TRACES OF CYNIC MONOTHEISM IN THE EARLY ROMAN EMPIRE

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ABSTRACT

The ancient Cynics rejected traditional religion, themselves on first appearances endorsing either atheism or agnosticism. But their criticism may also have stemmed from a radical monotheism as voiced by Antisthenes. After briefly discussing imperial Cynics and their views on religion, the article argues that the 4th letter of Pseudo-Heraclitus and the Geneva Papyrus inv. 271, Cynic texts from the Early Empire, are not contrary to the essentials of the philosophy and may represent late Hellenistic forms of the Antisthenic tradition in portraying Cynic-type sages mediating between humankind and the God of nature.

Introduction

Cynic philosophy's roots go back to the 4th century BC, but it experienced a revival approximately simultaneous with the dramatic rise of Christianity. The two movements had much in common, not least their shared criticism of traditional Greco-Roman religion. Two fundamental forces driving early Christian rejection of popular religion were belief in the one God of Judaism and a close association of his will with the rules for righteous living. It may be asked whether anything similar can be found in the Cynicism of that era. Some sources indeed suggest that the Cynics - traditionally focussing exclusively on ethics - were prepared to link their way of life to belief in a single God who provides or communicates the principles of correct conduct to the Cynic sage."
Cynicism gradually gained prominence as popular philosophy during the Roman Empire. By late antiquity, some Christian authors considered the Cynics to be their closest rivals from among the philosophical schools. If the claim may be accepted that monotheism was a prerequisite for the success of early Christianity, one may suspect that a contemporary movement with popular appeal would also have harboured thoughts on a topic of such crucial importance. This suspicion is strengthened by the Antisthenic roots of Cynicism. Antisthenes, the late 5th/early 4th century Socratic, is credited with probably the least ambiguous formulation of monotheism in all antiquity, expressed in terms of the sophistic nosos-physik antithesis. As reported by Philodemus, Antisthenes claimed in his Physics that there are many gods ‘according to custom’ (κατὰ νόμον), but only one ‘according to nature’ (κατὰ φύσιν).7

Unfortunately, evidence from Cynic literature of the Roman era is meagre and ambiguous, as reflected in the absence of an opinio communis on the issue of Cynic religion. However, indications exist of some Cynics at least who shared with the majority of ancient philosophers a belief in one God governing the universe. Before we attempt to establish the outlines of such a belief and even of a rudimentary theology, the Cynicism of the first centuries of our era and their attitude towards religion must be briefly considered.

perhaps that they apparently tended to reject traditional religion.’

3 Cf. Branham & Goulet-Cazé 1996:5: ‘the pre-eminent popular philosophy of the Roman empire.’
8 Goulet-Cazé 1996:47, 79-80 mentions the following views of modern scholars: ‘Enlightenment’ (Zeller), ‘the purest deist sect’ (Bernays), ‘colourless or strict monotheism’ (Gompertz, Malherbe) and ‘pantheism’ (Guthrie), herself preferring to label them agnostics; cf. also Malherbe 1978:47.
9 Frede 1999:56.
Cynics of the early Roman Empire

Following two low-keyed centuries, Cynicism became something of a philosophical mass movement during the early imperial period. By the 2nd century AD, Cynics were a common sight in imperial centres, as Dio and Lucian observe:

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There is no small mob of the so-called Cynics in the city (Alexandria) ... these gather at cross-roads and alleyways and temple-gates, and they deceive boys and sailors and such crowds ... They wander about the city, and stretch out their hands to beg, and beg and promise what, they say, is for the benefit of any who may happen to chance upon them, and they behold that they are deceived ever afterwards by anyone who has 

For this reason every city is filled with such knavery, particularly with those who enlist with Diogenes, Antisthenes, and Crates and are posted under the dog.

Taking into account that both these authors had Cynic sympathies, the passages reveal an apparent schism between the cultured or educated Cynics on the one hand, and the uneducated, charlatan Cynics on the other. Our sources are virtually all from the literate side of the controversy and strongly biased against the seemingly huge but voiceless group who, they claim, took to the externals of the philosophy without comprehending its intellectual core: these Cynics sported the costume, but degraded it with coarse, abusive behaviour and lack of integrity. The same authors (and others such as Seneca, Epictetus and Julian) also eulogise the early Cynics and those contemporaries they believe to be the true heirs of Diogenes, such as

10 Branham & Goulet-Cazé 1996:16. The standard treatment of the era is Goulet-Cazé 1990; more recently, Trapp 2007. Billebeek 1991a:147-48 agrees with scholars such as Zeller and Bernays that Cynicism had died out by the 2nd century BC, a view contested by others; cf. Dudley 2003:117-24; Moles 1983:122; Branham & Goulet-Cazé 1996:12 n. 34. The phenomenon is commonly regarded as a reaction against the excessive wealth and luxury of the era. The cultured version - using Cynic παρηγορία - played a significant part in the so-called philosophical resistance against Nero, Vespasian and Domitian; cf. Billebeek (above) 151.

11 Dio Chrys. Or. 32.9.

12 Lucian, Fig. 16.
Demetrius and Demonax. In the latter depictions, the famous Cynic 

dualēsia and other offensive aspects of the philosophy are deliberately 
downplayed for the purpose of social acceptance.\textsuperscript{13}

It seems unlikely, however, that our literary sources present us with a true 
picture. The Cynicism of the age should rather be viewed in terms of a con­
tinuum, including various degrees of education and extremism. The bound­
daries of the movement are ill-defined, often merging into other forms of 
popular philosophy. Their closest ties were with the Stoics, as is already 
clear from Cicero.\textsuperscript{14} First-century Stoic authors such as Seneca and 
Epictetus express genuine admiration for Cynic principles and figures; both 
their teachers (Attalus and Musonius Rufus) represented an ascetic form of 
Stoicism that could easily be mistaken for Cynicism. It appears, however, 
that the Cynics resisted late Stoic appropriation and felt in some respects 
closer to other schools of thought. Some scholars are of the opinion that by 
the second-century Cynics were probably closest to Epicureanism in respect 
of ascetic behaviour and rationalism, while others speculate that a figure like 
Peregrinus bears resemblance to neo-Pythagorean mysticism.\textsuperscript{15} In any event, 
the Cynic profile was well known in the philosophical and social landscape 
of the era; outwardly, the Cynic sage even embodied the ideal of the true 
philosopher.\textsuperscript{16}

In summary, the Cynics of the imperial age emerge from the evidence as 
a non-consolidated movement, sometimes admired – even among the 
cultured – for their uncompromising stance, their wit, lively style and literary 
inventiveness, and at other times despised – especially when represented by 
the less educated – for their shameless behaviour, intemperate demeanour 
and paucity of intellect. While a good measure of eclecticism may be 
presumed, the Cynics nonetheless wished to remain distinct from the other 
schools by reason of their strict adherence to simplicity and the dictates of 
nature, and to an outward style of radical παρηγορία, on occasion leading to a 
provocative subversion of social conventions.

\textsuperscript{13} Billerbeck 1991a.
\textsuperscript{15} Cf. Dill 1906:355; Hornsby 1991:168. That Lucian’s Cynic and Epicurean 
characters, such as Cynicus in the Zena Conf. and Damis in the Zena Trag. use the 
same arguments may be indicative of perceived closeness, although perhaps mainly 
in opposition to Stoic views on fate and religion.
\textsuperscript{16} Indicating, perhaps, that such Cynic-type figures were free to choose from the 
available philosophical repertoire supposedly compatible with Cynic austerity and 
criticism of societal norms.
The Cynics and religion

Ever since Diogenes of Sinope, the Cynics had emphasised correct living, to the neglect of other philosophical topics. In this regard, they departed from the path set by Antisthenes, who reflected on various (i.e. theological) issues. In addition to his monotheistic statement mentioned above, Antisthenes also commented on the epistemological impossibility of claiming knowledge of God by way of analogy.¹⁷ No radical break needs to be supposed, however, between Antisthenic theology and the opinion of Diogenes and his immediate followers that religious issues do not belong to the philosophical core: if the traditional views of the gods are without a solid intellectual basis, the philosopher has every right to be sceptical about cultic activities such as prayer, sacrifice and divination. Rejection of traditional cult hence flows logically from basic Cynic premises and was in fact the common denominator linking the imperial Cynics, who were known for their religious, cultic and oracular criticism in particular.¹⁸

One of the few traceable Cynic writings from the first two centuries AD is the Charlatans Exposed of Oenomaus of Gadara, quoted by Eusebius and containing an acerbic attack on Apollonian divination.¹⁹ The work must have been influential, as the emperor Julian, usually benevolent towards the Cynics, singles it out as having had a particularly devastating effect on traditional piety.²⁰ Oenomaus, who probably had links with Judaism,²¹ sets as particular target famous Delphic oracles from myth and history, while also mocking a personal experience at Claros. Oracle criticism was not restricted to the Cynics, as we find similar thoughts in the work of various authors, notably Cicero, Plutarch, Dio Chrysostom and Maximus of Tyre.²²

¹⁷ Fr. VA 181 G: ‘God is not known through an image, is not seen with the eyes, resembles no-one/nothing'; cf. also Antisth. fr. 24 Mullach. For a recent treatment of Antisthenes, see Prince 2006; also Prince 2001. For religious criticism prior to Antisthenes, cf. West 1999:32-34.
¹⁸ The ignorant religious public was parodied by Crates and Bion and satirised by Menippus and Meleager; Malherbe 1978:47; cf. Goulet-Cazé 1990:2781-82 n. 409.
¹⁹ It could originally have gone under the title κατὰ τῶν χρηστηρίων, ‘Against the oracles'; discussion in Hammerstaedt 1988; also 1990.
²⁰ Jul. Or. 6.199; 7.209.
²¹ Oenomaus, a contemporary of Hadrian, is probably identical with the Gadara philosopher Abnimos who, according to the Talmud, befriended the rabbi Meir; Hammerstaedt 1990:2836-39. Luz 1986/87 suggests that the Talmudic form was derived from Onomaos through apocopeation of an original Inomos to Nimos, to which 'Ab' was added as honorary appellation.
However, while these authors argue against the possibility of knowing the future or target the public frequenting the oracles, Oenomaus directs his invective at the oracular god himself. In this he is echoed by Lucian, whose Momus exposes Apollo as a charlatan in the Zeus Rants. The same topic is dealt with in Lucian’s Zeus Refuted, in which Cynicus forces Zeus himself to concede that the gods have no power over fate and no role to play in the lives of humans. In other works Lucian has Cynics criticise divination, disclosing that this was regarded as a Cynic domain.

Religious criticism may proceed from various attitudes and have various aims. Among other things, as Attridge notes, it may be intended to expose the folly of religion and belief in the gods in general, or to clear the way for a truer form of worship. For what reason did the Cynics criticise traditional piety: because they rejected the existence of the gods, because they considered religion to be a useless activity detracting from ethical progress, or perhaps because they regarded traditional polytheism as obstructing the way of an Antisthenic theology of a single God kata phusin?

Many figures in antiquity were accused of rejecting the gods in one way or another, but not all of these are listed as atheists. Antisthenes is not included in these typical lists, even though Cicero accuses him of stripping the gods of their essence and power. Neither is Diogenes, in spite of an anecdote having him respond to such an accusation. The anecdote is doubly attributed to Diogenes and Theodorus, well-known for his atheism, and might have accrued to the Diogenic tradition for its wit. The only

23 ‘Apollo’ to a large extent serves as textual tool to expose the true charlatans, namely the oracle officials, as the title of the work suggests and as the invective was interpreted by Eusebius. It is unlikely, however, that Oenomaus has any intentions of saving the deity from association with embarrassing cultic practices.


25 Luc. Dem. 37; Dial. mort. 9.3, 10; Nerym. 6; cf. also Plut. De Pyth. or.; Hammerstaedt 1990:2861. It should be noted that the anti-religious view in the Zeus Rants is expressed by the Epicurean character Damis.


28 Cic. De nat. deor. 1.32; Epicurus/Philodemos associates Antisthenes with the atheists Prodicus, Diagoras and Critias, but that may be interpreted polemically; cf. Obbink 1996:142-43; 359-61.


30 Double attributions also exist with the famous atheist Diagoras; cf. Malherbe 1978:48 n. 47.
other Cynic accused of atheism was Bion of Borysthenes, a student of both Diogenes and Theodorus.\footnote{On Bion’s religious views, cf. Kindstrand 1976:224-41.} Clement of Alexandria ascribes the view of Antisthenes to his Socratic allegiance, in what appears to be a deliberate attempt to divorce him from his Cynic descendants, suggesting that the Cynics were not associated with reputable theology.\footnote{Clem. Al. Prot. 6.71.} This should rather be seen in connection with a denial of proper knowledge of the divine than to a denial of its existence. Modern scholars are consequently reluctant to tag them with more than agnosticism. Even their agnostic front may be ascribed to a reluctance to be drawn into theological debate.\footnote{Kindstrand 1976:225-26 notes a general reluctance among Cynics to discuss religious issues in public and offers two possible reasons: either they considered people in general too ignorant to understand the issues involved, or they felt the matter too serious for public debate. He is less convinced of other possible explanations such as fear to be labelled atheists or their virtually exclusive focus on practical ethics. The Cynic reluctance may be construed as a form of agnosticism, at least in the public sphere; cf. Tert. Ad nat. 2.2: Diogenes consultus, quid in caelis agatur, ‘numquam’, inquit, ‘asseudi.’ Other examples and references in Kindstrand 1976:226.} It can therefore not be excluded that the movement retained some form of theistic belief.

A number of reasons may be put forward for Cynic aversion to traditional piety and cultic practices. The Hellenistic schools tended to impose their own ideals on the gods, hence the Stoic supreme divinity of pure reason, and the Epicurean gods minding their own business. Likewise, should the Cynics have rejected not the existence of God, but only knowledge about him, their God would be so self-sufficient (αυτάρκης) as not to need religiosity from humans.\footnote{Agnosticism does not per definition reject belief. The notion covers a range of positions; agnostic theism, for example, regards the existence of God/the gods likely, but denies the possibility of knowledge beyond that.}

Cynic criticism of religious practices and divination furthermore served to differentiate them from the Stoics, in particular from Stoic determinism and accommodation of traditional cultic practices. In the Stoic system, since the gods represent constituents of the rational cosmos, there is no need for their removal; in the predetermined Stoic universe oracles are not hoaxes by definition, as the future can in principle be known. In contrast, Cynic ethics are based on nature, and on the will and effort of the individual to attain virtue.\footnote{Malherbe 1978:51.} Instead of aligning themselves with fate as the Stoics did, the Cynics opposed fate with courage (θάρσος) in the same way that they placed νόμος.
and φύσις, and the passions and reason in opposition. While nature was a fundamental concept within the philosophy, the Cynics gave it little theoretical consideration, and there is no evidence that they deified nature as the Stoics did.

It may be concluded that, even though the early Cynics refrained from making epistemological claims about God/the gods, some form of theistic conception is not incompatible with their thinking, the most likely being that of the ‘one god κατὰ φύσιν’ as expressed by Antisthenes. In imperial Cynic literature, a slight change may be observed from the generally negative attitude of the early Cynics towards religion. References to God are fairly numerous in the Cynic epistles and there are even signs of monotheistic rephrasing of Cynic material. May this be indicative of a resurgence of Antisthenic monotheism within the tradition? An analysis of two texts, generally held by scholars to be of Cynic origin, casts some light on the nature and context of such a belief.

Ps.-Heracleitus, Ep. 4

The Cynic epistles attributed to Heraclitus form part of the larger body of pseudonymous Cynic letters. They are usually regarded as popular moralising written by Cynic authors for various educational and propagandistic reasons; as a body, they can be dated from around the turn of the era. The fourth epistle provides specific evidence for this dating, as in a vaticinium post eventum the author predicts that in 500 years Heraclitus (late 6th/early 5th century BC) will still be alive, but his opponent forgotten (Ps.-Her. 4.9-12).

The Cynic affinity with Heraclitus lies not so much in his philosophy as in his cultural criticism and (idealised) lifestyle. The former includes criticism of cultic activities, hostility towards the mysteries, and contempt for dead bodies and burial rites; the latter his austerity deriving from knowledge of the true nature of things. The fourth epistle provides some hints on how all of these relate to divinity. The letter, addressed to Hermodorus,

36 D.L. 6.38. Seneca observes in Dial. 10.14.2 that, while the Stoic attempts to overcome human nature (hominis naturam vincer), the Cynic tries to transcend it (hominis naturam excedere).
37 Cf. D.L. 6.37: τῶν θεῶν ἔστι πάντα: φίλοι δὲ οἱ σοφοὶ τῶν θεῶν κοινὰ δὲ τὰ τῶν φιλων. πάντ' ἄρα ἔστι τῶν σοφῶν (cf. also D.L. 6.72) with Ps.-Crates, Ep. 27.1: Διογένης ὁ κύων ἔλεγε πάντα τῶν θεῶν καὶ κοινὰ τὰ τῶν φιλων, ὡστε πάντα εἶναι τοῦ σπουδάσου. Inconsistent references in the singular and plural to god/the gods are, however, common in ancient literature.
38 Attridge 1976:4-5.
complains of an accusation of impiety against the philosopher, who was accused of attempting to acquire divine status by inscribing his name on an altar. Such false allegations, according to the author, are to be expected, since his (Heraclitus's) views about the gods differ from those commonly held. The charge of impiety, the letter states, should rather be turned against his accusers, namely, those with misconceptions about the true nature of God and where he may be found. In the context of finding traces of monotheism, two passages from the letter are of particular interest:

You ignorant men, teach us first what God is, so that you may be trusted when you talk of being impious. And where is God? Shut up in the temples? Pious indeed you are, who set up God in darkness! A man takes exception when said to be like stone; can a god then be properly honoured with this title: 'born from cliffs'? You uneducated men, don't you know that God is not handmade, never had a pedestal nor a single enclosure, but that the whole cosmos is his temple, adorned with animals, plants, and stars?

Euthycles, am not I, who alone know God, the pious one, while you are both insolent to think you know and godless to think what he is not? If a god doesn't have an altar, is he not a god? If an altar is set up to what is not a god, does it then become one, so that stones are proof for gods? In fact, his works testify to what he is like. Do not night and day bear witness to him? The seasons are his witnesses; the whole fruit-bearing earth is his witness. The circle of the moon, his handicraft, is his heavenly testimony.

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40 Ps.-Her. 4:10-18.
41 Ps.-Her. 4. 20-26, adapted from Attridge 1976:61.
Both passages have since Bernays often been regarded as Jewish or Christian interpolations, but such theories have now been definitively laid to rest, allowing us to regard them as authentically Cynic. The letter fills some lacunae left by the religious criticism attributed to the Cynics of the era, demonstrating that their critical stance could be accompanied by positive theology. The god referred to by Heraclitus does not accord with any of the traditional Greek divinities. This creator-god is independent from and not containable by places and objects of cult; his real abode is creation itself, not those places designated or desecrated by humans. Furthermore, his true nature can be deduced by observing the rhythms of nature, the earth bearing food, the circular form of the moon. A full complement of the aspects of God’s nature hinted at is not altogether obvious, but would include dependability (the regular patterns of night following day and the unfaltering succession of seasons) and his provision of basic requirements for sustenance. The perfectly spherical form of the moon presumably indicates its divine creation, in other words gives testimony of his very existence. In typical Cynic fashion, however, the author refrains from speculation and doctrinal elaboration, sticking to what is plainly at hand.

While the Cynic Heraclitus claims this knowledge of God to be unique to himself, such ideas were in fact widely held, in both biblical and pagan traditions. Old Testament notions of knowing God through nature go back to pre-exilic literature; one may think of passages such as Ps. 19:2-7 and Ps. 8. Similar notions, such as criticism of cultic practices as not being worthy of the real God, the world as God’s temple, worship of God as possible only for those who really know God, the superiority of internal religiosity, and a mystic piety arising from awe of God through contemplation of his creation were held during the time of the Roman Empire. In one respect the Cynics do seem to be unique in their conceptions of piety, encapsulated in the unique relationship between the Cynic sage and the God of nature stemming from the link between knowledge of God and proper ethical behaviour. Malherbe argues that the argument contains implicit justification for the divinisation of the Cynic sage: just as Heracles attained divinity by his virtue and by completing his labours, Heraclitus was also victorious over pleasures, money, ambition, cowardice, flattery, and a list of other typically Cynic enemies. The moral superiority of the Cynic sage, his individual barde

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43 Lurking behind these observations might be Heraclitus’s doctrine of the harmony of opposites, which had a profound influence on Stoicism especially; cf. Long 1975/76:132-53; Thom 2005:22-24, 104-12.
44 Cf. for instance Cic. De nat. deor. 1.100.
against and victory over the vices, allows him to claim knowledge of God not available to all.

The divinity emerging from the letter is a single God known from the events and the providence of nature. At the same time, the letter advocates the exceptional status of the Cynic in relation to God, gained through authentic piety and observance of the true nature of God, even possibly amounting to his divinisation by overcoming the obstacles to virtue.

Pap. Geneva inv. 271

The topics of communing with the God of nature, moral accomplishment and special status are again encountered in another Cynic text from the imperial age: a papyrus fragment dated to the early 2nd century AD or earlier, containing material dealing with the conversation between the Indian sage Dandamis and Alexander the Great. The Cynic credentials of the fragment are established not only by content, but also by the fact that the papyrus continues with the seventh letter of Ps.-Heraclitus.45

The tradition of an encounter between Alexander and the gymnosophists originated with Onesicritus, pupil of Diogenes. From there it had a long and varied history, appearing in various guises in – among others – Plutarch, Arrian, the Alexander Romance and writings attributed to a fifth-century churchman named Palladius, whose text has evidently been reworked to reflect a Christian view.46 In its later forms, the encounter consists largely of speeches by the leader of the gymnosophists explaining their way of life along strongly Cynic lines: the rejection of social life and worldly power, the advocacy of simplicity and self-sufficiency and of the barest of shelter and sustenance as provided by nature itself.47 A striking feature of the Geneva papyrus, however, is its theological grounding for the ascetic life. References to divinity are frequent: in the remaining fragments alone, the word theós occurs seventeen times, thirteen of which are in the singular. Dandamis dismisses Alexander’s claim to divinity by referring to the only real God,

47 The story was always thought to contain Cynic ideas, a suspicion confirmed by the discovery of the Geneva papyrus. The Indian ‘naked philosophers’, soon quite removed from the real Brahmans on whom they were based, became models of sorts to the Greco-Roman Cynics. They were seen as perfectly incarnating the life of ἀνδρόπετα and conformation with nature, at the same time fully rejecting civilised life by living outside cities, eating only what nature provided, and wearing no clothes at all; cf. Muckensturm 1993:239.
namely the one who receives the souls of men after death. The exclusivity of
the claim to divinity already implies radical monotheism. The sage goes
further to state that he is the friend and the ally of this God. He encourages
Alexander to learn from him wisdom, which amounts to the removal of
desire:

οὐδὲν ἐπιθυμῶ· τοῦτο παρ’ ἐμοὶ μᾶθε σοφὸν· μηδὲν βέλε καὶ σῶν
πάν· ἐπιθυμία μήτηρ ἐστὶ πενής, κακῶι φαρμάκα· ἡ ἐκρατευομένη
λύπη, πλούτισες ὡς ἐγώ, ἐὰν μοι προσέξῃς, κτήσῃς τα ἐμὰ
ἀγαθὰ, θεὸς μοὶ φίλος· ... κακῶι ἀνθρώπων ὡς ἀκοῦω, οὐρανὸς
μοι στέγη, γῇ πάσα στρώμα, ποταμοὶ πάντες διάκοιοι, ἕλαι
τράπεζα.

I desire nothing: Learn this wisdom from me: want nothing, and you
have everything. Desire is the mother of poverty, it treats pain with
bad medicine. You will be rich like me, if you attach yourself to me,
you will acquire my good things. God is my friend ... I do not listen
to wicked people. Heaven is my roof, the whole earth my bed, all the
rivers my servants, the woods my table.

ζητεῖς ὃ ἐγὼ οἶδα σοφὸν, ὃς βλέπεις, ὃς γεγραμμα ζῶ, ὃς
ἐτέχθης· ὁ θεὸς ποιεῖ ἐξήλθαι. ἢ τις δὲ ἡμετεροὶ γενεσθαι
διμβορυς, λοιμοῦς, κεραυνοῦς, αὐχείως, λιμοῦς· ἐγὼ δὲ
προβλέπω τοὺς, ποθεν, καὶ διὰ τὰ ταῦτα βίγγεσαί, [καὶ τοῦτο
λαμ] εὔφρατεῖ με, ὅτι ὁ θεὸς τῶν ἰδίων ἐργαλ. [ἐμὲ σύμμαχον
πεποίηκεν.]

You are looking for what I consider wisdom. As you see, I live as I
was born, as I was brought into the world. I know what God does.
While you wonder what is to happen, rainstorms, plagues, lightning,
lighting, and famine, I foresee how, from where, why these things
happen. And this delights me greatly, that God has made me an ally
of his own deeds.

Austere self-sufficiency had been the Cynic ideal since Diogenes and Crates,
and was the very feature that made the Indian gymnosophists into Cynic
models. Its foundation had been strict adherence to the dictates of nature
and its goal – like Socratic philosophy in general – the good life and
happiness. A theological grounding for ἀὐτάρκεια is novel in a Cynic
context, even when from the mouth of an Indian sage. It is on the basis of
his intimate knowledge of God and through his life of total dependence on
God’s care, that Dandamis knows the rules for correct ethical living. But the

ascetic life, in its turn, also contributes to this intimate familiarity with God, as there is nothing to distract, nothing that can turn the mind and the soul’s eye away from God:

[Ev τεχνόμια διάγοντες. χαίρομεν; τέν ἐρημίας, τέν μέσοις καθεξήμονει δένδρεισιν. ἔπι τοῦ θεοῦ προσέχομεν νῦν, ἵνα μὴ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ὁμοίως ψυχὴ ἤπει θεόν περιπάτησιν ὀρθαλίζως ... οὐ χρείαν ἔχομεν πάμιν ἔχειν, σύνοδον ἐπιμολίουν ἀνδρῶν.]

We continue to live without worry. We rejoice in living in desolate places amongst the trees. We keep the mind on God, so that intercourse with people does not distract the eyes of the soul from God. We do not need a city, a gathering of people plotting together.

The text places less emphasis on the moral struggle against vice than the Heraclitus epistle; rather, it preaches detachment from the corrupting influence of society resulting in radical freedom and minimal want. It thus gives us a clue as to how the Cynics regarded the interrelationship between God, nature and the ethical life: through contemplation of nature, they gain a pure knowledge of the God who created all and who provides all they need, simultaneously convincing them of the folly of those who think to attain happiness by satisfying their desires. It is the Cynic’s profound connection with nature that renders possible his special relationship with the creator, and that gives him privileged knowledge of and communion with this God.

God in Epictetus’s depiction of the ideal Cynic

As a final text for consideration, we turn to the depiction of the ideal Cynic by the late first-century Stoic, Epictetus. The fact that Epictetus resorts to a Cynic ideal is something of an enigma, raising questions as to Cynic influence on his thought and his ability to portray authentic Cynicism. In the context of this research, can one deduce anything about first-century Cynic religiosity from Epictetus’s bowdlerised depiction? There are three main reasons why I suggest one can. Firstly, perhaps most contestably,

50 Col. IV.28-50; Martin 1959:90. The fragment also contains elements difficult to reconcile with traditional Cynic thinking, such as the sage’s ability to predict natural events and disasters, the immortality of his soul, and God exacting justice on earth. These foreign elements may have been thought to be Brahman ideas, or should simply be ascribed to eclecticism in popular moralising.

51 Pace Billerbeck 1996:207, who concludes that Epictetus’s essay ‘contains nothing that qualifies as exclusively Cynic.’
Epictetus’s thought – though remaining Stoic through and through – does show some peculiar deviations from orthodoxy which may be due to Cynic influence. These include his emphasis on autonomous volition as opposed to typical Stoic determinism, his disregard for metaphysics, doctrines and technicalities, and his preference for theistic rather than pantheistic language in his treatment of the divine.\textsuperscript{52} Secondly, Epictetus deliberately creates room for himself to remain true to the authentic Cynic by not setting this Cynic up as the norm for moral behaviour to the general populace: for these, Stoic principles suffice. But the Cynic sage is something apart, the έξαίρετον, with a special calling and for whom special (Cynic) rules apply.\textsuperscript{53} It follows that Epictetus is free not to cast his sage in a strictly Stoic mould, even though he would naturally not contradict his own thought. Thirdly, as will emerge from the following discussion, Epictetus’s depiction displays some remarkable similarities to, and indeed reinforces the contours of the two Cynic texts already discussed.

The treatment of the true Cynic’s calling in 3.22 begins with both a statement about the sage’s dependence on God and an analogy between the cosmos and a household, all run by a single final command. On being asked what sort of man the Cynic ought to be, Epictetus replies:

σκεφόμεθα κατά σχολήν τοσούτον δ’ έχω σοι εἶπεν, ὅτι ο άχα θεοῦ τηλικοῦτο πράγματι ἐπιβάλλωμενος θεοχάλκωτος ἐστι καὶ οὐδὲν ἄλλο ή δημοσία θέλει ἀσχημονεῖν, οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐν οἷς καλὸς οἰκουμένη παρελθὼν τις αὐτὸς ἐαυτῷ λέγει ἐμὲ δει οἰκωνόμον εἶναι, ἐι δε μῆ, ἐπιστραφεῖς ο κύριος καὶ ιδὼν αὐτὸν σοφοῖς διατασάμενοι, ἐλκύσας ἐγεμεν. οὕτως γίνεται καὶ ἐν τῇ μεγάλῃ ταύτῃ πόλει, ἐστι γὰρ τις καὶ ἐνθάδε οἰκοδεσπότης ἐκαστά ο διατάσσων.

We will consider it at length, but this I have to tell you, that he who devotes himself to such a great task without God is under the wrath of God and wishes nothing else but to disgrace himself in public. For in a well-ordered house someone does not simply come by and say to himself, ‘I must be in charge here.’ For the lord of the house, turning and seeing him pompously giving orders, will drag him out and cut him to pieces. So it goes also in this great city; for here as well, there is a master of the house who manages everything.\textsuperscript{54}


\textsuperscript{54} Epict. 3.22.1-5.
From the following passage emerge the special status and high requirements set for the Cynic philosopher, in what can only be described as a divine mission. The Cynic sage is called by Zeus to be his messenger (ἀγγελός) and scout (κατάσκοπος):

εἰδότ' οὗτος παρασκευάζωμεν οὐκ ἔστι τούτως ἀρκεῖσθαι τὸν ταῖς ἀληθείαις Κυρικῶν, ἀλλ' εἰδέναι δεῖ, ὅτι ἄγγελος ἁπό τοῦ Δίως ἀπεστάλτη καὶ πρὸς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους περὶ ἄγαθῶν καὶ κακῶν ὑποδεικνύων αὐτοῖς, ὅτι πεπλάνυται καὶ ἄλαχοι ζητοῦσι τὴν ὀφθαλμών τοῦ ἄγαθον καὶ τοῦ κακοῦ, ὅπου οὐκ ἔστιν, ὅπου δὲ ἔστιν, οὐκ ἐνιαυτοῦσι, καὶ ὅς ὁ Διογένης ... κατάσκοπος εἶναι.

Furthermore, even when so prepared the true Cynic cannot rest contented with this, but he must know that he is a messenger, sent from Zeus to humans to show them regarding good and bad, that they have strayed and are seeking the essence of good and bad somewhere else, where it is not, but where it actually is, they do not consider; and as Diogenes ... a scout.55

As suggested by the passage itself, these and other metaphors of self-definition go back to Cynic roots.56 The sage is called to tell the people how and where they have gone astray. It is Zeus who sends him into the world; the hardships he suffers are the exercises of God to have him live his calling properly; his freedom from obligations towards family serves to free him from distraction and allows him to be fully devoted to the service of God.57 Much like the Old Testament prophet, or the Hellenistic/Late-Antique holy man, the scout of God holds the exceptional position of broker of divine truth to the rest of mankind.58 This position explains the need for the Cynic’s asocial, solitary behaviour, and the ‘extraordinary demands on its practitioner.59

Epictetus’s depiction of ultimate divinity is strikingly personalist.60 From the start but particularly since Cleanthes, Stoicism had displayed theistic tendencies, giving exceptional status to the supreme divinity who is simultaneously nature, reason, cause and mind.61 Epictetus, by no means consistently monotheistic, treats the Stoic divine principle with such piety and warmth that parallels with the New Testament authors have often been

55 Epict. 3.22.23.
56 Schofield 2004:454. Other designations are μάρτυς (witness) and κηφής (herald).
57 Epict. 3.22.69.
60 Long 2002:147.
drawn. The Zeus we encounter in connection with the true Cynic is not solely the providential deity, but personalised, reminiscent of the Zeus of popular religion. It is possible that the link between abstract deity and accommodated piety contributed to the language used by the Stoics, and by Epictetus in particular. Cynics or Cynic-styled Stoics who either rejected or downplayed a rigidly deterministic universe, could find easier connection with this personalised Zeus than with the deification of all reality.

The question remains whether this Zeus is the product of the language used by Epictetus, or whether he was aware of Cynics who espoused a similar conception and grounding for the calling of the sage. We have now seen two other instances of such a theological clothing of the Cynic calling, indicating that this was not an Epictetan invention. Epictetus’s own treatment also suggests that the ideal Cynic was known to answer exclusively to the calling of a single deity, the one which Epictetus identifies as Zeus:

What to a Cynic is Caesar, or a proconsul, or anyone other than he who has sent him and whom he serves, that is, Zeus? Does he call upon anyone but Zeus? And is he not convinced that whatever of these he might suffer, it is Zeus who is exercising him?

Without over-emphasising non-Cynic evidence, it appears that Epictetus’s depiction of the true Cynic leans on existing ideas about the relationship between the Cynic sage and a single deity, whom the Stoic naturally identifies with the supreme god in his divine hierarchy. Epictetus’s sage, like the Cynic Heraclitus and the gymnosophist Dandamis, considers himself to be engaged in an intimate relationship with this single theistic entity standing in close relationship to nature, but not fully identified with the cosmos itself. This intimate relationship renders the sage privy to the true ethical life katà φύσιν.

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62 Billerbeck 1978:8 regards the religious conception of the Cynic calling to be Epictetus’s own creation; so also Du Toit 1997:139 n. 79.
63 Epict 3.22.56, adapted from Oldfather 1928:151.
Conclusion

The evidence suggests that the Cynicism of the early Roman Empire might have exerted a greater influence on the spread of monotheism than is usually assumed. Cynicism appears to have been significantly visible, and had followers in many parts of the Roman Empire, particularly in the east. Even early Christians shared some of its tenets and in late antiquity the two movements contended for market share. While the early Cynics considered religion to be of peripheral importance, their imperial successors were known for their criticism of traditional religion. This poses the question of what their point of departure and aim were: did they reject religion as such, or did their criticism arise from their own theology or even piety? In other words, did the monotheism of Antisthenes manage to survive into the empire? It appears that Cynicising Stoics such as Epictetus were inclined towards theistic conceptions of God often difficult to reconcile with school Stoicism, which might reflect conceptions popularly held by Cynics. This suspicion is confirmed by some Cynic texts, which reflect conceptions of a single God to be known from nature. Such conceptions are certainly compatible with the basic tenets of Cynicism, such as disregard for theoretical and metaphysical speculation, and nature as basis for developing all further positions, including theology and ethics.

At the same time, the notion of the Cynic sage who occupies a special position of mediator between God and humans, the ally of God himself, recurs in various guises: the wise man who claims unique knowledge of God, Epictetus's scout and messenger, and the Indian sage who rejects civilisation in order to commune directly with the creator. Antisthenic monotheism appears to have exerted either continued influence on Cynic thinking, or renewed influence in Cynic circles of the Roman Empire. Such influence extended to both cultic criticism and a single God known through contemplation of nature. Due to the movement's particular conception of philosophy, textual evidence is far from abundant. However, the texts available to us display such coherence and similarity that we may assume them to be representative of more widely held views.

Bibliography


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