

***Inexcusables: Salvation and the Virtues of the Pagans
in the Early Modern Period***

Ed. Alberto Frigo
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Admiration for the virtues of Greek and Roman antiquity, polemical taunting from contemporary pagans, and pity for the destiny of those unaware of the Christian message are just the main reasons that provoked the ever-returning question of the possibility for the unfaithful to obtain afterlife salvation. The issue is known, especially for the centuries that span from Augustine to the late Middle Ages. In 1934, Louis Capéran offered his *essai historique* on the matter, pinpointing fundamental testimonies and the evolution of the question through the centuries.¹ More recently, John Marenbon (2015) has provided a new synopsis, also rightly pointing attention to the issue of the appreciation and effectiveness of pagan virtues, an issue closely related to that of their salvation.² Yet, several aspects of the matter remain unexplored, especially in the age that followed the great geographical discoveries, which faced the Christian West with a whole new multitude of men that had never heard about Jesus Christ. *Inexcusables: Salvation and the Virtues of the Pagans in the Early Modern Period* attempts to fill this void, although without aspiring to provide an exhaustive and complete account of the centuries that separate Montaigne from Leibniz.

The volume is mostly grounded on the papers presented at a conference, under a very similar title, held at the Warburg Institute in London in 2016. The distance in time between the conference and the publication of its proceedings has affected the book, since at least one of the papers presented there has in the meantime appeared elsewhere and others could not be included in the final edition.³ To make up for the

¹ LOUIS CAPÉRAN, *Le problème du salut des infidèles*, 1: *Essai historique*. Toulouse: Grand Séminaire, 1934 (nouvelle édition revue et mise à jour).

² JOHN MARENBOON, *Pagans and Philosophers. The Problem of Paganism from Augustine to Leibniz*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015.

³ The papers not included in the volume are listed on page 7, note 8. One appeared as: GUIDO GIGLIONI, 'Between Galen and St Paul: How Juan Huarte de San Juan Responded to Inquisitorial Censorship', in *Medicine and the Inquisition in the Early Modern World*, ed. MARIA PIA DONATO, in *Early Science and Medicine* 23, 1-2 (2018), 114–134 (*Medicine and the Inquisition in the Early Modern World* was reprinted separately under the same title: Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2019). The others that were not included do not seem to have appeared elsewhere.

losses, other authors were invited to contribute to the printed volume.⁴ In part due to these changes, the book appears to have lost its focus, which originally looked at a very specific long-standing topic of Christian theology and Western philosophy. Not all the newly included contributions – and even, in part, some of the original ones – are entirely respondent to the topic that the editor claims to be at the heart of the book: the issue of how to evaluate virtues attributed to pagans (unbelievers, ancient and modern) and whether pagans can attain afterlife salvation. This, of course, does not burden the quality and novelty of the single contributions. The book remains coherent under other aspects, such as the chronological, geographical and historical viewpoint: sixteenth-eighteenth century Christian Europe or its viewpoint.

The book is divided into four parts, which correspond to the sessions of the conference organised in London. The first part addresses the issue of pagans in the early modern world from the perspective of humanism. Alberto Frigo, editor of the whole volume, opens this section with an essay on Montaigne. He discusses the philosopher's view of pagan religion and its relation to Christian salvation, with special attention to the texts of the *Essays*, the *Apology for Raymond Sebond* and the handwritten annotations to the edition Montaigne possessed of Lilio Gregorio Giraldi's *De deis gentium varia et multiplex historia*. Distant from the attitude of previous humanists – such as Erasmus and his famous exclamation 'Sancte Socrates' –, Montaigne acknowledged the distance of any pagan religion from true Revelation, although he smoothed his judgment towards those religions that recognised deity in something incomprehensible and unknowable, as some early critics would not hold back from reproaching. Moreover, pagan culture stood for him as an example of virtue for contemporary Christianity. The other two chapters that complete part I seem to come short of responding to the general topic that inspires the volume, notwithstanding the authors' efforts to do so. The first, by Hanna Gentili, treats Giovanni Francesco Pico's attitude towards pagan philosophy and pagan sources. Discussing his considerations on ancient philosophy, prophecy and *imitatio*, Gentili marks Giovanni Francesco Pico's separation from the previous humanist generation, to which his uncle Giovanni Pico belonged, denying the possibility of a conciliation between ancient wisdom and Christianity and asserting the predominance of the latter over the former. The following chapter, by Finn Schulze-Feldmann, deals with Sebastien Castellion's work as biblical translator and exegete and his use, edition and translation of the Sibylline oracles, which he read – not at all isolated – as inspired prophecies of Christian revelation. The author also touches upon the context of the reception of the Sibylline texts in the Reformation world and the early responses to Castellion's work.

Part II of the book focuses on *The Theological Debate* concerning pagan virtues and salvation. Michael Moriarty draws a clear picture of the debate over the salvation of pagans in seventeenth-century France, rightly connecting it to the intertwined issues of the proportion between the number of saved and damned souls and the divine

⁴ The contributions by Hanna Gentili, Finn Schulze-Feldman, Frédéric Gabriel, Jean-Michel Gros and Lucy Sheaf do not originate from papers presented in London.

attributes of mercy, goodness and justice. The following chapter, by Frédéric Gabriel, sheds light on a previously disregarded voice inside the debate concerning the salvation of the pagans, the seventeenth-century recollect friar Pascal Rapine de Sainte-Marie, author of a work entitled *Le christianisme naissant dans la gentilité*, first part of a trilogy on early Christianity. The work openly engaged in the debated issue, arguing in favor of the possibility for pagans to be saved thanks to natural law, implicit faith, and grace. More deeply, the recollect friar proposed a reading of ancient history from a new historical perspective. The third article of the theological section of the book appears to move away from the central question regarding pagan virtues and pagans' chance to be saved. Han van Ruler discusses the issue of moral beatitude in early modern – primarily Dutch – philosophy (Erasmus, Geulincx, Spinoza). The issue of the salvation of pagans only comes up at the end of the essay, with just tangent connection with the rest of the discussion contained inside it.

The Philosophers and the Unbelievers is the title of part III of the book. In the first chapter of the section, Jean-Michel Gros investigates the issue of the virtues of pagans in Pierre Bayle's writings. Using the question as a strongly anti-religious argument, the philosopher wrote in favor of a society deprived of Christian religion and based on the virtues shared by the pagans of the past and the atheist philosophers of the present. In the following essay, François Trémolières explores the conception of pagan virtues in Fénelon's written production. He gives special attention to his works concerning the Quietist controversy, highlighting how his treatment of the issue – and of the connected issue of the salvation of pagans – is linked to the existence of a 'natural love' that can lead to 'pure love', that is love for God, even without knowledge of God. The third chapter of the section, by Lucy Sheaf closely analyses the claim made by Leibniz that pagans can effectively be saved – or, at least, not damned – in connection to his soteriology based, again, on love.

The fourth and final part of the book is dedicated to *The New Pagans*. Giuliano Mori's essay takes the discussion to a different level. The issue of pagan salvation and pagan virtues is used to correct Jan Assman's opposition of inclusivism and exclusivism with the use of the distinction between falsehood ('inaccurate or imperfect representation') and untruth ('the polar opposite of truth, its negation'). The distinction between these two notions opposed to that of truth is tested by Mori on historical writers of antiquity and in early modern Christian production (Nicholas of Cusa and Athanasius Kircher). This last part, especially concerning Jesuit views, brings the author to discuss the early modern views of pagan virtues in connection to Christian faith. The second and last contribution to this part and to the entire volume is an essay by Michela Catto regarding the Jesuit considerations (namely of Matteo Ricci) of Chinese 'atheism', a positive attribute related to the Confucian mandarins' highly moral life conduct. Catto then follows the transformation of the term in early modern Europe to its negative connotation.

As a whole, the book sheds new light on the treatment of an important topic for the history of theology, philosophy and culture, although in an uneven way. Of course,

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a more focused and harmonious discussion of the early modern theological developments – ‘in Capéran’s footsteps’, we might say – would be desirable, but, as clearly stated, this was not in the volume’s intentions. Surely, this book – and the conference that preceded it – contributes to bringing the issue back to the attention of scholars. A final, unfortunately negative, note: perhaps the book would have deserved more attentive proofreading, given the important academic publisher, since more often than one would expect it is tainted by typographical mistakes and non-idiomatic English phrases.