

THE NOTION OF TRUE FAITH IN THE POETIC WORK OF PRUDENTIUS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE POEM APOTHEOSIS

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Abstract

At a time when one was seeking to consolidate Christian principles, prompting converts to have their own social practices, differentiated from those exercised by Gentiles, Prudentius offers a work called Apotheosis, in which he advocates a uniqueness of identity for Christians, which would make them identify the errors of beliefs indicated as heretical. Presenting poetically the major departures in faith, the author seeks to provide a notion of true faith in which converts could begin to develop the right paths for those who wished to follow Christianity and obtain an eternal life after death. It is a proselytising work, which sought to provide exercise canons for the Christian faith for those already converted and for Gentiles in the process of conversion.

Keywords

Prudentius; Apotheosis; Christianity; identity; faith; heresy.

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Resumo

Num momento em que se buscava a consolidação dos princípios cristãos, levando os convertidos a terem práticas sociais próprias e diferenciadas das exercidas pelos gentios, Prudêncio oferece uma obra, denominada *Apotheosis*, na qual defende uma unicidade identitária para os cristãos, o que os faria identificar os erros das crenças indicadas como heréticas. Apresentando de forma poética os principais desvios na fé, o autor busca fornecer uma noção de fé verdadeira na qual os conversos poderiam se pautar para desenvolver as condutas corretas para aqueles que queriam seguir o Cristianismo e obter uma vida eterna após a morte. Trata-se de uma obra proselitista, que buscava fornecer cânones de exercício da fé cristã para os já convertidos e para os gentios em vias de conversão.

Palavras-Chave

Prudêncio; *Apotheosis*; Cristianismo; identidade; fé; heresia.

A Proselytising Work

One of the most striking features of the Prudentine work is its proselytising character. Appropriating the classic canons in the production of poems in hexagramic dactyls, Aurelio Prudentius Clemente, from the fourth to the fifth century AD, left us a large textual documentary corpus by which we are able to verify that he received a classical education based on the reading of pagan works of reference in the Latin pedagogical system. In Apotheosis, numerous formulaic and / or thematic references are identified that are consistent with the narratives of Catullus, Horace and Virgil, authors of prominence in Latin poetry. What most captures our attention in his style of production is his ability to appropriate classical canons, references, metaphors, and figures of speech, and re-use them in the noble task of converting Gentiles into Christians.

Seeking to draw closer to his listener / reader audience, Prudentius inserts in his poems abundant mythological material, already coming from the *emulatio* promoted by the Roman authors from the period of the end of the Republic and the Principate, as far as the re-reading of the Greek classics, such as the poems of Homer. The Christian god, for example, in several Prudentine poems, comes to be called 'the Thunderer' (Prudentius, Apotheosis, III, 173), as in the pagan poems of Homer's Zeus and Virgil's Jupiter. More than a mere reference to the past or a simple adaptation to the genre of classical poetry, we identify the use of those formulas, of those *topoi* by Prudentius, as a means to approach an audience that already knew those devices and to link to a tradition in the course of being redefined.

In the introduction to the book, *Interpreting Late Antiquity*, which first appeared in 1999, its editors - G.W. Bowersock, Peter Brown and Oleg Grabar - make explicit their intention to bring together in one volume works reflecting on events between AD 250 and 800, so as to verify the gradual construction of a 'post-classical world' (Bowersock, Brown, Grabar, 2001: 9). Little wonder then, that the first chapter of the collection, entitled 'Remaking the Past', is by Averil Cameron who presents the period of Late Antiquity, above all, as a period of intense re-elaboration of the structures from earlier times, as a moment of production of the new from the already known, in which creativity was amalgamated with the re-reading of what had been shown to be capable of being effective (Cameron, 2001: 7), promoted by the 'reconciliation' of the ancient and classic literary and rhetorical canons, which had passed through pedagogical processes that kept taking place, with the 'Christian faith' and the new proselytising needs that prevailed (Cameron, 2001: 13).

Instead of 'rejecting the pagan past, it was put to use' by Christians, promoting what Cameron calls 'renovatio' (Cameron, 2001: 14). According to her, Late Antiquity experienced a 'mass of experimentation', with new models being created and adjusted, in a process of creating a Christian mythology and the development of new identities that inevitably implied the re-appropriation of the past in accordance with the new concerns. The truth is that during Late Antiquity the past was remade in different ways and through a constant effort (Cameron, 2001: 16).

We think of Late Antiquity as a temporality in which the creation of new traditions is promoted, from the existing and their re-appropriation to the creation of Christian identities. For Christian proselytising writers, to convert is to enter into a new range of meanings, to re-appropriate a pre-existing vocabulary and to use it in the complex process of conversion, which stipulates adherence to a new way of life, to a new philosophy of action, to a new network of senses. Becoming a Christian would, above all, re-cast links with pagan culture into new interpretive possibilities.

This complex process of adherence to a 'new culture', full of new interpretations of reality, which implies acceptance of other social practices, abandonment of certain beliefs and the constitution of new social and community bonds, allowed works to be produced whose most relevant characteristic is exactly the mixture of references to the past, guaranteeing them insertion in the new order, without drastic ruptures, so that the sense of what is issued is not lost with the creation of new meanings for what is recognised as still relevant. Christian ethics are not so subversive to pagan ethics.

Returning, once again, to the thinking of Averil Cameron in her classic book *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*, the process of Christianisation meant above all the elaboration of new representations made from classical and pagan rhetorical canons, for successive accommodations and appropriations (Cameron, 1994: p.120 and p.189). The human need for examples of good social conduct remained pressing and the ancient heroes needed to be replaced by new models of community interaction, for we must always remember that philosophy and religion in the ancient world were, first and foremost, forms of life. To be a Christian was to express a faith in a specific way that marked its social insertion.

According to Erich S. Gruen, in *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* (1998), tradition can and must be constantly reinvented to survive the action of time. What seems to be crystallised, is actually a long and constant process of integration and reintegration of cultural vectors. Values are revised, practices re-constructed, and actions re-interpreted in the light of new symbolisms.

The Author and his Work

Prudentius was born in AD 348. In his work, he refers to the reign of Julian the Apostate (AD 361 to 363) and points to him as Emperor during his childhood (Prudentius, *Apotheosis*, V, 450) (Rivero-García, 1997: 35). Possibly Hispanic, he must have been the son of Christian parents, since he never alludes to his conversion. He received a careful education, in which he learned the most refined rhetorical techniques that he put to use in the service of his writing. He continued his administrative career and served in Milan during the reign of Theodosius I as one of the Emperor's closest advisers (*comes primi ordinis*). We know that he visited Rome between AD 401 and 402. However, we do not know when or where he died, although he was 57 years old in AD 404 or 405.

Although he produced his work in Latin, several titles are in Greek and his story is full of Greek expressions. The Prudentine poetic collection is composed of nine titles: *Praefatio* (a preface, a presentation of all its work); *Cathemerinon* (a set of Christian Hymns to be used daily by converts); *Apotheosis* (six refutations of heresies, also produced in the form of hymns); *Hamartigenia* (a poem about the origin of sin); *Psychomachia* (a poem on the tensions between vices and virtues for the domain of the human soul); *Contra Orationem Symmachi* (two books contrary to the pagan arguments of Symmachus, who defended the permanence of the altar of the goddess Victoria at the door of the Senate of Rome, whose removal was ordered by Gratian in AD 382); *Liber Peristephanon* (Crowns of Martyrdom, containing 14 lyric poems about the brave martyrdom of Christian heroes); *Tituli Historiarum* or *Dittochaeon* (48 epigrams of biblical themes, 24 on the Old Testament and 24 on the New Testament); and *De Opusculis suis Prudentius* (which can be translated as: 'Prudentius about his own compositions', since in the same way as we received a Preface of his work, so too appears an epilogue, in which the author presents himself as a singer of Christ, insofar as not having good deeds to offer God, nor riches that would enable him to offer alms, Prudentius consecrated his verses, so that his voice could proclaim the name of Christ, which has led commentators of

the work of Prudentius to believe in the recitation of their verses and even to see them as lyrics of songs).

Thus, the work to which we now turn, the long poem *Apotheosis*, integrates the so-called doctrinal poems that seek to help in the formation of Christian orthodoxy, defining belief systems and defending some conceptions about the phenomenon of the Trinity (the abstract and complex idea of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and its relationship with the principles of Christianity). This Prudentine poem is proof of what Andre Chevitaese (2012) calls Christianity, that is to say, that at the beginning of the attempt to constitute a Christian thought, even after the Council of Nicaea, organised and presided over by the Emperor Maximus Constantine in AD 325, conflicting, complementary and diverse thoughts and ideas abounded in the Christian world. A system of practices and representations had not yet been set up to be addressed by converts. This allowed Prudentius to create a work based on classical poetic canons, in which beauty and fluidity of meaning intersect themselves in importance to the ideas, integrating form and content, to defend some Trinitarian conceptions in the face of others existing in his time and defined as heretical positions, conceived as misinterpretations of sacred biblical texts.

The Heresies in the Prudentine Conception

Allaying oneself with a heresy, an error of interpretation, a wrong path caused by a misunderstanding of the order of thought, would, for Prudentius, be to move away from a rational manner of reflection. More than a sin, as the heresy was seen by several homilists, such as Basil of Caesarea or John Chrysostom, heresy in the Prudentine poetic vision would reveal itself in the manner of mistaken deliberation about a discourse, that would infuse erroneous beliefs. The six hymns and two prefaces that make up *Apotheosis* seek to break rational arguments, within the stipulation of a Christianised ratio, to combat certain principles judged wrong in the face of others considered as more appropriate to Christian thought.

The hymns are above all disputations in the sense of classical oratory, that is, argumentative dispositions by which a problem presents itself and progressively constructs a solution in a pearly way. In this specific work, rather than converting Gentiles, Prudentius seeks a re-conversion, namely, that those already Christianised moved away from mistaken ideas and began to profess true faith, based on the constitution of

assumptions more adequate to a specific interpretation, which sought to turn itself into canonical / hegemonic biblical text. This Prudentine poem invokes the long process of formulation of the so-called Christian orthodoxy, in which several positions were indicated as heretical, contrary to the canon that was still in the process of elaboration.

The very title of the poem, *Apotheosis*, already indicates from the Greek word the notion of transformation, of assuming a new form, of changing the constitution of something from a ritual or an intense and recurring practice. A being elaborates and suffers an apotheosis, which is a process in which the being is agent and receiver of change, just as in the process of conversion to Christianity. But change can be implemented from false postulates and fallacious premises. And it is in this way that Prudentius views heresies, as a conversion made from mistaken assumptions, that can be abandoned, generating a true conversion, through the recognition of hitherto instilled falsehoods. For this reason, Prudentius begins the poem with some definitions: what God is and how he manifests himself in the Trinity.

In the first Preface, Prudentius states that God is only one body that presents himself to men by means of three manifestations: The Father is power, the Son is wisdom and the Word is the Holy Spirit, and to believe in it is an act of faith and unquestionable force (Prudentius, *Apotheosis*, I, 1-4). In this way, power is established only through wisdom, using the Word as an instrument of command. In the second Preface, he defines Christianity as a *secta*, a Latin word that indicates a belief system, but also a school or philosophical doctrine, that is to say, a set of principles that must be professed by the adherents. In addition, he argues that Christianity is about correct faith and that one should avoid confusion, slanderous quarrels, disguised guile, and linguistic perversions in the stipulation of its principles. The language, in the Prudentine conception, 'is a spiked stone', which can overturn or can guide, depending on the use made of it (Prudentius, *Apotheosis*, II, 1-36).

The first hymn seeks to undo the deception of the *Patripasians*, who professed heresy, also known as modalism or monarchianism. They argued that the Trinity was composed of three manifestations or modes of a single God, which supposed that The Father, being incarnated in the figure of Christ also had suffered the passion on the cross. We know this heretical community from the work of Tertullian, *Contra Praxeas*, of the 3rd century AD, in which this heresy and its two main supporters, Noeto and Praxeas, are mentioned. Prudentius begins the hymn with a question: 'Is God susceptible to suffering?' (Prudentius, *Apotheosis*, III, 6). His negative answer is supported by three simple arguments: (a) nobody can

see God, thus no one can affirm that he suffered on the cross; (b) the Son is exposed to the human eye, for 'the majesty in its pure state is infinite and does not penetrate the eyes if it does not acquire form and limits' (Prudentius, Apotheosis, III, 25-27); and, (c) the invisible Father begot a visible son, who is the one who performs the miracles, and it is impossible to suffer passion if one was not born (Prudentius, Apotheosis, III, 119-120). In this way, the poet departs from any cosmogonic and / or theophanic account, such as those that marked Antiquity, as for example, Hesiod's Theogony or Ovid's Metamorphoses.

For Prudentius, it is important to emphasise the impossibility of seeing God, for this assures his rational premise of the Trinity, but also brings him closer to known classical thought. Let us remember that Zeus, in Greek mythology, is also light and heat, as for Christians, but when, at her insistence, he is made to look at Semele, daughter of Cadmus and Harmony and mother of Dionysus, he ends up incinerating her. Any attempt by a pagan or Christian to interact with a supreme deity in its primeval form is dangerous to humans.

Errors of Interpretation and Conduct

And so, in this way, the hymns are constructed, with the presentation of a premise judged erroneous, by the falsity of the interpretation of the biblical texts, and the list of arguments considered simple and irrefutable by the Christian poet, who believes his interpretation of the sacred texts the most truthful, because they are the most logical and most rational.

In the second hymn, Prudentius fights the Unitarians or Sabellians, who understood the Trinity as a mere manifestation of the same person. Named as the only heretic in the poem, Sabellius, nicknamed 'Desecrator of Christ' (Prudentius, Apotheosis, IV, 179-180) inspired the poem that retains the greatest number of references to entities of Classical Antiquity. Prudentius claims that Sabellius took from God 'the honour of being a father and his ability to generate lineage' (Prudentius, Apotheosis, IV, 186), a primordial activity for any being of masculine essence in Antiquity. The Prudentine poem then gives the reader / listener a range of references to Saturn, Juno, Apollo, Anubis, among others, to claim that the throne of heaven is occupied by only one sovereign: the Christian God. Everything else is misleading. He quotes the extravagant works of 'bearded Plato' and the twisted mistakes of 'the weaver Aristotle' (Prudentius, Apotheosis, IV, 200-204), who, using reason and logic, could not deny the existence of a supreme ruler. For Prudentius, we only

'understand the words of the ancient heroes and their prophecies after the contemplation of Christ' (Prudentius, *Apotheosis*, IV, 236-237). Thus, the key to understanding the past only comes with the arrival of Christ; it is his actions as the incarnation of the wisdom of the Christian god that gives meaning to all that has been said and professed in the classical past. In this way, Prudentius creates a new interpretation for all the accounts of the past: the logic implanted by the advent of the Christian faith.

The Gentiles are nicknamed 'incense bearers', 'worshippers of images of stone and wood' and 'worshippers of Deucalion' (Prudentius, *Apotheosis*, IV, 292-294), recalling that in Greek mythology Deucalion, son of Prometheus, together with his wife and cousin Pirra, daughter of Epimetheus and Pandora, were the only humans to survive the deluge sent by Zeus in the Bronze Age. When they feel lonely, they ask Zeus for new companions. Zeus tells them to throw stones over their shoulders and from these stones new men and women appear. Thus, in the Prudentine poem, the pagans are beings who come from the arid and stony land and not from the divine light and the Word, like the Christians, who thus come to be seen as possessing a new nature and a new cultural identity. For Prudentius, the Sabellians came close to having pagan thoughts when they did not see that it is fundamental for the creation of a specificity of the converts that the nature of its creation modifies. Christians should believe that they were the image of Christ and that this was, in turn, the image of the Father; hence, Father, Son and Holy Spirit could not be a complete union.

In the third hymn, Prudentius rebels against the Jews, seen as spreading heresy, an error of interpretation of the Scriptures. How can they deny the divine nature of Christ? In the Prudentine account, the Jews are blind, blasphemers, and perform criminal rituals (Prudentius, *Apotheosis*, V, 354-355). They are also deaf and ignorant, for they cannot understand what is stipulated 'by the Hebrew feathers, by the abundance of what is narrated attic and by the eloquence of the austere language.' (Prudentius, *Apotheosis*, V, 379-381), alluding poetically to the three successive versions of the sacred texts (in Aramaic, Greek and Latin). In the middle of the hymn, he asks himself again: 'Judea, has not this voice reached your ears? He came, but he did not enter into your spirit lacking in light, he was arrested at the first door, and he fled from you.' (Prudentius, *Apotheosis*, V, 423-425). Then Prudentius refers to the abandonment of the oracles, directly quoting Delphi and the Sibylline Books (Prudentius, *Apotheosis*, V, 438-441), and states:

Lying Dodona has lost its maddening vapours. Cumae is dumb and mourns for its dead oracles, and Ammon returns no answer in the deserts of Libya. The Capitol at Rome laments that Christ is the God who sheds light for her emperors and her temples have fallen in ruins at her leaders' command. Now the successor of Aeneas, in the imperial purple, prostrates himself in prayer at the house of Christ, and the supreme lord adores the banner of the cross. (Prudentius, *Apotheosis*, V, 442-449)

This is the big question mark of this hymn: how did the heathen end up recognising the glory and brightness of the Christian god, while the Jews remained blind and deaf to great deeds? No wonder it is the longest hymn of the poem, for the triumphalistic tone expands somewhat before the Jewish refusal to perceive true faith. With this, Prudentius affirms that the Jews, like pagans, make their cults through *bisbiseos*, (Latin word for whispers), that is to say, in a not very emphatic way, discreet, almost ashamed. For Christ, doing away with:

[...] the earthly Sabbath, has taken mankind to an eternal Sabbath. He has flashed upon the nations, his glory has shone before kings; He possesses the world, and has constrained imperial Rome to yield to Him, and subdued the images of gods on her Tarpeian Hill [...] Do not Solomon's stones, that were built up by hand, lie in ruins, his metal-work destroyed? (Prudentius, *Apotheosis*, V, 505-514).

And Prudentius answers that the true, eternal and indestructible temple is the Word that was made flesh. While Titus, the Roman Emperor, son of Vespasian and brother of Domitian, maintained the example already set by Pompey's troops to the Jews, dispersing the Hebrews throughout the Empire, the Prudentine Christians are painted as indestructible for wielding the strength of the new creed (Prudentius, *Apotheosis*, V, 525-548).

In the fourth hymn, Prudentius indicates the Homuncionite or Ebionite errors (from the Hebrew word *Ebionim*, meaning poor), practiced by some Jewish converts who recognised Christ as one of the prophets announced by Moses or Isaiah, but man and not god, which again disorganised the Trinitarian thought. The poet begins the hymn by stating that these heretics were approaching Jewish madness by recognising the piety of Christ, as a good son, but by denying his majesty (Prudentius, *Apotheosis*, VI, 553-557). Very interesting is the Prudentine appropriation of the Latin terms *pietas* and *maiestas*, since in their conception the Ebionites were able to observe the affection and respect of family relations exercised between Christ and the Father, but denied the majesty, the religious aspect of the superior nature of those touched by

the Divinity. For the Ebionites, Christ held no numen or genius, no divine power or essence, which was inconceivable to Prudentius. The poet then proceeds to defend the virginity of Mary and the action of the angels with humans, passing to denominate Christ as Emanuel, the 'god with us' (Prudentius, Apotheosis, VI, 606), able to perform various miracles by permission and divine presence. The poem goes on to describe in a poetic way various miracles offered by Christ, such as multiplying food, appeasing storms, recovering sight, resurrecting the dead (Prudentius, Apotheosis, VI, 743). In the latter case, Lazarus is the epic character, par excellence, who returns from Cape Tenaro, to the south of the Peloponnese, where one of the entrances of Hades was located in Greek mythology. In the Prudentine hymn, Christ overcomes pagan prohibitions, being more skilled than Orpheus and Odysseus, and brings into the world of the living a being before vanquished by death.

In the fifth hymn, Prudentius comments on the nature of the soul and questions those who do not believe that in each corruptible body inhabits an incorruptible soul, created by the Christian god as a pneuma, a breath, 'a shadow of God.' (Prudentius, Apotheosis, VII, 798). It was shaped by the mouth of God, but while the body is real, the soul is an imitation (simulacrum):

It is like God in that no time can waste it, in that it is wise and capable of righteousness, and sits like a queen on the throne of the world; it sees before, thinks, takes heed, speaks, contrives words and laws, is furnished with a thousand forms of skill and can traverse the heavens in thought (Prudentius, Apotheosis, VII, 801-807).

Therefore, heretics commit error with the soul, for they do not understand it well, they do not comprehend it, they do not listen to it. It is the human soul, in prudent thought, the receptacle of intelligence and hermeneutics, and without the proper contemplation of its teachings, errors of interpretation of the Scriptures are committed.

In the sixth and last hymn, Prudentius rails against Marcionists and Fantasmatics, that is, those who postulate that Christ was not really a man but only appeared to be human, without real foundation. Thus, they not only questioned the Trinitarian question as much as they questioned the passion and bodily resurrection of Jesus. The first hymn of the poem re-signifies the appearance of Christ; the last re-shapes the death of Christ. Prudentius claims that if the body of Christ was only an appearance, then God was a deceiver, a charlatan, and Christians cannot live with the anathema of being faithful to a deceitful and lying god. Prudentius points out: 'For if anything is done in error, this is not a god'

(Prudentius, Apotheosis, VIII, 975). And he seeks arguments in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke: Christ descended from the flesh of human ancestors, who proceeded from the seed of David and was heir to his blood (Prudentius, Apotheosis, VIII, 998-1002). Thus: 'Christ is our flesh, through me it is finished and by me is reborn. I am finished with death, which is mine, by the virtue of the reborn Christ' (Prudentius, Apotheosis, VIII, 1047-1049). Christ is portrayed as the one who disdains the horror of the tomb, and Prudentius closes the poem with verses that advocate the resurrection of Christ and men after the Last Judgment, 'who will return with the restored members' (Prudentius, Apotheosis, VIII, 1074).

This final part of the hymn is quite interesting, for Prudentius argues that even those who died because of terrible diseases, which destroyed pieces of flesh, and those who lost limbs throughout their lives, will be resurrected with fully recomposed bodies. Christ overcame death and corruption for himself and for all converts, he says. In this peroratio of the poem, the author solves a classic dilemma. Let us remember Tithonus, elder brother of Priam, King of Troy, with whom Eos, the dawn, sister of Selene, the moon, and of Helios, the sun, fell in love. She asks Zeus for the immortality of the lover, but forgets to ask for eternal youth, which causes a horrible old age for the hero, who ends up imprisoned in a dark room in which he becomes a cicada. In Prudentine Christian thought, Geras' dilemma of action falls apart, for even if during the lifetime of the Christian the body is tainted by accidents or infirmities, the magical process of the resurrection would ensure the restoration of bodily limbs, by action of the Word and of Christ himself.

Final Considerations

So, from conception to death, the Prudentine Christ demonstrates the wisdom of the Father and guarantees the truthfulness of Trinitarian thought. Prudentius thus gives his contribution to the construction of true faith, which could not contain in itself self-excluding presuppositions. The guarantee of truthfulness to the Christian faith precluded doubt. The arguments that supported it, like pillars of an architectural construction, should be strong and deep. They could not be shaken by linguistic earthquakes or interpretive tsunamis. They should be tested and sustained rationally, within the order of Christian discourse still under construction.

A strong faith was based on belief without question, but also on factual and believable arguments understood by believers, by those who professed the faith and who sought new converts. Only a complete faith, without internal divisions, could win new adherents, according to the Prudentine poetic conception expressed in the document analysed. More than communicating the principles of Christian life, this Prudentine work allows the resolution of conflicts, using Christianised logic and poetics to spread what the author believed to be true faith.

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