



A Phoenician Guide to Happy Protest

Citation

Muller, Fabien. "A Phoenician Guide to Happy Protest". Research Reflections Series. Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2026. © License: CC BY NC.

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A Phoenician Guide to Happy Protest

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Edited by Aaron Michael Ullrey.

Published in November 2025

The following Research Reflection is part of an ongoing series spotlighting the academic study of religions.

What happens when religious people cling to convictions that defy social reality or when they use religion for their personal interests, disregarding harm they're doing to others? Phoenician philosopher Porphyry of Tyre thinks they become miserable. Clinging to conservative or fundamentalist agendas that treat a certain tradition or scriptural authority as absolute blinds practitioners to the important part of religion, which is "happiness" and "truth" (*eudaimonia* and *aletheia*, *Letter to Anebo*, fr. 110).

In his fragmentary *Letter to Anebo*, which I have recently translated for the CSWR's new 4T initiative, Porphyry objects to what he considers degraded forms of religion. If practitioners use rituals to attain personal and material aims such as buying real estate, keeping a tight grip on their slaves, or making their bodily life more enjoyable (*Letter to Anebo*, fr. 72), then their religion is fake and leads them away from what the Neoplatonist tradition calls the "Divine" and "God." People readily justify such practices by stating it's always been done this way, and one should simply accept the truth of religious claims, but that doesn't give substance to those claims.

Philosophers should pique and prod religious conservatives and ask them to justify their views and practices, just as Socrates did with the "great men" of Athens, and just as Porphyry does with his Egyptian interlocutor Anebo—a pseudonym of the Syrian philosopher Iamblichus. Porphyry considers Iamblichus's philosophy of religion inconsistent and an example of bad faith. Iamblichus is a ritualist and anti-intellectualist who ultimately deems human intelligence incapable of attaining higher reality (*On the Mysteries*, II, 11) that can only be attained through ritual interaction with the gods, which Iamblichus calls "theurgy."

Porphyry asks Iamblichus: What if those theurgic rituals are powerless? Iamblichus replies that they aren't powerless, for practitioners' dispositions often change as a result of ritual practices. Porphyry has doubts. What if those changes actually result from psychological affections or hallucinations? Iamblichus maintains that theurgic rituals work with the substance of divine reality and truth, and they're not just self-suggestion.

But Iamblichus's prolix reassurances are hollow. All he can come up with are repetitions of the same empty claims, such as his priests having "hypercosmic powers" and "practicing celebrations through hieratic rituals" (*On the Mysteries* VIII, 5). These actions can't be illusory because that would discredit the whole tradition and hieratic authority of the priests, i.e., their authority to carry out rites.

This is the point where Iamblichus's traditionalist and fundamentalist argument fails. The argument boils down to: "It's true because we've always done it this way, and many people say it works." Just because a tradition claims truth for a long time, that doesn't make it valid. Just because some practice makes people behave differently, that difference is not indicative of a causal link between religious practice and real events.

The goals of human life are happiness and truth. To be sure, neither Porphyry nor his teacher Plotinus have rigid theories on what happiness and truth are. Their appeal to both things is generic and remains open to concrete realizations. Certainly, truth lies in ultimate reality and happiness in contemplating that reality—but the key lies in practicing that contemplation, not sticking to a tradition that dictates rituals around it.

And so, in his *Letter to Anebo*, Porphyry's main aim is not so much to construct a new theology than to denounce his interlocutor's bad faith arguments as untruthful, calling him to be more intellectually upright. To that end, he uses tools such as Platonic conceptual distinction (*dihairesis*) and dialectics. Rather than imposing a single model of reality, Porphyry stresses that the efficiency of theological and philosophical discourse lies in the actual happiness it creates, not in the theoretical justification it offers.

In a time when fundamentalist ideologies and magical thinking are remerging across the globe, Porphyry teaches us how philosophy can respond to these ideologies by protesting the conflation of religion and personal interests and by deconstructing arguments from authority. Such protest involves a careful analysis of the structures and claims of religion and the results it brings about in personal and social life. Somebody who is untruthful and unhappy practices religion in vain (*Letter to Anebo*, fr. 110).

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Bio: Fabien Muller (Postdoctoral Fellow in Philosophy of Religion, CSWR, 2023-25) does research on the history of metaphysics from a cross-cultural perspective, involving ancient Greek and Indian traditions, German idealism, and modern continental philosophy. He is interested in using a critical framework to deconstruct appropriations of philosophies such as Yogācāra Buddhism, Neoplatonism, and Hegelianism, which are commonly deprived of their metaphysical potential or presented as compatible with everyday assumptions about reality.