Why the Oracles Do Not Speak (Like Before): Plutarch and the Riddle of Second-Century Religion

by

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Abstract

Plutarch seems far more a man of his times, than one of past times. His nostalgia for the past cannot be separated from his awareness, and perhaps, concern, for the present. In his own way, he sought to provide an apologetic for a Greek culture that no longer existed, but whose cultural construction came sharply into conflict with the realities of second-century Roman transformation. We can admire his efforts to address these transformations with the power of his rhetoric, but at the same time, recognize that his cultural parochialism was giving way to a new imperial, universalist model.

Edward Gibbon did scholarship no favor when he labeled the Antonine century a ‘golden age’ of calm classicism and philosophical reason, whose repose was disturbed only by the rise of a new, and in Gibbon’s rationalist view, rather pernicious superstition, Christianity. His image of second-century paganism is a fine model for the age of Hume, but to be fair to Gibbon, he was only reflecting his sources, the belles lettres of Fronto and Pliny, the soothing stoicism of Marcus Aurelius, and the sceptical satires of Lucian. As far as I can tell, Gibbon was the first, but not the last, to employ the letters of Pliny and Trajan to juxtapose the broad intellectual tolerance of imperial rule with the ‘obstinance’ and foolishness of the Christians in order to establish the rational foundations of second-century paganism. And while most scholars do not share Gibbon’s disdain for Christianity, his image of late antique paganism has remained persistent. Nearly two centuries after Gibbon, E. R. Dodds, in his seminal work, Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety, contrasted the rationalism of the second century with the “anxiety” of the third century to explain the rise of Christianity. Yet Dodds’s brilliant psychological interpretation contains the flaw that nearly all his claims of third-century ‘anxiety’

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