IS EARLY CHRISTIANITY A RELIGION OR A PHILOSOPHY? REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF 'KNOWLEDGE' AND 'TRUTH' IN THE LETTERS OF PAUL AND PETER

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In this article I shall comment on the question whether early Christianity was a religion or a philosophy. As is well known, Jan Bremmer has been very sensitive to the issue of how we should define 'religion' in Antiquity, and has issued a clear warning against anachronism in these matters. First, I shall address the question of whether we should define early Christianity as a religion or as a philosophy, and comment briefly on the nature of ancient philosophy. Second, against strongly fideistic readings of the New Testament letters which focus on 'faith', I shall draw attention to the concept of 'knowing God and/or Christ' in the letters of Paul and Peter,¹ and compare this to the importance which ancient philosophers such as Epictetus attach to the insight that there is a God, and what the gods are like. Finally, I shall explore the way in which religion, conversion, and the purpose of Christian leadership are defined by Paul and Peter in terms of knowledge and truth.

Religion and Philosophy

In the introduction to his *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (1885), the philosopher and *Altertumswissenschaftler* Friedrich Nietzsche called early Christianity 'Platonismus für's Volk'. This was a daring attempt to characterize Christianity as one philosophy among many and to embed it in the history of ideas. It went against the grain of early modern endeavours, undertaken by philosophers such as Hume and Kant, who highlighted the *difference* between religion and philosophy. By contrast, Nietzsche defined the Christian religion in terms of a philosophy and, by so

¹ For the sake of brevity, in this paper I do not discriminate between authentic and pseudepigraphical letters of Paul and Peter but take an integral approach to the Pauline and Petrine literary corpora of the first and second centuries AD.

doing, emphasized the *similarity* between religion and philosophy. His approach has not yet been taken sufficiently seriously, but seems fruitful for the understanding of Antiquity; it is highly relevant to Europe's collective memory and its reflection on the (supposed) 'roots of Western civilization'. Instead of treating philosophy and religion in isolation, this approach stimulates research into the dialectic between both movements. Although Nietzsche's characterization of Christianity as popular Platonism was largely intuitive, he was informed by his wide-ranging knowledge of classical Antiquity as a Professor of Greek at the University of Basle.

The validity of Nietzsche's approach is confirmed by recent research, which shows the presence of Platonic concepts and modes of reasoning even in the earliest Christian writings.² Moreover, there is a growing dissatisfaction with the supposedly proletarian basis of early Christianity.³ These developments in recent research seriously undermine the still prevalent paradigm, particularly strong in continental Europe, which entails the belief that, before it came to power as the privileged religion of the Christian emperors, Christianity was a 'foreign body' in the ancient world and was not organically linked to the fabric of Antiquity.

Nietzsche's definition of Christianity in terms of a philosophy is also justifiable because 'religion' in Antiquity meant something different than in modern times. This observation is confirmed by important lexicographical and conceptual analysis of the term 'religion' in recent research that is discontented with a modern, anachronistic definition of 'religion' and 'philosophy' when applied to Antiquity. For this we owe much to Jan Bremmer, to whom this paper is devoted with great appreciation of his inspiring scholarship, deep learning, and supportive collegiality. Bremmer asks himself,

What does the term 'religion' mean and what does that meaning imply for a contemporary study of Greek religion? The first part of this question may occasion surprise, but the present meaning of religion is the outcome of a

² See, e.g., for Paul, W. Burkert, "Towards Plato and Paul: The 'Inner' Human Being", in *Ancient and Modern Perspectives on the Bible and Culture: Essays in Honor of Hans Dieter Betz* (ed. A. Yarbro Collins; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 59–82; and, for John, G.H. van Kooten, "The 'True Light which Enlightens Everyone' (John 1:9): John, Genesis, the Platonic Notion of the 'True, Noetic Light', and the Allegory of the Cave in Plato's *Republic*", in *The Creation of Heaven and Earth: Re-interpretations of Genesis I in the Context of Judaism, Ancient Philosophy, Christianity, and Modern Physics* (ed. G.H. van Kooten; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 149–194.

³ See R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), esp. 29–47 (chapter 2).

long process (...). In the time of Cicero, Lucretius and Vergil, *religio* was not equivalent to our notion of 'religion' but contained a strong ritualistic aspect and was often connected with active worship according to the rules.⁴

Bremmer's warning against an anachronistic understanding of religion is important:

the use of the term 'religion' for certain Greek ideas and practices is an etic term, which reflects the observer's point of view, not that of the actor: the Greeks themselves did not yet have a term for 'religion'.⁵

If not an etic but an emic perspective is applied, Christianity is not so much a religion, in the Graeco-Roman sense of the word, but rather a philosophy. This is rightly emphasized by Loveday Alexander, who follows Arthur Darby Nock's now classic views on Christianity, put forward in the 1930s:

To the casual pagan observer the activities of the average synagogue or church would look more like the activities of a school than anything else. Teaching or preaching, moral exhortation, and the exegesis of canonical texts are activities associated in the ancient world with philosophy, not religion.⁶

These remarks substantiate Nietzsche's intuitive view of early Christian religion as a particular type of Graeco-Roman philosophy.

In turn, Graeco-Roman philosophy is often of a religious nature. Leading classicists, such as David Sedley, have alluded to the religious nature of ancient philosophy. If Christianity was 'Platonismus für's Volk', the converse also holds: Platonism (and philosophy in general) was religion for the intellectual elite. This is confirmed by the following analysis, which Sedley puts forward in his work on philosophical allegiance in the Graeco-Roman world:

⁴ J.N. Bremmer, "Religion, 'Ritual' and the Opposition 'Sacred vs. Profane'", in *Ansichten griechischer Rituale* (ed. F. Graf; Stuttgart and Leipzig: Teubner, 1998), 9–32 (10). The scholarly discussion antedating Bremmer's contribution includes, among others, M. Despland, *La religion en occident: évolution des idées et du vécu* (Paris: Cerf and Montreal: Fides, 1979); for a fuller bibliography, see also Bremmer, "Religion", 10–11. See further G.G. Stroumsa, *Barbarian Philosophy: The Religious Revolution of Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 44–56 (chapter 3), esp. 47–48.

⁵ Bremmer, "Religion", 12.

⁶ L. Alexander, "Paul and the Hellenistic Schools: The Evidence of Galen", in *Paul in his Hellenistic Context* (ed. T. Engberg-Pedersen; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 60–83 (chapter 3); with reference to A.D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933), 164–186 (chapter 11).

In the Graeco-Roman world, specially during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, what gives philosophical movements their cohesion and identity is less a disinterested common quest for the truth than a virtually religious commitment to the authority of a founder figure.⁷

Religion is philosophical, and philosophy is religious. The commitment to a particular founder figure shows itself in the reverence for his texts:

For the vast majority of thinkers in this period (...), the revered text was either that of Plato, commonly regarded as divine, or of course the Old and /or New Testament, which were taken to represent, most prominently, the authority of Moses and St. Paul respectively.⁸

Just as Bremmer warns against a modern, anachronistic definition of religion, Sedley makes us aware of the danger of understanding ancient philosophy in modern terms:

My object, then, has been not to devalue ancient philosophical schools, but to warn against a temptation to assimilate their ways to those of a modern philosophy department.⁹

‘Learning That There Is a God, and What the Gods Are Like’

Although from a Harnackian perspective Greek philosophy only influenced Christianity from the second century AD onwards, whereas the New Testament is still believed to take a critical stance towards philosophy, epitomised in the warning in Colossians 2:8, ‘See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit’,¹⁰ to me it seems clear that the philosophical nature of early Christianity is already visible in two remarkable definitions, within the New Testament itself, of the Christian religion in terms of an intellectual enterprise.¹¹ Accord-

⁷ D. Sedley, “Philosophical Allegiance in the Greco-Roman World”, in *Philosophia Togata: Essays on Philosophy and Roman Society* (eds. M. Griffin and J. Barnes; Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 97–119 (97).

⁸ Sedley, “Philosophical Allegiance”, 100.

⁹ Sedley, “Philosophical Allegiance”, 102.

¹⁰ Translations from the Bible are normally taken from the NRSV, with alterations where necessary, and those from classical authors from Loeb, again with occasional changes.

¹¹ For A. von Harnack’s view on the Hellenization of Christianity, see E.P. Meijering, *Die Hellenisierung des Christentums im Urteil Adolf von Harnacks* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1985). Col. 2:8 is taken as a testimony of the New Testament’s criticism of Greek philosophy by, among others, A. von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 1 (fourth edition; Tübingen: Mohr, 1909), 505; and J.H. Waszink, “Some Observations

ing to Paul (Romans 12:1–2), the Christian religion is a ‘logical’ intellectual form of worshipping God, a λογικὴ λατρεία. Similarly, Peter (1 Peter 2:2) exhorts the newly converted ‘to long for the pure, intellectual milk (λογικὸν (...) γάλα), so that by it you may grow into salvation.’ The casualness with which Paul and Peter define their religion in these terms has largely gone unnoticed, and has been obscured by the preponderance of a strong ‘fideistic’ reading of the New Testament letters, which pays more attention to the terminology of ‘belief’ and ‘faith’ than to that of ‘intellect’, ‘knowledge’, and ‘truth.’¹² Yet Paul and Peter’s emphasis on religion as an intellectual enterprise is in line with their frequent mention of γνῶσις, the ‘knowledge’ of God and / or Christ. Moreover, it strongly resembles the religious programme of ancient philosophers such as Epictetus. According to this philosopher from Hierapolis in Phrygia, who lived from the mid-first to second century AD, it is the task of philosophy to determine whether there is a God and, subsequently, of what nature he is, so that man may learn to resemble him in ethics:

Now the philosophers say that the first thing we must learn is this: that there is a God, and that he provides for the universe, and that it is impossible for a man to conceal from him, not merely his actions, but even his purposes and his thoughts. Next we must learn what the gods are like. For whatever their character is discovered to be, the man who is going to please and obey them must endeavour as best he can to become assimilated to them. If the deity is faithful, he also must be faithful; if free, he also must be free; if beneficent, he also must be beneficent; if high-minded, he also must be high-minded, and so forth; therefore, in everything he says and does he must act as an imitator of God (*Discourses* 2.14.11–13).

on the Appreciation of the ‘Philosophy of the Barbarians’ in Early Christian Literature”, in *Mélanges offerts à mademoiselle Christine Mohrmann* (eds. W.K.M. Grossouw et al.; Utrecht: Spectrum, 1963), 41–56 (43–44). For a different view, see G.H. van Kooten, *Cosmic Christology in Paul and the Pauline School: Colossians and Ephesians in the Context of Graeco-Roman Cosmology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 11–12, 135–146.

¹² A major exception is J. Dupont, *Gnosis: La connaissance religieuse dans les épîtres de Saint Paul* (Louvain: Nauwelaerts and Paris: Gabalda, 1949). Other literature includes H. Folkers, “Wissen und Glauben”, *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 43 (2001): 208–235; D.M. Hay, “Pistis as ‘Ground for Faith’ in Hellenized Judaism and Paul”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108 (1989): 461–476; L. Bouyer, *Gnôsis: La connaissance de Dieu dans l’Écriture* (Paris: Cerf, 1988); J.L. Kinneavy, *Greek Rhetorical Origins of Christian Faith: An Inquiry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); W. Schenke, *Glaube als Erkenntnis: Das Grundwissen des Christen nach dem Neuen Testament* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1983); and E. Lohse, “Emuna und pistis—jüdisches und urchristliches Verständnis des Glaubens”, *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 68 (1977): 147–163.

A dual pattern emerges from this passage. First, knowledge of God concerns his existence.¹³ To put it in the phraseology of Plato's *Timaeus* (28c), ancient philosophers endeavour 'to discover the Maker and Father of this Universe' by recognizing the intelligent design of the universe.¹⁴ For Epictetus, God's creatorship already implies that man is subject to accountability: 'it is impossible for a man to hide from him'. Second, full knowledge of God also touches upon God's nature. This is necessary for man because he is only able to please God if his human actions correspond to God's nature. Through ethics man is able to assimilate to God.

This pattern, of knowing of the existence of God and of his true nature, also characterizes Paul's agenda. Christian religion, according to Paul (1 Corinthians 8:4–7), entails not merely the 'belief', but the 'knowledge' that there is a God:

We know that 'no idol in the world really exists', and that 'there is no God but one'. Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge.

This knowledge concerning the existence of God can be derived not only from Jewish traditions, but also through contemplating the design of the universe. In this way the existence of God is perceptible to all (Romans 1:19–20):

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.¹⁵

But just as in Epictetus, the knowledge of God's existence is not sufficient and needs to be supplemented with knowledge about his character. According to Paul (2 Corinthians 4:6), the true nature of the Creator is reflected in the figure of Jesus Christ:

¹³ On monotheistic conceptions of God among ancient philosophers, see M. Frede, "Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy in Later Antiquity", in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (eds. P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede; Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 41–67.

¹⁴ On intelligent design and creationism in ancient philosophy, see D. Sedley, *Creationism and Its Critics in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

¹⁵ For a reading of Romans 1 in the context of ancient philosophy, see G.H. van Kooten, "Pagan and Jewish Monotheism according to Varro, Plutarch and St Paul: The Aniconic, Monotheistic Beginnings of Rome's Pagan Cult—Romans 1.19–25 in a Roman

it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge (γνῶσις) of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

God's character is fully expressed in Christ, whose mentality and way of thinking needs to be imitated by man:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
 who, though he was in the form of God,
 did not regard equality with God
 as something to be exploited,
 but emptied himself,
 taking the form of a slave,
 being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form,
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death—
 even death on a cross (Philippians 2:5–8).

It is knowledge (γνῶσις) concerning this Christ, which is essential to man, as Paul (Philippians 3:7–8) himself testifies:

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the prominence of the knowledge (γνῶσις) of Christ Jesus my Lord.

Just as Epictetus wishes to assimilate to God by imitating him, in the same way Paul (Philippians 3:8–11) endeavours to become assimilated to Christ:

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him (...). I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

This assimilation to Christ is the starting-point for a kind of 'mimetic chain', as Paul follows Christ and invites his readers in turn to enter into this assimilation by imitating Paul himself: 'Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ' (1 Corinthians 11:1). The basis for all this lies in the knowledge of Christ, and of God.

It is this dual knowledge—knowledge both of the existence of God and of his character—that is visible in various passages in the New Testament

Context", in *Flores Florentino: Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Early Jewish Studies in Honour of Florentino García Martínez* (eds. A. Hilhorst, É. Puech, and E. Tigchelaar; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 633–651.

letters. And it is not restricted to Paul's writings: the second letter of Peter, for instance, opens with the assurance of the readers that

grace and peace may be yours in abundance through the knowledge (ἐπίγνωσις) of God and of Jesus our Lord (2 Peter 1:2).

The latter knowledge involves knowing Christ's goodness, self-control, endurance and other virtues, which are apparently features of Christ's life which call for imitation by the readers:

You must make every effort to support your faith (πίστις) with virtue, and virtue with knowledge (γνῶσις), and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with piety, and piety with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge (ἐπίγνωσις) of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:5–8)

There are two points of interest in this passage. First, 'faith' (πίστις) and 'knowledge' (γνῶσις) are supplementary values, and do not create a tension. This is understandable as πίστις should preferably not be translated as 'faith', with its modern association with blind faith and irrational subjectivity, but rather as 'trust', which can easily be aligned with 'knowledge'; trust may even presuppose knowledge, because if trust is accorded to someone who is 'trustworthy' this normally implies some form of preceding knowledge about the one who is trusted. Just as in the case of the terminology of 'religion', it is important to resist a modern, anachronistic understanding of 'faith'. The prevalent modern understanding is highly charged with Kant's view on the relation between 'faith' and 'knowledge', articulated by Kant in the following statement: 'Ich musste also das Wissen aufheben, um zum Glauben Platz zu bekommen'.¹⁶ Although this programme was criticized by Hegel, who was convinced that

Glauben dem Wissen nicht entgegengesetzt, sondern Glauben vielmehr ein Wissen ist und jenes nur eine besondere Form von diesem,¹⁷

Kant's stipulation of the relation between faith and knowledge has been extremely influential. A non-Kantian reading of the above-mentioned passage of Peter, however, offers a different perspective. In the Pauline writings, too, 'trust' and 'knowledge' are complementary values.¹⁸

¹⁶ I. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (second edition; 1787), preface, xxx. Cf. E. Heintel, "Glauben und Wissen I", in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 3 (ed. J. Ritter; Basle: Schwabel, 1974), 647–648.

¹⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie* (1830), § 554.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Tit. 1:1, Eph. 4:13.

Second, it is clear in the above-mentioned passage that ‘the knowledge (ἐπίγνωσις) of our Lord Jesus Christ’ results in the list of virtues such as goodness, self-control, endurance, piety, and love. These are the characteristics of Christ’s exemplary behaviour. Unless these virtues are appropriated by the readers, their knowledge of Christ will remain ‘ineffective and unfruitful’.

The full relevance of the knowledge of Christ becomes apparent from a subsequent passage in Peter’s letter (2 Peter 2:20), in which he states that it is ‘through the knowledge (ἐπίγνωσις) of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ’ that one can escape (ἀποφεύγειν) ‘the defilements of the world’. This escape from the world by imitating the features of an exemplary divine figure is indeed reminiscent of the famous statement of Socrates in Plato’s *Theaetetus* (176a–b), on which the Platonic doctrine of man’s assimilation to God is based:

We ought to try to escape (φεύγειν) from earth to the dwelling of the gods as quickly as we can; and to escape is to become like God, so far as this is possible; and to become like God is to become righteous and holy, with wisdom.¹⁹

For this escape, appropriate knowledge of the nature and character traits of God is essential, and the basis of each individual’s imitation of God, through which he or she is assimilated to God. This is also characteristic of Peter’s programme. The passage quoted above from the opening of 2 Peter (1:5–8) stands in the following context:

May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge (ἐπίγνωσις) of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything needed for life and piety, through the knowledge (ἐπίγνωσις) of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape (ἀποφεύγειν) from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως, participants in the divine nature. (2 Peter 1:2–4)

Knowledge of God and Christ is essential for man in order to bring about his participation in the nature of God. This assimilation to God is realized by imitating Christ’s exemplary behaviour, through which man

¹⁹ For an extensive treatment of the history of the concept of assimilating to God, see G.H. van Kooten, *Paul’s Anthropology in Context: The Image of God, Assimilation to God, and Tripartite Man in Ancient Judaism, Ancient Philosophy and Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 124–181 (chapter 2.2).

is able to escape the corruption of the world.²⁰ Given the importance of 'knowledge' in Peter's soteriology, it makes sense that he finishes his letter by exhorting the readers to

grow in the grace and knowledge (γνῶσις) of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18)

Before I continue in the next section to examine the further ramifications of this concept of γνῶσις in Paul's and Peter's definitions of religion, conversion, and the role of the Christian leadership, I wish to comment briefly on a confusion which might result from a particular historiography. Generally, γνῶσις is taken as the hallmark of Gnosticism. Whereas the New Testament and later 'orthodox Christianity' are primarily associated with πίστις ('belief'), Gnosticism is taken to be the movement in which γνῶσις flourished. Yet even the New Testament letters show that what was particular about the emergent Gnostic movement was its interest not so much in γνῶσις as such, but rather in the dualistic nature of the knowledge involved. For this reason Paul, in the first letter to Timothy, speaks of this γνῶσις of the Gnostic movement as ψευδώνυμος γνῶσις, 'knowledge under a false name', 'so-called knowledge' (1 Timothy 6:20). What is considered false about this knowledge is its mythical and dualistic, fully world-denying tendency, which is criticized as follows:

I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, and not to occupy themselves with myths (μῦθοι) and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith. (1 Timothy 1:3–4)

They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer (1 Timothy 4:3–5).²¹

²⁰ The accordance between Peter and Plato was recognized by Calvin in his commentary on 2 Peter (*Corpus Reformatorum* 55, 446–447, translation C. Partee, *Calvin and Classical Philosophy* [Leiden: Brill, 1977], 53): 'the holy apostles (...) were simply concerned to say that when we have put off all the vices of the flesh we shall be partakers of divine immortality and the glory of blessedness, and thus we shall be in a way one with God so far as our capacity allows. This teaching was not unfamiliar to Plato, because he defines the highest human good in various passages as being completely conformed to God' (cf. also Augustine, *Civ.* 8.5).

²¹ For an analysis of this movement see B. Dehandschutter, "The History-of-Religions Background of 1 Timothy 4:4: 'Everything that God has Created is Good'", in *Creation of Heaven and Earth* (see above, n. 2), 211–221.

Paul's criticism of 'what is falsely called knowledge' (1 Timothy 6:20) supports, rather than conflicts with my analysis that γνῶσις is central to Paul's concerns and exemplifies his characterization of the Christian religion as an intellectual form of worshipping God.²² The centrality of this concept in the New Testament letters can also be deduced from the way Paul and Peter define religion, conversion, and the role of Christian leadership within the communities, as we shall see in the next section.

*The Definition of Religion, Conversion,
and Leadership in Terms of Knowledge*

The emphasis which Paul and Peter place on intellectual categories such as knowledge and truth can also be discerned in their definition of religions, both Jewish, pagan, and Christian.

As Paul acknowledges, the Jewish law is 'the embodiment of knowledge and truth' (Romans 2:20). The Jews, as he admits, have a zeal for God, but the problem is that this zeal 'is not enlightened', it is not 'in accordance with insightful knowledge (ἐπίγνωσις)' (Romans 10:2). In this way Paul not only defines non-Christian Judaism in terms of knowledge and truth, but also describes its deficiency, or rather the deficiency of its non-Christian Jewish representatives, in these terms: they lack insightful knowledge. Similarly, pagan religion is not simply characterized as a movement of 'unbelievers', but as a movement of people who lack a particular 'knowledge' and have no access to a particular 'truth'. They are seen as 'those who by their wickedness suppress the truth' (Romans 1:18). They are the ones who

exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature instead of the Creator (Romans 1:25).

They 'did not see fit to acknowledge God', 'to hold him in ἐπίγνωσις', and in this way demonstrated that they possess 'a debased mind' (Romans 1:28). The preponderance of cognitive terminology is striking here. A

²² This is also the way in which some subsequent early Christians defend a proper type of γνῶσις. Cf. R. Stupperich, "Gnosis I", in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 3 (above, n. 16), 715–717 (717): 'Hatten schon die kirchlichen Schriftsteller des 2. Jh. wie Hegesipp, Justin und Irenäus der "betrügerischen" eine "echte" Gnosis entgegengestellt, so geschieht dies im Vollmass durch Clemens Alexandrinus. In seiner Gnosis vermischen sich philosophische und mythologische Traditionen. Durch die *paradosis* (Weitergabe) wird demjenigen, der ihr Glauben schenkt, Wissen vermittelt, wodurch er göttliche Natur und Unsterblichkeit erhält'.

similar description is also applied to the heretics within the Christian community, both to the false teachers and to their victims. The false teachers are people 'of corrupt mind and unsatisfactory persuasion',²³ who 'oppose the truth' (2 Timothy 3:8). Their victims are 'overwhelmed by their sins and swayed by all kinds of desires', 'always being instructed', and unable to 'arrive at a knowledge of the truth' (2 Timothy 3:6–7). According to Paul (2 Timothy 4:3–4), this disregard for the truth goes hand in hand with susceptibility to myths:

For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.

The opposition which Paul sets up between truth and myth lends further weight to the self-portrayal of Christianity as an intellectual religion, and it is also made by Peter, when he contrasts *μῦθος* and *λόγος* (2 Peter 1:16, 1:19). The antithesis between 'myth' and '*logos*' is deeply engrained in ancient philosophy,²⁴ although at the same time philosophers are able to 'save myths', as Luc Brisson has argued.²⁵ Yet philosophers are indeed ambiguous about myths, 'for when myths are not discredited they may be the counsellors of evil deeds' (Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists* 554).

Paul even applies the antithesis between myth and truth in his advice to Titus to warn the pagan Cretans against 'Jewish myths'. He asks him to

rebuke them sharply, so that they may become sound in their persuasion, not paying attention to Jewish myths (*μῦθοι*) or to commandments of those who reject the truth (Titus 1:13–14).

Again, the pagan religion and 'heretical' movements within Christianity are defined in terms of their lack of truth. As Paul subsequently says, 'Their very minds and consciences are corrupted' (Titus 1:15).

A similar view on heretical elements within Christianity is expressed by Peter (2 Peter 2:1–3):

²³ For the translation of *πίστις* with 'persuasion', cf. Kinneavy, *Greek Rhetorical Origins of Christian Faith*, who argues that the Christian idea of faith had its origins not in the Old Testament, but rather, at least in part, in the Greek rhetorical concept of 'persuasion', which was a major meaning of *πίστις*.

²⁴ See W. Burkert, "Mythos, Mythologie I", in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 6 (eds. J. Ritter, K. Gründer; Basle: Schwabe, 1984), 281–283. On this issue, see also R. Buxton, *From Myth to Reason? Studies in the Development of Greek Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

²⁵ L. Brisson, *How Philosophers Saved Myths: Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. (...) Many will follow their licentious ways, and because of these teachers 'the way of truth' will be maligned. And in their greed they will exploit you with deceptive words.

Whereas Jewish, pagan, and heretical religions are characterized by their (partial) lack of truth and insightful knowledge, Christianity itself is portrayed as 'the pillar and bulwark of the truth' (1 Timothy 3:15). Knowledge is so essential for Christian self-understanding that, even without knowing the Christian community at Rome, Paul can easily take the following characteristics of such a community as understood when he writes them (Romans 15:14):

I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another.

It is important to understand this polemical, anti-heretical nature of the early Christian movement in its proper context. It seems anachronistic to explain it as the natural response of a fundamentalist, narrow-minded, inward-looking orthodoxy which alienates itself from a broader cultural debate. Rather, as George Boys-Stones has shown, the early Christian movement exhibits the same characteristics as the philosophical schools of post-Hellenistic philosophy, which enter into competition with one another in their quest for truth.²⁶ Indeed, the vehement polemics of a Platonist philosopher such as Plutarch against the competing theology of Stoic philosophers, which he does not hesitate to label as 'barbaric', is similar to what goes on in early Christianity.²⁷

The definition of conversion, of entering Christianity, consequently also takes place in the cognitive terminology of knowledge and truth. Conversion is not seen simply as 'coming to believe', but as 'a change of mind, a *μετάνοια*, which leads to the knowledge of the truth' (2 Timothy 2:25). It consists of a 'coming to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Timothy 2:4), a 'receiving the knowledge of the truth' (Hebrews 10:26). It is a response to hearing 'the word concerning the truth' (Colossians 1:5; Ephesians 1:13). Or, phrased differently, it is a purification of the soul which takes place through 'obedience to the truth' (1 Peter 1:22).

²⁶ G.R. Boys-Stones, *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy: A Study of Its Development from the Stoics to Origen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²⁷ See Plutarch, *De Stoicorum repugnantibus* 1049a–b, 1051d–1052b.

As Nock already showed in his classic book in 1933, conversion is not a feature of polytheistic paganism, but of ancient philosophy.²⁸ The role of conversion in the lives of ancient philosophers proves very important and is testimony of the close resemblance between ancient philosophy and Christianity. Philostratus (*Lives of the Sophists* 512–513), for instance, relates that the sophist Isaeus

had devoted the period of his early youth to pleasure (...). But when he attained to manhood he so transformed himself as to be thought to have become another person (...). Thus he indicated (...) that all pleasures are a shadow and a dream.

The same applies to Dio Chrysostom who is said to have converted from sophistic rhetoric to true philosophy. Diogenes Laertius, in his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (4.16), tells a comparable story about Polemo. The Middle Platonist Maximus of Tyre (*Orations*), Galen (*On the Passions of the Soul*), and Lucian (*Hermotimus*) all also hold similar passages.²⁹ They employ the vocabulary of conversion, using terms such as ἐπιστροφή, μετάνοια, and *conversio*. This vocabulary, and that of 'truth' and 'knowledge', is similar to that of Christians, in the New Testament literature, but also in the writings of later authors such as Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho* 2–3). Christianity's self-understanding was also reinforced by pagan perceptions of their movement. Epictetus (*Discourses* 2.9), for instance, viewed Christianity as a practical, life-affecting philosophy because convictions and practice were consistent.

The way in which Paul and Peter reflect on the role of the leadership within the Christian communities is fully in line with this understanding of conversion as an intellectual change of mind. If conversion is 'a change of mind which leads to the knowledge of the truth', then it is extremely important that a leader within that community

must not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone, didactically skilled (διδακτικός), patient, correcting opponents with gentleness (2 Timothy 2:24–25).

As Paul shows, in the sophistic atmosphere of Corinth the correction of opponents might also involve the need for leaders to carefully demolish sophistic argumentations which built on rhetorical performance:

²⁸ Nock, *Conversion*.

²⁹ Cf. M.B. Trapp, *Maximus of Tyre: The Philosophical Orations* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), xx, including n. 20.

We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge (γνῶσις) of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ (2 Corinthians 10:4–5).³⁰

Leaders such as Paul have been appointed

for the sake of the assurance (πίστις) of God's elect and the knowledge (ἐπίγνωσις) of the truth that is in accordance with piety (Titus 1:1).

He is 'a teacher of the nations in faith and truth' (1 Timothy 2:7). It is the task of the Christian leadership to 'cut the word of truth in a straight line', 'to teach it aright', and in this way 'to avoid profane chatter':

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth. Avoid profane chatter, for it will lead people into more and more impiety, and their talk will spread like gangrene (2 Timothy 2:15–17).

Concluding Remarks

Indeed, if Jan Bremmer is right that in the time immediately preceding the composition of the New Testament writings,

[i]n the time of Cicero, Lucretius and Vergil, *religio* was not equivalent to our notion of 'religion' but contained a strong ritualistic aspect and was often connected with active worship according to the rules,³¹

then the observations made in this paper seem to incline us towards the definition of early Christianity as a philosophy, rather than as a religion. Philosophy, generally speaking, was of a religious nature, in the sense that it included reflections on the gods. We have seen that Epictetus' dual philosophical programme of establishing the existence and the nature of God, with the aim of enabling man's assimilation to God, strongly resembles Paul's views on the knowledge of God and Christ. The possibility of participating in God's nature through knowledge is also emphasized by Peter. The stress which both Paul and Peter place on the importance of knowledge and truth shines through in their characterization of Christianity as an 'intellectual form of worshipping God', and of its message as 'pure intellectual milk' by which converts are nourished so that they

³⁰ For Paul's competition with the Corinthian sophists, see B.W. Winter, *Philo and Paul among the Sophists: Alexandrian and Corinthian Responses to a Julio-Claudian Movement* (second edition; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

³¹ Bremmer, "Religion", 10.

‘grow into salvation’. Moreover, this cognitive perspective is also present in their definitions of Jewish, pagan and heretical religion as opposed to Christianity, in their views on conversion as a change of mind towards the knowledge of the truth, and, finally, in their requirements regarding the didactical skills of the Christian leadership. All these features help us to see why, already in its earliest manifestation in the first and second centuries AD, early Christianity was a competitor not only on the religious, but also on the philosophical market of Antiquity.³²

³² I am grateful to Dr Maria Sherwood-Smith for correcting the English in this paper.