

A war of words

**Julian the Apostate's attempt to affect
moral change in the Roman Empire**

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Table of contents

Introduction	3
Chapter 1	8
Chapter 2	13
Chapter 3	17
Conclusion	22
Bibliography	24

Introduction

No description of past events can be comprehensive. Historical actors become simplified to the point of being characters in a narrative. Prominent figures are referred to by the use of epithets, which in turn informs the reader of how they should view a particular individual in the story being told. The unusual epithet of "the Apostate" draws one to Julian I, sole ruler of the Roman empire for 20 months from November 361 to June 363. He was given this nickname by Gregory of Nazianzus, the 4th century Christian theologian, who determined the emperor's departure from Christianity to be his defining characteristic. In a world increasingly dominated by Christian thought, a clear distinction with the paganism of old could be drawn. Julian was the perfect antagonist in Gregory's story, signifying everything that was to be avoided by future emperors, philosophers and priests. Later Christian authors copied both the notion of a pagan-Christian contrast and the presentation of Julian as 'the Apostate'.¹

In modern scholarship, the same pagan-Christian dichotomy has survived as a common framework for the analysis of the 4th century empire. Gregory's frame had previously been used to contrast moral virtue (Christianity) with immorality (paganism). However, the model is only used as an analytical tool in academic research. It is one of the main characteristics of Late Antiquity (ca. 284 - mid-600s), a popular periodisation among historians since its introduction by Peter Brown in 1971. Cultural change was defined by the Christianisation of the Roman empire, to the detriment of pagan worship: a clash of two mutually exclusive worldviews with Christianity as the victor. Susanna Elm attempts to do away with this model of separation, pointing out the various ways in which pagans and Christians interacted. Maël Goarzin, too, describes the 'shared intentions' of both religious traditions, referring to their common attempts to provide moral guidance for the general populace.² As will become clear, even the moral values promoted could be strikingly similar.

Due to the success of Christianity, Roman sources from the 4th century have survived due to the efforts of Christian authors and copyists. This means that all pagan writing could have been heavily edited – we can only speculate on what was lost. Despite this, enough of Julian's work is available to us to require multiple volumes for its dissection. The works of W.C. Wright in the early 20th century did exactly that, which was elaborated upon by the trio of J. Bidez, G. Rochefort and C. Lacombrade between 1932 and 1964, and more recently K. Meiling. All offer a brief introduction to the emperor's life and character, accompanied by annotated renditions in English, French and Dutch respectively.³

¹ S. Elm, *Sons of Hellenism, Fathers of the Church: Emperor Julian, Gregory of Nazianzus and the Vision of Rome* (Berkeley, 2015) 337

² M. Goarzin, 'The Importance of the Practical Life for Pagan and Christian Philosophers' in: M. Sághy, E.M. Schoolman (red.), *Pagans and Christians in the Late Roman Empire: New Evidence, New Approaches (4th-8th centuries)* (Budapest, 2017) 59-68

³ Wilmer C. Wright, *Julian, Volume II. Orations 6-8. Letters to Themistius. To the Senate and People of Athens. To a Priest. The Caesars. Misopogon*, Loeb Classical Library 29 (Harvard 1913), J. Bidez, G. Rochefort & C.

Julian's oeuvre offers an insight into how a 4th century pagan ruler interacted with the wider Roman world. Moreover, it can tell us if Julian's ideas were at all similar to those of contemporaneous Christians. One of the ways in which this can be explored is to see how much the emperor sought to apply his philosophy into imperial policy.

Julian was a follower of theurgic Neoplatonism, a philosophy that emphasised the attempt to connect to the divine and did so by the practicing of rituals. These practices were based on centuries of literature on the subject of divine assimilation.⁴

Julian's Neoplatonic thought is not only complicated, but its impact on his administrative posture is not readily apparent. Elm observes that historians of Late Antiquity may not scrutinize Julian's philosophy comprehensively. By contrast, those concerned with his beliefs rarely discuss the emperor's practical application of them into policy. This should not necessarily surprise us, as it is difficult to determine how fruitful trying to make such a connection can be. Nevertheless, without connecting Julian's philosophy to his actions, the end result makes the emperor's motives harder to determine. As a result, the introductory work 'Emperors of Rome' characterises his administration as one that was marshalled to combat Christianity by pragmatic, if ultimately unfruitful means.⁵ Such brief allusions obviously cannot be exhaustive, so what little is written down can therefore be very telling. If one paragraph has to convey what the author wishes to convey most succinctly, it should describe what they perceive to be the essence of a particular subject. Consequently, Julian becomes the Apostate "par excellence", as Elm puts it, when he is discussed briefly. Theurgic Neoplatonism is indeed referred to in one form or another, but it serves solely as a descriptor, devoid of explanatory value for his political behaviour.

Whereas historians of ancient history may have largely put the issue of Julian's philosophy to one side, matters are complicated further by another gap between two other fields of study. Historians of religion on the one hand and historians of philosophy on the other are largely left separated by an unhelpful division: the divide between research into religion and philosophy respectively.⁶ Julian's belief system evidently straddles the line between the two disciplines: the philosophy of Plato as perpetuated by Plotinus (204/205-270) and Iamblichus (ca. 250-ca. 330) became linked to pagan practices. In short: religion and philosophy were inseparable in Julian's personal belief system.

Consequently, this belief system needs to be considered in its entirety if one wishes to analyse how Julian's philosophy influenced his actions. There are three modes of

Lacombrade, *L'empereur Julien: Oeuvres complètes*, 4 prts. (Paris, 1932-1964), H. Hokwerda (red.), K. Meiling, *Afvallige contra afvalligen: keuze uit zijn geschriften* (Groningen, 2016)

⁴ L.B. Dingeldein, 'Julian's Philosophy and His Religious Program' *Religious Competition in the Greco-Roman World* (Atlanta, 2016) 125

⁵ D.S. Potter, *Emperors of Rome: The Story of Imperial Rome from Julius Caesar to the Last Emperor* (London, 2013)

⁶ M. Sághy, E.M. Schoolman (red.), *Pagans and Christians in the Late Roman Empire: New Evidence, New Approaches* (4th-8th centuries) (Budapest, 2017) 1-29

thought with regard to what extent Julian was guided by his belief system. Polymnia Athanassaidi argues that the emperor's philosophical stance greatly influenced imperial policy.⁷ This implies that researchers must look more closely to Julian's own writing in trying to determine his motives. Rowland Smith and Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler, on the other hand, see Julian take a far more pragmatic stance: that of the general promotion of paganism as a bulwark against Christianity.⁸ This view postulates that countering the Christian faith was Julian's main concern, regardless of personal conviction. Finally, Laura Dingeldein seeks to find a middle road between the other two theories, concluding that some of Julian's theurgic Neoplatonism seeped into political action by the imperial administration, but not as a general rule.⁹ All three perspectives concern Julian's motives, and directly impact our view on the emperor's own claims of tolerance.

Regardless, the brief reign of Julian the Apostate marked a departure from more than 2 decades of Christian rule. The religion he replaced it with invites further investigation. Vasiliki Limberis characterises Julian's paganism as idiosyncratic and noted the influence that Christianity had had on it.¹⁰

As both pagan and Christian intellectuals of the 4th century sought to promote what they saw as moral virtues, in what way did Julian do so? What were Julian's motives in his attempt to influence the religious views of the general populace? The degree to which his actions were out of anti-Christian sentiment, if at all, remains an open question. Furthermore, the answer to that question directly impacts how one should view the emperor's stated aim of religious tolerance.

M. Marcos subscribes to the 'two phases' of Julian's reign as described by Gregory of Nazianzus: firstly a period of religious tolerance (or the pretence thereof), secondly one of confrontation or persecution.¹¹ The wording itself is disputed: H.C. Teitler summarises the possibly fictional descriptions of anti-Christian atrocities during Julian's reign. These stories contradict Gregory's account, which whilst hostile towards the emperor are devoid of any accusations of institutional violence. Nevertheless, Gregory does perceive Julian's anti-Christian actions to have been persecutory in nature.¹² The first religious stance Julian took as sole ruler is also perceived by Marcos as one of genuine tolerance, followed by an increasing hostility towards Christianity only after multiple incidents.¹³ A prime example of this behaviour came in the form of Julian's school edict in July 362, in which he essentially prohibited Christians from teaching higher education.¹⁴ Raffaella

⁷ P. Athanassaidi, *Julian and Hellenism: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford, 1981)

⁸ *Ibidem*

⁹ Dingeldein, *Religious Competition in the Greco-Roman World* 119-130

¹⁰ V. Limberis, "Religion" as the Cipher for Identity: The Cases of Emperor Julian, Libanius, and Gregory Nazianzus' *The Harvard Theological Review* 93:4 (2000) 373-400, here 378

¹¹ M. Marcos, "He forced with gentleness": emperor Julian's attitude to religious coercion' *AnTard* 17 (2009) 191-204

¹² H.C. Teitler, *The last pagan emperor: Julian the Apostate and the war against Christianity* (New York, 2017)

¹³ Marcos, "He forced with gentleness" 191-204

¹⁴ Meiling, *Afvallige contra afvalligen* 181

Cribiore has written various works with regard to the topic of pagan-Christian schools and education in the 4th century Roman world. This helps contextualise Julian's actions within regard to the increasingly Christianised community of the highly educated elite.¹⁵

This leads to what is perhaps the most controversial aspect of Julian's reign: his supposed 'pagan church', or apparent counterweight to the Christian faith. It proposes that Julian did not simply intend to promote his pagan views over those of the Christian Church, but to imitate its structure outright. The idea that this was the emperor's objective was outlined by J. Bidez in his 1930 work *La Vie de l'Empereur Julien*, but does not enjoy wide acceptance among modern scholars.¹⁶

Julian evidently opposed Christian doctrine taken as a whole, but did not reject all of its teachings. In fact, both he and the religion he discarded wrote about how an individual should behave. Morality, after all, was an important topic for both pagans and Christians. What, then, did Julian find moral? To what degree did he expect others to behave as he wished? This finally leads us to the main objective of this research:

How did Julian seek to promote the moral values he believed in?

Essential to answering this question are three main concerns: how he infused his arguments with the divine, what his various moral guidelines were for particular sections of his subjects, and to what extent he anticipated the creation of a would-be 'pagan church'. The answer should determine how tolerant Julian was of what he perceived to be immoral, rather than his tolerance of particular religions. Although the emperor's oeuvre is extensive, a selection of it should already provide us with more than sufficient information.

Firstly, I shall discuss Julian's letter to a fellow priest in his capacity of *pontifex maximus*. This will help elucidate the degree to which Julian sought to influence the role of the pagan priesthood. What follows is an exploration of the satire *Caesares*, written for the occasion of Saturnalia in December 361. It shows not only how Julian viewed his imperial predecessors, but also his conceptualization of the moral role an emperor had. In Chapter 2 I will analyse the work *Misopogon* in relation to the previous 2 sources. Whereas the letter to a priest anticipates Julian's attempt to promote his moral values, *Misopogon* reflects on what the effect was of this promotion in the city of Antioch. . The third and final chapter relates to Julian's vision for a pagan state religion: what can one actually determine to have been his practical application of his philosophy. A selection of relevant letters relating to Christianity will help expand on what the sources in the first two chapters reveal.

¹⁵ Raffaella Cribiore, 'Why Did Christians Compete with Pagans for Greek Paideia?' in: Karina Martin Hogan, Matthew Goff and Emma Wasserman, *Pedagogy in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Atlanta 2017) 359-374; Raffaella Cribiore, *Libanius the Sophist: Rhetoric, Reality and Religion in the Fourth Century* (New York 2013)

¹⁶ Meiling, *Afvallige contra afvalligen* 7-8

Julian referred to various moral values throughout his works. These ranged from proper worship to kind treatment of the poor, and from the correct way of thinking to the behaviour expected from a priest. On some occasions the emperor went into great detail for why he considered a particular action virtuous or not. On others, he briefly stated his reasoning or leaves it out altogether. To organise them, I have decided to take inspiration from the quad-modal categorization of ancient Mediterranean religious activity from Stanley Stowers. Laura Dingeldein used this model for a case study on Julian's religious program.¹⁷ Although my classification concerns an entirely different subject matter, the general idea is the same. Namely, it is meant to systematize Julian's various moral judgments by severity and target audience.

On occasion Julian mentioned types of behaviour he deemed pious or just, but did not actively seek others to follow them. The opposite occurs as well: certain moral failings the emperor did not find severe enough to admonish or reject outright. These respective viewpoints I shall refer to as an **inclination for** or **against**.

Julian pointed out particular actions that he specifically sought to either argue for or reject. However, he stopped short of requiring people to perform or refrain from them. They often occur simply as statements of fact, without reservations. In this thesis, they are defined as a **promotion** or **condemnation** respectively.

The most severe form of support or rejection of moral or immoral actions is restricted to those Julian wished to make mandatory or outlawed, or accepted them as such. Such directives will be characterised as a **requirement** or an **interdiction**.

¹⁷ Dingeldein, *Religious Competition in the Greco-Roman World* 121

Chapter 1 | Moral gods, emperors & priests

In this chapter I will address what specific moral guidelines Julian had in mind for various entities – the gods, the emperor, the priests and the populace respectively. This will be done by characterizing Julian’s various moral stances based on the methodology mentioned in the introduction. In doing so, the emperor’s conceptualization of a morally virtuous Roman empire can be envisaged. Firstly, I shall describe the sources used in this chapter.

Caesares is a satirical work written for the occasion of Saturnalia in December 361.¹⁸ In this short piece, Julian described all former Roman emperors (and Alexander the Great) being invited to a banquet with the gods. During this event, they were individually judged on their moral standing, with Marcus Aurelius ultimately deemed the most virtuous of all. *Caesares* showed Julian’s views on his predecessors in brief and gives an insight into his representation of the divine world – it is these two elements that are relevant to this research. The work exemplifies how Julian sought to promote his worldview and cosmology.

Additionally, Julian’s letter to an unidentified pagan priest is perhaps one of the most valuable sources available to us if one wishes to define his conceptualisation of a state religion. It is believed to have been written during Julian’s stay in Antioch between June 362 and March 363. The text starts and stops abruptly, which Kees Meiling suggests is possibly due to later Christian copyists omitting parts of the letter. Whilst only a fragment, it already provides a lot of information about how Julian wanted priests to act.¹⁹

When combined, the two sources serve as case studies for how Julian wished to convey both the divine world and his proposals for the role of the priesthood. The sources shall be referenced using the labelling applied by W.C. Wright, as is common in the discussion of Julian’s works. *Caesares* will henceforth be referred to as (C.) and the letter to a priest as (L.) for the remainder of this chapter.

To imitate the gods

The pantheon as described by Julian appears notably harmonious. They are positioned cosmologically at the ‘apex of the sky’, below the moon (C. 308B²⁰). Crucially, Julian explicitly stated the gods did not mean harm to one another out of jealousy, envy or hostility (L. 301A²¹). They passed final judgment on mortals that have passed away and

¹⁸ Roger Pack, ‘Notes on the Caesars of Julian’ *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 77 (1946), 151-157, there 151

¹⁹ Meiling, *Afvallige contra afvalligen* 101

²⁰ Wilmer C. Wright, *Julian, Volume II. Orations 6-8. Letters to Themistius. To the Senate and People of Athens. To a Priest. The Caesars. Misopogon*, Loeb Classical Library 29 (Harvard 1913) 348

²¹ Meiling, *Afvallige contra afvalligen* 97

denied access to those who do not model themselves after the divine (C. 317D²²). As a collective, the gods provided humans with wine, olive oil, gold and other desirable goods (L. 289D²³). This sanitized view on the Greco-Roman pantheon stood in stark contrast to the clash of the gods described in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Euripides. No longer was the pantheon described as being engulfed in conflict – in fact, Julian believed such a description was highly impious. Moreover, he was convinced that portraying the divine world as being at odds with itself led ‘inferior people’ to the adherence of Christianity (L. 301A²⁴). Instead, the emperor promoted the notion of gods being transcendent (C. 308A²⁵) and charitable to those who imitated them in their everyday life (L. 290C²⁶).

Ultimately, Marcus Aurelius was promoted in *Caesares* as the most virtuous among the succession of Roman rulers. His ‘imitation of the gods’ was summarised as ‘having the fewest needs, and doing good to many’ (C. 333C²⁷). Condemnation is reserved to indulgence in pleasure and enjoyment (C. 315C²⁸, 317D²⁹, 329A³⁰). Constantine I, Julian’s uncle, is described as unable to control his own passions (C. 336A). Furthermore, Julian insinuates that Christianity’s forgiveness for sins is frivolous, especially baptism:

*There too he found Jesus, who had taken up his abode with her and cried aloud to all comers: "He that is a seducer, he that is a murderer, he that is sacrilegious and infamous, let him approach without fear! For with this water will I wash him and will straightway make him clean. And though he should be guilty of those same sins a second time, let him but smite his breast and beat his head and I will make him clean again."*³¹

The role of a Roman emperor had always been twofold: that of the most senior executive statesman on the one hand and *pontifex maximus* on the other. For this task of the highest priest of the empire Julian judges himself to be unworthy (L. 298C³²). Regardless, he was inclined to strive for being up to the task - what that entails is shown in how Julian wished priests to act.

Priestly duties

In the order in which they appear in the letter, Julian required priests:

²² Wright, *Julian Volume II* 370

²³ Meiling, *Afvallige contra afvalligen* 86-87

²⁴ Meiling, *Afvallige contra afvalligen* 97

²⁵ Wright, *Julian Volume II* 348

²⁶ Meiling, *Afvallige contra afvalligen* 87

²⁷ Wright, *Julian Volume II* 406

²⁸ *Ibidem* 364

²⁹ *Ibidem* 368

³⁰ *Ibidem* 396

³¹ *Ibidem* 412

³² Meiling, *Afvallige contra afvalligen* 95

1. to persuade people to follow divine laws (L. 288C³³)
2. to live their lives most venerably, in the way they encourage others to (L. 289C³⁴, 299A³⁵)
3. to practice philanthropy, even to the incarcerated (L. 291A³⁶, 305B³⁷)
4. to stop people from losing faith in Roman paganism after the destruction of a temple or statue (L. 295A³⁸)
5. to be careful not to be misled by those who deny divine providence (L. 295C³⁹)
6. to preach admiration of the gods above all (L. 299B⁴⁰)
7. to avoid partaking in or hearing impious declarations, offensive pleasantries, or decadent conversations (L. 300C⁴¹)
8. to only read and act in accordance with the philosophy of pious thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle and the followers of Chrysippus and Zeno (L. 300D⁴²)
9. to teach three things about the gods: 1) they exist, 2) they watch over everything on Earth and 3) they mean no harm to people or each other (L. 301A⁴³)
10. to only read non-fictional stories and avoid tales with erotic themes (L. 301B⁴⁴)
11. to learn the hymns in honour of the gods by heart (L. 301D⁴⁵)
12. to pray at least twice per day, preferably three times (L. 302A⁴⁶)
13. to clean themselves according to divine law (L. 302D⁴⁷)
14. to refrain from entering houses and markets whilst staying at a temple (L. 302D⁴⁸)
15. to only visit magistrates within a sacred precinct whilst staying at a temple (L. 302D⁴⁹)
16. to only enter a friend's house in everyday life or visit the abode of a host with noble character if invited (L. 302D⁵⁰)
17. to only wear the most beautiful clothing whilst worshipping at the temple, but in public to only be clothed plainly (L. 303C⁵¹)
18. to never visit theatres (L. 304B⁵²)

³³ Ibidem 85-86

³⁴ Ibidem 86

³⁵ Ibidem 95

³⁶ Ibidem 88

³⁷ Ibidem 101

³⁸ Ibidem 91

³⁹ Ibidem 92

⁴⁰ Ibidem 95

⁴¹ Ibidem 96

⁴² Ibidem 96

⁴³ Ibidem 97

⁴⁴ Ibidem 97

⁴⁵ Ibidem 97

⁴⁶ Ibidem 98

⁴⁷ Ibidem 98

⁴⁸ Ibidem 98

⁴⁹ Ibidem 98

⁵⁰ Ibidem 98

⁵¹ Ibidem 99

⁵² Ibidem 100

It is important to stress that Julian's letter was largely prescriptive in nature. The emperor's statements would naturally have held great authority. Nevertheless, he asserted he did not intend to provide a unified set of rules to follow in order to lead an exemplary priestly life, which he considered impossible (L. 302C⁵³). However, since Julian based his preferred selection of priests based on moral virtue, any behaviour that would have gone against the above recommendations would consequently constitute a moral failing by his estimation.

Primarily, Julian asserted that priests were to live the most venerable lives among the people (L. 289C⁵⁴). In fact, acting in a way that is unbecoming of a priest was grounds for dismissal if proven guilty (L. 297A⁵⁵). Even though it is not explicitly stated as such, what Julian meant by 'the most venerable life' can once more be seen as the aforementioned 'imitation of the gods': the fewest needs, with the most care for the greater good of fellow people.

Meiling suggests that the lifestyle the emperor endorses in this letter is in fact an ascetic one, reminiscent of Christian religious orders.⁵⁶ However, Julian stopped short of requiring priests to adhere to one unified set of rules - he thought it ideal, but not feasible (L. 302C⁵⁷). This is a crucial aspect of the emperor's promotion of his moral values. Fundamentally, what made a priest worthy of being one was not solely the adherence to a set of moral rules. It was to be judged by one's adherence to them *in relation to* the populace as a whole: the *most venerable* (L. 289A⁵⁸), the *most god-loving* (L. 305B⁵⁹), the *most philanthropic* (L. 305A⁶⁰) were to be eligible for the priesthood.

Christians and the people

Although the Christian faith itself was not the main topic in either source discussed in this chapter, Julian's characterisation of it stands out to a modern observer. Besides apparently mocking Christianity's forgiveness for all sins (C. 336B⁶¹), the religion supposedly clouded the common people's judgment. Julian used the imagery of light to make his point:

But the real reason why they are not wise is that they have not submitted their souls to be cleansed by the regular course of study, nor have they allowed those studies to open their tightly closed eyes, and to clear away the mist that hangs over them. But since these men see as it were a great light through a fog, not plainly or clearly, and since they think that what they see is not a pure light but a fire, and they fail to discern all that surrounds it,

⁵³ Ibidem 98

⁵⁴ Ibidem 86

⁵⁵ Ibidem 93

⁵⁶ Ibidem 21

⁵⁷ Ibidem 98

⁵⁸ Ibidem 86

⁵⁹ Ibidem 101

⁶⁰ Ibidem 100

⁶¹ Wright, *Julian Volume II* 412

*they cry with a loud voice: "Tremble, be afraid, fire, flame, death, a dagger, a broadsword!" thus describing under many names the harmful might of fire.*⁶²

In short, Julian sees the Judeo-Christian religion as a misinterpretation of reality. It ostensibly emphasises elements of the natural world to the detriment of everything else. Consequently, adherents to Judaism and Christianity respectively are to be corrected by priests on this - it is the faith that misdirects the common people. Although 'the Galileans' were blamed for various misdeeds, the lack of pious behaviour from priests (education, exemplary lives) was seen as the root cause for Christianity's prominence. Julian pointed to the neglect of the poor from priests in particular as a situation the Christians profited from - the downward trend of paganism was caused by pagans themselves (L. 305B⁶³).

To summarise: the emperor considered the gods to be representative of the highest moral standard. They were to be the role models for a pious life, and were responsible for everything the natural world had afforded humanity. Any description of discord between the gods was deemed false and impious. Julian did not think himself worthy of the moral standing a *pontifex maximus* was to be held by, but tried to be. Priests, in turn, had not fulfilled their task admirably enough either. It was their lack of care for the poor that had given room for Christianity to thrive and, in Julian's eyes, to misdirect the common people. In *Caesares*, Julian promoted the virtues and condemned the vices of previous emperors. In the letter fragment, Julian required priests to behave in a way that he thought would defuse the Christian threat - living in and educating the 'imitation of the gods' would be the emperor's tactic of regaining the people's confidence in paganism. Overall, only the gods were beyond reproach: Julian himself was not virtuous enough for his position, the priests had failed to educate the populace and the common people had been deceived.

⁶² Ibidem 313

⁶³ Meiling, *Afvallige contra afvalligen* 101

Chapter 2 | Misopogon: Julian admits defeat

In his letter to a priest, Julian anticipated how one should go about spreading the pagan faith. In *Misopogon* ("Beard-Hater"), by contrast, the emperor reflected on a failed attempt to teach his people the ways of his beliefs. In this chapter I shall seek to demonstrate how Julian sought to present the values he stood for in this work, and to what degree he did so.

The work *Misopogon* from early 363 is another satirical piece written by Julian.⁶⁴ It is a fictional dialogue between the emperor and the city of Antioch, a city he would stay in for 8 months. This period of July 362 to March 363 is often perceived by scholars as a crucial chapter in Julian's reign, during which time the emperor's habits and personality clashed with the urban population of Antioch.⁶⁵ Maud Gleason (1986) characterises *Misopogon* as a 'festive satire' in its first half, a mundane and well-meaning text that its contemporaries would not have been surprised by. The second half, Gleason argues, was akin to an 'edict of chastisement', accusing the population of Antioch of various misdeeds.⁶⁶ Van Hoof and Van Nuffelen (2011) agree with Gleason's assessment of this second half of *Misopogon* whilst emphasising that 'anger shimmers through' throughout. In fact, they note that the text is a large-scale reply to the hostilities faced by Julian during his time in Antioch.⁶⁷

Susanna Elm notes that from his ascension to *caesar* in 355 to his stay in Antioch, Julian had not experienced major setbacks. His arrival was met with great enthusiasm from the Antiochenes, who were hoping the emperor could help alleviate the food shortage in the city. Julian himself held Antioch in high regard, praising its Greek heritage.⁶⁸ He was ultimately there to prepare for the forthcoming Persian campaign - and thus required much of the city's resources to be siphoned off for his army. As a result, the strain put on Antioch caused upheaval between the urban population and Julian from the autumn of 362 to early 363. On top of that, the emperor's religious policies proved to be unpopular.⁶⁹ *Misopogon* is therefore an account by Julian reflecting on why and how he thought his encounter with Antioch had proven to be adversarial. The work is interesting for the purposes of this research as it once again shows how the emperor sought to promote the values he believed in, how he explained his own personal inclinations and what he thought worthy of requirement or interdiction. The references to the text are once more those applied by Meiling in his translation.

⁶⁴ Maud W. Gleason, 'Festive Satire: Julian's *Misopogon* and the New Year at Antioch' *The Journal of Roman Studies* 76 (Cambridge 1986) 106-119, here 106

⁶⁵ *Ibidem* 106

⁶⁶ *Ibidem* 113

⁶⁷ Lieve van Hoof and Peter van Nuffelen, 'Monarchy and Mass Communication: Antioch A.D. 362/3 Revisited' *The Journal of Roman Studies* 101 (Cambridge 2011) 166-184, here 168

⁶⁸ Elm, *Sons of Hellenism* 270

⁶⁹ Van Hoof and Van Nuffelen, 'Antioch Revisited' 172

I will begin by describing the emperor's inclinations, followed by what he promoted and condemned respectively before exploring his characterisation of the city of Antioch.

Julian's virtuous personal preferences

Although *Misopogon* is satirical in nature, combined with Julian's personal correspondence it is possible to define what is and what is not to be taken as sarcasm in this work. Julian's personal inclinations come to the fore much more emphatically in *Misopogon* than in the two previously discussed works. He described himself as full of conceit (339A⁷⁰) - 'as much as Ismenias of Thebes'. At face value, this appears to be genuine self-criticism: as a result of his vanity, Julian asserted he can be very stubborn, verbally combative and ignorant (349B⁷¹). However, his other personal inclinations are all to some degree more easily interpreted to be self-praise. The emperor characterised himself as mild and willing to flatter others - without adjusting one's own appearance according to local custom (351A⁷²). Julian used this unwillingness to alter his looks to create a clear divide between him and the Antiochenes. Whereas he did not mind lice living inside his beard (338C⁷³), the senior citizens of Antioch wished to resemble their sons and daughters by their 'soft and delicate way of living' (339A⁷⁴). Effectively, Julian's supposed 'self-criticism' is turned around to show the difference between his and the Antiochenes' habits.

The emperor's parting shot

In many ways, *Misopogon* can be seen as opposite to Julian's letter to a priest. Obviously, the former was addressed to the entire population of Antioch and the latter to a single individual. More importantly, *Misopogon* represents the emperor attempting to represent his view on events after the fact - as discussed in Chapter 1, the letter rather proposed various strategies in anticipation of trying to affect socio-religious change. It is therefore interesting to note just how similar the matters being promoted by Julian remained. The emperor once more made note of his aversion to theatres and his strict lifestyle (339C/339D⁷⁵). The texts of Plato and Aristotle, admired greatly by Julian, were not fit to be read by the general populace (359C⁷⁶). Responsibility for defamatory remarks was shared not only by those who uttered them but also by those who heard them (364B⁷⁷). As Julian did not intend to return to Antioch after his acrimonious interaction with its citizens⁷⁸, it is questionable whether or not he thought these comments would affect change after he was gone. As Elm notes, it is very much possible Julian was relying on a successful Persian campaign to give credence to the behaviour he promoted.⁷⁹

⁷⁰ Meiling, *Afvallige contra afvalligen* 104

⁷¹ Ibidem 116

⁷² Ibidem 118

⁷³ Ibidem 103

⁷⁴ Ibidem 104

⁷⁵ Ibidem 105

⁷⁶ Ibidem 127

⁷⁷ Ibidem 132

⁷⁸ Van Hoof and Van Nuffelen, 'Antioch Revisited' 175

⁷⁹ Elm, *Sons of Hellenism* 282

Rather than truly being self-critical, *Misopogon* instead condemns the Antiochenes above all. They supposedly focused on outward appearances - 'wearing appropriate clothing, taking a nice warm bath and going to bed' (342D⁸⁰) - to the detriment of moral purity. Whereas Constantine was the subject of condemnation in *Caesares*, the example of Antiochus (after whom Antioch was named) served a similar role in *Misopogon*:

*You know of course the tale that is told about the king who gave his name to this city - or rather whose name the city received when it was colonised, for it was founded by Seleucus, though it takes its name from the son of Seleucus -; they say then that out of excessive softness and luxury the latter was constantly falling in love and being loved, and finally he conceived a dishonourable passion for his own step-mother. And though he wished to conceal his condition he could not, and little by little his body began to waste away and to become transparent, and his powers to wane, and his breathing was feebler than usual. But what could be the matter with him was, I think, a sort of riddle, since his malady had no visible cause, or rather it did not even appear what was its nature, though the youth's weakness was manifest.*⁸¹

Julian then remarked how it was unsurprising that his descendants behaved in a similar fashion (348B⁸²). He went on to condemn their lack of respect for the gods (357A⁸³) and the population's unwillingness to offer a bull or oxen to sacrifice at the temple at nearby Daphne. Instead, the Antiochenes spent their money on meals and feasts - evidently, their priorities were diametrically opposed to Julian's (362C⁸⁴). Ultimately, the emperor blamed himself for the hostilities between himself and the people of Antioch. It was his own misplaced benevolence and foolishness that caused this ideological conflict (371B⁸⁵).

There are few references to moral actions Julian regarded as required or forbidden. Through an imagined reply by the Antiochenes, he summarised the moral values he had to embody (343A/343B⁸⁶):

- 1) The knowledge that humans should serve the gods and laws 'as slaves'
- 2) The fair treatment of equals
- 3) The mild treatment of those inferior to him
- 4) To protect the poor from injustice done to them by the rich
- 5) To endure hostility, anger and mockery
- 6) To teach moderation

⁸⁰ Meiling, *Afvallige contra afvalligen* 108

⁸¹ Wright, *Julian Volume II* 447

⁸² Meiling, *Afvallige contra afvalligen* 115

⁸³ Ibidem 125

⁸⁴ Ibidem 130

⁸⁵ Ibidem 139-140

⁸⁶ Ibidem 109

Generally, these are the same values Julian required priests to promote. 5) is perhaps at odds with the requirement for priests to avoid listening to impious utterances, so this may only relate to Julian himself as emperor. The only interdiction mentioned in the text concerned the emperor being prohibited by law to mention by name those who had been hostile to him in the preceding months in Antioch (337A⁸⁷).

Antioch as a cautionary tale

Shortly after the publication of *Misopogon*, Julian left Antioch.⁸⁸ The text was therefore not part of an ongoing dialogue between emperor and city, but a conclusion to it. As has been pointed out by Van Hoof and Van Nuffelen, the account allowed Julian to present counter arguments to his policies and actions in a way that would portray him favourably.⁸⁹ Their suggestion of what *Misopogon* was meant to achieve holds true by my estimation. Instead of being an honest effort to deal with the concerns of the Antiochenes, Van Hoof and Van Nuffelen state that the text is 'a subtle attempt to control the interpretation of [Julian's] stay in Antioch for a much wider audience'.⁹⁰ This would explain why the emperor felt the need to write the text in the first place, and specifically when he did so. If Julian had returned from Persia victorious, *Misopogon* would have been useful in contrasting his own virtuous philosophy and lifestyle versus the indulgence and impiety of the Antiochenes.

To sum up, Julian used *Misopogon* to suggest his own personal inclinations were virtuous in nature, and appear in stark contrast to the Antiochenes' supposed indulgent behaviour. It allowed the emperor to present his personal view on his hostile interaction with the Antiochenes. Finally, he condemned the city's extravagance and the impiety of its citizens. The ironic tone may have been an attempt to assuage the population's reaction, but its condemnations are readily apparent. The effort to promote his lifestyle and beliefs was most likely directed to the outside world rather than Antioch itself, which he left shortly after publishing *Misopogon*.

⁸⁷ Ibidem 103

⁸⁸ Van Hoof and Van Nuffelen, 'Antioch Revisited' 174

⁸⁹ Ibidem 175

⁹⁰ Ibidem 177

Chapter 3 | A pagan church, a Hellenic school

The concept of a Julianic ‘pagan church’ coined by the Belgian scholar J. Bidez in 1930 is not widely used in modern scholarship around Julian’s religious policies. Nevertheless, it remains an attractive notion. In this chapter I shall explore the structure of Julian’s proposed state religion, and how the various moral values promoted in his works form a cohesive whole. This will be done by utilising a selection of letters, specifically 15, 19, 20, 22, 23, 36, 37, 47, 51 and 55 as translated by K. Meiling. I will first describe the letters that dealt with measures that countered the popularity of Christianity, whether directly or as a byproduct of the proposed policy in question. Secondly, I shall explore Julian’s common ground with various monotheists and what may have been his reasoning for aligning himself with them. Finally, I will return to the topic of the role Julian had in mind for himself, and how this relates to the wider religious system he envisioned for the empire.

Perhaps a notable exception to this analysis is the emperor’s most thorough rebuke to the Christian faith: *Contra Galileos*. Whilst this work is fascinating in its own right, its contents focus more on the inherent differences between the paganism of Julian and Christianity. The letters mentioned above are therefore better equipped to answer the main question of this research. Essentially, *Contra Galileos* would be more suitable in answering how Julian sought to oppose Christianity, rather than how he aimed to promote his own religious values. Nevertheless, Kees Meiling’s characterisation of how Julian viewed the Christians is good to keep in mind moving forward. Namely, the emperor saw adherents to the Christian faith as apostates of both Judaism and Hellenism. He further mocked their internal divisions about the divine nature of Jesus and the Trinity. As Meiling makes clear, this is what Julian meant when he mentioned the ‘foolishness of the Galileans’.⁹¹

Destabilisation, exclusion

Soon after becoming sole emperor, Julian used his imperial authority to cancel the exile of those with heretical viewpoints by his predecessor Constantius. Among those free to return was his friend and bishop of Antioch Aetius, an Anomoeanistic Arian. Adherents to this sect held the view that Jesus was not of the same substance as God, which went even further than Arians.⁹² As a result, his beliefs were opposed by both Trinitarians and Arians - with the effect of further fracturing the unity of Christian worship. A similar figure was bishop Photinus of Sirmium, who according to Julian believed that God could not have arrived on Earth through a womb. The emperor praised this particular challenge to Christian doctrine, characterising Photinus’ resistance as the bishop’s loyalty to the truth.⁹³

⁹¹ Meiling, *Afvallige contra afvalligen* 25, 157

⁹² Ibidem 157

⁹³ Ibidem 199

A curious figure described in Julian's letter to an unknown priest is a former bishop named Pegasius. The emperor met him on a journey from Nicomedia to Troy in the winter of 354. Julian was surprised to find that the Christian Pegasius treated various pagan shrines and monuments with reverence - he then concluded the letter by declaring that those converted back to paganism should be treated honourably.⁹⁴ A similar sentiment is echoed in Julian's letter to Atarbius of Ancyra, an administrator of the Euphrates at the time of writing. Pagans were to be favoured over Christians, but the latter group ought not to be put to death for their religious beliefs.⁹⁵ At face value, this was another example of Julian's mild disposition in his role as emperor. However, this denied Christians the possibility of martyrdom, and as a result must have made it harder for later Christian authors to condemn his short reign.⁹⁶ Julian simply did not fit the mold of a persecutor akin to Decius (r. 249-251) and Diocletian (r. 284-305). This was something even Gregory of Nazianzus recognised, who in other regards did not hold back in his criticism of the late emperor Julian.⁹⁷

Julian's most evident anti-Christian measure, then, was his edict on higher education on 17 June 362.⁹⁸ It stated that teachers had to be 'morally excellent' - Meiling understands this as an effective ban on Christian teaching.⁹⁹ Raffaella Cribiore suggests it was issued when the emperor was on his way from Ancyra to Antioch, whereas Meiling places its publication in Antioch itself.¹⁰⁰ The educational system of the 4th century had not been divided along pagan-Christian lines before this time, and indeed would not be after Julian's death.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, Julian ordered the targeted disposal of Christian texts, at least in the instance of his letter to Ecdicius, who governed Alexandria.¹⁰² Indeed, the interdiction on Christian teaching and the requirement of removing Christian literature may easily be seen as religious intolerance - but as mentioned before, Julian considered Christianity a dangerous ailment and misdirection. The emperor's educational policies essentially sought to exclude 'Galilean' influence in order to promote his own 'Hellenic' values. After all, Christians failed to revere the gods and myth, and were therefore unworthy of educating the young. It deserves mention that Ammianus Marcellinus, generally supportive of Julian's reign, condemned the edict as an unnecessary attack.¹⁰³

The common ground

Although Julian vehemently opposed Christianity, the same was not true for Judaism. The emperor wrote a letter in Antioch in late 362 to the Jewish community in which he

⁹⁴ Meiling, *Afvallige contra afvalligen* 161-163

⁹⁵ Ibidem 184

⁹⁶ Marcos, "He forced with gentleness" 193

⁹⁷ Ibidem 193

⁹⁸ Cribiore, Libanius the Sophist 230

⁹⁹ Meiling, *Afvallige contra afvalligen* 181

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem 181; Cribiore, Libanius the Sophist 230

¹⁰¹ Cribiore, 'Why Did Christians Compete for Paideia?' *Pedagogy in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* 359-374, here 359

¹⁰² Meiling, *Afvallige contra afvalligen* 170

¹⁰³ Limberis, "Religion" as the Cipher for Identity' *The Harvard Theological Review* 93:4 373-400, here 384-385

announced his support for them. Furthermore, he declared his wish for the Jewish temple in Jerusalem to be rebuilt. Meiling suggests the letter may have been a forgery, as it portrays Julian as perhaps excessively amicable to the Jews.¹⁰⁴ However, evidence for his positive stance on Judaism also comes in the form of another letter, written to high priest Theodore. Its contents suggest that this individual had a strong relationship with Julian - they had both been taught by Maximus of Ephesus.¹⁰⁵ The letter also gives an insight into the emperor's reasoning for his view on Judaism: he regarded the Jewish God as a deity that pagans like him honoured 'under different names'.¹⁰⁶ Julian's declared intention to rebuild Jerusalem ostensibly came from this shared adherence. This focus on heritage was something the emperor emphasised in various instances. It was its Greek heritage that had made Julian hold Antioch in high regard before arriving there.¹⁰⁷ Lamenting the Alexandrians' acceptance of Christianity, the emperor appealed to its founder Alexander the Great in a letter addressed to the city's population.¹⁰⁸ It should therefore not be too surprising that Julian would have been willing to facilitate the Jewish community to such an extent. Moreover, Judaism by its very nature was not a missionary faith, and therefore did not pose a threat to Julian's paganism.

The same could not be said for paganism itself. Vasiliki Limberis outlines how the emperor's own religion was at odds with pagan tradition, however varied it may have been.¹⁰⁹ Julian attempted to unite the ideals of Neoplatonism with a general adherence to the Greek pantheon, which by no means recognised the divine as wholly virtuous. In fact, Limberis shows that Hesiod's writing portrays the gods as far from philanthropic - "the gods keep hidden from men the means of life".¹¹⁰ Of course, Julian explained this as a virtue regardless: the gods had granted all that was sought after and pleasant to mortals in the first place.¹¹¹ His acceptance of the Jewish God was also compatible with his view that there was ultimately just one divinity, which came in many forms.¹¹² Nevertheless, Julian chose to refer to 'gods' in a general sense in his writing to fellow priests and the populace. This leads us to the matter of the supposed 'pagan church'. Limberis cites J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz's 1972 work to characterise Julian's religious system: "an ideal community which bore some resemblance to the Christian church".¹¹³ This obviously only equates institutional Christianity with Julian's paganism to an extent. Ultimately, the promotion of modesty and philanthropy by Christians had found widespread acceptance. Julian, with similar intentions, failed to persuade fellow pagans *en masse* during his short tenure.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁴ Meiling, *Afvallige contra afvalligen* 193

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem 164

¹⁰⁶ Ibidem 166

¹⁰⁷ Elm, *Sons of Hellenism* 271

¹⁰⁸ Meiling, *Afvallige contra afvalligen* 189

¹⁰⁹ Limberis, "Religion" as the Cipher for Identity' *The Harvard Theological Review* 93:4 373-400, here 378-79

¹¹⁰ Limberis, "Religion" as the Cipher for Identity' *The Harvard Theological Review* 93:4 373-400, here 379

¹¹¹ Meiling, *Afvallige contra afvalligen* 86

¹¹² Limberis, "Religion" as the Cipher for Identity' *The Harvard Theological Review* 93:4 373-400, here 379

¹¹³ Ibidem 383

¹¹⁴ Ibidem 384

A philosophical suggestion

Julian wished to be seen as following in the footsteps of Marcus Aurelius, whom he greatly admired.¹¹⁵ Even his anti-Christian measures did not explicitly exclude Christians as such, although it is very much possible that this was Julian's aim. Tolerance in itself was a means of persuasion when compared to Constantius' despotic tendencies before Julian had acquired sole rule of the empire. Julian saw himself as the providential saviour tasked with healing the people of the Christian ailment.¹¹⁶ His own life was to be exemplary both as a *civilis princeps*¹¹⁷ and in the role of *pontifex maximus*. Priests, in turn, would be selected based on their moral standing and were to serve as living exemplars of the 'imitation of the gods'.

In Julian's view, then, teachers were to serve a somewhat similar role to priests, and were held to similar standards. In general terms, the emperor would use the priesthood to teach the values of Hellenism to the general populace, whereas students of higher education would only be taught by those who were morally virtuous enough according to Julian. As mentioned in Chapter 1, it was the apparent lack of care pagans had taken with regard to the poor that had given Christianity room to grow. In advising his priests to be more philanthropic, Julian implied this would help drive back the Christian faith.

Laura Dingeldein defined Julian's philosophy as a crucial tool in his competition with Christianity, but only in a general sense. The rituals required by theurgic Neoplatonism could be practiced without those involved being completely informed of its supposed cosmic significance.¹¹⁸ Based on the sources used in this research, any notion that Julian wished to promote theurgic Neoplatonism specifically is therefore untenable. He did not instruct his priests to do so, nor that they themselves should perpetuate the teachings of Plotinus or Iamblichus. Even if that were the case, it would be indirectly. The works of Plato and Aristotle, among others, were to be the basis on which a priest was to teach moral values - implying a degree of freedom of interpretation for the priesthood.¹¹⁹ He lamented the lack of enthusiasm for sacrifice to the gods during his stay at Antioch, but did not require the people to perform these rituals by law.¹²⁰ His criticism of Christians was not always distinct from the accusations levelled at fellow pagans - in fact, the latter group's shortcomings had ostensibly facilitated Christianity's rise.

In summary: Julian used his imperial power to allow those with heterodoxical Christian views back from exile. He impeded Christian teaching in higher education and instead allied himself with Judaism. In replacing the privileged position that Christianity had occupied, he did not seek to apply his own personal philosophy in all its intricate detail. Ultimately, his religious program constituted more than only a counterweight to the Christian faith. He insisted on moral excellence from those tasked with educating both

¹¹⁵ Marcos, "He forced with gentleness" 193

¹¹⁶ Ibidem 200

¹¹⁷ Ibidem 198

¹¹⁸ Dingeldein, *Religious Competition in the Greco-Roman World* 121

¹¹⁹ Meiling, *Afvallige contra afvalligen* 97

¹²⁰ Ibidem 130

the masses and students, but refrained from enforcing his specific interpretation of theurgic Neoplatonism.

Conclusion | A war of words

Julian the Apostate sought to promote the moral values of his philosophy throughout the Roman empire in various ways. First of all, he legitimised his own personal inclinations as pious and exemplary - in the role of *pontifex maximus*, he was to be held up to the highest moral standard. Although he did not necessarily demand that the priesthood fully comprehended his philosophy, he did require priests to be selected from the most virtuous individuals in society. What that entailed was best summarised as an 'imitation of the gods'. This meant that one should live with the 'fewest possible needs, and doing good to many'. Julian considered his predecessor Marcus Aurelius to be a prime example of someone living up to this moral ideal.

Julian preferred rhetorical persuasion over coercion in his promotion of paganism. He went to great lengths to promote the moral values of modesty, piety and philanthropy. He put the works of Plato, Aristotle and the followers of Zeno and Chrysippus on a pedestal. Priests were required to promote the teachings of these philosophers and above all veneration of the gods.

The rise of Christianity was blamed on fellow pagans who had been insufficiently philanthropic to the poor. This lack of virtue was condemned by Julian; the Christians themselves, who before conversion had not been taught how to live piously, had simply been tricked by the malevolent 'Galileans'. Constantine and Jesus were equated with indulgence, as was Antiochus. His encounter with the city of Antioch was portrayed by Julian as a stark contrast between his personal modesty and piety versus the Antiochenes' excesses and lack of reverence for the gods.

Julian used interdictions sparingly, but did exclude Christian teachers from the sphere of higher education to monopolise the *paideia* of the elite. According to the emperor, this did not contradict his self-proclaimed tolerance - Christianity was an ailment that required extraordinary measures to combat. He acted under the assumption that his tolerance would help persuade others to (re-)convert to paganism and behave in a fashion that Julian deemed most virtuously.

The emperor's vision for a morally virtuous society revolved around a hierarchical structure. Atop stood the gods, who were the moral standard by which all mortals were to live by. Priests and teachers would have to teach the populace and students respectively how to behave in a most proper fashion, and use their own lives as examples of how to do so.

Ultimately, it was this moral hierarchy that was to provide the basis for moral improvement of Roman society. Those who imitated the gods better than anybody else would be the vanguard of the repaganisation of the empire. Of course, due to Julian's death on campaign in Persia, his attempt to affect moral change was ultimately left

incomplete. Nevertheless, the emperor's tactics are apparent throughout his writing. He used public celebrations to promote his beliefs and inclinations. He sent letters describing how his fellow priests should spread the faith. His promotion of modesty and philanthropy may have been similar to that of Christianity, but it failed to find a similar audience. Whether or not that was due to the brevity of his reign or inherently ineffective methods of promotion, we cannot say. His attempt to affect moral change in the Roman empire continues to fascinate to this very day.

The study of the similarity between Julian's paganism and Christianity will remain an interesting topic of research, and certainly requires more attention than I could give it considering the scope of this thesis. Although the epithet 'the Apostate' remains an appropriate one by my estimation, it fails to show Julian's main characteristic: above all, he put morality front and centre. It did not matter whether he was in correspondence with a pagan priest or a city's population: moral vices and virtues would be condemned and promoted respectively. The emperor refrained from outright requiring or prohibiting certain behaviour most of the time, despite having the authority to do so.

In conclusion, it would be remiss of me not to thank dr. L. Foubert and dr. J.H.M. de Jong for their feedback and suggestions in the process of writing this thesis. Furthermore, dr. N. de Haan and my fellow students of ancient history helped elucidate me on what I was specifically trying to research whilst in the early stages of the bachelor thesis.

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