

Religious Paradox and Aporia¹

Paradoxo religioso e aporia

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Abstract: Focusing on religious or metaphysical paradox, which is, strangely, a neglected subject, this paper surveys well-known and little known instances in ancient Greek literature and early Christian sources. Religious paradox is highlighted in texts ranging from Hesiod, Archilochus, Heraclitus, and Euripides' *Bacchae* to the Gospel of St John, St Paul, and the 6th century *Akathistos Hymnos* in honour of the Virgin Mary. *Aporia* in the wake of religious paradox confirms human limitation and points to the transcendence of the divine. Christianity, the religion of paradox par excellence, acknowledges the impossibility of offering philosophical “solutions” to the paradoxes and *aporiai* of dogma, and resorts to oxymoron and paradox as the only adequate form of expression. The only recourse before the estranging dislocation of order and logic provoked by contact with the divine is “ignorance”, for paradoxically ἐν ἀγνοίᾳ γὰρ γίνεται γνωστός ὁ Θεός (“God becomes known/knowable through ignorance”), as St Dionysius the Areopagite states.

Keywords: Paradox; *aporia*; oxymoron; *atopon*, *thaumazein*; *mirabilia*; religious paradox; Homer; Hesiod; Archilochus; Heraclitus; Plato; Euripides *Bacchae*; ancient mysteries; Zeno of Elea; the Gospel of St John; *Akathistos Hymnos*; Virgin Birth.

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Resumo: Abordando o paradoxo religioso e metafísico – assunto, aliás, estranhamente bastante negligenciado –, este artigo investiga exemplos em fontes da literatura grega antiga e do início do Cristianismo, alguns bem conhecidos; outros menos. O paradoxo religioso é destacado em textos que vão de Hesíodo, Arquíloco, Heráclito e as *Bacantes*, de Eurípidas, ao Evangelho de São João, São Paulo e *Akathistos Hymnos*, do século VI, em honra à Virgem Maria. *Aporia*, na esteira do paradoxo religioso, confirma a limitação humana e aponta para a transcendência do divino. O Cristianismo, a religião, por excelência, do paradoxo, reconhece a impossibilidade de oferecer “soluções” filosóficas para os paradoxos e aporias do dogma e recorre ao oximoro e paradoxo como a única forma adequada de expressão. O único recurso diante do estranho deslocamento da ordem e da lógica provocado pelo contato com o divino é a “ignorância”, pois, paradoxalmente, ἐν ἀγνοίᾳ γὰρ γίνεται γνωστός ὁ Θεός (“Deus se torna conhecido/conhecível por meio da ignorância”), como afirma São Dionísio Aeropagita.

Palavras-chave: Paradoxo; *aporia*; oximoro; *atopon*, *thaumazein*; *mirabilia*; paradoxo religioso; Homero; Hesíodo; Arquíloco; Heráclito; Platão; Eurípides *Bacantes*; mistérios antigos; Zenão de Eléia; São Paulo, São Dionísio Aeropagita; *Akathistos Hymnos*; Nascimento virginal.

In ancient Greek the adjective παράδοξος/ παράδοξον means ‘contrary to expectation, incredible’—that is, contrary to, or beyond, the assumption that nature follows predictable patterns. Citing examples mainly from nature and everyday experience, Aristotle demonstrates in the 2nd book of his *Art of Rhetoric* two types of argument, one based on the ‘possible’, the other from probability, or τὸ εἰκός (ch 19: 1392a.1-22). Belief in the existence, for instance, of Centaurs, the Chimaira or the Gorgons challenges the expectation of the probable— τὸ εἰκός – and, *a fortiori*, the possible in normal conditions.² *Paradoxa*, because they supersede and frustrate everyday expectations, can be reckoned to be *thaumasta* or *thaumasia* (‘wonderful, marvellous’);³ they perplex us, leading to the condition of *thaumazein* (‘wonder, marvel’) and more generally to

² Plato, *Phaedrus* 229 c-d.

³ Cf. Plato, *Meno* 593, παράδοξα καὶ θαυμαστά.

aporia,⁴ a sense of being at a loss.⁵ In its extreme form, *aporia* recalls the confusion and wonder brought about by an experience of the divine. Unlike philosophical *aporia* (as I understand it), which is open-ended (but in Plato is ultimately solvable), religious *aporia* offers no intellectual or philosophical way out. It traps us in a labyrinth of bafflement. In this paper I intend to look at ancient Greek and early Christian examples of metaphysical or religious paradox and concomitant *aporia*. Paradox of this kind is a huge and strangely neglected field.⁶ My comments will, I hope, cast fresh illumination on well-known instances, and bring little known examples to light. It is as well to bear in mind that each of these instances would lend itself to an entire series of articles.

Paradoxes have always come in many shapes and sizes. The earliest example of one type occurs in *Odyssey*, IX, 401 ff. Polyphemos the Cyclops has just been blinded by Odysseus and his men. Odysseus has previously revealed his name to be Οὐτις/ ‘Nobody’ (364ff.). The monster howls in pain, prompting the other Cyclopes to rush to his cave and to ask him what the matter is; Cyclops answers quite truthfully that “Nobody is trying to kill me”. Whereupon the Cyclopes conclude in unison that Polyphemos is the victim of mental disease (411, νοῦσος) sent by Zeus.⁷ The statement “Nobody is trying to kill me”, under the

⁴ *Aporia* and wonder are identical states in Plato, *Symposium* 208b; see also immediately below. In *Theaetetus* 155c et passim ‘wonder’/ *thauma* (*thaumazein*) is “sudden and frontal bewilderment”, a state of suffering--of disorientation and dizziness signalling intellectual pregnancy, as S. Chrysakopoulou (2012, p. 6) notes. Producing the same constellation of painful physical and psychological effects (or symptoms) as those caused by Eros, *thaumazein* precedes and accompanies (re)initiation, through “midwifery”, into the invisible realities of knowledge. Thus philosophy, according to Plato, begins and ends with *thaumazein*; cf. Aristotle *Metaphysics* 982b. For full treatment see Chrysakopolou (2012, p. 11 ff.); and Nightingale (2001, p. 23-58).

⁵ *Aporia* means literally ‘without passage, lacking ways and means’ (in a geographical/physical sense) and hence figuratively ‘being at a loss’ (primarily an economic metaphor in English), and is personified as *Penia*/ ‘Poverty’, the mother of Eros in Plato’s *Symposium* (203b4). As said, *aporia* is equated with *thaumazein* in the dialogue (*Symposium* 208b); see below.

⁶ *Status quaestionis* and bibliography of religious paradox in Yusa (1995, p. 194-195).

⁷ Cf. Euripides, *Cyclops* 549, 672 ff.

circumstances, is so illogical that it must be the result of mental affliction. This humorous example is an instance of W. V. Quine's *veridical paradox* (QUINE, 1976, p. 1-18). It shows how a paradox engenders *aporia*; one means of escape from *aporia* is to assume that the suspension of the rules of everyday logic reflects insanity or, ultimately, the handiwork of a god.

A special class of *paradoxon*, in the narrower sense of self-contradiction, is the mathematical and philosophical arguments associated with Zeno of Elea (fl. ca 460 BC) and the Stoics.⁸ Perhaps the most notorious is the *logos*, or argument, of "Achilles and the Tortoise". Aristotle, our main source, calls it "The Achilles" (ὁ Ἀχιλλεύς); I quote the opening sentence of the philosopher's account of the paradox: "The slowest will never be overtaken in a race by the swiftest" (τὸ βραδύτατον οὐδέποτε καταληφθήσεται θεόν ὑπὸ τοῦ ταχίστου, *Physics* 239b15). How bizarre (at least on first thought)! How unreasonable, especially as the competitors in Zeno's argument are Achilles, reputedly the fastest runner in myth, and a tortoise. This is a mathematical conundrum (which I leave to specialists to explain); but its surprising absurdity is merely superficial, for, as an eminent mathematician has put it, "In mathematics there is no paradox".⁹ If the layman cannot understand Zeno's *logos*, this is because he or she lacks the proper conceptual paradigm to decode it.

Contradictory propositions such as the paradox just cited can prove true, but sometimes they are genuinely preposterous (and even absurdly funny, as in the rhetorical praise of unworthy topics such as fever, gout, baldness, adultery, vomit, dung, and death).¹⁰ The domain of the absurd lies out of the way, beyond normality, in a *heterotopia*; hence the Greeks also called paradoxes and *oxymora* "atopa".¹¹ Cyclops, inverting as he does social codes and conventions, inhabits the fantasy

⁸ Booth (1957, p. 187 ff.) on the paradox; Sorabji (1983, ch. 21) on Zeno's paradoxes.

⁹ Michalis Dafermos (of Princeton University), *viva voce*.

¹⁰ Menander Rhetor 346. 9-23 (Russell-Wilson); cf. Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*, Alcidas' *Encomium of Death*, and Lucian's *Encomium of a fly*.

¹¹ In Plato's *Philebus* 49 the adjective *atopos* refers to childish envy as an instance of a painful emotion that may be also pleasant (... εἰ μέλλομεν τὸν παιδικὸν ἰδόντες φθόνον ἄτοπον ἡδονῆς καὶ λύπης ὄψεσθαι μεῖζιν/ "... if we are to gain insight into childish envy with its absurd mixture of pleasure and pain.").

world of the *atopon*, the veritable ‘placeless’. Flouting the laws of *xeinia*, Polyphemos eats his guests rather than treating them to a meal. *Atopa*, in the general sense of ‘absurd or abnormal things or events’, may characterise places and peoples we would call “outlandish”. Antonius Diogenes, probably dating to the 2nd century AD (at the time when the New Testament was crystalising as a text), wrote a labyrinthine novel that was a parody of travel-fantasy. Early on, the heroine Derkyllis travels to Iberia where, the narrator tells us, “she came to a city where people could see in the dark but were blind by day” (WINKLER-STEPHENS, 2014, p. 123-124, 109b3). The inhabitants of this strange city invert normality; the city is, one might say, *atopos*, i.e. not on the map of normality.

Paradox, in its broader and narrower senses (as ‘incredible’ or ‘self-contradictory’ respectively), is the stuff for religion. As K. Patton states, “Paradox is the rule, not the exception in religion” (PATTON, 2009, p. 180). By which this historian implies that religion is hospitable particularly to contradictions in terms, such as the dogma—an *oxymoron*, or compressed paradox-- that Christ is fully human and yet also divine, and (I might add) the “absurd” proposition, at least at first sight, that the three persons of the Holy Trinity in reality comprise one being, to wit, $1+1+1=1$. Unlike the case of Zenon’s paradox, the Holy Trinity is incomprehensibly puzzling because human beings lack the cognitive language to explain its surface contradictoriness (see below). If I may offer a generalisation: Religion addresses itself, either explicitly or by implication, to the chaotic world at the core of which lies paradox. Chaos, notes the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, takes the form of “a tumult of events” that threatens man’s “analytic capacities”, “powers of [sc. physical] endurance”, and “moral insight” (GEERTZ, 1966, 14). “Bafflement”, he goes on to say, “suffering, and a sense of intractable ethical paradox” challenge the “proposition that life is comprehensible” (GEERTZ, 1966, p. 14). Because, as Geertz observes, man cannot cope with chaos (and corollary *paradoxa*), he turns to religion, and the Greeks were no exception. Their divinities suffused this disordered physical and moral universe either abstractly or as anthropomorphic forces. They caused wondrous or awe-inspiring, unbelievable events and phenomena,

i.e. ‘miracles’, or they tolerated, in the relative short term, the paradox of the suffering of the innocent and the prospering of evildoers. To cite two *mirabilia*: In *Iliad*, XX, 344-348 Achilles describes the sudden disappearance of Aineias from the battlefield as a *thauma*/ ‘marvel’ (344), and puts this down to the workings of a deity:

ὦ πόποι ἦ μέγα θαῦμα τόδ’ ὀφθαλμοῖσιν ὄρωμαι:
 345 ἔγχος μὲν τόδε κεῖται ἐπὶ χθονός, οὐδέ τι φῶτα
 λεύσσω, τῷ ἐρέηκα κατακτάμεναι μενεαίνων.
 ἦ ῥα καὶ Αἰνεΐας φίλος ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσιν
 ἦεν: ἀτάρ μιν ἔφην μᾶψ αὐτως εὐχετάσθαι.

“Now look, truly a great marvel is this that my eyes behold.
 [345] My spear lies here upon the ground, yet I cannot see the man
 at whom I hurled it, eager to slay him.
 Truly, it seems, Aeneas too is dear to the immortal gods,
 although I thought that his boasting was idle and vain.”¹²

Archilochus also conjures a *thauma*, here an outright natural *paradoxon*, which seems to him to occur *praeter naturam*. His fr. 122 W famously records a solar eclipse, possibly dating to spring 648 BC:

χρημάτων ἄελπτον οὐδέν ἐστιν οὐδ’ ἀπώμοτον
 οὐδὲ θαυμάσιον, ἐπειδὴ Ζεὺς πατὴρ Ὀλυμπίων
 ἐκ μεσαμβρίας ἔθηκε νύκτ’, ἀποκρύψας φάος
 ἡλίου †λάμποντος, λυγρὸν† δ’ ἦλθ’ ἐπ’
 ἀνθρώπους δέος
 ἐκ δὲ τοῦ καὶ πιστὰ πάντα κἀπίελπτα γίνεται
 ἀνδράσιν· μηδεὶς ἔθ’ ὑμέων εἰσορέων θαυμαζέτω
 μηδ’ ἐὰν δελφῖσι θῆρες ἀνταμείψωνται νομὸν
 ἐνάλιον, καὶ σφιν θαλάσσης ἡχέεντα κύματα
 φίλτερ’ ἠπείρου γένηται, τοῖσι δ’ ὑλέειν ὄρος.
 10 Ἀρ]χηνακτίδης]
 ητου πάϊς]
 τυθη γάμωι

¹² Perseus text and (modified) tr.

Nothing is to be unexpected or sworn impossible or marvelled at, now that Zeus father of the Olympians has made night out of the noonday, hiding away the light of the shining sun, and clammy(?) fear came over people. From now on, men can believe and expect anything; let none of you any longer marvel at what you see, not even if wild animals take on a briny pasturage in exchange with dolphins, and the crashing waves of the sea become dearer to them than the land, the wooded mountain dearer to dolphins... Archeanactides... child of... marriage...¹³

The poet says in effect that an impossible reversal has become possible, Zeus turning midday into night (3); to his mind this raises the possibility of further reversals of nature, all of them paradoxical *adynata*. The vocabulary of “paradox” is conspicuous in the first lines of the elegy: ἄελπτον (‘unexpected’), ἀπώμοτον (‘to be sworn as impossible’) (line 1); θαυμάσιον (‘marvellous’) (line 2); πιστά πάντα κάπιελπτα (‘credible and expected’) (line 5); and θαυμαζέτω (‘marvel’ [imper.]) (line 6). The powerful hand of Zeus is responsible for the eclipse. Plato would agree that something supramundane is afoot, and would go a step further by acknowledging that the *thauma* reflects the incorporation of the supreme divine power of the ‘Good’ (ἀγαθόν) in nature.¹⁴ In similar fashion, Heraclitus and most Presocratics, as well as Hippocrates, assume that behind natural wonders and incomprehensible events and all other *paradoxa* lies divine agency.¹⁵

The extraordinary events that the gods bring about are generally *contrary to the laws of logic or normality*; at their most dramatic, they involve jarring symmetrical reversals of nature such as the turning of the midday light into darkness as in Archilochus. At times Zeus is said to successively perform mutually exclusive, contradictory actions in order to uphold morality. Gods and *daimones*, in keeping with a theological (and magical) principle well-attested in Greek literature and other sources, can effortlessly carry out an action, let us call it “A”, and just as easily its exact, symmetrical opposite, “-A”. As Hesiod advertises in his hymn to

¹³ Text & tr. in Gerber (1999, p. 161, 163).

¹⁴ See n. immediately below.

¹⁵ Collins (2003, p. esp. 22-24; 27, “... φύσις incorporates the gods ([*Laws*] 10.889e, 890d).”

Zeus in the proem of the *Works and Days*, “For easily he makes strong, and easily he oppresses the strong,/ easily he diminishes the conspicuous one and magnifies the inconspicuous,/and easily he makes the crooked straight and withers the proud” (*Works & Days*, 5-7, ῥέα μὲν γὰρ βριάει, ῥέα δὲ βριάοντα χαλέπτει,/ ῥεῖα δ’ ἀρίζηλον μινύθει καὶ ἄδηλον ἀέξει,/ ῥεῖα δὲ τ’ ἰθύνει σκολιὸν καὶ ἀγήνορα κάρφει/ ῥεῖα δὲ τ’ ἰθύνει σκολιὸν καὶ ἀγήνορα κάρφει).¹⁶

These polar formulations and imagery not only celebrate the Justice of Zeus, but also lend insight more generally into the power and unpredictability of the gods as agents of chaos. Paradox as a concept originated, I suggest, from religious speculation, from thinking about the *mysterium tremendum et fascinatum* of the gods. Their deeds and actions tend to be “incredible-but-true”; no greater proof of their power exists than the fact that quite often these actions amount to sweeping reversals. Consider again Hesiod’s precept, “Zeus can (capriciously) diminish the strong or exalt the humble”.¹⁷ As ‘cloud-gatherer’ (νεφεληγερέτης), he can also herald fair weather or cause a storm, although not, it seems, at the same time. An analogue to Zeus’ bipolar potentiality is provided by Hermes, who, according to *Iliad*, XXIV, 343 ff., uses his magical wand to charm people to sleep or alternatively to rouse them. In *Odyssey* X he goes to Kirke’s isle with the mission of liberating Odysseus from her clutches. He holds his wand, which is now said to be golden (X, 277). Hermes gives the hero a magical herb—a “good drug” (φάρμακον ἐσθλόν, 291), as he touts it—to neutralise the witch’s magic potion, her *kukeōn* (which is actually a ‘posset’). It is interesting that Hermes’ *pharmakon*, termed *molu* by the gods (305), has a *black root but a milk-white flower* (304). Only gods can pull it out of the ground *with ease* (304-5), for (in the words of Odysseus) “the gods can do anything” (306). Like any potent drug, the herb is ambivalent, hence it is black and white; but this

¹⁶ Tr. West (1988, p. 37). Cf. Greek and Latin parallels in West (1978, p. 139-40) ad *Works & Days*, 5 ff.

¹⁷ Cf. also *Theogony* 27-28, ἴδμεν ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα, ἴδμεν δ’ εἴτ’ ἐθέλωμεν, ἀληθέα γηρῦσασθαι /‘we know to tell many lies that sound like truth,/ but we know to sing reality, when we will’, tr. West (1988, p. 3).

coincidentia oppositorum also sums up the ontology of the gods, who sometimes deal in pairs of contrary alternatives that are easy as pie. If a god enacts A and then its opposite, -A, the two antithetical strands in his supernatural repertoire make up a paradox.

From theological (in effect, psychological) paradox, it was but a small step to Heraclitus' fundamental principle of "unity and diversity" and his use of paradox in an attempt to explain the eternal, ever-changing *kosmos*.¹⁸ In his *Refutation of all heresies*, Hippolytus, the 2nd century Christian apologist, gives numerous examples of Heraclitean paradoxes:¹⁹

...Heraclitus says that dark and light, bad and good, are not different but one and the same...

"The path up and down is one and the same." [B 60, ὁδὸς ἄνω κάτω μία καὶ ὡπτή.]

...And he explicitly says...

"Immortals are mortals, mortals immortals: living their death, dying their life." [B 62, ἀθάνατοι θνητοί, θνητοί ἀθάνατοι, ζῶντες τὸν ἐκείνων θάνατον, τὸν δὲ ἐκείνων βίον τεθνεῶτες.]

Aristotle found the Ephesian philosopher's reliance on paradox something of a paradox. As he puts it (*Metaphysics* 1062a 31 ff.), "If someone had questioned Heraclitus... he might perhaps have compelled him to agree that contradictory statements can never be true of the same subjects." Aristotle may be right, as G.E.R. Lloyd and others have argued, inasmuch as Heraclitus may have defined and qualified his opposite terms and their contexts.²⁰ ὁδὸς ἄνω κάτω μία καὶ ὡπτή (B 60, "The path up and down is one and the same.") may have meant, for instance, that an object on a mountain slope is "down" when viewed from the summit; seen from the foot of the mountain, it is "up". His contradictions vanished when his statements were qualified relationally (and possibly also when set in the context of incessant motion, cf. his famous, if often ill-construed

¹⁸ See esp. McKirahan (1994, p. 134-139); Osborne (1997, p. 88 ff., esp. 102 ff.).

¹⁹ Book X of Hippolytus' work, which circulated separately by Photius' time, was entitled "Labyrinth" from its opening statement, "I have broken through the labyrinth of heresies".

²⁰ Lloyd (1966, p. 102).

“everything is in flux”, cf. B 12 and 91).²¹ The Ephesian philosopher may have been experimenting with antinomies (as logicians call them) rather than using them in an actual sense as a first principle. However that may be, it is, I believe, significant that Heraclitus was resorting to the formulation of antinomies in the first place to explain the baffling *kosmos*.

Although he levels criticism at popular religion, it is fairly clear, as M. Adoménas has proposed, that the philosopher also used the Dionysiac mysteries and other religious rituals to demonstrate, e.g. in B 15, the seemingly paradoxical structure, or *logos*, of the universe (ADOMÉNAS, 1999, esp. p. 91, 101, 113). Heraclitus held that this *logos* was also articulated in secular practices and institutions. Perhaps this Presocratic, far from simply detecting paradox at work in ritual and society, actually inferred it as a comprehensive principle from religious thinking in particular.

Paradoxa in the sense of intriguing antinomies or other contradictions may have been common in ancient mystery cults. Despite the paucity of the surviving written evidence of such cults, Euripides’ *Bacchae* may nevertheless furnish indirect evidence. The play is an exercise in paradox, for Dionysus (to quote A. Henrichs), is “essentially a paradox, the sum total of numerous contradictions” (HENRICHS, 1979, p.3). Bacchus is, first of all, a true god, though the son of a mortal, Semele, and Zeus (1 ff., 335, etc.); he is both god and mortal—a paradox that recalls the fully human and fully divine nature of Christ. As a foetus snatched from his mother’s womb, he gestated in Zeus’ thigh, which doubled as a “male womb” (526-527, Ἴθι, Διθύραμβ’, ἐμὴν ἄρ- /σενα τάνδε βᾶθι νηδύν [“Go, Dithyrambus, enter this my male womb”]), another contradiction. In the beginning of the play, Teiresias praises Dionysus, inventor of wine, alongside Demeter, provider of bread to mankind; in the course of his parallel encomia, the prophet

²¹ McKirahan (1994, p. 143-144): Heraclitus upholds inherent stability and continuity rather than radical change into diametrical opposites. Cf. Hussey (2000, p. 633-634): Heraclitus’ “oppositions cohere so closely that they are mutually inseparable in thought or experience, that they need one another...Each unity, then exhibits...a systematic ambivalence, as between two opposites.”

says something so paradoxical that some scholars have cast doubt on the passage (284-285):

οὗτος θεοῖσι σπένδεται θεὸς γεγώς,
ὥστε διὰ τοῦτον τὰγάθ' ἀνθρώπους ἔχειν.

He, being god, pours a libation [middle voice]/ is poured as a libation [passive voice] to the gods,
so that through him mankind might receive blessings.

‘Being (a) god’ (θεὸς γεγώς) may have a concessive force: though a god himself, Bacchus, rather than receiving a libation, offers one to the gods; in fact, he passively *becomes* a libation to the gods, because he is identical with the wine used in libations. Whether σπένδεται is middle or passive, there is the customary distinction here between pouring and receiving; either way, Dionysus, indwelling in the wine,²² is sacrificed to other gods for the good of mankind. R. Seaford detects an allusion to the mystical role of wine in the mysteries, and I agree (SEAFORD, 1996, p. 176 ad 283-284). Not only does this passage “reflect or refract mystic instruction”, as Seaford suggests, it also evokes a deep paradox. In a number of vases from the late archaic period on, gods, including Dionysus and even Zeus, offer libations or perform other forms of sacrifice without any recipient (s) depicted. K. Patton argues that the gods are sacrificing to themselves, and that these cases of pure reflexivity, typical of the paradoxes associated with religion, serve as a prototype of “religiousness”.²³ In Euripides the sacrificial act of the god, however, not only has recipients, but also explicit beneficiaries. We are dealing with something slightly different from the divine self-reference of the vases and more akin to Christ’s self-sacrifice as it is interpreted by St Paul in *Philippians* 2:6-7: ὃς ἐν μορφῇ Θεοῦ ὑπάρχων οὐχ ἄρπαγμὸν ἠγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα Θεῶ, ἀλλ’ ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσε

²² He is not just a metonymy for wine. Cf. Dodds (1960, p. 106) on addressing a person or a drink in Hindu ritual.

²³ Patton (2009, p. esp. 7-9, Zeus’ libation to himself); 13, 316 (the paradox of divine reflexivity is the defining element of the divine); 313-315 (the gods, the sources of sacrifice, carry out perfect sacrifice in perpetuity); 71-73 (in a red-figure Attic *kantharos* by the Nikosthenes Painter [ca 520-510 BC] Dionysus pours a libation over an altar; he does the same in an Attic red-figure *kylix* by Douris [ca 480 BC]).

μορφήν δούλου λαβών, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος (“who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men”).²⁴ The paradox of gods offering to gods is axiomatic not only for the ancient world but even more so for Christianity. Christ, albeit God, foregoes equality with God, emptying himself figuratively, like a vessel filled with water, in order to shed his blood on the cross; in similar vein, according to the Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of St John, and early Church Fathers, he variously becomes a sacrificial lamb, goat, heifer, even a scapegoat for the sake of mankind.²⁵ In the Divine Liturgy of both Sts John Chrysostom and Basil the Great, the priest utters in a low voice the Cherubic prayer, which includes: Σὺ γὰρ εἶ ὁ προσφέρων καὶ προσφερόμενος καὶ προσδεχόμενος καὶ διαδιδόμενος, Χριστὲ ὁ Θεὸς ἡμῶν (“For you are the one who offers and is offered, who receives and is distributed, Christ our God”).²⁶ Dionysus, by the same token, becomes a libation to the gods, paradoxically combining the roles of god and victim for the good of man.²⁷

I now come to another paradox, the central one in the play. Bacchus arrives at Thebes disguised by means of a mask as a young beardless devotee of himself. Pentheus denounces him as a θηλύμορφον ξένον/ a “girlish stranger” (353) rumoured to have blonde curls and a wine-red complexion (235-236). He is in fact a *travesty*, a contradiction in terms.²⁸ The delicate externals mask a paradox, for he is alike the ephebic inventor of wine that soothes, and an agent of the violent *mania* caused by wine and ecstasy; a passive, suffering god, but also a brutal avenger. At the end the chorus call upon Dionysus to make an epiphany as “a beast with a laughing face” (1019-1021, φάνηθι ταῦρος.../ ἴθ', ὦ

²⁴ English Standard Version (ESV).

²⁵ On Christ’s “auto-sacrifice” cf. Patton (2009, p. 241-243), who does not cite *Bacchae* 284-285.

²⁶ In Matthew 26: 26-28 and Hebrews 7: 26-27, Christ is High Priest and victim alike: another paradox.

²⁷ It is tempting but perhaps not altogether pertinent to cite John 15:1, Ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ ἄμπελος ἡ ἀληθινή, καὶ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ γεωργὸς ἐστίν. (“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.”).

²⁸ Seaford (1996, p. 180) on transvestite Dionysus.

Βάκχε, ... γελῶντι προσώπῳ [“Appear as a bull.../ Go, Bacchus, with a laughing face”]).²⁹ ‘Face’ here may also mean ‘mask’; however that may be, a savage beast with a laughing ‘face’ (or ‘mask’) is another contradiction that shows up this god’s ambivalence. (Perhaps when he appears *ex machina* at the very end [*Bacchae* 1330], the god has changed his mask and costume. If so, he now appears as the bearded, mature male familiar from earlier iconography.)³⁰

The transformation of Dionysus in the course of the action from A (a seductive, soothing androgyne) to –A (a mature, masculine avenger) is nothing short of miraculous. As said, it may well be that the prominence of *mirabilia* in the *Bacchae* corresponds to the ecstatic, “otherworldly” experiences, perhaps including hallucinations promoted in mystery cults. The terms *thaumata* and *thaumasia* are used several times in the *Bacchae* to denote the violent superhuman feats of the ecstatic women worshippers and Dionysus during their *oreibasias* (667, 716, 1063 ff., cf. 764, 785-786). The exodus of women from the protective polis was itself a paradoxical reversal of norms.

As noted in passing, Christianity is the religion of paradox par excellence; I should like to conclude with a few more examples from the early Christian and early Byzantine periods. If we look at Christian paradoxes, we might gain insight into ancient religion and possibly the mysteries. For lack of evidence, Walter Burkert leaves open the question whether the emphasis of the new religion on paradox reflects the influence of pagan mysteries.³¹ *Inter alia*, the conflation, however, of titles of gods and incongruities such as *Zeus katachthonios*, viz. ‘Zeus Lord of Death’

²⁹ At *Bacchae* 439 the god is a gentle beast surrendered to his captors and has an enigmatic smile; see Dodds (1960, p. 131) ad loc.

³⁰ But cf. Foley (1985, p. 249-250, 252-253): there is no change of mask; rather, the smile is variously (mis)interpreted by the characters in the course of the play.

³¹ See also Burkert (1987, p. 101) on the “dynamic paradox of death and life in all the pagan mysteries associated with the opposites of night and day, darkness and light, below and above”. For a less skeptical view of the reception of the *Bacchae* and associated cults by the early Church, see now Friesen (2015). Paradoxical formulations may have been key in Orphism. The Derveni papyrus mentions, for instance, that Orpheus taught through “riddles”, which may have lent themselves to paradox.

(*Iliad* IX, 457), may support a greater degree of paradox than we might suspect. Sustained paradox, at any rate, begins in earnest with St Paul and the Evangelists, as noted. St John proclaims the supreme paradox in his rousing opening Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ Λόγος ('In the beginning was the Word'): the transcendent Word of God became flesh, that is, material and contingent. The sublime became lowly, a paradox reflected also in the stylistic lowliness and simplicity of the first specimens of Christian literature, which purportedly expressed sublime subject matter.³² The new religion threw into relief the everyday paradox of living in *this* world while aspiring to the other. The paradox of God becoming flesh is encapsulated in the related paradox of the Virgin Birth of Christ. In the Byzantine *Akathistos Hymnos*, probably dating from the early 6th century,³³ Mary tells the Archangel Gabriel that his voice (and, by extension, his message of the Annunciation) is a *paradox*: τὸ παράδοξόν σου τῆς φωνῆς ("the paradox of your voice") (AKATHISTOS HYMNOS, 1998, p. 49). The hymn exalts the Virgin Birth in philosophical terms: Χαῖρε, ἡ τάναντία εἰς ταὐτὸ ἀγαγοῦσα, χαῖρε, ἡ παρθενίαν καὶ λοχειάν ζευγνῶσα ("Hail, You who has joined *contraries*. Hail, you who has conjoined virginity with parturition"). (AKATHISTOS HYMNOS, p. 61).³⁴ This event infringes Aristotle's law of contradiction. In the course of the hymn, the lector praises Mary for "having united God-Logos with humanity through your paradoxical gestation" (ἡ Θεὸν Λόγον τοῖς ἀνθρώποις τῇ παραδόξῳ σου κύησει ἐνώσασα). (AKATHISTOS HYMNOS, p. 77).

Early Christians generally used the trope of the paradox to express the "otherness" and power of divinity that shock one into uncomprehending speechlessness. Again, to cite the *Akathistos Hymnos*, "Rhetors full of sounds turn into voiceless fish on your account, Theotokos; they are at a loss (ἀποροῦσι) to express (λέγειν) how you nevertheless remain a Virgin..." (Ῥήτορας πολυφθόγγους, ὡς ἰχθύας

³² Thus Auerbach (1965, p. 52): "...the sublimity of the subject matter shines through the lowliness."

³³ *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, s.v. 'Akathistos Hymn'.

³⁴ Translations of the hymn are by me.

ἀφώνους, ὀρῶμεν ἐπὶ σοὶ Θεοτόκε•ἀποροῦσι γὰρ λέγειν, τὸ πῶς καὶ Παρθένος μένεις...) (AKATHISTOS HYMNOS, p. 63)³⁵

Christianity acknowledges the impossibility of offering philosophical “solutions” to the *aporiai* and paradoxes of dogma, and resorts to oxymoron and paradox as the only adequate form of expression. Insoluble “riddles” such as the Virgin Birth reduce the Christian to ignorance and bafflement that is nothing but *aporia*. To quote once again the *Akathistos Hymnos*, “Having seen this strange/ *xenos* childbirth [sc. the Virgin Birth], let us *estrangle ourselves* from this world (ξενωθῶμεν τοῦ κόσμου) and transport our mind to Heaven. For it was for this reason that God sublime appeared as a humble human being upon the earth.” (AKATHISTOS HYMNOS, p. 61)³⁶ This is an exhortation to set aside all earthly concepts (including those of philosophy) when approaching the mysteries of God. The only recourse before the estranging dislocation of order and logic provoked by contact with the divine is “ignorance”, for ἐν ἀγνοίᾳ γὰρ γίνεται γνωστὸς ὁ Θεός (“God becomes known/knowable through ignorance”), as Dionysius the Areopagite states in *On the Divine Names* (PG 3:664C).³⁷ This is neither the ignorance of the uneducated nor the failed, learned kind, but rather the ignorance at which we arrive by eliminating all concepts, since the Godhead transcends anything we can conceive of: Ἄγνοιαν δὲ μὴ τὴν διὰ τῆς ἀμαθίας λάβης, (αὕτη γὰρ σκότος ἐστὶ ψυχῆς,) μήτε τὴν γινώσκουσας, (ὅτι ἀγνοεῖται ὁ ἄγνωστος,) εἶδος γὰρ καὶ αὕτη γνωριστικόν· ἀλλὰ κατ’ ἐκείνην τὴν ἄγνοιαν, καθ’ ἣν ἀπλωθέντες ὑπὲρ τὰς νοήσεις, καὶ πᾶσαν ἔννοιαν περὶ Θεοῦ ὑπερβάντες, ἀπλοῖ γινόμεθα (*ibid.*, “Do not assume the ignorance that comes from lack of education (for this is darkness of the soul), nor the perceiving kind

³⁵ Cf. in non-religious contexts the oxymoron kennings in Aeschylus *Seven against Thebes* 82, ἄναυδος...ἄγγελος/ ‘silent...messenger’ (a dust-cloud), repeated in *Suppliants* 180; *Eumenides*, 245, μηνυτῆρος ἀφθέγκτου/ ‘voiceless guide’ (a footprint); Theognis 549, ἄγγελος ἄφθογγος/ ‘speechless messenger’ (a beacon). The point of the pagan passages is however different: something inanimate speaks volumes, as it were.

³⁶ *Akathistos*, p. 61: ξένον τόκον ἰδόντες, ξενωθῶμεν τοῦ κόσμου, τὸν νοῦν εἰς οὐρανὸν μεταθέντες, διὰ τοῦτο γὰρ ὁ ὑψηλὸς Θεὸς ἐπὶ γῆς ἐφάνη ταπεινὸς ἄνθρωπος.

³⁷ My tr.; cf. his *Mystical Theology* (PG 3:1024BC), ...τότε τῇ ἀγνοίᾳ τὸ πᾶν ἔγνω (“... then through ignorance he came to understand everything”).

(because He who is unknown is unknowable), for this too is a cognitive kind; but rather the ignorance in which, after expanding ourselves beyond conceptions and having surpassed every notion about God, we become simple.”)³⁸ The utter simplicity urged by the Areopagite leads us, paradoxically, to knowledge of the unknowable.

Since antiquity, then, paradox has characterised not merely ritual sacred actions and accompanying prayer, but also other related genres and media, including religious iconography. In paganism, *mirabilia* and, especially, wondrous contradictions associated with the gods reflect a world rife in physical, intellectual, and ethical inversions and antinomies. Confusion, *aporia*, and wonder follow in the wake of miracles and contradictions worked by the gods. Religious paradox has thus always been a cipher for the unintelligible, transcendent divine, the unbridgeable “otherness” of the gods or God. Christianity has self-reflexively defined itself from the first as the religion of paradox. Multiplying self-contradictory propositions and taking them to greater heights, the new faith has converted paradox into a trademark, as it were, of its transformative uniqueness, its turning of the tables on the world. Logic and all earthly conceptual paradigms collapse under the new dispensation, and paradox shows up man’s permanent state of *aporia*. Indeed, as many theological texts indicate, the Christian God transcends any notion of existence; so, when we think we have begun to have some understanding of Him, it is not God whom we have understood. This is the supreme paradox.

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³⁸ My translation.

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