A truly amazing Letter about Ancient Christianity

After Constantine converted to Christianity in AD 312, every Roman emperor was Christian (at least nominally). This fact is remarkable, considering both the great pride Romans had long placed in worshiping their gods. There was, however, a single exception to this rule—the emperor Julian, who reigned from AD 361–63.

Julian was both angered and disturbed by the growth of Christianity and set out to restore the dominance of paganism. This meant funding pagan feasts, building temples, and paying priests. He even developed a "missiological strategy" for expanding paganism.

In the letter below, Julian advises the chief priest of paganism in Galatia *to act more like the Christians*! He wanted the world to learn from all that Christianity had to offer them, to bring the pagan way of life into the day to day living of the people. His is a letter from which we could all gain something with regards to our own Christin living but also in terms of the way we shape the faith-life of parish communities.

A Letter of Julian ("the Apostate") to Priscus, the high priest of Galatia (AD 359)

The pagan religion [hellēnismos/Hellenism] does not yet prosper as I desire, and it is the fault of those who profess it; for the worship of the gods is on a splendid and magnificent scale, surpassing every prayer and every hope. May the goddess Adrasteia pardon my words, for indeed no one, a little while ago, would have ventured even to pray for a grand, complete, and swift change [i.e., the mass conversion of Romans to Christianity]. Why do we pagan leaders not observe that it is [the Christians] benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase atheism?

I believe that we pagans ought really and truly to practice every one of these virtues. And it is not enough for you alone to practice them, but so must all the pagan priests in Galatia, without exception. If they do not attend the worship of the gods with their entire household, but allow their servants or sons or wives to show impiety towards the gods and honor atheism [i.e., Christianity, which did not believe in the pagan gods] more than piety [i.e., public sacrifices to the gods], then either shame or persuade them into righteousness or else remove them from their priestly office.

Also, admonish the pagan priests that none may enter a theatre, drink in a tavern, or control any craft or trade that is base and not respectable. Honour the pagan priests who obey you, but those who disobey, expel from office. In every city establish

frequent hostels in order that strangers may profit by our benevolence; I do not mean for our own people only, but for others also who are in need of money.

I have made a plan to provide you funds for this—I have given directions that 60,000 gallons of corn and 7,500 gallons of wine shall be assigned every year for the whole of Galatia. I order that 20% of this be used for the poor who serve the priests, and the remainder be distributed by us to strangers and beggars. No Jew ever has to beg [because they take of their own] and the impious Galileans support not only their own poor but our pagans as well. From this, everyone sees that the people lack aid from us. That is disgraceful for us. Teach those of the pagan/Hellenic faith to contribute to public service of this sort, to offer their first fruits to the gods, and to do these good works by teaching them that this was our practice of old. Remember the example of Eumaeus in Homer's Odyssey (when he said to the filthy and unrecognizable Odysseus): "Stranger, it is not lawful for me, not even though a baser man than you should come, to dishonor a stranger. For from Zeus come all strangers and beggars. And a gift, though small, is precious." Then let us not, by allowing others to outdo us in good works, disgrace by such negligence, or complete abandonment, the reverence due to the gods. If I hear that you are carrying out these orders I shall be filled with joy.

Julian notes the problem that, because of Christians, the "splendid and magnificent" gods were not getting the honour they deserved. This echoes the logic of the Ephesian silversmiths in Acts 19—Christians brought disrepute upon the gods because they did not worship them. The pagans feared this would displease and anger the gods, leading to calamity. By the time of Julian, Christianity had made such inroads that even the priests' own family members had begun to "show impiety toward the gods and honour atheism" (the latter term being a common slur for Christianity).

The *old* Roman Honour Code:

> Values for the Romans were: bravery, loyalty, piety, seriousness, respect and authority. Bravery was defined by the term *virtus* and initially, it had a male designation (the word comes from the word *vir,* meaning "husband"). In the 2nd century BCE, the Roman poet Lucius stated that "bravery" is, besides courage, also the ability to distinguish good from evil or to appear on the side of good, and to fight against evil (c.f. for more details… https://imperiumromanum.pl/en/curiosities/values-professed-by-romans/

The reason for rapid Christian growth, according to Julian, was that Christians had, in effect, adopted a **new honour code**. They were extending benevolence and charity

to the poor, the sick, and travellers, even those who were pagan outsiders! Christians unconditionally helped anyone with needs. In Julian's words, *That is disgraceful for us*.

The pagans looked bad in comparison because, in conventional Roman culture, people were cautious to give gifts only to those people who could reciprocate. In such a context, the Christian practice of setting up hostels for travellers and hospitals for the sick undermined the prevailing political and religious system, which was designed to increase and perpetuate the honour of elites, not attend to the needs of people in lower classes.

To re-honour the gods and restore the reputation of paganism, Julian set about, with great urgency, to revamp and energise pagan worship. This involved whipping the priests into shape using both the tactics of honour and shame. Those who failed to transform their behaviour would be shamed and removed from office; those who did get on board were to be honoured. This may have included job promotions, new titles, financial payment, and/or public accolades. Julian even provided a generous stipend to create institutional structures for helping the masses. Such benevolence was done in the name of paganism to recruit people back to pagan rituals.

It is a fascinating letter, in that it is a kind of reversal of the situation in which the Church finds itself today. Many of the suggestions Julian proposed for the revitalisation of the pagan Empire, could well be applied to Christians today. As they had to be better pagans, so too we need to be better in our reflections of the life of Christ into which we were baptised. As Ghandi observed, **I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.**