christian notions amongst the pagans would confirm by consensus the validity of the Christian truths, instead of proving the unnecessariness of revealed religion, “cum enim id sit veritatis maxime proprium, ut non uno aliquo argumento, sed compluribus se approbet, quae posita in medio ab unoquoque pro ingenii captu inveniri possunt”.¹³⁷

In order to ultimately demonstrate the orthodox implication of the much-abused doctrine of natural theology, Huet could reverse the classic arguments of ancient theology. In the *Alnetanae quaestiones* he cites the whole range of *prisci theologi*, from Hermes and Zoroaster to the Brahmans and the Druids, yet he does not mention explicitly their exceptional status as established by the tradition of ancient theology. On the contrary, he only mentions these figures as exemplars of the knowledge attained by the pagan nations and of that knowledge’s accord with revealed truths, which are confirmed by consensus.¹³⁸ However, a close reading of *Alnetanae quaestiones* makes it clear that, far from ruling out revelation as the source of the quasi-Christian notions among the pagans, Huet avoids referring to revelation precisely in order to assert the orthodoxy of natural theology and to provide an example of the accord between reason and faith.

¹³⁶ Cf. SHELFORD 2002, p. 604.

¹³⁷ HUET, *Alnetanae quaestiones*, 91. Cf. also: *ibid.*, pp. 97, 102, 435; RAPETTI, *Pierre-Daniel Huet*, p. 190.

¹³⁸ Cf. HUET 1690, pp. 214-215.

Epilogue

As exemplified by the appeal to ancient theology in the *Demonstratio evangelica*, to natural theology in the *Alnetanae quaestiones*, and to scepticism in the *Traité philosophique de la foiblesse de l'esprit humain*, Huet fashioned his works in order to fight his enemies by adopting their own demonstrative tools. The irreligious doctrine developed by Deists and atheists could be proved false, according to Huet, by demonstrating that the very argumentative strategies upon which it was grounded were in fact perfectly orthodox from the Christian perspective. The use that Libertines had made of doctrines such as scepticism, *prisca theologia*, and *theologia naturalis* was – Huet believed – completely deviant. However, it was not enough to censure this misuse. It was also necessary to correct it by contrasting it with the righteous use of the same doctrines, as sufficiently demonstrated by Huet.

Although logically coherent, Huet's strategy was extremely dangerous. Much as Huet could envision his use of natural theology as the ultimate weapon in the battle against Deists and atheistic Libertines, it is easy to imagine why works such as the *Alnetanae quaestiones* and the *Traité philosophique* perplexed and baffled the Catholic milieu. The posthumous publication of the *Traité*, in particular, was a shock for the French Catholic intellectuals, some of whom refused to believe that it was truly authored by the erudite bishop of Avranches.¹ Yet, on close inspection, the Christian character of Huet's scepticism appeared, and still appears, incontestable, much as it was understood by the Jesuit Jean-François Baltus (1667-1743), who defended it as an anti-Libertine measure in the *Sentiment [...] sur le Traité de la Foiblesse de l'esprit humain*.²

Huet's use of ancient theology and natural theology aroused suspicion not because of Huet's actual theorisation but in the wake of the general alert triggered by the Libertine appropriation of these doctrines.³ Even traditional (that is, Thomistic) natural theology, which was in principle unequivocally orthodox and had been accordingly endorsed by many apologetic writers of the seventeenth century, was virtually absent from the European cultural scene after the 1640s. Théophile Raynaud's (1583-1663) *Theologia naturalis*, for instance, was published in 1622, while Hugo Grotius' (1583-1645) *De veritate religionis Christianae* appeared in 1627.⁴ Even the relatively late four volumes of the *Theologie naturelle*, written by Yves de Paris (ca. 1590-1678) in explicit opposition to the Libertines, were published in the early 1640s, at a time when it was still feasible to propose natural theology to debunk the growing number of irreligious doctrines.⁵ However, by the time of Huet's writing, the situation had changed dramatically. The increase in number and strength enjoyed by Libertine doctrines had widely

¹ Cf. RAPETTI 1999, pp. 231-223, 254-255. Baltus represents an exception in the more common trend amongst Catholic thinkers to consider Huet's late works with some suspicion at the very least.

² Cf. BALTUS 1726, pp. 171, 183, 188, 242-243.

³ Cf. MOMIGLIANO 1950, p. 309.

⁴ Cf. in particular: RAYNAUD 1622, pp. 24, 35; GROTIUS 1855, p. 19. Cf. also: MALBREIL 1985, p. 129; RAPETTI 1999, p. 206; SINA 1976, p. 153.

⁵ Cf. YVES DE PARIS 1640-1642, 1:[Advertissement], 1:5, 1:42-44. Concerning Yves' understanding of natural theology, cf. also: *ibid.*, 1:22-23, 1:29, 1:50-51, 1:60, 2:392, 3:33, 4:376-377.

compromised argumentative strategies concerning doctrines such as natural theology, regardless of their original character.

In brief, rather than being too adventurous, Huet was merely too late. Furthermore, he was guilty of two serious miscalculations. First, he thought that his righteous use of doctrines such as natural theology could be enough to counterbalance their adoption by the Libertines, deviant as it might have been. Second, he perhaps short-sightedly believed that his apologetic intentions would suffice to prevent his work from serving as a repository of materials and information to be used by the Libertines themselves. Yet, as demonstrated by Charron's case, nothing was easier for the Libertines than to put aside the original intention of a work while using its information to their own ends.

By contrast, Huet's contemporaries were very much aware of the irremediable corruption of some of the doctrines adopted by Huet. This is clear not only from the criticism directed to Huet's works but also from the fortune of ancient theology and natural theology in the cultural debate of the seventeenth century. While, until the middle of the century, natural theology was largely used and universally recognised as a sound and safe theological approach, during the seventies and the eighties it became recommendable to insist more clearly on the necessity of revelation, through an approach such as ancient theology. By the end of the century, natural theology had become off limits and ancient theology, which had been more or less unproblematically accepted throughout the seventeenth century, soon followed the same course.

The eighteenth-century decline of ancient theology is illustrated by the fortune of Figurism, whose exponents, with the partial exception of Bouvet, made a mistake not too different from that which Huet had made with regard to natural theology. On the one hand, they continued to rely on the tradition of *prisca theologia* even once the development of Libertinism and Deism had rendered it suspicious, that is, decades after the publication of Kircher's and Beurrier's (and even Huet's) works, which they took as a model. On the other, they did not fully understand that in spite of their rather orthodox intentions, their theories about Chinese culture could have greatly favoured the Deist cause.

By identifying the Chinese classics with prophetic writings belonging to the most ancient divine tradition, that is, with the books of Enoch, the Figurists ended up reversing Kircher's and Bossuet's historiographical programmes. Rather than universalising the histories of the pagan nations through Judeo-Christian history and through the Bible, they universalised Judeo-Christian tradition through Chinese history. In a cultural environment which took for granted that truth shined most brilliantly at the beginning of history only gradually to be corrupted later in time, the chronological precedence of the *Five Classics* over the Bible was inevitably perceived to be more than merely chronological. As Bouvet put it, ancient Chinese "paroissent avoir au dens le commencement une Philosophie aussi pure et aussi saine, et j'ose ajouter peut-être encore plus solide et plus parfaite que n'est aujourd'hui la nôtre".⁶ This line of enquiry was clearly doomed to heterodoxy. Rather than limiting themselves to acknowledging in a Kircherian fashion traces of Christian notions in pagan texts, the Figurists ultimately appeared to seek in the Chinese classics an exposition of some Christian notions which had to be even more profound than that contained in the Sacred Texts of Christianity. Some

⁶ WIDMEIER 1990, p. 122 [Bouvet to Charles Le Gobien for Leibniz, 8.XI.1700]. Cf. also: LUNDBAEK 1991, p. 15; MUNGELLO 1989, p. 19; PINOT 1932^a, pp. 258, 353-354.

of the figurist writings thus give the impression of considering the restoration of Fu Xi's philosophy to its original splendour even more important than the restoration of Christianity in China, after centuries of partial corruption.⁷

Such deviances from the accepted standards of orthodoxy and from the orthodox conception of accommodation were clearly enough to motivate the bitter opposition encountered by the Figurists even in the environment of the Jesuit Mission in China itself.⁸ Not only did the Jesuit superiors advise extreme caution in the circulation of figurist theses, but they also required all of the writings touching upon Figurism to be in Latin rather than Chinese, in order to prevent the Chinese from believing themselves to be the depositaries of a tradition more ancient than the Bible itself.⁹ By the same token, Bouvet was prohibited from talking about Figurism to the Chinese emperor, while Prémare and Foucquet were never permitted to publish their works, either in China or in Europe.¹⁰

The opposition to Figurism was even more pronounced outside of the Society of Jesus: Figurism was rejected by the Propaganda Fide, and Prémare was urged to retract his theories.¹¹ What is more, during the same years, the Jesuit order had to defend itself from the combined attack of Gallicans and Jansenists in France, while also suffering from the cooling of papal support in Rome. As a consequence, the Jesuit superiors could not afford to weaken their position even more by associating themselves with heterodox doctrines such as those propounded by the Figurists. Besides, the Chinese Mission had already provided the anti-Jesuit movement with one of its paramount weapons, that is, the Rites Controversy, which was inflamed by Gallicans and Jansenists during the late-seventeenth century.¹²

The Controversy was explicitly shaped in order to tackle three main principles concerning Jesuit preaching in China: the legitimacy of the rites in honour of Confucius, the legitimacy of the rites in honour of the ancestors, and the legitimacy of the Chinese names for God – all points upon which the Jesuits were absolutely positive. In 1707 the Controversy was definitively settled by the papal legate Charles-Thomas Maillard de Tournon, who condemned all Chinese rites so marking the end of the era of Chinese accommodation and the start of the decline of the Jesuit China Mission.¹³ It was clear, in this cultural context, that the Order could not have permitted the Figurists to diffuse their ideas, causing the general condition of the Society, and in particular of the Chinese Mission, to deteriorate even further by adding an accusation of sheer heresy to the accusation of excessive laxity implied by the Rites Controversy.

With the singular exception of the Jesuit missionary Joseph-François Lafitau, and of his *Mœurs des sauvages américains* (1724), the influence of the Figurists on the Catholic milieu of

⁷ Cf. WIDMEIER 1990, pp. 126-127.

⁸ Cf. BROCKEY 2007, p. 198.

⁹ Cf. MUNGELLO 1989, p. 311.

¹⁰ Cf. LUNDBAEK 1991, pp. 11, 16; WITEK 1982, pp. 176-177.

¹¹ Cf. MUNGELLO 1976, p. 392.

¹² Cf. HO-FUNG 2003, pp. 256-258; MARCOCCI 2015, pp. 173-174; PINOT 1932^a, pp. 69-70; WALKER 1972, p. 202.

¹³ Cf. FERLAN 2015, p. 81; NEILL 1986, pp. 163-164; PINOT 1932^a, pp. 129-131; ROWBOTHAM 1966, p. 120; STANDERT 2012, p. 14; YU 2005, p. 37.

the eighteenth century was exceedingly scarce.¹⁴ Even the few authors who took seriously into account the theories of Bouvet and Prémare were very far from being interested in Catholic apologetics, as it is the case with Leibniz and Andrew Michael Ramsay.¹⁵ More generally, the decrease in the power and influence of the Jesuit order, together with the dangers posed by the Figurists' theses, and by the upsurge of libertine and deistic doctrines caused by ancient theology, let alone natural theology, to exit the Catholic cultural debate of the eighteenth century almost completely. This is not to say, however, that these doctrines were abandoned by the European culture at large. On the contrary, the primary reason why they were rejected by the Catholic milieu can be seen in their appropriation and use by heterodox thinkers such as Deists and Libertines, who fashioned them in a new way, so as to serve their philosophical purposes.

Ancient theology and natural theology hence did not disappear altogether from the culture of the eighteenth century. On the contrary, they were absorbed by an intellectual current which was radically different or, indeed opposite, to the Jesuit tradition that, after the age of Renaissance Platonism and starting with Kircher, had revisited ancient theology and natural theology turning them into political and apologetic tools.

Yet, somehow ironically, this whole set of doctrines and the attitude associated with them would have re-emerged in the Jesuit discourse, much later than it would have been reasonable to expect. In December 1939 the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* determined that "plane compertum est" that "in Orientalium Regionibus nonnullas caeremonias, licet antiquitas cum ethnicis ritibus connexae essent, in praesentiarum, mutatis saeculorum fluxu moribus et animis, civilem tantum servare significationem pietatis in antenatos vel amoris in patriam vel urbanitatis in proximos".¹⁶ This fact was clearly not as 'compertum' in the age of the Rites Controversy, however it evidently had become so in the course of the following three centuries. At any rate, the conclusions drawn were in perfect accord with Ricci's accommodation strategy: "non habendum est illicitum imaginem Confucii, vel etiam tabellam eius nomine inscriptam, in scholis catholicis collocari, praesertim si Auctoritates id iusserint".¹⁷ And, by the same token, "inclinationes capitis atque aliae civilis observantiae manifestationes ante defunctos vel defunctorum imagines, et etiam ante tabellam defuncti, simplici nomine inscriptam, uti licitae et honestae habendae sunt".¹⁸

It is clear that such 'accommodating' indication would have been nonsensical had the accommodation strategy died off altogether. Anyway, all doubts were removed by the Second Vatican Council, which encouraged the Chinese Catholic theologians to embrace the "incarnation of the Gospel in local cultures", that is, to "build up a theological corpus consistent

¹⁴ Cf. in particular: LAFITAU 1724, 1:119-122, 1:128, 1:131. Cf. also: BORGEAUD 1986, pp. 59-60; MUNGELLO 1989, p. 310; PINOT 1932^a, p. 355.

¹⁵ Leibniz corresponded with Bouvet for years and expressed great interest in Bouvet's numerological interpretation of the *I Ching*. Concerning Leibniz relationship to Figurism, cf. *inter alia*: MUNGELLO 1971, p. 18; PERKINS 2004, p. 165; ROWBOTHAM 1956, p. 42. With regard to Ramsay and to the probable influence of Prémare on his works, cf. instead: LUNDBAEK 1991, pp. 174-175; PINOT 1932^a, p. 365; WITEK 1982, p. 308.

¹⁶ *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* 1940, p. 24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

with the needs and difficulties encountered by the Local Church".¹⁹ Paul VI's call was immediately answered in the first plenary assembly of the *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference* (Taipei, 22-7.IV.1974).²⁰ Especially during the last quarter of the twentieth century, the term *inculturation* came into use to address specifically, in Dhavamony's terms, the way in which the "[Holy] Spirit guides the Church in its task of communicating the Gospel to peoples of different cultures, enriching them and being enriched by them".²¹ In consideration of the Chinese case especially, it is clear that the purpose of such *inculturation* was not too far from that of seventeenth-century *accommodation*, the difference being that nobody in the seventeenth century would have dared suppose that the Holy Spirit might have been "enriched" by the Chinese culture.

In a Riccian fashion, thanks to *inculturation*, "Hindu, Buddhist and other religious practices were adapted to serve Christian spiritual life and worship".²² However, although similar in purpose, *accommodation* and *inculturation* differ in the degree of openness with which such purposes were put forward. An example in this regard will certainly sound familiar to the historian of the seventeenth-century. In 1996 Peter C. Phan published in *Studia Missionalia* an article which goes under the interesting title of "The Christ of Asia. An Essay on Jesus as the Eldest Son and Ancestor". At the beginning of the essay, the author affirms that his aim is at "situating Christ within the context of the Confucian teaching on family relationships [...] and the Asian practice of veneration of ancestors".²³ The author proceeds then to analyse the "perceived threat posed by Christianity to [...] ancestor worship" and he concludes that "the question is not simply whether it is possible to remove this perceived threat in Christian missions [...] but whether it is impossible to conceive Christ in terms of filial piety and ancestor worship".²⁴ Now, if the first proposition is shared by *accommodation* and *inculturation* alike, the second one is specific to *inculturation* and it involves a notion that for the seventeenth-century standards would have been utterly heretical. Namely, the idea that Jesus might be 'enriched' by the ancestor worship, in the same way in which, according to Dhavamony, the Holy Spirit was enriched by Chinese culture.

Having settled that it is in fact possible to "conceive Christ in terms of filial piety and ancestor worship", Phan unhesitatingly proceeds with such enrichment. In the first instance he recalls Jesus' familiarity with "the injunctions of the Torah concerning the duties of children toward their parents", so implying a connection to ancestor worship.²⁵ Then he proceeds to say that "as the firstborn male and kinsman-redeemer, Jesus can be compared to the Vietnamese *truong toe*, that is, the head of the family-clan".²⁶ In other words, not only Confucians are Christians *in voto*, as supposed by seventeenth-century Jesuits, but Jesus himself was, somehow, Confucian *in voto*. Accommodation is reversed: ancestor worship can be preserved in

¹⁹ Cf. DHAVAMONY 1995, p. 7; VARMANDER 1996, p. 119.

²⁰ Cf. MARRANZINI 1981, p. 143.

²¹ DHAVAMONY 1995, p. 21.

²² THANGARAJ 2008, p. 161.

²³ PHAN 1996, p. 27.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

the Christian rite, yet by the same token Christianity can be preserved in the Confucian rite: “*just as the ancestors receive the cult of their descendants, so Jesus receives the worship of his spiritual descendants. [...] Through this worship, Christ, just as the ancestors, is made present and is made to snare in the lives of his spiritual descendants*”.²⁷ In brief, Jesus “must be regarded as embodying the highest perfection of ancestorhood; he is the ancestor par excellence after God the Father whose life and goodness he communicates to his spiritual descendants. He [God the Father] can be called the ‘proto-ancestor’”.²⁸

As a total outsider in contemporary theology I may presume that Phan’s article, published in a review issued under the aegis of the Vatican, might represent an exception. However, be that as it may, it does demonstrate two facts. First, that an excess of accommodation tends to blur the distinction between the agent and the object of accommodation. Second, that, if Huet was not really heterodox, but merely too late, Figurists as well were not really heterodox, but merely too much in advance of the times.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51 (italics mine).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

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