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ANDROGYNOUS DIVINITIES IN CLASSIC AND CHRISTIAN ANTIQUITY

It may be checked how often in Greek and Latin antiquity the tendency to characterize gods as androgynous or asexuate beings is found, even in its oldest philosophical trends. To assume that the opposite natures of maleness and femininity blend themselves and metaphysically coexist represents a peculiar doxology where the *coincidentia oppositorum* fitting the supreme being is evidence of its complete and totalizing perfection. Such a representation, which, due to its sphere of action, links manhood and divinity together, has been in high favour with philosophical as well as religious interpretations, so that the fascinating myth of an androgynous god (and, on the contrary, of the human sexual differentiation caused by the loss of original perfection) was interpreted as a yearning for restoration and regeneration¹.

Because of the frequency of that idea not only throughout the classic period, but also during the so called age of anxiety, i.e. late antiquity, it's thus difficult to define the way of its birth and developing, sometimes ascribed to Egyptian or oriental ambits, sometimes regarded as genuinely Hellenic. It was Eduard Norden² who for the first time acted for an oriental origin, later mediate to Hellenic culture by Orphics³ and Stoics⁴, in whose speculation an androgynous supreme god played a very important role; but such a statement was contested mainly by Festugière: he stressed in fact not only its frequency in the Porch where the two sexes of god signified activity or passivity, but considered it also representative of the Pythagoric philosophy and of its arithmology grounded on a perfect monadic principle prior to quality and number, combining and originating everything, also the both sexes. Androgyny is in fact the implicit condition if assumed that a supreme principle should generate by itself, being simultaneously father and mother, and therefore it is not disjoined from fertility or fecundity, where the creative force is able to compenetrates the two productive moments, the male and the feminine⁵: and, furthermore, this can be proved by the many *testimonia* presenting lower gods as bisexuate⁶.

Characterizing God as an androgynous leads of course to link this attribute to a dichotomy between male and female elements, which is, so to say, a topic in ancient culture or literature: namely, the opposition between the feminine weakness or feebleness, and the manly strength⁷, as well as an imagery like the *mulier virilis*, who, cast off her carnal and weak skin, is finally able to get on and reach perfection, becoming a man; an ancient ascetic trend that gained increasing importance in philosophical circles and mostly in early Christian literature, as showed since from Pauline epistles, where life in Christ is assimilated to virility (Eph 4,9) or even to overcoming earthly passions and sexuality (Gal 3,27-28)⁸.

Much worth of interest is noting how the same statements deeply influenced philosophical tendencies, marking protologic principles, for example regarding matter as life and fertility or also movement. This way behaved not only Stoic⁹, but Pythagoric (and partially Academic)¹⁰ thinkers too, who, after

¹ Many works are devoted to this subject: here I remember the most important ones, such as Bertholet 1934; Baumann 1955; Eliade 1962; Delcourt 1958 (1992²); Delcourt 1966, influenced by Jungian schemes; Widengren 1969, pp. 52 ff.; Libis 1980; Doniger O' Flaerty 1980, cap. 9; Zandee 1988; Brisson 1997; Perea 1999. I also devoted some papers to this subject (cp. Tommasi Moreschini 1998 and Tommasi Moreschini, *forthcoming*).

² Norden 1913, pp. 228 ff.

³ Cp. the hymnologic formulas in the so called Derveni papyrus (=frg. 21a Kern), lately dated to IVth century b.C.

⁴ See *infra*, n. 9.

⁵ Festugière 1954, pp. 43 ff. He, reacting against Norden's opinion, usually considers as Hellenic all theological tenets related to philosophy (cp. also Orbe 1958, p. 289).

⁶ Further evidence in Perea 1999, pp. 31 ff.

⁷ Exhaustive Mattioli 1983; but cp. also Casadio 1992.

⁸ Cp. Meeks 1964, Buckeley 1985, Arai 1997, and, above all, Orbe 1966; Sfamemi Gasparro 1984.

⁹ See for example the statements ascribed to Diogenes of Babylon (in *SVF III*, p. 217,9); Apollodorus (*ap. Ioh. Lyd., de Mens. IV,34*, p. 92,26 Wunsch); and, above all, Chrysippus (in *SVF II*, p. 316,11); during the late antiquity Athenagoras, Philostratus and Servius related god's androgyny to Stoic speculation too. Philodemus, who is for us the source of Chrysippus,

professing an original dualistic *Weltanschauung*, developed a monistic system, ruled by an androgynous monadic principle¹¹. A similar position is shared by Xenocrates, whose well known fragment 15 Heinze defines the monad as a male intellect and the infinite dyad, source of life, as feminine – an assumption maybe still dualistic that nevertheless seems to ground all the following Platonic speculations, in which the vivifying force is an *aoristos* and a female one¹².

As we may see god's androgyny cannot be taken back to a precise theoretical ambit: a further proof is offered by henotheistic tendencies spread during the late antiquity in order to excell traditional religion by syncretic doctrines: unfailing attribute of the *deus summus*, ruler of the universe, is its *arrenothelia*¹³. Just to recall few examples, I'll draw attention to gnostic systems, because they strengthened this subject quite a lot, emphasizing not only how redemption is possible only by giving up "femininity", but underlining god's androgyny as the resolution of a dualistic tension, or even a struggle between two opposite principles, male vs. female¹⁴. Such a trend may be brought back to platonic-pythagoric dualism, or can be considered deriving from Orphism, as did Hippolytus and Clement¹⁵. Other doctrines assume androgyny as the ultimate expectation, after a splitting of the divinity, whose female side fell in this world and is finally able to join again her husband, a male redeemer¹⁶: like Sophia, paradigm of the Gnostic, all men wait to be saved and this will be possible only if virility can prevail. This is shown, *exempli gratia*, in Valentinianism, where a syzygy between two paritetic principles represents divine perfection and generative power, applying a familiar model to metaphysical realities¹⁷.

Hermetic speculation uses in a more traditional way the same statements, although the anonymous authors of the *Asclepius* or of the *Poimandres* address them against the god-matter dualism, which considers matter as the bad and negative principle. Moreover, optimism inborn in hermetic doctrines seems to be confirmed by exalting marriage as image of god's two sexes¹⁸. Like most of hermetic tenets, I think that this also derives from Egyptian religion, a view that can be confirmed by some analogous passages in Aelius Aristeides¹⁹.

But parallel to the supreme and archetypal being where the two sexes coexist and blend together, also relevant are the cases of a mediate figure acting in different moments as male or female, the two sexes corresponding to heaven and earth, to divine and human condition²⁰, so that descent in the hylic world and return to heavenly Fatherland is a common feature of such characters, often described as bisexual. The tension between a male monad and a feminine dyad, already stressed by Academics, was further refined by middle Platonists (even if this idea can be traced back to Pythagorism, especially to Moderatus), who postulated a *dynamis*, i.e. the first principle, immovable and unpolluted, and its demiurgic *energeia*, explaining it as a stream from pure being to form, from power to act, from a hidden to a visible element. Thus the demiurgic and creative force is womanly, as life-giving spurs animate it, and moreover because, moulding the world, it is contaminated by evil matter. While the dichotomy monad-dyad is not completely solved, lacking of a third step to restore the previous condition, that overthrow-

links his sentences to Orpheus.

¹⁰ I pass over the famous myth recorded by Plato in his *Symposium*, because it doesn't contain any direct references to god's androgyny, even if it's undeniable to read it as an exhortation for men to reconstitute the lost unity and their original perfection: but cp. the discussion about this passage in my forthcoming paper.

¹¹ Valer. Soran., *ap. Aug., de Civ. Dei* VII,9 = *frg. 2 Büchn.* (= 4 Morel); Nicom. Geras., *ap. Phot., Bibl.* 187, 143a; [Iambl.], *Theol. Arithm.* p. 3,21 e p. 4,17 De Falco; Macrob., *in Somn. Scip.* I,6,7.

¹² Cp. Dillon 1986 (1991); and, before Xenocrates, already Speus., *frg. 72 Isnardi Parente* (*ap. Iambl., de comm. math. sc.*, cap. 4). On Chaldean Oracles, where Life is equated to the Father's *Dynamis*, see Lewy 1978, pp. 340 ff.

¹³ Firm. Mat., *Math. 5 praef. 3: tu omnium pariter pater et mater*; Tiberianus, 4,23, *tu sexu plenus toto*; Avien., *Arat.* 26: *sexu immixtus utroque*. I discuss these passages with further bibliographical references in a forthcoming article.

¹⁴ This occurs in Sethian or Barbeloite systems: see Casadio 1989 (1997).

¹⁵ Hipp., *Ref.* I,2,6 ff.; Clem. Alex., *Strom.* V,14,26.

¹⁶ On the androgynous monadic principle in gnosticism see Zandee 1988, p. 248.

¹⁷ Cp. Orbe 1977; Böhlig 1981 (1989); Zandee 1988, pp. 264 ff.

¹⁸ Cp. *Poimandr.* 9; *Ascl.* 20; but also *CH* V,7; II,17 VI,4 IX,4-5 X,5 XI,22 XII,8. A critical inquiry is offered by Mahé 1975 (see now Perea 1999, pp. 187 ff.). Lactantius knows such theories, as shown in *Div. Inst.* IV,8,4-5 (in 13,2-5 he condemns them), which he traces back to Orphism.

¹⁹ Cfr. Ael. Arist., *Orat.* 41,4: an Egyptian background in Hermetic philosophy is assumed by Iversen 1986; Fowden 1986. Egyptian mythology infers god's androgyny, for example, in the so called Heliopolitan Cosmogony, where god is able to generate by himself the universe.

²⁰ See Eliade 1951, 317 ff. On androgyny as feature of intermediate figures cp. also Brisson 1971 and Brisson 1976, where he analyses particularly Tiresias' myth: the famous foreteller transformed by the gods into a woman (a story which influenced also G. Apollinaire) or, according to a different tradition, into a beast, is considered a paradigm of the mediator between the humans and the gods.

ing just represents the return, *conditio sine qua non* to re-establish original perfection. A. Böhlig²¹ convincingly linked middle Platonism to encratite tendencies so usual in late antique religious or spiritual circles²²: he noted how the dualistic unsolved disagreement between monad and infinite dyad (that in post-plotinian speculation will become *mone* and *proodos*), where the first element is male and the second feminine finds, so to say, a natural settlement thanks to the third, the *epistrophe*, assimilable, from an ethic point of view, to perfection and virilization²³, that is androgynation²⁴.

Mediators partaking both sexes are, therefore, the Moon, uranic earth²⁵, acting as the female side in the *hieros gamos*²⁶, but above all the Orphic demiurgic Eros: *protogonos* and *protophanes* (first born)²⁷, he attains in Plato's doctrine, as well in his followers', including gnosis and Chaldean theurgy, to represent a symbol of *coniunctio oppositorum*, as Plato says by calling him son of Poros and Penia, that is wealth and poverty²⁸; he is a daemon connecting gods and human world, and this testifies not only his intermediate nature, but his being a paradigm of the perfect man able to come back to heaven after leaving earthly dissensions too.

Yet, in classical culture Eros holds the same position held by the Logos in Christian doctrine²⁹, but traces of a similar characterization may be found, now and then, also in Philo, to whom God's Wisdom is an androgynous virgin, feminine in that inferior to God, male in that prior to world³⁰. Christ's androgyny is, on the contrary, a tenet in Gnostic systems, partially explaining what Reitzenstein used to call the "saved saviour": besides the valentinian hierogamy between Christ and Sophia³¹, where her sin is redeemed by a husband, who ransoms her from terrestrial slavery, our Lord is presented as "the virgin who came down" in the *Gospel of Philip*, a text deeply influenced by encratite *milieux*, with allusion not only to His virginal birth from Mary, but also to the weakness He had to suffer assuming human flesh and dying in order to cancel our sins³². But also some Christian theologians, whose cultural background may be traced back to Greek Platonic philosophy, spoke of an androgyny of Christ, linking it to His intermediate role³³ and to His incarnation: I mean Clement of Alexandria³⁴ and Synesius (who also affirmed God's father-motherhood)³⁵, but the western philosopher Marius Victorinus too: the latter applied to Christ a barbeloite scheme, ascribing to Christ the Gnostic virgin Barbelo's attributes³⁶.

Particularly, Barbelo represents the 'high' projection of Sophia, and as such she is a guiltless figure, personifying the first aeon and acting as intermediary between the Supreme Father and the world³⁷: but she is also a male virgin, whose three different aspects, being, life and intellect, go back to middle platonic philosophy, and in the same time signify in turn stasis, descent and ascent. The same tenets ground also the interpretation offered during late antiquity and, above all, Middle Ages by alchemists, who assumed mercury as a dyadic compound of opposite elements (maybe going back to ancient astro-

²¹ Cp. Böhlig 1985.

²² See also Sfameni Gasparro 1984.

²³ A further confirmation of this statement is offered by Pythagoric arithmetic, where three was assumed as the first male number.

²⁴ See also Turner 1989-90.

²⁵ I produced some evidence in Tommasi Moreschini 1998, p. 986; but cp. also Perea 1999, pp. 165 ff.

²⁶ Cp. Eliade 1976, pp. 184 ff.

²⁷ Cp. Pherec., in DK 7b3 a11; Parm., in DK 28b13, but especially the Orphic elaboration of this myth. Eros is called also Phanes in *Orph. frgg.* 80 e 98 Kern; or Metis in *frg.* 85; or Ericepaios in *frg.* 81. On *protogonos* see *Orph. frgg.* 73 e 86 Kern and the inquiry by Bianchi 1957. As far as the rare attribute *protophanes* is concerned, it is employed also by Gnostics and by Synesius to indicate the demiurge or Christ (cp. Quispel 1977).

²⁸ *Symp.* 203b; on Platonic interpretation see Reale 1997.

²⁹ Tardieu 1974, p. 161.

³⁰ Cp. Phil., *Fug.* 51 (about similar tenets see also the discussion by Baer 1970; the same idea will be assumed by cabbalistic speculation: cp. Scopello 1981).

³¹ Cp. Orbe 1977.

³² Cp. Thomassen 1995. Regrettably I should note that a fine scholar like Thomassen doesn't mention some older works devoted in the Seventies by G. Sfameni Gasparro to the same subject, and particularly Sfameni Gasparro 1977 (1982).

³³ As it results from some neo-testamentary Epistles, such as Hebr. 8,6; I Tim. 2,5-6.

³⁴ Cp. Clem. Alex., *Quis div. salv.* 37: "God is agape and thanks to agape we could see Him. His inexpressible side is Father but, His suffering for us, became Mother. By love the Father became female, and the great sign of it was He, whom God generated from Himself". This passage is discussed by Orbe 1958, pp. 324 ff., who cites also *Strom.* VI,146,1 ff., where the Mother is the Wisdom/Ennoia of Philonian and Gnostic ascendance.

³⁵ Cp. *Hymn.* I,186. Further passages in Lilla 1997, pp. 172 ff.

³⁶ But also in ancient iconography Christ is sometimes represented as a beardless young man, a trend deriving from pagan imagery, where gods such as Dionysus or Apollo were gifted with androgynous features: cp. Matthews 1993 and Jensen 1997. As far as some womanly metaphors characterizing God or Christ in Middle Ages devotional and mystical texts are concerned, see Bynum 1982.

³⁷ Cp. Zandee 1967; Stead 1969 (1985); Sieber 1981.

logical literature, where the planet Hermes was gifted with two sexes)³⁸, but also considered it a type of Christ, and a model of the human *microcosmus*³⁹.

Towards the end of the IVth century another philosopher, Julian the Emperor, although with little method, linked Neoplatonic philosophy and mythological imagery, equalling Attis, the young paretros of the Mother of the Gods, whom she emasculated out of jealousy, to the demiurge who, glowing with desire for matter, forgot the proper love due to supreme realities. This ancient Phrygian-Anatolic myth had been worked out throughout the centuries, in order to sweeten its previous bloody version⁴⁰: for example, among such new interpretations stood out the Naassene's one, where Attis is assumed as paradigm of the perfect man without sexual difference, or of the soul longing for heavenly life. The exegesis followed by Julian in his *Oration to the Mother of the Gods* echoes much more that Gnostic version than platonic philosophy or Iamblichus' theurgy, equating Attis to a *theos gonimos*⁴¹; Salustius too, in his obscure treatise *de Diis et mundo* will reemploy similar statements⁴². Thus, Attis represents the human soul that, after getting rid of its feminine side incline to generation, wins back the manly strength, even overcoming it in a transcendent condition⁴³. In that case too asceticism permeated the late antique religious feelings, tending to join together a cathartic way and the loss of sexual characters, as well as the descending and ascending path of an androgynous being and the fate of all humans.

The idea of an androgynous link between two different worlds is outlined in classical world also by attributing bisexuality to some kinds of animals: first of all the snake, since its relationship to Tiresias' vicissitudes⁴⁴, but also later employed by Gnostic sects as a symbol of procession and return; then the hyaena, whose yearly change of sex was numbered among its wonders, such as the stare or the prophetic ability⁴⁵, as well as other little beasts related to magic cults or sorcery, in its mediating function, and considered as chthonic symbols: partially, the weasel, the mole, the hare, the gecko-lizard⁴⁶, or, most of all, the shrew-mouse⁴⁷ and the mongoose (or ichneumon)⁴⁸, both snake-hunters.

Finally, the same account is reported for the phoenix (which Ovid links to the hyaena in referring the metamorphosis of Kainis into a young man)⁴⁹, considered since pagan antiquity as allegory of palinogenesis, and as such drawn on from Christian authors in order to signify the resurrection of Christ, as well as the regenerated man, without sexual differentiation⁵⁰.

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³⁸ See, e.g., Procl., in *Tim.* I p. 46, 18 Diehl; Maneth. V, 137 ss. p. 105 Kochlein. Perea 1999, p. 159.

³⁹ Cp. especially Jung 1988.

⁴⁰ Cp. Sfameni Gasparro 1985, with further bibliographical evidence.

⁴¹ Iul., in *deor. Matr.* 161c. Cp. Nock 1926, p. lii: "he [scil. Julian] seems to have clothed in that philosopher's terminology a traditional belief very like that of the Naassenes, as recorded by Hippolytus, or that of the Poimandres". See also Sfameni Gasparro 1981 and Turcan 1997.

⁴² Cp. Sal., *de Diis* 4,2,7 ff.

⁴³ Cp. Sfameni Gasparro 1981, p. 395.

⁴⁴ Cp. Brisson 1976, pp. 45 ff.

⁴⁵ Cp. the most important sources for this belief: Ael., *Nat. Anim.* I,25; Plin., *Nat. Hist.*, XXXVIII,168; a confutation in Diod. Sic., XII,2-3; Arist., *Gen. Anim.* III,6, 757a 2-14; *Hist. Anim.* VI,32, 579b 16-30; Brisson 1997, p. 121; Perea 1999, pp. 203 ff.

⁴⁶ Its Greek name *-galeos-* seems related to *galee*, weasel: Brisson 1976, p. 97. Moreover its features are similar to the snake's ones.

⁴⁷ Brisson 1976, pp. 99 ff. He also notes (p. 107) that in ancient French a Greek transliteration of the term was used, *mygale*, that is compound of *mus* and *galee*, mouse and weasel. Now, in French the modern word *belette* (weasel) designs also a coquette; this metaphoric significance seems to me present also in the English term for this beast, whose first element is just *shrew*.

⁴⁸ Ael., *Hist. Anim.* X,47. Brisson 1976, pp. 92ff.; 108 ff.; not convincing Bettini 1998, pp. 265 ff.

⁴⁹ Ov., *Met.* XV,409 ff. Note that Aelian remembers the same story in his account about the hyaena. On Kainis/Kaineus see Perea 1999, pp. 91 ff. Plutarch who saw in it the paradigm of the *mulier virilis* of Stoic ascendance allegorised the same legend.

⁵⁰ See, e.g., NHC II,5,122; Lact., *de ave phoen.* 163 sgg. Further references in van den Broek 1971; to the Phoenix in Hermetic speculation is devoted Festugière 1967. Cp. now Perea 1999, pp. 115 ff.

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