
H-France Review Vol. 23 (September 2023), No. 156

Laura Nicolì, *Les Philosophes et les Dieux. Le Polythéisme en débat dans la France des Lumières (1704-1770)*, trans. Julia Ollivier. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2022. 508 pp. €71.10 (pb/pdf). ISBN 9782745356789.

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At one level, *Les Philosophes et les Dieux* seems designed to update *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (1959), Frank Manuel's classic but flawed synthesis of the theories that thinkers like Pierre Bayle, Isaac Newton, David Hume, and Charles de Brosses proposed to make sense of the religious universe of antiquity.^[1] Yet, at another and perhaps more fundamental level, Laura Nicolì aims to draw proper attention to the scholars who studied that universe the most deeply in eighteenth-century France: the antiquarians, historians, and erudite intellectuals who belonged to the Académie des inscriptions et belles lettres in Paris. As she argues, the ways in which these scholars approached the beliefs and cultural practices of ancient peoples shaped the long and complex debate over polytheism that took place in France and Britain from 1704 to 1770. Moreover, their work influenced the views of *philosophes* like Voltaire and the Encyclopedists more than has been generally recognized. Nicolì's methodology is staunchly textualist: she is committed to reconstructing precisely what the authors in her corpus meant when they used words such as *idolâtrie* and *polythéisme*, and to locating historic shifts in the signification of those words. She also illuminates many aspects of the context surrounding their writings from the role of the Académie des inscriptions in framing discussions of ancient religions to the interchanges that the philosophical problem of polytheism created between Christian apologists and secular philosophers on both sides of the English Channel.

Les Philosophes et les Dieux is a French translation of the Italian-language doctoral thesis that Nicolì defended in 2015, with additional sections written directly in French by the author. It is divided into two parts of three or four chapters each, accompanied by supplementary materials: lexical notes on the evolving meanings of the words *idole* and *polythéisme*; thirteen images of sculptures, paintings, and engravings discussed in chapter two; four annexes; a comprehensive bibliography of primary and secondary sources; a name index; and copious footnotes throughout, many referring to pertinent secondary studies that are likely to be unfamiliar to non-Italian speakers. The annexes are a particularly striking feature of this book. Annex one reprints in parallel columns the major source of each paragraph of Claude Yvon's *Encyclopédie* article "Polythéisme." Annex two uses the same format to compare works by Augustin Calmet and Antoine Banier on the origin and development of idolatry. Annex three compares selected excerpts from Banier's *La Mythologie et les fables expliquées par l'histoire* (1738-1740) and de Brosses's *Du culte des dieux fétiches* (1760). Annex four presents a chronology of Louis de La

Barre's activities at the Académie des inscriptions and a detailed list of his works. The annexes attest to Nicolì's determination to ground her study in close textual and intertextual analysis, and to shed light on La Barre, a figure who has been overshadowed by his friend and colleague Nicolas Fréret.

The periodization indicated in the book's subtitle reflects the importance that Nicolì places on three dates: 1704, 1757, and 1770, the respective years of publication of Pierre Bayle's *Continuation des Pensées diverse sur la comète*, the first French-language work to develop a philosophical reflection on the question of polytheism, David Hume's *Natural History of Religion*, which relocated the question out of the field of theology and into that of human history, and Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach's *Système de la nature*, which illustrates the effects of that paradigm shift on French thinking about the nature and origins of religion. Before analyzing those texts in part two, Nicolì devotes part one to a series of scholarly debates held in the first half of the century over the meanings and forms of ancient idolatry (polytheism, a word that Bayle introduced into French, became the preferred term and concept in the 1750s, particularly among philosophes). Although some authors involved in those debates adhered to the Christian apologetic view of polytheism as an "corruption idolâtre" of humanity's original monotheism, others were more interested in uncovering the cultural-historical forces that drove transformations in the religious systems which ancient peoples embraced (p. 15).

One of the central issues in part one is the tension between the two rival methodologies that scholars at the Académie des inscriptions used to investigate the religious cults of antiquity: Euhemerism, an approach named after the ancient Greek writer Euhemerus, who maintained that the pagan gods were deified human beings whose history was recounted in myths, and allegorism, whose proponents argued that ancient myths, fables, and visual icons were symbolic. Chapter one's main protagonist is the abbé Antoine Banier, whose system for explaining ancient myths in Euhemerist historical terms dominated the Académie for thirty years, until the 1740s, when it was superseded by the neo-allegorical interpretations proposed by his younger colleagues La Barre and Fréret. Banier's effort to preserve the orthodox Christian idea of an original monotheism factored into his theory that paganism originated in astrolatry, or the worship of heavenly bodies. Chapter two examines how the themes of idols and idolatry were used in eighteenth-century European commentaries on art, starting with the thesis of "la faute du sculpteur," that is, the argument that ancient sculptors had fueled idolatrous veneration by endowing images of deities with superhuman beauty. Nicolì also considers evocations of idolatry in critiques of Catholicism's veneration for images and statues of saints. Chapter three returns to the critique of Euhemerism by considering the new forms of allegorism that La Barre and Fréret developed based on their *longue durée*, culturally grounded view of pagan religious systems. The jointly historical and symbolic orientation of their works contributed to the emerging tendency to interpret the deities of pagan religions as allegorical representations of elements of nature, abstract concepts, or human passions: that is, as anthropomorphic creations imagined by poets, devised by philosophers, or inspired by popular fantasy. In Chapter four, Nicolì explores linguistic theories that stressed the role of allegory and symbolism in the development of pagan languages. She dwells particularly on the links that William Warburton and l'abbé Pluche made between the history of writing and the history of idolatry. This chapter ends with a short but incisive consideration of Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, who drew on those theories (and those of Banier and Fréret) to portray both language and religion as expressions of human nature. Condillac is a pivotal figure in Nicolì's overriding argument that ideas first formulated by erudite scholars were taken up by thinkers affiliated with the Enlightenment.

Part two of *Les Philosophes et les Dieux* presents three chapters devoted to Bayle, Hume, and the French *philosophes* who engaged with their ideas on polytheism. They are organized around two theoretical axes: the ideas that these authors proposed to explain polytheism's underlying logic, or the "enjeux spéculatifs, théologiques, cosmologiques, moraux, et politiques qu'entraîne le fait de penser la divinité comme plurielle"; and their speculations about the anthropological or psychological factors that gave rise to paganism (pp. 16-17). In chapter five, Nicolì shows that Bayle progressively replaced *idolâtrie* and *paganisme* with *polythéisme* as he jostled polemically with critics like Jacques Bernard and the Cartesian Pierre Poiret. One of this chapter's key threads is the theoretical equivalence that Bayle proposed between atheism and polytheism, and his controversial but influential argument that atheists, particularly "negative" atheists who never possessed the notion of a divinity, might be morally preferable to *idolâtres*, whose conception of God was degrading (p. 209). That argument, combined with Plutarch's thesis that superstition was a greater evil than atheism, would be adapted by several philosophes, including Diderot, Voltaire, and d'Holbach. In Chapter six, Nicolì shows that Hume's thesis that ancient peoples originally believed in multiple gods was already present in French language works before he published his *Natural History of Religion*: most notably, in the work of Fontenelle, Fréret, and Condillac. Chapter seven, on Hume and his reception in France, examines the arguments Hume used to refute the idea that religion is founded in reason, to demolish the view that monotheism was the original or superior form of religious belief, and to dispute the theory that humanity had moved progressively toward more elevated ideas of God. For Hume, all the forms that religion had taken over the course of history were grounded in apprehension over the "very little known and very uncertain" (p. 284) causes of or happiness or misery. He viewed polytheism as a more "poetical" and reasonable religion than monotheism because it did attempt to hide its natural, irrational roots (pp. 284, 288). Nicolì then compares Hume's naturalist approach to religion with that which Voltaire dealt in his *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764), and with De Brosses' *Du culte des dieux fétiches* (1760). While de Brosses endorsed Hume's emphasis on religion's natural, psychological origins, he disagreed with his model of religious history as fluctuating, contending instead that humanity had moved steadily from fetichism and polytheism toward the mature, civilized belief in monotheism. By 1760, the Humean thesis that humanity was initially polytheist was adopted by most philosophes (apart from Voltaire), as was de Brosses's metaphor of fetichism and polytheism as "les religions de l'enfance de l'humanité" (p. 309).

In the book's brief conclusion, Nicolì synthesizes the spectrum of positions that philosophes took on ancient polytheism, which ranged from the cheerful view taken by Montesquieu, Fréret, and Hume to the more somber perspective of thinkers like d'Holbach. Whatever perspective they took, the polytheist universe gave philosophes the possibility of rethinking religion in its relation to nature, which was, as she underscores, the *idée maîtresse* of the eighteenth century (p. 318).

Les Philosophes et les Dieux is, at bottom, an erudite book about eighteenth-century erudites, which may make it daunting for historians who work in other fields. Part one, especially, assumes a good deal of prior knowledge (of Euhemerism, for instance). The book's accessibility for non-specialist readers would have been enhanced by including a selective title index, or by providing cross-references in the footnotes to the various places where Nicolì discusses important texts like Voltaire's article "Idole, Idolâtrie" (her analysis of that text is dispersed over several chapters). It nonetheless succeeds in showing how much the philosophes' reflections on ancient religions owed to the historical methods developed by academicians La Barre and Fréret, along with other scholars. It also gives a sense of how the Académie des inscriptions functioned as an institution,

a topic that could be pursued by reading it in tandem with Anton M. Matytsin's work, which delves more into the Académie's history, its connections to the French state, and the ways in which it was caught up in the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns.[2] Finally, *Les Philosophes et les Dieux* makes a deep and thought-provoking contribution to the broader discussion currently underway about what the Enlightenment *was*, and where it happened.

NOTES

[1] Frank Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (New York: Atheneum, 1959, 1967).

[2] See Anton M. Matytsin, "Enlightenment and Erudition: Writing Cultural History at the Académie des inscriptions." *Modern Intellectual History*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2022, pp. 323-348, doi:10.1017/S1479244321000068.

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ISSN 1553-9172