

Introduction

THE PROBLEM OF PAGANISM

Readers who are puzzled by the phrase ‘the Problem of Paganism’ should not think that it is famous Problem that has somehow slipped through the net of their reading. It is a newly invented label, and the central contention of this book is that it serves an important purpose.¹ It picks out a set of closely connected issues about pagan virtue, knowledge of God and salvation—issues which reveal a central tension within the culture of Western Europe in the period from c. 200 to c. 1700, the ‘Long Middle Ages’.² More often than not they are sidelined or hidden, but they are given sustained attention by a number of the most remarkable thinkers and writers of the period.

¹I have introduced the idea of ‘the Problem of Paganism’ into some of my previous writings: Marenbon 2004b, 2009b, 2012a, 2012d. But there are some slight variations in how I have used the term. Since it is a term of my own devising, there are, of course, no existing studies on ‘the Problem of Paganism’, except for these. But individual aspects of the problem in particular authors, especially those from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, have been much studied and I have profited enormously from much of this work, which is cited in my footnotes. There are also some studies which cover wider areas of my ground, under various different labels. Cary Nederman’s work (Nederman 2000) on medieval toleration brings together a number of the same authors. Capéran 1934 and Harent 1922 offer fine studies of one strand of the problem, the salvation of pagans. Harent’s essay, though learned and detailed, has ultimately doctrinal, rather than historical aims. Capéran’s treatment of the eleventh to fifteenth centuries is somewhat thin, but his 150 pages on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are very rich. Sullivan 2002 gives a more popularizing, but clear account; Frezza 1962 is insubstantial. Von Moos, in his introduction and commentary to a late fifteenth-century work on the salvation of Aristotle (von Moos 2013a), gives a rich and detailed discussion of various aspects of the problem, along with a general introduction. (von Moos 2013b provides a briefer account, in French, of some of the material.) Von Moos has also written suggestively on another aspect of the problem in his comments on a ‘praeter-spiritual’ tradition of thinking in John of Salisbury, Boethius, Abelard, Engelbert of Admont and others: see von Moos 1988b, 491–94; 2012. There have also been studies of pagan virtue. Some are linked to Middle English literature (Hahn 1974; Vitto 1989; Minnis 1982). Grady 2005 pursues a particularly interesting line of discussion, arguing that the encounter with a virtuous pagan had become a *topos* in late medieval English poetry and can be analysed formally. Others are linked to Dante (Colish 1996—a wide-ranging discussion; and see chapter 10 for studies more narrowly linked to Dante) and seventeenth-century French literature (Herdt 2008; Moriarty 2011—particularly valuable because of its detailed study of the theological background). Grellard (2014)—important for the theme of invincible ignorance—appeared after my book was finished.

²On the ‘Long Middle Ages’, see below, p. 5.

A POET, A HEROINE, A PHILOSOPHER AND A CANNIBAL

Four figures, who will reappear later, will help not just to explain the questions involved in the Problem of Paganism, but also this book's scope and method. The first three illustrate, in turn, the three main aspects of the problem: the salvation of pagans, pagan virtue and pagan knowledge. The first of them appears in the opening pages of the most famous of all medieval poems, Dante's *Commedia divina*, written early in the fourteenth century. The poet, lost and threatened, encounters what he quickly finds is the shade of Virgil, the ancient poet whom he reveres above all others, his *maestro*. Virgil will be his learned and understanding guide through his visit to Hell and part of Purgatory, though no further. For, as the reader quickly learns, despite his supreme eloquence, his virtue and his goodness, Virgil is himself in Hell, albeit its most comfortable corner. He is damned because he was pagan and so lacked Christian faith.

The second, Lucretia, lived at Rome in far earlier days, and she is presented in the pages of an author who looked back on Roman history at the moment when Christianity had almost, but not completely, displaced the old pagan religion. Lucretia, as every Roman knew, set an example of heroic virtue when, after being raped by king's son, she ensured that the crime would be punished and then, to preserve her honour, killed herself. In his *City of God*, however, Augustine describes her as someone led by pride into committing the crime of suicide. Her virtue, like that of other pagan heroines and heroes, turns out to be a sham.

The third is Aristotle: not, however, the solid reality of the Greek philosopher, but the image of Aristotle—what he stood for in the eyes of the thirteenth-century Arts Master, Boethius of Dacia. Boethius thought that Aristotle had a comprehensive and coherent view of the universe, and he dedicated his professional life to expounding it. But he also knew that some of these doctrines, such as the view that the universe had no beginning, were incompatible with his Christian faith. Boethius tackled this problem by trying to confine pagan, Aristotelian wisdom to its own sphere, where it could be considered in its own terms—a type of limited relativism.

The fourth figure is from the pages of Montaigne's *Essais*, first published in 1580. He is evoked in a strange and violent scene. Everyone is naked, and they are not Europeans but Native Americans. He is tied to a cord, held by members of a crowd that surrounds him, brandishing clubs and swords with which, he knows, he is about to be killed. Then they will roast him on the fire that has been prepared and eat him. He knows too that he need only beg his captors for mercy and he will be set free—but nothing is further from his mind. Rather, he has spent the weeks since he

was taken prisoner taunting his captors that when they eat him, they will be eating their own ancestors and families, since he has feasted on them so many times.

At the centre of the Problem of Paganism, as the case of Dante's Virgil brings out better than perhaps any other example, is a discrepancy between the status of some pagans as moral, intellectual and cultural heroes and the fact that they were pagans. The question of salvation puts the discrepancy most sharply in focus. Why, since Dante makes it clear that Virgil was not just the greatest of poets, but also a good and wise man, is he not in Heaven? The theological doctrines that are taken by Dante to exclude him do not seem to square with God's goodness and justice. Either the doctrines must be altered or negotiated, as they often were—many medieval writers considered that people like Virgil had been saved—or it must be explained how, despite appearances, they do not make God unjust.

Augustine's treatment of Lucretia is one extreme way of handling the problem of pagan virtue, by insisting that, without Christian belief, there can be no true virtue: she is just one of a whole series of pagan heroes and heroines whose virtues are shown to be merely apparent. Some sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers followed or even exaggerated this line of thought, but in general medieval thinkers did not accept Augustine's position, although they did follow him in distinguishing between the virtues of a Christian and those of pagans. The result was, in some cases, to mark out an area of virtuous human behaviour, to be regarded in its own terms, apart from specifically Christian virtue.

Such an attitude to pagan virtue parallels Boethius of Dacia's approach to pagan knowledge. But Boethius's limited relativism was an important, but minority strategy. Most thinkers in the Long Middle Ages refused to separate revealed and natural knowledge so sharply. Some, like Aquinas, strove to see the unity of pagan and Christian wisdom; others emphasized the mistakes and deficiencies in the views of even so wise a pagan as Aristotle. But Aristotle is the central figure in just one strand of the problem of pagan knowledge, which is problematic for the same ultimate reason as pagan virtue: because of the exclusiveness of Christian claims. Just as, at least according to some elements in Christian doctrine, only those who believe in Christ can be virtuous, so the full truth about God is that which Christianity alone teaches. There is, though, an important difference. Where with regard to virtue, especially once salvation came into question, doctrinal requirements tended to encourage a sharp division between Christians and those who were not, there was much more room to think of knowledge of the true God as coming by degrees, so that non-Christians can have a more or less partial grasp of it. This explains

not only why so many thinkers avoided Boethius of Dacia's division of spheres, but also how the problem of pagan knowledge is not confined to obviously wise pagans such as Aristotle. The same underlying questions about knowledge posed about the prodigiously intelligent and cultivated, long-dead philosopher could be posed too about ordinary, unsophisticated and perhaps uneducated living pagans. How true is their conception of God, and what is the explanation, in each case, for the extent to which pagans grasp the truth and by which they fall short of it?

Thinking about such contemporary pagans forms an important strand in the Problem of Paganism, not just in the period after Columbus, but from the thirteenth century onwards (and even before then), and questions about pagan virtue and pagan salvation, as well as knowledge, are involved. Montaigne's cannibal suggests some of the special difficulties of this side of the problem, and how it links with studying the origins of anthropology and ethnography.

Although they raise different issues, the four figures have one important feature in common, which indicates the character of the discussions in this book. None of them is a real person, though none is entirely imaginary. Dante's Virgil is not Virgil, nor Augustine's Lucretia Lucretia, nor Boethius of Dacia's Aristotle Aristotle, nor Montaigne's cannibal any one of the Tupí Indians. The Problem of Paganism is a matter not of how Christians interacted with pagans, but rather of how they thought about them. Contacts with contemporary pagans, especially from the thirteenth century onwards, certainly affected how the problem was conceived and addressed, but their interest, for the present project, is in the conceptions they produced or changed, or the new questions they generated, rather than in what in fact took place.

There is another common feature of these four illustrations that is equally revealing about the following chapters—that they are indeed *illustrations*, involving figures, rather than concepts and their subdivisions, or a set of positions or arguments. Although most of this book will be occupied by looking at concepts (such as faith, natural law, virtue, reason), at the positions taken by different writers on, for instance, pagan virtue or the salvation of pagans and at the arguments made for and against them, it is not merely a matter of presentation to begin with four concrete figures. The Problem of Paganism presents itself frequently in terms of particular imagined pagans, whether they hark back to a known individual or a type, or they are purely imaginary. This is why, although this is a book about medieval *philosophy*, among the authors examined are poets, literary, imaginative writers and authors or inventors of travel stories, as well as specialist philosophers and philosopher-theologians.

SCOPE

The different backgrounds of the four figures point to the range of those who will be regarded in what follows as pagans: anyone, at any period, who is not a Christian, a Jew or a Muslim. This categorization is not, of course, intended as one that could be defended nowadays, when, although many would place in one group the 'Abrahamic Religions' (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), few would be happy to lump together all other faiths under the same, negative-sounding label. But it does correspond to how beliefs were classified by educated Christians in Western Europe in the Middle Ages and later. In the classification given in the thirteenth century by Aquinas, 'pagans' or 'gentiles' were a distinctive subgroup of the wider class of unbelievers (*infideles*) that also included Jews and heretics.³ It is true that the difference between pagans and Muslims was less clear cut than that between pagans and Jews or heretical Christians. Less well-informed writers and much popular opinion represented Muslims as idolaters and polytheists and grouped them along with the pagans. But the educated recognized that Islam is a monotheistic religion and tended to regard it as a type of distorted Christianity, so that the Muslims were heretics rather than pagans.⁴ Paganism, as understood in this book, following the medieval example, is wider, however, than the connotations of the term today would suggest. Many pagans—including those most relevant to the Problem of Paganism—discussed by medieval writers were, though not Christians, Jews or Muslims, considered to have been or to be worshippers of a single, immaterial God.

The four figures just discussed span most but not all of the period considered in the book. After a look at the ancient background, it starts with the early Christian Greek tradition and extends to close with Leibniz, who died in the early eighteenth century. It runs therefore from c. 200 (with some glances back to the century and a half before) to c. 1700. Usually, these years are divided into four different eras: Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Early Modern Period. But there are arguments—and one of the most important of this book's conclusions is to strengthen them—that in the history of philosophy it is more illuminating to think of these fifteen centuries as a single period, the Long Middle Ages.⁵

³I generally translate the word *infidelis* as 'unbeliever', a word that avoids the archaism of 'infidel' and the clumsiness of 'non-faithful'. But 'unbeliever' should be taken merely as a token for the technical meaning of *infidelis* as explained here.

⁴See Daniel 1993; Gauthier 1993, 110; and Tolan 2002; and for an important exception, below pp. 109–13.

⁵For a more general justification for using the Long Middle Ages as a period in the history of philosophy, see Marenbon 2011b; 2012c, 6–7.

In order not to make the book too unwieldy, however, the material at the beginning and the end of the tradition has been treated in less detail. The Problem of Paganism was very important for those Church Fathers who lived in a culture and society that was still mostly or partly pagan. Its treatment by Greek thinkers such as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria and Origen, and Latin ones such as Ambrose and Jerome deserves a book to itself. But the particular form of the Problem of Paganism in the Latin tradition right up to Leibniz was set by Augustine, and so there is good reason for him to be the first thinker studied here in some depth, with only the briefest sketch of his predecessors. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Problem of Paganism, far from dwindling (as would be expected by those who think of this period as a time when medieval categories and concerns were replaced by a new science and philosophy), became a more central intellectual preoccupation than ever before. To treat this period comprehensively would be far beyond the scope of this single volume. The strategy here has been, rather, to select some of the most significant texts and developments in the three areas of pagan knowledge, virtue and salvation, in order to show how they are part of this continuous tradition of thought about paganism, stretching back through the Middle Ages. Many important names and areas have had to be left aside.⁶

Although the Middle Ages presented here is Long, it is not, at least in an important respect, broad, since it is confined to Western European Latin and vernacular material. The Greek Christian, Islamic and Jewish traditions all have, to some extent, their own versions of the Problem of Paganism, and a comparative study could be fascinating. But, because the shape of the Problem of Paganism depends on precise theological doctrines, it would need to be reformulated for each branch (even between Greek Christian doctrine and that of the Latin world, decisively influenced by Augustine, there are sharp differences). Moreover, the problem seems to be especially rich in the Latin world, for two reasons. First, although ancient *philosophy* was transmitted to all four cultures, only the Latin and Greek traditions also inherited ancient *literature*. In Byzantium, however, such was the suspicion of ‘Hellenism’ (the revival of a pagan past) that the Problem of Paganism was usually suppressed, although occasionally it emerged, even in extreme form (as in the case

⁶For example, there is nothing on Erasmus, Gassendi, Locke, Spinoza or the so-called Cambridge Platonists, all of whom are important for the subject, nor is there an attempt to look at poets, in the way that Chaucer and Dante were examined in the previous section. Although some Protestant writers, such as de Léry and Bayle, are discussed, the Catholic tradition is favoured in the treatment of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, because the strong influence of Augustine on many Protestant authors made it comparatively easy for them to resolve the Problem of Paganism, to their own satisfaction, in an Augustinian way.

of Gemisthos Plethon). In Western Europe, where such worries were less pervasive, one main reason why the Problem of Paganism became a special concern for some thinkers was that concerns about the theological and philosophical problems posed by paganism combined with, and were often fired by, an admiration for the classical world as presented through its literature. The list of writers in the Latin tradition who were specially engaged by the Problem of Paganism bears out the point: many of them—Augustine, Boethius, Abelard, John of Salisbury, Vincent of Beauvais, John of Wales, Dante, Boccaccio, Robert Holcot, Chaucer, Valla, Moore, Montaigne, La Mothe le Vayer—were, in their different ways, steeped in the Roman classics. Second, although Islamic travellers and explorers wrote accounts of strange peoples and their beliefs, there is nothing in the other branches to compare with the two very different Western European encounters with contemporary pagans at the end of the period studied here: with the natives of America (ranging from isolated island tribes to the people of the great Aztec and Inca Empires) and with the Chinese.

AN APPROACH

The following chapters aim to show readers now how writers in the Long Middle Ages saw and tackled the complex of issues about pagan virtue, knowledge and salvation labelled here the Problem of Paganism. They will therefore be considering ideas, positions and arguments developed within cultural and intellectual contexts very different from today's. There are many different possible approaches. At one extreme, there is the antiquarian approach, which aims to keep as close as possible to the medieval and Early Modern texts, following their vocabulary and method of presentation, avoiding anachronism at all costs. Its practitioners are rather like explorers who, coming across the ruins of an ancient city, record every detail with minute precision and then consider that their work has been done. At the other extreme, there is the narrowly philosophical approach, which takes just whatever ideas and arguments seem, or can be re-read or adapted to be, of value within contemporary philosophical discussion. Its exponents resemble explorers who take from the ancient city's rubble whatever they can use for their own purposes. The approach taken here falls between these two extremes. It sets out to make the views and differences of medieval and Early Modern writers comprehensible to readers today by translating them into terms which people today can understand, explaining the context in which they arose, their aims and presuppositions. The explorer, in this case, would be one who, from the traces which remained, attempted to describe not

only how the city looked when it stood intact and proud, but also the life which once went on within its walls.

An important part of the context which needs to be supplied is theological. The Problem of Paganism was given shape by a set of strict, though in part changing Christian doctrinal requirements. The last part of this introduction gives a sketch of their outlines, which is filled in and adjusted as necessary in the following chapters. It might seem that, by contrast, broader notions, such as religion or monotheism, need no explanation or translation, because they are still current. But such terms can be false friends, since they were understood very differently in the Long Middle Ages.

One of the most striking features of the Problem of Paganism is that, for thinkers in the Long Middle Ages, the virtuous and wise pagans they consider, especially from antiquity, are usually envisaged as being believers in the one God. Our contemporary concept of monotheism seems to provide a way to think about this aspect of their views, especially since there is a current controversy over, apparently, this very point. Until recently, the view of some ancient pagans as monotheists would have seemed a medieval anachronism, since it was generally held that even the philosophers were polytheist in religion. But this assessment has been challenged. Plenty of ancient philosophers, from pre-Socratics such as Xenophanes, Anaxagoras and Antisthenes onwards, talked of a single, supreme principle: Aristotle recognized an unmoved mover, Intellect (*nous*) engaged in thinking itself, an 'eternal, living, most good' being; whilst the Stoics, though materialists, looked to an immanent god, which organized the universe rationally.⁷ Where classical scholars traditionally separated such philosophical views from their judgements about ancient Greek and Roman religion, the revisionists argue that this distinction is artificial, and add that there is also evidence for monotheistic pagan worship.⁸

Yet this contemporary controversy in fact blurs understanding of the how thinkers in the Long Middle Ages thought about pagans and God. The question of whether or not a religion is monotheistic belongs the repertoire of Comparative Religion. It arises from a scientific approach, in which different religious practices and beliefs are scrutinized for their likenesses and dissimilarities. Monotheism in this sense was a concept

⁷See Jaeger 1947; Liebeschuetz 1979; Gerson 1990. For Aristotle, see *Metaphysics* XII, 1072–75.

⁸See Athanassiadi and Frede 1999 for the revisionist case, for which the editors' introduction (1–20) and Frede's own essay, 'Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy in Later Antiquity', provide a manifesto. The position has been criticized: see Edwards 2004 and 2010, and Frede 2010 for some replies. For a summary of the debate, see the editors' introduction to Mitchell and Van Nuffelen 2010.

alien both to the ancient world itself and the Long Middle Ages, even to those sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers who engaged in a serious and informed comparative study of religious beliefs.⁹ They regarded themselves, not as monotheists—as holding a religious belief which belongs to a certain category, Monotheism, which might take many different forms—but as believing in and worshipping the one, true God. All evidence about beliefs and practices of worship other than their own had to be understood in the light of God's existence, and his creation and providential disposition of the universe. They did not, therefore, try to place the beliefs of pagan philosophers within a neutral scheme of classification, into which they could also fit their own religious conceptions. Rather, they asked themselves to what extent these pagans had comprehended the one, true God. For this reason, they also reacted differently from scholars today to evidence—less clear to them, but still unmistakable—that many of the ancient pagans who recognized a single supreme God also accepted and worshipped many lesser gods. In the contemporary debate, the question is whether 'monotheism' should be defined broadly enough to include such people. For writers in the Long Middle Ages, the problem was rather to explain, in a way which made sense in terms of divine justice and providence, how those who had grasped to some extent the truth about the supreme deity could still fall into the error of having false gods.

Whilst some contemporary notions which seem to be useful prove dangerous, others, which might appear quite inappropriate, turn out to be exactly what are required in making the necessary translation. The most important of all these is the idea of relativism. Relativism is usually considered a particularly modern, or even post-modern, notion, with as its earliest great epigones nineteenth-century figures such as Nietzsche. But it will emerge from the following chapters that, throughout the Long Middle Ages, there was an important tendency towards ways of thinking that are properly characterized as relativist, although almost never unqualifiedly so; on some occasions, indeed, their relativism is explicitly and reflectively discussed.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS SUPPOSED TO BE AND DO

Is this book a study in intellectual history, or does it belong to the history of theology or literature, or even that, more loosely defined, of 'mentalities'? In some ways, it is all of these and none of them. But what it seeks

⁹On the appropriateness or not for scholars today to use 'monotheism' in connection with the ancient world, see Van Nuffelen 2010 and Cerutti 2010.

to be above all, is a book about the history of *philosophy*. There are two reasons, however, why this aim might seem to be an impossible one, in view of its subject and a considerable part of its contents. First, the whole theme seems to be a theological one, since the Problem of Paganism is set up by various Christian doctrines, biblical passages and patristic authorities. Yet these elements, which are internal to Christianity, give particular form to a more general problem, from whatever religious or non-religious standpoint: how can we understand, and how should we judge beliefs and values different from our own? Although, then, the Problem of Paganism is *not* itself a living problem (even for the most resolutely old-fashioned religious believer), it is a form of a general philosophical problem which is very much alive. This kinship opens up the possibility that treatments of the Problem of Paganism can be understood philosophically: not indeed by those philosophers who are interested only in what they can use for present-day discussions, but by those who are willing to think themselves into contexts that offer them no such immediate, first-level benefits, and yet are not utterly detached from our own intellectual predicament.

The second reason for questioning this book's claim to be concerned with philosophy is that a number of the texts it discusses are not, in the main, devoted to presenting and discussing arguments. Perhaps, indeed, in a narrow sense, the history of philosophy ought to be concerned only with such writing. In a wider sense, however, the history of philosophy should accept within its purview texts which examine philosophical themes in a mixed mode, combining argument with narrative or description. The central core of the material examined in the following chapters comes from philosophical or theological works and is argumentative in the traditional philosophical manner. The less purely argumentative texts are closely related to this core, and the different types of writing are often linked by shared motifs, such as the story of Pope Gregory and Trajan, found in scholastic theological treatises, learned disquisitions, hagiography and vernacular poetry. Moreover, the Long Middle Ages are rich in writing (from Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* and Abelard's *Collationes* to More's *Utopia* and Montaigne's *Essays*) that combines philosophical sophistication with a literary form which requires far more of interpreters than simply to understand an argument. One of the subsidiary aims of this book is to reclaim such texts for philosophy.

Its main aim, however, is the one announced in the first paragraph: to show that the Problem of Paganism, which it introduces for the first time, is a valuable concept for understanding philosophy in the Long Middle Ages. It can show it only by doing it. If readers finish the book convinced

that the very different types of material discussed, from twelve centuries and many countries, fit together to show how thinkers in a coherent period addressed a single, though many-stranded underlying problem, it will have succeeded. It does not, of course, seek to be comprehensive, since its purpose is to open up a new subject, not to complete and dispose of it. Nor will it offer any neat conclusions of the kind through which some intellectual historians like to understand the past, but rather a negative one which might, ultimately, be more instructive.

SOME THEOLOGICAL PREMISES

The Problem of Paganism, as already mentioned, depends on particular, precise theological doctrines. Contrary to the popular stereotype of Christian doctrine as a fixed, authoritative body of teaching, it was constantly changing and under dispute throughout the whole Long Middle Ages, as the following chapters will make clear. But it is useful to start with a framework—a sketch of the theological issues surrounding pagan knowledge (of God), virtue and salvation which made paganism a problem.

There are four characteristics of God which few if any medieval Christians disputed. First, he is one, and nothing else is a god. Second, although he is one, he is also a Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Third, he became incarnate in the person of the Son. Fourth, he is not simply a first, natural cause or principle, but a personal God, who acts voluntarily. Each of these features, except the first, posed problems for pagan knowledge, so that Christian writers were forced either to maintain that even apparently very wise pagans were fundamentally ignorant about God, or else to find ways of attributing to pagans beliefs which, to an observer nowadays, it seems unlikely they held. The first feature, too, *ought* to have caused problems, because it is doubtful whether many pagans believed in God exclusively in the manner of Christians (and Jews and Muslims). But writers in the Long Middle Ages were remarkably ready to discover exclusive belief in the one true God in pagans both long dead and contemporary. Many, especially before the thirteenth century, also found knowledge of the Trinity among pagan thinkers. Such knowledge, some argued, could be reached simply by reasoning (although most writers from the thirteenth century onwards rejected this view).¹⁰ Knowledge of the Incarnation, however, could not be derived from reasoning. But it

¹⁰For the classic later medieval position, see, e.g., Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 32, a. 1. Some writers, especially those engaged in proselytizing, such as Ramon Llull, disagreed.

had been made available by the Gospel, and there was a widespread view that the Gospel had been preached to all peoples (a view shaken, but not entirely displaced, by the discoveries of new lands in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries). Before Christ, the Incarnation could be known only through prophecy. The Old Testament was usually read as foretelling the coming of Christ, and there were also supposed to have been ancient Roman prophecies of Christ through the Sibyls. But it was recognized that few ancients other than the Jews showed signs of knowing about Christ's future birth. Problems were also raised with regard to some other areas of knowledge about God. Many fourteenth-century theologians insisted that even the wisest pagan philosophers did not know that God acts as a voluntary contingent agent, not a necessary natural cause. Many of their predecessors and successors, however, found no such gap in pagan knowledge.

Knowledge of the true God was intimately connected to conceptions of virtue, and both knowledge and virtue to the possibility of salvation. Although Augustine's view of pagan virtue as almost an oxymoron was, as already noted, extreme, there were powerful doctrinal reasons for not simply accepting that pagans could be morally good in exactly the same way as Christians. All Christians until quite recently accepted the idea of Original Sin: that, whilst Adam was created capable of leading a morally upright life, by sinning he lessened the ability of his progeny to do so. The view advanced by Pelagius that it was still possible, unaided, to act well consistently, but just very difficult, was recognized by everyone in the Latin tradition as heretical, although many saw fallen humanity as less completely corrupt than it was held to be by Augustine and Augustinians such as Gregory of Rimini, Luther and Jansenius, and some of Pelagius's writings did in fact circulate pseudonymously and had considerable influence. To be virtuous and lead a good moral life required, therefore, God's special assistance or 'grace', and there was general agreement that God's generally gracious disposition of all things was not enough: each individual needed to receive God's grace and retain it, or else in some sense fail to live well.¹¹ There were various divisions of types of grace, and differing

¹¹The theology of grace is exceedingly complicated; elements of it will be touched on in the following chapters. One important distinction which came to be made was between *gratia gratis data*, a gift of grace which could be made even to someone in a state of sin, and *gratia gratum faciens*, that which makes a person in a state of grace and so acceptable to God and to be saved if he or she dies in this state. Another was the distinction between merit in the strict sense, *de condigno*, which could be earned only by those in a state of grace, and merit *de congruo*, which according to some thinkers attached to good actions performed out of a state of grace and provided a reason for God to infuse grace and so enable the agent to merit in the strict sense. A good introduction to this area is provided by McGrath 2005.

conceptions of these divisions, but typically it was seen in relation to a Christian's life. Baptism was, in Christian times, the remedy for Original Sin and brought Christian infants into a life of grace in which, with God aiding them in this way, they might in principle avoid any serious sins. To be in a state of grace means that a person acts out of a disposition of charity, and charity was considered to be the third of a trio of supernatural, infused virtues—that is to say, virtues which are not acquired through habituation or effort, but are put into people by God. The first two of these 'theological' virtues are faith and hope: faith in God and in Christ, the Redeemer, leads to the hope of salvation and that, in turn, to a state of charity, in which a person acts from love of God. Without some sort of belief in the Incarnation, there can be no faith in the Redeemer, and so, if pagans knew nothing of the Incarnation—as it seemed was true for many of them—then the path seemed to be blocked to the morally good life, which is made possible only by the gracious help needed to overcome Original Sin.

Even from this sketch, however, there seems to be enough of a gap between the excellent grace-directed life of a Christian, and a wicked, immoral, vice-ridden existence, to suggest that there could be pagan virtue which is genuine, but falls short of Christian perfection. Many thinkers developed such a notion, but they then were faced by a much less easily soluble problem about salvation. Christian doctrine recognizes just two ultimate destinies for humans in the world to come: eternal suffering (of varying degrees) in Hell, or eternal happiness (of varying levels) in Heaven.¹² In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Latin thinkers fully developed the idea of Purgatory, where sinners not destined for Hell would be punished and purified, but Purgatory was no one's final destination. All theologians agreed that, at the Final Judgement, when immortal souls will be reunited with their spiritualized bodies, Purgatory will cease to exist and all humans will be among the damned or the saved. It was also accepted in Latin theology that the judgement to bliss (perhaps after purg- ing) or to damnation made at a person's death is final and irreversible.¹³

¹²The souls of unbaptized children who die before they are old enough to sin were thought by some theologians not to receive eternal punishment, but to spend eternity in limbo (the edge of Hell), where they neither suffer nor are happy. A few writers, most notably Dante, suggested that virtuous pagans too might be in limbo or somewhere similar.

¹³The Jewish prophets, patriarchs and many other Old Testament Jews, who were destined for salvation, were usually thought not to have gone to Heaven until after the Crucifixion, and so to have waited in another limbo (the so-called *limbo patrum*). Some Greek theologians, but not the Latin tradition, thought that, on his descent to Hell, Christ preached there, giving pagans the chance to believe in him and reverse the sentence of damnation. There were apparent exceptions to the irreversibility of damnation in the Latin

If virtuous pagans, then, are not saved, they will be condemned to eternal punishment, and yet it is hard to see how such a judgement—endless punishment as the reward for those who have lived good lives—could be made by a just God.

An Augustinian, who denies that any pagans live good moral lives, does not face this dilemma. It might seem that those who accepted some form of pagan virtue in principle could also avoid it, by supposing that, although pagans could act virtuously in many ways, there are definite sins linked to paganism which justify the damnation of pagans. Many pagans were idolaters: they worshipped things other than the one God, such as natural objects or images. Idolatry was considered to be a sin, since even without revelation humans were thought able to know that God alone is to be worshipped. Moreover, *infidelitas* ('unbelief' as it will be translated here) could be positive or negative.¹⁴ Positive unbelief is not pure ignorance of the faith, but involves the refusal to accept it. Such unbelief, unlike simple ignorance of Christ (negative unbelief), was considered sinful. In so far as the Gospel was thought to have been universally disseminated, therefore, pagans living after the time of Christ are likely to be guilty of the sin of positive unbelief.

None the less, some pagans, most notably the philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome, seemed not to be idolaters; those who lived before Christ, and not among the Jews, appeared to be genuinely ignorant about the coming Incarnation, and it was usually admitted that, in theory at least (and after 1500, by many, in fact also), that someone living after the Gospel had been preached might never have heard about it. But Christian doctrine seemed to stand in the way of allowing that any such virtuous pagans should, despite their good lives, be saved from damnation. The obstacle was not in itself lack of baptism, although this reason was often given, simplistically, to explain why non-Christians were damned.¹⁵ Baptism was not required until it was instituted with the coming of Christ, and it was widely thought that, before then, prayers, sacrifices and, for the Jews alone, circumcision acted as remedies for Original Sin. Moreover, it was accepted from early on that there were circumstances in Christian times when someone could be considered to be baptized without a literal

tradition, especially the case of the soul of Trajan, freed from Heaven by Pope Gregory's prayers (discussed extensively below). But here it was said that he was never definitively sent to Hell.

¹⁴There is a particularly clear discussion of negative and positive unbelief in Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* IIaIIe, q. 10, a. 1.

¹⁵The classic supporting biblical verse is John iii, 5: 'Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God'.

baptism by water having taken place.¹⁶ Rather, the problem was that only those in a state of grace could be saved, and to be in such a state required the supernatural virtue of charity, which in its turn required faith (as well as hope). If, then, it was accepted that there could be a virtuous pagan, such a person seemed to be condemned to damnation simply for not having heard about Christ, prophetically or through the Gospel.

¹⁶See Dublanchy 1923, col. 2238–44 for the patristic sources of this doctrine, which was formalized in the twelfth century. The Council of Trent (session 6, 13 January 1547, chapter 4; Denzinger 1976, no. 1524/796) gives a carefully balanced view of what had been widely accepted for centuries: baptism *or the wish for it (aut eius voto)* is necessary ‘after the promulgation of the Gospel’; cf. Sesboué 2004, 125–26.