Critical Notice

Porphyry against the Christians: Critical Notes on a Recent Volume of Studies


This volume collects the papers presented by some of the world's best experts in the study of ancient pagan-Christian religions at a 2009 Paris conference devoted to the lost treatise Against the Christians by the Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry of Tyre (c. 234-c. 310). After lengthy neglect, the past few years have witnessed a flurry of studies, editions and translations of the fragments of this work, so that the publication of a weighty tome devoted to it is very timely indeed. In view the importance of this volume, I shall give a brief account in what follows of each of the contributions.

In “Comment le problème du Contra Christianos peut-il se poser aujourd'hui?” (p. 11-49), Sébastien Morlet provides a wide-ranging introduction to the volume. He sketches the history of scholarship on the treatise, discussing the question of its contents and date, its title, and its independent existence as a treatise, and its influence on subsequent Patristic literature. Particularly useful is his section entitled “Vers une nouvelle édition du traité de Porphyre”, which contains mini-reviews of the recent editions and translations of the Contra Christianos by Berchmann (in English), Ramos Jurado et al. (Spanish),
and Muscolino (Italian). All these works, particularly Berchmann's,¹ come in for criticism, in that they either restrict themselves to translating Harnack's 1916 collection telle quelle, or tend to inflate the number of fragments without sufficient reflection on questions of methodology. A new edition of the fragments should be limited to texts explicitly attributed to Porphyry’s Contra Christianos, while fragments of dubious attribution should be either omitted altogether or else edited separately. The article ends with two appendices, containing the text and translation of new fragments of the Contra Christianos taken from Jerome, Augustine, and Petrus Comestor, as well as the translation of two new fragments from Isho’dad of Merv, about whom one would have liked to learn more. It is hard to find fault² with this excellent article: in particular, Morlet is certainly right to reject in no uncertain terms the thesis, produced by P.F. Beatrice and M.J. Edwards, among others, that Porphyry never wrote a work entitled Against the Christians, but that this title referred to a heterogeneous conglomeration of other known Porphyrian works. I shall return to this question in the context of Gillian Clark’s contribution.

André Laks, in a brief contribution (pp. 51-57) entitled “Réflexions à propos de l’édition Harnack du Contre les chrétiens de Porphyre”, offers methodological considerations on the process of editing a collection of fragments, which he illustrates by comparing Harnack’s collection of Porphyry’s fragments with Diels’ collection of the fragments of the Presocratics. Harnack’s methodology reflects his view that Porphyry was essentially correct in his criticisms of Christianity. Laks suggests that future editors of the fragments of the Contra Christianos might consider dividing them into 1) biographical indications, 2) doctrinal fragments and testimonies, and 3) reception.

In “Méthodologie et collecte des fragments de Porphyre sur le Nouveau Testament chez Jérôme” (pp. 59-74), Ariane Magny proposes a methodology closely related to that of Laks, followed by examples intended to illustrate the method. Yet the paper’s first part amounts more or less to saying that it is important to take into account the context of a report when studying fragments: a true but hardly revolutionary principle, even when dolled up with new-fangled terminology (“deconstruction of the cover-text”). A section on quotation in Antiquity contains many questionable assertions: claims such as “Les Anciens ne reproduisaient pas fidèlement les propos de ceux qu’ils citaient” (p. 65)

¹ It is ultimately judged to be “useless for the researcher” (p. 36). Compare, for instance, that largely negative review of Berchmann’s work by Michael Simmons, Journal of Early Christian Studies 16.2 (2008) 263-265.

² One would like to know, however, whence Morlet derives his information (p. 23) that Porphyry died in 305.
and “la distinction entre citation littérale et allusion (…) était perçue comme inutile” (ibid.) are surely false when presented in such absolute terms: the former, if it were true, would make impossible the study of Presocratic, Stoic, and many other branches of ancient philosophy based almost exclusively on the study of fragments: do we really believe that when, say, Simplicius cites the poem of Parmenides he is not reproducing the text faithfully? The latter is easily falsified by the frequent case of authors who introduce quotations by saying “X says in these vary words” (autais <tais> lexesin, cf. autois epesin). The fragments from Jerome presented as a “case study” intended to exemplify the author’s methodology are interesting, mainly because relatively little work has been done on Jerome and Porphyry. Here again, however, despite the author’s claims of novelty, the results are not particularly spectacular. Clearly, Jerome’s choice of which Porphyrian fragments he will choose to report and/or comment upon is motivated by his (Jerome’s) goals and interests: but who has ever claimed otherwise? “Contextualization” is then said to prove that the mere fact that Jerome does not report Porphyrian discussions of a given theme does not mean that Porphyry did not discuss that them: again, true but fairly obvious. Finally, the author has, I think, merely asserted rather than proven that the Porphyrian fragments in Jerome are “modifiés par son interprétation”, although it would certainly not be unduly surprising to learn that Jerome did occasionally alter the original meaning of some texts of Porphyrian origin. It is always salutary to be reminded that we should not believe that ancient practices of quotation were like our own: it is less helpful, however, to replace this belief with facile over-generalizations.

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3 Origen Contra Cels. 5.12.23f.; Irenaeus Adv. haer. 1.12.31; 1.18.2; Clement Alex., Strom., 2.20.114.3.1; 4.12.81.2.1, etc., etc.

4 See, for instance, the contribution by R. Courtray, on which infra. This is not, or not simply, because “le Père de l’Église ne s’est sûrement pas préoccupé de rapporter les propos de son adversaire dans leur intégrité” (p. 65). This would have to be shown, not merely supposed: In fact, the rules of ancient polemics led authors to be surprisingly faithful when recording the views of their opponents, as has been revealed by the Church Fathers’ reports on the Gnostics, found to correspond reasonably well to the writings of the Gnostics themselves when a collection their texts was discovered at Nag Hammadi. Compare, for instance, Jerome, Commentary on Daniel, III, 9, 24a (cited by Courtray, loc. cit., p. 337): “He [sc. Apollinaris] says, translating him word for word lest I should seem to slander him [by attributing to him] things he does not say…” (dicet ergo [sc. Apollinarius], ut verbo ex verbo interpreter ne calumniam uidere facere non dicenti). Accurate quotations and translations were the norm in ancient polemics, not out of any sense of fair play, but in order to rob one’s adversaries of a facile counter-argument.
In a long, learned study entitled “Recherche de la source porphyrienne dans les objections « païennes » du Monogénès: l’enjeu des citations scriptuaires” (p. 75-104), Olivier Munnich brings his expertise in the field of Biblical criticism to bear on the Monogenês or Apokritikos of Macarios Magnes, from which Harnack drew many of the fragments of his edition of Porphyry’s Against the Christians, recently given a masterful edition by Richard Goulet. Porphyry is never mentioned in this treatise, but Harnack thought the Tyrian philosopher’s anti-Christian treatise lay behind roughly half of the anonymous pagan’s objections to Christianity recounted by Macarios. Yet Munnich, like Goulet (see below), finds that many of these objections bear the mark of a Christian author, with their rhetorical flourish and signs of a deep knowledge of the New Testament textual tradition. The article, which contains insightful critiques of Harnack’s edition of the Contra Christianos and useful conjectures to Goulet’s edition of Macarios, concludes, persuasively, that Macarios rearranges and reformulates traditional pagan objections to Christianity which may or may not be Porphyrian in origin.

In an erudite, meticulous survey entitled “Porfirio e Origene: uno status quaestionis” (p. 107-164), Marco Zambon reviews the scholarship on the question of the relations between Origen and Ammonius Saccas, rendered difficult because our two main sources, Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History and Porphyry’s Against the Christians, provide information that is hard to reconcile. The exhaustive nature of Zambon’s bibliographical research and his careful accounts of the positions of various scholars since the 17th century will likely make this article the standard work on the subject. Zambon’s own conclusions are cautious: there are likely to have been two Origens, he believes, the younger of whom was a pagan student of Ammonius Saccas. While it is possible that the Christian Origen may also have studied under Ammonius Saccas, this cannot be proved.

My only reserve with regard to this excellent study is the cavalier treatment reserved for the work of Willy Theiler. While Zambon devotes two of three pages of detailed discussion to many of the articles he summarizes, Theiler’s important papers “Ammonios und Porphyrios”5 and “Augustin und Origenes”6 are not so much as mentioned, while his “Ammonios der Lehrer des Origenes”7 is dismissed, along with the work of other authors, in a single sentence, which informs us that his results are “disappointing” (p. 155). One would have liked to know in what sense. Indeed, Theiler’s attempt to recover

6 Ibid., pp. 543-553.
the philosophy of Ammonios Saccas by comparing primarily Hierocles the Neoplatonist and the Christian Origen, but also Nemesius, whom Zambon almost completely ignores, would seem to be more germane to his announced topic than his lengthy discussion (152-156) of the comparison of Origen and Plotinus. Zambon doubts that Porphyry “knew a system or set of doctrines going back specifically to Ammonius”: yet this leaves it hard to understand whence Nemesius, Hierocles and other sources derived their information on Ammonius, if not through the intermediary of Porphyry. Theiler (“Ammonios & Porphyrios” 37ff.) suggested Porphyry derived knowledge of the philosophy of Ammonius from Theodotos, Diadoch of the Platonic Academy, who published a work entitled syllogê skholôn c. 268. One would have liked to know Zambon’s reasons for dismissing this hypothesis, as well interesting methodological suggestion that Porphyry “returned to Ammonius in the same degree as Plotinus distanced himself from him” (Theiler, op. cit. p. 40). For Theiler, this would explain why, for instance, Plotinus rejects the Chaldaean Oracles and Aristotle’s doctrine of the Categories, while Porphyry, perhaps following Ammonius, accepts both, albeit with reservations; likewise, Porphyry may have been following Ammonius when he rejected metensomatosis into the bodies of animals, which Plotinus accepts, and when he taught the creation of matter by God. These suggestions, among others, may be mistaken, but they are not absurd, and they amply deserve the thorough, fair-minded discussion Zambon accords to others but inexplicably denies to Theiler.

In “Porphyry’s Hellenism” (pp. 165-181), Aaron P. Johnson sets Porphyry’s Hellenism within the broader context of his representation of the Greeks, by sketching Porphyry’s conception of Greek identity, considering Porphyry’s own self-identity and its interactions with his representation of the Greeks, and finally studying the occurrence of the verb hellênizein in Contra Christianos fr. 39.

Some aspects of Johnson’s paper seem more convincing than others. It is interesting to note that most of Porphyry’s references to “the Greeks” range from lukewarm to downright derogatory as compared to his positive estimations of foreign peoples, particularly Jews and Indians, and it is no doubt globally correct to interpret Porphyry’s overall attitude as “a universalizing interpretive framework aimed to evaluate each people’s teachings and practices on their own terms, without adopting any sort of cultural or ethnic centrism” (p. 174). Yet Johnson’s application of this principle to the interpretation

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8 For instance, the doctrinal resemblances between Nemesius’ De natura hominis and Porphyry’s Sententiae may be explained by the fact that Porphyry is following Ammonius (Theiler, op. cit. p. 40).
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of Contra. Chr. fr. 39 is less persuasive. Porphyry’s objection to Origen, we learn, was not that Origen was raised a pagan and switched to Christianity, but that “he carried (his) Greek heritage with him into the reading of foreign texts”: in other words, Origen used Greek interpretive techniques in his study of Jewish texts, rather than interpreting them in their own terms. I find this explanation quite implausible: Porphyry does not, like some multiculturalist professor of comparative literature, accuse Origen of transgressing some (poorly attested) literary-critical or ethnographical canons, but, as Cook points out in his contribution (see below) of living unlawfully (paranomôs) yet Hellenizing in his doctrines. In this context, the verb “to Hellenize” has nothing to do with ethnicity, but refers to the practice of Greek philosophy. Origen, according to Porphyry, failed to practice what he preached: although he had learned Greek philosophy from the best possible teacher Ammonius, and applied this learning to his own philosophy, he nevertheless lived unlawfully, i.e. as a Christian. When Porphyry speaks of Origen’s continued use of Greek logoi, it is extremely unlikely this word should be translated “sophistical arguments” (p. 179), an ad hoc interpretation Johnson needs to bolster his thesis: the term logoi simply means, as it usually does in a philosophical context, “philosophical doctrines, theoretical considerations”.

In “Le fragment 78 Harnack (101 Ramos Jurado) du Contra Christianos de Porphyre et la question de la «tolérance» chrétienne d’après Ex 22, 27 LXX” (p. 183-203), Bernard Pouderon compares “Porphyry’s” use of this Biblical passage, which enjoins respect for “the gods”, to various Patristic and Jewish texts that attempt to explain away its apparent acknowledgement of the existence of a plurality of divinities. Born from a mistranslation of the Hebrew text, this passage allowed Porphyry—if he is indeed behind the anonymous objector in Macarios Magnes’ Monogenês—to point to a seeming contradiction in the sacred books of Christianity. This wide-ranging article also contains interesting remarks on the meaning of “god(s)” in the Jewish and Greek traditions.

In “Porphyre et Macarios de Magnésie sur la toute-puissance de Dieu” (p. 205-230), Richard Goulet examines the status of the “fragments” which Harnack extracted from the Monogenês or Apokritikos of Macarios Magnes. He concludes that Macarios transmits anti-Christian objections by Porphyry, but these cannot be considered “fragments” in the strict sense of the term, since Macarios has re-elaborated them with regard both to form and to content. Each “fragment” must be examined on a case-by-case basis, in order to delimit what, in its contents, is Porphryian and what is Macarian. Goulet illustrates that complexity of this task by studying fr. 94 Harnack, in which Macarios attributes to his anonymous anti-Christian adversary two quite different positions: the most widespread pagan view, according to which there are limits on
divine omnipotence, and what appears to be the position of Macarios himself, viz. that God can do anything, but only wishes to do what is appropriate to his divine nature. Clear, well-organized and well-written, Goulet's article includes a fascinating dossier of Christian and pagan texts on divine omnipotence.9

In “Porphyry’s Contra Christianos and the crimen nominis Christianorum” (pp. 231-275), John Granger Cook explores Porphyry’s view that Christianity is a lawless (paranomos) activity or lifestyle, primarily on the basis of the text constituting fr. 81 Harnack in which John 14 is criticized, although Augustine’s testimony in his Letter 102 is also taken into account. In the process, Porphyry’s views on law, sacrifice and salvation are studied in detail. Porphyry held Christian law to be incompatible with Greco-Roman sacrifice, pointing to the Christian refusal to participate in temple cult. He genuinely disliked Christianity, which he viewed as a radical, arrogant trend lacking in respect for traditional beliefs, and therefore dangerous to Greco-Roman society.

I found some sections of Cook’s lengthy paper more rewarding than others: his discussion of Augustine is interesting, and section VII on salvation in Porphyry is excellent. Other sections consist mainly in vocabulary studies, where some of the texts adduced seem questionably relevant. In general, the article seems less well-constructed and written than Goulet’s. Some sloppy formulations lead to dubious generalizations,10 while others make it hard to understand the author’s point.11 Yet the wealth of texts with translation12

9 In one or two cases, one may question the translations provided. At Galen, De usu partium XI, 14 (cited p. 216 and n. 19), kosmēsai tên hulên means “set matter in order” rather than “créer le monde à partir de la matière” (although the two expressions amount to approximately the same thing). In Augustine, Contra Faustum Manichaeum 25.2, col. 481 Migne (cited p. 229 & n. 45), faciat will mean “let him bring it about” rather than “il ferait”.

10 At p. 265, we read that “Sacrifice is so important in Porphyry because it was intimately related to his conception of salvation for the innocent souls...”, yet ten pages earlier the fact that sacrifice was an integral part of temple cults was adduced to explain Porphyry’s interest in the subject.

11 At p. 264, n. 132 we are advised to consult the apparatus of Des Places’ edition of Porphyry’s Ad Marcellam “for the numerous quotations of other authors of Sentences in this text”, where it is not clear whether a title or a literary genre is intended by the italicized word; at p. 255 n. 99 we learn of an inscription “from ca 15”, without indication of whether it is BC or AD. In the same note, Caracalla’s edict is cited which conferred citizenship on all people of the empire “with an exception”, without any explanation of what the exception consisted in.

12 Again, one may question some translation choices. At Porphyry, Philosophy from Oracles fr. 314F Smith (cited p. 258), Diōnusioio te dôra will likely mean the gifts of Dionysus, i.e. wine, rather than “gifts for Dionysus”; at Porphyry, History of Philosophy, fr. 220F Smith (cited p. 266 & n. 141) the phrase ei khrê phanai should be rendered by “if one may say so”
and bibliographical references make the article an important contribution to further study. One may disagree with individual assertions, but Cook's overall thesis seems clearly correct, and serves, among others, as a convincing refutation of Johnson's view that Porphyry's objections to Origen were merely methodological in nature.

In “Le Christ comme Lógos suivant Porphyre dans Contre les chrétiens (fragment 86 von Harnack—Théophylacte, Enarr. in Joh., PG 123, col. 1141)” (pp. 277-290), Luc Brisson studies a fragment in which Porphyry objects to the Christian doctrine of the Son of God as Logos. In order to situate the fragment within its Neoplatonic philosophical context, he then studies the doctrine of the logos in Plotinus, and the doctrine Christ as Logos in the pagan philosopher Amelius, Porphyry's fellow-student under Plotinus. Brisson concludes by examining Porphyry's History of Philosophy fr. 16, which contains a doctrine analogous to the Christian Trinity: the highest god is the Good, the second is the demiurge, and the third the World Soul. Cyril of Jerusalem, who preserves this text, assimilates Porphyry's Good to God the Father, the demiurge to the Son, and, the World Soul to the Holy Spirit. Finally, Brisson adduces fr. 35 of the Contra Christianos, taken from book IV of the Monogenês of Macarios Magnes, according to which the “divine and active Logos of God” (ho theios kai drastérios tou theou Logos) is capable of intervening in the course of events, but chooses not to do so.

Brisson's contribution raises interesting methodological issues. In his conclusion, he emphasizes the necessity of situating each Porphyrian fragment within its context: hence his discussion of the doctrine of the logos in Porphyry's colleagues Plotinus and Amelius. Yet it is dangerous to deduce Porphyry's doctrine from that of either of these two figures: the basic three-hypostasis structure of their metaphysics may have been similar, but the differences between the details of their doctrines are just as striking. In the present instance, it seems to me highly unlikely that the “divine and active Logos rather than the incongruous “if it is necessary to speak”; at p. 267, to deon apothanein (Porphyry, Ad Nemertium, 279 F. Smith) should perhaps be rendered by “that which must die” rather than by the ungrammatical “what is necessary to die”.

"Logic" has little to do with Porphyry's criticism of Gn 4, 3-4, as discussed on pp. 251-252. I find it improbable that Porphyry found the concept of grace in Plato (pp. 274-275); this is more likely to be a tendentious interpretation by Augustine, who reports the fragment cited (Porphyry, De regressu, 297F Smith).

Cook discusses (§ VI, pp. 255-266), but does not resolve satisfactorily, the apparent contradiction between Porphyry's condemnation of blood sacrifice in the On abstinence and his espousal of some forms of it in the Philosophy from oracles. On this tension in Porphyry's thought, cf. the contribution by I. Bochet, p. 387-388.
Of God” of Contra Christ. fr. 35 can be a Porphyrian concept.\textsuperscript{15} much more probably, it is a elaboration by the Christian bishop Macarios. As we have seen, moreover, R. Goulet has convincingly shown that the notion that God has unlimited power but chooses not to do certain things, as occurs in this fragment, is typically Christian, not pagan. Thus, Brisson’s article, interesting though it is,\textsuperscript{16} illustrates the dangers of focusing on the context of a Porphyrian fragment, if one understands by “context” the philosophical milieu in which Porphyry lived and thought. Porphyry was not Plotinus, and his views on a given subject cannot be legitimately deduced from what Plotinus thought on the same point, much less from the views of Amelius or Cyril.\textsuperscript{17}

The title of José M. Zamora’s contribution “Ἀνθρώπος γενόμενος: la divinité du Christ dans le Contra Christianos de Porphyre” (p. 291-304) is somewhat misleading, for the article consists, not so much of a study of the question of Christ’s divinity in the Contra Christ., as in a survey of all the anti-Christian objections contained in the fragments of this treatise. Thus, Zamora studies what Porphyry considers the falsifications contained in the Old and New Testaments; the mistakes and contradictions within the New Testament; the Bible’s unacceptable use of allegory; the question of Christ’s divinity; the doctrines of baptism, eucharist and resurrection, the Christians’ lack of social integration; and the structure of the Church, with its hierarchy of the faithful and its cult places. Zamora works on the hypothesis that all the fragments reflect Porphyrian objections: as he admits, however, this is a problematic assumption, as is made clear not least by the contributions to the present volume. Nevertheless, the article provides a very useful introduction to the contents of the treatise, and should perhaps have been placed at the beginning of the volume.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} Pace Augustine, ciu. Dei X, 23 = Porphyry, De regressu fr. 284F Smith; cf. Bochet, loc. cit. p. 390. This will have been another tendentious interpretation by Augustine.

\textsuperscript{16} Particularly valuable are Brisson’s clear formulations of Plotinus’ doctrine of the logos.

\textsuperscript{17} Unfortunately, Brisson’s article is marred by material errors. The last paragraph on p. 282 contains an incoherent hodgepodge of dittographies, which gives the impression it represents two slightly different versions of the same paragraph; while on p. 289, the footnotes jump from 40 to 44, leaving out at least three notes’ worth of information.

\textsuperscript{18} Errata: p. 293 n. 6: J.-M. Demarolle’s article “Les femmes chrétiennes vues par Porphyre” appeared not in Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies but in the Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum 13 (1970), 42-47; at p. 294, end of the first paragraph, read \textit{inuere} rather than \textit{inuere}. At fr. 94 Harnack (end of p. 301), the phrase \textit{kataginôskesthai hupo tou dêmiourgêsan-tos} should no doubt be translated “be condemned to destruction by the Demiurge” rather than “qu’il ne reçoive pas de reproches du démiurge”. Finally, at p. 304 (second full paragraph), awkward phrasing makes it sound as though Ammonius, rather than Origen, was accused of having abandoned his Greek training.
In “Existe-t-il des traces de l’argumentation antichrétienne de Porphyre dans l’oeuvre de Grégoire de Nysse?” (p. 307-328), Volker Henning Drecoll studies the claim, made primarily by Jean Pépin, that Gregory of Nyssa knew and used Porphyry’s *Contra Christianos*. After studying the *Catechetical discourse*, *On the creation of man*, *On the soul and resurrection*, and several other treatises by Gregory, Drecoll comes to what he characterizes as a modest result: Porphyry’s *Against the Christians* contained anti-Christian objections similar to those of Celsus, which may have been at the origin of a collection of an anti-Christian tradition that is reflected in Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa and Macarios, but that cannot be specified in all its details. To this collection, Gregory would have added more strictly philosophical considerations taken from other works of Porphyry and from Plotinus.

It is hard to disagree with such a sober conclusion. Yet once again, Drecoll’s paper raises interesting methodological issues. He insists repeatedly (p. 314; 321; 323 etc.) that there can be no absolute certainty that Porphyry is behind a given text by Gregory: this is clearly true, but of what can one be absolutely certain in the field of the history of philosophy? Is this not a concept inapplicable to the human sciences in general, and hence irrelevant? Pépin and others had claimed the use of Porphyry is likely in cases where there are parallels between Gregory, Macarios and Augustine, but Drecoll responds by emphasizing (p. 313; 314 n. 26; 327 etc.) that there are differences between these authors. Yet what is the significance of such divergences? Should they exclude the use of a common source, or is it possible each of these Christian authors may have used and elaborated the same Porphyrian material differently? Drecoll often suggests that the Church Fathers authors used a variety of sources, which may have included Porphyrian material (on Augustine: p. 325). For instance, Gregory (p. 327) may have taken up anti-Christian objections he found in one or many anti-Christian sources, then compared them to such texts as Plotinus’ *Enneads* or Porphyry’s *Sentences*. Yet such a process implies an awful lot of work, and one may wonder whether authors as prolific as Augustine or Gregory would have had the time or inclination to carry out such careful comparative research. The use of a single source, possibly a florilegium, seems much more likely. Finally, when the author comes to compare with Gregory’s doctrine on motion and rest the actual doctrines of Porphyry (pp. 325-326), he bases his survey only on the *Sentences*. Yet this is inadequate: we have fragments of nearly two dozen Porphyrian works, and the mere fact that a doctrine is not attested in the *Sentences* (transmitted in incomplete form!) cannot be taken to prove it is not Porphyrian. This last point is a serious objection to all studies of the philosophy of Porphyry that adopt a more or less positivistic approach. When dealing
with an ancient author most of whose philosophical production is lost, the use of argumenta e silentio cannot help but be highly problematic.

In a thorough study entitled “Porphyre et le livre de Daniel au travers du Commentaire sur Daniel de Jérôme” (pp. 329-356) Régis Courtray shows how Jerome transmits and deforms Porphyry’s criticisms of the Book of Daniel. After arguing that Jerome (like Augustine) had no direct knowledge of Porphyry’s treatise, but knew it only through its refutations by Eusebius, Methodius and Apollinaris, Courtray shows how Jerome defends the prophetic nature of the book of Daniel—Porphyry had argued that the book was written during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes, around 165 BCE, and that the prophecies contained in the book were therefore uaticinia ex eventu—and attacks Porphyry by a wide variety of rhetorical techniques. Porphyry’s broad learning in philology and literary criticism sometimes elicits grudging respect from Jerome, which does not prevent the Church Father from attacking him ferociously and denigrating his erudition on other occasions.

The paper by Claudio Zamagni, “Porphyre est-il la cible principle des « questions » chrétiennes des IVe et Vᵉ siècles?” (pp. 357-370) is perhaps the most deflationary in a volume marked by the tendency to reduce expectations regarding the possibility of reconstructing the contents of Porphyry’s Contra Christianos from the works of the Church Fathers. Against a number of authors (Labriolle, Courcelle and most recently Rinaldi) who thought the Patristic literary genre of treatises in question-and-answer form arose primarily in response to anti-Christian objections originating primarily from Porphyry, Zamagni’s stance is almost entirely negative. The careful study of such works as Eusebius’ Questions and answers on the Gospels, the Ambrosiaster’s Questions and answers on the Old and New Testaments, and the works of the Pseudo-Justin show that these works, like other examples of the genre, can be explained by inter-Christian concerns, and many of the issues addressed in them antedate Porphyry.

In “Les quaestiones attribuées à Porphyre dans la Lettre 102 d’Augustin” (pp. 371-394), Isabelle Bochet evaluates the likelihood that the anti-Christian objections Augustine records in this epistle, also known as the Quaestiones contra Porfyrium expositae sex, derive from the Contra Christianos. Augustine records the following objections: that the resurrection of the dead is absurd; that Christ’s late coming condemns untold generations of pagan to damnation; that Christianity condemns pagan sacrifices, although they resemble those practiced in Judaism, its parent religion; that eternal punishment for temporal sins is unjust; that Solomon asserts that God has no son; and that the tale of Jonas and the whale is absurd and lacks symbolic import. Although Augustine, who has not read the Contra Christianos, hesitates to attribute
all these objections to Porphyry, Bochet concludes they all may well do so, via
the work of a Latin-speaking excerptor. Their content corresponds to such
well-attested Porphyrian themes as the comparative study of religions, the
search for a universal path of salvation, reflections on sacrifice and other cul-
tic acts, concern for the post-mortem destiny of souls, and denial of eternal
punishment and resurrection of the fleshly body. Interestingly, Bochet points
out that most of these objections are based on the relationship to time estab-
lished by Christianity: Porphyry denies that what is eternal can intervene in
history, or that acts within time can have eternal repercussions. These anti-
Christian objections, and Augustine’s answers to them, had a determining
influence on the writing of the City of God. I find Bochet’s arguments per-
suasive, although given the difficulty of identifying Porphyrian material in
Macarios (see above on Goulet’s paper) one may question the value of confir-
matory evidence taken from the Monogenês.

We return to deflationary scepticism with Gillian Clark’s “Acerrimus
inimicus? Porphyry and the City of God” (pp. 395-406), where the author goes so
far as to wonder out loud whether it is worthwhile spending so much effort to
study the fragments of the Contra Christianos. It is not certain, she maintains,
that Porphyry is the source for everything Augustine says about the Platonists;
and those anti-Christian arguments that do come from Porphyry need not
derive from the Contra Christianos. Indeed, we cannot be sure Porphyry ever
wrote such a work, as is shown inter alia by the fact that Porphyry makes no
mention of it in his Life of Plotinus, written near the end of his life in 301.

The article contains valuable discussion of Augustine’s largely favorable
attitude toward Porphyry in the civ. Dei, and raises the important questions
of Augustine’s knowledge of Greek and the contents of the Libri platonici. Yet
I find Clark’s scepticism concerning the existence of the Contra Cristianos
unconvincing. Porphyry’s failure to mention the treatise can, as she admits,
be explained in a variety of ways, most simply by supposing he wrote it after
the Life of Plotinus (Porphyry may have lived until 310).19 It is, I believe, impos-
sible to reject en masse the ancient testimonies to the existence of the Contra
Christianos (the Suda specifies that it consisted in fifteen books); in particu-
lar, can one seriously maintain that three emperors (first Constantine, then
Theodosius and Valentinian in 448) issued orders to burn a non-existent

19 As Morlet points out (art. cit.), this is one of the two main propositions for dating the
Contra Cristianos. Morlet rejects unequivocally the suggestion that the treatise never
existed: “une telle hypothèse n’est pas seulement invraisemblable, mais ignorante des
témoignages antiques” (p. 27).
Finally, to express doubts that “Porphyry must somehow be involved in the transmission of all Platonist arguments against Christian teachings” (p. 406) seems to be a straw man argument, since I know of no scholar who has put forth such a patently absurd view.21

Finally, in his “Porphyre et Julien contre les chrétiens: intentions, motifs et méthodes de leurs écrits” (pp. 407-429), the late Jean Bouffartigue compares the Against the Christians to the similarly fragmentary remains of the Emperor Julian’s own anti-Christian work, Against the Galileans. In general, whereas Porphyry uses a primarily philological approach, often tinged with sarcasm, to annihilate his Christian adversaries, Julian’s attitude is more conciliatory, since his goal is, by demonstrating the falsity of the Scriptures, to lure Christians back to the fold of paganism. Julian does not seem to make broad use of Porphyry’s treatise, which he no doubt considered poorly adapted to his purposes. Indeed, Julian, unlike Porphyry, believes that some Biblical myths contain hidden truths suitable for being revealed by allegorical exegesis. The article proposes extensive side-by-side quotations from Porphyry and Julian, which facilitate comparison (although one would have liked to see the Greek original). It is generally informative and convincing, although one may argue with some of Bouffartigue’s descriptions of Porphyry’s philosophy. For instance, he declares that Julian’s view that Jewish piety exceeds that of contemporary Greeks “is far indeed from that of Porphyry” (p. 426), but this conclusion needs to be relativized in view of Johnson’s paper, which tends to show that Porphyry held a very similar favorable view of the Jews.22

Every edition of the acts of a conference contains some contributions that are better than others. In the present instance, however, the quality is very high overall, and the reader comes away with up-to-date, in-depth information on virtually every aspect of Porphyry’s Contra Christianos. One may quibble with a few editorial choices,23 but overall Sébastien Morlet and the

20 Most of the sceptical arguments against the existence of a Porphyrian treatise entitled Contra Christianos have been refuted in a 2004 article by Richard Goulet, which Clark does not cite: see “Hypothèses récentes sur le traité de Porphyre Contre les chrétiens”, in M. Narcy – E. Rebillard, eds., Hellénisme et christianisme, Villeneuve d’Ascq 2004, 61-109.
21 Porphyry clearly has nothing to do with the anti-Christian objections of Celsus, who pre-dates him by a century.
22 See above. Likewise, the author’s claim (p. 420) that Porphyry found it important “to avoid any experience of evil” is hard to reconcile with the testimony from the De regressu that souls were sent down to earth in order that they might come to know the evil of matter.
23 Instead of the Selective Bibliography, with its items ranged somewhat curiously in chronological order, it might have been useful to produce one combined and exhaustive bibliography of all the papers. This would have eliminated the useless repetition of, for
Études Augustiniennes are to be thanked and congratulated for rendering an important service to Porphyrian scholarship in particular and to the study of pagan-Christian relations in general.

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instance, the full bibliographical data of Harnack’s edition of the fragments of the *Contra Christianos*, which is given in pretty well every contribution. The volume contains an *Index Biblique* and an *Index des auteurs anciens et médiévaux*, but a subject index and index of modern authors would also have been helpful.