‘Part heathen, part Christian’: Recording Transitions and Amalgamations of Belief Systems in Constantine Cavafy’s Poetry

PRE-PRINT

Sanja Bahun

Constantine Cavafy was neither a religious nor a mythological poet in the traditional sense of these terms. A Greek Orthodox Christian, Egyptiote Cavafy attended liturgies (albeit not regularly), keenly read ecclesiastical history, hagiographies of saints, sages and miracle-workers of all faiths, and, as a young writer, mounted a spirited attack on Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1789) for its critique of monotheistic religions and misinterpretation of Byzantine history. Yet, he was mostly silent on any religious feelings he might have had, and his mature depictions of religion are often underwritten by irony and anxiety about the abuse of religion for political causes. A few valuable studies have attempted to read Cavafy’s poetry and prose through the lens of the ‘religious attitudes’ discernible in his opus, notably, his interest in modern mysticism and esotericism, revived Gnosticism, and the lives of Early Christian Fathers.[1] However, most scholars have conceded that the weight of ‘Cavafy persona’ – that multi-layered, observing-ironic-emotive voice that dominates his poetry – is such that it renders any ‘genuine’ religious affect hard to discern and that the scrutiny of the poet’s theological viewpoints leads only to a ‘well-informed but rather inconsistent set of conclusions.’[2] When Cavafy engages

[1] The only recorded exception comes from an early letter to his brother John Cavafy, where Constantine, then living as an evacuee in Istanbul, denounces secularism (24 October 1882), cited in Diana Haas, *Le probleme religieux dans l’ oeuvre de Cavafy: Les annees de formation (1882- 1905)* (Paris: Presses de l’Universite de Paris- Sorbonne, 1996), 13. For a range, see Evangelia Papachristou-Panou, *Το χριστιανικό βίωμα του Κ. Π. Καβάφη: δοκίμιο* (Athens: Iolkos, 1974); Yiannis Dalas, *Ο ελληνισμός και η θεολογία στον Καβάφη* (Athens: Stigmi, 1986); Vassilis Adrahtas, ‘Cavafy’s Poetica Gnostica in Quest of Christian Consciousness,’ *Modern Greek Studies* (Australia and New Zealand), 11: Pages on C. P. Cavafy, ed. Vrasidas Karalis and Michael Tsianikas (2003): 122-133. Biographically, see Robert Liddell, *Cavafy: A Critical Biography* (London: Duckworth, 1974).

[2] Adrahtas, 122.

religion, it is less as a religious poet than as a poetic record-keeper of religious expression and its effects on the believing and the non-believing. Noting the deification of the poet-seer and of the labour of creative (re)production in his opus, some scholars have identified Cavafy's 'true religion' precisely in his commitment to aesthetic record-keeping. 'Although religion, morality […] are treated ironically and are often repudiated in Cavafy's poetry,' Gregory Jusdanis writes, 'aesthetics is never questioned and is venerated with religious conviction.'[3] At least one commentator and fellow-writer labelled this belief position an 'ascetic Epicureanism'.[4] As it happens, the tension between askesis (of intellectual work, or creative production, of religious piety; and, metonymically, the figure of the hermit) and the erotic pulls of the body (of inherent human licentiousness, of morphology of Beauty, of creative production again; metonymically, the figure of the mystic) is also the most mercilessly scrutinized theme in Cavafy's poetry.

I honour this wealth of scholarship on Cavafy and religion but note the variety of inconsistent conclusions it produced. Cavafy is hard to compartmentalise, I suggest, because his engagement with religion was rooted in his own lived experience and interest in the experience of others (including temporally distant others); and experience, we know, is messy. I notice a different positionality and task for the poet-seer in his output: as a participant-observer. Complementing his effort to reconceive aesthetic-ascetic experience as an ontology, and in line with his self-appointment as a recorder of human experience in history, Cavafy was a forceful (if sometimes dubitably informed) amateur-ethnographer and amateur-historian of religion.[5] He was particularly intrigued by interfaith reciprocities,

---

[3] Gregory Jusdanis, *The Poetics of Cavafy: Textuality, Eroticism, History* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987), 85–6.

[4] Nikos Kazantzakis, *Journeying: Travels in Italy, Egypt, Sinai, Jerusalem, and Cyprus* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1975), 74.

[5] A cautionary note must be made on Cavafy as a historian (of religion, culture, politics). While an admirable portion of his poetry concerns historical events, persons and legends, and his poems, by dint of their precision and palimpsestic referencing, often project an aspiration to factual veracity, Cavafy is neither historian nor historical poet. He was little concerned with the questions of objectivity and quandaries of historical causes and

crosspollination of religious and mythic frameworks, their sedimentation in lived and recorded memory, and the ways interreligious exchanges could be deployed aesthetically; more interested in these hybridities, I maintain, than in any religion or mythology by itself. Further, Cavafy's poems - palimpsests of successive mythic, historical, and religious texts across more than twenty centuries – articulate the varied models of belief-knowledge production, structure of belief-affects, and everyday practices and interreligious exchanges overwhelmingly focus on one specific region: the stretch from Antioch to Alexandria, his home-place. He obsessively returns to the key moments of transition and transformation of communities and belief systems in this region – those in which the Egyptian belief system interacted with the ancient Hellenes' beliefs and practices, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and further, the transitional moment in which he himself lived, where the varied models of belief and unbelief interacted and attached themselves to the political future of Egypt.

Studies of modernism, religion, and myth often focus on the individual modernist's engagement with a particular belief system (e.g., modernist Catholicism, theology of ontological uncertainty) or their interest in comparative religion (late nineteenth century syncretism), treating these as distinct responses to contemporary history. In this essay I use Cavafy to engage a complementary set of questions: the modernists' compulsion to take stock of different belief systems and their interrelation over *longue durée*; their examination of the effects that belief transitions have on the embodied experiences of those living through them; and their efforts to explore the ideological and representational challenges of lived syncretism. The last is a particular interest of mine. When modernist scholars engage syncretic phenomena, like anthroposophy or revival of Gnosticism, they (often rightly) treat them as variants of an essentialising 'natural religion' or attempts to establish an aestheticized

consequences, of single and multiple events, and significance hierarchies. But his attention to the history of the everyday and the unseen facets of official history makes him, we shall see, a new breed of poet of history.

world theology, and, unwittingly, deprive them of those experiential particulars – gestures, material forms, traditions, customs, and patterns of behaviour – through which a religion is mediated and performed in particular settings and particular literary chronotopes. Thinking through the performance of hybrid belief systems and cultural identities in moments and spaces of transition, like early twentieth century Alexandria, and with the help of Cavafy's poetry, I aim to shift the focus towards these neglected areas.

Religion and Inter-religion

Claims to perpetuity and purism form the heart of many religions and mythologies. For this reason, scholars of religion have a natural tendency to explore religion as a belief system that exists, as systems do, somewhat abstractly, outside time; a system that can therefore be most usefully examined at the level of ideas and principles and the predetermined flows of tradition deemed to be expressive of these ideas and principles. When transposed onto the interpretation of artworks, this stance translates into a hunt for the traces of religious ideas and principles in creative texts. Such an approach is not only valid but also necessary. Yet, it often occludes the historicity and operation of a religious or mythological framework as a *living* system; troublingly, it favours religious tradition and conceptualisation over religious participants' agency.[6] The scholarship on modernism and religion occasionally falls prey to conceiving the history of religion as free from human agency, too: it privileges the discussion of the conceptual content of religions and their blends over the ethnographic practices and experiences modernists may have been enmeshed in—rites, rituals, sights, sounds, and smells of the places of worship.[7] This lack of focus on the everyday history of religious interaction

[6] Marilyn Robinson Waldman, Olabiyi Babalola Yai, and Lamin Sanneh, 'Translatability: A Discussion,' *Journal of Religion in Africa* 22, no. 2 (1992): 159–72.

[7] This is so irrespective of the known fact that, for many modernists, it was precisely the experiential content of a religion that influenced their practice and sometimes led to their engagement with religious activities. Instances abound, as seen, for example, in the chapters by Anderson (on ritual in women's writing), Callison (on retreats) and Vetter (on HD) in this volume.

leads to another problem. Because of the unwarranted assumption that each system is homogenous, a loaded record of religious clashes, and overreliance on the official annals of ecclesiastic histories, it is easy to assume that religious systems fully replace each other or that they subsist independently from or in an eternal conflict with each other. Cavafy scholarship is no exception. His opus has been routinely interpreted within the conceptual parameters of a homogenous religious framework (Greek Orthodox Christianity), even when the actual theme, tone, and language make such focalisation questionable. Cavafy's texts themselves, however, consistently probe what seemingly monolithic conceptual principles and grand historical occurrences (e.g., the destruction or building of a temple or a bishop's behaviour) mean for ordinary people, and what existential and psychological effects exposure to inter-religiosity has on believers and their leaders. They paint a picture of religion not as a conceptual system but an experiential and emplaced practice. Ethno-anthropologically understood, this vision is correct: a community's religion or belief system is a complex of practices, dispositions, charismatic roles, and traditions materialized through actual gestures in an actual place, or places; this is how a religion is made 'recognizable, sensible, indigenous, and authoritative.'[8] Understood in this way, a religious complex necessarily lives and interacts, within the same place or at different places, with other practices, dispositions, charismas, and customs. With or without the approval of its authorities, on the ground, a religious complex is based on and nurtured by syncretism.

Tellingly, the contemporary notion of syncretism derives from the nineteenth century assessments of the Hellenistic culture in the Middle East and Egypt.[9] Although the term was initially used neutrally, syncretism quickly became a contentious category, often taken to

[8] David Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt: Syncretism and Local Worlds in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), xiv.
[9] As often referenced, the contemporary notion of syncretism derives from Johann Gustav Droysen's description of the Hellenistic culture as 'the east and west mixture of people' in *Geschichte des Hellenismus*, 2 vols (Hamburg: Friedrich Perthes, 1836).

imply ‘inauthenticity’ or a contamination or corruption of a notionally ‘pure’ religion by symbols and meanings belonging to other traditions. Noticeable in this interpretation of syncretism is the urge to treat discrete contents in a religious amalgam hierarchically and belittle the impact of, especially, indigenous cultures and local belief systems – a tendency that originates in, Charles Stewart writes, European anxieties about racial, cultural, and linguistic purity, reinvigorated in the nineteenth century by the emergence of ethnically diverse states in North America.[10] The same context, however, gave birth to the ascription of affirmative meanings to syncretism, in particular, among early modernist thinkers and artists, espousal of a synthetic, natural, ‘personal religion’ (William James’s 1902 *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is a well-known monument to this endeavour). It is this type of syncretic imagination that begat neo-Gnosticism and anthroposophy and fuelled the insouciant mixing of diverse, even incompatible, belief systems in the texts of modernists as different as Mina Loy, W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, H.D., and Andrei Bely. Concerned with channelling disparate manifestations into a system of correspondences, this kind of syncretism also paradoxically relieved some purists’ anxieties: pursuits of ‘natural, ‘personal religion’ honouring a common transcendence flatten out the heteroglossia inherent to syncretic social compositions and tone down the difference in religious custom, behaviour, robe, expression. Syncretic belief forms like theosophy presented themselves as whole, coherent, authentic, and superior to other religions precisely on the grounds of their synthesizing capacity, sometimes transmogrifying from hyper-syncretistic systems into anti-syncretic behaviours.

Yet, syncretism could be understood in a different way, too. Already in 1933 phenomenologist of religion Gerardus Van der Leeuw observed that syncretism was, in fact,

[10] Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, ‘Introduction: Problematizing Syncretism,’ *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, ed. Stewart and Shaw (London: Routledge, 1995), 16.

a practical feature of all religions.[11] All religious forms, David Frankfurter writes more recently, involve endless '*bricolages*, combinations and recombinations of symbols, conducted in the home and the workshop, at the shrine and by the ritual expert.'[12] On this view, syncretism emerges as an emplaced practice of living in the world, one that accounts for present and past patterns of sociability, transfers of meanings, questions of political power and symbolic capital, and cross- and inculturation that happens both systematically and haphazardly. It encompasses the ways in which a religion 'lives' syncretically and is acted out through a complex grid of knowing or unwitting agents, within an area or across areas and real or imagined communities.[13] An agency-based, emplaced perspective on syncretism is illuminating. It reveals that seemingly archaic religious elements often persist not as survivals of a bygone religious expression but as strategically implemented building blocks for the new religion;[14] that religious bricolages may signal cultural survival and resistance to colonial hegemony;[15] that amalgamation can be consciously utilised to authorize an emerging social group or political entity (as in, for example, the incorporation of ancient Greek beliefs into Greek Orthodox Christianity, nationalist discourse and new folklore during Greek independence war, 1821-1829);[16] and, of specific relevance to Cavafy, that syncretism presents not a corruption of religion by 'inferior' indigenous elements but a multidirectional process of social interpenetration where equally valued agents interact and reshape each other across long time-spans.

---

[11] Gerardus Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation: A Study in Phenomenology*, trans. J. E. Turner (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1938 [1933]), 609.
[12] Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt*, 15.
[13] Stewart and Shaw, 'Introduction,' 16.
[14] Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt*; Stewart and Shaw.
[15] Some modernists used their 'lived syncretism' strategically to create the processes of organic 'interculture'; see James Clifford (on Aimé Cesaire), *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988), 14-15.
[16] On these efforts, see Charles Stewart, 'Syncretism as a Dimension of Nationalist Discourse in Modern Greece,' Stewart and Shaw, 127-144.

Recombining Powers and Names of Gods: Alexandria, Egypt, longue durée

How did these categories—religious pluralism, interfaith reciprocities, syncretism, interpenetration of belief systems—operate as material gestures within the real and imaginary landscape in and about which Cavafy was writing? Egypt has a long history of the interanimation and crossbreeding of peoples, customs, belief systems and everyday religious practices. Ancient Near East peoples migrated intensely, transporting with them beliefs and deities, and Egyptian polytheistic system was itself mobile: popular religion often contested the institutionalized Pharaonic practice, individual deities rose, waned, and intertwined to create new gods and goddesses (for example, Amon-Ra), iconographies or their bans. The belief territory was further heterogenized in the period of 4thBC-7thAD, when ancient Egyptian beliefs and marginalised religious and folkloric practices, like the cult of Isis, came to interact closely with imperially imported Greek and Roman polytheistic religions and solidifying Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the Hellenistic era, these processes engendered self-consciously syncretic forms like Gnosticism and Manichaeism, and created hubs of religious interaction, like Cavafy's hometown, Alexandria (founded in 331BC), where 'priests, intellectuals, artists and prophets creatively assimilated deities of different heritages through iconography and new languages of invocation.'[17] Alexandria has been the place of constant imperial, cultural and religious interactions—bellicose, amicable, or 'judiciously integrative,' as Cavafy describes them in 'In 200 BC' (1931)—ever since.[18] Coptic Christianity took a distinct shape there, admixing the components of Pharaonic, Jewish, Arabic, and Zoroastrian religious practices, which proved incompatible with the dogmas of the Council of Chalcedon (651); and, while the city became majorly Muslim

[17] Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt*, 15.
[18] On the history of the region, see William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, sixth edition (Boulder: Westview Press, 2016), esp. 76-96 and 184-205.

following the Conquest in 641, it remained a site of complex and organic poly-religiosity.[19] Interreligious exchanges peaked again in the nineteenth century, when economically revived Alexandria attracted new cohorts of migrants – regional peasants, Nubians, French, Italians, English, Greeks,… The last group included one Petros Cavafy, a successful merchant from Constantinople and a father of Constantine.

During Constantine Cavafy's lifetime, Alexandria thrived as a site of transpatialization: a patchwork of more than twenty jurisdictions/capitulations, the city had 'many authorities but no hegemon'.[20] As such, it experienced rapid economic and infrastructural development as well as an ample share of destruction, imperial imposition and bottom-up contestations, all intimately linked to the history of Cavafy's family. Following the ʿUrabi revolt and the bombardment by the British naval forces in 1882, much of Alexandria, including the Cavafys' home, was destroyed, and the family spent the following three years as refugees in Istanbul; Cavafy renounced his British citizenship in a quietly belligerent move. Meanwhile, interreligious tensions both escalated and softened. Alexandrine religious communities interacted not only at the places of worship, but also, and more intimately so, in cafés, open-air cinemas, trams, public parks like the Mahmudiya canal, food and drink stalls, and even brothels. Will Hanley has argued that such sites and quotidian activities that ordinary people performed there constitute true, vulgar Alexandrian cosmopolitanism (contrasting the romanticised elite cosmopolitanism), and, significantly for my discussion, Hala Halim has linked this Alexandrian conviviality to the long-standing tradition of

[19] Patriarch Dioscorus's rejection of the Chalcedonean definition of Christ as possessing two natures led to the excommunication of Oriental Orthodox Christian churches from the rest of Christianity. On interreligious exchanges in Alexandria during the Ayyubid and Ottoman empires, see Salah Ahmad Haridi, *Al-Jaliyyat fi Madinat al-Iskandariyya fi al-ʻAsr al-ʻUthmani* (Giza: 'Ain li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Buhuth al-Insaniyya wa-l Ijtimaʻiyya, 2004), 20–21ff.

[20] Will Hanley, *Identifying with Nationality: Europeans, Ottomans, and Egyptians in Alexandria* (New York: Columbia UP, 2017), 17. Cyrus Schayegh defines the process of transpatialization as an intense socio-spatial intertwinement of regions, authorities, and religious cultural currents associated with urban spaces in the Middle East in the period 1850-1950; Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2017), 2.

syncretism and interfaith reciprocities in the region.[21] (It seems fair to add, though, that such sites of conviviality were also used to advance religious intolerance.) This dynamic interreligious environment is captured well in the multi-faceted categorisation of the 1907 Egyptian census, according to which the city had Muslims, Orthodox Copts, Catholic Copts, Protestant Copts, Catholic Christians, Protestant Christians, Orthodox Christians, Oriental Christians, Jews, and other religions (including traditional Egyptian polytheistic belief as well as contemporary religions, for example, Bahá'í).[22] This was, then, Cavafy's home-space. And this home-space and its contemporary and long-span history determined, in the way the prefigured matter does, the organization and mode of utterance through which Cavafy chose to address religion.[23]

Religious Ethnographies

Diana Haas has rightly identified in Cavafy's early religion-related output 'an ethnographic element.'[24] His essays 'Masks,' 'Romaic Folk-lore of Enchanted Animals,' 'Persian Manners,' and 'Fragment on Lycanthropy' (c1882-1884) showcase this impulse, and Cavafy's unpreserved essay 'Prayers' must have been of a similar mould. Here, the depiction of ornaments, environment, and performances of rites like baptism and funeral and the effect they have on participant-observers take precedence over the complex matters of religious feeling and theological concerns. Thus Cavafy's 1885 poem 'Nichori,' describing, in loving detail, the sights, smells, and sounds of the town of Yeniköy (Nichori), zooms in on the

[21] See Hanley, 31-32. Hala Halim, *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism: An Archive* (New York: Fordham UP, 2013), 13-14.
[22] Wizārat al-Mālīyah, Egypt, The Census of Egypt Taken in 1907 (Cairo: National Printing Department, 1909). Noticeable, too, in this British-sponsored census is the all-encompassing nature of the category Muslim (90% of population) and maximum precision given to other categories.
[23] The widely held belief that Cavafy was more invested in creating a mythic city than living in or describing a real one has recently been challenged by several scholars, including myself. Cavafy's Alexandria was not, I emphasize in the context of this discussion, an abstract platform for phantasies (even when it nourished them or when they coagulated in a poetic metaphor), but a living, active, and inter-religiously charged site.
[24] Haas, 14.

Church of the Dormition of the Mother of God Koumariotissis not so much to relay the particular content of religious experience as to claim that, in that fragrant, vivid environment, prayers, too, must be more effective – they 'win a different grace'.[25] For Haas, this stage is a preamble to Cavafy's subsequent deeper engagement with mysticism. I would rather describe this 'element' as a formative and enduring strategy that, simultaneous with his examination of sensual syncretic mysticism and ardent reading of lives of saints and sages, led Cavafy, gradually, into anthropological psychology. This ethno-anthropological-psychological perspective, enriched by passion for history and historiography, remained, as far as the matters of religion are concerned, the dominant framework for Cavafy's poetry and prose. Cavafy continued to explore the 'external elements' of the life of the church – its labara, silver vessels, ecclesiastic vestments, chants, incense smell, rhythm of priest's movement – in a lived synaesthetic fashion in poems such as 'In Church' (1912), or 'Manuel Comnenus' (1915) and included ethnographic details in poems as late as 'Following the Recipe of Ancient Greco-Syrian Magicians' (1931). The reason for Cavafy's interest in these 'exterior' elements of belief is that, put anthropologically (and not without deeper relation to Orthodox Christian theology), these elements *are* the lived faith.

This anthropo-ethnographic impulse does not attach itself only to Eastern Orthodox Christianity in Cavafy's opus. Cavafy represents, with varied levels of sophistication and understanding, rites and rituals across the religious and ritual spectrum in past and contemporary Egypt, and is particularly interested in sites and behaviours that, by dint of shared historical affect, appeal to different ethnicities and religious groups. Cavafy's underdiscussed 1892 poem 'Sham El Nassim' is a case in point.[26] This tightly structured,

[25] C. P. Cavafy, 'Το Νιχώρι' (1885); Onassis Cavafy Archive (OCA). Unless specified differently, all references to and quotations from the poems in Greek come from OCA; Cavafy, 'Nichori,' *Complete Poems*, trans. Daniel Mendelsohn (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012; hereafter *CP*), 252.
[26] Constantine Cavafy, 'Sham-El-Nessim' ('Σαμ ελ Νεσίμ,' 1892; repudiated), in Cavafy, *Apokērygmena Poiemata kai Metafraseis, 1886-1898*, ed. G. P. Savvides (Athens: Ikaros, 1983), 23–25, and *CP*, 206-208. Cavafy published little in official print, but circulated, instead, some poems among friends and acquaintances,

eight-stanza poem is set in an open space area in contemporary Alexandria, but its semantic and emotive centre is an ancient festival that materially syncreticizes religions. Sham El Nassim is a spring arrival festival celebrated around the spring equinox since the Third Dynasty of the Old Kingdom (about 2,700 BC), when it was an occasion to give food offerings to gods, notably in the form of salted fish. In early Christianity, the spring festival rituals got attached to Easter time, and, after the Muslim conquest, the festivities were fixed to, specifically, Monday after the Coptic Easter, on which day it has been celebrated ever since by all Egyptians. The two identical stanzas encircle the poem and confirm the meaning of this breeze-festival for Egyptians of all beliefs: they juxtapose the everyday ordeal of 'bitter' 'tyrant sun' that dries and wears out their home, Misr'/Misiri (Egypt), and the gay, bibulous, breezy challenge to this death-brining heat – a challenge that transforms, if for a day, pallidity into colour. The contrast between the sounds, smells, and sights of Sham El Nessim and arid Misiri also permeates the middle section which describes the revellers congregating from all sides of the city, their jovial but occasion-honouring poise, and the festivities. The poem records the gradual building of the belief that the duly performed festival rites such as decorating eggs, preparing food offerings (*fiseekh*, salty, dried grey mullet fish, symbolizing preservation of resource), feasting, chanting/singing, and dancing (a local habitus that, whilst criticised by both Islamic and Christian thinkers, was sustained in Egypt as the vehicle to embed religion) would attract Ptah, the ancient Egyptian god of creativity and craftsmanship. Ptah, in turn, will bring with him 'magic blossoms,' 'myrrhs that emanate obscure aromas,' and inspiration for the *moganny* (public singer) to reconnect the meaning of the festival with participants by singing popular Arab ballads.[27]

printed individually on broadsheets or in pamphlets. In addition to these, there are also poems that Cavafy chose not to disseminate/publish (referred to in scholarship as 'hidden'), poems he rejected in later years but did not destroy ('repudiated'), and 'unfinished' poems. The exact meaning of Cavafy's decision to classify poems in one way or another—including labelling some of them 'repudiated' yet preserving them—is still a subject of debate.

[27] *CP*, 207.

Not only the festival but also its name testifies to the accretions of belief systems. In the early Egyptian language, the festival was known as Shemu or Shamo ('renewal') and, in the Coptic language (the last vernacular stage of the Egyptian language, spoken from about 200 AD and almost extinct by the 17th century), this name got phonetically transliterated into 'tshom ni tshom,' or 'tshom ni sime,' which means 'garden meadows.' As Arabic became prevalent in Egypt, the name of the festival again phono-semantically transformed into 'sham el-nessim,' which means 'smelling the breeze' or 'whiff of the breeze' in Arabic. Well aware of this linguistic odyssey (and at least three religious frameworks under which it unfolded), Cavafy makes language peripatetics into a distinct strategy in 'Sham El Nessim.' He strategically transliterates Arabic into Greek in a few crucial invocations: that of the country, affectionately invoked as 'our Misiri' (the transliteration of Arabic 'Misr'' for Egypt into Greek 'Misiri,' rather than using Greek word 'Aigyptos'), that of 'sweet'-voiced moganny (public singer), and the name-subjects of his ballads.[28] Some translations and the ensuing heteroglossia are less noticeable, though, as they cut across the discourses, diversified rhythms and line lengths, all passionately wrapped up in consistently long rhyme. For example, the fragments of the popular and high Arabic Egyptian phraseology make it into the interior dialogue between Greek *katharevousa* (high or formal Greek) and demotiki (demotic Greek) unfolding in the poem, as in the pairing of the adjective 'glad/gladsome' and 'Sham El Nessim', or the adoption of adjectival proper noun phrases from Arabic ballads ('flighty Fatma,' 'harsh Eminah,' etc.). Similarly, the rhythm of Egyptian folkloric idiom is translated into the sudden intrusions of the fifteenth syllable beat characteristic of the Greek popular

[28] Haas has commented on Cavafy's use of the phrase '*our* Byzantinism' in his 1912 poem 'In Church' to signal his affection for Byzantine culture. Haas's interpretation has been cogently criticised for missing Cavafian irony in the use of 'our' (see Cornelia Tsakiridou, 'Hellenism in C.P. Cavafy,' *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*, 21, no. 2 (1995): 115–129). However, the oral ballad scaffolding, transliteration strategies and the site-specificity of much earlier 'Sham El Nessim' suggest that 'our' is indeed used to impart affection and foster participatory thinking here. See, also, Stratis Tsirkas, *Ο Πολιτικός Καβάφης* (Athens: Kedros, 1971), 83; and Halim 109-110. One of the reasons Cavafy might have repudiated 'Sham El Nessim' later would be precisely its one-dimensionality and lack of ironic distancing.

song in the stiff diction and pace of lofty Greek *katharevousa*. Materializing syncretism in language and form in this way draws attention to the variety of Egyptians –Muslims, Jews, Christians, pagans – whose agency (that is, active participation in the festival) is crucial in bringing about a renewal. To corroborate these possibilities, amid the mythic promises, a real site of renewal is mentioned: 'dreamy, azure Mahmudiya' Canal, built between Alexandria and the Nile by Alexandrians themselves to facilitate the supply of water and food to the city in the mid-nineteenth century.[29] Cavafy seems to have had special affection for the Mahmudiya landscape, but for him, like other turn-of-the century Alexandrians, the canal also harboured material and metaphoric significance: it brought life-giving waters to the city, and reminded its inhabitants of the mighty river Nile, itself often imagined as the physical and symbolic site of transcending and synthesizing religions.[30]

Cavafy was the child of nineteenth century syncretism, yet he also saw around him an almost unmanageable diversity of religious articulations interacting daily and across long periods to generate both competing systems and amalgams. By trying to capture the latter in 'Sham El Nassim' and later poetry, Cavafy challenges not only purist religious worldviews but also the abstracting tenets of late nineteenth century syncretism. With its focus on a shared ritual that transcends but also feeds onto various religious practices in his home-place, 'Sham El Nassim' stands out as a visible example of Cavafy's ethnographic impulse and appreciation of syncretic rituals. Why did Cavafy become a proponent of lived syncretism in 1892? His previous output often foregrounded the antitheses between religions, mostly Christianity and Islam; repudiated early, many of these texts display misguided understanding

[29] *CP*, 206. Building of the Mahmudiya Canal was one of Ottoman/British ruler Muhammad Ali's major accomplishments. It transformed Alexandria into a trade, transport, and cultural centre of the region.
[30] The ancient Egyptian cult of the Nile subsumed under itself many different religious cults and was supported and even elevated to the official status by Roman authorities. Its persistence throughout Christian and Islamic periods may be due to the ubiquity of the worship; David Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998), 64. F. T. Marinetti associated Cavafy's poetic idiom specifically with Mahmudiya in his remembrances of the poet, in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, 'Il poeta Greco-Egiziano Cavafy,' *Il fascino dell'Egitto* (Milano: A. Mondadori, 1933): 131-138.

of both religious principles and adherents' behaviours that Cavafy would later recant. The decade 1882-1892, glossed earlier, changed both Cavafy and Egyptian politics. In 1892, the poet obtained a salaried position as *muwazzaf* (low functionary) in the Third Circle of the Department of Irrigation. His job entailed handling papers and conducting exchanges with diverse population in various languages, with specific focus on agriculture and water supply (indeed, the operation of Mahmudiya itself). Like many Alexandrians, Cavafy became critical of British colonial government and tried to imagine an independent future Egypt and his own position in such circumstances. Greeks residing permanently and transgenerationally in Egypt, Cavafy included, started identifying themselves by syncretic term 'Egyptiotes' ('Greek Egyptians') precisely in 1892.[31] Egyptiotes feared that independence would be delivered by the mono-religiously fanatic rather than the 'judiciously integrative' and that the promotion of the discourse of integration was an existential necessity. Somewhat stilted and ornate, 'Sham El Nassim' is hardly the most complex or sophisticated of Cavafy's poetic addresses to lived syncretism, but it tells an important story about a particular moment in the history of early twentieth century Alexandria, where the accreted experiences of religious interaction and competition dominated the public sphere and interreligious activities like Sham El Nassim gave shape and tone to everyday life. This contemporary context, I argue, profoundly informed Cavafy's poetic practice and inspired him to chronicle and explore meanings of religious interaction across the *longue durée* history of the area.

Transitions and Amalgams in Longue Durée

[31] The first recorded use of the term 'Egyptiotes' appears in an anonymous article in Greek, signed by 'Ulysses,' in Egyptian journal *Omonoia* (15/27 June 1892). It has been widely hypothesized that Cavafy himself wrote the article and coined the term, but no material evidence has ever been produced. On the development of the identity of Egyptiotes, see Marios Papakyriacou, 'Formulation and Definitions of the Greek National Ideology in Colonial Egypt (1856-1919),' PhD Thesis, Freie Universität Berlin, 2014, 352-57.

‘Sham El Nassim’ also provides an early signal of Cavafy’s lifelong interest in rituals and customs as both the guarantees of continuity and sustainability of a community and memory traces of its hybridization over *longue durée*. Cavafy had a strong interest in long-span history, which he reportedly believed was governed by ‘religious sentiment’ no less than by economic forces.[32] Cavafy’s ‘historical poems’ often represent political-imperial transformations through religious accords and tensions as played out by agents on the ground. He was particularly attracted by those transitional moments when paradigm shifts happen, and the surrounding historical time-space is rippled. The rendition of these moments creates a poetic world of ‘the twilight zones,’ ‘an area marked by blending, amalgamation, transition, alteration, exceptions,’ populated by figures – minor or major, historical or fictional – that epitomize transitions.[33]

To shed light on interreligious relationships within this world, Cavafy, like his unacknowledged Hellenistic precursor, Apuleius, chooses to write with a polyphonic ‘desultoriae scientiae stilo,’ strategically appropriating different viewpoints and idioms/languages.[34] He makes minor historical agents into touching monads and places them in the (ethnographic) position of observer-participants in an intensely interreligious context, where followers of different religions can live in the same household, or be lovers or close friends, and one may be exposed to various religious traditions without requesting special access. Such figures are commonly tasked with viewing a religion from the outside, as in the case of the unnamed non-Christian speaker of ‘Simeon’ (1917, unpublished), who sets aside a pressing work-related issue to contemplate the effects that the hagiography of Saint Simeon

[32] Cavafy, in Liddell, *Cavafy*, 124–25.
[33] George Seferis, *On the Greek Style: Selected Essays in Poetry and Hellenism*, trans. Rex Warner and Th. D. Frangopoulos (Toronto: Little, Brown, 1966), 152.
[34] Apuleius writes in *Metamorphosis, or the Golden Ass*: ‘iam haec equidem ipsa vocis immutatio desultoriae scientiae stilo quem accersimus respondet;’ ‘this very changing of language [involving changes of voice and style] corresponds to the type of writing we have undertaken, which is like the skill of a circus rider [jumping from one horse to another]’ (Apuleius, *Met.* 1.1). The same source contains the locus classicus of syncretism, the Neoplatonic *Hymn to Isis* (*Met.* 11.5).

has had on him. Even more frequent than these demonstratives of interreligious understanding are Cavafy's depictions of those who are collateral victims of transition, pained by the effort to reconceive their own or their loved ones' identity in purist terms or through a lens of a single religion. These aching negotiations are often formally represented through the device of life-death breach, in which the loved one's identity is reassessed posthumously with distinct repercussions for the living. Such are, for example, the cases of mourning Lanes, an indigenous Egyptian boy who rejected his own visual (re)representation as a Greek hero ('Tomb of Lanes') and Myres, a boy whose 'Christian life' was invisible to his group of friends and lovers ('Myres: Alexandria in 340 A.D.').[35] Cavafy's poignant 'Priest at the Serapeum' hones in on the necessity of interreligious understanding for the affective life of individuals and communities: its two tight stanzas relay a zealous Christian's attempts to reconcile the profound pain he feels after his father's death and the circumstance that the latter was a priest of the cult of Greco-Egyptian god Serapis, serving at the Serapeum temple at Rhakotis (Alexandria)—a temple which, the reader should be aware, was destroyed by Christians in 391 in a well-known instance of interreligious street-violence.[36]

The rulers who embody the models of knowledge production and structure of affects attendant to religious interaction also abound in Cavafy's poetry. Of these, perhaps the most memorable is queen Zenobia (Bint-Zabbai, c. 240 – c. 274 AD), the subject of an unfinished 1930 poem by Cavafy.[37] In the poem Cavafy adopts the view of Zenobia as a level-headed and integrative ruler of the multicultural, multireligious Palmyrene Empire, particularly protective of religious groups marginalized by Rome. Zenobia herself likely followed the Palmyrene paganism, where the pantheon of Semitic gods, led by god Bel, was worshipped;

[35] 'Λάνη τάφος' (1916/18); 'Μυρης· Αλεξανδρεια του 340 μ.Χ.' (1929).
[36] 'Ιερεύς του Σεραπίου' (1926); *CP*, 133. The Serapeum temple was closed on the orders of Constantine in 325, but it remained a site of pagan worship and was eventually destroyed in violent riots by a Christian mob or Roman soldiers in 391.
[37] The handwritten draft of 'Zenobia' ('Η Ζηνοβία', 1930) is preserved in OCA (https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/4crf-dqgx-xckc/); *CP*, 386.

but the Manichaeans claimed her their own and St John Chrysostom declared her Jewish. The debates around Zenobia's religious identity were particularly intense in the first decades of the twentieth century when emergent nationalisms in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon started affiliating themselves with distinct religious traditions. The significance of her court in the development of Middle Eastern intellectual history and heritage and her tragic end (the Palmyrene Empire was recaptured by Rome in Aurelian's campaign and the queen was apprehended and likely publicly displayed/shamed by the Romans) made Zenobia an attractive figure for religious leaders, politicians, and writers alike. In the few poignant lines of the poem, set at the height of the Palmyrene Empire when Zenobia claimed independence from Rome, Cavafy puts these appropriations centre-stage. The poetic voice warns that many will attempt to 'create a genealogy' for wise queen Zenobia and claim her for their religious or political aims; and the worst are those forfeiters of history who wish to 'absolve her' of her identity as an 'Asiatic woman.' A distinct poetic mandate is readable in those few lines: to rescue from misappropriation the historical figures and behaviours that embody the possibilities of material religious syncretism and peaceful interreligiosity.

Less sympathetic yet more intense was Cavafy's treatment of Julian the Apostate. Julian is the subject of eleven Cavafy's poems (plus an embryonic draft), written at various points in his career. A general, philosopher, cultured emperor, and a prolific writer, Julian was baptized and raised Christian, but playacted Christianity for at least ten years before coming out as a pagan and, in a campaign marked by both puritanism and declamatory tolerance, imposed a version of rigid, highly administrated Neoplatonic polytheism on the newly Christianized Empire. Julian's revival of paganism was ascetic and exacting, and it gained him ardent enemies; he was killed in the Battle of Samara by a Christianized Roman

soldier in Persian service.[38] Scholars often gloss Cavafy's dislike for this historical figure, yet there is little doubt that Julian also fascinated Cavafy. The poet, who derived most of his knowledge about Julian from Gibbon's negative account, shared with Julian an interest in Neoplatonic mysteries, theurgy, astrology, and magic, Iamblichus, and the life of Maximus of Ephesus. Cavafy's strong unease with the emperor's treatment of other religions, in particular Christianity, speaks out, however, in the sarcastic voice in poems like 'On the Outskirts of Antioch' and 'Julian an the Antiochians' that relate Julian's excessive and ultimately ineffective actions, made more brutal and absurd by his preaching tolerance.[39] Julian's duplicitous religious performance provided Cavafy the psychologist with a minefield of thought; poems like 'Julian in Nicomedia' and 'The Bishop Pegasius' probe closely the emperor's strategies of self-concealment and their motivations, including hybrid identifications and the possibility of Julian's homosexuality.[40] The most overdetermined of Cavafy's Julian poems, 'The Rescue of Julian', considers the impact that the early childhood trauma of seeing his family executed had on Julian's later behaviour, including his curious ability to forget that, as official historiography records it, *Christian* priests rescued him. Here, an unexpected, ambivalent insertion reminds us of the power of religious politics and casts doubt on the account of Julian as it has come to us: 'Still it's absolutely essential for us to say that / this information comes from a Christian source.'[41] Taken together, the twelve Julian

[38] On Julian's life, see Rowland B. E. Smith, *Julian's Gods: Religion and Philosophy in the Thought and Action of Julian the Apostate* (London: Routledge, 1995). On various accounts of Julian's death, see David S. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay AD180-395* (London: Routledge, 2004), 518.

[39] 'Εις τα περίχωρα της Αντιοχείας' (1932-1933) focuses on Julian's order to remove the bones of third-century bishop Babylas buried near the temple of Apollo at Daphne; 'Ο Ιουλιανός και οι Αντιοχείς' (1926) explains, with double-edged irony, why the Antiochenes preferred Christianity to Julian's austere paganism.

[40] 'Ο Ιουλιανός εν Νικομηδεία' (1924); 'Ὁ Ἐπίσκοπος Πηγάσιος' (1920). Julian's homosexuality is unrecorded but, as a ruler, he was more welcoming towards homosexuals than Constantine and his sons. In entertaining the possibility of Julian's homosexuality, Cavafy may have relied on his reading of Julian's positive portrayal of Marcus Aurelius in *Caesares*.

[41] 'Ἡ διάσωσις τοῦ Ἰουλιανοῦ' (1923, unfinished) *CP*, 369. To complicate the matters further, Cavafy reassures the reader that, 'historically speaking, there's nothing that seems/ incredible: the priests of Christ rescuing an innocent Christian child,' yet he closes the poem enigmatically: 'If it's true—could this be what the very philosophical/ Emperor was also referring to when he said/ "let there be no memory of that darkness"'? (*CP*, 369) The 'darkness' in this line may refer to the trauma of execution, but Cavafy's syntax also suggests that the Christian priests' *rescue* of the six-year-old itself constitutes 'darkness.' The reader is plunged into urgent

poems seem to reprimand the emperor not because he chose paganism over Christianity (and certainly not because of Cavafy's own Christianity),[42] but because playacting itself is ethically problematic and duplicitous performance is painful – a subject of personal significance for Cavafy.

Julian's greatest sin when it comes to the matters of religion, however, appears to be something else: namely, his failure to realize that, in any case, 'gods are deathless' ('Remembrance'); that, 'just because we've torn their statues down, / and cast them from their temples,/ doesn't for a moment mean the gods are dead' ('Song of Ionia').[43] Taking as an example Egyptian religious transformations from 1st-7th century AD, Frankfurter has convincingly argued that, even in the cases of institutionalised religion transfers or hegemonic impositions, some elements of one complex may continue through – and often by means of – new religious or institutional idioms: rites continue under different names, deities get a makeover or synthesize with other deities, beliefs exist in parallel and covert or sanctioned interaction and interpenetration.[44] Appreciating these processes of bricolage, combination and recombination (as opposed to officially instigated raptures and purist overturns like Julian's), Cavafy was profoundly interested in interreligious continuities and the mutation of deities on the ground. Some of his most enigmatic poems recount the various ways in which deities translate into each other across long time (getting compacted into a monotheistic figure or expanded into a polytheistic group) while maintaining significance for

questioning: did Julian experienced the act of mercy by Christians as a source of shame, or did he think of their effort to save 'a Christian child' (as opposed to any child) as dishonest; or did, more alarmingly, something happen to him during the rescue that cast the saving act as dark or shameful.

[42] Here I agree with John Phillipson, *C. P. Cavafy: Historical Poems* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2013), 584; *pace* G. W. Bowersock, 'The Julian Poems of C. P. Cavafy,' *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 7, no. 1 (1981): 89-104.

[43] 'Remembrance' ('Μνήμη,' 1891/1896, renounced) was revised into 'Thessaly' ('Θεσσαλία'), then into 'Song of Ionia' (*Ιωνικόν*, 1911); *CP*, 230; 44; modified translation. The chiselling work excised the 1896 line 'the gods are deathless' ('Δεν αποθνήσκουν οι θεοί.'), but Cavafy specified its implications: 'Γιατί τα σπάσαμε τ' αγάλματά των, /γιατί τους διώξαμε απ' τους ναούς των, /διόλου δεν πέθαναν γι' αυτό οι θεοί.' Gods are repeatedly described as 'deathless' in the Iliad, but Cavafy does not deploy the Homeric Greek here.

[44] Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt*, esp. 1-50.

the ordinary people, so that they may appear, unexpectedly and unexplainedly, with 'the joy of incorruptibility in [their] eyes,' in a street that leads into the red-light district long after their time ('One of Their Gods').[45]

I shall return to the translation of deities later, but here let me add that Cavafy's poetic interpretations of religious continuities are most often anchored to, or indeed focalised through, amalgamated subjectivities – an identity-position that the poet deemed in dire need of acknowledgment. Cavafy's 1912 'Dangerous Things' lays bare this project. One of the most richly layered, emotionally charged, and unsettling of Cavafy's 'historical poems,' the poem is also typical of Cavafy's strategy to connect the moments of belief transition to our embodied experiences, identity choices, and political behaviours. These include mystical (frequently erotic) experiences that reorganize everyday life through an appeal not to major ontologies but to minor and mundane syncretic transcendences. Formally introduced with a Homeric-biblical opening 'Said Myrtias:…,' 'Dangerous Things' relays, over fifteen lines with strong beat yet little rhyme, the impassioned first-person, demotic locution of 'a Syrian student /in Alexandria during the reign / of the Emperor Konstans and the Emperor Konstantios; / part heathen, part Christian,'[46] self-reasoning that the ascetic pursuit of his studies would enable him to enjoy sensual delights in balance. The poem, these lines explicate, is set during the uneasy double reign of the sons of Constantine the Great, Constans and Constantius, in the fourth century AD, when the Roman Empire's adopted Christianity became more proscriptive, and just before Julian's coming to power. This setting and his 'part-and-part' religious identity make Myrtias, an ordinary youth of the time, comparable to Julian, even, potentially, his double; but they are in fact the exact opposites. Myrtias aspires to resolve his dilemma by continuous transitions rather than breakups – he will jockey from

[45] 'με την χαρά της αφθαρσίας μες στα μάτια' in 'Ένας Θεός των' (1899/1917); *CP*, 65.
[46] '(Σύρος σπουδαστής /στην Αλεξάνδρεια· επί βασιλείας / αυγούστου Κώνσταντος και αυγούστου Κωνσταντίου· /εν μέρει εθνικός, κ' εν μέρει χριστιανίζων)·' in 'Τα Επικίνδυνα' ('Dangerous,' or 'Dangerous Things,' or 'Dangerous Thoughts,' 1912); *CP*, 37.

one belief system and set of values to another and back to suit his bodily, affective, and intellectual needs, in hope that such behaviour will stabilize the extremes of the ascetic and the erotic into a balanced existence. Myrtias' unique belief inter-positionality affords him, the poem implies, that surplus of experiential vision which allows him to understand, bridge, and crossbreed (or perhaps just deceive himself he is doing so) two contrastive behaviours and the belief systems and ideologies that underpin them. His compromise may be paradoxical, dangerous, 'impure,' and self-deceptive, but it is experientially, and so also historically, necessary.[47]

While the poem ostensibly stages the tension between pagan and Christian values and may delude (and have deluded) readers into an easy alignment of a set of values and a particular religion, this staging is fickle and unclear. Pointedly, Cavafy eschews any clues as to which of the two parts of Myrtias' religious identity – paganism or Christianity – is to be credited for his erotic indulgences or his ascetic excesses. The work of alignment, or a realization of the non-alignment, is then up to the reader; it's a dialogic provocation of a kind that Cavafy often plants deep in his poetry, one that casts the reader into the position of an active agent. This provocation is not exacting, and Cavafy does not presage its outcomes: *en route* the reader may realize their own embeddedness in a certain set of meanings, behaviours, and religious texts; or they may not. The reader may also opt to ascribe the poem's ambiguity to the poet's personal and professional tribulations as captured in those numerous notes in which Cavafy dissects the trials of the austere and the sensual. This is a valid proposition. Yet, if the trials of askesis and eros were the only focus of the poem, why would Cavafy mark religious identity, and religious identity in flux, so prominently in 'Dangerous Things'? First, it merits reiterating that, in Cavafy's opus, religious identity is

[47] This argument is perched precariously over the evident dominance of sensual imagery in the poem. See the purposefully repetitious three-liner at the mid-point in the poem: 'to enjoyments I've dreamed of, / to the most audacious erotic desires, / to the lascivious impulses of my blood' ('στες απολαύσεις τες ονειρεμένες, / στες τολμηρότερες ερωτικές επιθυμίες, / στες λάγνες του αίματός μου ορμές, χωρίς'); *CP*, 37.

consistently presented as a vital component of the spectrum of subjectivity, and, by extension, the crucial aspect of material history. Second, Myrtias' hybrid religious identity is intrinsically linked to the poem's provocation to the reader. For, how one perceives Myrtias' 'part-and-part' position depends on one's own positionality: it appears most disquieting to those that, like 'appropriators' of queen Zenobia, aspire to reinscribe Myrtias's identity as purely one or the other – a cohort that may include, Cavafy's ironic wager has it, not only the overt proponents of religious and political purism of his and subsequent eras, but the agent-reader, too. Myrtias, as written down by Cavafy, vehemently rejects categorization; his identity, explained in the characteristically charged Cavafian parenthesis, is both divided and unitary – just as the focused use of enjambment, followed by a summary of his 'part' identities, suggests. Anthropologically and politically, Myrtias, then, is a paradigmatic embodiment of those often-uncomfortable manoeuvring positions in which the subjects living within or between religions find themselves.[48] Here, Mendelsohn observes, Myrtias is a skilful player: he as if 'profits' from that uncertain, transitional moment in the history of religion.[49] As often in Cavafy's poetry, however, what appears to be successful self-management at present may be disclosed as 'dangerous' behaviour by later history.

On this interpretation, 'Dangerous Things' is all about morphology of exchange: its mode is an exploration whether compensatory behaviours may bring about the successful realization of a hybrid identity, including an amalgam religious identity. Such realization is vitally important for the poet. Cavafy's preferred word to describe identity was 'κράμα' (mixture, amalgam), a word that also happens to echo 'συγκρητισμός' (syngkretismos), as first recorded in Plutarch's *Moralia* and derived from the Ancient Greek 'συγκρασις' ('syngkrasis', 'mixing together', the prefix 'syn' meaning 'with' or 'together,' and the word

[48] Cavafy sets up a similar dilemma for an interreligious subjectivity in his 'Of the Jews (50 AD),' ('Των Εβραιων (50 μ.Χ.)') but does not leave the resolution unknown.
[49] Mendelsohn, 'Introduction', *CP*, xxxiv.

'krasis' meaning 'mixture').[50] Mixtures and amalgams, Cavafy appreciated early, are normative to religions (as they are inherent to culture as a whole), whereas 'purity' is less frequent and often invented.[51] The force of that invention and rigidity with which it is pursued in a community often determines the individual's behaviour and strategies of adjustment and defence; one such is Myrtias' belief in the economics of compensation. The title of the poem deserves to be reread in this light. At a psychological-anthropological level, these 'things' or 'thoughts' might be 'dangerous' because they entail the potentially unmanageable excesses of contrastive behaviours. They are *certainly* 'dangerous' in the newly monolithic, religion-purifying historical context, and will continue to be so, we infer, when, after the rule of Constans and Constantius, Julian seizes power. Unless he adopts the cunning self-concealment strategies of Julian himself, Myrtias will be the victim of the history of religious-political purisms.

As the tensions between purism and syncretism, at the levels of principles and behaviours, accrue in long history, and the purist impulse often wins (or so it appeared to Cavafy, worried by the sudden rise of exclusionary, often religion-backed nationalisms, in Egypt, Greece, and elsewhere), who is, then, to promote syncretism and amalgams in the moments of transition? How can one do it without endangering oneself in exclusionary environments? To answer these questions, I would like to close with a brief reading of another poem, 'For Ammonis, Who Died at 29, in 610,' which treats the subject of religious cohabitation through the activities of creation and translation.[52] This poem was written in 1917, the year of another Egyptian census. Its design reflecting the ambition to inculcate affiliation by nationality in multi-ethnic Egypt, the 1917 census subsumed religion under the

[50] Plutarch, 'On Brotherly Love' [Peri Philadelphias], *Moralia* (*Ἠθικά*), 490b; 16 vols, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt et al. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1927–2004. For Plutarch's specific use, related to but also distinct from today's meanings of the word, see Stewart and Shaw, 3-4.
[51] Paul Christopher Johnson, 'Syncretism and Hybridization,' *The Oxford Handbook for the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017), 754-71.
[52] 'Για τον Αμμόνη, που πέθανε 29 ετών, στα 610' (1917), *CP*, 71; translation slightly modified.

category of nationality and produced obfuscating guidance on how to record it. Featuring an absurdly expanded repository of nationalities (one of the subcategories listed being 'Egyptiotes'), the census also occluded some religious communities, noticeably, the Copts.[53] Through a temporal transposition into the Byzantine Egypt, 'For Ammonis…' celebrates this whirlpool of identifications, while strategically drawing attention to the Copts. The title positions the action at the threshold moment in Egyptian and world history: it coincides with Mohammed's first vision and the beginning of his career as a prophet, and it narrowly precedes the conquest of Alexandria by Sassanian Persian king Khosrau II in 616 and the subsequent conquest by the Muslim Rashidun Empire in 639-641, as well as the Council of Chalcedon in 651. Appearing in the form of dramatic monologue (a genre, favoured by Cavafy, where a directive/advice is given to a silent interlocutor), 'For Ammonis…' relates a request that a group of Copts, or at least Coptic language speakers, poses to their Coptic or Jewish poet-friend Raphael: to write a tombstone epitaph in Greek celebrating the life of another poet, Ammonis.[54] Raphael is advised to 'pour his Egyptian feeling' into 'a foreign language' ('ξένη γλώσσα', repeated twice), that is, Greek.[55] Here Greek is constructed as the imperial language that is good enough for the decorous epitaph-writing but inadequate for expressing emotions and their assumed site-specific qualities; the group's vernacular – presumably Coptic Egyptian – may be better suited to the task if only sanctioned. The contextual background for the poem is the gradual loss of the Coptic language and the occlusion of indigenous means of expression by an imperial tongue.

Thus set, the poem is imbued with lived syncretism and deep history of religious interaction, disclosable in the coded choice of names. Raphael (*Rafa'El*) is the name of one of

[53] Egyptian Government, Ministry of Finance, Statistical Department, Ta'dād sukkān al-quṭr al-Miṣrī li-sanat, 1917 (Cairo: Government Press, 1920-21).
[54] Phillipson, 665-6; Halim 91. Phillipson argues Raphael is Jewish, Halim argues that the entire inner circle is comprised of the Copts with limited knowledge of Greek.
[55] 'Το αιγυπτιακό σου αίσθημα χύσε στην ξένη γλώσσα.'

the three archangels venerated across religions. Strongly associated with Jewish tradition, Raphael is also a prominent saint in Roman Catholic Church (where his patronage includes that of lovers and messengers), and, less so, Greek Orthodox Christianity; as Arabic إسرافيل (Isrāfīl), he is also a venerated archangel in the Islamic tradition, influentially present in the everyday life of Muslim communities in Egypt and Syria.[56] Finally, Angel Raphael is particularly venerated in the Coptic Church: the Copts and Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church commemorate with a feast day his miracle on the occasion of dedication of a church on an island off Alexandria in the late 4th-early 5th century AD.[57] The name of the lamented poet, Ammonis, presents the Hellenized version of Amun. It is the name of chief Egyptian (and Nubian) deity Amun ('the hidden one'), later Amun-Ra ('the hidden sun'), often depicted as a human male wearing a crown with two tall plumes or a green ram with curved horns/a sun disk. Amun-Ra was also worshipped in Libya, Nubia, and Greece, where he was fused with Zeus (as Zeus Ammon; Alexander the Great claimed to be his son), and had a major influence on the Abrahamic religions.[58] In the Cavafian universe, we have seen, deities endure and can appear in our everyday long after the peak of their religion. Might it be that Amun-Ra himself strayed into the lives of the group about which Cavafy's poem speaks, left a lasting imprint, and then disappeared, or died in its worldly youth form, only to be reincarnated, or manifested, in another? If that is so, then the commissioned poem must be read as an offering that will ensure his reappearance, continued 'deathless' existence, potentially translated into other deities and religious forms. The emphatic request that the language in the epitaph resonates widely supports this possibility. Prayers, hymns, and spells

[56] 1 Enoch 9:1; Tobit, 12;17-20; and Babylonian Talmud. The unnamed angel in *Quran* 6:73, who stands ready to sound the trumpet on the Day of Resurrection, is considered to be Raphael.

[57] As recorded in the 14th century Ethiopian Synaxarion (*Synaxarium Aethiopicum*, Pagumen 03, Feast on September 8), a new church was discovered to have been built on the back of the whale, but Archangel Raphael steadied the whale by his spear so that the church can stand. The legend is recorded in Alban Butler's *Lives of Saints* (1756-9), which Cavafy may have consulted.

[58] Amun was the tutelary deity of Thebes during the 11th Dynasty. With the political rise of Thebes, Amun came to be fused with the Sun god Ra, and became the chief national deity, worshipped throughout Egypt.

to Amun-Ra, appearing inscribed in epitaphs since 2,300 BC, have as their common feature a metatextual reflection on the obligation to use exquisite craftsmanship yet site-specific language to propagate Amun's role as both a god of creation and a god of fertility. Similarly, Raphael's mandate is to deploy 'all [his] craftsmanship' to convey emotions in 'a foreign language' while ensuring that the verses 'contain something of [their] life within them,/ so the rhythm and every phrase declare/ that an Alexandrian writes of an Alexandrian.'[59] The praise of Ammonis, like that of Amun-Ra, must be superior in form and demonstrative of deep tradition, but it should also reflect the life or circumstances of those who utter it, which, in Alexandrian context, entails echoing across languages and identities, and, in Cavafy's own project, making homoerotic mourning public.

What does one make of all this onomastic religious criss-crossing and quest for a locally expressive language? Burying someone, adorning graves, remembering in rites, writing epitaphs (first recorded in ancient Egypt but developed to an elegiac form by ancient Greeks), using polyphonic language – these are everyday communal experiences that, while embedded in specific religious traditions, also stretch across them. Attracting social management, these experiences are also, in some fundamental way, unappropriable, therefore, the points of resistance. McKinsey notes that the poem also presents a metapoetic statement on the challenges faced by 'technicians of the word living and writing during periods of foreign domination [like Cavafy's own], with its attendant pressures on linguistic practice.'[60] Significantly, though, the protagonists navigate this situation dexterously, using the forces of translation and (re)combination to put forward the vision of a writing and living practice that keeps different cultural and religious traces in dialogue. The concluding line in

[59] Όμως την μαστοριά σου όληνα τη θέμε τώρα. / Σε ξένη γλώσσα η λύπη μας κ' η αγάπη μας περνούν. / Το αιγυπτιακό σου αίσθημα χύσε στην ξένη γλώσσα. // Ραφαήλ, οι στίχοι σου έτσι να γραφούν / που νάχουν, ξέρεις, από την ζωή μας μέσα των, / που κι ο ρυθμός κ' η κάθε φράσις να δηλούν / που γι' Αλεξανδρινό γράφει Αλεξανδρινός.

[60] Martin McKinsey, *Hellenism and the Postcolonial Imagination: Yeats, Cavafy, Walcott* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2010), 123.

the poem suggests that such practice is, in fact, what means to be an Alexandrian. Raphael's prospective poetic achievement will not only justify but also publicly validate cross-affiliations, including religious affiliations, in Alexandria, and memorialize them in deep-time at a site available to all.

To reflect on what it means to live at the site of cohabitation and hybridization across *longue durée* is, of course, a challenge Cavafy – an Alexandrian – posed to himself. Complemented by Cavafy's belief in the power of the poetic word and informed by his daily exposure to inter-religiosity, this mandate may be summarised as follows: to think deeply and express passionately, with as little ideological compromise as possible, not discrete dogmas and systems but lived experiences of religions and their interactions in transitional moments in history, as they impact real human beings in actual situations.

Heuristic Remarks, after Cavafy

The interest in belief system interactions and inter-positionalities appears in the texture of artworks in especially pronounced ways in the sites with long history of cultural crossbreeding and at those times when the ripples of conflicts and co-operations are most intensely felt, often due to recent political and epistemological raptures. It is easy to recognise early twentieth century Alexandria in this description and to place Cavafy's specific interest in inter-positionalities within this context. However, it may be useful to spell out, in closure, that religious pluralism in fact dominates more global modernist sites than usually acknowledged. Fostered by transpatializations that occurred at multiple global sites from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, and supported by demographic shifts, travel, and technological inventions, religious pluralism may indeed constitute one of the historical and anthropological dominants of modernism, and, as such, requires scholarly interpretation.

The same applies to the question of cross-pollination of religions, hybrid religious identities, and syncretic religious frameworks. Global modernists were intensely aware of their various inter-positionalities, including fluctuating or hybrid belief identities, and modernist scholarship has long recognized and included heterogeneity and 'inbetweenness' into its primary heuristic categories. It may come as a surprise, then, that scholars still tend to focus on belief system hybridity in modernist texts as a curiosity or anomaly rather than a pervading phenomenon. The contested terrain of poly-religiosity and religious syncretism itself is a likely source for this disjunct between what we know about modernism and how we treat it in practice. Yet, the main reason why the discussions of modernism and religion do not consider site-specific religious pluralism and syncretic trends nearly as much as their contextual dominance requires lies in the relative lack of attention to the site-specific ethnographic elements in the experiences of religious practices more generally. My discussion of Cavafy suggests that focusing on the plurality and everyday interpenetration of belief frameworks at a modernist site may bring palpable benefits to scholars. The chief among these include an improved understanding how modernists were able to use emplaced religious practice(s) and artefacts for aesthetic effects, regardless of whether they believed in their ontological premises; how their depiction of religious rites and types of behaviour helped them debate identity and belonging; and how the site-specific religious pluralisms both fuelled their syncretic imagination and help them build their own hybrid identities. For, 'we're a mixture here,' Cavafy pointedly reminds us.[61]

[61] 'Είμεθα ένα κράμα εδώ·'; 'In a City of Osrhoene' ('Εν πόλει της Οσροηνής,' 1916-17); *CP*, 68.