

THE VENERATION OF IMPERIAL IMAGES BETWEEN THE CONSTANTINIAN AND THEODOSIAN DINASTIES

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RESUMEN: En el texto procuramos hacer un análisis del modelo de emperador que proponen los oradores paganos Libanio y Temistio a finales del siglo IV d. C. Este modelo acorde con las tradiciones romanas está basado en las virtudes del emperador, principalmente la filantropía, incluso aceptando un emperador cristiano. Sin embargo, observamos cómo ese modelo imperial choca con el modelo propuesto por el cristianismo principalmente en el ejercicio del culto imperial y la veneración de las imágenes. Así, la visión anicónica del cristianismo va desplazando paulatinamente el ritual tradicional romano que considera como idolatría muchos elementos relacionados con la importancia espiritual de las imágenes.

Palabras clave: culto imperial, veneración, sincretismo religioso, imagen imperial, Libanio, Temistio.

ABSTRACT: In this text we try to carry out an analysis of the emperor model proposed by the pagane orators Libanius and Themistius at the end of the fourth Century AD. They propose an ideal emperor in accordance with traditions, based on the virtues of the emperor, especially on philanthropy, even accepting the Christianity of the ruler. However, this emperor model is against the Christian thought, mainly in the veneration of the emperor, the imperial cult and the worship of images. The point of view of Christianity based on aniconism will gradually displace the traditional Roman ritual and it will consider many elements related to the importance of images as idolatry.

Keywords: imperial cult; veneration; religion syncretism; imperial image; Libanius; Themistius.

This contribution is part of a series of works and papers aimed at the development of a doctoral thesis at the University of Potsdam in Germany. With this broad title we refer to the subject matter of the thesis itself, but here we will focus on some particular aspects of this vast universe. Perhaps this paper should have the more specific name: The alteration of the concept of the veneration of images and the hope of a mixed imperial model (halfway between the traditional imperial model and the model of the Christian emperor) during the fourth century through the works of the Greek orators Themistius and Libanius.

The doctoral thesis that this research is part of and whose final objective is to study the image of the Christian emperors, is confronted with several difficulties added to the historical research. The issue is the understanding of what we mean by imperial images, because we are confronted with a linguistic trap. For instance in English, unlike other languages such as Spanish or French, there is no distinction between the concepts of image and picture, but when we talk about the study of the images in Spanish or French, the spectrum of possibilities becomes almost infinite.¹ Therefore we could make a research focused on the aesthetic aspects of the Imperial image, based on the description and interpretation of imperial sculptural models and the numismatics. However, our work aims to go beyond the material meaning of image, into other fields of study such as hermeneutics and philology. We could speak about images in a dual sense. On the one hand, images are a representation of something absent, as «being without being». Furthermore, the images are expressions that differ from the elements that they claim to represent. Therefore, the physical images of the emperor such as the sculptures, are representations of the absent ruler and independent unique pieces of art.² On the other hand, those who look at the emperor or worship him generate a new image of the emperor, different from the image which is offered by the official sources. This new image should also be part of our work,

1. This contribution belongs to the communication made in the «XIV COLOQUIO POTESTAS 2015. DISCURSOS DEL PODER» whose language was Spanish. This reflection about the perspective of the concept «image» depending on the language has to be understood in its original context (este texto pertenece a la comunicación realizada en el XIV COLOQUIO POTESTAS 2015. DISCURSOS DEL PODER y cuyo idioma fue el español. Esta reflexión acerca de la perspectiva del concepto imagen dependiendo del idioma en que se traduce ha de ser entendida en su contexto original, es decir, el español).

2. About the dual concept of images: cf. MICHEL MELOT: *Breve historia de la imagen*, Siruela, Madrid, 2010.

because in order to generate a complete and holistic discourse about the image of the emperor in the first third of the fourth century we must also feed off this information, comparing on the one hand the elements that are represented in the official pictures (whether physical or literary) and on the other hand the transcendental content and the reception that are made of them.

It is in this dialectic - representation and expression - connected with the images, where the concepts of worship, contemplation or destruction of images are linked to the transcendent, religious or political element of this term.³ In this contribution we cannot make a broad philological and conceptual analysis of the meaning of these terms; however, we will speak about the necessary transformation of the meaning of images according to the imposition of Christianity as the official religion of the Empire.⁴ The veneration of images of the gods is, according to Eusebius, a reprehensible and punishable act of idolatry.⁵ From the moment Constantine declares freedom of Christian worship to the date of prohibition of worship or pagan worship by Theodosius not only changes the law concerning religious matters but also the proper sense of imperial power (which involves a change in the representation of power creating a new model of political theology) and the perception that the subjects have of that power.⁶ Based on this ideological framework we will analyze a selection of literary works that can shed light on the issue of the construction of the imperial image, its worship and its reception. In this first point we will focus on analyzing the concepts of the imperial image and the veneration of images of two orators from the late fourth century who belonged to the pagan intellectuality: Themistius and Libanius, the latter a living witness of the most part of the fourth century due to its extraordinary longevity.

In the nineteenth speech of Themistius, *Por la humanidad del emperador Teodosio*, probably written at the end of the year 384, we find several interesting elements. The speech, which aims to praise the virtues of the Emperor Theodosius, begins with a myth⁷ in which the Pythia, according to the words of Apollo, considered the Spartan Lycurgus more divine than human. God says

3. About the first images of imperial cult, see the essential work of RICHARD BRILLIANT: *Gesture and Rank in Roman Art. The use of Gestures to Denote Status in Roman Sculpture and Coinage*, Copenhagen & New Haven, 1963, 63.

4. The bibliography about the history of images is abundant. Cf. JEAN-PIERRE VERNANT: «Naissance d'images», *Religions, histories, raisons*, Paris, 1979; DANIELE MENOZZI: *Les images. L'église et les arts visuels*, Cerf, 1991; MICHEL PASTOUREAU: *Une histoire symbolique du Moyen Âge occidental*, Seuil, 2004.

5. Eusebius of Caesarea mentions a lot of times the need to end idolatry. Only in his work *Vita Constantini* he refers to this problem in Chapters 16, 27 and 40 of Book I, 5, 15 y 47 of Book II, and 26, 27 and 48 of Book III.

6. To understand the impact of religious change in Constantine, see: JONATHAN BARDILL: *Constantine, Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2012; SANTIAGO CASTELLANOS: *Constantino. Crear un emperador*, Sílex Ediciones, Madrid, 2010.

7. It is very common that the classical model of myths follows the pagan procedures and formalities in panegyric speeches in the Christian imperial court. Therefore, there is a similarity with the work of the poet Claudian in the court of Honorius when he follows the same structure in its imperial panegyrics. Cf. SANTIAGO MONTERO HERRERO: *El pensamiento historiográfico de Claudio Claudiano*, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 1983, 4-11.

that neither the Lydian Croesus nor the emperor Nero, as examples of rulers, deserve anything other than contempt. As it is neither victories, riches, nor symbols that adorn the emperor which make him deserve such treatment, yet:

la mansedumbre, la justicia, la piedad y la virtud que es directora de éstas: la humanidad, la única con la que un rey puede llegar a asemejarse a Dios.⁸

Ἡ **πρῶτης** καὶ ἡ **δικαιοσύνη** καὶ ἡ **εὐσέβεια** καὶ ἡ τούτων ἕξαρχος φιλανθρωπία, καθ' ἣν μόνον δύναται βασιλεὺς θεῶ **ὁμοιοῦσθαι**.

According to the words of Themistius the problem of the divinity of the ruler is determined by his actions, and the philanthropy is the quality that makes him stand out among others. As Joaquín Ritoré Ponce says in the notes of his translation of the political speeches of Themistius, the orator believes in the divine origin of the royalty, but it is the institution that holds such legitimacy, not the person. Therefore the person must resemble God (*eikōn theoû*), according to the neo-Platonic concept of «assimilation of divinity» (*tò Diî homioithênai*). Piety, meekness and justice are the three key elements for Themistius to exercise power (*eusébeia, prāiôtés, dikaiosýnē*)⁹. Obviously Themistius in his eulogizing speech says that Theodosius deserves such a distinction, and therefore admiration and veneration:

¿No vas a revelar, con más seguridad que sobre la arena que hay en la tierra, que a este príncipe le conviene el apelativo de «dios»? Ya tuvimos ocasión de admirarlo cuando vimos retomar el oro desde el erario público a los que habían sufrido extorsiones...¹⁰

ἄρα διστάσεις καὶ ἐπι-σκέψη πότερον θεὸς ἢ ἄνθρωπος εἰσελήλυθεν ἡμῖν εἰς τὸν νεών, καὶ οὐκ ἀποφανῆ θαρραλεώτερον ἢ περὶ τῆς ψάμμου ὀπόση ἐστὶν ἐν τῇ γῆ, τούτῳ τῷ βασιλεῖ προσήκειν τῆς ἄνωθεν **προσηγορίας**; πάλαι μὲν γὰρ τοῦτο αὐτοῦ **ἀγαστὸν** ἦν ὅτι χρυσὸν ἐωρῶμεν πολλάκις ἐκ τῶν δημοσίων ταμειῶν ἐπανιόντα πρὸς τοὺς οὐ δικαίως εἰσπεπραγμένους.

On the other hand, it is also interesting to see how in the imperial ideal which proposes Themistius the legitimacy of the power comes from God. Then, the Emperor is the representative of God on earth. For example,

pues nada de esto está a la altura del cielo ni de la imagen que tiende hacia él, sino porque sólo Dios y el príncipe tienen la facultad de otorgar la vida.¹¹

ταῦτα γὰρ πάντα χθαμαλώτερα τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ τῆς πρὸς ἐκεῖνον **εἰκόνας** – ἀλλ' ὅτι μόνῳ θεῷ καὶ βασιλεῖ ἐν ἐξουσίᾳ ἐστὶ ζωὴν ἐπιδοῦναι.

8. THEMISTIUS, *Oration XIX. 227a.1*, 527. Translation by Joaquín Ritoré Ponce, Editorial Gredos, Madrid, 2000.

9. JOAQUÍN RITORÉ PONCE: *Themistio, discursos políticos*, Editorial Gredos, Madrid, 2000, 40-51.

10. THEMISTIUS, *disc. XIX. 227d*, 527.

11. THEMISTIUS, *disc. XIX. 229.b.5*, 530.

In the work of Themistius there is a criterion of universality in the government of the emperor based in Constantinople, which is similar to the Christian view of universality, but ideologically justified in ethics.¹²

Esta es la sabiduría que tu padre demuestra; a ti te corresponde añadirle la ciencia. Si te volvieras hacia Platón y hacia Aristóteles, ellos te conducirían a ti, que aún caminas sobre la tierra, hasta el santuario del reino celestial, te explicarían el orden que allí impera y te iniciarían en los misterios de aquel mundo. Aquellos reinos lo guardan la mansedumbre, la benevolencia y la humanidad, en ellos no penetra la maldad, a ellos no se acerca la delación, y de ellos se mantiene alejada la calumnia.¹³

Ταύτην δὲ ὁ μὲν πατήρ ὁ σὸς ἐπιδείκνυται, σοὶ δὲ ἔνεστι προσλαβεῖν καὶ τὴν ἐπιστήμην. καὶ εἴ γε σεαυτὸν ἐπιτρέψειας Πλάτωνι καὶ Ἀριστοτέλει, οἱ δὲ ἔτι σε βαδίζοντα ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἀνάξουσιν εἰς τὰ ἀνάκτορα τῆς τοῦ οὐρανοῦ βασιλείας καὶ τὴν ἐκεῖ τάξιν περιηγήσονται καὶ πρὸς τὸν κόσμον ἐκεῖνον μυσταγωγήσουσι. ἐκεῖνα τὰ βασίλεια δορυφοροῦσι πραότης καὶ εὐμένεια καὶ φιλανθρωπία, ἐκεῖνοις οὐ πρόσεισι κακοήθεια, ἐκεῖνοις οὐ πλησιάζει συκοφαντία, διαβολὴ δὲ καὶ πόρρωθεν ἀπελήλαται.

According to Themistius, the Emperor must aspire to excellence in virtue, he must shape a model for the rest of his subjects and he should show clemency and respect instead of fear.¹⁴ Therefore, the veneration/worship of the imperial cult is a crucial factor in the ideological model of the Empire proposed by Themistius. In fact, one of the essential elements in the work of the Greek orator was the religious tolerance as a requirement of a good government. In this time of deep religious syncretism, Themistius proposes a solution for the religious conflict by an ecumenical conception of the Empire. According to Themistius, tolerance towards different religious cults and integration of the barbarian groups in the Empire are a desirable and reasonable condition for resolving the conflict.¹⁵ In the last third of the fourth century we can see how one of the most influential pagan orators tries to solve the religious conflict by ethical reflection. Themistius is a good example of how the tradition of Hellenistic speech is mixed with the Neoplatonic and Christian philosophical component in his conception of the world. However, the entire Christian component in its ontological dimension has not yet permeated into the political thoughts of many pagan authors such as Themistius or Libanius. So these pagan authors, aware of the progress of Christianity, react differently to the threat of the new religion, and they reflect alternatives to the Christian political theology in their speeches. As we have seen in the case of Themistius and we will see in Libanius,

12. GILBERT DAGRON: «L'empire romain d'Orient au IV^e siècle et les traditions politiques de l'hellenisme. Le témoignage de Thémistios», *Travaux et Mémoires* 3, (1967), 89.

13. THEMISTIUS, *disc. ix. 127a*.

14. About the monarch's model of Themistius: STEPHEN A. STERZT: «Themistius, a Hellenic Philosopher-Statesman in the Christian Roman Empire», *The Classical Journal* 71, (1976), 349-58.

15. RITORÉ PONCE, *Themistio*, 40-51.

during these early centuries these authors do not share the visceral refusal of Christianity of the veneration/worship of images (rejection reflected in the work of Eusebius and Augustine, as we will see below), because its cultural heritage doesn't come from Christian radical dogmatism but from a different context, regarding the veneration/worship of images.

The relationship between Greek philosophers and sophists with the government of the Empire had traditionally been beneficial for both. On the one hand, it was an advantage to the emperors that Greek orators made propaganda of their virtues (Libanius and Themistius insist on the philanthropy of the Emperor Theodosius, for example), on the other hand the relationship of the emperor with the sphere of the *paideia* was important for their social prestige.¹⁶ As proof of this prestige we have the text of the Greek sophist Eunapius of Sardis, who mentioned in his *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists* that Libanius preferred the title of Sophist to another of even higher prestige.¹⁷ Sometimes the Sophists used their speeches and local influence to solve personal quarrels¹⁸ or even to criticize some actions of the government.¹⁹

Actually, this kind of conflict between philosophers and local politicians did not intend to question the emperor. To Libanius, the emperor and the imperial cult were factors to be taken into account according to the traditional model. However, we find in Libanius two types of speeches dedicated to the Emperor. The first group deals with local matters, in which he denounces social injustices (for example, the oration XXVIII, *F. against Icarius*, oration II, the L oration *For the Peasantry, about forced Labour*, the oration XXXIII, *F. against Tisamenus*, the oration XLV, *F. De vincitis*, LI, *On the governors' levees*, XLVII, *F. De Patrociniis*, the oration XLIX and *F. Pro Curiis* XLVI, *F. Against Florentius*). The second group in which the subject transcends the political context and the

16. For a better understanding of the relationship between Theodosius and the *paideia*, see: HANS-ULRICH WIEMER: *Libanios und Julian. Studien zum Verhältnis von Rhetorik und Politik im vierten Jahrhundert n. Chr.*, Beck, München, 1995.

17. EUNAPIUS, *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists* (1921) pp. 343-565. English translation by Wilmer Cave Wright. The problem of the honorary title that Libanius refused has been much discussed. From the point of view of OTTO SEECK: *Geschichte des Untergangs der Antiken Welt*, 2^oEd, Berlin, 1967, 527 where he places the obtaining of the title in 388, to the version of PAUL PETIT: «Sur la date du Pro Templis de Libanios», *Byzantium*, 1951, 285-294, where he affirms that the honorary prefecture was given by Theodosius to Libanius in 383. JEAN MARTIN: *Libanios. Discours II – X*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1988, suggests that Libanius never received this kind of specific honorary title.

18. We could see some cases of the use of that influence even in Libanius. For example, in his speech 41-42, he criticizes the Comes from Orient Proclus (383-384), confronting the political power from the point of view of the defense of local traditions.

19. As we say, it is not the only case of opposition against the politic power supported by local prestige. We could find a similar case in the neo platonian philosopher and bishop of Cyrene Synesius, who criticized to the Superior of Libya Andronicus in 412 for blasphemy, accusing him of abuses and vices. Synesius even excommunicated him, arguing that his contacts in Constantinople forced the Praetorian of the East, Antemio, to deal with the governor for the benefit of Synesius: SINESIO DE CIRENE, *Cartas 41-42*, Introducción, Traducción y Notas de Antonio García Romero, Editorial Gredos, Madrid, 1995.

conflict that Libanius rises to Theodosius is related to the religious sphere.²⁰ We will focus on the analysis of this second group of speeches.

In the oration 30, *Pro Templis*, the orator warns the emperor about the terrible situation of the rural pagan temples, which are being destroyed and outraged by Christian monks. Libanius's arguments are based on logic and law, and they are not focused on the religious conflict, because Libanius accepts the Christianity of the emperor. Libanius, this time, tries to demonstrate that these rural temples or shrines are defended by the law (according to the Codex Theodosianus 16. 10. 02 of the year 341, using the temples and performing sacrifices is prohibited, but nevertheless their unjustified destruction is not allowed), and he argues that if these temples are still attacked, the landowners would be authorized to defend the lands themselves. Libanius also insists in the economic benefits that these shrines offer to the rural regions where they are located.²¹ Therefore, Libanius attempts to argue taking side with the law and the economic impact. In the same way, in his speech XIX, he argues against the possible reprisals from the Emperor Theodosius for the revolt which destroyed the statues of the emperor and caused an important social disorder as a result of a tax increase. We can also obtain a lot of interesting information in this speech. On the one hand, Libanius shows absolute conviction in the defense of the imperial cult, and we can understand how Libanius was in opposition to such sacrilege against Theodosius. However, he begs the emperor to not take massive reprisals against the entire city, because not all citizens undertook the campaign of outrage against his images. Therefore, he begs the emperor to punish only the culprits, who must obviously be punished with death:

*It cannot be denied that the treatment of your statues was shocking.*²²

Καὶ ὡς μὲν οὐ δεινὰ τὰ περὶ τὰς ὑμετέρας εἰκόνας, τίς ἂν ἀντείποι;

*We used to gaze with reverence upon your statues; not so those blackguards then.*²³

ἄς γὰρ μετ' αἰδοῦς ἐφορῶμεν ὑμετέρας εἰκόνας, ταύτας οὐχ οὕτως εἶδον οἱ τολμηρότατοι.

*Things reached the stage of meddling with the statues, there were some offenders, but the spectators far outnumbered the performers of this outrage.*²⁴

τοῦ πράγματος δ' ἐπὶ τὰς εἰκόνας προελθόντος οἱ μὲν ἠδίκουν, οἱ δὲ ἐθεώρουν ὄντες πολλῶ πλείους τῶν τὰ δεινὰ ταῦτα ποιούντων.

20. ANTONO LÓPEZ EIRE: «Reflexiones sobre los discursos de Libanio al emperador Teodosio», *Fortunatae: Revista canaria de filología, cultura y humanidades clásicas*, 1, (1991), 26-66.

21. ELENA MUÑIZ GRIJALVO: «El declive del templo pagano y la agonía de la tradición», *ARYS*, 2, 1999, 239-252.

22. LIBANIUS: *Oration XIX*, 8. *Libanius Selected Works II*, with an English translation, introduction and notes by A. F. Norman, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, 1977, 273. For the next notes on Libanius, we will use the same edition and translation.

23. LIBANIUS, *Oration XIX*, 29.5, 287.

24. LIBANIUS, *Oration XIX*, 31.5, 289.

According to Libanius, the Emperor must be merciful and show humanity to resemble the gods (here we see the same phenomenon discussed above in the case of Themistius, in which the actions of the Emperor determine his level of excellence and his objective should be to resemble the gods) and he should also behave to his subjects as a benevolent father does to his children. Libanius suggests that Theodosius has such virtues, what is evidenced in the episode of Constantinople (Speech xx. 14), where the emperor showed himself conciliatory with the inhabitants of the city although they killed a Goth soldier of the Roman army. Similarly, Libanius appeals for clemency of the emperor against the received, justifying the terrible event by a unique possibility, which was the influence of an evil god that must cloud the minds of those who began the revolt, because otherwise such a fact would never have happened.²⁵

As we can see, his attitude towards the emperor is mostly respectful, maintaining similarity with the standards established by the imperial propaganda. However, this situation changes when Libanius compares Theodosius with his predecessors Constantius and Constantine. Regarding them, Libanius changes the tone of his speech and he distances himself from the official propaganda, appearing cynical and critical.²⁶ However, Libanius's criticisms of Constantine aims to show the Emperor Theodosius a governance model according to the civic governance perspective of Libanius, but his intention was not exactly to generate a critical discourse about Constantine. Like Themistius, Libanius proposes a kind of imperial model based on humanity or philanthropy, in the exercise of clemency and the example of virtue. Using the example of Constantine, Libanius shows the emperors Theodosius and Constantius II how the imperial model of fiscal policy should be, accusing Constantine of *avaritia* and showing a viable model of *utilitas publica*.²⁷ Libanius also criticizes the emperor's model of municipal administration (Speech XLVIII) and the beginning of a progressive decline of the eastern provinces as a result of his policies in the East (he may refer to the statement of Constantinople as capital). He also criticizes Constantine for his military policy against the Persians (Speech XLVIII).²⁸ In summary, we can say that the criticism towards Constantine is based on Libanius's traditionalist conception of Rome, and that he accuses him of not acting in accordance with the most important civic virtue, philanthropy. The only area where Libanius does not criticize Constantine is when referring to his *clementia*, because in the nineteenth speech to the people of Rome he alludes to Constantine as owner of *clementia* and *humanitas* by an exemplum, a literary propaganda creation.²⁹ Therefore, we can see how Libanius portrays Constantine as a bad legislator

25. LIBANIUS, *Oration XIX*, 25-30.

26. HANS – ULRICH WIEMER: «Libanius on Constantine», *Classical Quarterly*, 44 2, (1994), 511-524.

27. LIBANIUS, *Oration LIX*.

28. LIBANIUS, *Oration XLVIII*.

29. LIBANIUS, *Oration XIX*, 19. ESTEBAN MORENO RESANO: «La semblanza de Constantino en la obra de Libanio», *Gerión* 24, (2006), 341-356.

and generally as a bad ruler, with the exception of the episode where he shows mercy, that is precisely what Libanius asks Theodosius for in his 19th speech.

However, we can extract more information about the conception of Libanius regarding the idea of worship or veneration of images, versus the pejorative vision of the new Christian thought in the criticisms that Libanius makes against Constantine in religious matters. Indeed, Libanius refers to the issue of the conversion of Constantine,³⁰ yet he does not emphasize his criticism at this point. Thus, he criticizes his refusal and contempt of the traditional religion and magical practices. It seems that Libanius's criticisms appertain more to the idea of *impietas* than to the idea of *theomakhia* (Θεομαχία). This means that Libanius reproaches the emperor for the apostasy of traditional religion because Constantine based this apostasy on the contempt of the old religion.³¹ Although Libanius emphasizes that Constantine did not transform the whole tradition, he did, however, allow the looting of the temples. According to Libanius, it was an act of greed more than an act of impiety (it is possible that by this quotation Libanius wants to show Theodosius the idea that the temples have been plundered since time of Constantine and that they have no more materials to offer).³²

Above all, it should be stressed that the attitude of Libanius is opposed to the prohibition of the magical practices that he considers beneficial.³³ Magic was not regarded a *religio deorum* and its use was not seen as an act of faith, that is, of *pietas* or veneration. However, it was a very common ritual and as widespread as the *cultus*. In the 19th speech, Libanius only attempts to maintain the tradition as the civic logical heir in favour of the classical tradition, not to criticize Christianity. Libanius, just like Themistius, perceived a strange reality for both of them. Libanius's criticism on the ban on *haruspicina* (that it was not a harmful practice to the emperor) means that the Greek orator feared that this negative view which was proposed by Christianity concerning magic or agnostic practices, spread to other theurgical practices. In fact, in 357³⁴ Constantius II includes both *haruspicina* and *mathematicorum scientia* as theurgical practices. Although they were two different practices, it is a clear example of how the Christian perspectives on the transcendental practices are increasingly covering a wider territory.

Libanius and Themistius proposed an ideal emperor model in accordance with the traditions, even accepting the Christianity of the ruler. They insist

30. LIBANIUS, *Oration xxx*, 6.

31. About the conflict between Paganism and Christianity in Libanius, see: J. MISSON: *Recherches sur le paganisme de Libanios*, Bruxelles, 1914; ANDRE MARIE JEAN FESTUGIÈRE: *Antioche païenne et chrétienne. Libanios, Chrysostome et les moines de Syrie*, Paris, 1959; DAVID G. HUNTER: «Libanius and John Chrysostom: New Thoughts on an old Problem», *Studia Patristica*, 22 (1989), 129-135; IOANNIS G. FATOUROS: «Julian und Christus: Gegenapologetik bei Libanios?», *Historia* 45, (1996), 114-122.

32. HANS ULRICH WIEMER, *Libanius on Constantine*, 521.

33. LIBANIUS, *Oration XIX*, 20.

34. C.Th. IX, 16, 14.

on showing that tolerance must be a fundamental element of the religious policy of the regent. Furthermore, they create a model of power based on the virtues of the emperor, especially on philanthropy and mercy. In spite of attempts to reconcile the new religion with pagan tradition through such imperial models, neither Themistius nor Libanius assimilate that at the core of Christian thought, there are certain practices that cannot be reconciled with tradition in any way. The Christian view of representation and worship are therefore an essential part of that intolerance. We can say that Christianity increasingly expands the frame of what is considered idolatry and therefore punishable to a broader spectrum of traditional practices. Naturally including the veneration of images, as we said at the beginning of this contribution, which is a transcendental connotation that Christianity interpreted as negative. Therefore, the texts of Themistius, and fundamentally Libanius, are reactions to this new Christian worldview.

The origin of this aggressive and expansive Christian position against the universe of images is based on the strong aniconism. This is one of the identity structures of the new monotheistic religions. Christianity establishes a relationship between power and salvation through invisibility, not through magic and ritual reproduction of divinities in their iconic representations. Christianity is also built as an opposition to the false religion in an iconoclastic antagonism with paganism; therefore, divine sovereignty is settled directly in men without the need of iconic mediation. God is present in the world without the need for images of worship, which are considered idols. Therefore, Christianity prefers the autonomy of men to the pagan need for rituals or idolatrous representations.³⁵

Chapter XXVI: It is certainly a remarkable thing how this Egyptian, when expressing his grief that a time was coming when those things would be taken away from Egypt, which he confesses to have been invented by men erring, incredulous, and averse to the service of divine religion, says, among other things, Then shall that land, the most holy place of shrines and temples, be full of sepulchres and dead men, as if, in truth, if these things were not taken away, men would not die! As if dead bodies could be buried elsewhere than in the ground! As if, as time advanced, the number of sepulchres must not necessarily increase in proportion to the increase of the number of the dead! But they who are of a perverse mind, and opposed to us, suppose that what he grieves for is that the memorials of our martyrs were to succeed to their temples and shrines, in order, forsooth, that they may have grounds for thinking that gods were worshipped by the pagans in temples, but that dead men are worshipped by us in sepulchres. For with such blindness do impious men, as it were, stumble over mountains, and will not see the things which strike their own eyes, that they do not attend to the fact that in all the literature of the pagans there are not found

35. JAN ASSMANN: *Moses der Ägypter. Entzifferung einer Gedächtnisspur*, München/Wien 1998 (traduzione italiana di E. Bacchetta: *Mosé l'Egizio. Decifrazione di una traccia di memoria*, Milano, 2000), 17-23; *Monotheismus und die Sprache der Gewalt*, Vortrag im Minoritensaal, Graz, 2007.

any, or scarcely any gods, who have not been men, to whom, when dead, divine honors have been paid...³⁶

For example, in these texts of St. Augustine we can see the Christian aversion to idol worship, thanks to a comparison made by a pagan Egyptian character about the way of burying the dead. For the Egyptians, Christians have simply replaced the tradition of the cult of the dead in the temples, with the worship of the dead in graves or underground. Augustine explains that this is precisely the root of conflict, because this is a corrupt vision, proper to the evil gods. Christians do not worship the burial areas and they do not consider dead people worthy of receiving worship, because all that remains of them are simply the corrupted bodies, whilst they really are in heaven. Therefore, the Egyptians worship dead gods. Similarly, Augustine says that Egyptian ancestors were «mistaken and incredulous», and that they attributed special characters and virtues removed from nature and magical elements to their dead ancestors to revere them as gods.

Chapter VIII, 21. Whether the Gods use the Demons as Messengers and Interpreters, and Whether They are Deceived by Them Willingly, or Without Their Own Knowledge:

What else do these men think concerning the gods who, they say, are all in the highest degree good, but that they are concerned about human affairs, lest they should seem unworthy of worship, while, on the other hand, from the distance between the elements, they are ignorant of terrestrial things? It is on this account that they have supposed the demons to be necessary as agents, through whom the gods may inform themselves with respect to human affairs, and through whom, when necessary, they may succor men; and it is on account of this office that the demons themselves have been held as deserving of worship. If this be the case, then a demon is better known by these good gods through nearness of body, than a man is by goodness of mind.³⁷

In this passage, Augustine criticizes pagan gods because they have to turn to demons (he means the transcendental character of the statues, that is, the motive of worship) to know the reality of men, and he blames them for just wanting to receive worship if they would ever need the help of men. He says they don't know the matters of the goodness of the human soul. It is interesting to see how Augustine differentiates between false gods and demons, the latter being the magical performances of the first, wherefore the main argument of Augustine is, how real could be gods who need the mediation of demons to communicate with men.

36. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *City of God VIII*, 26, Translated by MARCUS DODS: *From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 2*. Edited by Philip Schaff, NY, Christian Literature Publishing Co, Buffalo, 1887. Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. For next notes of Augustine, we will use the same edition and translation.

37. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *City of God VIII*, 21.

Therefore, the aniconic Christian vision of Faith does not make a difference between God and his image, and political and worldly justice comes from God himself, not from his images as intermediaries. The only element of mediation for Christianity (and in general for the monotheistic religions) is the choice of a spokesman who speaks for God and who is chosen by God himself. So Augustine calls demons the cult images, because he sees in these images a magical and transcendental content, which clashes with the direct power of the Christian God.³⁸

But not only images, also the sacred places where idolatrous rites occur should disappear, as they are the support and context of the veneration of images. That is why Augustine calls the pagans and paganizing Christians «worshippers of columns».³⁹ The places of worship must be legitimized by Christianity, if not, they must be destroyed.

The paradox is established when these spaces themselves are legitimized by Christianity, and rituals are encoded according to Christian tradition. Also outstanding is the difference that early Christianity makes between idolatry and iconodule, which is the acceptance of images that do not represent God or its opposite, that is, the false gods. Therefore images of animals (such as the decorating ones in the temple of King Solomon), family or the Virgin Mary herself, are accepted by Christianity. We should not confuse the radical aniconism of apologists in the early centuries of Christianity with a Christian confrontation of art, as we can see in several examples of early Christian art.⁴⁰

This is the reason why the replies that Themistius and Libanius make to the emperor about religious tolerance (based on a model of Hellenistic *paideia*) do not make an impression on a deeply Christian emperor.⁴¹ In case of Libanius, even more remarkable is his desperate defense of places of worship like civic places, as we have seen, contrary to the Christian vision of images and sacred spaces. Obviously, the survival of pagan cults continued in certain parts of the Empire⁴² in the fourth century and possibly later on. Some authors even speak of a resurgence of paganism within certain social elites.⁴³ But how can the continuation of paganism influence in the perspective of the worship of images and objects? For A. Cameron, this continuation of paganism is only a consequence of the cultural base of the *paideia*, established in social elites with a more secular than religious content. For him, art works, such as the Esquiline Treasure, were works that the Roman senatorial elite ordered because of their

38. LUIGI CANETTI: «Costantino e l'immagine del Salvatore. Una prospettiva mnemostorica sull'aniconismo cristiano antico», *DOI 1 0.1515/ZAC* vol. 13, 2009, 233-262.

39. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Serm.* 198A.

40. PAUL CORBY FINNEY: «The invisible God», *The Earliest Christian on Art*, Nueva York/Oxford, 1994, 7-9.

41. For the context of Theodosius, see: GONZÁLO BRAVO: *Teodosio. Último emperador de Roma, primer emperador católico*, La esfera de los libros, Madrid, 2010.

42. ROSA SANZ SERRANO: «Aristocracias paganas en Hispania Tardía», *Gerión*, Vol. Extra 443-480, 2007.

43. ERNST KITZINGER: «Byzantine Art in the Making: Main Lines of Stylistic Development», *Mediterranean Art, 3rd - 7th century*, Cambridge, 1977, 4.

love for traditional forms, and they were not a pagan resistance to Christianity.⁴⁴ But in a recent article by Alessandra Bravi she argues very convincingly that we cannot be sure that these objects do not have a significance of pagan worship, which would mean that the aniconic proposal of Christian apologists like Eusebius would not have an absolute reception within Roman society. According to A. Bravi, the interpretation of A. Cameron is wrong because he homogenized the syncretic process between paganism and Christianity and the interpretation of symbols. According to Bravi, there were still examples where mythological iconography was present in the images, and therefore their expressive values were still valid, as in the inscriptions of the Thetford treasure, where Christian motifs are mixed with the devotion of God *Faunnius*. Something similar occurs in the burials of the cities where the choice of the motives for the graves should not be a matter of no importance, because they were very visible and would have a particular significance. We must also take into account the possibility that some Roman citizens continued to believe in a «divine presence» in *simulacra* and the sacredness of temples, even after the sacrifices were banned, whereas the simulacra were still present inside these spaces. Thus, the value of the symbolism of the images would be still real, not metaphorical.⁴⁵

We can note how there is indeed a transition between the time of Constantine, where the emperor himself used sculptures from public spaces of Roman cities to decorate the buildings of his new city, Constantinople⁴⁶ (as the sculptural decoration of the Baths of Zeuxippus), and the time of Theodosius, where it seems that the worship of images is increasingly censured, but not entirely eradicated, as the Christian apologists would like to. We see for example this fragment from the chronicle of the Byzantine writer Johannes Malalas, where he describes the decoration of the Baths of Zeuxippus made by Constantine:

Likewise he completed the public bath known as the Zeuxippon, and decorated it with columns and marbles of many colours and bronze statues.

ὁμοίως δὲ ἀνεπλήρωσε καὶ τὸ λεγόμενον Ζεῦξιππον δημόσιον λουτρόν, κοσμήσας κίονας καὶ μαρμάρους ποικίλους καὶ χαλκουργήμασιν· εὗρε γὰρ αὐτὸ ἀπλήρωτον, ἀρχθὲν μὲν πρῶην ὑπὸ Σεβήρου βασιλέως τὸ αὐτὸ δημόσιον.⁴⁷

44. ALAN CAMERON: «The Date and the Owners of the Esquiline Treasure», *AJA*, 89, 1985, 135-145.

45. ALESSANDRA BRAVI: «The last pagans of Rome and the Viewers of Roman art», *The Strange Death of pagan Rome. Reflections on a Historiographical Controversy*, Ed by Rita Lizzi Testa, Brepols Publishers n. v, Turnhout, Belgium, 2013, 171-188.

46. Cf. ALAN CAMERON: *Porphyryus the Charioteer*, Oxford, 1973, 186-187.

47. JOHN MALALAS: *Book 13, 321, The Chronicle of John Malalas*, a Translation by Elizabeth Jeffreys, Michael Jeffreys and Roger Scott with Brian Croke, Jenny Ferber, Simon Franklin, Alan James, Douglas Kelly, Ann Moffatt, Ann Nixon, Australian Association for Byzantine Studies Byzantina Australiensia 4, Melbourne, 1986, 174.

Therefore we can extract from the actions carried out by Constantine that images and sculptures with pagan motifs in the mid-fourth century still had a fundamental symbolic significance related with cultural prestige, and that they aspired to raise the value of the spaces where they were relocated. At the same time, for Christian authors this was an abomination, a trick⁴⁸ of the ancient gods. As an example, we can observe in the text of «Life of Constantine» the negative point of view of the Christian author Eusebius about the situation of the new city and the relocation of bronze statues:

All these things the emperor diligently performed to the praise of the saving power of Christ, and thus made it his constant aim to glorify his Saviour God. On the other hand he used every means to rebuke the superstitious errors of the heathen. Hence the entrances of their temples in the several cities were left exposed to the weather, being stripped of their doors at his command; the tiling of others was removed, and their roofs destroyed. From others again the venerable statues of brass, of which the superstition of antiquity had boasted for a long series of years, were exposed to view in all the public places of the imperial city: so that here a Pythian, there a Sminthian Apollo, excited the contempt of the beholder: while the Delphic tripods were deposited in the hippodrome and the Muses of Helicon in the palace itself. In short, the city which bore his name was everywhere filled with brazen statues of the most exquisite workmanship, which had been dedicated in every province, and which the deluded victims of superstition had long vainly honored as gods with numberless victims and burnt sacrifices, though now at length they learnt to renounce their error, when the emperor held up the very objects of their worship to be the ridicule and sport of all beholder.⁴⁹

We can draw several conclusions about the analysis of the texts of Themistius and Libanius in relation to the idea of imperial worship and veneration of images. On the one hand, we have seen how the ideal of an emperor considered by the two Greek orators intended to convey to the Emperor is considered: a syncretic model of inherited elements of classical Hellenistic tradition mixed with a worldview influenced by the neo-Platonic thesis about the universality of the government of the emperor as well as certain air of the incipient Christian thought. Similarly, both speakers agreed that the emperor has to appear like a real God in order to reach the appellation of God, by exercising a just government based on philanthropy and mercy. Based on this ideological fundament, the emperor worship remains essential in the thought of both authors, as a continuation of tradition and as a basic element of civic life.

However, the imperial model of power proposed by these authors has a serious problem, because both authors appeal to the need for religious tolerance as a necessary prerequisite of a good government. Themistius bases

48. ALESSANDRA BRAVI, *The last Pagans of Rome*, 178.

49. EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA: *Vita Constantini III 54*. Translated by Philip Schaf, Christian Classic Ethereal Library.

the concept of tolerance on the ethics of the ruler, while Libanius only tries to demand of the ruler that he should enforce the law in religious matters and he should reflect on the economic and social benefits of maintaining traditional structures in these temples. In order to illustrate this model, Libanius speaks to Theodosius about the figure of Constantine, criticized by the Greek orator in most of their actions, but praised by Libanius when it suited him, which is, when he wanted to propose him like a model of clemency for Theodosius.

But this model of imperial power ignores that Christianity, whose banner is the own emperor, cannot under any circumstances accept religious tolerance while maintaining some traditional structures like temples. And the basis of this dogma is precisely the Christian conception of idolatry, which is increasingly expanding its vision to more traditional elements of Roman culture of Hellenistic tradition. During the course of the fourth century, Christianity considered many elements related with the importance of images as idolatry, not only referring to those images related to the gods, but also to all representative and expressive forms of images involving any type of transcendence. Therefore we can conclude that Christianity would progressively interpret the concept of *agalma* (ἄγαλμα) as idolatry. It is a wider concept than *eikon* (εἰκόνη) which refers mainly to physical images, such as statues. *Agalma* could possibly be translated to image in a broader sense, like a statue of a God, or according to the Platonic and Neo-Platonic conceptions a sensitive image or cult object which is identified as idol in the Christian world.⁵⁰

However, it is possible that at the end of the fourth century in the Empire there were still people and families maintaining such practices: the veneration of images and spaces of worship are practices that are being pursued gradually, but they are connected inevitably with the religious and philosophical tradition that remain possibly even longer.

As a final element, and after formulating this hypothesis, it is noteworthy that both texts, the one of Themistius and the one of Libanius, refer to the emperor mainly using the term *eikon*. Themistius and Libanius use this concept discussing the model that the emperor should have of God, but specially to refer to the imperial statues that project the power of the emperor. Libanius only uses the concept *agalma* to refer to the outrage committed against images of traditional gods, «*the outrages Committed Against the images of the gods (agalmata)*».⁵¹ Clearly there is reasoning in the use of one term or the other, as they may refer to different concepts. Probably we define both concepts too homogeneously as «image», but according to this idea, it is significant that Libanius uses the term *agalma* only when he talks about the statues of pagan gods, his true gods. So does Libanius consider the image of the Emperor below the image of the traditional gods? Is it just a figure of speech? These issues in

50. For the translation of concepts *eikon* and *agalma*, we have used the Diccionario Griego – Español DGE del CSIC.

51. SIMON SWAIN: «Sophists and Emperors: The Case of Libanius», 23.

relation to a conceptual discussion of the term «image» are being currently developed in our research, and we intend to present the results of the research in a future article.

Finally, here we want to show a reflection of the contemporary Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben about the fundamental importance that image and facial expressions have for humans which fits well into this discussion about the importance of contemplation, of seeing and of image.

Tutti gli esseri viventi sono nell'aperto, si manifestano e splendono nell'apparenza. Ma solo l'uomo vuole appropriarsi di quest'apertura, afferrare la propria apparenza, il proprio essere manifesto. Il linguaggio è questa appropriazione, che trasforma la natura in volto. Per questo l'apparenza diventa per l'uomo un problema, il luogo di una lotta per la verità.⁵² ●

52. GIORGIO AGAMBEN: *Mezzi senza fine. Note sulla politica*, Bollati Boringhieri editore, Torino, 1996, p. 43.