

THE DOCTRINE OF DIVINE UNITY IN HELLENIC TRADITION

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"The doctrine of Unity, i. e. the affirmation that the Principle of all existence is essentially One, is a fundamental point, shared by every orthodox tradition" (1). So writes René Guénon, according to whom "every authentic tradition is essentially a monotheistic one; using a more precise language, every tradition affirms first of all the unity of the Supreme Principle, from which all derives and upon which all completely depends; this affirmation, particularly in the expression assumed in the traditions having religious form, constitutes the true monotheism" (2).

According to this conception, an authentic traditional form cannot be a polytheistic one; in other words, it cannot admit a plurality of principles considered as completely independent. In fact, Guénon writes that the polytheism is "consequence of the incomprehension of some traditional verities, precisely of those concerning the divine aspects or attributes" (3); he also says that "this incomprehension is always possible in the case of isolated and more or less numerous persons; but its generalisation, corresponding to the state of extreme degeneration of a disappearing traditional form, has surely been rarer than one usually thinks" (4).

Then, if the legitimacy of a traditional form is strictly determined by its coherence with the doctrine of Unity, which is the degree of validity of the ancient European traditional forms, generally characterized by a plurality of deities?

As I cannot envisage this matter in all its extension, I will limit myself to consider the Hellenic culture, which is a typical one for the multiplicity of divine figures, generally having an anthropomorphic aspect.

It is true that the polytheistic perspective is surpassed by the philosophic thinking, which began looking for a unitary arché and culminated with the individuation of a *causa causarum*, called Supreme Good by Plato, Motionless Mover by Aristotle, Logos by the Stoics. In the Latin culture, this *causa prima* has been defined by Cicero as *princeps deus, qui omnem mundum regit* (5). Nevertheless, in ancient Greece the affirmation of divine Unity can be found not only in philosophy, but also elsewhere.

For example, in Homer's *Iliad* we see the Olympic gods and goddesses who struggle the ones against the others, as some of them are favourable to the Achaeans, others to the Trojans; nevertheless, some episodes of the *Iliad* suggest a vision that reduces the multiplicity of divine figures to a superior and transcendent unitary principle.

For example, a passage of *Iliad's* book VIII is the most ancient document concerning the argument we are envisaging. The episode is the following. Zeus convokes the council of gods on the highest summit of Olympus and prohibits all them from sharing in the battle. Zeus not only menaces he would throw the eventual transgressors into the deepness of Tartarus, but also puts into evidence his crushing

superiority over all gods:

"Try, gods, that you may know!
Hang a golden chain from heaven,
and lay hold of it all of you, gods and goddesses together;
you will not be able to drag from heaven to earth
Zeus the supreme counsellor, with all your efforts.
But were I to pull at it myself,
I should draw you up with earth and sea,
then would I bind the chain about a pinnacle of Olympus
and leave all dangling in the sky.
So far am I above all others, gods and men". (6)

The superiority of Zeus' power to the power of all the gods put together symbolizes the essential nothingness of the divine beings' multiplicity in face of the principle's unity.

But the power of Zeus himself, which is supreme in face of that of the other gods, finds its own limit in the inflexible will of the Moira. The subordination of the personal god to this impersonal Will emerges very clear from those passages of Iliad where the Father of gods and men weighs the destinies of the contenders by means of a cosmic balance, which reveals him the Moira's decree. The more explicit of such passages are in the books VIII (verses 69-75) and XXII (verse 209 and foll.): in the first one Zeus weighs the collective destinies of Trojan and Achaean strugglers, in the second one the individual destinies of Achilles and Hector. I quote from the second passage:

"Then, at last, the Father balanced his golden scales
and placed two dooms in them,
one for Achilles and the other for Hector the horsebreaker.
As he held the scales by the middle, Hector's fatal day fell down deep,
into the houses of Hades. Then Phoebus Apollo left him". (7)

Apollo abandons Hector to his own destiny, Athene announces to Achilles that the victory will belong to him, Zeus renounces to the proposal of saving Hector's life. All the gods subordinate themselves to the will of a divine force that transcends them all.

An analogue affirmation of Zeus' supreme power is present in the parodos of

Aeschylus' Agamemnon, where the chorus, consisting of twelve elders, after having recalled the beginning of the expedition against Priam's city, intones a solemn hymn:

"Zeus, whoever he may be, - if by this name

it pleases him to be invoked,

by this name I call to him -

as I weigh all things in the balance,

I have nothing to compare

save Zeus, if in truth I must cast aside

this vain burden from my heart". (8)

Since Chalcas has predicted that Artemis' hate against the Atrids would be terrible, the chorus says that, to eliminate the anxiety caused by this prediction, it is necessary to have recourse to Zeus, only to Zeus, because there is nobody and nothing which can be equal to him.

Zeus is the name used also by the Stoics, to mean the Logos which moulds every being, giving him soul and life. An expression of the stoic religiosity is the Hymn to Zeus written by Cleanthes from Axos (300-220 b. Chr.), which begins exalting Zeus as origin and sovereign of all that exists:

Most glorious of the immortals, invoked by many names, ever all-powerful,

Zeus, the First Cause of Nature, who rules all things with Law,

Hail! (9)

Max Pohlenz writes that, when the philosopher-poet "prays Zeus 'invoked by many names', the believers understand that Zeus, Logos, Physis, Pronoia, Heimarmene are only the different names of the unique universal Godhead" (10).

Also Aratus from Soli (320-250), in the solemn beginning of his Phaenomena, gives the name of Zeus to the cosmic manifestation's principle, thought as omnipresent spirit:

"Let us begin with Zeus, whom we mortals never leave

unspoken; for full of Zeus are all the streets

all our market-places, full of him are the sea

and the harbours; everywhere everyone is indebted to Zeus". (11)

Differently, in Plutarch the divine unity and unicity is not symbolized by the figure of Zeus, but by that of Apollo. In the dialogue On the E at Delphi, where are proposed

some interpretations of the alphabetical letter E (epsilon) which is represented at the entry of Apollo's Delphic temple, the final explication is given by Plutarch's master, Ammonios: the E, being read eî, coincides with the second singular person of the present tense of the verbe eimí, then it means "You are". Said to the god who exhorts the man to know himself (the phrase "know yourself", gnôthi sautón, was graved on the face of the sanctuary), "You are" is an acknowledgement of Apollo as Being.

"Thus then we ought to hail him in worship, and thus to address him as 'Thou art', aye, or in the very words of some of the old people, 'Thou art One'. For the Divine is not many things, as each one of us, made up of ten thousand different states, a multiform scrap-heap, a proud mixedness. No, the being must be one, as the one must be being. (...) Hence the first of the names of the god, and the second, and the third. He is Apollon, because excludes plurality and denies multiplicity; he is leios, because is One and Unique; Foibos, because the ancients called by this word all that which is pure and clean". (12)

Following the hermeneutic method founded on the symbolic meaning of the elements constituting a word, Plutarch finds that the name Apollon can be understood as composed by a privative a- and by the theme of polýs, pollé, polý, "much, many"; then: "without multiplicity". Similarly, Apollo's name leîos is put into relation with heîs, "one", while the appellation Foîbos, etymologically connected with fáos, "light", means "luminous, pure", then "unmixed". Therefore Apollo's divine person is a symbol of the sole and unique principle of the universal manifestation, it is the Supreme Self of all that exists.

On Plutarch's traces, Numenios from Apameia (II cent.) interprets Délphios, Apollo's epithet, as an ancient Greek word meaning "unique and sole" (unus et solus) (13).

In the "solar monotheism", that under Aurelian (274 d. C.) becomes the official religion of the Roman Empire, Apollo is identified with Helios, whose Latin name itself, Sol, remembers the adjective solus ("unique"). In the epoch of Constantine, the figures of the solar god - Apollo and Sol Invictus - stand out in the coins and in the reliefs of the triumphal arch.

We know that in the Empire the solar monotheism was successful also thanks to the role of a solar cult which had a large diffusion among the peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean coast, specially in Syria. Purified from those elements that the Roman mentality could not accept, the cult of the so called "solar god from Emesa", born among the nomadic populations of preislamic Arabia, became a Roman State cult, so that the god Sun was identified with Jupiter Capitoline and Apollo. Probably this fact, that René Guénon could have defined as "a providential intervention of East" in favour of Rome, could happen for the reason that the solar cult of the late ancients represented the re-emersion of a common primordial heritage.

Concerning the meaning of the solar symbolics, it is convenient to quote René Guénon:

"The sun (...) is par excellence the symbol of the only one Principle (Allâhu Ahad): the necessary Being, the only one that is sufficient to Himself in its absolute fullness (Allâhu es-Samad); on it totally depend the existence and the subsistence of all things, that without It would be nothing at all. Therefore the 'monotheism' - if we can translate 'Et-Tawhîd' by this word, that narrows its meaning and suggests a nearly exclusively religious point of view - has an essentially 'solar' character. (...) One could not find a more true image of the Unity, which displays itself in the multiplicity without ceasing to be itself and without being influenced by the multiplicity, and apparently reduces to itself the multiplicity; this latter has never really existed, since nothing can exist out of the Principle, to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be subtracted, as It represents the indivisible totality of the Unique Existence". (14)

The doctrine of the so called "solar monotheism", according to which Helios is a hypostasis of the Principle, while the different deities of the Greek-Roman pantheon are only specific and particular aspects of him, has been exposed by the emperor Julian in the oration entitled Hymn to King Helios (Eis tôn basiléa Hélión). Julian quotes a passage from Platon's *Politèia* (508B-C), where it is said that the function of Sun (Hélios) in the sensible and visible world (*kósmos aisthetós, oratós*) is similar to the one of the Supreme Good, transcendent source of that which is, in the intelligible world (*kósmos noetós*). In other words: the daily star is nothing else but a reflection of that metaphysical Sun which illuminates and fecundates the world of archetypal essences, the platonic ideas. To say it with Julius Evola: "Helios is the Sun, not as a deified physical star, but as symbol of metaphysic light and power in a transcendental meaning" (15).

Between the intelligible world of the pure Being and the world of the bodily forms, which are perceptible to the eye and to the other senses, there is a third, intermediate world, defined as "intellectual" (*noerós*), i.e. endowed with intelligence.

Incidentally I remember that the muslim theosopher Mahmûd Qotboddîn Shîrâzî (1237-1311) resumes the doctrine of the three worlds saying that Plato and the other savants of ancient Greece "affirmed the existence of a double universe: on one side the universe of the pure suprasensible, comprehending the world of the Godhead and the world of the angelic Intelligences; on the other side, the world of the heavenly Spheres and the Elements; between the two, the world of the autonomous archetypal Forms" (16).

Hypostasis of the supreme Principle ("son of the One") in the centre of the intermediate world, Helios fulfils a co-ordinative and unifying function in relation to the intellectual and demiurgical causes, as he participates in the unity of the transcendent Principle and the contingent multiplicity of the phenomenal manifestation. So his position is perfectly central and justifies the title of King that is attributed to Helios. In theological terms: all the gods depend upon the light of Helios, the only one being not subordinated to the constraining necessity (*anánke*) of Zeus, with whom he identifies himself.

On the traces of Henry Corbin, who includes the "so called late Neoplatonists" (then also the emperor Julian) among the qur'anic People of the Book (17), an Italian scholar has suggested that Helios "corresponds to that in Islam is called an-nûr min amri-Llâh, 'the light which proceeds from the divine order'", so that the god "is nothing else but the 'niche of the lights' from which (...) every knowledge is drawn" (18).

After that, Julian comes to treat about Helios' powers (dynámeiai) and energies (enérghēiai), that is, respectively, about his potencies and activities in relation to the three worlds. The most considerable aspect of this part of the Hymn (143b-152a) consists in the attempt of reduce the multiplicity of gods to a unique Principle represented by Helios, so that the different divine figures appear as his aspects, as Names corresponding to his innumerable qualities. A similar doctrine had been exposed by Diogenes Laertius, who interpreted Zeus, Athene, Hefaistos, Poseidon, Demeter as appellations corresponding to the "modes of the power" of the unique God (19).

Then Helios possesses the demiurgic power of Zeus, from whom he is not really different. Athene Prònoia, in her wholeness, has sprung from the wholeness of Helios; being the perfect intelligence of Helios, she unites the gods who are around him and implements the unity with him. Aphrodite represents the fusion of the heavenly gods, the love and harmony which characterize their essential unity.

The last part of the Hymn enumerates the gifts and the benefits dispensed by Helios to the mankind, which has its origin from him and receives sustenance from him. Father of Dionysos and Lord of the Muses, Helios gives every science; inspirer of Apollo, Asclepios, Aphrodite and Athene, he is the legislator of the community; finally it's he, Helios, the true founder and protector of Rome. To Helios, creator of his immortal soul, Julian addresses his prayer; he asks the god to give an immortal life to Rome, identifying "with the prosperity of the Empire not only his personal mission on the earth, but also his spiritual salvation" (20).

The oration is sealed by a last prayer to Helios, the third contained in the Hymn: may the God of universe concede to his devoted servant a virtuous life and a better knowledge and, in the supreme hour, let him ascend to Him.

The Hymn to King Helios is dedicated by Julian to Sallust, who in the treaty About the gods and the universe enunciates the doctrine of Unity in the following terms: "The first cause must be one, because the unity precedes the multiplicity and is superior to everything in power and goodness; therefore it is necessary that everything participates in it, because nothing else will hinder it, thanks to its power, nor will remove it, thanks to its goodness" (21).

If considered from a historical perspective, Julian's solar theology finds its place in a mature phase of Neoplatonism, a phase in which the doctrinal foundations of this spiritual school are already consolidated. The founder of the school, Plotinus (204-270), had indicated the One as the principle of the being and the centre of the universal possibility, while his successor Porphyry from Tyros (233-305) had

dedicated to the solar theology his treaty *On the Sun* (22). This text is lost, but is quoted in the *Saturnalia*, where Macrobius, relating Apollo, Liber, Mars, Mercury, Saturn and Jupiter to the solar principle, says that, according to Porphyry, "Minerva is the power of Sun and gives sageness to the human minds" (23). In the treaty *About the philosophy of the oracles* (24), Porphyry had quoted an Apollonian response according to which there is only one god, Aion ("Eternity"), while the other gods are nothing else but his angels.

After Julian, it is possible to follow the solar tradition unto Proclus (410-485), author of a *Hymn to Helios* in which the god is invoked as "king of the intellectual fire" (πυρὸς νοεροῦ βασιλεῦς, v. 1) and "image of the god generator of all things" (εἰκὼν πανγενέταο θεοῦ, v. 4) (25), i.e. as an epiphany of the Supreme God. Concerning the multiplicity of the gods, Proclus relates it to the One; and the One is God, because, he argues, the Good and the One are the same and the Good is God (26). Therefore it can be understood why Henry Corbin recommended the confrontation between Proclus' theology and the doctrines of Dionysius Areopagite and Ibn 'Arabî. In particular, he writes, it would be very instructive

"a deepened comparison between the theory of the divine Names and that of the theophanies which are the divine Lords; I mean a parallel between Ibn 'Arabî on one side (the ineffableness of the God, who is the Lord of Lords, and the theophanies corresponding to the hierarchy of the divine Names) and Proclus on the other side (the hierarchy having its origin in the henad of the henads and propagating itself through all the degrees of the Being's hierarchies" (27).

"The last attestation of the solar syncretism in West" (28) is Philologia's prayer to the Sun (29), a "considerable document of the 'solar theology' of late Neoplatonism" (30) due to Martian Capella, a contemporary of Proclus. This is the last attestation, because after 531, when the last scholar of the School of Athens Damascius (470-544) and the other Neoplatonists escaped to Persia, the solar tradition continued to exist in the same places from which the mithraic cult had diffused to Europe.

In the opinion of Franz Altheim, the solar theology elaborated by the Neoplatonists had an important relation with islamic monotheism. "The message of Muhammad - he writes - had its pivot in the concept of Unity and excluded that the Godhead could have a 'partner'; so he followed the steps of the antecedent neoplatonist and monophysite fellow-countrymen. The religious enthusiasm of the Prophet succeeded in affirming with intensified force the same idea that had animated others before him" (31).

1. R. Guénon, *Aperçus sur l'ésotérisme islamique et le taoïsme*, Gallimard, Paris 1973, p. 38.

2. R. Guénon, *Monothéisme et angéologie*, "Études Traditionnelles", n. 255, Oct.-Nov. 1946.

3. *Ibidem*.

4. *Ibidem*.

5. "Princeps deus, qui omnem mundum regit" (Cicero, *Somnium Scipionis*, 3).
6. Homer, *Iliad*, VIII, 18-27.
7. Homer, *Iliad*, XXII, 209-213.
8. Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 160-166 (transl. by H. Weir Smyth).
9. Cleanthes, *Hymn to Zeus*, I Powell, 1-3.
10. M. Pohlenz, *La Stoa. Storia di un movimento spirituale*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1967, I, p. 218.
11. Aratus, *Phaenomena*, 1-4.
12. Plutarch, *On the E at Delphi*, 393 b-c.
13. "Apóllona Délphion vocant, quod (...), ut Numenio placet, quasi unum et solum. Ait enim prisca Graecorum lingua délphon unum vocari" (Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, I, 17, 65).
14. R. Guénon, *Et-Tawhîd*, "Le Voile d'Isis", July 1930.
15. J. Evola, *Ricognizioni. Uomini e problemi*, Edizioni Mediterranee, Roma 1974, p. 140.
16. H. Corbin, *Corpo spirituale e Terra celeste. Dall'Iran mazdeo all'Iran sciita*, Adelphi, Milano 1986, p. 140.
17. H. Corbin, *Il paradosso del monoteismo*, Marietti, Casale Monferrato 1986, p. 70.
18. R. Billi, *L'Asino e il Leone. Metafisica e Politica nell'opera dell'Imperatore Giuliano*, University of Parma, 1989-1990, pp. 79-80.
19. Diogenes Laertius, VII, 147 (*Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, II, fr. 1021).
20. M. Mazza, *Filosofia religiosa ed "Imperium" in Giuliano*, in: B. Gentili (ed.), *Giuliano Imperatore*, QuattroVenti, Urbino 1986, p. 90.
21. Sallustio, *Sugli dèi e il mondo*, ed. by C. Mutti, Edizioni di Ar, 2a ed., Padova 1993, pp. 27-28.
22. Porphyry's treaty is quoted by Servius (*Commentary to the Eclogues*, V, 66) and perhaps must be identified with the treaty *About the divine names*; it is also possible that it was a part of the *Philosophy of the oracles*. Cfr. G. Heuten, *Le "Soleil" de Porphyre*, in *Mélanges F. Cumont*, I, Bruxelles 1936, p. 253 ff.
23. "et Porphyrius testatur Minervam esse virtutem Solis quae humanis mentibus prudentiam subministrat" (Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, I, 17, 70).
24. G. Wolff (ed.), *Porphyrii de philosophia ex oraculis haurienda librorum reliquiae*, Springer, Berlin 1866.

25. Proclo, *Inni*, ed. by D. Giordano, Fussi-Sansoni, Firenze 1957, pp. 20-25.
26. Proclo, *Elementi di teologia*, Edizioni all'insegna del Veltro, Parma 1983, pp. 94-95.
27. H. Corbin, *Il paradosso del monoteismo*, p. 8.
28. R. Turcan, *Martianus Capella et Jamblique*, "Revue des Études Latines", 36, 1958, p. 249.
29. Martiane Capella, *De nuptiis*, II, 185-193.
30. L. Lenaz, *Introduction to: Martiane Capellae De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii liber secundus*, Liviana, Padova 1975, p. 46.
31. F. Altheim, *Deus invictus. Le religioni e la fine del mondo antico*, Edizioni Mediterranee, Roma 2007, pp. 115-116.