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‘Do Not Examine, But Believe?’  
A Classicist’s Perspective on Teresa Morgan’s *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*

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Abstract: This paper offers a Classicist's perspective on Teresa Morgan's book *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*.

In her superb book, Professor Morgan provides a new understanding of what faith meant to Greek and Roman ‘pagans’, Jews, and Christians in the early Roman Empire. How does this new understanding change our thinking about faith in antiquity?

Professor Morgan’s book breaks important new ground in three crucial respects. Firstly, her book shows us that ‘pagans’, Jews, and Christians had much more in common in how they understood and experienced ‘faith’ than we have previously thought. Secondly, this book urges a fundamental reconfiguration of our own understanding of where the major difference lay between early Christian ‘faith’, on the one hand, and ‘pagan’ and Jewish ‘faiths’, on the other. Thirdly, her book succeeds in bringing to light, and then resolving, a fundamental disconnect which has prevailed until now between scholars of the New Testament, and scholars of ‘pagan’ Greek and Roman religions. In what follows, I would like to offer some comments and further questions on these three points in turn.

Let us begin with the commonalities between ‘pagan’, Jewish, and Christian ‘trust’ or ‘faith’ (Greek *pistis*, Latin *fides*). As Professor Morgan traces in her Introduction, previous scholars have tended to assume that Christian ‘faith’ was of a different nature or essence than

the 'faith' of contemporary Greek and Roman, or even contemporary Jewish,<sup>1</sup> traditions. Christian 'faith' has typically been seen as a religious phenomenon consisting primarily of 1) intellectual assent to propositions (e.g. 'I believe that Jesus is the Messiah'); and 2) emotional effects upon the innermost being or experience of the believer (what the book calls 'interiority') (e.g. the sensation/transformation/experience of being able to have faith in the Christian revelation). Classicists have tended to accept this definition, and have used it to posit fundamental differences between 'pagan' and Christian religions. Firstly, because 'pagan' religions do not offer the kinds of fully-articulated creedal statements which we encounter in Christian religions, we have concluded that propositional belief (in Professor Morgan's definition, convictions about the truth of certain propositions about the gods) was peripheral to 'pagan' religious experience. What mattered to pagans, we are told, was orthopraxy, not orthodoxy; what you did, not what you believed (I draw here on the influential formulation of John Scheid).<sup>2</sup> To see faith or belief as an important part of 'pagan' religion has therefore been criticized as a misleading, 'Christianizing' enterprise.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, we have tended to downplay the affective, emotional and relational effects of religiosity upon 'pagans': Christians may have been deeply moved by their religion, but 'pagans', in this view, simply got on with the practical realities of cult. (Indeed, for some scholars, one function of ritual was precisely to eliminate the emotions which contact with the divine might otherwise have called up.)<sup>4</sup> This second notion points in a somewhat different direction than the first. The contrast it sets up is between emotion-driven, interior, largely unreasoning Christian 'faith', on the one hand, and what has been called 'pagan' 'empiricism' or 'empirical knowledge' on the other, a way of

dealing with the divine supposedly based not on personal convictions but on ‘observations of the actions of the gods in the world.’<sup>5</sup>

Professor Morgan shows powerfully that neither of these contrasts between ‘pagan’ and Christian is defensible. The key lies in her demonstration that ‘faith’ in the period under consideration was understood, by ‘pagans’, Jews, and Christians alike, as above all a relational and communal phenomenon. As highlighted also in the other papers in this volume, Professor Morgan’s book shows us that ancient Mediterranean ‘faith’ was trust expressed, created, and sustained by action, by how one chose to interact with other members of the divine-human community, and only secondarily (if at all) by what one chose to think. This conclusion has important implications for the contrasts previously drawn in Classics between ‘pagans’ and Christians. With respect to previous assumptions about propositional belief in ‘pagan’ versus Christian religions, Professor Morgan’s challenge proceeds on two fronts. Firstly, she demonstrates convincingly that *pistis* and *fides* in the ancient Mediterranean were never absolutely devoid of intellectual content: ‘relational trust is always intertwined with propositional beliefs: when anyone— Greek, Roman, Jewish, or Christian— puts their trust in anyone, divine or human, they do so in part because of things they believe about them.’<sup>6</sup> Chapter 4 (‘*Pistis* and *Fides* in Graeco-Roman Religiosity’) establishes that, although mentions of divine-human *pistis* and *fides* are not as frequent in pagan literature as they are in Jewish or Christian texts, the notion of having ‘faith’ in the gods is not foreign to Greek and Roman religions. Not only this, but such relational ‘faith’ also entailed the proposition that the gods themselves were ‘faithful’, a belief for which there is good evidence in Greek and Roman literature. Greek and Roman invocations of divine-human *pistis* and *fides* thus pointed in a

consistent direction, painting the gods as reliable and trustworthy, and calling human beings to recognize (cognitively) this divine nature, and to respond by putting their own trust in it.

'Faith' in this sense is therefore not unique to Christianity. Professor Morgan's second challenge to the scholarly contrast between Christians as propositional believers and pagans as ritualistic doers comes from her demonstration (in Chapters 6-10) that early Christians themselves did not place as much emphasis upon the propositional, cognitive, and interior aspects of 'faith' as we have supposed. For them, too, 'faith' was primarily relational (although this would soon change, as discussed below, as well as by Professor McKaughan and Professor Morgan in this volume). The relative lack of interest which 'pagans' showed in ensuring intellectual assent to specific propositions about the divine, may thus be a less significant difference from Christian religions in the early Roman Empire than we have thought.

Professor Morgan's book also renders untenable the second contrast we identified above, between irrational, emotional Christians and empirical, pragmatic 'pagans'. The Christian half of this portrait has already been justly criticized: early Christians too claimed to have had direct, empirical experiences of the divine.<sup>7</sup> Professor Morgan's work now gives us abundant evidence for the flip side of that coin: that pagans too had 'faith' (trust, hope, and fear) towards their gods. Chapter 11 ('Relationality and Interiority in *Pistis* and *Fides*') makes an especially important contribution on this point. This chapter reinforces Professor Morgan's argument that interiority was initially of little more interest to Christians than it was to 'pagans' and Jews. But it also shows that *pistis* and *fides*, including 'faith' in god(s), likely had some affective aspects (especially clear in the case of emotions), even if our sources do not describe or differentiate them in the detail which we might desire. Adherents of all three

religious traditions, therefore, experienced 'faith' not primarily as a way of assenting to ideas about gods but, above all, as a way of building a relationship with them, a relationship which could include hope, fear, shame, and even love. At the same time, adherents of all three traditions had ideas about the divine which could not be fully substantiated by evidence. Although some of the grounds of their 'faith' might qualify as 'empirical' (for example, personal experience or physical evidence), Professor Morgan shows powerfully that 'pagan' assertions about the *pistis* or *fides* of the divine were no different from Christian ones in resting, above all, on 'foundational and coherentist' claims: that is, on assumptions which were simply accepted as being true because the universe would be incomprehensible otherwise. It is on this basis above all that, as Professor Morgan writes, 'Jews, Greeks, Romans, and Christians all take for granted that they live in a world in which the divine is normatively trustworthy and human beings can trust the divine.'<sup>8</sup>

What becomes clear in reading this book is that within Classics, the search for 'faith' in Greek and Roman 'pagan' religions has been guided by a limited understanding of that term, as denoting either fully-articulated propositional belief or deeply-felt personal commitment. For all its good intentions, this understanding of 'faith' is itself 'Christianizing'; more seriously for the theory of a fundamental difference in nature between 'pagan' and Christian religions, it is not an understanding of faith that early Christians themselves would have recognized. Professor Morgan's emphasis upon the relational, communal, and emotional aspects of ancient 'faith' in all three religious traditions therefore offers us a new and more sophisticated approach. It enables us to detect 'faith' in many more 'pagan' sources than we previously thought. And it also enables us to detect more continuities between 'pagan', Jewish, and

Christian conceptions and experiences of 'faith'. In Professor Morgan's words, in none of these traditions is faith a 'radical act of trust/belief in the unknowable'. Rather, 'it is part of an ongoing relationship with gods who are seen as having a long and proven relationship with people.'<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, Professor Morgan is careful not to overlook the differences which did exist in 'pagan' as compared to Christian perceptions of 'faith'. One difference which I wonder if we could explore further, is early Christian 'fideism' (dependence on what we might call a 'leap of faith' in the absence of logical proofs or demonstration). This takes us a bit beyond the chronological limits of Professor Morgan's focus on the Early Principate, but since the book does consider some second-century texts, I hope that this is not too far afield! Our evidence is a well-known strand of 'pagan' polemic, beginning in the second century AD, which attacked Christians for emphasizing 'faith' at the expense of rational (especially philosophical) argument. A prime example comes from the writings of the 'pagan' philosopher Celsus. Around the mid-second century, Celsus produced a lengthy treatise, entitled *The True Doctrine*, which aimed to debunk Christianity. Although the treatise itself no longer survives, substantial quotations from it are preserved by a Christian author of the following century, Origen of Alexandria (to whom we will return). One of Celsus' more interesting complaints about Christians is that they 'trust/have faith (*pisteuein*) unreasoningly' (*τούς ἀλόγως πιστεύοντας*). He alleges that Christian teachers actually discourage their followers from scrutinizing their doctrines (according to Celsus, this is because such scrutiny would soon lay bare the foolishness of their beliefs), instead brushing off questions with an imperious 'Do not

examine, but believe!' (Μὴ ἐξέταζε ἀλλὰ πίστευσον).<sup>10</sup> Similar complaints were made by the second-century medical writer Galen of Pergamon,<sup>11</sup> and remained a stick for pagans to beat Christians with even into the fourth century.<sup>12</sup> Now, as we saw above, Professor Morgan has shown quite convincingly that in the first and early second centuries AD, Christians themselves did not perceive 'faith' this way. For in the New Testament 'faith' is not seen as demanding some kind of counter-rational commitment, but as resting on the same range of grounds (from problematic written tradition all the way to readily-trustable personal experience) upon which 'pagan' and 'Jewish' 'faith' also depended. This seems to me to raise two questions:

1) Were 'pagans' in the second century and onwards right to see Christians as depending more heavily than themselves on 'faith', especially a different kind of 'faith' which disavowed demonstration?

2) If so, given the evidence that Christians themselves did not perceive 'faith' this way in the first century, what caused the change?

One possibility that occurs to me is that this 'pagan' portrayal of early Christianity is simply misleading or unfair: that believing something without philosophical argument was perfectly acceptable when a 'pagan' did it, but became objectionable (in 'pagan' eyes) when a Christian did it. 'Pagans' themselves sometimes admitted something very like this. Galen, for example, complains that adherents of the major philosophical and medical schools of his day are guilty of accepting doctrines without weighing or reasoning out the logical proofs for them.<sup>13</sup> The same point is made by the Christian theologian Origen of Alexandria, who sought in the third century AD to produce a comprehensive refutation of Celsus' objections (including the allegation of fideism). Origen admits that Christians ask many people to accept their



doctrines (*pisteuein*) without fully understanding the reasoning behind them. But he says, this is no different from the procedure used by contemporary ‘pagan’ philosophers. They choose their preferred sect after being exposed to it by chance, or through the influence of a charismatic teacher, simply because they ‘believe’ it to be better than the others (τῷ ΠΙΣΤΕΥΕΙΝ τὴν αἵρεσιν ἐκείνην κρείττονα εἶναι). (Origen also tries to defend Christian practice with an argument from practicality: it should be obvious, he says, that some people are more educated for abstract reasoning, and have more leisure time for pondering, than others. To those who are capable of understanding, he insists, Christians offer full reasons for their beliefs.<sup>14</sup>) I wonder, however, whether that is all there is in this strand of polemic, and I would be glad to hear more on this from Professor Morgan.

I would like to turn now (more briefly) to what I have mentioned as a second particularly exciting contribution made by Professor Morgan’s book, and that is the way it reconfigures our understanding of a(nother) major difference between Christian and non-Christian ‘faith’ in the early Empire. This argument emerges especially from Chapters 6-10 (on *pistis* in the New Testament texts). What we see there is that Christian ‘faith’ differed from contemporary ‘pagan’ and Jewish ‘faiths’ not, primarily, in the grounds upon which it was based, nor in its interior or emotional or cognitive aspects, but rather in where it was placed. Both Jews and Gentiles valued what the book calls ‘intra-human’ as well as ‘divine-human’ *pistis* and *fides*, seeing the two as mutually circulating and reinforcing: trust between human beings was both made possible by, and expressed, trust in god or the gods. The Christians of the first century, by contrast, focused almost exclusively on the ‘divine-human’ ‘faith’

relationship, and paid little attention to 'faith' between human beings within the newly emerging Christian communities.<sup>15</sup> For adherents, the message was that 'there is no longer any trustworthy relationship or community for them except that which exists with God and Christ and in the kingdom of God.'<sup>16</sup> This was a dramatic reconfiguration of the dynamics of 'faith' in ancient life, and although Professor Morgan does not discuss this possibility in detail, I wonder whether it can help us to understand in a new way why 'pagans' found Christianity so threatening that they decided to persecute it. 'Pagan' laments that Christians threatened social cohesion are well known: among other things, Christians were reproached for abandoning the customs of their forefathers, for refusing to participate in the cult rituals which bound the community together, and for choosing to follow a 'barbarian' (non-Roman or non-Hellenic) doctrine.<sup>17</sup> But they were also accused (perhaps more puzzlingly, from a modern point of view) of 'hatred of the human race',<sup>18</sup> and although this is typically understood as a dig at Christian exclusivism, I wonder if it might also be a distorted reflection of the Romans' perception that Christians were being asked not just to put their 'faith' in a new deity, but to withdraw their 'faith' from all of the other bonds which held Roman society together.<sup>19</sup> I would be glad to hear Professor Morgan's thoughts on this.

Thirdly and finally, we owe Professor Morgan a debt of thanks for revealing a serious disconnect between scholarly approaches to 'pagan' 'faith' in New Testament Studies and Classics, respectively. Scholars of the New Testament have long accepted that Greeks and Romans could use *pistis*-language to articulate the idea that one should put one's 'trust' in the gods' power to help and heal, or in the evidence for their previous interventions in human life (such as oracles and miracles).<sup>20</sup> Yet, as Professor Morgan observes, this aspect of 'pagan'

religious experience has received less attention from Classicists. We have tended to focus instead on the non-religious meanings of *pistis* and *fides* in relations between human beings, especially the role Greeks and Romans attributed to 'good faith' in strengthening and maintaining economic, legal, familial, and political bonds (extensively documented by Professor Morgan in Chapters 2 and 3). It was fascinating to see, in reading her book, how scholars of Judaism and Christianity have characterized 'pagan' uses of *pistis*- and *fides*-language (from the Hellenistic period onwards) as primarily propositional, even as an impersonal and non-committal (*unverbindlich*) intellectual exercise, sharply at odds with the action-oriented trust demanded by so-called 'Biblical' or 'Jewish' faith.<sup>21</sup> And all the while we as Classicists have been busy insisting that 'pagan' 'faith' and relationships with gods were not about propositions! Professor Morgan does more than simply bring this divergence to light. By showing that it is the relational aspects of 'faith', not the propositional ones, which offer the most promising avenue for understanding what 'faith' meant to 'pagans', Christians, and Jews, she offers us a way to bridge the gap between our different disciplines and discourses. Furthermore, she shows that both Biblical scholars and Classicists have neglected the emotional aspects of 'pagan' 'faith', and I look forward to seeing where this new approach takes us in future. In sum, by setting Greek and Roman non-Christian sources side by side with the Jewish and Christian sources, so as to consider as many texts as possible from all three traditions; and by setting out not just to tell us what *pistis* or *fides* 'means' in each particular text, but, much more fruitfully, to map out the mechanics and dynamics of *pistis* or *fides* in each of the cultures under consideration,<sup>22</sup> this book urges a reconsideration of the sharp contrasts we have drawn between Christian and non-Christian religions of the ancient world.

Proponents of a radical difference, from Celsus in the second century to those grappling with  
the issue today, may find the implications challenging. But with such a masterful 'examination'  
of the evidence for ancient 'believing', the conversation is sure to be a profitable one.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Especially Buber 1951.

<sup>2</sup> Especially Scheid 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Most Classicists would probably be prepared to accept the applicability to ‘pagan’ religions of ‘mental activity around the gods and the means of communication with them— feeling, speculation, imagination, argument, and so on’ (North 2013: 78 and n. 48). North also rightly notes that the position of the original advocates for caution against ‘Christianizing’ assumptions about belief, above all Simon Price and John Scheid, has been exaggerated in subsequent scholarship (and in less temperate critiques such as that of Versnel [2011: App. 4]): ‘The contention [of these scholars] was only that beliefs as such were not made explicit, professed or made into the object of coercion by others.’ Unfortunately these nuances have not prevented some scholars from drawing the further conclusion that the study of ‘pagan’ religions should concentrate on ritual at the expense of beliefs. Cf. e.g. Turcan 2000: 1: in order to ‘show the main characteristics of the part played by gods in the lives of Romans’, we should ‘emphasise the material aspects of each cult, its ritual forms and practices, rather than concentrate on beliefs or theology’.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Liebeschuetz 1979: 12-13; Turcan 2000: 11; Baier 2002: 93; Scheid 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Ando 2008: xi-xii; 17. The same contrast between Roman ‘empiricism’ and ‘knowledge’ attained through rituals, on the one hand, and (implicitly Christian) beliefs and ideas about the divine, on the other, was also drawn by Robert Turcan in *The Gods of Ancient Rome* (2000).

<sup>6</sup> Morgan 2015: 427.

<sup>7</sup> Williams 2008: ‘even looking at the matter “from a Roman perspective”, it seems suspiciously neat to distinguish Romans who could “know” the rules of their religion from Christians who could “merely believe” (...). Christians claimed knowledge as well as belief, and on an empirical basis at that: for the truth had been revealed to them in historical time, and had been recorded by eye-witnesses in the scriptures.’

<sup>8</sup> Morgan 2015: 480 n. 36; also 160, 168.

<sup>9</sup> Morgan 2015: 155; also 142.

<sup>10</sup> Origen, *CC* 1.9.

<sup>11</sup> Galen, *De puls. diff.* 2.4 (VIII.579 Kühn): Jews and Christians accept ‘undemonstrated laws’ (*nomôn anapodeiktôn*). Discussion in Walzer 1949; Wilken 2003: ch. 4.

<sup>12</sup> E.g. Julian the Apostate according to Greg. Naz. *Or.* 4.102.

<sup>13</sup> Galen, *Ord. lib. suor.* 1 (XIX.50 Kühn).

<sup>14</sup> Origen, *CC* 1.9-11; similarly 3.38; 3.59; 6.10.

<sup>15</sup> Morgan 2015: 215, 223, 478.

<sup>16</sup> Morgan 2015: 306.

<sup>17</sup> E.g. the edict of Galerius (AD 311) quoted in Lact. *Mort. Pers.* 34; the petition of the Lycians and Pamphilians to Maximinus Daia and Licinius (AD 311-312) (*CIL* III 12132= *TAM* II, 785).

<sup>18</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 15.44 (*odium humani generis*).

<sup>19</sup> A subsidiary question would be whether we can find more explicit evidence that ‘pagans’ understood Christians to be reconfiguring or re-siting *pistis/fides* in the way Professor Morgan describes. One possible counter-indication could be the ‘pagan’ perception of Christianity as a

*coniuratio*, a secret 'conspiracy' or union (e.g. Min. Fel. *Oct.* 8): how far is this compatible with an awareness that Christians were being asked to be 'faithful', not primarily to each other, but to a god?

<sup>20</sup> Barth 1982; Lindsay 1993: 16; Lindsay 1997: 189.

<sup>21</sup> Lindsay 1993: 185.

<sup>22</sup> Above all by exploring 'what community members find easy, difficult, or problematic to trust or believe in; where and how trust is deferred; where reifications of *pistis/fides* and related concepts and located and where they are not; who invests *pistis/fides* in whom, on what grounds, in what contexts, and for what purposes' (Morgan 2015: 23).