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# Origen's Celsus and Imperial Greek Religiosity

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The investigator into Celsus' account of mainstream imperial cult and religiosity faces some formidable obstacles.[1] Compared with Origen's quotations and citations from Celsus on philosophy, Christian thinking or Christian behaviour, the evidence of *Contra Celsum* for Greek and Roman cult is extremely slender and fragmentary. We can infer that comparison with mainstream cult was not a central plank of Celsus' argument. It follows that even what Celsus wrote, let alone what he is reported as writing, about cult is unlikely to be systematic and may not even be coherent.

Where Origen does cite Celsus on cult or ritual practice, there is often no indication whether Celsus is describing something that was practised by most people, by any particular group, or by himself. (This problem, of course, is not unique to *Contra Celsum.* We have very little idea whether

[1] I share the view of e.g. Nongbri 2013 that 'religion' is an anachronistic term in this period, but occasionally use 'religion' or 'religious' where the alternatives are cumbersome. I use 'mainstream' as preferable to 'pagan', including elective cults in the term. What follows takes an optimistic view of the scope and reliability of Origen's quotations: see Bader 1940; Pichler 1980; Arnold 2016, 1–32. Despite the elegant argument of Mitchell 2007, it remains unlikely on balance that Celsus the Epicurean is the Celsus of Lucian's *Alexander.* I am grateful to the editors for convening the conference at which this paper was first delivered, and to George Boys-Stones and Lindsay Driediger-Murphy for their helpful and illuminating comments on its first draft.

there was such a thing as a typical profile of Greek or Roman religious behaviour in any group at any period. We often assume that it was normative to worship some, if not all, the principal gods of one's village, town or city, sometimes to visit other established cults – an oracle, say, or a healing cult – and perhaps to belong to a religious association or consult an occasional freelance prophet or magic-worker. That picture has intuitive appeal, but it is little more than an impression.[2]) As evidence for normative second-century religious behaviour, therefore, or the behaviour of any individual or group, *Contra Celsum* is intriguing but unreliable.

The relationship between Celsus' cult activity, his thinking about the gods, and his Platonism is also uncertain. Was Celsus a philosopher who practised cult using a separate compartment of his Balkanized brain?[3] Does he draw on ideas which we identify as philosophical but which were widespread in the thinking of second-century worshippers and not marked by them as philosophical? Is it appropriate to try to disentangle 'philosophical' from 'religious' thinking at all? This essay's brief is to do the last, so it will try to set aside those sections of text which are clearly identifiable with philosophical doctrines. At some points, though, I will argue that philosophy and thinking about cult are closely related; and in general we should bear in mind that Celsus may not systematically have distinguished philosophical from other kinds of thinking about the gods.

Despite these difficulties, investigating mainstream imperial cult and religiosity through *Contra Celsum* is not a hopeless task. Worship of the gods appears in a number of Origen's quotations and citations from Celsus. The fact that it does not seem to have been central to Celsus' argument

[2] Ando 2013; Rüpke 2013, 3–28. The few individuals for whom we can build a partial profile of individual religious activity (Cicero, Plutarch, Aelius Aristides) are, for that and other reasons, atypical.

[3] After Veyne 1988, but on the limitations of the concept see Morgan 2015, 171–72.

makes it more likely that what he does say is reliable, on the principle that remarks made in passing, which are not part of an author's main argument, are likely to be relatively little distorted by their immediate context. What is more, Origen often shows Celsus thinking about the nature of worship, and sometimes holding strong views about what constitutes right worship, and why.[4] This puts us in the unusual position, as students of ancient religions, that we know nothing about Celsus' cult practice but a little about his thought. More significantly, it tells us that thinking about worship is something which at least some people thought was worth doing in the second century. For Celsus – and, I shall argue, others in his day – cult is much more than a matter of *faire c'est croire*.[5]

## 1 CELSUS AND CULT

Celsus' scattered references to mainstream cult have received understandably limited scholarly attention.[6] Two recent developments in the field, however, offer reasons to look at them again. We no longer think of mainstream cult as being in crisis in the early Roman Empire, so the idea, common a generation or two ago, that Celsus attests to such a crisis is probably wrong.[7] And historians have become increasingly interested in Greek and Roman cognitive–affective religiosity and the possibility that Greek and Latin sources express collective and personal ideas and feelings about worship and the divine.[8] To this project,

[4] At *Cels.* 4.47 Origen claims that, though Celsus' book is called *True Doctrine*, it contains no positive doctrines, merely criticisms of Judaism and Christianity. He is apparently talking here about doctrines concerning cult and the gods rather than about philosophy, but he is unfair: his quotations of Celsus do offer positive information.

[5] After Scheid 2005.

[6] For useful discussions see Crouzel 1976; Pichler 1980, 86–94; Fédou 1988, 61–65, 198–210.

[7] Cf. e.g. Rüpke 2007, ch. 12 contra Fédou 1988, 61–65; Hauck 1989, 77–78.

[8] E.g. Pleket 1981; Versnel 2011; Morgan 2013, 2015, ch. 4, 2017a; Eidinow et al. 2015; Harrison 2015 Petrovic and Petrovic 2016; Rüpke 2016.

I shall argue that *Contra Celsum* has a substantial contribution to make.

Celsus self-identifies both as a philosopher and as a regular Greek worshipper. He is clear that not to believe in any gods (in the manner of, for instance, the Scythians, Seres, and nomads of Libya) is impious and unacceptable (*Cels.* 7.62–64).[9] He mentions a number of Olympian gods and heroes in approving terms: among them Zeus (3.43, 5.45), Apollo (3.25, 3.37), Athena (8.66), Helios (8.66), Dionysus (3.42), Asclepius (3.3, 3.42), Heracles (3.42) and the Dioscuri (3.22).[10] Nowhere does Origen cite him as dismissing the gods or criticizing their temples, altars, images or cult practices (e.g. 7.62–64, 8.17), though occasionally he praises philosophical allegories of the gods' activities (e.g. 6.42).[11]

Like many worshippers, Celsus takes for granted that the gods manifest their power to their adherents. They appear to worshippers – especially in sanctuaries, often during incubation – and they regularly help them, heal them, give advice through oracles and punish wrongdoers (e.g. *Cels.* 3.24, 7.3, cf. 2.68, 4.6).[12] A high-toned passage in

[9] Celsus is not reported as acknowledging that Greeks or Romans might be atheists (on evidence for atheism in this period see Whitmarsh 2016, 193–242). Celsus identifies Christians as atheists. Origen (unusually) does not straightforwardly deny it but argues that atheism may be based on various grounds (*Cels.* 7.63–64): Christians do not worship mainstream gods because they are commanded to worship only the one god.

[10] Celsus mentions Orpheus as a wise and pious man (1.16, 7.53), but we do not hear that he is especially interested in mysteries. Origen implies that, as a Greek, he might approve of Bacchic mysteries, but immediately after a quotation in which Celsus is negative about them (*Cels.* 4.10; cf. 3.16, 8.48). At *Cels.* 6.22 Origen accuses Celsus of enthusiasm for Persian mysteries, in a passage where he seems to have compared them favourably with Christianity and Judaism, but, perhaps tellingly, does not quote him; he also asks rhetorically why Celsus does not mention other barbarian (including Roman) mysteries. Overall, our impression is that Celsus is polite but non-committal about mysteries: cf., below, n. 22.

[11] This, of course, reveals little about Celsus' practice or thought: philosophers after Socrates routinely present themselves as conventionally pious to avoid attracting hostile attention to their experimental theologies.

[12] Though Celsus does not mention informal meetings between gods and worshippers, e.g. at home or on the road, which elsewhere are treated as commonplace (Morgan 2013, 6–7), perhaps because he thinks religious experience is trustworthy only if experienced by the wise or by everybody (below, pp. 156, 164–167).

Book 8 (8.45, cf. 3.35, 7.6) praises the power and reliability of oracles, which manifest divine truths to worshippers and have been responsible for the successful foundation of cities, establishment of colonies, eradication of diseases, ending of famines, and just punishment of those who neglected them. Celsus recognizes the prophetic powers of certain birds and animals (4.91) and objects to the adulteration of the Sibylline oracles with Christian material (7.53). He is apparently comfortable with established myths of the afterlife such as that of the Elysian Fields (7.28).

Celsus favours mainstream cults and practices not least because they are widespread, their effectiveness is well attested and they are accepted by a great many people.[13] Origen seems to find these arguments difficult to counter. The best he can do is to assert that Christians could also say that an 'untold number' of people worship Christ (*Cels.* 3.24), though he cannot think that Christian numbers, however untold, equal those of mainstream worshippers in his day. Christians, he says, also have stories about prophets (8.45–46); not everyone accepts oracles (7.3); and his god does not reveal himself to more people because he is not an exhibitionist (4.6).

With other educated Greeks and Romans, Celsus recognizes some of the gods of different peoples as the same gods.[14] It makes no difference, he says, whether we call Zeus the Most High, Zen, Adonai, Sabaoth or Amun (*Cels.* 5.45).[15] Origen (unlike some Christians before and after him[16]) does not accept that other peoples may worship his god by another name, but his counter-argument is again less than compelling. He invokes the Stoic theory of the

[13] See further below, pp. 164–165.

[14] Cf. e.g. Seneca, *Ben.* 4.7.1–2; Apuleius, *Met.* 11.5; ps.-Aristotle, *De mundo* 7; Mitchell and Van Nuffelen 2010.

[15] Not all gods have foreign counterparts: Celsus also says (invoking Herodotus) that different parts of the earth are allotted to different divine overseers (*Cels.* 5.34–45).

[16] E.g. Acts 17.23; Augustine, *CD* 4.11.

naturalness of names, together with the language-specific power of daemonic names in magic-working, to argue that no name can be translated from one language to another without losing its significance (5.45, cf. 1.24–25). Since, to make this argument, he must gloss over the fact that Christians recognize their god as the god of the Jews (whom, despite the continuity of Christianity with the history of Israel, he does not regard as one with Christians in his own day), and the fact that Christians speak of their god in many languages, his response reads weakly. The fragility of Origen's responses to some of Celsus' least technical arguments for mainstream cult suggests that he is not misrepresenting Celsus. One does not invent for one's opponent arguments one cannot decisively refute. It also underlines the strength of Celsus' position. Origen succeeds in presenting Celsus' views as widely shared, rationally based and sophisticated. Origen's struggle to reply convincingly attests not only to the practical ascendancy of mainstream cult in the second and third centuries, but also to its intellectual strength.

Celsus also recognizes the existence of daemons, which he sometimes distinguishes (*Cels.* 5.2, 7.68) from gods and heroes.[17] As part of the hierarchy of divinities, he regards it as appropriate for people to sacrifice and pray to daemons (8.25). They have been given control over much of the everyday business of life, so we should thank them and offer our first fruits to them (7.67–68, 8.33, 8.55). We should do this if only out of prudence, as we would honour worldly authorities who had the power to help us (8.24, 35). To acknowledge daemons and offer them cult is unremarkable, but here Celsus' Platonism influences his thinking.[18] Like other Middle Platonists, he identifies as

[17] Sometimes the class of daemons seems to include angels but at *Cels.* 7.68 they are two separate orders; cf. 7.64 if this derives from Celsus. For Origen, daemons are always evil spirits.

[18] Dillon 1977, 89–90, 171–74, 216–18, 287–88, 317–20; Martin 2004, 152–54.

daemons not just the many nameless freelance spirits that are regularly invoked in magic and other informal practices, but all the sublunary gods.[19] This leads him to claim, inter alia, that emperors hold power by the might of daemons (8.65), and that if everyone became Christian and stopped worshipping them, Roman power would fail (8.68).[20]

## 2 CELSUS AND REASON

So far, this is a conventional enough picture. Origen's Celsus presents himself as a mainstream, consensual thinker who affirms established cults and cultural authorities. As a production of rhetorical *ethos* designed to contrast Celsus with marginal, ignorant, intolerant, atheistic Christians, this self-presentation makes excellent sense and, as we have seen, Origen finds it difficult to combat effectively; whether it also reflects Celsus' own religiosity, we cannot know. There are, though, some boundaries to Celsus' polytheism and preferences within it which look more distinctive and perhaps even personal. These are connected with Celsus' interest in reason.

Celsus has mixed views about cults which he understands as originating outside the Greek world. Barbarians, he asserts (*Cels.* 1.2), can discover doctrines, but Greeks are the best judges of the value of their discoveries.[21] Celsus can see Mithraism, for example, as presenting, obscurely, some

[19] Boys-Stones 2018a, 291–92, 326–28. Lindsay Driediger-Murphy observes in conversation that Origen is probably unfair to Celsus here. At *Cels.* 8.60, 63 he accuses Celsus of being inconsistent in worshipping daemons which are at best inferior and morally ambiguous. Celsus, though, understands daemons as the morally inconsistent divinities below the pure supreme deity. Ironically, Celsus accuses Origen of a parallel inconsistency when he questions how Christians' 'great god' can be both perfectly good and responsible for suffering (*Cels.* 7.14–15, cf. 7.66).

[20] Lanfranchi 2014 exaggerates in saying that Celsus is the first writer to identify polytheism with the success of the empire, as opposed to Christian monotheism, since Romans have always taken for granted the support of multiple gods.

[21] Origen (*Cels.* 1.2) agrees that Greek wisdom can establish the truth, and claims it can help to establish the truth of the Gospel.

of the truths of philosophy (6.22), but also as irrational and exploitative.[22] He respects the wisdom of the Egyptians (8.58) but disapproves of what he understands as animal worship (3.17).[23] Foreigners can be wise, but their wisdom needs to be checked against that of the Greeks.[24]

We might assume, given Celsus' philosophical affiliations, that the wisdom of the Greeks here is that of philosophers. Occasionally it is (only philosophers can find the 'maker and father of the universe' (*Cels.* 7.42)), but usually it is not. Celsus indicates that no sane (Greek) person, entering an Egyptian temple and seeing, apparently, an animal being worshipped, would join in (3.17). He cites Pindar and Herodotus – often identified as cultural authorities but not normally as philosophers – in support of the view that 'custom is king' (5.25, 34). He quotes Heraclitus to the effect that anyone who talks to a statue as if it were a god is as mad as a man talking to a house (1.5). Presumably Heraclitus could only say this if being able to recognize the difference between a statue and a god should be a routine accomplishment. Apparently, then, any sensible Greek should be able to evaluate both foreign cults and unusual Greek behaviour.[25]

On one level, deciding when, how, and to whom to offer cult, often under the direction of a god or a divine sign, is an everyday Greek and Roman activity. Celsus is unusual, though, in giving human reason an explicit and leading role in the process, and in describing it, in terms borrowed from philosophy, as the discernment of value and truth.

[22] *Cels.* 1.9, cf. 3.16; the same can be true of the cults of Cybele and Sabazius.

[23] At *Cels.* 8.58 Egyptians can teach Greeks about the value of worshipping the daemons who are in charge of regions of the world. On Celsus' conventional view of animal worship cf. Versluys 2002, 387–436.

[24] Despite occasional references to Rome (*Cels.* 1.3, 3.36, 8.65; see Pichler 1980, 86–94), Celsus' frame of reference is essentially Greek.

[25] Both, presumably, on the basis that 'established social conventions' (*Cels.* 5.25) are normative. Origen's objections to these passages are not to any of these points, but to Celsus' apparent claim that Christian worship is as irrational as animal worship, and Christians in general are out of step with cultural norms. On who counts as 'any sensible Greek', see further below, pp. 160–161.

Book 3 provides a revealing, because unusually extended, example of his thinking. The early chapters of the book form part of Origen's argument for the divinity of Christ, and tackle Celsus' objections to the idea that human beings (in historical time) ever become divine.[26] At *Cels.* 3.26–29 Origen reports Celsus' account of an occasion when Apollo commanded the people of Metapontum to treat Aristeas as a god (ἐν θεῶν ... νἐμειν). Origen (3.26) quotes Celsus' conclusion that, despite Aristeas' miracles and Apollo's command, no one, in fact, thinks that Aristeas is a god. At 3.29 – this time apparently paraphrasing Celsus – Origen adds that the Metapontines thought that the fact that Aristeas was a man, and perhaps not a very good one, was more important than the oracle which pronounced him a god, or as worthy of divine honours. The Metapontines therefore declined to obey Apollo on this occasion, which is why no one treats Aristeas as a god.

Origen thinks that Celsus knows this story from Herodotus or Pindar.[27] If there was a Pindaric version it does not survive, but in Herodotus' version, which Origen quotes, Aristeas does not explicitly command the Metapontines to worship him as a god. He tells them to set up an altar to Apollo and a statue to himself beside it. The Metapontines consult Delphi; Delphi advises them that it will be advantageous to comply; they do so, and the statue survives to Herodotus' own day. Either Celsus knew a different version, or altered the story himself, or Origen is misrepresenting him. We can, I think, rule out the last. Origen's response to the story does not rely on, or even refer to, Celsus' apparent deviation from his sources or the unusual behaviour of the Metapontines in assessing Aristeas for themselves and rejecting the oracle's advice.

[26] See below, pp. 174–175; cf. *Cels.* 3.31, 32.

[27] Herodotus, *Hist.* 4.14–15. Bolton 1962, 130 argues that the offering of divine honours to Aristeas is a fourth-century story or later, so cannot have appeared in Pindar (cf. e.g. Apollonius, *Mirabilia* 2).

Its focus is elsewhere: Origen argues that if one accepts that human beings can perform miracles, then the stories about Jesus are better founded than those about Aristeas (*Cels.* 3.27);[28] that it would do no credit to Apollo, so should lessen worshippers' respect for him, if he commanded them to worship a former man (3.28); that worship of Christ is not, anyway, based on his miracles (3.28); and that the success of Christianity is one reason not to believe in the divinity of daemons in general (3.29).

Whether Celsus cited an otherwise lost version of the story or changed it himself we cannot know, but his version is striking. Though he is clear elsewhere that the gods punish wrongdoing (*Cels.* 8.41), no harm apparently came to the Metapontines as a result of their decision. Their negotiation with Apollo was both rational and within the bounds of piety.[29] The story, as Celsus tells it, highlights Celsus' high view of human reason: its ability to discern the truth and its role in establishing what constitutes right worship in mainstream cult.[30]

Celsus cites Aristeas to argue that, even if Jesus was a wonder-worker, sensible people should have been able to see that he was not *ipso facto* a god. To infer divinity from wonder-working, he thinks, is absurd. He has reservations about practitioners of a number of other cults who, in his view, foster irrationality in their adherents. Some of these (like priests of Bacchus) practise mystery cults; others (like priests of Cybele and worshippers of Sabazius) are of 'foreign' origin (*Cels.* 1.9). Worshippers of Hecate and 'other daemons' are

[28] An argument better focused against Herodotus' version than Celsus'.

[29] Cf. *Cels.* 3.36, where Celsus is unsympathetic to the cult of Antinous, who was also a man and, he thinks, not virtuous.

[30] Algra 2007 argues that Varro's influential typology of theology as civic, mythological and philosophical (Augustine, *CD* 6.5) goes back at least to the early Hellenistic period, and that philosophers across schools use philosophy to think about both other types, even claiming occasionally that cult practice can strengthen philosophy. In his view, however, all the philosophers he discusses are primarily interested in and committed to philosophical understandings of the divine. Celsus appears to take a step further, validating cult in its own right and using philosophical-style thinking to understand the truth of it.

perhaps suspect because of their connection with the underworld (1.9). Some of these practitioners demand unreasoning commitment: the Christians allegedly say, 'Do not ask questions, just believe' (μὴ ἐξέταζε ἀλλὰ πίστευσον) (1.9). Others frighten people with 'phantoms and terrors' (4.10, cf. 3.16, 8.48), and 'use some kind of magic and sorcery and invoke the barbarous names of certain daemons' (6.39).[31]

Celsus objects to 'all those people who have taught rituals of purification, or spells which bring deliverance, or formulas that avert evil, who produce noisy crashes, or pretended miracles, or all the various prophylactics of clothes, or numbers, or stones, or plants, or roots, and other objects of every sort' and their 'books containing barbarian names of daemons and magical formulae' (*Cels.* 6.39, 40).[32] He deplores the many

> anonymous individuals who prophesy at the slightest excuse for some trivial cause both inside and outside temples; and others who wander about begging and roaming around cities and military camps, pretending to be moved as if giving some oracular utterance. Every one of them has the standard formula to hand: 'I am God (or the son of God, or a divine spirit)' ... (*Cels.* 7.9)[33]

Celsus' objection to all these types is the same: they are charlatans, so whatever they persuade their followers to do or think is meaningless.[34] In some cases, Celsus also

[31] Here and below translations are based on Chadwick 1965, modified.

[32] Origen does not recognize this passage as a description of any practice he knows, and takes Celsus to be confused, but suggests that his objection is to those who deceive the gullible by giving an impression of being able to perform miracles by divine power.

[33] Origen and many commentators take this to be a reference to Christians, but Celsus' reference to prophets' speaking inside temples and roaming around military camps suggests that other groups are also in his sights.

[34] Part of Origen's response is to emphasize the element of trust and risk in the formation of any relationship with the divine (e.g. *Cels.* 1.11). This is a bold move with implications for Origen's own theology, but could be read as fragile in response to Celsus' appeal to reason.

seems to think that such practitioners make the gods sound irrational: frightening or dangerous.[35] Philosophy may play a role here – as a Platonist, Celsus is committed to the view that the divine is both good and rational – but not necessarily.[36] Popular moral thinking, for instance, about the gods in this period often represents them as both good and just and resists the idea that they are irrational or punitive.[37] (Connected to this theme is Celsus' outrage at Paul's claim, as he reads it, that wisdom in this life is evil and foolishness good.[38] Here again Celsus is in line not only with philosophy but with popular morality, which rates reason in the form of practical wisdom as among the most indispensable virtues and safeguards of mortal life.[39])

Philosophers are always concerned with reason, but in these passages Celsus does not restrict reason to the practice of philosophy.[40] He attributes reason to, and expects it from, individuals, social groups, people in general and gods; he praises it where he sees it, and criticizes it where he does not. He sees reason, for both gods and worshippers, as centrally important in divine–human relations, possible

[35] Cf. e.g. Plutarch, *Mor.* 169e; Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.36.

[36] Philosophers who object to the irrationality of Christianity include Lucian's Peregrinus (*Peregr.* 13, Galen [*Prim. Mov.* fr. *ad* Ibn Abi Usaibia, *History of Physicians* 5]), Hierocles (*FGH* 4 p. 429), Porphyry (*ad* Eus. *PE* 1.2.4), Julian, *Mis.* 2.36; cf. Justin, *Apol.* 2.10. Judge 1983, 22–23, sees a 'preoccupation' with Christianity's illogicality as widespread among intellectuals.

[37] Morgan 2007, 31–35, 75–78, 111–16, 131–35, 207–11; Versnel 2011, ch. 2; Morgan 2013, 9–13, 15–16. At *Cels.* 1.5, Celsus suggests that the goodness of the gods should be honoured to the degree that their images should not be made by immoral craftsmen.

[38] *Cels.* 1.13; 1 Cor. 3.18–19, cf. 1.19–25.

[39] Morgan 2007, 166–69, 188–90. At *Cels.* 1.4, Celsus thinks (and Origen accepts) that Christian ethics are similar to those of Greek philosophy. In the surviving quotations, he does not distinguish between philosophical ethics and those which Christians teach, raising the question whether for Celsus there is no call to distinguish between philosophical and religious ethics.

[40] At *Cels.* 7.42 he recognizes that not everyone has the capacity to know the great god (i.e. can be a philosopher), but that one can reasonably worship the great god by worshipping the other gods.

in principle, and even – at least among Greeks – regularly practised.[41]

Many of the cults whose practitioners or devotees Celsus criticizes as unreasonable are new, or relatively new, in modern scholarly terms 'elective', foreign in origin or pejoratively labelled as foreign, and/or practised by magic-workers, freelance prophets or oracle-mongers. Criticism of such cults and practices is a topos of early imperial literature, as is their apparently magnetic attraction for women, slaves and the uneducated; the invectives of Petronius, Juvenal, Apuleius, Dio Chrysostom, Lucian and others on the subject are well studied.[42] What, though, about such cults or practitioners is particularly disliked is different in different authors and contexts. The speaker of Juvenal's Satire 6 claims that adherence to foreign goddesses makes women abuse themselves and neglect their husbands (6.512–41). The Chaldean and Egyptian magi driven out of the Hellespont by Apollonius of Tyana are accused of being there to make money (Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 6.41). The Greeks of Josephus' *Against Apion* claim that the Jews are insignificant, diseased and originally Egyptian (1.12(64, 68), 2.2(8), 2.3(38)).

Celsus is not consistently negative about traditions that he labels 'barbarian', nor about cults which we call 'elective'. He does not seem to regard either as regularly politically subversive.[43] His most consistent objections are to

[41] Cf. Cicero, *ND* 1.43–49, where Epicurus is cited as holding that right beliefs about the gods are based on universal human consensus, not only the views of philosophers. Celsus suggests that this was not only an Epicurean view; cf. Cicero, *Leg.* 1.23; Plutarch, *Mor.* 550d; Epictetus 2.8.23. On the importance of worshippers' thinking rightly about religious ritual see Morgan 2017a.

[42] Wendt 2016, 5, notes that the complaint goes back at least to Plato, *Republic* 364b–365a. In light of the debate about whether Christianity at this period is best understood as a new cult, the new Israel, a new type of familial formation, race, polity or philosophical school, it is notable that Celsus' main point of attack is the divinity and worship of Christ and the comparisons he draws are with cults.

[43] Though cf. Seneca, *Ep.* 95.35, arguing that *superstitio*, which is a threat to the state, is defined by what one thinks rather than what one does. This would make irrational cults *ipso facto* subversive, but Celsus does not make that move.

unreason, whether in the form of charlatanism, fear-mongering, or demands that worshippers 'believe without thought',[44] and to the attractions of irrational cults for a large section of the population.[45] Whether he understands this position as his own, as characteristic of a philosopher who is also a worshipper, or as shared by others whether or not they are philosophers, is impossible to tell from Origen's quotations. It is, though, worth underlining that what Celsus dislikes about Christianity is not distinctive to it. He sees in Christianity an extreme example of qualities he dislikes in many cults. He values reason not just as a weapon against Christianity, but in its own right as an aspect of Greek religiosity.

## 3 CELSUS AND πίστις

Since Celsus identifies as a philosopher and calls his book Ἀληθὴς Λόγος, we are not surprised to find his quotations much concerned with truth and doctrine, but it is striking how often he uses πίστις language. On one level this is also unsurprising – πίστις language is used extensively by Platonists, especially in relation to the unreliability of beliefs founded on the evidence of this world, as opposed to the world of ideas – but Celsus' use of it goes beyond what we might expect of a Platonist.[46] A strict Platonist, for instance, would not regard any of the phenomena of the everyday world as worthy of πίστις, but Celsus treats a number of this-worldly phenomena as worthy of πίστις or testable for their πίστις. This raises the question whether Celsus' interest

[44] Cf. *Cels.* 6.41, unmasking Dionysius, an 'Egyptian musician', who, he claims, admits that magic is only effective with the uneducated or morally depraved.

[45] See below, pp. 170–172. The Jew's arguments against Christianity are also couched in strongly rationalist terms, suggesting that Celsus shaped them even when he derived them from Jewish sources (e.g. *Cels.* 4.52).

[46] I am indebted here to an unpublished paper by Mark Edwards, '*Pistis* and Platonism'; cf. Morgan 2015, 152–53.

in πίστις and treatment of it are less those of a philosopher than of a regular Greek worshipper.

Celsus' interest in πίστις, of course, is related to his interest in reason, but they are not coextensive. Celsus understands πίστις in relation to the gods as encompassing both trust in the gods and beliefs that certain claims about them are true.[47] He recognizes, for example, that Christians and Jews put their trust in their god, in Christ and in other leaders, notably Moses.[48] Similarly (and, in his view, with better reason) Greeks and barbarians put their trust in Asclepius (*Cels.* 3.24).[49] Daemons (in the sense of the mainstream gods) 'belong to god' and have the capacity to help worshippers, so it is appropriate for worshippers to put their trust in them (8.24).[50] Celsus even asserts that animals can have πίστις towards the gods. Elephants are the most faithful of all animals to the god, he claims (and as a result the best oath-keepers).[51]

All peoples also believe that certain things are true about their gods. Jews and Christians believe that a saviour was prophesied to come to earth (*Cels.* 3.1). Everyone believes that what prophets predict will come about (7.14–15) (though Celsus thinks one should not believe a prophet if

[47] On the range of other meanings of divine–human πίστις see Morgan 2015, chs. 4–10. On the intertwined nature of trust and belief see Morgan 2015, 20–21, 214–24.

[48] *Cels.* 2.8, 54, 70, 75–8; 4.6, 6.29 cf. 1.23. An element of belief is probably involved here (though not absolutely necessarily: see Howard-Snyder 2017, 24–29; Morgan 2017b, 36–37), but worship, loyalty and following a leader require a personal commitment that is more than propositional belief: see Morgan 2017b, 13–16).

[49] This may relate to what seems to be a popular identification of Asclepius with the world soul: e.g. Aristides, *Or.* 4.334.19–35; Frede 2003.

[50] πίστις often has implications of confidence or hope, and it is perhaps with that inflection that Celsus understands Jews to believe in heaven (6.19). (On πίστις as hopeful see Morgan 2015, 1 n. 3, 16–18, 20, 22.) Christian πίστις often has strong overtones of obedience, faithfulness or endurance, but these do not seem to be equally controversial or interesting to Celsus.

[51] Elephants' πίστις is thought to be based on knowledge of the divine; cf. *Cels.* 4.98, Pliny, *HN* 8.2–3; *DC* 39.38. This is part of Celsus' natural-theological argument that the world is not made for the benefit of human beings but equally for animals; Origen disagrees and the possibility of animal πίστις is not pursued.

he or she predicts something that conflicts with the nature of the great god, such as that god will serve as a slave or die (7.15)).[52] It is appropriate to trust and worship daemons (8.54, cf. 8.24) because people are born bound to the prison of the body, so 'we must believe' (πιστέον) that we are given over to the charge of the divine 'officers in charge of this prison'. Celsus' views of the great god and of daemons here again invoke Platonism, but Platonism as a tool for thinking about mainstream cult.

Celsus is very interested in what constitute credible or trustworthy (πιστός, πιθανός) foundations for trust and belief, and trustworthy witnesses to truth-claims about the divine. He thinks that Greek myths and the Homeric poems contain the same truths as Heraclitus and Pherecydes, and can be a trustworthy guide to the divine if interpreted allegorically (*Cels.* 6.42, cf. 4.36). Homer 'should not be disbelieved' (οὐ χρὴ ἀπιστεῖν) on a literal level either, when he says that there should be one king (in Celsus' world, the emperor) to whom Kronos gave power (8.68). At the same time, Celsus thinks that Greeks are more discriminating in relation to their authoritative texts than Christians are: they do not automatically believe ancient myths (οὐδ' αὐτοῖς ἐπιστεύσαμεν), even when myths testify to great works done by heroes of the past for humanity (1.67).

Greek myth and epic have a long tradition, which Christian writings lack, of being tested by experience and debate, and this is one reason (together with Christian writings' literary shortcomings and insider bias) why, for Celsus, Christian writings are unreliable. Among many examples, Celsus wants, for instance, a more trustworthy witness than the Gospels to the descent of the Spirit on Jesus

[52] This is primarily an objection to prophecies about Christ, but applies to all prophets (above, p. 161): cf. Plutarch, *Mor.* 406b–7c, where Plutarch suggests that Delphic oracles are now given in prose due to a change in human πίστις (407a–b). Modern πίστις wants to understand the true meaning of an oracle and to be certain that it is not being misled by charlatans.

at his baptism (*Cels.* 1.41).[53] He argues that if Jesus wanted to establish πίστις (here, perhaps, both trust and belief) in himself, he should have appeared to more people after the resurrection, including people who had not trusted/believed (πιστεύειν) before (2.70, 2.75, cf. 4.6). He comments sardonically that, given that Christianity rests on no solid foundation (ἀξιόχρεως ὑπόθεσις), it is amazing that Christians have any shared πίστις at all, and speculates that the main foundation for their unity is their common revolt against Judaism and fear of outsiders (3.14).

On the Greek side, Celsus regards antiquity as a sound basis for belief-πίστις. Above all, he affirms ideas which, he claims, have been articulated by many nations, cities and wise men over time.[54] He offers an eclectic set of examples, geographically and chronologically wide-ranging and encompassing mythical and historical characters, wise barbarians, Greek sages, writers of myth, poetry and philosophy, and keepers of famous cults. 'Hear Celsus' words,' says Origen (*Cels.* 1.14, cf. 1.16): 'There is an ἀρχαῖος λόγος which has existed from the beginning, which has always been maintained by the wisest tribes and cities and wise men.' These include the Egyptians, Assyrians, Indians, Persians, Hyperboreans, Odrysians, Samothracians and Eleusinians. Celsus also approves of the Galactophagi of Homer, the Druids of Gaul, and the Getae.[55] In later books (4.14, 6.3), ideas which have been 'thought for a long time' can also include Plato's.

Closely related to his validation of ancient and widely shared traditions is the credence Celsus gives to experts and wise men of earlier times or his own. He rates highly the

[53] At *Cels.* 2.27–28 Christians themselves lack real confidence in the Gospel, which is why some try to change it to make it πιθανώτερος.

[54] Tertullian, *Apol.* 19 claims this is normal for Greeks and Romans.

[55] These examples are all paralleled in other authors, but, by citing them all, Celsus again emphasizes his broad-mindedness and inclusivity. It is unusual to find druids in such a list, but Chadwick 1965, xviii, 28. 91, notes that some Alexandrian scholars saw them as wise men. On the authority of 'the ancients' cf. Plutarch, fr. 157.16–25 Sandbach *ad* Eusebius, *PE* 3.1.1.83c.

writings of Linus, Musaeus, Orpheus and Zoroaster (*Cels.* 1.18). Like other Middle Platonists he admires Pythagoras (1.18), and approves of the Pythagorean Numenius (1.15) who studied many books and made a synthesis of the doctrines that seemed to him true. He believes the 'myths' of Heraclitus and Pherecydes (6.42), and regularly mentions and cites Plato and other Platonists (e.g. 4.14, 5.65, 6.3, 7.42). He thinks that prima facie what wise and educated men recognize as wisdom is likely to be wisdom.[56]

Carl Andresen has argued that the content of the ἀρχαῖος λόγος is knowledge of the divine in a Platonic sense, and hence that Celsus' intellectual affiliation here is with Plato; and other 'wise men' are invoked only in support of Platonic ideas. Gary Burke takes issue with him on the basis of his reconstruction of Celsus' text, and he is surely right on grounds of argument too.[57] Origen distinguishes between the opinions which Celsus passes on from Plato and those which derive from a wider group (*Cels.* 6.1, 3). He does not report many of the alleged shared views of wise men, but they include the non-Platonic concept of war in heaven (6.42).[58] Celsus is not reported as saying that his view of the coherence of the writings of wise men depends on their agreement with Plato: he affirms antiquity and coherence in themselves, and Origen attacks this claim in itself.[59] It seems clear that Celsus thinks the credibility of

[56] Trust must be involved here in principle (he trusts that philosophers can access the truth as they claim), but belief is central (he thinks there are good reasons to think they can).

[57] Andresen 1955, 50; Burke 1985, 109–10.

[58] Though the allegedly widely shared ideas of the incorporeality of God (1.15) and God's goodness and happiness (4.14) are also Platonic.

[59] Boys-Stones 2001, 105–22, cf. 14–39, shows that Celsus echoes a Stoic theory of the preservation of ancient wisdom in myth which is widely shared in his day, though Platonists additionally think that Plato 'reconstructed the ancient, primitive and (thereby) privileged wisdom of mankind' (p. 118). Antiquity and tradition are often validated in this period as sources of πίστις/*fides* towards the gods, but not universally: Sceptics typically reject them (Morgan 2015, 147–49).

cult is based on more than Platonist ideas; it has its own reasons which it is appropriate for men of reason to respect.

Celsus thinks that, as an educated man, he has access to reason himself, and can assess the credibility of Christian claims. We must follow reason, he says, in accepting doctrines, because those who believe/trust (πιστεύειν) people without doing so are certain to be deceived (*Cels.* 1.9). He is outraged by what he claims is the Christian refusal to articulate the grounds for their beliefs or let anyone else investigate them. Their slogan, 'Don't think, only believe,' is simply unacceptable (1.9). Celsus has a great deal of fun with what he regards as the more unreasonable Christian beliefs, arguing, for example, through multiple examples that there is no proof of Jesus' divinity except his own word, and that since Jesus was low-born, uneducated and self-interested, there is no reason to believe that (1.48, 2.6).[60]

Occasionally Celsus indicates that direct experience can be trustworthy and a basis for belief, but only if it is experienced either by the wise and educated or by everybody.[61] What god that comes among men, he asks (*Cels.* 2.75), 'is disbelieved/mistrusted (ἀπιστεῖται) when he appears to those who were waiting for him?' Last, but not least, Celsus invests a great deal of credence in consequentialism. The truth of myth and epic, as noted above, has long been tested by experience as well as debate. At 7.3 Celsus declares that the whole earth became inhabited through the Pythia, the priestess of Dodona, Clarian Apollo, Apollo at Branchidae and Zeus Ammon. He claims that in general there is good evidence that the Greek gods take harsh revenge on those who blaspheme against them

[60] Many of Celsus' criticisms take the form of Occam's razor, arguing that the Christian interpretation of the phenomena is not the most economical.

[61] Personal experience is often cited as a basis for πίστις in this period (Morgan 2015, 145–47), but Celsus is unusual in saying that the wise or everybody must share it.

(8.43).[62] He takes life to be full of the experience that cult works, in the form of cities built, empires extended and defended, diseases and famines ended and those neglectful of the gods destroyed.

Celsus' discussions of πίστις add complexity and nuance to his commitment to reason, by recognizing that cult practice and religiosity involve cognitive and interpersonal trust as well as belief, that the two are intimately connected, and that both trust and belief are based on multiple foundations which often interact. Celsus' account of πίστις, as one might expect of a Platonist, is well developed, but it goes beyond Platonism in the range of authorities it validates, the ideas it finds acceptable, the foundations of belief it allows, and in whom Celsus thinks is capable of holding a valid belief and how.

We have no way of knowing how widely Celsus' interest in reason and πίστις was shared among worshippers of mainstream gods in the early principate. Among intellectuals, at least, however, his views were certainly not eccentric. In a recent study I argued that the early principate is a period of lively interest in the role of both trust and belief in divine–human relations, in the relationship between them and in their complex foundations. Literary sources and inscriptions regularly talk of the πίστις or *fides* of worshippers towards gods and claim that gods are faithful or trustworthy towards worshippers.[63] Celsus is one of a number of writers (Plutarch, Epictetus and Lucian are others) who are particularly interested in what philosophers call 'propositional belief' or the 'attitude of belief',[64] discussing what it makes sense to believe and why, and who is in a position to decide.[65] I would go further now than in that volume and

[62] At *Cels.* 8.41, if Christians blasphemed Dionysus or Heracles directly, they might not escape lightly.

[63] Morgan 2015, 128–42. [64] Howard-Snyder 2013.

[65] Morgan 2015, ch. 4, esp. 142–51. Thinking that things are true, of course, is often expressed in Greek and Latin with 'thinking' rather than 'trust/belief' language; I focus here on πίστις because of its importance to Celsus and Origen.

argue that a concern with trust and belief is not only prominent in Greek and Roman culture and religiosity in this period, but more distinctive of Graeco-Roman thinking than of the early years of Christianity, and that it becomes prominent in Christianity largely (though not entirely) in interaction with Greek and Roman thinking.[66] I would also argue that one of the most remarkable aspects of *Contra Celsum* is how much of Celsus' understanding of trust and belief Origen is willing to accept. Both those topics, however, lie beyond the scope of this essay.

If Origen's quotations situate Celsus comfortably in an early imperial intellectual landscape of interest in religious belief and its foundations, and add something to our evidence for that landscape, is there anything discernibly unique about Celsus' thought? On the admittedly fragile evidence of Origen's quotations and citations, it is perhaps unexpectedly systematic.[67] We think of systematic theology as the preserve of philosophers and Christians, but Origen offers us an image of a Greek worshipper thinking methodically, not only as a philosopher about metaphysics, but as a worshipper about his relationship with his gods and the credibility of new cults and practices. It may be that other writers of the early principate, if investigated, would also turn out to be thinking, not just with sophistication, but systematically about their own and others' relationship with their gods, but that work has largely yet to be done.[68]

## 4 CELSUS, RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND THE UNEDUCATED

Celsus' interest in reason and πίστις reveals a related interest in authority. He holds clear views about who can

[66] Though I agree with Boys-Stones 2001, 151–53, 218–19, that it is simplistic to see the Christian idea of orthodoxy as arising specifically in response to philosophical criticisms that truth cannot be discerned within Christianity because Christians are too divided: cf. Morgan 2015, 437–41, 512–14.

[67] Though see Arnold 2016, ch. 5, esp. 431–33 on the structure of Celsus' book.

[68] For moves in that direction see e.g. Betz 1975; Dillon 2002; Hirsch-Luipold 2007.

appropriately decide what it is right or wrong to think about the gods and their worship, and on what grounds. This is interesting not least because we often assume that a concern for religious authority and orthodoxy is distinctive to Christians, attributing it to the fact that Christian theology is closely involved with institutional authority and competitions for authority. Origen's quotations of Celsus show that Greek worshippers are also concerned with religious authority, not only within philosophical schools but in connection with mainstream cult, even though Greek (and Roman) cults do not formally charge anyone with responsibility for identifying or enforcing orthodoxy. At no point, moreover, does Origen suggest that Celsus' interest in authority and orthodoxy is unusual or inappropriate in a worshipper of the mainstream gods.

Celsus, as we have seen, approves, among other authorities, of wise men, philosophers and experts. He disapproves of religious practitioners who, in his view, invite irrational responses and lead people cognitively astray.[69] He thinks that what large numbers of people have agreed to be the case about the gods and cult is likely to be right, and that even ordinary Greeks can apply reason to their worship.

His validation of ordinary people, however, turns out not to be unqualified. Almost as much as religious charlatans, he dislikes people who take up and discuss new cults without having the intelligence or education to do so: the poor, uneducated, or low in status.[70] The passages of invective which Origen quotes against these groups (*Cels.* 1.9; 3.52; 6.39; 7.9) are among the most memorable in the book.

[69] On freelance religious 'experts' in the early principate see Wendt 2016. She argues (pp. 9, 64) that numbers of such experts are growing in this period, perhaps in tandem with slackening aristocratic control over religious knowledge and authority. On the perceived trustworthiness of experts of all kinds, including self-defined religious experts, in the early empire, see Morgan 2015, 64–65, 79–81, 146–47, 241.

[70] Especially if their meetings are secret (*Cels.* 1.1, 8.17).

Christians, for example, Celsus claims (*Cels.* 3.18), 'drive away any intelligent person from arguing about this πίστις, and invite only the stupid and low-class folk' (cf. 1.27; 6.12).[71] They want to persuade 'only the foolish, dishonourable, and stupid, slaves, women, and children' (3.49; cf. 3.72, 74). '[T]hose who display their trickery in the marketplaces or go about begging would never enter a gathering of intelligent men, nor would they dare to reveal their noble beliefs in their presence; but whenever they see adolescent boys and a crowd of slaves and a company of fools they push themselves in and show off' (3.50). Worst of all (3.55):

> In private houses also, we see woolworkers, cobblers, laundry-workers, and the most illiterate and bucolic yokels, who would not dare to say anything at all in front of their elders and more intelligent masters. But whenever they get hold of children in private and some stupid women with them, they let out astounding statements, such as, for example, that they must not pay any attention to their father and school-teachers, but must be persuaded by them ... they should ... go along with the women and little children ... to the wooldresser's shop or to the cobbler's or the washerwoman's shop, that they may learn perfection ...[72]

On one level this passage is a conventional attack on charlatan teachers and preachers. (One might hope that Celsus' concern would be for their victims' standing with the gods, but phrases like τοὺς ἀπαιδευτοτάτους τε καὶ ἀγροικοτάτους (3.55) and τοῖς ἀμαθέσι καὶ ἀνοήτοις (4.33) suggest that Celsus is more concerned with identifying legitimate religious authorities than with the well-being of the worshipping

[71] At *Cels.* 6.14 they flee from them.
[72] *Cels.* 3.56. On the contrary, Origen argues, Christians liberate people from all kinds of unethical behaviour.

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public.[73]) At 3.56, however, there is a telling slippage between the teachers and the low-class individuals who are both their interested audience and teachers themselves. Celsus implies here that not only do Christian preachers talk about their faith, but so do the people they preach to: Christian ideas (and very likely other religious ideas) are passed around and discussed among ordinary, uneducated people. Although such activity is not much attested, it is not at all implausible that it took place. Paul's Corinthians, whose ideas about their new cult seem to go so much further than Paul's teaching intended or he approves of, furnish another likely example of it.[74]

The second century is a period not only of mobility in cults and religious practitioners, but of increased social mobility in general, redistributed wealth and increasing education. All these trends could have encouraged more people to develop and debate their own opinions on a wide range of subjects. Celsus' invective suggests that, in his world, a socially wide range of people discuss and contribute to discussions about who is worshipped and how. His disapproval of them adds something both to our picture of the early principate as a period of lively religious experimentation and debate, and to our picture of early imperial debates about the location of religious authority.

## 5 FURTHER THEOLOGICAL FRAGMENTS

It is worth picking out one or two more themes in Celsus' thinking, some of which are probably influenced by his Platonism, but which are presented as influencing his view of the gods and cult practice too.

[73] Den Boer 1976, 311–12 with Francis 2008, 154–55 shows that Celsus equates being poor with being naturally unreasonable, and poor in spirit with being inspired by a malevolent spirit.

[74] Mitchell, M. M. 2010; White 2013, ch. 4; Horrell 2016, 121–33.

In a recent article, Lindsay Driediger-Murphy examines the debate between Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria, and L. Mussius Aemilianus, Vice-Prefect of Egypt, at the trial of the former during the persecution of 257–58 CE (Eusebius, *HE* 6.40; 7.11.1–19). She argues persuasively that Aemilianus does not simply, pragmatically, urge Dionysius to perform acts of worship to the gods of Rome in order to avoid exile, but that he articulates a natural theology according to which he objects to the Christian god as being 'contrary to nature'.[75] Aemilianus was a man of active religious interests but not, as far as we know, a philosopher, so Driediger-Murphy argues that an educated worshipper at this time need not be a philosopher to be interested in, and to articulate, theological ideas.[76] Some of Origen's quotations suggest that Celsus too holds some natural theological ideas, which may have been shared by other Greek worshippers of his time. He thinks that the volume of evil in the world is stable and neither increases nor decreases (*Cels.* 4.62), an idea which can be paralleled in Greek thinking back to Homer.[77] He claims that people do not change (3.64, 66), and that the Christian god's preference for sinners (3.59) is therefore unnatural: a view with abundant implicit parallels in Greek religion, where the gods normally reward the good and punish the bad (cf. 8.41, 45).[78]

[75] After discussing several possible interpretations of the phrase 'contrary to nature', Driediger-Murphy argues that what Aemilianus objects to is his impression that the Christian God is a law unto himself, acting in ways which are sometimes capricious, arbitrary and beyond the bounds of nature: Driediger-Murphy 2017, 670–84. Cf. above, n. 37, on the benignity of the gods in popular moral thinking.

[76] Driediger-Murphy 2017, 669.

[77] Platonist (and Stoic) views of the divine are often more benign and allow for the possibility that people can improve by 'following' or 'imitating' the divine: e.g. Plutarch, *Mor.* 550d, quoting Plato, *Theaet.* 176e; Alcinous, *Didask.* 28.

[78] On the salvific activity of gods, see Jim (2021), but salvation by Greek or Roman gods is not normally undeserved or transformative as for Christians. Celsus objects to the Christian theology of sin and salvation as a whole: it is perverse for a god to prefer bad to good people (*Cels.* 3.71, cf. 3.59), and to seek to correct

Celsus insists that human beings do not (in historical time[79]) ascend bodily to the divine realm, whether to become gods or to encounter god.[80] He objects to what he claims is the universal Christian commitment to resurrection in the flesh (*Cels.* 6.66; 7.33; cf. 6.71), which he thinks Christians maintain because they want not only to know, but to see and meet God in the flesh, on the grounds that it is both absurd and aesthetically repellent (5.14). He dislikes equally the idea that human beings might become gods and that they might be worshipped as gods by Greeks or anyone else (3.29, 3.31–32, 3.34, 3.36). He disapproves of such worship even when it is performed by wise men, such as the Getae (3.32, cf. 27), whom he otherwise admires.[81]

A Platonist might well object to the idea of physical ascent to the divine realm, but the best-known objections to apotheosis and the worship of human beings in this period come from two Stoics who are also members of the senatorial elite. Seneca the Younger's *Apocolocyntosis* ridicules the idea that dead emperors become gods. A famous speech written by Arrian for the historian Callisthenes (*Anab.* 4.11.1–9) criticizes Alexander the Great for seeking divine honours in his lifetime (and perhaps at all). Arrian's speech has even more point if it is read as a diatribe by a lifelong servant of the imperial administration in a period of

human sin by sending his son to suffer indignity and death in the form of a man (*Cels.* 4.73).

[79] He uses the stock examples of the Dioscuri, Heracles, Asclepius and Dionysus (*Cels.* 3.22) as men who became gods in the mythical past.

[80] Celsus does not believe the myths that attribute divine birth to Perseus, Amphion and others (*Cels.* 1.67), nor stories of miracles performed by men (3.26). On unclarities in the Hellenistic concept of the θεῖος ἀνήρ, however, see Gallagher 1982: Celsus uses a spectrum of terms for beings between the divine and human, not all of whom he disapproves of.

[81] He points out that even if Jesus had performed great deeds (for which the evidence is poor), this would not be a sound basis for worship, any more than sensible people worship Perseus or Amphion for their great deeds (*Cels.* 1.67–68).

increasing emperor-worship, than if it is read as the speech of a Greek courtier to a king who is unlikely to have been seeking divine honours at this point in his campaigns. Both works suggest that there was resistance – perhaps equally political and theological – in the early principate, among some members of the elite and/or intellectuals, to the worship of human beings, dead or living, and Celsus' arguments add a little more ballast to that theory.[82]

Celsus (like Origen) does not think that most people, foolish and ignorant as they are, need to understand the origin of evil. They do, however, need 'to be told that evils are not caused by God, but inhere in matter and live among mortals' (*Cels.* 4.65, cf. 3.3). Apparently Celsus thinks that some theological teaching is appropriate, even for ordinary people. This goes beyond what a philosopher needs to assume, and also goes beyond what we often assume about mainstream Greek and Roman religiosity. It does, though, accord well with sources such as proverbs, gnomic anthologies and fables, which have a good deal to say about the gods, and which seem to communicate that it is appropriate for those below the level of the sociocultural elite to learn lessons about the gods.[83] *Contra Celsum* hints that some kind of 'religious education' could be thought suitable for worshippers up and down the social scale. This possibility also puts Celsus' objections to what he sees as the Christian refusal to answer questions in a different light. Perhaps Celsus sees (what he claims is) Christians' refusal to engage in discussion not only as irritating when Christians are talking to philosophers, but as educationally inappropriate when Christians are talking to ordinary people who are potential or existing community members (so e.g. 1.9, 12).

[82] Dillon 1977, 198, notes that we hear of no Platonist opposition to the principate, so Celsus may be influenced by Stoicism here, or may not be speaking as a philosopher.

[83] Morgan 1998, 139–40.

## 6 CONCLUSION

We remain far from a complete understanding of Celsus' cult practice or his religiosity, but we can now add something to existing accounts. Celsus confirms the current scholarly view that, far from being in crisis, state and elective cults, established and new cults are all flourishing in the early Roman Empire. (The vigorous atmosphere of religious innovation and competition coexisting with established cult, indeed, is surely one reason why Christianity is able to spread and grow in this period.) Celsus does not seem to find it difficult to position himself and his views, in this context, as mainstream, broad-minded, learned and inclusive, and Origen seems to find his position difficult to attack effectively.

Celsus adds to a growing body of evidence that some individuals and groups in this period not only practised cult, but thought about it, and thought that it mattered what people thought about it. Up and down society, at least some regular worshippers entertained thoughts, emotions and beliefs about the gods, wanted to discuss them, and thought it was important whether or not they were right. As a philosophically educated worshipper, Celsus is among those who use philosophical techniques of investigation and debate to think systematically and theologically about mainstream cult, positioning his investigations as a normal part of his religiosity. As part of his interest in thinking about cult, Celsus is concerned with both truth and authority: especially with who has the authority to say what account of the gods is true or whom it is right to worship and how. In this connection he hints at some of the debates which were controversial in his day: notably about whether human beings can become gods or should be worshipped as gods.

Much remains to be investigated: above all the large subject of the relationship between Celsus' religiosity and his Platonism. But, since (probably) all we know of Celsus

derives from Origen, we may conclude with two questions about Celsus' relationship with Christianity. Is the style or content of Celsus' thinking sharpened in conflict with Christianity? Given that he evidently knew a good deal about Christianity and thought it worth investing time and energy in attacking it, it is not impossible. Is he borrowing significantly from Christian styles of thinking, in particular theological thinking? This is much less likely. Systematic Christian theology is only beginning to develop in Celsus' likely lifetime, in the works of Justin, Irenaeus and other writers of the later second century. It is more plausible that Celsus and near-contemporary Christian writers belong to a shared culture of systematic, theological thinking about the gods and their worship: a culture whose roots are predominantly Greek. If so, then Celsus offers some new evidence not only for Greek theological thinking in his day, but also for the origins of Christian theology.

# Celsus on Texts and Practices of Ritual Power: A Response

Sophie Lunn-Rockliffe

Prof. Morgan helpfully begins her essay by problematizing any attempt to investigate 'Celsus' account of mainstream imperial cult and religiosity', pointing out that the evidence for these in the *Contra Celsum* is comparatively thin, probably unsystematic, and hard to identify as representative of his or others' views.[84] There are, of course, broader methodological questions which dog any study of Celsus: how far was Celsus' text shaped by the intended aims and audience for his original treatise, and what kinds of self-image (intellectual, philosophical, 'religious') did Celsus promote through it? As Morgan explains, Celsus self-identifies 'both as a philosopher and as a regular Greek worshipper', but the need to present himself as 'conventionally pious' might also lead him to repeat platitudes which do not advance our understanding of his more personal cultic commitments.[85]

Further methodological questions could be raised. How far is the Celsus who emerges from *Contra Celsum* polemically 'constructed' by Origen? And to what extent do the selections quoted from Celsus' *True Doctrine* by Origen represent the content, order and emphases of the original text? Here, Prof. Morgan confesses that she takes an 'optimistic view of the scope and reliability of Origen's

[84] Morgan in this volume, p. 149. [85] Morgan, p. 149 and n. 1.



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quotations',[86] and later states: 'The fragility of Origen's responses to some of Celsus' least technical arguments for mainstream cult suggests that he is not misrepresenting Celsus.'[87] I agree that Origen's responses are often 'fragile', and in fact I would go further: in some instances Origen quotes enough of Celsus' own words for us to see that his characterization is misleading. For example, in Book 8 Origen points to Celsus' apparent self-contradictions about the nature of *daimones*, first as riveted to sacrifice and magic (*Cels.* 8.60), and later as minor gods who neither want nor need anything (8.63). However, from examining the passages quoted, it seems that Celsus was actually engaging in a sinuous argument which considered and tested multiple points of view, rather than just contradicting himself. Origen's condemnation of Celsus' thought also went far beyond a demolition of its consistency; he claimed that Celsus' reason had been affected by the very *daimones* he discussed (8.63) which in turn produced a state of irrationality (ἀλογιστία). This tallies with Origen's earlier accusation that Celsus' abuse of Jesus was impelled by some (implicitly evil) spirit (τινος πνεύματος) which had been conquered by Jesus (7.56–57). The accusation that one's opponents were manipulated or even possessed by *daimones* was already, and continued to be, a staple Christian rhetorical and polemical manoeuvre.[88]

Overall, I agree with much of Prof. Morgan's meticulous and illuminating characterization of the overall shape of Celsus' religiosity, and in this response will confine myself

[86] Morgan, p. 149 and n. 1. [87] Morgan, p. 154.

[88] On demonizing one's enemies, see Pagels 1995. Of course, this accusation by Origen is underpinned by a notion of *daimones* which is different to that of Celsus: for Origen, *daimones* are a single category of corrupt, morally evil spiritual creatures (cf. *Cels.* 5.5, 8.3), whereas for Celsus they are minor deities which act as intermediaries between the supreme God and humans, and which have the capacity for evil but are not universally hostile. Origen acknowledges the gulf between him and Celsus on their notion of demons at 8.39. For a more detailed discussion of the terminological and ideological differences between Celsus and Origen in their treatment of *angeloi* and *daimones*, see Cline 2011, 5–8.

to outlining one further possible avenue of research prompted by her discussion. Arising from Morgan's demonstration of Celsus' interest in 'thinking about worship', and of the centrality of πίστις language to Celsus' discussion of cult and the gods, I think it could be productive to explore further the complex relationship between practising cult, and thinking and talking about it – if indeed this dichotomy does not continue to lock us into the problematic binary of 'thought' and 'action' – and in particular to compare the picture of cult that emerges from Celsus' writings with evidence from and for the broader material context of 'lived' religion.[89] As Morgan concludes, there is growing evidence in this period that people 'not only practised cult, but thought about it, and thought that it mattered what people thought about it'.[90]

The long-standing notion that Greco-Roman religion was defined by a praxis which lacked any meaningful 'theology' has been successfully challenged by recent works of scholarship, but the theologies that these scholars have recovered are rarely propositional, and rather more vaguely 'ideas and feelings about the divine'.[91] By contrast, and as Morgan demonstrates, Origen's Celsus expresses ideas that are more theologically precise than this. For example, he reports the henotheistic ideas that different peoples refer to one supreme God by multiple names (*Cels.* 1.24 and 5.41, 45), and that *daimones* are in fact minor divinities below the level of the supreme God (5.2) who were assigned to different things (7.68) and different portions of the earth. Even though Celsus' formulations are often negative, they are still often surprisingly dogmatic. In a passage chiding the

[89] For classic discussions which trouble the binaries of thought and action, practice and belief, see De Certeau 1985 and Bell 1987. I note that Morgan writes, p. 151: 'For Celsus – and, I shall argue, others in his day – cult is much more than a matter of *faire c'est croire*', thereby politely going beyond the lapidary characterization of Roman religion of Scheid 2005 ('Quand faire, c'est croire').

[90] Morgan, p. 176.

[91] See for example, Kindt 2012; Eidinow and Kindt 2015; Eidinow, Kindt and Osborne 2016.

Jews for their failure to recognize the powers of the sun, moon and stars, Celsus endorses the heavenly bodies as the 'most sacred and powerful parts' of heaven, and ascribes more specific powers to them as follows: '... as for those beings who prophesy so clearly and distinctly to everyone, through whom showers and heat, clouds and thunders ... and lightnings and fruitfulness and all productivity are controlled, by whom God is revealed to them, the clearest heralds of the powers above, the truly heavenly angels ...' (5.5).[92] Elsewhere, Celsus endorses more explicitly the value and efficacy of cultic practices from sacrifice (8.25) and oracles (8.45), to singing hymns to Helios and Athena (8.66–67). This raises an important question: how might this nexus of ideas and cultic practices have related and been 'lived out'?[93]

In order to recover some of the ways in which Greek individuals and communities of the period conceived of the ontology and history of the gods and of their relationship to humans, and of how they related to and interacted with the gods in cultic terms, it is useful to look at material and especially epigraphic evidence for dedications, which can suggest rich and reflexive connections between 'theology' and 'practice'.[94] A famous example is to be found in the late second- or early third-century CE inscriptions set up on the interior of the city wall at Oenoanda in Lycia.[95] One of these summarizes an older oracular text – perhaps from the oracle of Klarian Apollo – which hymns a single god in a series of alpha privatives, and characterizes that god as 'not contained in a name, known by many names', chiming with Celsus' claim that it makes no difference by which of his many names one calls 'the highest god'

[92] This translation of Celsus (as quoted by Origen) is taken, as those below, from Chadwick 1965.
[93] On practice and belief, see Kindt 2012, 30–31; Harrison 2015.
[94] On epigraphy and Greek religion see Taylor 2015.
[95] *SEG* 27 (1977), 933. For important discussions of the inscription see for example Hall 1978; Mitchell 1999, 81–92; Cline 2011, 19–46.

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(*theos hypsistos*, *Cels.* 1.24; 5.41, 45).[96] It seems likely that the Oenoanda inscription was erected at a cult site: it is engraved across a bas-relief altar some four metres from the ground, at a point which catches the first rays of the rising sun, paralleling in its positioning the instructions within the oracle itself to 'pray at dawn facing east'.[97] The text emphasizes cultic practice connected to the sun: the reader is enjoined to 'gaze and pray' on the god at dawn, 'looking towards the sunrise', which could fruitfully be considered alongside Celsus' care for reverencing the divine heavenly bodies (5.5) and hymning Helios (8.66).

On the same portion of wall, another inscription – also carved across a relief of an altar – can be found two courses of blocks below the oracular inscription, recording the dedication of a lamp as a prayer offering to the 'highest god' (*theos hypsistos*) by Chromatis.[98] The proximity of the two inscriptions is likely not coincidental, and perhaps indicates that this was some kind of cult site. It would only have accommodated small gatherings, but it has been suggested that devotees might have gathered there at dawn to worship and make offerings to a deity, whether to Aether–Helios; or to 'the highest god' (*theos hypsistos*) widely attested in epigraphy of this period across and beyond the eastern Mediterranean; or to some combination of the two.[99] The site offers some insight into how Celsus' henotheistic thinking, reverence for oracular wisdom, and commendation of hymnic practices might have interrelated in cultic terms. Obviously inscriptions like those at

[96] The inscription is translated thus by Mitchell 1999, 86: 'Born of itself, untaught, without a mother, unshakeable, not contained in a name, known by many names, dwelling in fire, this is god. We, his angels, are a small part of god. To you who ask this question about god, what his essential nature is, he has pronounced that aether is god who sees all, on whom you should gaze and pray at dawn, looking towards the sunrise.'

[97] On the significance of the siting of the inscription, see Hall 1978, 265.

[98] *CIG* 4380.2. See Hall 1978, 264–65; Mitchell 1999, 91.

[99] Hall 1978, 266, suggests Aether-Helios, and Mitchell 1999, 2010 makes a concerted case for *theos hypsistos*.

Oenoanda were erected by individuals or groups with considerable resources, both intellectual and material, but as the productions of relative elites, this makes them quite a good example against which to read Celsus' work.

Of course, hymning gods was not just a public aspect of civic cult in the Greek world; it was also part of a range of more 'occult' ritual practices which are dubbed, for ease, 'magical', even though few scholars today would use the category as a straightforward, neutral descriptor.[100] Thus a fourth-century CE magical handbook contains, in a 'spell of attraction', a hexametrical hymn to Helios commanding that he send the practitioner an assistant corpse-*daimon*, and characterizing Helios in terms not dissimilar to the Oenoanda oracle.[101] Origen's Celsus is presented as condemning these kinds of acts of ritual power, often in relatively generic terms. For example, in *Cels.* 1.6 he condemns Jesus and his followers for wonder-working in the pejorative language of γοητεία ('magic' or 'witchcraft'),[102] and compares Jesus' miracles with those of the γόητες ('sorcerers') taught by Egyptians, who for a fee will perform miracles in the marketplace (1.68). His allusion to the baser economic motivations of itinerant wonder-workers who travelled the empire peddling miracles was a commonplace of contemporary critiques of magic,[103] and the close association of ritual expertise with Egypt was also widespread.[104]

[100] On ancient 'magic', see Frankfurter 2019, and on hymns and 'magic' see Faraone 2004.

[101] *PGM* IV.1928–2005, with the hymn at lines 1956–90, including the closing invocation: 'O primal god, O father of the world, self-gendered one (αὐτογένεθλε)', chiming with the Oenoanda description of the god as 'born of itself (αὐτοφυής) . . . without a mother (ἀμήτωρ)'.

[102] For a classic discussion of Jesus the magician, and the broader tradition of magical charlatanry, see Smith 1978.

[103] An analogue can be found in Celsus' near-contemporary Lucian: *Lover of Lies* 16 recounts the exorcistic work of a 'famous Syrian of Palestine', and includes the detail that every time the man heals someone, 'he charges a large amount for this'. On this theme more broadly, see Gordon 1999, 212–14.

[104] On itinerant magicians, including the popular type of the Egyptian magician, see Dickie 2001, 195–234.

Celsus mentions two types of miracles: firstly, efficacious ritual performances – 'driving *daimones* out of men' and 'blowing away diseases'; and secondly, fantastical tricks, 'displaying expensive banquets and dining-tables and cakes and dishes which are non-existent, and who make things move as though they were alive although they are not really so, but only appear as such in the imagination' (1.68). This latter type reflects another age-old critique of magicians, that they delude with trickery, and play on the credulity of their witnesses' imaginations.[105]

In Book 6, Celsus is quoted characterizing Christians as those who 'profess also some magical sorcery' (*Cels.* 6.38), and goes on to compare the Christian invocation of *daimones* with 'barbarous names' with those (presumably 'sorcerers') who bamboozle their clients by 'invoking the same *daimones* in various languages', for their audience do not know that their names have one form among the Greeks and another under the Scythians (6.39). Celsus is then quoted as listing a whole range of 'magical' activities which, Origen implies, he falsely attributes to Christians: rites of purification, spells which bring deliverance, formulas that avert evil, prophylactics of clothes, numbers, stones, plants, roots and so on (6.39). Celsus is then again accused of lurid invention, both in his claim that Christians commit cannibalism and fornication – charges which other sources suggest were made against Christians[106] – and in his statement that he has seen 'books containing barbarian names of *daimones* and magical formulas' in the possession of Christian presbyters dedicated to harm (6.40). Celsus also apparently reported the explanation of a musician called Dionysius, for why magic works with some, and not others (6.41): it is effective against the uneducated and with men of depraved moral character, but with

[105] Celsus' complaints against 'those who display their trickery in the marketplace' (*Cels.* 3.50) could be taken – as per Chadwick 1965, 63, n. 1 – to allude to the activities of magicians. On the view of magic as 'specious and vain', see Gordon 1999, 210–19.

[106] Athenagoras, *Legatio* 3.

people who had studied 'philosophy' it had no effect, because they were careful to lead a healthy way of life.

At 8.60 Celsus warns 'lest by association with these beings [*sc*. the thirty-six *daimones* of the body] anyone should become absorbed in the healing with which they are concerned, and by becoming a lover of the body and turning away from higher things should be held down without realizing it'. That is, Celsus was marking off the dangers of particular kinds of ritual knowledge and power and condemning Christians who use and abuse them, while also revealing himself to have some command of both. In these passages, there is particular polemical force in Celsus' characterization of Jesus' and his followers' reliance on magic, essentially marking off wonder-working charlatanry from 'true philosophy'. In the late second century CE, the figure of the philosopher with interests in 'the occult', practising for example theurgical rituals and techniques, crops up in other (non-Christian) polemical texts such as Lucian's *Lover of Lies*.[107] A more sympathetic presentation of the wonder-working philosopher can be found in Philostratus' early third-century biography of the first-century Apollonius of Tyana, a figure to whom Origen alludes (6.41). That is, there was more to Celsus' condemnation of Christians as magicians than just his interest in presenting Jesus as a charlatan sorcerer; he was also aligning himself with a particular strand of philosophical behaviour and identity.

As well as condemning magical texts and practices, the passages of Celsus cited by Origen reveal that he understood (and thereby perhaps even commanded) some aspects of this kind of expert knowledge. This effect is heightened if we compare Celsus' reports of the contents and dynamics of particular texts, objects and rituals of power with other kinds of material evidence for these aspects of 'lived religion', to return to the comparative idiom suggested earlier in this

[107] Lucian, *Lover of Lies* 16 on the Syrian expert who exorcizes demoniacs 'for a large fee'.

article. Two examples will suffice. Firstly, the various spells and rituals which Celsus is quoted as listing at *Cels.* 6.39 echo the kinds of applied and practical magic preserved on various media (including in the Greek magical papyri), and show an awareness on Celsus' part of the range of available texts, objects and rituals of power.[108] Secondly, when he reports that there is a brand of 'Egyptian' learning which teaches that the human body is under the charge of thirty-six *daimones* or ethereal gods who have charge of its separate parts, he actually goes on to name a quarter of those *daimones*: Chnoumen, Cnachoumen, Knat, Sikat, Biou, Erou, Erebiou, Rhamanoor, Rheianoor (8.58). He reports that by invoking these, they heal the sufferings of the various body parts. This kind of exhaustive daimonic naming, as well as the practice of enumerating multiple body parts, is a very pronounced feature of the Greek magical papyri, both for healing and cursing.[109] It is striking that in both these instances, Celsus reveals and shares a kind of arcane knowledge which he also condemns; the question remains whether this was perhaps an impression which Origen was keen to cultivate for polemical purposes, visible in his mischievous suggestion that the author of *True Doctrine* might be the same Celsus who wrote several books against magic (1.68).

[108] Celsus asks: 'Why need I enumerate all those who have taught rites of purification, or spells which produce deliverance (καθαρμοὺς ἢ λυτηρίους ᾠδάς), or formulas that avert evil, who produce noisy crashes, or pretended miracles, or all the various prophylactics of clothes, numbers, stones, plants, or roots and objects of every sort?'. Rites of purification are integral to spells in the magical papyri for a variety of purposes (e.g. *PGM* I.42–195 contains a number of spells for acquiring an assistant including rites of preliminary purification; *PGM* II.64–183 contains a rite for purifying the doorposts of your bedchamber in which you are observing ritual purity). The herbal quality of the spells in the papyri has been assessed by Scarborough 1991, 156–61, and Wilburn 2012 tackles the materiality of magic including the power of *ousia* – materials from human bodies, or in close touch with them like clothing.

[109] On the logic of exhaustive naming of body parts in texts of ritual power, as well as the piercing of the body parts of figurines, see Collins 2008, 64–103; on lists more generally see Gordon 1999.