
Peri Theôn: The Renaissance Confronts the Gods

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Abstract: This essay traces the legacy of the ancient Greek sophists in the European Renaissance with particular attention to the study of religion as a human institution. Vernacular writers such as Niccolò Machiavelli and Michel de Montaigne follow the lead of the sophists in their effort to bring religion into the field of social thought. Montaigne himself offers a particularly interesting variation on the sole remaining fragment of Protagoras of Abdera's *Peri theon*. In this way, these thinkers inscribe themselves in a genealogy of sophistic that continues from Classical Greece to the Enlightenment.

Keywords: sophists, religion, atheism, enlightenment, Protagoras, Montaigne, Machiavelli.

In *The Greeks and the Irrational*, E. R. Dodds explains that the Enlightenment did not begin with the sophists. "The Enlightenment is of course much older" (180). For students of European history, this chronology of enlightenment is hardly a matter of course. Yet within classical studies and the history of ancient thought, it is standard usage, more so in the Germanic languages than in the Romance languages,¹ to designate the latter half of the fifth century as either the Greek Enlightenment, the Sophistic Enlightenment, or even, in at least one instance, the Euripidean Enlightenment. This usage developed in the wake of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in order to identify some trans-historical affinities between the leading thinkers of the Periclean Age and the modern Enlightenment philosophers. These affinities are broadly subsumed under the headings of rationalism and atheism. As applied to the ancient world, Enlightenment involves a rationalist critique of traditional values in the context of some political crisis or revolution. Characteristic is the view of Friedrich Solmsen: "The Greek Enlightenment of the fifth century B.C., also known as the Rationalistic Movement or the Age of the Sophists, is generally associated with progressive or revolutionary ideas and even more, perhaps, with their negative correlate, the questioning of time-honored beliefs and values" (3). This paradigm can apply to other times and places than ancient Greece and eighteenth-century Europe, and, at the limit, can serve to organize a comprehensive history of human civilization such as the East German scholar Hermann Ley's multivolume study on Enlightenment and Atheism, whose title is meant to be redundant. The protagonists of the Greek Enlightenment are the sophists, whose collective identity is professional rather than ideological, but whose fame and infamy spring from their corrosive chal-

lenge to traditional values and beliefs and from their exclusive focus on human society and what we may call, in retrospect, the human sciences.

It must be stressed at the outset, not only of this intervention but also of our larger research project, that the unity of the sophists cannot derive from their coherence as a philosophical school or their adherence to any common doctrinal system. Moreover, it was Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz who defined the corpus of the sophists through the successive editions of their monumental anthology, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (DK), even though the sophists are not really presocratic in any meaningful sense of the term. Therefore, the status of the sophists as an object of inquiry meets with some resistance among historians of philosophy. Rather than form a distinct school of thought, sophistic can be understood as the natural expression of a new consciousness of the problems of social life in late fifth-century Greece. The scholar most closely associated with this approach is Mario Untersteiner, a leading editor and commentator of the sophists. Following in the same tradition, Giovanni Reale sees the sophists as the exponents of a new cultural paradigm that supplants the prior cultural paradigm of natural philosophy with a countervailing interest in anthropology (Reale, 17-19). My own point of emphasis is how the sophists, and their heirs and successors in subsequent eras, bring religion itself into the field of social thought.

The paradigmatic figure in this regard is Protagoras of Abdera, who is credited with authoring the first treatise ever written on the gods or *peri theon*. Coming on the heels of a long tradition of natural philosophy represented by works entitled *peri phuseos*, Protagoras' *Peri theon* marks a change of emphasis which is all the more remarkable in so far as Protagoras does not really seem to be interested in theology. The *Peri theon* is a very convenient work to analyze since all that remains is the opening sentence, and, as we know, the shorter the fragment, the longer the commentary. Diogenes Laertius and other doxographers conserve Protagoras' opening words, with slight variations, as "regarding the gods, I do not know if they exist or if they do not exist or what form they have, for human life is short and the subject is obscure" (DK 80B4).² As many scholars have remarked, this is not a very promising beginning for a treatise on the gods, and some have even wondered if Protagoras really wrote a book on the gods that seems to disavow its subject matter from the outset (Fritz, 920). One hypothesis offered by historians of ancient philosophy is that Protagoras must have rehearsed arguments for and against theism or belief

in the gods in accordance with the spirit of his *Antilogiai* or opposing speeches, a work attested in Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Philosophers* (9.55).³ Some have even reconstructed these opposing arguments from the doxographic surveys in Cicero's *De natura deorum* and Sextus Empiricus' *Adversus Mathematicos* (Gigon). One weakness of this hypothesis is that Sextus classifies Protagoras among the dogmatic atheists, who argued on one side of the question, not both. I prefer to follow a different but no less authoritative conjecture, which was developed by Rodolfo Mondolfo on the basis of a suggestion by Werner Jaeger.

In 1936 Jaeger delivered a series of lectures in English, which were later published under the title *The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers*, of which the last chapter or last lecture is on the sophists. Jaeger recognizes the sophists as, essentially, the first social scientists of religion. For the sophists, the study of religion belongs to the study of man, and so Jaeger declares, "But the real fathers of rational anthropology are the fifth-century Sophists. In this respect they resemble the philosophers of the modern Enlightenment, who perform a similar function and have many close points of contact with them" (175). This is the phrase that caught the eye of Frank Manuel and supposedly gave him the idea for his groundbreaking study, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods*, to which my own title alludes. "The idea for the study first occurred to me while reading Werner Jaeger's description of ancient rationalistic theory in *The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers*. The affinity between Sophist and Enlightenment thought, to which Professor Jaeger there alludes in passing, challenged me" (Manuel, vii). Thus my essay situates itself in a genealogy of sophistic from Classical Greece to the Enlightenment via the Renaissance. Jaeger credits the sophists with reorienting the object of philosophical inquiry from objective knowledge of divine essence, such as the natural philosophers sought, to human subjectivity, by analyzing man himself. In particular, he highlights the role of Protagoras of Abdera, who looks upon religion as an anthropological fact to be understood in the light of its origin and function in human society.⁴

This is the viewpoint that Rodolfo Mondolfo seized upon in his magisterial study of the human subject in classical antiquity, first composed in Spanish and best known in its Italian version, *La comprensione del soggetto umano nell'antichità classica*. In a chapter on the subjectivization of religious representations, Mondolfo rehearses Jaeger's argument and applies it more particularly to Protagoras' enigmatic treatise *Peri theon*, whose first and, for posterity, last sentence seems to foreclose any sequel or even any content. If Protagoras does not want to say whether the gods exist or not or in what form, what is left to talk about? The only thing left to discuss, Mondolfo insinuates, are the motives and the function of religious belief in human society (Mondolfo, 95-96). No more prudent than his fellow classicists, Mondolfo insists that Protagoras must have asked, why do people believe in the gods, and, following the utilitarian bent of sophistic thought, how can society use religion to its own advantage? Other sophists dealt with these same questions, including Critias in the famous Sisyphus fragment conserved by Sextus Empiricus in book nine of his *Adversus*

Mathematicos (DK 88B25).⁵ To confirm Critias's credentials as an atheist, Sextus cites a dramatic poem (elsewhere identified as the tragedy of Sisyphus by Euripides) where one of the characters, perhaps the protagonist Sisyphus, explains the invention of religion as a political expedient. In the beginning men lived a beastly and disordered life, with no reward for virtue or punishment of vice, until laws were passed to punish crime and secure justice. Since law deterred overt but not covert crime, some ingenious and prudent man first invented the fear of gods and persuaded others to believe in an eternal power that sees everything we do, hears everything we say, and even knows our secret thoughts so that no misdeed can escape detection. Moreover, this invention is explicitly acknowledged to be a lie, a ψεύδος λόγος, or *falsa oratio* for Gentian Hervet, the Renaissance translator. Thus the Sisyphus fragment, which enjoyed a fairly wide diffusion in Greek, Latin, and, in condensed form, even in French in the late sixteenth century, represents religion as a surveillance system that supplements the law and limits the scope for undetected crime.⁶ God is assigned the role of the ἐπίσκοπος or *inspector rerum* whose all-encompassing view keeps everyone in line at least until they realize that it's all a hoax. This theory of religion necessarily seems irreligious, since to explain the instrumental value of religious belief is to undermine such belief.

Roman state religion seems to have been the heir to this legacy of sophistic thought, at least according to the testimony of Marcus Varro conserved in Saint Augustine's *City of God*. Augustine quotes Varro to the effect that, as there are some truths which it is not useful for the people to know, so there are some falsehoods which it is expedient to believe, including the belief that some men are born from the gods (Varro 23).⁷ Presumably, Varro would have counted his own understanding of religion as one of the truths best concealed from the people. Cicero largely endorses this understanding of the political expediency of religion in the *De natura deorum* through the role of C. Aurelius Cotta, who, though a priest, allows himself to doubt in private conversation or *in consessu* what he affirms in public speech or *in contione* (1.61).⁸ Apparently Cotta is the better able to perform his functions as a priest because he does not really believe in the gods. Ironically, it is Cotta who denounces the Epicureans as atheists who eradicate religion from the minds of men (*De natura deorum* 1.121). What is the difference, he asks, between Epicurus and other atheists like Diagoras, Theodorus, Protagoras, or the author of the *Sisyphus*:

Li qui dixerunt totam de dis immortalibus opinionem fictam esse ab hominibus sapientibus rei publicae causa, ut quos ratio non posset eos ad officium religio duceret, nonne omnem religionem funditus sustulerunt? (*De natura deorum* 1.118)

Those who have said that the whole idea of the immortal gods was made up by wise men for the sake of the republic, so that those whom reason cannot guide to duty, religion would, have they not completely eradicated all religion?

This is Cicero's paraphrase of the Sisyphus fragment, which he denounces precisely because it is true, and some truths should never be acknowledged in public. Rather than writing a play for the theater, Critias would have

been better off writing a dialogue for his friends. All these figures from Critias to Cicero are precursors to our Sophistic Renaissance.

Following this genealogy, we may ask the question, where in Renaissance literature, in Latin or the vernacular, can we hear an echo of Protagoras' *Peri theon*? Who else, in the wake of Protagoras, thinks that life is too short for theology but just right for the sociology of religion?⁹ I propose to turn first to a figure who took an unseemly interest in how religion was used in Republican Rome and misused in Renaissance Italy, namely Niccolò Machiavelli, my first candidate for the invidious title of Renaissance sophist. In the first book of the *Discorsi*, Machiavelli devotes a series of chapters to a scandalously convincing appraisal of Roman religion as a triumph of statecraft and a complete imposture (*Discorsi* I, 11-15).¹⁰ Machiavelli admires the ancient Romans for using religion to promote civic order and military discipline, and he insinuates that Roman religion was successful because the people believed in it and the ruling class did not (*Discorsi* I, 12). In this way, ancient Rome and its class conflicts exemplify the crucial tension between belief and understanding: religious belief obscures understanding and understanding dissipates belief. In this dichotomy, the author of the *Discorsi* obviously identifies with the interpreters of religion, as John Najemy calls them, rather than with the believers. In short, with Machiavelli we witness the modern instauration of a resolutely non-theological approach to religion.

Where else can we find in Renaissance literature a modern adaptation of the *Peri theon*? Who follows next in the wake of Protagoras? My main candidate for the dubious distinction of Renaissance sophist, and one who certainly knew Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Philosophers*, is the French Renaissance prose writer and inventor of the essay form, Michel de Montaigne. The question of Montaigne's relationship to sophistic has already been raised and answered rather categorically by François Rigolot in an article on Montaigne and rhetoric. "La position de Montaigne vis-à-vis de la sophistique ne fait aucun doute," he says. "Chez lui comme chez la plupart de ses contemporains--on pense surtout à Érasme--le terme est toujours pris dans un sens dépréciatif" (80). This is all the more true if we take the term "sophistic" to be a synonym of "scholastic," which I do not.¹¹ Rather, leaving aside the question of Montaigne and rhetoric, which as Rigolot acknowledges is not simply a question of antagonism, I want to situate Montaigne in relation to sophistic social thought. I will begin with Montaigne's essay on custom, "De la coustume et de ne changer aisément une loy reçue" (I, 23), which merits close attention for its contribution to the "functional analysis of religion"¹² which extends throughout Montaigne's essays. Ostensibly devoted to the tyranny of custom and the arbitrary authority of the law, while advocating the strictest adherence to law and custom, before recognizing in civil war an exception to its own rule, "De la coustume" revisits the prototypically sophistic distinction between *nomos* and *physis* or law and nature.¹³ Montaigne could have encountered this familiar topos in the dialogues of Xenophon and Plato if not in the less accessible, or in the case of Antiphon, inaccessible fragments of the sophists themselves.

Following a long enumeration of diverse and, for a European audience, perverse customs illustrative of the relativity of cultural values, Montaigne argues that our very morality or the distinctions we draw between right and wrong are conventional rather than natural. "Les loix de la conscience, que nous disons naistre de nature, naisent de la coustume: chacun ayant en veneration interne les opinions et moeurs approuvées et receuës autour de luy, ne s'en peut desprendre sans remors, ny s'y appliquer sans applaudissement" (I, 23, 115 C).¹⁴ This issue continued to preoccupy Montaigne as he revised his essay on the Exemple de Bordeaux until his death in 1592, adding the concrete example of a virtue that is conventional rather than natural: "la pudicité" or *pudicitia*. Writing in the margins of his own copy of the 1588 edition of the *Essais*, after attributing to Plato himself the notion that sexual mores are conventional rather than natural, Montaigne declares: "De vrai, la pudicité est une belle vertu, et de laquelle l'utilité est assez connue: mais de la traiter et faire valoir selon nature, il est autant malaysé, comme il est aisé de la faire valoir selon l'usage, les loix et les preceptes" (I, 23, 117 C). Here Montaigne renders the second term of the *Physis / Nomos* dichotomy with three vernacular terms: "l'usage, les loix et les preceptes." Like the sophists, then, Montaigne classifies law and morality under the heading of *nomos*. However, as Aldo Magris reminds us in his article on Greek Enlightenment, to recognize that morality is conventional is not to minimize its importance, nor is it, by any means, subversive: "Anche la morale, dunque, è una costruzione umana, ed una convenzione, ma ciò non toglie per nulla la sua importanza, dato che questa importanza si misura sulla sua utilità sociale" (248). Jacqueline de Romilly makes very much the same point in her analysis of the sophistic critique of the law (93). For Montaigne, as a sophist, the law is valid because it is conventional; it is a convention entered into for the mutual benefit of society. This can explain, I believe, why such a caustic critique of custom yields such a classic expression of conservatism in "De la coustume": "Car c'est la regle des regles, et generale loy des loix, que chacun observe celles du lieu où il est" (I, 23, 118 A).¹⁵ The only general law he recognizes is the need to obey our own laws and to honor our own customs.

Moreover, the convention that most appeals to Montaigne, and that he most strongly urges his audience to respect, is the Catholic religion. The French are Catholic by convention, and they would do well to remain so, is the burden of his essay on custom. When he does speak of Christianity in this essay, he offers a very unorthodox endorsement: "La religion Chrestienne a toutes les marques d'extreme justice et utilité; mais nulle plus apparente, que l'exacte recommandation de l'obéissance du Magistrat, et manutention des polices" (I, 23, 120 B). Here the criterion of utility completely displaces the question of truth.¹⁶ In that respect, Machiavelli and Montaigne invoke the same criterion but arrive at opposite conclusions in their evaluation of Christianity.

Montaigne further inscribes himself in the sophistic tradition through his very keen insight into what we may call the psychology of superstition, which is related to the faculty of the imagination. In his essay, from the first book, on the force of the imagination (I, 21), Montaigne compiles a leisurely sequence of anecdotes involving

what we might call psychosomatic ailments, illustrative of the power of the human imagination. The initial version of the essay includes a rather categorical statement of rationalism, the feature most emblematic of the sophistic enlightenment. “Il est vray semblable que le principal credit des miracles, des visions, des enchantemens et de tels effects extraordinaires, vienne de la puissance de l’imagination agissant principalement contre les ames du vulgaire, plus molles. On leur a si fort saisi la creance, qu’ils pensent voir ce qu’ils ne voyent pas” (I, 21, 99 A). It is most likely, Montaigne declares, that the credit we give to miracles, visions, enchantments, and other extraordinary effects comes from the power of the imagination acting primarily on the minds of the common people, whose credulity is so far preoccupied, “si fort saisi,” that they think they see what they do not see. Therefore the category of the supernatural is a subjective representation rather than an objective reality. In revising his essay, Montaigne added a comic anecdote about a friend of his who suffered from sexual impotence on his wedding night and who was cured by a psychological ruse, which Montaigne does not hesitate to call a “miracle” (I, 21, 100 C), that exploited the friend’s belief in sorcery and more particularly in the type of magic spell that the French call “les nouements d’aiguillettes.” It is clear that the essay on the imagination inscribes itself in a very specific ideological context, namely, the vogue of demonology and the persecution of witches in late Renaissance Europe (Nakam, 377-97). In this context, Montaigne’s aristocratic friend was no more able than the common people to resist the lure of superstition.

The very same year that Montaigne published the first two books of *Essays* in 1580, Jean Bodin published his fanatical treatise *De la démonomanie des sorciers* where he strenuously rebuts the kind of rationalist arguments that Montaigne uses to explain belief in witches. Among other details, he adds juridical testimony to defend belief in “les nouements d’aiguillettes” that Montaigne demystifies (Bodin, 182). Moreover, Bodin draws a very imprudent connection between religious orthodoxy and demonology. In the appendix to his work that he calls “Réfutation des opinions de Jean Wier,” aimed at the physician Johann Weyer, whose treatise *De praestigiiis daemonum* appeared in 1563, supplemented by the *De Lamiis* in 1577, Bodin insists that to refute sorcery, as Weyer and Montaigne and some others do, is to refute religion. If sorcery isn’t real, then god isn’t real (Bodin, 469, 475). Bodin goes so far as to assert, against Weyer, that lycanthropy is just as certain as holy scripture: “Et en assurant que le changement des Sorciers en loups, et autres bestes est fabuleux, et que c’est une illusion, il faict une conclusion que l’histoire sacree est une fable et illusion, car s’il est fait en l’un, il se peut faire és autres, attendu que la puissance de Dieu n’est point diminuee” (475). This was immediately recognized as a dangerously inept approach to Christian apologetics, in fact so inept that it was open to suspicion of clandestine atheism.¹⁷ Whatever his secret motives may have been, Bodin does profess an absolute, literal belief in sorcery and witchcraft. For Bodin, who was primarily a jurist, what counts in this debate is the legal procedure used to prosecute witches. The guilty verdict is the goal of his book.

By contrast, Montaigne remains an agnostic on the objective question of guilt or innocence. Rather than render a verdict on the truth status of the examples he adduces, Montaigne prefers, in uncertain cases like the famous trial of Martin Guerre, to follow the model of the Areopagus, which, according to Valerius Maximus, deferred judgement on a capital case for one hundred years in order to avoid an “inexplicabilem cunctationem” (8.1.2) or insoluble dilemma. In witch trials, Montaigne wishes the court could simply declare, “La court n’y entend rien” (III, 11, 1030). In this way the essayist shuns what Andrea Frisch has called “the tribunal of history” and seeks instead to defuse the prosecutorial zeal of his contemporary French historians.

In his essay on the force of the imagination, Montaigne takes a rather casual attitude to the veracity of the anecdotes which he recounts, including the one about the falconer who made a bird fall from the sky merely by staring at it, “à ce qu’on dit” or according to hearsay (I, 21, 105 A). In revising his essay, Montaigne magnified this aspect of hearsay, insisting that he does not care if his examples of the power of the imagination are true or false. Verification and falsification are not the purpose of his book, which he defines as follows, in a key passage for understanding the essays: “Aussi en l’estude que je traite de noz moeurs et mouvemens, les tesmoignages fabuleux, pourveu qu’ils soient possibles, y servent comme les vrais. Advenu ou non advenu, à Paris ou à Rome, à Jean ou à Pierre, c’est tousjours un tour de l’humaine capacité, duquel je suis utilement advisé par ce recit” (I, 21, 105 C). First of all, the project of Montaigne’s essays is anthropological: he studies human *mores* (*nomoi* we might say) and movements. Primary among these “mœurs et mouvemens” is human credulity, our impulse to believe in the supernatural and the divine. It is indifferent to this study whether our beliefs are true or false, as long as they are useful, and as long as we grasp the use to which they are put in society. Therefore, he dismisses the objective question: do witches exist, are they guilty or innocent, “advenu ou non advenu”? In this question, that Montaigne refuses to answer, that he leaves in suspense at the end of his essay on the force of the imagination, I propose to hear an echo of the question that Protagoras puts aside at the outset of his *Peri theon*: the question of whether the gods exist. We do not know what Protagoras said next, because his text has been lost and perhaps suppressed by subsequent orthodoxies. However, we do know what our Renaissance authors wrote, and through our collective efforts, we may be able to retrieve some of the fugitive legacy of the sophists from the substantial remains of the European Renaissance.

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- ⁶ Sextus's *Adversus Mathematicos*, including the long version of the Sisyphus fragment, was first printed in Latin translation in Paris and Antwerp in 1569 while the shorter version of the fragment, attributed to Euripides, was found in the *De placitis philosophorum* included in Plutarch's *Moralia* and thus translated into French in 1572 by Jacques Amyot. The *editio princeps* of the *Moralia* was published by Aldo Manuzio in Venice in 1509.
- ⁷ Montaigne paraphrases Varro's opinion in the "Apologie de Raymond Sebond": "Voicy l'excuse que nous donnent, sur la consideration de ce subject, Scevola, grant pontife, et Varro, grand theologien, en leur temps: Qu'il est besoin que le peuple ignore beaucoup de choses vrayes et en croye beaucoup de fausses" (II, 12, 535).
- ⁸ On this point, see André.
- ⁹ Magris paraphrases the end of DK 80B4 as follows: "la vita umana è troppo breve e troppo preziosa per sprecarla in tali questioni; meglio dunque impiegare il proprio tempo nella soluzione di problemi più utili" (221).
- ¹⁰ For an analysis of these chapters, see Sasso, 549-560. Sasso anticipates, in order to contradict, my thesis when he argues that Machiavelli's concept of religion has only extrinsic connections with ancient sophistic: "E come il concetto che egli ne costruisce ha riscontri soltanto estrinseci con, poniamo, le antiche teorizzazioni sofistiche, così non ne ha alcuno con l'atteggiamento che predominò nel periodo della Controriforma" (553-554).
- ¹¹ For the use of the term *sophist* to designate the scholastic philosophers and professors of dialectic, see MacPhail 2011, 52-58.
- ¹² The term is taken from Machiavelli criticism, especially Preus. Before Preus, Tenenti focused his discussion of Machiavelli's religion on "la sua analisi funzionale delle credenze religiose" (715). MacPhail 2014 studies Montaigne's functional analysis of religion with particular reference to the essay "De la gloire" (II, 16).
- ¹³ For a general treatment of the theme, see Heinimann as well as Guthrie, 55-134.
- ¹⁴ The essays are cited by book, chapter, and page and also layer: A, B, or C for 1580, 1588, or the *Exemplaire de Bordeaux*.
- ¹⁵ See Langer for the tension between conservatism and critique in I, 23.
- ¹⁶ Similarly, Mathieu-Castellani: "l'utile se trouve privilégié par rapport à l'authentique" (10).
- ¹⁷ The seventeenth-century libertine Guy Patin bears an interesting testimony to Bodin's posthumous reputation for atheism and religious hypocrisy in a letter dated November 16, 1643: "La Démonomanie des Sorciers de Bodin ne vaut rien du tout. Il ne fit ce livre qu'afin qu'on crût qu'il y croyait, d'autant que, pour quelques opinions un peu libres, il fut soupçonné d'athéisme, parce qu'il favorisa les huguenots" (304).

Notes

- ¹ The usage is not unknown in the Romance languages. See Saitta as well as Magris.
- ² The fragment is conserved in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 9.52; Eusebius of Caesarea, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 14.3.7; and Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* 9.56.
- ³ This hypothesis was first proposed by Gomperz, 133-34. Untersteiner 1, 55 considers *Peri theon* to be the first section of the *Antilogiai*.
- ⁴ Summarizing Jaeger, 189, Babut says of Protagoras, "il est vraisemblable qu'il y appréciait positivement le fait religieux en tant que phénomène social et élément important de la culture humaine" (56).
- ⁵ See Davies for text, translation, commentary, and bibliography.