

Montaigne's Gods

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Abstract

According to Montaigne, 'we cannot condignly conceive' the nature and actions of God 'if we are able to conceive them at all. To imagine them condignly, we must imagine them unimaginable, unutterable, incomprehensible'. These criticisms, directed at Raymond of Sebond, lead implicitly to the promotion of a radically negative theology. Yet, even if 'human reason goes astray [...] when she concerns herself with matters divine', it is still possible to elaborate a discourse on God which speaks 'condignly' of His nature as beyond our power to comprehend. Moreover, it is in the literature of pagan antiquity that Montaigne finds the elements of this more 'religious' theology. This chapter examines Montaigne's annotations on Lilio Gregorio Giraldi's treatise, *De deis gentium varia et multiplex historia* ('The Varied and Manifold History of the Pagan Gods', 1548), as well as the comparison between Christian and pagan theology sketched out in the *Essais*.

Abbreviations

- MS Michel de Montaigne. 2003 [1991]. *The Complete Essays*, ed. Michael A. Screech. London: Penguin
- MT Michel de Montaigne. 1998. *Essais*, ed. André Tournon, 3 vols. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale Éditions. Cited by volume, page number, followed by the reference to the *Essais*' book and chapter. We quote the text of the *Essais* from MT.
- MVS Michel de Montaigne. 2004 [1965]. *Les Essais*, ed. Pierre Villey and Verdun-Louis Saulnier, Paris: Presses Universitaire de France.

2.1. 'Among the Likes of Us'

There is no denying that with Montaigne a corner was turned in the early modern debate on salvation and the virtues of the pagans. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Erasmus saw the great pagans as inspired forerunners of Christianity, Rabelais argued that Socrates had been entrusted with a revealed wisdom which was a kind of 'manna from heaven' and in his late *Christianae fidei brevis et clara expositio* ('Brief and Clear Exposition of the Christian Faith', 1531), Zwingli even went so far as to open the gates of Paradise, not only to the Catos, the Scipios, Aristides and Socrates, but also to Hercules and Theseus. A generation later, much had changed. For Montaigne, pagans are pagans, not classical prophetic proto-Christians, and any speculation touching the possible salvation of righteous unbelievers was not to his taste.

We can easily gain a measure of quite how extensively attitudes had changed by comparing a famous passage of the *Colloquia* of Erasmus with some lines from the last chapter of the *Essais*. A character in Erasmus's *Convivium religiosum* confesses,

I sometimes find – even in pagans and the very poets – things written by the Ancient authors so chastely, so piously and so religiously that I cannot convince myself that they were not divinely inspired when they composed them; and perhaps the Spirit of Christ is more widely diffused than we imagine; and that there are more saints than we have in our calendars.²

Indeed, wondering at the pious humility of the Socrates in the *Phaedo* ('such an admirable spirit in a man who knew not Christ nor Holy Writ'), another speaker can scarcely refrain from exclaiming: 'Sancte Socrates, ora pro nobis'.³ These are characters speaking, yet the characters are not speaking for themselves alone. Erasmus 'never tired of pointing out that the path to Paradise was beset with virtues that were thought best by the Ancients'.⁴ And even if he had few qualms about arguing explicitly that some pious pre-Christian heathens were saved, he suggests that at least in the case of Cicero there is good reason to think that the latter was favoured by divine inspiration, and to hope he was vouchsafed a special saving grace.⁵ By contrast, Montaigne contends that for him 'nothing in the life of Socrates is so awkward to digest as his ecstasies and his daemonizings, and nothing about Plato so human as what is alleged for calling him divine' (MS 1268).⁶ As is pointed out with harsh irony on the final page of the essay 'On Glory', Plato and 'his pedagogue', Socrates, 'are marvellous and bold workmen at introducing divine operations and revelations, anywhere and everywhere, when human strength gives out' (MS 715).⁷

In this respect, all the heroes of Montaigne's personal pantheon are to be admired 'as though [they] were above our human condition' (MS 850), 'quasi au-dessus de l'humaine condition' (MVS 752/ MT II, 661, II, 36). Yet the point is not to forget that 'quasi': 'That great soul of [Plato] – [was] great, however, with merely human greatness'. [Socrates] deserves boundless esteem, not because of his ecstasies and moments of divine inspiration, but for having done 'a great favour to human nature by showing how much she can do by herself'. [Cato] 'was truly a model which Nature chose to show how far human virtue and fortitude can reach', and, despite his 'fantasies' about his birth and his immortalization, [Alexander] is to be thought of as 'the greatest man who was simply man'.⁸ The words or deeds of these great pagans are almost miraculous: yet their one-off accomplishments are not a proof of a more than human inspiration, and even less are they demonstration that these individuals were touched by grace. If Montaigne christens them *saintes formes* or *sainte[s] image[s] de l'humaine nature* ('holy image[s] of the human form'),⁹ it is only because they bear witness to the 'highest possible form of human nature'. These 'divine souls' (*âmes divines*) are certainly exceptional, but they cannot in any sense be labelled 'superhuman' (*surhumaine[s]*), a term that Montaigne used only once in a marginal comment on the Bordeaux copy and immediately crossed out.¹⁰

Much of Montaigne's moral discourse finds its rationale here.¹¹ While launching a critique of contemporary attempts to belittle the great-souled actions of antiquity, Montaigne refrains from the excess of admiration which turns into a stunned worship of the greatness of the ancient heroes:

I consider some men, particularly among the Ancients, to be way above me and even though I clearly realize that I am powerless to follow them on my feet I do not give up following them with my eyes and judging the principles which raise them thus aloft, principles the seeds of which I can just perceive in myself, as I also can that ultimate baseness in minds which no longer amazes me and which I do not refuse to believe in either. I can clearly see the spiral by which those great souls wind themselves higher (MS 822).¹²

In a word, Montaigne appears to leave no room for the vital, if mostly unstated, question in Renaissance eulogies on outstanding pagans: were they destined to eternal damnation, however virtuous and wise they might have been? 'The virtuous actions of [Socrates] and of [Cato] remain vain and useless, since they did not have, as their end or their aim, love of the true Creator of all things nor obedience to him: they did not know God' (MS 499).¹³ They are *saintes formes*, not 'revered souls' (*âmes vénérables*), a term Montaigne uses in a technical sense to describe Christian souls 'which, through ardour of devotion and piety, are raised on high to a constant and scrupulous anticipation of things divine [...] enjoying by the power of a quick and rapturous hope a foretaste of that everlasting food which is the ultimate goal, the final destination, that Christians long for'. These 'revered souls' whose 'endeavour is a privilege', i.e. the effect of a grace proffered by God, are at the extreme boundary of humanity, they 'pré-occupent' (pre-occupy) the final beatitude.¹⁴ Yet, apart from such *miraculeuse métamorphose*, man cannot 'mount above himself or above humanity' (MS 683).¹⁵ Ancient virtuous pagans are 'among the likes of us' (*entre nous*)¹⁶ – certainly not to be confused 'with the scrapings of the pot that we are' but still *hommes purement hommes*,¹⁷ as [Descartes] would say fifty years later, 'armed with no arms' but their own and 'stripped of [...] grace and knowledge of God' (MS 502).¹⁸ In short, great men to be admired, not to be venerated.

2.2. 'Bastard Religions'

Given his views on the pagans' virtues and salvation, one might expect Montaigne to hold quite the same attitude towards the related subject of the pagans' knowledge of God. This is only too clear from the astonishing two-page-long Rabelaisian catalogue of 'the ancient opinions of men touching religion' we read in the *Apology for Raymond Sebond*. Montaigne concludes ironically:

So much din from so many philosophical brainboxes! Trust in your philosophy now! Boast that you are the one who has found the lucky bean in your festive pudding! There is for me no such thing as a privileged choice, except one coming expressly from the hand of God (MS 576).¹⁹

Therefore, 'les opinions humaines et anciennes touchant la religion' (MVS 513/ MT III, 289, II, 12) – such opinions as are merely human *because* they pertain to the ancient word which lived before the revelation of Christ – can be addressed as freely as the virtuous deeds of great Roman and Greek souls: they are human phenomena which can be assessed and judged. And Montaigne's judgement is mostly quite severe.

The criticism of pagan theologies and religions represents a major topic of the *Essays*²⁰ and the two charges Montaigne focuses on are very well known. On the one hand, he dwells on all forms of pagan anthropomorphism, recalling that nothing is more vain 'than trying to make guesses about God from human analogies' (MS 572; MVS 512/ MT III, 289, II, 12). On the other hand, he repeatedly unmasks the political use of religions.²¹ Most ancient 'lawgivers' embroidered the origins of their states 'with supernatural mysteries', which served well 'as a bridle to keep the people to their duties' (MS 715). If Montaigne speaks sometimes of the 'coarse deceit of religions' (*la grossière imposture des religions*),²² the expression refers mostly, if not exclusively, to ancient political theologies which, therefore, turn out to be 'bastard religions', as the chapter *On Glory* (II, 16) puts it.²³ That is clearly not the case of the true faith: 'All polities have a god at their head, truly so in the case of the one drawn up by [Moses] for the people of Judaea on leaving Egypt; the rest, falsely so' (MS 716). Moreover, Christian religion promotes stability with the specific 'injunction to obey the powers that be and to uphold the civil polity' (MS 136).²⁴ But its own truth is not submitted to the relativity of policies and customs. Thus Montaigne can recall the words of an ancient god, [Apollo], who was reported to have 'taught us that religion is really no more than a human invention, useful for binding societies together,

[...] by telling those who came before his Tripod to beg for instruction that the true way of worship is the one hallowed by custom in each locality'. And he retorts by exclaiming:

Oh God, how bound we are to the loving-kindness of our sovereign Creator for making our belief grow up out of the stupidities of such arbitrary and wandering devotions, establishing it on the changeless foundation of his holy Word! (MS 653).²⁵

According to Montaigne, then, ancient religions are mostly 'not only false but impious' because men have 'forged' (*fingitur; fictio*) for themselves the attributes of God, taking themselves 'as the correlative' (MS 573, 595). And in the best-case scenario, they are 'bastard religions', issuing from the union of political necessity and theological fantasies, in order to 'deceive the people for their own good' (MS 571). So, there is no denying that Montaigne's judgment on ancient theologies is harshly mocking, if not merciless. But while that is the case generally speaking, still there are exceptions. As M. A. Screech has pointed out, 'for Montaigne there is a hierarchy of religious opinions among pagans' (MS XXX). Montaigne touches briefly but specifically on this point in a couple of very dense pages of the *Apology for Raymond Sebond* which merit a close reading.

At the very beginning of the chapter, while dismissing the first of the two criticisms of Sebond ('Christians do themselves wrong in wishing to support their belief with human reason', MS 491), Montaigne quotes a key text of St Paul (*Romans* 1: 20): [God] has left within these lofty works the impress of his Godhead: only our weakness stops us from discovering it. He tells us himself that he makes manifest his unseen workings through those things which are seen.²⁶ Sebond toiled at this honourable endeavour, showing us that there is no piece within this world which belies its Maker. God's goodness would be put in the wrong if the universe were not compatible with our beliefs. All things, Heaven, Earth, the elements, our bodies and our souls are in one accord: we simply have to find how to use them. If we have the capacity to understand, they will teach us. For this world is a most holy Temple into which Man has been brought in order to contemplate the Sun, the heavenly bodies, the waters and the dry land – objects not sculpted by mortal hands but made manifest to our senses by the Divine Mind in order to represent intelligibles. 'The invisible things of God', says St Paul, 'are clearly seen from the creation of the world, his Eternal Wisdom and his Godhead being perceived from the things he has made' (MS 498–499).²⁷

Now, in Christian theology the quotation from *Romans* 1: 20 was regularly interpreted as arguing in favour of the possibility that pre-Christian philosophers could have attained knowledge of God.²⁸ A standard reading of St Paul's text was that the wise Gentiles (*sapientes gentilium*) hold a basic truth about God: 'some of them reached a true knowledge of God, even if just a limited one, because "what is knowable of God", that is, what man can know of God with his reason, "was shown in them", that is, it was shown to them through something which belongs to them, that is through internal light'.²⁹ The pagans had no access to the high mysteries of Christian faith (God's Trinitarian essence, the mystery of Christ's redemption); nonetheless, they succeeded in discovering through the observation of nature that there is one God, that he is eternal, perfect, omniscient, omnipotent, cause and creator of everything, perfectly good, perfectly wise, perfectly just, unchangeable, incorporeal, and the ultimate goal of all creatures.³⁰ And although it was held by some theologians that pre-Christian thinkers were able to reach such an embryonic knowledge of God 'per lumen non tantum naturale, sed etiam suprannaturale', this thesis was almost universally dismissed by sixteenth-century exegetes.³¹

Montaigne seems to be defending a quite similar view, when, right after *Romans* 1:20, he quotes five verses by the Roman pagan poet Manilius which claim that 'God himself does not begrudge to the world the sight of the face of heaven, which, ever-rolling, unveils his countenance, his incorporate being inculcating and offering himself to us, so that he may be known full well' (MS 499).³² And the 1588 edition of the *Essays* recalled that Montaigne would have used some 'verses such as these' as a 'prefatory-piece' to his translation of Sebond's *Theologia naturalis*.³³ Yet, one might doubt that Montaigne's use of *Romans* 1:20 fits exactly with this standard interpretation.³⁴ In actual fact, he seems quite evasive about relating the words of St Paul to the theological problem of the nature and extent of that knowledge of the true God which could have been articulated by men in pagan times.

Firstly, in the opening pages of the *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, Montaigne is dealing essentially with the problem of the relation between faith (better: 'lively faith', *foi vive*³⁵) and reason in a Christian context. The quotation from *Romans* 1:20 is thus exploited to highlight the role of 'human reasonings and concepts' as signposts which set men (Montaigne says 'apprentices', *apprenti[s]*) on the road to belief by making them 'capable of God's grace'. Rational arguments, in turn, require that 'faith tinges [...] and throws her light upon them' in order to become 'firm and solid'.³⁶ Therefore, the issue is not so much whether pagans without revelation could have reached knowledge of God. Rather, Montaigne questions whether his definition of faith – that is, a 'private inspiration from God's grace' (MS 491) – dismisses recourse to 'human reasoning' to support belief as radically useless.

Secondly, Montaigne follows Sebond in arguing that only 'man enlightened by God and cleansed of original sin' by grace can read the book of nature properly and discover a print 'impressed upon the fabric of this world by the hand of the great Architect' and 'some image' of the invisible Godhead 'within created things', as suggested by St Paul. After the Fall, Sebond maintains,

no one can see and read that great Book [of Nature] by himself (even though it is ever open and present to our eyes) unless he is enlightened by God and cleansed of original sin. And therefore not one of the pagan philosophers of Antiquity could read this science, because they were all blinded concerning the sovereign good; even though they drew all their other sciences and all their knowledge from it, they could never perceive nor discover the wisdom which is enclosed within it nor that true and solid doctrine which guides us to eternal life (MS LVIII).³⁷

Accordingly, Montaigne states that ‘in a matter so holy, so sublime, so far surpassing Man’s intellect as is that Truth by which it has pleased God in his goodness to enlighten us, we can only grasp that Truth and lodge it within us if God favours us with the privilege of further help, beyond the natural order’. There is no reason, then, to believe

that purely human means have the capacity to do this; if they had, many choice and excellent souls in ancient times – souls abundantly furnished with natural faculties – would not have failed to reach such knowledge by discursive reasoning. Only faith can embrace, with a lively certainty, the high mysteries of our religion (MS 491–492).³⁸

Does this mention of the ‘high mysteries of our religion’ suggest a quite traditional distinction between basic truths – certain ‘preambles of the Faith’ (*praeambula fidei*), accessible to the unaided reason of the pagans – and specifically Christian mysteries (Trinity, redemption etc.)? It is hard to say. At any rate, it is fair to conclude that, while being quite clear about the ‘error of paganism and the ignorance of our holy Truth’, on this opening page of the *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, Montaigne tends to evade the theological question of the extent and contents of the true but imperfect knowledge of God which the pagans reached through philosophical speculation and through the contemplation of nature.³⁹

2.3. Excusabilior

To find a more detailed, yet briefly conducted discussion of this point, one must turn to the opening statement of the section of the *Apology* on the vanity of human knowledge of divine realities. Here we find the other page of this chapter that we would like to submit to a close reading.

‘Of all the ancient opinions of men touching religion’, Montaigne maintains

it seems to me that the most excusable and verisimilitudinous was the one which recognized God as some incomprehensible Power, the Origin and Preserver of all things, all goodness, all perfection, who took and accepted in good part, the honour and reverence which human beings rendered him, under any guise, under any name and in any way whatsoever. *Jupiter omnipotens rerum, regumque deumque/ Progenitor genitrixque* (MS 572, translation slightly modified).⁴⁰

Montaigne’s preference for negative theology is well known.⁴¹ ‘To imagine’ God ‘condignly, we must imagine’ him ‘unimaginable’ and ‘incomprehensible’ (MS 579). This is the view of the most venerable fathers of the Church: ‘*Melius scitur deus nesciendo* [God is best known by not knowing], said St Augustine’ (MS 556); ‘I know from myself how incomprehensible God is: I cannot even comprehend the constituents of my own being’ (MS 610), maintains St Bernard⁴²; both are quoted by Montaigne in the *Apology*. And given that St John Chrysostom’s *Homilies on First Corinthians* are evoked elsewhere in the *Essays*,⁴³ Montaigne may well have known that the very same saint was also the author of famous homilies *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God*. Montaigne’s own copy of the treatise *De deis gentium varia et multiplex historia* (‘The Varied and Manifold History of the Pagan Gods’, 1548) by the Italian polymath Lilio Gregorio Giraldi (1479–1552), read and annotated around 1555, bears witness to an early discovery by the young Michel of apophatic theology as the most ‘devout’ way of speaking of God ‘condignly’.⁴⁴ In the lines corresponding to the second annotation, Giraldi recalls that ‘Denys, Eusebius of Caesarea and many others were right in defining God *per modum negandi*’ and Montaigne’s third annotation reads ‘that man cannot find a name which is appropriate [*conveniens*] to God’).⁴⁵

Yet, traditionally, the theology of the *via negationis* is to be completed by a theology of the *via eminentiae* and a theology of the *via causationis*.⁴⁶ Therefore, the ancient opinion which Montaigne judges ‘the most excusable and verisimilitudinous’ is the one that recognized God not only as ‘an incomprehensible Power’ but also as ‘the Origin and Preserver of all things’ (*via causationis*) and ‘all goodness, all perfection’ (*via eminentiae*). Even though he does not explicitly put forward a name for this ‘most excusable’ religion he has in mind, Montaigne immediately goes on to quote a couplet on *Jupiter omnipotens and progenitor* by the Roman poet Valerius Soranus which was previously cited by Augustine in the *City of God* (VII, 11).⁴⁷

As we have seen, Montaigne judges that this form of pagan monotheism – namely, worshipping a perfect and incomprehensible creating power – is for him ‘the most excusable and verisimilitudinous’ of ancient beliefs. Indeed, this personal opinion will be propped up in the second part of the page we are reading by three arguments that all look quite elusive and problematic. Firstly, Montaigne argues that ‘such devotion has always been regarded by Heaven with favour’ (MS 573). Pagan devotion to an incomprehensible, perfect, providential and all-powerful deity is ‘most excusable’, as much to Montaigne’s as to God’s eyes. Montaigne even ventures to say that divine providence may have rewarded pagan worshippers and their policies with ‘temporal benefits’ as if ‘God in his mercy may perhaps have deigned to protect those tender principles of rough-and-ready knowledge of Himself which Natural Reason affords us, amid the false imaginings of our dreams’ (MS 573).⁴⁸ The argument is sketched out in a very evasive or even clumsy way. Yet it was nonetheless clear enough to be seized upon by an early critic of Montaigne, Father Boucher (c.1548–1646), who in the *Triumphes de la Religion* (1628) quotes the passage from the *Apology* and argues as follows:

Saying that God regards with favour any reverence which human beings render Him, under any guise, under any name and in any way means to provide an argument to Pagans, Jews, Turks, heretics and schismatics to persist in their errors, and to die in their blindness, for Montaigne lets them believe that God takes in good part and accepts the honour, reverence and devotion they render him, according to the way and the guise of life they are accustomed to.⁴⁹

In other words, by arguing that the devotion the pagans addressed to an incomprehensible and all-perfect creator is ‘most excusable’ and that it should be thought of as a rough-and-ready knowledge which God seems to appreciate and reward,

Montaigne goes much too far. For he thereby accords to ancient (and implicitly also to modern) non-Christian believers much more than any orthodox sixteenth-century theologian would have done.⁵⁰

The second argument developing the idea of a ‘most excusable’ pagan religion is shorter yet equally complex: ‘Of all the religions which St [Paul] found honoured in Athens, the most excusable, he thought, was the one dedicated to a hidden, “unknown God”’ (MS 573).⁵¹ [Screech] has provided a detailed analysis of these lines,⁵² so we can comment on them only very briefly by saying that Montaigne is combining three biblical passages: the final clause of *Romans* 1:21, ‘so that [the pagans] are inexcusable’ (implicitly evoked by the expression ‘most excusable’); [Paul]’s sermon in Athens about the *ignotus deus* in *Acts of the Apostles* 17:23, and a well-known verse from *Isaiah*, 45:15, ‘Vere tu es Deus absconditus’. The merging of multiple scriptural sources is extremely clever, and even risky if compared with contemporary biblical exegetes.⁵³ Montaigne is using [Paul] (the [Paul] preaching in Athens) against [Paul] (the [Paul] speaking in *Romans* 1:20–21) through [Isaiah] in order to show that not all pagan believers are equally ‘inexcusable’. But the argument is once again problematic: nothing in the text of the *Acts* suggests that [Paul] esteemed Athenian philosophers ‘more excusable’ because they worship an ‘unknown God’ – that is, according to Montaigne, a God they revered as ‘incomprehensible’. At the origin of Montaigne’s hermeneutic tour de force there is perhaps a note that can be found in the *Glossa ordinaria* to the Bible, commenting the expression *ignoto deo*:

God is known in Judea, yet not accepted. The God of Achaea is unknown but many look for him. And he who ignores will be ignored, while the sinner will be punished. Neither will be innocent, but those who do not offer their faith to the Christ they did not know will be more excusable than the ones who imprisoned the Christ they knew.⁵⁴

The text is taken from the *Commentary* of [Bede] to *Acts* 17, and the Latin *excusabilior* announces Montaigne’s ‘most excusable’. Yet, [Bede] is simply saying that pagans who did not have faith in Christ because they did not know him are ‘more excusable’ than the Jews who knew Christ but persecuted him.⁵⁵ Indeed, the proximity between the *deus absconditus* and the *deus ignotus* allows Montaigne to develop an original interpretation of *Acts* 17:23, and therefore to argue, despite *Romans* 1:20, that [Paul] himself judged a certain kind of apophatic pagan monotheism (devotion to the unknown God) false, yet nevertheless the ‘most excusable’ of the pagans’ religious opinions.

Let us conclude this very close reading of the page of the *Apology* on ‘the most excusable and verisimilitudinous’ of ‘ancient opinions of men touching religion’ with a third and final remark from Montaigne, which is in fact a somewhat ironic coda. ‘Of all the deities to which bodies have been ascribed (as necessity required during that universal blindness), I think’, Montaigne says, ‘I would have most willingly gone along with those who worshipped the Sun’ (MS 574).⁵⁶ There follows a long quotation from [Ronsard], a sort of ode to the Sun, that Montaigne comments on, arguing that ‘even leaving its grandeur and beauty aside’ (these were highly eulogized by [Ronsard]), ‘the Sun is the most distant part of the universe which Man can descry, and hence so little known that those who fell into reverent ecstasies before it were excusable’ (the French text says ‘ils étaient pardonnables d’en entrer en admiration et révérence’, but the first version [1580] reads ‘ils étaient excusables d’en entrer en admiration et épouvantement’).⁵⁷ Once again, what allows a pagan cult to be thought ‘excusable’ is its capacity to make the believer aware of the remoteness and the mystery of God. The opening stanza of a great poem by Philip [Larkin] (‘Water’) reads: ‘If I were called in / To construct a religion / I should make use of water’ – Montaigne would have said ‘I should make use of the Sun’, and eventually he would have added, as we can read a couple of pages on:

I would rather have followed those who worship the serpent, the dog and the bull; since the natures of such animals are less known to us, we are free to imagine them as we like and to endow them with extraordinary qualities’ (MS 576).⁵⁸

2.4. Devout Worshippers of Idols

Far from looking on all pagan theologies as idolatrous, Montaigne singles out devotion to a hidden, ‘unknown’ divine power as the ‘most excusable’. He could equally have said the ‘most religious’, that is, the one which appears most aware of the transcendence and the incommensurability of divine nature with respect to any human ‘conjecture’ (MS 492). In this respect, the *Apology* ends with ‘a very religious conclusion of a pagan’ (MS 683) – namely, the [Plutarch] of *On the E’i at Delphi*, who argues, in terms perfectly consonant with Christianity, the radical contingency of all beings when compared with God’s being.

But Montaigne goes even further. If some of the false religions of antiquity are to be esteemed ‘most excusable’ because they promote a ‘very religious’ approach to the divine, for this same reason they might even have something to teach Christians. This is the last point we will discuss by offering two brief remarks about a page of the chapter ‘On Prayer’ (*Essays* I, 56).⁵⁹ Montaigne is criticizing the ‘free examination’ of the Bible promoted by the Reformation in its translation of that work ‘into the vulgar tongues’:

By bringing Scripture that little bit nearer they actually push it further away. Pure ignorance, leaving men totally dependent on others, was much more salutary and more learned than such vain verbal knowledge, that nursery of rashness and presumption (MS 359).⁶⁰

The assault against ‘the liberty everyone takes of broadcasting so religious and so vital a text into all sorts of languages’ is developed in a more general account, in a marginal comment added on to the Bordeaux copy.

One of our Greek historians justly accused his own time of having so scattered the secrets of the Christian religion about the market–place and into the hands of the meanest artisans that everybody could argue and talk about them according to his own understanding: ‘It is deeply shameful’, he added, ‘that we who by God’s grace enjoy the pure mysteries of our pious faith should allow them to be profaned in the mouths of persons ignorant and base, seeing that the Gentiles forbade even Socrates, Plato, and the wisest men to talk or to inquire about matters entrusted to the priests at Delphi (MS 360).⁶¹

The Priests of Apollo knew the meaning of mystery far better than sixteenth–century Christians: the respectful silence of Socrates and Plato is thus to be contrasted with ‘the horrifying impudence with which’ men of the time of Montaigne ‘toss theological arguments to and fro’ (MS 494). The aim of the comparison is admittedly ironic: look at pagans, they are far more religious – that is, reverent and respectful towards divine mysteries – than contemporary Christians belonging to the *Religion prétendue réformée*. One can even go so far as to venture that here Montaigne is playing on the charge constantly addressed by Reformed theologians to Roman Catholics, who are stigmatized as idolatrous because of their cult of saints.⁶² Montaigne would retort: if only we were as idolatrous as those pagans, who were so pious that they did not dare speak of the holy mysteries! But if the tone is ironic, still, there is no denying that Montaigne is almost suggesting the adoption of the pagan religion as a model which the contemporary believer could – or even should – imitate.

The issue is addressed again at the very end of the same marginal annotation, but this time Montaigne sketches out a sort of utopian picture of a Christianity which could reform itself by imitating paganism:

A bishop has testified in writing that there is, at the other end of the world, an island which the Ancients called Dioscorides, fertile and favoured with all sorts of fruits and trees and a healthy air; the inhabitants are Christian, having Churches and altars which are adorned with no other images but crosses; they scrupulously observe feastdays and fasts, pay their tithes meticulously and are so chaste that no man ever lies with more than one woman for the whole of his life; meanwhile, so happy with their lot that, in the middle of the ocean, they know nothing about ships, and so simple that they do not understand a single word of the religion which they so meticulously observe – something only unbelievable to those who do not know that pagans, devout worshippers of idols, know nothing about their gods apart from their statues and their names. The original beginning of Euripides’ tragedy *Menalippus* went like this:

Juppiter, car de toy rien sinon

*Je ne connois seulement que le nom...*⁶³

Here is the example of a faith in which the holy mysteries are so mysterious and so reverently adored that they are completely unknown. The Christian cult is meticulously observed, the inhabitants of this Eden–like island are simple, pure, naturally and therefore perfectly moral. One might object that it is unbelievable, a utopia situated so far ‘at the other end of the world’ that it probably does not even exist in this world. But Montaigne retorts: let us consider the ‘pagans, devout worshippers of idols’, who were ‘very religious’ while not knowing anything about their gods except their names and attributes. Once again, it is hard to say if Montaigne is only being ironical here – and, more importantly, if he is proposing the pagan–like faith of the inhabitants of Dioscorides as a model for the Christians of his time. A century later, in the entry ‘Dioscoride’, of the *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, Pierre Bayle would argue, on the one hand, that Montaigne was right (all the pagan gods, not only the one St Paul spoke about in Athens, were in fact ‘unknown gods’) and, on the other hand, that we can even find some (foolish) Christians who look exactly like the believers of Dioscorides: they are the ‘misérables Docteurs’ of quietism, teaching that the highest form of contemplation consists, not in knowing God more perfectly than other people, but in not knowing Him.⁶⁴

Montaigne says somewhere, probably reacting to the criticisms levelled at the *Essays* in Rome, that he will let his book speak *verbis indisciplinatis*, that is, using undisciplined words; it will say ‘fortune, destiny, accident, good luck, bad luck, the gods and similar phrases, following its own fashion’ (MS 361).⁶⁵ To say not only *Dieu*, but also *les Dieux* is to reject the ‘error of paganism’ and its ‘ignorance of our holy Truth’, but it is also to acknowledge that some of the ‘ancient opinions of men touching religion’ are more excusable than others, and even that the most excusable and religious of them might have something to teach to Christian believers.

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¹ See Levi 1974; Screech 1979, 123–124; Kravý 2002; Herdt 2008, 101–127; Screech 2015, 253, 301–302.

² Erasmus 1972, 251: 'Sacris quidem literis ubique prima debetur autoritas, sed tamen ego nunquam offendo quaedam vel dicta a veteribus vel scripta ab Ethnicis, etiam poetis, tam caste, tam sancte, tam divinitus, ut mihi non possim persuadere, quin pectus illorum, quum illa scriberent, numen aliquod bonum agitaverit. Et fortasse latius se fundit spiritus Christi, quam nos interpretamur. Et multi sunt in consortio sanctorum, qui non sunt apud nos in catalogo'. Translation from Screech 2015, 130.

³ Erasmus 1972, 254: 'Profecto mirandus animus in eo, qui Christum ac sacras literas non noverat. Proinde quum huiusmodi quaedam lego de talibus viris, vix mihi tempero, quin dicam: sancte Socrates, ora pro nobis'. Translation from Screech 2015, 130. On this famous exclamation see Erasmus 1997, 233–235 and 195 (illustration).

⁴ Bietenholz 1994, 410.

⁵ Erasmus 1924, 339: 'Quid aliis accidat nescio; me legentem sic afficere solet M. Tullius, praesertim ubi de bene vivendo disserit, ut dubitare non possim quin illud pectus unde ista prodierunt, aliqua divinitas occuparit. [...] Ubi nunc agat anima Ciceronis, fortasse non est humani iudicii pronunciare. Me certe non admodum aversum habituri sunt in ferendis calculis, qui sperant illum apud superos quietam vitam agere. Nulli dubium esse potest quin crederit aliquod esse numen, quo nihil esse posset neque maius neque melius'.

⁶ MVS, 1115/ MT III, 503–504, III, 13: 'Et rien ne m'est à digérer fâcheux en la vie de Socrate que ses extases et ses démoneries. Rien si humain en Platon que ce pourquoi ils disent qu'on l'appelle divin'.

⁷ MVS, 629/ MT II, 477, II, 16: 'Ce personnage et son pédagogue sont merveilleux et hardis ouvriers à faire joindre les opérations et révélations divines tout par tout où faut l'humaine force'.

⁸ MS 498, 1175, 260, 94. Respectively MVS 446/ MT II, 181, II, 12: 'Cette grande âme de Platon, mais grande d'humaine grandeur seulement'; MVS 1038/ MT 385, III, 12: 'Il a fait grand'faveur à l'humaine nature, de montrer combien elle peut d'elle-même'; MVS 231/ MT I, 379, I, 37: 'Ce personnage-là fut véritablement un patron que nature choisit pour montrer jusques où l'humaine vertu et fermeté pouvait atteindre'; MVS 85/ MT I, 161, I, 20: 'Le plus grand homme, simplement homme, Alexandre, mourut aussi à ce terme'.

⁹ MVS 231; 1054; 501–502/ MT I, 379; III, 410; II, 270–271, I, 37; III, 12; II, 12.

¹⁰ MVS 1109/ MT III, 494 and 633, III, 13: 'Cettui-ci Socrate s'est vu en extase debout un jour entier et une nuit, en présence de toute l'armée grecque, surpris et ravi par quelque profonde pensée [Bordeaux copy, f. 493^v]: 'cett'action est un peu haute et surhumaine: je m'en passerois [pour moi] volontiers au [conte] recit de sa vie. Ce sont [des] miracles de ces divines ames [je n'en puis faire estat] lesquels je ne puis poiser ne les pouvant concevoir'.

¹¹ See Screech 1983, ch. 15; 19.

¹² MVS 725/ MT II, 620, II, 32: 'Moi, je considère aucuns hommes fort loin au-dessus de moi – nommément entre les anciens – et encore que je reconnaisse clairement mon impuissance à les suivre de mes pas, je ne laisse pas de les suivre à vue, et juger les ressorts qui les haussent ainsi: desquels je apperçois aucunement en moi les semences: comme je fais aussi de l'extrême bassesse des esprits: qui ne m'étonne, et que je ne mescrois non plus. Je vois bien le tour que celles-là se donnent pour se monter; et admire leur grandeur'.

¹³ MVS 447/ MT II, 183, II, 12: 'Les actions vertueuses de Socrate et de Caton demeurent vaines et inutiles pour n'avoir eu leur fin, et n'avoir regardé l'amour et obéissance du vrai créateur de toutes choses, et pour avoir ignoré Dieu'.

¹⁴ MVS 1114–1115/ MT III, 503, III, 13: 'Je ne touche pas ici, et ne mêle point à cette marmaille d'hommes que nous sommes, et à cette vanité de désirs et cogitations qui nous divertissent, ces âmes vénérables, élevées par ardeur de devotion et religion à une constante et consciencieuse méditation des choses divines, lesquelles préoccupant par l'effort d'une vive et véhémence espérance l'usage de la nourriture éternelle, but final, et dernier arrêt des Chrestiens désirs, seul plaisir constant, incorruptible, dédaignent de s'attendre à nos nécessiteuses commodités, fluides et ambiguës, et résignent facilement au corps le soin et l'usage de la pâture sensuelle et temporelle: c'est un étude privilégié. Entre nous, ce sont choses que j'ai toujours vues de singulier accord: les opinions supercélestes et les mœurs souterraines'.

¹⁵ MVS 604/ MT II, 438, II, 12.

¹⁶ See Screech 1983, ch. 18, § 4–5.

¹⁷ Descartes 1964–1974, VI, 3 (*Discours de la méthode*, first part).

¹⁸ MVS 449/ MT II, 438, II, 12: 'Considerons donc pour cette heure l'homme seul, sans secours étranger, armé seulement de ses armes, et dépourvu de la grâce et connaissance divine, qui est tout son honneur, sa force et le fondement de son être'.

¹⁹ MVS 516/ MT II, 294, II, 12: 'Fiez-vous à votre philosophie! Vantez-vous d'avoir trouvé la fève au gâteau, à voir ce tintamarre de tant de cervelles philosophiques. – Le trouble des formes mondaines a gagné sur moi que les diverses mœurs et fantaisies aux miennes ne me déplaisent pas tant comme elles m'instruisent, ne m'enorgueillissent pas tant comme elles m'humilient en les conferant; et tout autre choix que celui qui vient de la main expresse de Dieu me semble choix de peu de prérogative'.

²⁰ Desan 2007, 261–264 (entry 'Dieux' by A. Legros); Carraud 2004; Desan 2008.

²¹ See Desan 2007, 862–867 (entry 'Religion' by Emmanuel Naya).

²² MVS 111/ MT I 202, I, 23: 'Je laisse à part la grossière imposture des religions, dequoi tant de grandes nations, et tant de suffisants personnages se sont vus enivrés: car cette partie étant hors de nos raisons humaines, il est plus excusable de s'y perdre, à qui n'y est extraordinairement éclairé par faveur divine'.

²³ MVS 629/ MT II 477, II, 16: 'Ce moyen a été pratiqué par tous les Législateurs, et n'est police où il n'y ait quelque mélange, ou de vanité cérémonieuse, ou d'opinion mensongère, qui serve de bride à tenir le peuple en office. C'est pour cela que la plupart ont leurs origines et commencemens fabuleux, et enrichis de mystères supérieurs. C'est cela qui a donné crédit aux religions bâtardes, et les a faites favoriser aux gens d'entendement'.

²⁴ MVS 121/ MT I 202, I, 23: 'La religion Chrétienne a toutes les marques d'extrême justice et utilité mais nulle plus apparente, que l'exacte recommandation de l'obéissance du Magistrat, et manutention des polices'. See Sève 2007, 176–199.

²⁵ MVS 579/ MT II, 398, II, 12: 'Comment pouvoit ce Dieu ancien plus clairement accuser en l'humaine cognoissance l'ignorance de l'être divin, et apprendre aux hommes que la religion n'était qu'une pièce de leur invention, propre à lier leur société, qu'en déclarant, comme il fit, à ceux qui en recherchaient l'instruction de son trépied que le vrai culte à chacun était celui qu'il trouvait observé par l'usage du lieu où il était? Ô Dieu! quelle obligation n'avons-nous à la bénignité de notre souverain créateur pour avoir dénié notre créance de ces vagabondes et arbitraires dévotions et l'avoir logée sur l'éternelle base de sa sainte parole!'

²⁶ See Hebrews 11:3.

²⁷ MVS 446–447/ MT II, 182, II, 12: 'Il a laissé en ces hauts ouvrages le caractère de sa divinité, et ne tient qu'à notre imbécillité que nous ne le puissions découvrir. C'est ce qu'il nous dit lui-même, que ses opérations invisibles, il nous les manifeste par les visibles. Sebond s'est travaillé à ce digne étude, et nous montre comment il n'est pièce du monde qui démente son facteur. Ce serait faire tort à la bonté divine, si l'univers ne consentait à notre créance. Le ciel, la terre, les éléments, notre corps et notre âme, toutes choses y conspirent: il n'est que de trouver le moyen de s'en servir: elles nous instruisent, si nous sommes capables d'entendre. Car ce monde est un temple très saint, dedans lequel l'homme est introduit pour y contempler des statues, non ouvrées de mortelle main, mais celles que la divine pensée a fait sensibles: le Soleil, les étoiles, les eaux et la terre, pour nous représenter les intelligibles. Les choses invisibles de Dieu, dit Saint Paul, apparaissent par la création du monde, considérant sa sapience éternelle et sa divinité par ses œuvres'.

²⁸ See Frigo 2011.

²⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Super epistolam B. Pauli da Romanos lectura*, ch. 1, lectio 6: 'Primo enim consentit quod sapientes gentilium de Deo cognoverunt veritatem [...] Dicit ergo primo: recte dico quod veritatem Dei detinuerunt, fuit enim in eis, quantum ad aliquid, vera Dei cognitio, quia quod notum est Dei, id est quod cognoscibile est de Deo ab homine per rationem, manifestum est in illis, id est manifestum est eis ex eo quod in illis est, id est ex lumine intrinseco'.

³⁰ See Van den Steen 1635, 38.

³¹ See Frigo 2011, 206–207 and Marenbon 2015, 268–276, 289–291.

³² MVS 447/ MT II, 183, II, 12. On Montaigne and Manilius, see Frigo 2016.

³³ MS 499, n. 30: 'If my printer were so enamoured of those studied, borrowed prefatory-pieces with which (according to the humour of this age) there is no book from a good publishing-house but has its forehead garnished, he should make use of verses such as these, which are of a better and more ancient stock than the ones he has planted there'.

³⁴ See Screech 1983, ch. 5, § 2.

³⁵ Desan 2007, 402–405 (entry 'Foi' by A. Legros) and Frigo 2015.

³⁶ MVS 447/ MT II, 183, II, 12: 'La foi venant à teindre et illustrer les arguments de Sebon, elle les rend fermes et solides: ils sont capables de servir d'acheminement et de première guide à un apprenti pour le mettre à la voie de cette connaissance; ils le façonnent aucunement et le rendent capable de la grâce de Dieu, par le moyen de laquelle se parfournit et se parfait après notre créance'.

³⁷ Sebond 1581, 3^v: 'Toutefois nul ne peut veoir de soy, ny lire [la sapience et la science de nostre salut] en ce grand livre (bien que tousjours ouvert et present à nos yeux) s'il n'est éclairé de Dieu et purgé de sa macule originelle. D'où il est advenu que les anciens philosophes payens, qien ont tiré toutes leurs autres sciences et tout leur sçavoir, n'y ont pourtant jamais peu apercevoir et découvrir (aveugles en ce qui concernoit leur souverain bien) la sapience, qui y est enclose, et la vraie et solide doctrine, qui nous guide à la vie éternelle'. For Montaigne's translation and adaptation of the 'Prologus' of Raymond Sebond's *Theologia naturalis*, see Panichi 2010, 225–262; Panichi 2012 and Sebond-Montaigne forthcoming, Introduction.

³⁸ MVS 440/ MT II, 183, II, 12: 'Toutefois je juge ainsi, qu'à une chose si divine et si hautaine, et surpassant de si loin l'humaine intelligence, comme est cette vérité de laquelle il a plu à la bonté de Dieu nous éclairer, il est bien besoin qu'il nous prête encore son secours, d'une faveur extraordinaire et privilégiée, pour la pouvoir concevoir et loger en nous; et ne crois pas que les moyens purement humains en soient aucunement capables. Et, s'ils l'étaient, tant d'âmes rares et excellentes, et si abondamment garnies de forces naturelles ès siècles anciens, n'eussent pas failli par leur discours d'arriver à cette connaissance. C'est la foi seule qui embrasse vivement et certainement les hauts mystères de notre Religion'.

³⁹ On the faith of the 'new pagans' living in the New World, see Legros 1993.

⁴⁰ MVS 513/ MT II, 289, II, 12: 'De toutes les opinions humaines et anciennes touchant la religion, celle-là me semble avoir eu plus de vraisemblance et plus d'excuses, qui reconnoissait Dieu comme une puissance incompréhensible, origine et conservatrice de toutes choses, toute bonté, toute perfection, recevant et prenant en bonne part l'honneur et la révérence que les humains lui rendaient sous quelque visage, sous quelque nom et en quelque manière que ce fut. *Jupiter omnipotens rerum, regumque deumque/ Progenitor genitrixque*'.

⁴¹ See Desan 2007, and 257–260 and 967–972 (entries 'Dieu' and 'Théologie' by A. Legros).

⁴² Augustin, *De ordine*, II, 16 and St Bernard, *De anima seu Meditationes devotissimae*, I.

⁴³ See MS 361 and de Montaigne 2003, 31–32, 218–220.

⁴⁴ MS 589: 'I find it unacceptable that the power of God should be limited in this way by the rules of human language; these propositions offer an appearance of truth, but it ought to be expressed more reverently and more devoutly'.

⁴⁵ Legros 2000, 22, 25 and Legros 2010, 209–210.

⁴⁶ See Thomas Aquinas, *Super epistolam B. Pauli da Romanos lectura*, ch. 1, lectio 6.

⁴⁷ See Est 1614, 18.

⁴⁸ MVS 513/ MT II, 289, II, 12: 'Ce zèle universellement a été vu du ciel de bon oeil. Toutes polices ont tiré fruit de leur devotion: les hommes, les actions impies, ont eu par tout les evenemens sortables. Les histoires payennes reconnoissent de la dignité, ordre, justice et des prodiges et oracles employez à leur profit et instruction en leurs religions fabuleuses, Dieu, par sa miséricorde, daignant à l'aventure fomenter par ces benefices temporels les tendres principes d'une telle quelle brute connoissance que la raison naturelle nous a donné de luy au travers des fausses images de nos songes'.

⁴⁹ Boucher 1628, 128–129: 'Car dire que Dieu voit de bon oeil tout le service qu'on lui rend sous quelque visage, sous quelque nom, et en quelque manière que ce soit, n'est-ce pas donner sujet aux Païens, Juifs, Turcs, Hérétiques et Schismatiques, de persister en leurs erreurs, et de mourir dans leur aveuglement, puisqu'on leur fait croire que Dieu reçoit en bonne part, et a pour agréable l'honneur, la révérence et service qu'ils lui rendent, selon leur façon et manière de vivre accoutumée?'

⁵⁰ Boucher is probably right, and the final sentence, 'there are religions Man has forged entirely on his own, not only false but impious and harmful' ('Non seulement fausses, mais impies aussi et injurieuses sont celles que l'homme a forgées de son invention', MVS 513/ MT II, 290) was clearly added at a later moment in the Bordeaux copy of the *Essays* (f. 214^v), perhaps precisely to forestall such a criticism.

⁵¹ MVS 513/ MT II, 290, II, 12: 'Et, de toutes les religions que Saint Paul trouva en crédit à Athènes, celle qu'ils avaient dédiée à une divinité cachée et inconnue lui sembla la plus excusable'.

⁵² See MS XXVI–XXX.

⁵³ The association of *Romans* 1:20–21 with *Isaiah* 45:15 is quite typical, as well as that of *Isaiah* 45:15 with *Acts of the Apostles* 17:32. Yet an association of the three texts looks far more unusual. See Frigo 2011.

⁵⁴ Biblia 1588, 195: 'Notus in Iudaea deus, sed non receptus. Ignotus Achaiae deus quamvis per multa quaesitus. Et qui ignorat ignorabitur. Praevaricator damnabitur, neuter immunis a culpa, sed excusabilior, qui fidem non obtulit Christo quem nesciebat, quam qui manus intulit Christo quem sciebat'.

⁵⁵ See Bede 1970, 66.

⁵⁶ MVS 514/ MT II, 291, II, 12: 'De celles ausquelles on a donné corps, comme la nécessité l'a requis, parmi cette cécité universelle, je me fusse, ce me semble, plus volontiers attaché à ceux qui adoraient le Soleil'.

⁵⁷ MS 574, MVS 514/ MT II, 291, II, 12: 'D'autant qu'outre cette sienne grandeur et beauté, c'est la pièce de cette machine que nous découvrons la plus éloignée de nous, et, par ce moyen, si peu connu, qu'ils étaient pardonnables d'en entrer en admiration et révérence'.

⁵⁸ MVS 516/ MT II, 294, II, 12: 'J'eusse encore plutôt suivi ceux qui adoraient le serpent, le chien et le boeuf: d'autant que leur nature et leur être nous est moins connu, et avons plus de loi d'imaginer ce qu'il nous plaît de ces bêtes-là, et leur attribuer des facultés extraordinaires'.

⁵⁹ On this chapter, see de Montaigne 2003.

⁶⁰ MVS 321/ MT I, 502, I, 56: 'Pour l'en approcher de ce peu, ils l'en reculent. L'ignorance pure et remise toute en autrui était bien plus salutaire et plus savante que n'est cette science verbale et vaine, nourrice de présomption et de témérité. Je crois aussi que la liberté à chacun de dissiper une parole si religieuse et importante à tant de sortes d'idiomes, a beaucoup plus de danger que d'utilité'.

⁶¹ MVS 321/ MT I, 503, I, 56: 'L'un de nos historiens grecs accuse justement son siècle, de ce que les secrets de la religion chrétienne étaient épandus emmi la place, es mains des moindres artisans, que chacun en pouvait débattre et dire selon son sens. Et que ce nous devait être grande honte, qui, par la grâce de Dieu jouissons des purs mystères de la piété, de les laisser profaner en la bouche de personnes ignorantes et populaires, vu que les Gentils interdisaient à Socrate, à Platon et aux plus sages de parler et s'enquérir des choses commises aux Prêtres de Delphes'.

⁶² See Legros 2005.

⁶³ MVS 322/ MT I, 503, I, 56: 'Un évêque a laissé par écrit que, en l'autre bout du monde, il y a une Île que les anciens nommaient Dioscoride, commode en fertilité de toutes sortes d'arbres et fruits et salubrité d'air: de laquelle le peuple est Chrétien: ayant des églises et des autels qui ne sont parés que de croix, sans autres images; grand observateur de jeûnes et de festes, exact payeur de dîmes aux prêtres, et si chaste que nul d'eux ne peut connaître qu'une femme en sa vie. Au demeurant si content de sa fortune qu'au milieu de la mer il ignore l'usage des navires, et si simple que de la religion qu'il observe si soigneusement il n'en entend un seul mot. Chose incroyable à qui ne saurait les païens, si dévots idolâtres, ne connaître de leurs dieux que simplement le nom et la statue. L'ancien commencement de *Ménalippe*, tragédie d'Euripide, portait ainsi: *Ô Jupiter, car de toi rien sinon/ Je ne connais seulement que le nom*'. See de Montaigne 2003, 238.

⁶⁴ See de Montaigne 2003, 238. Bayle 1740, II, 298 'DIOSCORIDE, en Latin *Dioscoridu*, Île de la Mer rouge, selon Étienne de Byzance. On croit qu'elle se nomme aujourd'hui Zocotora. Si c'est la même que celle dont parle Montagne, il faut que l'on en ait fait des Relations bien différentes; car selon Mr. Moreri, les habitants de Zocotora *n'ont point d'autre Religion que la Mahometane, et ne souffrent l'exercice d'aucune autre*, et ils sont naturellement fourbes. Mais, selon l'Auteur cité par Montagne, ils sont Chrétiens, et les plus honnêtes gens du monde, sans autre défaut que celui de n'entendre rien dans la Religion qu'ils professent. Cela est plus ordinaire qu'on ne pense, et peut s'accorder en quelque façon avec les principes des Quiétistes ^(A), gens dont la prétendue dévotion s'est chargée de tant de folies mystérieuses, qu'il n'y a presque point d'extravagance, ni de blasphème, à quoi elles ne confinent par quelque bout. Mais voyons ce que dit Montagne ^(B).

(A) Ces misérables Docteurs enseignent que *la perfection de la contemplation ne consiste pas à connaître Dieu plus parfaitement que les autres, mais à ne le point connaître [...]*.

(B) Ce que Montagne observe des anciens Païens est très-vrai: l'idée qu'ils attachaient au mot *Dieu* ne ressemblait nullement à la nature divine, et en était infiniment éloignée; de sorte que les Athéniens n'étaient point les seuls à qui Saint Paul eût pu dire qu'ils avoient dressé un Autel au Dieu inconnu. Tous leurs Autels méritaient cette Inscription [...]. There is an interesting story of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century afterlife of the tale of Dioscorides. See, among others La Mothe Le Vayer 1662, 817; Bouhours 1682, 66–67; *Parte Moderna* 1786, 109–114 and Guébourg 1998.

⁶⁵ See Legros 2009 and Panichi 2010, 45–96.