

Arnobius and Lactantius: Two Views of the Pagan Poets

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In his study of the attitude of early Christian writers toward pagan literature, Wilhelm Krause remarks that we will seldom find a greater difference between teacher and pupil than we do between the two apologists Arnobius of Sicca and Lactantius.¹ Polemical fervor characterizes the seven books of Arnobius' *Adversus nationes*. There is little effort to appreciate the merits of literary form in pagan literature, to find the truth hidden in error, or to assume good will on the part of his adversaries.² His one purpose is to refute whatever position the pagan may assume.

Lactantius, on the other hand, is more cognizant of the values of pagan culture. His approach may be in part the result of a broader education³ and a greater familiarity with the Christian faith. The rapid political developments in the early decades of the fourth century may also have contributed to a more mature apologetic.⁴ But Lactantius' expressed aim of appealing to the

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¹ W. Krause, *Die Stellung der frühchristlichen Autoren zur heidnischen Literatur* (Vienna 1958) 176. S. Jerome (*Ep.* 70.5; *De viris illustribus* 80) testifies that Lactantius was Arnobius' pupil, and I see no reason to deny this. Whether or not Lactantius knew the *Adversus nationes* is dubious. For a study of the problem see E. F. Micka, *The Problem of Divine Anger in Arnobius and Lactantius* (Catholic University of America Studies in Christian Antiquity 4; Washington 1943) 145-47. Throughout this paper I have used C. Marchesi's text of the *Adversus nationes* (CSLP 62 2nd. ed. [Turin 1953]) and S. Brandt's edition of the *Divinae institutiones* (CSEL 19 [Vienna 1890]).

² In addition to Krause (above, note 1) see F. Gabarrou, *Arnobé, son oeuvre* (Paris 1931) 55. Consult also G. L. Ellspermann's chapters on Arnobius and Lactantius in *The Attitude of the Early Christian Writers toward Pagan Literature and Learning* (Washington 1949), esp. pp. 56-60, 72-77.

³ See the interesting comments of R. Pichon in his sensitive study of the "Christian Cicero," *Lactance* (Paris 1901) 191-93.

⁴ The evidence for dating Arnobius' work is subject to so much interpretation that it seems we must be content with G. E. McCracken's conclusion that the *Adversus nationes* was composed "probably in the reign of Diocletian not much before or after the year 300. . . ." See McCracken's discussion of the question in his *Arnobius of Sicca, The Case against the Pagans* (Ancient Christian Writers 7; Westminster 1949)

educated pagan of his day, of joining eloquence to truth, is surely a most significant reason why he differs from Arnobius. This difference is clearly evident in the attitude of the two authors toward the poetic treatment of myth. By focusing on this point we can perhaps see more clearly the contrast between two apologists who shared the same education and profession, the same kind of religious conversion,⁵ and the same general purpose of vindicating Christianity in the eyes of the pagans.

Whatever be the personal reasons for Arnobius' decision to write his *Adversus nationes*,⁶ his professed aim is clearly stated in the opening chapters of Book 1: he hopes to refute the pagan claim that Christianity is responsible for innumerable ills that have befallen mankind.⁷ "Inspiciamus igitur opinionis istius mentem et hoc quod dicitur quale sit summotisque omnibus contentionem studiis, quibus obscurari et contegi contemplatio rerum solet, an sit istud quod dicitur verum, momentorum parium examinatione pendamus" (1.2). The irony and sarcasm of Arnobius throughout the *Adversus nationes* all but obliterates the intention expressed here of conducting a reasoned analysis of the pros and cons of the pagan position. One of his recurrent delights is to accept the pagan view for the sake of argument and then to carry it to an inevitable absurdity. Though these ironical concessions may, as A. D. Nock suggests, indicate that "Christianity is now on the offensive and . . . is beginning to be quite confident of ultimate success,"⁸ they are the natural approach of a man schooled in

1.7-12. For dating the *Divinae institutiones*, which seem to have appeared in stages between 305 and 313 A.D., see J. Stevenson, "The Life and Literary Activity of Lactantius," *Studia Patristica* (Texte und Untersuchungen 63; Berlin 1957) 1, pt. 1, 661-77 and S. Prete, "Der geschichtliche Hintergrund zu den Werken des Laktanz," *Gymnasium* 63 (1956) 498-502.

⁵ Arnobius speaks of his own conversion in the *Adversus nationes* (1.39; cf. 3.24). On the conversion of Lactantius see Stevenson (above, note 4) 666, and Prete (above, note 4) 374-75.

⁶ S. Jerome (*Chronicon* [326/7 A.D.]) relates that Arnobius wrote his work as testimony to the bishop (presumably of Sicca) of his sincere desire to become a Christian. Though the bishop's incredulity seems to be unique in the annals of early Christianity, I am inclined to agree with McCracken (above, note 4) 1.16 that we must not discount the story on those grounds. If Arnobius was a prominent rhetorician of Sicca, as is stated elsewhere by S. Jerome (*De viris illis*. 79), and if he had openly opposed Christianity up to the time of his conversion, there may have been some reason for delay in admitting him to the Church.

⁷ For other authors who took up this common theme both before and after Arnobius see McCracken (above, note 4) 1.268.

⁸ A. D. Nock, *Conversion* (Oxford 1953) 259.

rhetoric and concerned only with the refutation of his adversary's argument. This form of argumentation takes precedence over the search for truth. Arnobius says as much in Book 4 where he discusses the multiplicity of pagan divinities. If the pagan claims that he himself is not certain whether the mythical accounts of the *theologi* are the result of diligent research or merely of idle imagination, Arnobius retorts that for his purposes this is beside the point (4.18): "Nobis enim satis est rebus de publicatis loqui neque quaerere quid sit in vero sed refutare, convincere id quod in medio positum est atque opinatio concepit humana." In short, it is not Arnobius' purpose to determine what is true or not true in the myths. It is his task to analyze any current pagan position and to show that it is untenable.⁹

Arnobius seems to recognize four possible ways of interpreting the myths: (a) as factual accounts of divinities who are real beings, (b) as fabrications of the poets in the spirit of jest and entertainment, (c) as allegorical accounts of physical phenomena, (d) as accounts of heroes of the past who have been deified after death—the theory of Euhemerism which appealed to so many of the Christian apologists. Arnobius' criticism of the myths as factual accounts of real divinities is pointed, unmitigating and repetitious to the point of distraction. Throughout the seven books of his *Adversus nationes* he dwells on the absurdities, blasphemies and immorality that characterize the myths if they are read in this way.¹⁰ He asks whether the pagans themselves would pose the myths as suitable examples for their own children (5.29), and calls them true atheists who "sub specie cultionis" level more accusations and calumnies against the gods than if they had openly aimed to heap abuse upon the divinities (5.30). To the pagans' defense that these tales are fabrications of the poets in the spirit of jest,¹¹ Arnobius retorts that the mythical accounts

⁹ This fits in well with the agnostic position which Arnobius assumes in his polemics. See the excellent study of H. Hagendahl, *Latin Fathers and the Classics* (Studia Graeca et Latina Gothoburgensia 6; Göteborg 1958) 23.

¹⁰ It was the absurdities and impossibilities involved in a literal reading of both the pagan myths and the Bible which drove pagan, Jewish and Christian writers to an allegorical interpretation. On this point see J. Pépin, "A propos de l'histoire de l'exégèse allégorique: l'absurdité, signe de l'allégorie," *Studia Patristica* (Texte und Untersuchungen 63; Berlin 1957) 1, pt. 1, 395–413.

¹¹ Arnobius finds this interpretation hard to accept. The poets were intelligent men who had studied antiquity and would not have desired "to arrogate to themselves such license as to fabricate in their folly things not far removed from madness,

found in histories and commemorated at festivals and religious celebrations can hardly be dismissed as poetic fiction (5.1).¹²

But for the sake of argument he assumes for the moment that the poets have invented the mythical accounts as a form of entertainment (4.32).¹³ If so, the pagans are accessory to the slander contained in these fables since they have done nothing to punish the blasphemies or to forestall the calumnies that are inherent in the falsehoods told of the gods. Though punishments are prescribed for libellous attacks on men, it is permissible to introduce the most base accusations against the gods with impunity (4.34). If the pagans think that abstract deities such as *Honor*, *Salus* and *Virtus* "are mere words and names without substance and yet deify them . . . [they] will have to consider whether it is a childish joke or is calculated to bring mockery to [their] divinities by equating and identifying them with the fiction of meaningless words" (4.1).

Thus far it is clear that the myths must be judged on the basis of a literal reading of them. Whether they be totally fictitious or actual accounts of real beings, the objection remains the same: the pagan cannot escape the charge of blasphemy, irreverence and absurdity in his understanding of the gods.

A more serious problem for the apologist is posed by the allegorical interpretation of myths. This theory which was popular with the Stoics¹⁴ sees in the accounts of the gods a hidden description of nature in its manifold workings. From the amount of attention accorded to this theory at the end of Book 5, Arnobius seems to have recognized it as particularly appealing to the pagan. For other Christian apologists, the answer to this approach is that such an interpretation reduces the divinities to

such as could cause them to stand in fear of the gods and in danger of men" (4.32) Here and throughout the paper I have used McCracken's translation (above, note 4).

¹² The argument that the preservation of the mysteries proves that the myths reflect actual events appears again in Arnobius as well as in Lactantius when these two apologists discuss Euhemerism.

¹³ In his fine study of the use of allegory in pagan, Jewish and Christian writing, J. Pépin (*Mythe et Allégorie* [Paris 1958] 411) treats this purely aesthetic interpretation very briefly since it received little attention among the pagans themselves. It is mentioned by Aristides in his *Apologia* (13), but for the apologists it warranted only the scant attention which Arnobius affords it here.

¹⁴ Consult J. Geffcken's article, "Allegory," in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (1928) 1.327-331 and, more recently, J. C. Joosen and J. H. Waszink, *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 1 (1950) 283-93, s.v. "Allegorese."

created elements.¹⁵ Arnobius adopts a similar argument (3.30) and also insists that the literal narrative is an insult to the gods regardless of any hidden meaning (5.33).

But he realizes that these arguments are insufficient; a direct attack on the validity of allegory is needed. Accordingly, he goes to considerable lengths to describe the practical difficulties involved in allegory (5.33–45). How can the reader be certain of the author's allegorical intent or know that he has interpreted the allegory in the sense intended? How can he justify his intrusion upon the meaning which the poet obviously wished to remain hidden? The problem grows when one tries to interpret allegorically all the details of a myth, or to determine what parts are to be read allegorically and what parts literally. His conclusion is that the whole procedure is an attempt to hide the pagans' shame and to enoble what is base (*cohoneſtare res turpes*) by subverting the real meaning of words (5.43).

Again it is clear that Arnobius favors the literalist's approach which sees a one-to-one relationship between word and object. He denies the possibility of allegory (5.38):

quia omne quod gestum est et in alicuius operis evidentia constitutum est conversionem non potest in allegoriam duci; neque enim potest infectum esse quod factum est aut rei gestae natura in alienam potest degenerare naturam. numquid bellum Iliacum in Socraticam verti condemnationem potest, aut pugna illa Cannensis proscriptio fieri crudelitasque Sullana?¹⁶

These remarks indicate a significant lack of appreciation not only for the ambivalence of the written word but for the liberties and even the demands of poetic language.¹⁷ Arnobius' rejection of allegory is more than a lack of appreciation for the multiplicity of meanings that can be found in the poetic handling of myth.

¹⁵ E.g. Athenagoras, *Leg. pro Christ.* 22; Aristides, *Apol.* 13; Tatian, *Or. adv. Graec.* 21; Ps.-Clement, *Hom.* 6.20.

¹⁶ Pépin (above, note 13) 435–38 has a good discussion of Arnobius' arguments for the rejection of allegory.

¹⁷ Though Arnobius obviously overstates his case for polemical purposes, the same literal approach is reflected in his opening remarks concerning allegory: "Argutiae sunt ut apparet atque acumina haec omnia, quibus fulcire sollemne est malas in iudiciis causas, quin immo, ut verius dicam, sophisticarum disputationum colores, non quibus [non] verum sed imago et species veri semper atque umbra conquiritur" (5.33). The poets' *colores* are here equated with the form without substance that was common to the orators.

We must recall the point made earlier in the *Adversus nationes* that it is sufficient "to speak about things that are public property and not to investigate what the content of truth is, but only to confute, disprove what lies before all and what human thought has taken in" (4.18). In this general context we can see that allegory as a commonly used defense of pagan literature and myth must fall within Arnobius' attack. His method here is a practical rather than a philosophical one. By showing some of the difficulties and inconsistencies of the allegorical process through a few rather common examples he need not probe the theory behind the poetic treatment of myth very deeply. The fairly lengthy consideration given to practical problems reflects the bent of a man more concerned with formalizing and evaluating the rules of rhetorical argumentation than seeking the *ratio* which lay behind the poets' method.

For Arnobius as for other Christian apologists there was one explanation of myth, an explanation which had been adopted by the pagans themselves and which, for the Christian at least, was totally destructive of the gods as real beings. This was Euhemerism. Though Arnobius mentions the name of Euhemerus only once in the *Adversus nationes* (4.29), he adopts the theory that the gods are heroes of the past who have been deified because of their services to mankind.¹⁸ The proof of this theory is to be found in the sacred rites and ceremonies of the mystery religions (5.39): "Neque enim credendum est sine suis originibus haec esse, frustra atque inaniter fieri nec habere coniunctas primis institutionibus causas." Without going very deeply into the theory of Euhemerism or attempting to explain its causes, Arnobius accepts this interpretation of the gods and uses it as a further argument against allegory (5.39): "Si rebus actis mysteriorum causae atque origines effluunt, in allegoricas species nulla possunt conversione traduci. quod enim factum gestum est, infectum non potest fieri rerum prohibente natura." Euhemerism, instead of being a strong positive argument against paganism, is subordinated here and made a kind of negative argument for his anti-allegorist views.¹⁹

¹⁸ Cf. J. Schippers, *De Ontwikkeling der Euhemeristische Godencritiek in de Christelijke Latijnse Literatuur* (Diss. Utrecht 1952) 70-72, 105-6 (summary in English).

¹⁹ In reference to Arnobius' work in general Schippers (above, note 18) 106 remarks that "it would seem as if the regular development of Euhemerism is brought to a standstill, and is no longer a coveted weapon in the fight against heathen conceptions."

In short, the attack on the myths is from all sides, and the pagan finds no way of avoiding the charges of blasphemy, scandal or atheism. The poet (or historian) who contributes to the errors of paganism shares in the guilt. There is nothing to be said for elegance of style or levels of meaning, least of all for the specious resort to allegory as a legitimate literary device. Arnobius' analysis of myth leads inevitably to Euhemerism which offers a rational basis for the gods but, as Arnobius treats it, little appreciation for the way in which the myths were transmitted. A broader approach more cognizant of the role of the poet will be forthcoming in the work of Lactantius.

Like Arnobius, Lactantius sets out to refute the false charges made against Christianity by the pagans²⁰ and thereby to fill a void created by the dearth of apologists. He recognizes that this very paucity is responsible for some of the ignorant attacks on the Christians (*Div. inst.* 5.2.1): "Ergo quia defuerunt apud nos idonei peritque doctores, qui vehementer, qui acriter errores publicos redarguerent, qui causam omnem veritatis orate copioseque defenderent, provocavit quosdam haec ipsa penuria, ut auderent scribere contra ignotam sibi veritatem." To make up for this deficiency lest the educated pagan be put off by the lack of an eloquent defense of the Christian position, Lactantius wrote his *Divinae institutiones*.²¹ He proposes to attack the problem not merely with the *reductio ad absurdum* that is characteristic of Tertullian and Arnobius, but with a positive exposition of Christian doctrine.²² Lactantius conceives of his task as filling out the work of Minucius Felix, whose book "declarat quam idoneus veritatis adsertor esse potuisset, si se totum ad id studium contulisset" (*Div. inst.* 5.1.22). This design is no idle musing or literary device for Lactantius. Though he is conscious of

²⁰ See *Div. inst.* 5.2, where Lactantius speaks of two specific opponents to Christianity. One seems to be Hierocles who is mentioned in the *De mortibus persecutorum* (16.4); the other is unidentified.

²¹ For a discussion of Lactantius' aims see Br. Alban, "The Conscious Role of Lactantius," *CW* 37 (1943) 79-81 and J. Stevenson, "Lactantius and the Classics," *Studia Patristica* (Texte und Untersuchungen 79; Berlin 1961) 4, pt. 2, 497-503. One of the clearest statements of his purpose is found in *Div. inst.* 1.1.10; cf. also 3.1.2.

²² For Lactantius' purposes Tertullian is found wanting, not only because he is *parum facilis et minus comptus et multum obscurus* (*Div. inst.* 5.1.23), but also because there is a great difference between replying to adversaries and instructing others in the Christian faith (5.4.3).

the obstacles he faces, he has hopes of reasonable success (5.1.13): "Verum non est desperandum, fortasse non canimus surdis. nec enim tam in malo statu res est, ut desint sanae mentes, quibus et veritas placeat et monstratum sibi rectum iter et videant et sequantur."²³ It is in this context that we must examine Lactantius' attitude toward the poets and their myths.

At the outset it must be clear that he is acutely aware of the absurdities and immoralities found in the myths and in the religious rites connected with them. Throughout Book 1 and the early chapters of Book 2 of the *Divinae institutiones* he criticizes these defects with considerable vigor.²⁴ But the content of the myths and their transmission by the poets are two separate entities. The condemnation of one does not of necessity involve the condemnation of the other. On the contrary, Lactantius seems to go out of his way to absolve the poets of blame in recounting the lives and activities of the gods.

Adopting the theory of Euhemerism, he attempts to clarify the way in which human persons and events become transformed and obscured in myth.²⁵ The poets are exonerated of the charge of deceit and blasphemy which would follow if their accounts were purely fictionalized imaginings,²⁶ and their role in formulating the myths is recognized as a legitimate one. If they seem to be guilty of deceit, this is because popular beliefs have forced them to conceal the truth (*Div. inst.* 1.19.5),²⁷ or because the reader cannot distinguish poetic license from the telling of falsehoods (1.11.24–25): "Nesciunt enim qui sit poeticae licentiae modus, quousque progredi fingendo liceat, cum officium poetae in eo sit ut ea quae vere gesta sunt in alias species obliquis figurationibus

²³ See also 5.4.8. Nonetheless, as P. Monceaux (*Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne* [Paris 1905] 3.339) points out, Lactantius did have some doubts about his own effectiveness; cf. *Div. inst.* 5.1.1–12.

²⁴ This part of the *Divinae institutiones*, as Pichon (above, note 3) 73 pointed out, contains nothing that had not been said many times by his Christian and pagan predecessors.

²⁵ Pépin (above, note 13) 438–45 sees in this analysis of the formation of myth a further step in the anti-allegorist position. By clearly demonstrating the natural origin of myth Lactantius shows the superfluousness (and therefore the error) of the allegorical approach. Although I agree with this view, it seems that this was not the only purpose Lactantius had in mind.

²⁶ Cf. *Div. inst.* 1.11.23–25; *Epit.* 11.1; 12.3.

²⁷ At times the poetic coloring of an actual event is necessary *maioris alicuius turpitudinis legendae gratia*. See Lactantius' treatment of the story of Priapus (*Div. inst.* 1.21.29).

cum decore aliquo conversa traducat. totum autem quod referas fingere, id est ineptum esse et mendacem potiusquam poetam.”²⁸ The mythical accounts of the gods were not intended as blasphemous insults against the divinities, whom the pagan poets themselves worshipped, but were designed to add *venustas ac lepor* to their verses (1.11.36), which actually commemorated deceased kings and heroes. The error of both pagan and Christian critics of the poets lay in not recognizing that the poets were speaking of men as if they were gods in order to sing their praises adequately (1.11.17): “Illi enim de hominibus loquebantur, sed ut eos ornarent quorum memoriam laudibus celebrabant deos esse dixerunt. itaque illa potius ficta sunt quae tamquam de diis, non illa quae tamquam de hominibus sunt locuti.” Far from being the blasphemers mentioned by Arnobius, the poets were adding the grace of their talents to a process that came very naturally to men. “Sive ob miraculum virtutis . . . sive . . . in adulationem praesentis potentiae . . . sive ob beneficia,” the rulers and heroes of the past quickly became deified (1.15.2), and the poets’ description of them understandably reflected this fact.

Lactantius’ handling of the Euhemeristic theory has obvious apologetic purposes. Pichon makes the following observation:

Inversement, l'évhémérisme plaît à Lactance parce qu'il dépouille la mythologie de son charme prestigieux. Ces belles fictions gracieuses ou grandioses s'évanouissent au souffle d'une exégèse brutalement prosaïque, pour faire place à des histoires sèches, vulgaires et mesquines. . . . Le paganisme est ainsi, non seulement convaincu d'erreur, mais dépoétisé, enlaidi.²⁹

I would agree that Lactantius’ approach is designed to disprove the reality of the pagan gods. But given the expressed purpose of appealing to the educated non-Christian, and his exoneration of the pagan poets, it seems that he is concerned with the poetic form of myth as well as its content. It is precisely here that his attitude differs from that of Arnobius. Instead of condemning the poets’ treatment of the gods as outrageous insult, he exposes the misconceptions but justifies the poetic handling of pagan divinities. A natural conclusion, it would seem, is that rationalistic Euhemerism need not involve a total rejection of the pagan literary

²⁸ See also 1.11.30 and 34; 7.22.1–3.

²⁹ Pichon (above, note 3) 84.

tradition. The cultured audience whom Lactantius was addressing need not find its appreciation of the poets completely stifled by the Christian faith, provided the myths were understood as they were meant to be.³⁰

It is clear how far Lactantius is from the position of Arnobius. Though the latter, like most of the apologists, cited pagan sources in his own defense, his work is predominantly characterized by a polemical rejection of all that is pagan. Though he adopts the Euhemeristic theory, he finds little to commend in the poetic treatment of myth. Lactantius, who is equally aware of the moral, philosophical and theological shortcomings of paganism, is more inclined to recognize the complexities of pagan literature and culture and to adopt what is amenable to the Christian position. In this way he appealed to the educated pagan of his day.

The effectiveness of this approach is difficult to judge. If Monceaux is correct,³¹ Lactantius' labors bore little fruit. It may be that the pagan audience was not to be converted by one who subordinated philosophy to religion in the way that Lactantius did. It may be that the apologist was simply too ornate and verbose to be convincing. In any event his attitude toward pagan culture as reflected in his handling of the myths must surely have obtained a more sympathetic hearing than did the unyielding attitude of his teacher Arnobius.

³⁰ Lactantius' use of the poets throughout the *Divinae institutiones* is testimony of his own attitude. In addition to recognizing that the poets taught some of the truths found in Christianity in a darkened and partly corrupted form (e.g. 1.5.2-3; 2.10.5-6; 7.22.1-3), he continually cites them verbatim in his arguments. See Krause's study (above, note 1) especially chapters 11 and 12, where the difference between Arnobius' and Lactantius' use of the direct citation is very pronounced. Without denying Arnobius' heavy dependence on Lucretius and his ironic allusions to classical authors (cf. Hagendahl [above, note 9] 12-47), I would agree with Hagendahl's suggestion that Lactantius' copious verbatim citations of the *De rerum natura* indicate that the apologist "appreciated its poetic merits while combating its doctrine" (87). In a more expanded form I believe that this was Lactantius' general attitude toward the poetic treatment of myth.

³¹ Monceaux (above, note 23) 339.