1 Nonnus: ‘Pagan’ or Christian?

Nonnus is the author of both a decidedly Christian work, the *Paraphrase of St. John*, and a ‘pagan’ work, the *Dionysiaca*. In searching for the religious background of our poet, this begs the question whether he was a ‘pagan’ or a Christian, and how this background influenced his writings. How can we reconcile these two seemingly divergent works by the same author?

In the first section we shall cast our net a bit wider and look at the religious background of intellectuals such as philosophers and poets in late antique Egypt. Whereas the idea that these intellectuals formed a ‘pagan resistance’ against Christianity in this period has found widespread acceptance, it has now been firmly rejected in favour of a more complex model of coexistence and interaction. No doubt there were some intellectuals who still adhered to the traditional cults and practices, but they were few and we should not confuse the extraordinary flourish of Hellenism in late antique Egypt with ‘paganism’. These views neatly tie in with Alan Cameron’s recent study of the literature of late fourth- and early fifth-century Rome.

In the next section, his study will be taken as a starting point for a fresh new look at the religious background of the classicizing poets of late antique Egypt, in particular of Nonnus. There has been a fierce debate about whether these poets were ‘pagan’ or Christian and on the basis of their classicizing tendencies it has long been assumed that they were, at least initially, ‘pagan’. As will be argued, this discussion is based on the wrong premises as classicizing literature in this period was commonplace, also among Christian authors, and thus does not inform us about religious background, though in the case of Nonnus we know that he was a Christian as he wrote the *Paraphrase*. Thus reframing the question we shall look in the last section at how Nonnus combines classical and Christian learning in his writings.¹

¹ Many thanks to Jan Bremmer for his insightful comments on an earlier version of this chapter, which also benefitted from a lively discussion at the Ottawa Early Christianity group on 27 February 2015.
The Myth of Intellectual ‘Pagan Resistance’ in Late Antique Egypt

The *Life of Severus*, written in Greek by Zachariah of Mytilene shortly after 512 but preserved in Syriac translation, contains a section on Paralius that paints a detailed picture of his life as a student of Greek philosophy at Alexandria in the 480s. One of the professors, Asclepiodotus, is said, perhaps in the Spring of 486, to have visited a shrine of Isis at the nearby suburb of Menouthis after which a child is born to his barren wife. Perceiving this at first to be a miracle, Paralius begins to doubt the story under influence of his brother Athanasius at the Enaton monastery and becomes openly deviant to the professors, including his teacher Horapollon. As a result, a group of fellow students beats him up. Paralius flees to the *philoponoi*, zealous Christian students with ties to the Enaton monastery, who hail the incident as a ‘persecution’ by the ‘pagan’ intellectual establishment of a Christian student. Finally, when bishop Peter Mongus hears of the incident, he reconceives it as an outright Christian-‘pagan’ conflict and sends a group of monks to the shrine to demolish it and parade its idols.

These and other remarkable stories of intellectuals associated with traditional cults and practices at this late date have led scholars traditionally to assume that there was a sizeable movement in Egypt that actively opposed Christianity. Papyrologists Jean Maspero and Roger Rémondon speak of it in terms of ‘la suprême résistance au christianisme’, describing the fifth-century intellectuals as follows: ‘la “philosophie” formait une sorte de société demi-secrète, qui considérait comme un devoir national d’employer la science à défendre les restes de l’ancienne religion; et des générations de sophistes se transmettaient de père en fils ce poste de combat’ and ‘Le paganisme des philosophes de la capitale, au Ve siècle, n’est donc pas un anachronisme isolé et sans racines, il est lié au paganisme d’une partie du peuple, il n’en est que l’expression intellectuelle.’ Such views are not surprising as it has long been held that one of the main characteristics of Late Antiquity was a fight to the death between Christianity and ‘paganism’.

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2. Kugener (1907) 14–44. For the place of the Paralius section in the larger work, see Watts (2005); for the *Life*, see Greatrex (2011) 15–18. A detailed study of the incident is offered by Watts (2010), with pp. 263–264 (Appendix 1) on the date.

3. Maspero (1914), quote at p. 18, providing a first edition of a remarkable petition on papyrus of Horapollon (*P.Cair.Masp*. 111 67295 i–ii), a copy of which ended up in the papers of Dioscorus of Aphrodisite (see below), from which we learn that the philosopher possessed lands and came from the village of Phenebytis in the Panopolite nome; Rémondon (1952), quote at p. 67. The influence of these studies is still felt e.g. in Wipszycka (1988) 125–126, 145.

4. As appears e.g. from Momigliano (1963), on which see Brown (2011).