

# Ambrose as an Apologist

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## ABSTRACT

Ambrose's only apologetic texts against traditional Roman religion are his letters 72-3 written against Symmachus' request (*Letter 72a*) to the emperor that the altar of victory and ritual subsidies be returned. The content of his letters contain a number of common rhetorical comments made by earlier apologetic writers. One of these is refuting the pagan linkage between natural or man-made disasters and lack of pious observances toward the gods. Ambrose is no less motivated to disconnect the two. Of course Ambrose replies that many catastrophes occurred in history when the altar was in place and the vestal virgins were lavishly supported. It is noteworthy and unexpected that Ambrose makes no attempt to pose pagan claims in contrast with the greater antiquity of Judaism-Christianity as he has emphasized elsewhere for different reasons. Instead, he opposes Symmachus' argument with the observation that the world naturally improves for the better. In fact, Ambrose claims that no supplication to the gods is necessary for the processes of natural growth and practical human knowledge. Progress in grace is more important than empty claims for antiquity.

The controversy between Symmachus and Ambrose over Rome's Altar of Victory has long been regarded as one of those defining 'Polaroid moments' during the Christian and pagan conflicts in the later fourth century.<sup>1</sup> The picture consists of a most eminent pagan aristocrat, Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, appointed *Praefectus urbi* in 384, petitioning the boy emperor Valentinus II to restore the Altar of Victory and the longstanding subsidies for cultic practices in the city. Symmachus had tried to do this with Gratian two years before, but was not given an audience. Now a new administration presented new possibilities. It is not unlikely Symmachus was encouraged to make this attempt

<sup>1</sup> One will notice how many translations of select works of Ambrose include the letters (72, 72a, 73) which were the primary sources in this incident. Brian Croke and Jill Harries, *Religious Conflict in Fourth Century Rome: A Documentary Study* (London and Beaverton, 1982); Boniface Ramsey, *Ambrose* (Abingdon and New York, 1997); J.H. Liebeschuetz, *Ambrose of Milan: Political Letters and Speeches* (Liverpool, 2005), 61-94; Fathers of the Church 26.31-51 (excludes Symmachus); NPNF<sup>2</sup> 10 'Ambrose: Select Works of Letters'. The latter two use Migne as the primary edition which numbers the letters as 17, 17a, 18). As useful as these letters are for shining a light into the bishop's perspective on the relations between contemporary paganism and Christianity, their frequent retranslation and printing suggests that this episode marks a significant point in Ambrose's career that is questionable.

again<sup>2</sup> by the then Praetorian prefect, Praetextatus, and by the fact that Symmachus did not think he was asking for something virulently anti-Christian. Usually read in the light of Eugenius' eventual acquiescence to requests for the Altar's restoration, the latter's affiliation with pagan advisors, culminating in the battle of Frigidus (394), has infused the conflict<sup>3</sup> between Ambrose and Symmachus with a greater historical tension than it deserved. As rightly observed, the exchange was not an exchange; it was not a debate as if the leading pagan and Christian of their age faced off against each other. Much of the generally accepted portrait owed to Sheridan's and other reconstructions has been reconfigured in by Cameron and others that tend to regard religious piety as a superfluous motivation.<sup>4</sup>

My interest here therefore is not to discuss the alleged 'pagan revival' or review the evidence. More simply, I wish to look at the content of Ambrose's two letters to Valentianian and see what they can tell us about the evolution of Christian apologetic literature in the later fourth century. The questions I raise imply that I am treating Ambrose's two letters (72-3) as apologetic in substance and style. Typically addressed to the emperor or an imperial authority, both petitions are intent on making his *contra Symmachum* the basis of a broader appeal for the legitimacy of Christianity to an audience of undecided Christians or pagans. If we regard the two documents in this way, we are acknowledging the elasticity of Christian apologetic literature, a recognition that has come to typify scholarly assessment of Christian apologetic texts. To claim that there existed an apologetic tradition<sup>5</sup> is difficult prove if by that we mean a purposeful collecting of either texts or authors or both. Still, there seems to have been a widespread appropriation of the most seminal anti-pagan arguments, and, in a few instances, earlier texts are cited as sources by subsequent ones.<sup>6</sup> Cyprian (*Ad Demetrianum* and *De vanitate idolatrum*), Lactantius (*Divinae institutiones*) and Arnobius of Sicca (*Adversus nationes*) seem to have been drawn upon by fourth century writers.<sup>7</sup>

In the Christian mind, pagan oppression had had a long history and only briefly but dramatically reared its head under Julian. Christians in the 370s and 380s had no reason to think that it couldn't happen again, despite the growing

<sup>2</sup> Besides the two times Symmachus sought an audience with the emperor, there were at least seven subsequent delegations sent by the senate for the purpose of obtaining subsidies for temple rituals. Two of these were successful: one with Eugenius and the last with Theodosius.

<sup>3</sup> I use this word advisedly since there was no actual contact between the two men other than correspondence.

<sup>4</sup> *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford, 2011), 33-46. There is overwhelming interest in publications over the last 20 years that seeks to uncover the genuine motivations of the bishop.

<sup>5</sup> *Viz.*, 'The Apologetic Tradition', chapter 3 in Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's City of God: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Lactantius mentions by name Minucius Felix, Tertullian and has highest praise for Cyprian (*Div. inst.* 5.1.22); Maximus of Turin quotes Cyprian twice (*Contra paganos* 4).

<sup>7</sup> As were a number of Cyprian's other works directly cited by Hilary of Poitiers and Augustine.

hegemony of the Church.<sup>8</sup> Military and natural disasters continued to fuel religious doubts on both sides in much the same way they had in the second century. As Prudentius intoned:

[W]hen the plague has broken out anew and seeks to trouble the well-being of the race of Romulus, we must beg a remedy of our father, that he let not Rome sink again into her old filthy torpor nor suffer her great men's gowns to be stained with smoke and blood.<sup>9</sup>

Of course anti-pagan practices and their defenses did not cease once the persecution of Christians ended in the Roman Empire.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the most sweeping Christian apologies come from the very end of the third and fourth centuries while episodes of serious friction would continue to occur into the sixth century. If we look to the varied imperial laws against sacrifice, sooth-saying, divination, making offering in shrines, etc.,<sup>11</sup> we can only re-echo the commonly put observation that they were notoriously difficult and unevenly enforced since much depended on local knowledge and willingness to apply the law.<sup>12</sup> But more than this, the religious history provided by Augustine's *City of God* makes it absolutely clear that pagans and Christians continued to argue heatedly over the implications of bypassing the gods of Roman tradition. Any amount of scholarly enthusiasm for removing religious motives from Symmachus or Ambrose must reckon itself to the way religion was an essential part of late Roman cultural and political identity (pagan or Christian).

### Quintus Aurelius Symmachus

Probably as late as Honorius' reign, the Roman senate continued to have a pagan majority. Orator and philosopher Themistius delivered several orations before Christian emperors<sup>13</sup> and one (in 376?) before the Senate where he

<sup>8</sup> Ambrose writes of Julian's law (AD 363), which denied Christians the right to teach and speak, as *proxima*. Ep. 72.4 (CSEL 82.3.13).

<sup>9</sup> Prudentius, *Contra Symm.* I.praef.: '*sed quoniam renovata lues turbare salutemtemptat Romulidum, patris inploranda medellaest,ne sinat antiquo Romam squalere veternoneve togas procerum fumoque et sanguine tingui.*' Translated by H.J. Thomson, LCL 387, *Reply to Symmachus, Book I*, 350-351. See also Tertullian, *Apol.* 19.1: 'Their high antiquity, first of all, claims authority for these writings.'

<sup>10</sup> On the Latin side: Arnobius, Firmicus Maternus (?), 'Ambrosiaster', Augustine and Orosius.

<sup>11</sup> The first extant law against sacrificing was a 341 code of Constantius (*CTh.* 16.10.2); these prohibitions were often reiterated. See *CTh.* 9.16.4 (357); 9.16.8 (370); 16.10.5 (353); 16.10.8 (382); espec.16.10,12 (392)

<sup>12</sup> Michele Renee Salzman, 'Ambrose and the Usurpation of Arbogastes and Eugenius: Reflections of Pagan-Christian Conflict Narratives', *J ECS* 18 (2010), 191-223, 202.

<sup>13</sup> Themistius, wishing to pursuing a life of philosophical retreat to a greater degree than Julian, his career did not advance as it did under Constantius and Theodosius. He has high praise for Theodosius (*Orat.* 17.214).

maintained a discreet Hellenistic type of theism that centered on the one God described in terms of *ho theos* and as manifestations of Zeus.<sup>14</sup> Themistius knew how to play both sides. When the same orator addressed the senate in preparation of Gratian's *adventus* in 376, 'he speaks as an overt polytheist, in sharp contrast with his language before the emperors.'<sup>15</sup>

It was likely Themistius who inspired Symmachus' sentiment<sup>16</sup> that so irritated Ambrose. In his speech to Roman senate, Themistius remarks about religion (*Orat.* 5.69A), using an athletic metaphor of the runners in a race that encounter different types of terrain and different paths yet 'all of them leading to the same goal.'<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Symmachus makes his case for acknowledging the native gods of Rome with the purpose of creating unity in worship, he writes, 'Man cannot come to so profound a mystery by one road alone.' Scholars have interpreted Symmachus statement as 'conciliatory' and placed in sharp contrast with Ambrose's uncompromising approach.<sup>18</sup> Much has been written about Symmachus' intentions, so I will simply note: the point of Symmachus' words are not unlike Cicero's *De natura deorum*: Arguments over which gods should be worshipped is not as important as the worship itself. That is, the practice of piety is necessary for keeping beneficial relations between the divine and the state. The Altar and subsidies for Roman cult were directly tied to the fortunes of the empire.

Symmachus was well versed in the etiquette of politics and patronage, as his personal letters to Ambrose and recommendations for bishops long after the affair of Altar, demonstrate.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, he is portrayed in Macrobius' *Saturnalia* as one of the great pagan presences of the late fourth century.<sup>20</sup> In a brief letter<sup>21</sup> to Flavianus about the corn famine in Rome, Symmachus exclaims, 'Gods of the fatherland pardon our neglect of sacred things!' 'May our city recall as soon as possible those whom it reluctantly sent away.'<sup>22</sup> It takes

<sup>14</sup> I am inclined to see in Themistius' rendering of god, not a monotheism but henotheism with modalist characteristics; where one entity has many manifestations in accordance with Roman tradition religion.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher P. Jones, *Between Pagan and Christian* (Cambridge, 2014), 108.

<sup>16</sup> On the parallels in argumentation between Themistius and Symmachus, Maijastina Kahlos, *Forbearance and Compulsion: The Rhetoric of Religious Tolerance and Intolerance in Late Antiquity* (London, 2009), 97.

<sup>17</sup> *Orat.* 5. 69A.

<sup>18</sup> John Moorhead, *Ambrose: Church and Society in the Late Roman World* (London and New York, 1999), 125.

<sup>19</sup> Conveniently collected in B. Croke and J. Harries, *Religious Conflict* (1982), 118-121.

<sup>20</sup> *Sat.*, I 4, *et passim*. There remains the issue as to what degree the *Saturnalia* is a post-hoc document of pagan propaganda. Symmachus could already boast of an impressive cursus before his appointment as *praefectus urbi* in 384 (*PLRE* I. 865-70).

<sup>21</sup> Dated to 383 or 384.

<sup>22</sup> Ep. II 7.

little imagination to see in these words, among other things, a desire to restore the Altar of Victory and subsidies for Roman religious reasons.<sup>23</sup>

Valentinian II (barely a teenager), had been in Milan only a short while and, evidently, pagan senators gauged this a good time to move on a petition. The fact that Valentinian, prompted by his infamous mother, had declared himself in favor of the Ariminum (or Homoian) creed had nothing to do with this.<sup>24</sup> As head of the senate and possibly encouraged by the aristocratic pagan Praetextatus, Symmachus was delegated by the senate to bring what he calls a 'petition' to the imperial court in Milan. It was cautiously wrought, though there was nothing conciliatory about it.<sup>25</sup>

### Ambrose's Response

A fundamental question that should be raised is why Ambrose responded as vigorously as he did. He wrote the first of two letters to Valentinian having only heard from some Christian senators that a delegation of pagan senators had been sent to the emperor with a petition. Curiously, Ramsey claims the bishop 'never entertained any doubts about the ultimate triumph' in this matter.<sup>26</sup> Such a view might be justified as it pertains to the delegation (also led by Symmachus) sent two years earlier to Gratian. But it is evident that Ambrose did not have certainty about the outcome in the present circumstances. The mere fact that he penned a response to a document he had not yet seen (though heard about), then issues a second letter already knowing the outcome, suggests a sense of some trepidation on the bishop's part. There are good reasons for this. The bishop of Rome, Damasus, who would have been the most likely choice for receiving the Christian senators' concern as he was two years earlier, was unwilling or (more likely) unable to participate in the senatorial petitions

<sup>23</sup> Salzman is right to question Cameron's claim that the Christians, not the pagans, turned the Altar into a religious *cause célèbre* since the pagan response was 'conspicuous by its absence'. However, she herself is too eager to rule out religious motivation in the events leading to the battle of Frigidus and in the post-reconstruction of the events. M. R. Salzman, 'Ambrose' (2010), 197.

<sup>24</sup> It is a mistake to conflate the reaction of 'Arians' toward pagans because of seeming similarities in Christology as per James J. Sheridan, 'The Altar of Victory – Paganism's Last Battle', *L'antiquité Classique* 35 (1966), 186-206. See D.H. Williams, 'Historical Portrait or Polemical Portrayal? The Alignment between Pagans and Arians in the Later Fourth Century', *SP* 29 (1997), 178-94.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (Princeton, 2012), 105. While not definitive, July/August in 384 is the best dating for presenting the petition for the simple reason that August 28, a feast of the sun and the moon, was the anniversary celebration of the Altar's installation. R.E.A. Palmer, 'Severan Ruler Cult in the City of Rome', *ANRW* II.16.1102, 7-8.

<sup>26</sup> B. Ramsey, *Ambrose* (1997), 174.

by the summer of 384. Within the space of five months the Roman bishop is dead and so is a critical source of information.<sup>27</sup> More significantly, Ambrose indicates that many Christians have been attracted to the outward showing of pagan<sup>28</sup> cultus, rituals, and festivals. Even under Christian emperors, Ambrose admits, ‘Christians have been led astray ... and many have fallen.’<sup>29</sup> Just as problematic are those who Ambrose calls the ‘nominal Christians’ who find no difficulty in returning the subsidies or the Altar.<sup>30</sup> Ambrose was well aware that there were Christians in the senate, but it may not have mattered for much.<sup>31</sup>

When one looks at the arguments Ambrose quickly thatched together in his first letter, it is apparent that the bishop is flying blind. His statements containing allusions to arguments contain little more than limited and conventional apologetic arguments from the second century – that the gods are nothing other than demons (δαίμόνια),<sup>32</sup> that paganism is the worship of idols,<sup>33</sup> that pagans perform blood sacrifices,<sup>34</sup> that paganism is rightly called a ‘*superstitio aliena*’<sup>35</sup> and that paganism was the persecutor of Christians.<sup>36</sup> The document was nothing less than a shot-gun blast, meant to cover a wide enough area of concerns with the intention of obviating those of Symmachus.

There is more substance in the second letter which Ambrose sent to Valentinian already knowing that Symmachus’ petition had not been approved. But if Ambrose was aware of the decision, why send the letter at all? To think of it as a ‘purely academic exercise’,<sup>37</sup> misses the mark. It is not unreasonable to think that a strong motivation for Ambrose’s second letter is the most obvious; namely, to sway the ‘nominal Christians’ with whom Ambrose has to contend. But just as serious is the fact that Ambrose does not fully comprehend why Valentinian refused the delegation without his encouragement. Throughout his youthful reign, the emperor functioned more like a puppet than a regent to those around him. Though Ambrose says the consistory agreed with Valentinian’s

<sup>27</sup> It may have been on account of Damasus’ absence that Ambrose latter comments that he alone opposed Symmachus’ petition and the pagan senators. *Ep.* 10 (57).

<sup>28</sup> Ambrose always uses the word *gentilis* for ‘pagan’.

<sup>29</sup> *Ep.* 72.4.

<sup>30</sup> *Ep.* 72.8.

<sup>31</sup> Ambrose claimed a majority of Christians in the Senate which was possible if a number of these were to include ‘nominal Christians’. *Ep.* 72.8: ‘*Quod si aliqui nomine Christiani tale aliquid decernendum putant ...*’ CSEL 82.3. 14). Otherwise, it is difficult to be convinced Christians formed a majority.

<sup>32</sup> *Ep.* 72.1 quoting from the Greek OT, *Ps.* 95:5 (96:5). Tertullian makes the same application of this verse, *De idol.* 20. See also Tertullian *Apol.* 22-4; M. Felix, *Oct.* 26-7; Lactantius, *Div. Inst.* 4.27.

<sup>33</sup> Ambrose, *Ep.* 57.2; Cyprian, *Ad Dem.* 12; Clement, *Protr.* 1.

<sup>34</sup> *Ep.* 72.1-2, 9, 14; Clement, *Protr.* 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Ep.* 72.14 and 16, confer with 14: ‘*alieni erroris*’.

<sup>36</sup> Arnobius, *Adv. nat.* I 74.

<sup>37</sup> Neil McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital* (Berkeley, 1994), 167.

refusal, it could have just as easily gone the other way. And there was no reason to assume otherwise in the near future.<sup>38</sup> Throughout Symmachus' *relatio*, he reiterates that he is acting as Valentinian's guardian by defending the teaching 'of our forebears, the laws and oracles of the homeland.'<sup>39</sup> One also discovers from this petition that fastening the blame on the Christians for natural or man-made disasters as well as Christian historical novelty remained fixed arguments for the pagan intelligentsia.

Now armed with the specific knowledge of the *relatio*, Ambrose declares he will refute Symmachus' points in a consecutive manner, and while he does more than this, he makes his own intentions clear enough.<sup>40</sup> As a result, he is more exact in reproducing his opponents' words and more exact in the kinds of counter arguments presented. In particular, Ambrose divides the *relatio* into three overlapping parts: 1) Rome is itself asking for its ancient cultus, which includes the Altar; 2) the subsidies, once removed, should be returned to the Vestal Virgins and priesthoods; 3) widespread famine resulted once the priestly subsidies were removed. While he responds to each of these, his response is governed by an overarching aim that tends to slur these three together.

As Symmachus' petition was intended for a general audience, not merely the consistory (as were Ambrose's), his arguments are formulated in such a way that presumes sweeping as well as specific applications. Symmachus is clear about his petition: 'We seek therefore the restoration of the state of religious affairs which was beneficial to the state (*rei publicae*) for so long.'<sup>41</sup> Both the prefect's argument and the bishop's responses are very familiar and have to do with affirming or negating the benefit which customary Roman cult has brought to the City over its many years. Symmachus is short on examples, but his logic is that Valentinian is playing with fire by not ordering the Altar of Victory to be restored (3). 'That Altar', he says, 'maintains the peace of all' (5). The potency of this protection is that it represents the authority of an ancient cultus with which 'we must keep faith.'

In Ambrose's second letter, or what he calls a *sermo*, the bishop seeks to endorse Valentinian's decision to take no action. In the process of doing so, Ambrose takes the opportunity to challenge the heart of pagan reasoning for restoring the Altar and subsidies. 'Do not yourselves forsake her [the Altar's] friendship and patronage with the triumphs she brings', Symmachus wrote. And it is largely against this principle that Ambrose directs his refutation.

<sup>38</sup> Flavius Bauto (Mag. Mil. [west] 380-385). Despite assertion of *PLRE* I 159 that he opposed Ambrose on the matter of the Altar of Victory, Ambrose (*Ep.* 57.3) says that both Bauto and (Flavius) Rumidorus (who was pagan) agreed with Valentinian's decision.

<sup>39</sup> *Ep.* 72a. 2.

<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, M. Kahlos characterizes both Symmachus and Ambrose in a predictable and anachronistic manner by calling the first a tolerant pluralist whereas the latter imbibes the rhetoric of separation and segregation. *Forbearance and Compulsion* (2009), 99-101.

<sup>41</sup> *Ep.* 72a. 3.

An essential factor in the Roman argument for the authority of antiquity was that the ancient rites brought security and victory to Rome. No longer are Christian intellectuals vying to counter this claim as before by trying to prove the antiquity of Christianity. Ambrose bypasses it entirely and begins in staccato-like fashion against the basic assumption: 'But what need is there for me to deny that their sacred rite fought for the Romans?' He then lays down various historical scenarios that reveal the failure of the ancient rites:<sup>42</sup> Hannibal's siege of the city, which shouldn't have occurred, the pious pagan emperors who reigned no more than two months, the barbarians who have crossed the frontiers,<sup>43</sup> an emperor (Valerian) who was – most embarrassingly – captured by the Persians (in 260), and Julian, the pagan emperor who was died so prematurely. Ambrose continues to ask, did these not perform the required sacrifices or rituals? 'Surely no one will maintain that in those days too there was no Altar of Victory?' This line of reasoning – the supposed presence of the gods despite natural or public catastrophes – is a mainstay of apologetic responses going back to Tertullian and will be carried on by Augustine.

Similar objections are raised about restoring the subsidies to the Vestal Virgins and priesthoods.<sup>44</sup> Of course Ambrose cannot resist pointing out that Christian priests never received subsidies, nor were the possessions and land removed from Christians in persecutions ever returned to them.<sup>45</sup> For fourth century apologetic texts, it is rare when a Christian writers fails to mention that the pagans, who want flexibility and justice, never gave any to the Christians.

Symmachus brought to light the corn famine having just recently affected Rome as another example of the cause of impiety and the effect of disaster: 'the cult of the ancestors must be preserved' (22). John Matthews puts this logic most succinctly: 'If the gods were to support the state, then the state must support the gods.'<sup>46</sup> Ambrose is no less motivated to disconnect the two. He writes,

Do they really believe that these calamities are prodigies which have never before happened on earth and that they did not occur when pagan superstition flourished all over the world?<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> *Ep.* 73.35-39.

<sup>43</sup> Probable reference to the battle of Hadrianople 378.

<sup>44</sup> Exactly which subsidies and land willed to temples were removed is a matter of some debate. R. Lizzi Testa, 'Christian Emperor, Vestal Virgins and Priestly Colleges: Reconsidering the End of the Roman Paganism', *An Tard* 15 (2007), 251-62; A. Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (2011), 39-46.

<sup>45</sup> Which is not true. According to Constantine's letter to Anullinus (proconsul of Africa), properties once confiscated from Christians and churches were to be returned. Eusebius, *HE* 10.5, 15-7 reflects a portion of Constantine's and Licinius' edict of Milan that commanded the restoration of all properties extorted from churches.

<sup>46</sup> John Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court A.D. 364-425* (Oxford, 1975), 208.

<sup>47</sup> *Ep.* 73.17: 'Nova videlicet prodigia terrarum, quae numquam ante acciderant, cum superstitione gentilis toto orbe feveret' (CSEL 82.3.44).



It is noteworthy and even surprising that Ambrose makes no attempt to pose pagan claims in contrast with the greater antiquity of Judaism-Christianity. Instead, he opposes Symmachus' insistence on Roman tradition and antiquity as a safeguard with a *prima facie* observation that the world naturally improves for the better (*omnia postea in melius profecerunt*<sup>48</sup>). No supplication to the gods is necessary for the processes of natural growth and practical human knowledge. As far as I can tell, it is a unique argument among the history of Christian apologetic literature and even rare (or inconsistent) within antiquity.<sup>49</sup> The argument is a simple one, sharing apparent parallels with the Roman historian Polybius (died c. 118 BC).<sup>50</sup> The world has always suffered from famines and plagues, but it is becoming a better place by means of better agricultural techniques, just like a child who grows into maturity of knowledge, and the way the Christian faith has beneficially spread in recent times among so many different peoples (25-29).<sup>51</sup> To want everything to remain as it was in the beginning is nothing short of wishing the world, once begun in darkness, to stay that way (28). Ambrose is not constructing a theory, much less adducing a conception of progress, but is meant to undermine the foundation of Symmachus' argument: 'The love of custom is great.'<sup>52</sup> Prudentius has clearly read Ambrose and uses the same theme of progress in *Against*

<sup>48</sup> *Ep.* 73.23, 249.

<sup>49</sup> As per E.R. Dodds, *The Ancient Concept of Progress and Other Essays on Greek Literature and Belief* (Oxford, 1973, rpt. 1985), 1-25. In the first chapter, Dodds addresses the question whether the ancients ever had a conception of progress with varying results. The 'slipperiness of the concept' is not helped by the fact that there was no classical term for 'progress'.

<sup>50</sup> Polybius, *The Histories*: 'This confirms the assertion I ventured to make at the outset that the progress of the Romans was not due to chance and was not involuntary, as some among the Greeks choose to think, but that by schooling themselves in such vast and perilous enterprises it was perfectly natural that they not only gained the courage to aim at universal dominion, but executed their purpose.'

'Some of my readers will wonder what can be the reason why, now that they are masters of the world and far more puissant than formerly, they could neither man so many ships, nor put to sea with such large fleets. Those, however, who are puzzled by this, will be enabled to understand the reason clearly when we come to deal with their political institutions ...' (I 63, 9-64.2; trans. W.R. Paton, LCL 128. 173, 175).

'I decided on writing a history of actual events; firstly, because there is always something fresh in them which demands novel treatment—since it was not in the power of the ancients to narrate events subsequent to their own time—and secondly, owing to the great practical utility of such a history, both formerly and especially at the present day, when the progress of the arts and sciences has been so rapid, that those who study history are, we may almost say, provided with a method for dealing with any contingency that may arise' (*Fragmenta* IX. 2,5-6; trans. W.R. Paton, LCL 159. 5).

<sup>51</sup> With some similarity, Arnobius encouraged his pagan opponents pass from ancient customs just as one moves from ignorance to knowledge, from foolishness to wisdom ... from godlessness to God (*Adv. nat.* II 67).

<sup>52</sup> *Rel.* 4: '*Consuetudinis amor magnus est*' (CSEL 82.3.24).

*Symmachus*.<sup>53</sup> It is obvious however, that for both Ambrose and Prudentius, the so-called ‘naturalist’ argument is a strategy that implicitly rejects the Platonist eschewal of change as defect.

While I am touching only on the surface of Ambrose’s absorption of and contribution to Christian apologetic in the later fourth century, I hope to have shown that Ambrose’s letters offer some illumination on the status of Christian apologetic strategies almost 50 years after Constantine. A body or awareness of older anti-pagan arguments seems still intact, though new or refurbished claims have evolved to meet new situations. Ambrose’s two letters provides evidence that these were occurring simultaneously.

There is an irony in the series of pagan (or Christian) deputations from the senate to the emperors over ritual subsidies.<sup>54</sup> Despite Ambrose’s strenuous efforts in 384, and Theodosius’ sweeping condemnation of pagan practices in February 391,<sup>55</sup> a last ditch effort in 394 on the part of pagan senators to win back subsidies in Rome was granted by Theodosius. The one-time announcement of Symmachus’ actions in 384 as that of the ‘last pagans’ of Rome is wholly premature.

<sup>53</sup> ‘The deputy’s last tearful, sorrowful complaint is that sacrificial grain is refused to the altars of Pallas, grants to the very Vestals, and maintenance to the pure choirs, and that Vesta’s fires are cheated of their wonted upkeep. And this, he says, is why our fields are barren and their fruits scantier, grim famine rages, and over the whole world mankind are pale with want and lack of bread. What great, malignant famine has arisen at this present time ...’ (Prudentius, *Contra Symm.* II 910ff; trans. H.J. Thomson, LCL 398. 79); ‘The weather by defect or excess brings on these plagues of the earth and sickens and hurts the world. In the same way the functioning of our body often goes wrong and lapses into some imperfection; it does not continue in the right system, and by getting out of control brings disease on our organs. For the constitution of the world and of this body which we wear is one; it is the same nature that upholds both’ (980-93; trans. H.J. Thomson, LCL 398, 85).

<sup>54</sup> Various counts have been made (Cameron proposes six), but there were no fewer than nine. See below.

<sup>55</sup> *CTh.* XVI. 10, 10; Otto Seeck, *Regesten der Kaiser und Päpste für die Jahre 311 bis 476 n. Chr.* (Stuttgart, 1919), 278.-

SENATORAL DELEGATIONS TO THE EMPEROR for the REMOVAL  
or RESTORATION OF THE ALTAR

357	Constantius removes Altar
362-3	Julian restores it (presumed) with or without prompting by Senate
366 (ca)	Valentinian I leaves it place (presumed) 1. Petition from Christian senators (refused by Valens?)
380 (ca)	Gratian 2. Petition from Christian senators (refused)
382	Gratian removes Altar, priestly subsidies and robes of Pontifex Max. ( <i>Ep.</i> 72-3) 3. Pagan senators and Symmachus seek restoration (audience refused)
384	Valentinian (II) 4. Symmachus from senate seeks Altar, etc. restoration (refused) 5. Pagan senators seek restoration (refused) (Ambrose, <i>Ep.</i> 57.5)
389	6. To Theod (when in Milan to defeat Maximus [Ambrose, <i>Ep.</i> 57.4])
392 (ca)	Eugenius 7. Pagan delegation seeks restoration of subsidies (refused, but 'gifts' given) ( <i>Ep.</i> 57.6: 'you did not make any restitution to temples, but presented gifts to men who had deserved well of you.' 8. Another delegation for same purpose (refused) – but changed mind and restores them ( <i>Ep.</i> 57.6)
394 (ca)	Theodosius in Milan (after defeat of Eugenius presumed to have removed Altar, subsidies) 9. Pagan delegation seeks their restoration (refused) – but changed mind about subsidies

