

Early Christian Particularity and Engagement with Society¹

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Introduction

In this conference the stated focus is on “Confucian civilization” and “Christian civilization”. I have to say that in some sense I find “Christian civilization” problematic. I presume that the reference is to European “Christendom”, which resulted from what is often called the “triumph” of Christianity from the fourth century CE when Christianity was adopted by the Roman imperial state and thereafter increasingly exercised institutional and official influence on the broader culture.² As a practicing Christian myself, I regard the period of “Christendom” and its aftermath with mixed feelings.

In any case, my focus in this paper will be on the period *prior* to “Christendom”, the time when Christianity was not officially sanctioned and authoritative, when Christians were a minority (often suffering both social hostility and governmental opposition). I contend that this earlier period gives us more useful precedents and resources for Christians seeking to live out their faith today in modern pluralist cultures and in societies where Christianity is not dominant. In such settings, Christians will want to maintain the non-negotiable particularities of Christian faith while also conducting themselves as good neighbors and citizens in a culture and political system that they do not control, and should not seek to control coercively. I contend also that this earlier period also gives non-Christians and governments more useful guidance in how to accommodate Christian faith productively for the greater good of society.

General Setting

In the first three centuries CE, there emerged the new religious movement that developed into the religion that we know as “Christianity”. This involved a noteworthy and rapid development (probably singularly so) from a small Jewish religious party to a religious movement that continued to grow both trans-locally across the Roman Empire and (more slowly) vertically through social levels,

¹ An invited paper for the First Nishan Forum of World Civilizations on “Dialogue between Confucian Civilization and Christian Civilization,” 26-27 September 2010, Jining, China.

² For a lively and provocative view of early Christian growth, see Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire A.D. 100-400* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

becoming by ca. 200 CE an increasingly confident and visible religion that attracted converts and critics, both admiration and opposition.³ From ca. 30 CE to the early/middle second century, Christian discourse was conducted using and adapting mainly terms and conceptual categories that derived from the biblical (Old Testament) texts and Jewish tradition, which was the religious matrix in which the Christian movement first appeared. During the second century CE, however, we also see earliest conscious efforts to articulate and defend Christians and Christian faith by drawing upon, and engaging critically, the larger intellectual environment, which was largely shaped by Greek philosophical traditions of the time.⁴ This period also saw the earliest Christian efforts to address the governmental authorities about Christian faith, largely because imperial authorities had begun to treat Christians as criminals on the basis of their faith. For some Christians, this meant death at the hands of the authorities.⁵

The second century CE is sometimes referred to as the period of “the Apologists” (from the Greek word *apologia*, meaning a speech given in defence of someone), the label later given to several Christian writers of that time who composed these works.⁶ In a vigorously argued study of several Christian thinkers of the second century, Eric Osborn characterized it as “one of those brief periods of human

³ “How did it ever happen that the church could grow at such a rate, so as actually to predominate in occasional little towns or districts by the turn of the second century and, by the turn of the fourth, to have attained a population of, let us say, five million?” MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 32. And see 135-36 (n. 26) for various attempts to estimate numbers of Christians. More recently, Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), is a stimulating (if sometimes debatable) study that includes an attempt to calculate growth in numbers (esp. 3-27).

⁴ The magisterial study by Jean Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture* (trans. J. A. Baker; London: Darton, Long & Todd; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), remains unmatched.

⁵ For Greek and Latin primary texts reflecting non-Christian views and responses to early Christianity, with German translation and copious notes, see Peter Guyot and Richard Klein, *Das frühe Christentum bis zum Ende der Verfolgungen* (2 vols.; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1993). Volume 1 comprises texts reflecting Roman governmental responses, and volume 2 responses from the general society of the time.

⁶ See, e.g., H. Y. Gamble, “Apologetics,” *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland, 1998²), 81-87; R. M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988). The key named Christian apologists of the second century CE whose works are extant are Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Tatian, Theophilus (all written in Greek), and Minucius Felix (Latin). Others are referred to but their works now lost or only fragments preserved: Quadratus, Aristides, Melito of Sardis, Apolinarius of Hierapolis. In addition, there is the anonymous *Epistle to Diognetus* (ca. 161-180 CE?). The Greek term *apologia* originally meant a speech in defence of an accused person, as in the New Testament use in Acts 25:16 and also by extension could refer to the defence of an idea or belief (e.g., Philippians 1:7, 16; 1 Peter 3:15). Eusebius gives the earliest use of the term with reference to Tertullian’s *Apology for the Christians* (*Ecclesiastical History* II.2.4) and another six writers from the second century: Quadratus and Aristides (IV.3.1-3), Justin (IV.18.2), Melito of Sardis and Apolonarius of Hierapolis (IV.26.1-2), and Miltiades (V.17.5).

invention when earlier concepts become museum pieces,” a time of “intellectual acceleration,” “a turning-point of *Geistesgeschichte* and the beginning of European culture,” colorfully observing, “Fortunately for posterity, Christian apologists had to argue for their lives.”⁷ In their recently-published edition of Justin Martyr’s *Apology*, Denis Minns and Paul Parvis state, “Christianity in Rome would never again know such intellectual vitality and diversity as it enjoyed in the second and third centuries.”⁸

One of the key aims was to promote and justify Christian beliefs against objections from Jewish and pagan critics.⁹ In fact, from a much earlier point, Jewish believers had to defend the beliefs and practices that distinguished them from the larger Jewish communities, both in Roman Palestine and also in the Diaspora. In particular, Jewish believers sought to justify their claims about Jesus and their devotion to him, which, to other Jews seemed at least curious and at worst blasphemous.¹⁰ From the earliest years of the Jesus-movement there was criticism, opposition, and even forceful attempts to stamp out the young Jesus movement. Prominent among these earliest negative responses against Jewish believers was the effort of the Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, to “destroy” the movement, Saul’s actions commonly dated to within the first year or two after Jesus’ crucifixion (i.e., ca. 30-35 CE).¹¹ Several texts in the New Testament, written in the later decades of the first

⁷ Eric Osborn, *The Emergence of Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1-3. Osborn was primarily concerned with the theological and philosophical aspects of the second-century Christian engagement with the wider culture, contending that from the structure of Christian theology of this period “came the philosophy and culture of Europe” (5). I do neither the space nor the competence to engage adequately here this latter claim.

⁸ Denis Minns and Paul Parvis (eds.), *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 70.

⁹ In addition, of course, there were heated debates among Christians of this time over what constituted authentic Christian teaching. Justin refers to a “*syntagma*” (now lost), in which he says he refuted the teachings of those he regarded as Christian heretics (e.g., Marcion), but Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies* (written 174-189 CE) is the most well-known and extensive of the genre.

¹⁰ E.g., for first-century evidence in Christian texts, L. W. Hurtado, *How on Earth did Jesus Become a God?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 152-78; and for evidence from Jewish texts Johann Maier, *Jüdische Auseinandersetzung mit dem Christentum in der Antike* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1982). For a larger study of the place of Jesus in earliest Christian belief and practice, L. W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

¹¹ Saul of Tarsus (known more familiarly as Paul the Apostle) was a zealous Pharisee and later described himself as “violently persecuting the church of God”. In the course of his forceful opposition to Jewish believers, he underwent an unexpected a sudden religious change that he ascribed to God’s “revelation of his Son to me” (Paul’s epistle to the Galatians 1:13-16; cf. also Philippians 3:4-11). As a result of this experience, he embraced faith in Jesus and became a zealous proponent of Christian faith, especially to non-Jews (Gentiles). The date of Jesus’ crucifixion is typically dated between 30-33 CE.

century CE reflect continuing (likely growing) opposition and criticism from Jews, e.g., the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of John.¹²

In the second century CE, Christian writers (by then largely non-Jews, “Gentiles”) continued to argue for the validity of Christian claims against Jewish objections. The most extensive example of this is Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* (ca. 160 CE).¹³ The anonymous text known as the *Epistle of Barnabas* (ca. 132-135 CE?) is another literary artifact of this debate.

But I want to focus here on second-century Christian efforts to address the wider culture and political authorities. These efforts had two main aims: (1) to defend Christians against various rumors and allegations which attracted social harassment and sometimes governmental prosecutions, and (2) to commend Christian faith to the wider culture as valid, indeed as superior to pagan religion and philosophy. I concentrate here particularly on the first of these aims. But the second should be noted as well, for it was integral to their endeavor. These Christian apologists were not simply asking for passive tolerance and a cessation of persecution, a quiet social space in which Christians could eek out their existence undisturbed and not disturbing others. They asked not to be persecuted, but they also wanted to engage their cultural and intellectual environment in serious discussion and debate about fundamental principles of truth, theology, ethics, and philosophy. That is, they believed that Christian faith had some important things to contribute to human life universally. Their faith was not a religious hobby or merely a quest for personal fulfilment, and they saw their way of life not simply as one option among others of equal value. Instead, they insisted that Christian faith offered distinctive and important teachings that held out unique benefits to individuals and the wider culture, and that rejecting Christian faith meant various serious deficits now as well as ultimate consequences in the future divine judgement of the world that they believed in and in the light of which they lived.

From its inception, Christianity was an evangelistic movement, proclaiming its message as of universal significance, and urging commitment to it. This did not often

¹² E.g., Douglas R. A. Hare, *The Theme of Jewish Persecution of Christians in the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, SNTSMS, 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967). Among specific texts, Matthew 10:16-17; John 16:1-4.

¹³ For introductions to this work and the larger body of early Christian writings, see Claudio Moreschini and Enrico Norelli, *Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature: A Literary History* (trans. J. O’Connell; 2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005).

involve organized missionary efforts, but more typically “ordinary” Christians talking about their faith and exhibiting it. In the New Testament text, 1 Peter (composed 70-100 CE), believers are exhorted, “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (3:15-16). But the texts that I will consider here give us earliest extant written efforts to do this.

Unquestionably, early Christianity was marked and shaped by the settings in which it emerged and developed. Christian teachings drew initially upon biblical/Jewish traditions. Perhaps the most salient example of this is the Christian “monotheistic” emphasis, involving an exclusive commitment to the one God of biblical tradition, and a refusal to take part in the worship of the many other deities of the Roman world.¹⁴ Likewise, the high ethical standards advocated, especially in sexual behavior (marital chastity required of husbands as well as wives!), clearly derived from biblical/Jewish teachings. The eschatological outlook, involving a future universal divine judgement, and the divine vindication of believers in bodily resurrection and immortality also came from the Jewish matrix. In various other matters, both unconsciously and deliberately, early Christianity also drew upon concepts and assumptions of the time from the wider Roman setting. So, e.g., the New Testament refers casually in many places to human “conscience” (Greek: *syneidēsis*; e.g., Acts 23:1; 24:16; Romans 2:15; 9:1), thereby using freely a term and concept that derives from Greek tradition.¹⁵

But, typically, in the early texts of classical Christianity there is not a simple borrowing of ideas unaltered. Instead, we see serious, often novel, adaptations comprising an innovative, distinctive religious outlook and behavior. So, e.g., early apologists drew upon ancient philosophical critiques of the traditional deities, images, and blood-sacrifice. In Christian teaching, however, this critique follows through in a summons to forsake the pagan gods, refrain from worshipping them, and to devote oneself solely to the one true God of biblical revelation. In short, whereas pagan philosophers had toyed with a critique of the traditional gods without intending to make any difference in the actual religious practices of anyone (including the

¹⁴ Robert M. Grant, *The Gods and the One God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986). On the Jewish background, Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?*, 111-33.

¹⁵ *Syneidēsis* occurs thirty times in the New Testament, fourteen of these in the Pauline letters (but not in the Gospels). There is no direct Hebrew equivalent, and it is rare in Greek before ca. 200 BCE. See, e.g., Gerd Lüdemann, *συνείδησις*, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (3 vols; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 3: 301-3.

philosophers themselves), early Christians were expected to live out their convictions that the traditional gods were illusory (or worse), backing up their critique by radically altered cultic behaviour that involved refraining from participating in the rituals devoted to these gods.

Second-Century Christian Apologetics

I turn now to consider second-century Christian efforts to engage the wider culture, focusing on two early texts as key illustrations: the *Epistle to Diognetus* (ca. 150-200; hereafter *Diognetus*) and Justin Martyr's *First Apology* (ca. 153-155).¹⁶ I wish to note first their efforts to refute the slanders and complaints against Christians, and then also their pleas to governmental authorities not to criminalize them simply for being Christians. Though I cannot linger over the matter here, it should be noted that the assorted works usually referred to as "apologies" comprise an innovative body of literature, with "little in the empire of the time to compare with them, at least until the third century."¹⁷

It appears that the distinctive circumstances of Christianity in the second century gave impetus to this distinctive type of writing. It should also be noted that the second century also saw the appearance of formal attacks upon Christians by major literary figures of the time.¹⁸ We have references to a now-lost anti-Christian oration by Cornelius Fronto (ca. 100-166 CE, who became the teacher of future emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus), and in Minucius Felix's work,

¹⁶ For *Diognetus*, Michael W. Holmes (ed.), *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 686-719; Paul Foster, "The Epistle to Diognetus," *Expository Times* 118 (2007): 162-68, reprinted in *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Paul Foster (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 147-66. For Justin's *Apology*, see now Minns and Parvis (eds.), *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr*. They argue that the text known as Justin's "*Second Apology*" is likely not really a second, distinguishable work but comprises "cuttings" from Justin's editing of his *Apology*. They also propose a probable date "shortly after . . . 153" (44). For a collection of recent studies, see *Justin Martyr and His Worlds*, eds. Sara Parvis and Paul Foster (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

¹⁷ Sara Parvis argues strongly that Justin invented the genre: "Justin Martyr and the Apologetic Tradition," in *Justin Martyr and His Worlds*, eds. Sara Parvis and Paul Foster (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 115-27. I cite her statement (117) where she draws upon the results of the collaborative volume, *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, eds. Mark Edwards, Martin Goodman, and Simon Price (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁸ For further discussion of the anti-Christian literature of the second and third centuries CE, see Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1984); Stephen Benko, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1984); *id.*, "Pagan Criticism of Christianity during the First Centuries A.D.," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II. 23/2, 1055-1118; and John H. Corbett, "Paganism and Christianity," *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York/London: Garland, 1998²), 848-52 (with ample bibliography).

Octavius (chapters 5–13; ca. 200 CE), the accusations and criticisms uttered by Caecilius likely echo the sort levelled by Fronto.¹⁹ There are several references to Christians by the Roman physician, Galen, which are largely negative (though expressing grudging admiration of Christians’ ethics and courage).²⁰ The critique of Christianity by the second-century Roman philosopher Celsus survives, however, in the refutation written several decades later by Origen.²¹ As another indication both that by the second century Christianity had come to the attention of the higher levels of Roman society, and that it was regarded with disdain by many among the elite, there is Lucian’s satirical *Death of Perigrinus*.²² So, the Christian apologetical writers launched their works in a time when Christianity was a hotly controversial subject.²³

The Epistle to Diognetus

In the Christian text that bears his name, Diognetus is addressed as “most excellent” (*kratiste*), which connotes a person of a high social or official standing.²⁴ Given that the text does not explicitly appeal against government prosecution of Christians, it is likely that Diognetus (whether a real or fictional character) should be taken as a person of social standing, not a government official.²⁵ The main purposes in *Diognetus* are to explain and justify the Christian view of God and the proper worship of this God, to show Christian behavior as distinctive and admirable, and to account for the historical (then recent) appearance of Christian religion.

Toward the first aim of setting out the distinctive Christian belief about God, the first move (*Diog.* 1–2) is to ridicule the pagan gods, detailing the foolishness of treating inanimate objects of stone, wood or metals as deities. The reason for this aggressive first move comes in 2.6, where the author complains, “This is why you [plural] hate the Christians: because they do not consider these objects to be gods.”

¹⁹ Minucius Felix (*Octavius* 9.6-7) has the anti-Christian character, Caecilius, refer to a speech by Fronto.

²⁰ Wilken, 68-93. For Galen’s references to Christians, see Richard Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), esp. 10-16.

²¹ Celsus’ *True Doctrine* (late second century CE) can be reconstructed from Origen’s refutation, *Against Celsus* (ca. 245-249 CE).

²² Lucian portrays Perigrinus as a charlatan who succeeds in duping Christians into regarding him as a prophet, the point being to show Christians as foolish and easily deceived.

²³ Because the exact dates of the various Christian and pagan works are not certain, it is difficult to know with certainty whether the Christian apologetic texts were responding to written pagan critiques, or the latter appeared in response to the Christian texts.

²⁴ See, e.g., New Testament uses in addressing Roman officials (Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25). Cf. Flavius Josephus’ use of the term in *Contra Apionem* (1.1) for Epaphroditus (a freedman of Domitian), to whom he dedicated this work and also his *Antiquities of the Jews*.

²⁵ Holmes (*Apostolic Fathers*, 688) cites the various options for who Diognetus might have been.

We have here a clear reference to the early Christian refusal to reverence the pantheon of Roman-era deities, and the consequent antagonism that this stance generated. Unquestionably, their self-separation from the worship of the traditional deities of the various cities and lands in which Christians lived brought resentment against them, and even suspicion of being socially subversive. The traditional gods of cities were their guardians against plague and other harm, and so refusal to reverence them was understandably taken as both offensive and perhaps even as endangering the common welfare. Likewise, within the home and in many other social settings it was customary to reverence various gods, giving a wide swathe of occasions in which conscientious Christians could give offence in their reluctance to join in these traditional religious rites. In short, Christian religious behavior regarding the traditional gods was a serious issue for non-Christians.

But it was at least equally so for Christians too. For they were convinced that it was a deep offence against the one true God to compromise the reverence due him by reverencing beings that were either illusions or perhaps inferior (even malevolent) spiritual beings masquerading as deities. In short, for them to take part in what the larger Roman society regarded as proper and requisite religious behavior would be “idolatry”. There was little room for compromise with a good conscience. Given the choice between acquiescing in the reverence of the gods to obtain social acceptance, thereby imperilling their souls and eternal destiny, and fidelity to the revealed truth of the one God, Christians were taught to choose the latter, suffering immediate social consequences but confident in an eternal vindication.

In further expression of the claim of Christian distinctiveness, *Diognetus* goes on to distinguish Christian worship from Jewish practices (3–4). Acknowledging that Jews “rightly claim to worship the one God of the universe” (3.2), *Diognetus* nevertheless criticizes them for thinking that this God can be worshipped through sacrificial offerings (3.3-4).²⁶ Furthermore, *Diognetus* also rejects Jewish practices of sabbath-observance, “qualms about meats”, calendar-observance, and circumcision (4:1-5).

After this forthright (perhaps even somewhat feisty) declaration of the distinctiveness of Christian religious commitment, in *Diogenes* 5–6 the author

²⁶ Of course, by the likely date of *Diognetus* (mid/late second century CE), the Jerusalem temple had long lain in ruins (destroyed in 70 CE), and Jewish sacrificial worship had long ceased. But, in so far as Jews of the time continued to regard sacrifice as in principle valid and to be resumed if possible, the author of *Diognetus* considers his criticism justified.

portrays more positively the place of Christians in the larger society. Though distinctive in their religion, “Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, language, or custom” (5.1). They live in cities with the general populace, and do not practice “an eccentric way of life” (*oute bion parasēmon askousin*, 5.2). They follow local customs “in dress and food and other aspects of life,” while also demonstrating “the remarkable and admittedly unusual [*thaumastēn kai homoloumenōs paradoxon*] character of their own citizenship” (5.4-5), which, in some ways, amounts to living (even in their native lands) as if resident aliens (*hōs paroikoi*) and enduring treatment as if foreigners (*hōs xenoī*). “Every foreign country in their fatherland, and every fatherland is foreign” (5.5).

In several rhetorically-framed statements, *Diogenes* then illustrates how Christians are both like and unlike the other people of the societies in which they live. For example, Christians marry and have children, “but they do not expose their offspring” (5.6, reflecting the Roman-era practice of leaving unwanted babies to die in city trash heaps or deserted places). In another memorable statement, Christians “share their food but not their spouses” (5.7).²⁷ Christians live “in the flesh” but “not according to the flesh” (denying claims that Christians engaged in sexual orgies in their church meetings).²⁸ Christians “love everyone, and by everyone they are persecuted” (5.11). “They are cursed, and yet they bless; they are insulted, and yet they offer respect” (5.15).

Then, in *Diognetus* 6 the author deploys an extended simile: “In a word, what the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world” (6.1). Christians are dispersed “throughout the cities of the world” (6.2). “Christians dwell in the world, but are not of the world” (6.3). Like the invisible soul, though Christians are known to be in the world “yet their religion remains invisible” (6.4).²⁹ As the flesh “hates the soul and wages war against it . . . so also the world hates the Christians . . . because they set themselves against its pleasures” (6.5). But, as “the soul loves the flesh that hates it,” so “Christians love those who hate them” (6.6). In short, along with a firm, even pugnacious defence of Christians’ refusal to take part in the worship of the pagan

²⁷ In the Greek, we catch the intended aural effect: “*trapenzan koinēn paratithentai, all’ ou koitēn*”.

²⁸ It is likely that the affection that Christians showed to one another, which included the “holy kiss”, served to fuel wild rumors about Christian sexual practices. See, e.g., Michael Penn, “Performing Family: Ritual Kissing and the Construction of Early Christian Kinship,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10 (2002): 151-74; Benko, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians*, 79-102.

²⁹ Does “invisible” (*aporatos*) here mean unrecognized, or not seen clearly (and so distorted in popular imagination)?

gods, *Diognetus* also presents Christians as willingly part of their society, as kindly disposed toward their fellow citizens, even toward those who despise and harass them.

In the final part of *Diognetus* (7–10), the author describes further some key Christian beliefs, with the clear intention of attracting the intended reader to embrace them.³⁰ Having poured scorn on the pagan deities and their images, the author now emphasizes the contrastingly exalted nature of the God whom Christians worship. This deity is “the omnipotent Creator of all, the invisible God,” who has now “established among humans the truth and the holy, inconceivable [*aperinoēton*] word from heaven,” by sending “the Designer and Creator of the universe himself” (7.2). Yet this one came, not “to rule by tyranny, fear, and terror” (7.3, a critical allusion to the frequent tactics of earthly governments?), but instead “in gentleness and meekness,” “as a human to humans,” seeking to save “by persuasion, not compulsion, for compulsion is no attribute of God” (7.4).

Rejecting the speculations of philosophy, *Diognetus* insists that the transcendent God cannot be known by human investigation, but only on the basis of God’s self-revelation (8.1-5), and so is seen only “through faith” (8.6). Moreover, this true God is “not only tenderhearted but also very patient” (8.7), “kind, good, without anger, and true, and he alone is good” (8.8). God shared his “great and marvelous plan” of salvation with “his child [Jesus] alone,” and revealed it through him, thereby making known “the things prepared from the beginning” (8.9-11).

During the time prior to this historical revelation in Jesus, humankind was permitted to wander in sin, so that we might see clearly “our inability to enter the kingdom of God on our own” (9.1). Then, the time came when God chose “to reveal at last his goodness and power.” God did not hate or reject us, but instead in patience and forbearance “he took upon himself our sins; he himself gave up his own Son as a ransom for us” (9.2). The author waxes lyrical in declaring God’s merciful revelation and redemption: “O the sweet exchange, O the incomprehensible work of God, O the unexpected blessings” (9.5). So, to the question about why the Christian faith had appeared only in somewhat recent historical time, *Diognetus* answers that it all comprises the divine plan.

³⁰ The material in chapters 11–12 is now commonly thought to have come from some other composition, and was attached to *Diognetus* at some point in its transmission. E.g., Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 689.

The main observation I want to underscore at this point is that *Diognetus* shows us how second-century apologists combined a critique of pagan religion with an effort to explain and commend Christian faith. They were not simply interested in conflict, but instead sought to win over those who opposed them.

After this brief exposition about God's revelation, *Diognetus* concludes by urging acceptance of it and a life lived in response to it. Here we see the strong linkage of religious belief with behavior that marked Christianity out in the Roman setting, and led some to liken Christianity more to philosophy than religion. In the Roman period, religion was mainly the performance of ritual, and had little to do with ethics. Roman-era philosophy, however, typically emphasized a strong link between one's professed beliefs and one's way of life.³¹

This Christian behavior is to be motivated by an answering love for God "the one who so loved you first" (10.3), and "by loving him you will be an imitator of his goodness" (10.4). This love for God, however, also issues in loving care for others, not "lording it over one's neighbors, or desiring to have more than weaker people, or possessing wealth and using force against one's inferiors" (10.5). Instead, those who love and seek to imitate God will take up "a neighbor's burden," will seek "to benefit someone who is worse off," will provide "to those in need" (10.6). Clearly, *Diognetus* claims that Christian faith should produce caring people who will benefit others, and the text gives no impression that this care is restricted to other Christians. So, although the author does not expressly make the point, it is obvious that the sort of behavior that he urges would comprise a positive contribution to the larger society, both in practical terms and in the example set.

Justin Martyr's Apology

Justin Martyr's place in the history of early Christian literature is significant. He has even been referred to as "the first Christian author" and "the founder of theological literature" in whose work we have "a new era" in Christian history.³² A bit more modestly, and more to the point of the present discussion, Sara Parvis has

³¹ For an excellent resource, see Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³² *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (10 vols.; reprint ed.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994, orig. ed., 1885), 1: 159. Their comments might well be regarded as a bit of an exaggeration, as some scholars contend that the Apostle Paul might be regarded as the first Christian theologian. And surely the New Testament text, the Epistle to the Hebrews, is another first-century example of a serious theological treatise.

argued recently that Justin invented the genre of Christian *apologia*. I cite the powerfully-worded conclusion to her study.

It was he who had the brilliant idea of attempting to bring before the emperor himself the legal anomaly under which Christians were suffering, for nothing more than the name of Christian. It was he who believed that it must be worth attempting to persuade people who called themselves Pious and philosophers that Christianity was neither impious nor philosophically bankrupt. It was he who first risked his life, lifted his head above the parapet, to try to do so. It is no accident that Christianity comes out of the shadows with Justin, and into a period of theologians whose names and histories we know, at least to some extent. Because it was he who worked out that if you try hard enough to understand them, it must be at least theoretically possible to persuade other human beings to understand you—and that if you could do that, maybe you could even make the killing stop.³³

Whereas *Diognetus* is addressed to a figure of social status who may be interested in Christian faith, Justin's *apologia* was addressed to the highest level of Roman government: "To the emperor Titus Aelius Hadrian Antoninus Pius Augustus Caesar, and to Verissimus his son, philosopher, and to Lucius, the son of Caesar by nature and of Pius by adoption, lover of learning" (*Apology* 1.1).³⁴ Whereas *Diognetus* responds to questions about what Christians believe and how they worship, particularly responding to complaints about their neglect of the traditional gods, Justin's work aims to be a formal appeal to the emperor to intervene to stop the prosecution of people for being Christians.³⁵

As the *entrée* into his treatise and a common basis with his intended royal readers, Justin urges reason over second-hand opinion and rumor, boldly appeals to them to prove that they really are "pious and philosophers and guardians of justice and lovers of learning," and warns that a verdict against Christians being treated fairly

³³ Sara Parvis, "Justin Martyr and the Apologetic Tradition," 115-27, citing 127.

³⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, I cite the translation in Minns and Parvis. Antoninus Pius was emperor 138-161 CE. "Verissimus" was a nickname given to Marcus Aurelius, who was adopted by Antoninus Pius and ruled after him 161-180 CE. Lucius, also adopted by Antoninus Pius and ruled with Marcus Aurelius 161-169 CE. For more information on the addressees, see Minns and Parvis, 34-41.

³⁵ As noted by others, we do not know what sort of reading Justin's *apologia* may have had in the imperial household, whether it was noticed at all. It survives because it was preserved and copied by Christians. See, e.g., Minns and Parvis, *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr*, 70.

“would actually be against yourselves” (2.1-3). Using a statement from Plato that had become by then a commonplace, Justin declares, “You have the power to kill us, but not to harm us” (2.4).³⁶

Thereafter, Justin urges that Christians should be treated no differently than any others. If they are found guilty of crimes, they should be punished (3.1-5; also 7.1-5), but it is unjust to punish them simply for admitting to being Christians (4.1-9).³⁷ He sharply accuses the Roman officials of not conducting legal proceedings against Christians with “sober judgement but with senseless passion” (5.1). He then refutes the charge that Christians are “atheists”. They certainly refuse to reverence the unworthy and false pagan deities (5.1-4) portrayed in pagan myths, and so are atheists as far as these are concerned. But Christians do reverence “the God who is most true and the Father of justice and temperance and the other virtues and who is unalloyed with evil” (6.1). As well, Christians reverence “the Son who came from him,” the angels who attend him, and the divine Spirit (6.2), and so are not atheists toward these true and appropriate recipients of reverence.

Justin then reiterates the folly of worshipping the traditional gods, and contrasting them with the God revered by Christians (8—10), and seeks to clarify and correct negative impressions about Christians. The kingdom of God that they speak of is not a human regime, and so they are not political subversives (11.1-2).

In *Apology* 12, this positive stance is reaffirmed, and then Justin proceeds boldly to advise the emperor that it would in fact be in the interests of good government and stable society to encourage others to live like Christians. “We more than all people are your allies and fellow soldiers for peace,” says Justin (12.1), for Christians live their lives with a view to the all-knowing God who will render judgement to everyone for their behaviour. In this portion of the *Apology*, it is interesting how Justin combines what must be a genuine affirmation of social and political good-will with forthright exhortation to the rulers, and also a clear distinction between the true God and the very human rulers, Justin none-too-subtly thereby demurring from demands that the emperor be treated as himself divine. Evil-doers might think that they get away with their deeds, he says, “knowing that it is possible to escape your notice because you are human beings” (12:3). On the one hand, Justin

³⁶ See Minns and Parvis (83 n. 2) for references to classical usages of the statement.

³⁷ In 7.1-5, Justin admits that there are some who call themselves Christians but whose behavior justifies punishment. See the discussion of the textual difficulties in this passage in Minns and Parvis, 93 n. 3.

refrains from supposing that the rulers “who of course yearn for piety and philosophy, do anything irrational” (12.5).³⁸ But then, in one of the most forthright statements in the *Apology*, Justin warns them, “If, like the mindless, you honour custom before truth, do what you have the power to do; though rulers too, when they honour opinion before truth, can do as much as brigands in the wilderness” (12.6).³⁹

In subsequent chapters, Justin gives specifics of Christian behaviour that illustrate their positive contribution to the larger society. Though prior to their conversion Christians “rejoiced in promiscuity,” they now exercise temperance. Forsaking magic (most often used for personal gain and to harm others), they now are dedicated to the good and true God. Formerly concerned with acquisition of personal wealth, they now share their goods with everyone in need. In place of the hatred of others and the violence of their pagan past, they now eat together irrespective of race, pray for their enemies, and urge others to live similarly (14.2-3). Justin then cites teachings of Jesus to show the kind of behaviour that he urged, including marital faithfulness and abstaining from licentiousness (15.1-7), love for others (including enemies, 15.8-9), sharing with others and avoiding avarice (15.10-17), and other matters. Just a bit later, Justin affirms Christians’ readiness to obey their rulers, pay their taxes, and respect those in authority (17.1-4).

After offering an explanation of some key Christian beliefs, arguing that they are not as stupid or incredible as the rulers may have been told (18–23), Justin then turns to answering allegations against Christians. He insists that nothing in bearing the name “Christian” justifies the hatred and state-prosecutions that Christians suffer. It is interesting that Justin begins here by pointing to the religious diversity of the time, with various gods worshipped by the different peoples, “so that everyone is impious in the eyes of everyone else on account of not worshipping the same things” (24.1), and yet, he complains, Christians are charged as criminals “as we do not worship the same gods as you” (24.2). But he then goes on to contend that their conversion to Christian religion has led former pagans to forsake the unworthy deities portrayed in pagan myths, which glorify sexual frenzy and promiscuity (25.1-3).

³⁸ Justin here plays on the preferred name of the current emperor, Antoninus *Pius*, and alludes to the professed interest in philosophy associated with Marcus Aurelius, addressed as “Verissimus” (*Apology* 1.1).

³⁹ “Custom” and “opinion” here refer to the rumors and calumnies about Christians circulating at the time.

Insisting that Christians are taught to avoid all injustice and impiety, Justin reiterates that they do not expose their newborn, in contrast to the practice of many.⁴⁰ He goes on to observe that many abandoned infants (females and males) were reared for prostitution, and he daringly chides the rulers for receiving taxes and levies from this sordid business “when you ought to extirpate these practices from your world” (27.1-2). Moreover, as we noted in *Diognetus*, so also Justin refutes the rumor that Christians engaged in sexual orgies in their meetings (29.1-3), though he had granted earlier that there were some who are called Christians who teach various heresies and may be guilty of dubious practices (26.1-8).⁴¹

In the remainder of the *Apology*, Justin proffers a large number of prophecies from the Old Testament intended to show that Christ was foretold, and that the Christian message, though comparative recent in origin, is true. He also portrays the moral transformation of believers as a new birth and a washing from former sins (61.1-13), leading believers to live thereafter in the light of God’s judgement. He explains the basics of Christian worship, including the eucharistic meal (66.1-4), the reading of scriptures, prayers, and a distribution of contributions to the widows and others in need (67.1-8). Justin sought thereby to allay fears and suspicions that Christian meetings were seditious or scandalous in nature.

Justin then appeals to the rulers to honor Christian teachings “if they seem to you to be not far from reason and truth,” or, “if they seem to you to be portentous nonsense, despise them as nonsensical matters,” but “do not decree death against those who do nothing wrong, as though they were enemies” (68.1). To this plea, Justin boldly adds another final warning “you will not escape the coming judgement of God if you remain in wrongdoing” (68.2). He concludes by expressing confidence that his petition is just and should seem so on its own merits (68.3). But, for good measure, he also then attaches a copy of a letter of the previous emperor, Hadrian, which essentially ordered that Christians be prosecuted by the government only if they were found guilty of some crime, and not simply for being Christians (68.5-10).⁴²

⁴⁰ William V. Harris, “Child-Exposure in the Roman Empire,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 84 (1994): 1-22.

⁴¹ See Benko, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians*, 54-78, who argues that rumors about Christians were based on a combination of misunderstandings of Christian teachings and on the unusual, even shocking behavior of some heretical groups.

⁴² Scholars have debated questions about the Hadrian “rescript”, but in a recent study Denis Minns argues strongly that it is authentic and that Justin indeed added to the end of his *Apology*: “The Rescript of Hadrian,” in *Justin Martyr and His Worlds*, eds. Sara Parvis and Paul Foster (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 38-49.

In Justin's final sentence, there is one last forthright wish that the rulers addressed may make judgements "worth of piety and philosophy and—for your own sake—be just" (70.4).

Conclusion

I trust that this brief summary of these two second-century Christian texts will suffice as a basis for some concluding observations, which I believe can be instructive for questions about the relationship of Christians to the wider society and cultures in which they find themselves.

We see a readiness to address rumors and charges that were circulating popularly, in the interest of promoting a greater understanding of Christianity in the social environment. Along with this, we see a desire to articulate Christian teaching, with a view to promoting an open and balanced consideration of it, and even an acceptance of it. These Christian writers felt free (obliged?), not simply to defend their faith, but to advocate it.

In Justin's *Apology*, we also see a formal appeal to the imperial rulers to investigate Christians, their teachings and behavior, and so to acquire an informed and accurate view. Thereby, Justin takes seriously the professed values of the rulers, showing a respect for them and giving them the benefit of the doubt. At the same time, he does not hesitate to exhort the rulers to live up to their professed values.

Essentially, both texts present Christians as engaged members of their society. They are not withdrawn into ghettos, but seek to be part of the cities in which they dwell. Yet they insist on their own religious distinctives and on maintaining their religious integrity. In short, these authors propose what we might call a negotiated engagement. Christians will pay their taxes, will obey laws (those that do not require them to compromise their faith, e.g., through worshipping other gods), will accept punishment whether just or unjust, will respect those in authority, and not seek to subvert or overthrow the rulers.

Moreover, these authors urge that the distinctive ethical commitments of Christians actually make them valuable members of society. Christians are taught to live in stable and committed marriages, conducting themselves responsibly in sexual behavior. They take up fully the responsibilities of child-rearing. They do not promote degrading entertainment. They are honest in their dealings, and benevolent toward those in need. They avoid conflict and do not engage in violence against

others. It is obvious that any society would benefit from people promoting and practicing this sort of behavior.

The authors are fully content for Christian faith to live on the basis of the cogency of its teachings and the moral example of believers. They argue against compelling religious uniformity, and for a pluralist society in which the rulers do not involve themselves in promoting any one religious stance. Instead, any religious faith is to rest on its persuasiveness and credibility when considered freely. These texts warn of eschatological judgement, but urge against coercion from the society or the state in religious matters.⁴³

To my mind, it is to be regretted that in the fourth century C.E., imperial Christianity arose, the coercive power of the state thereafter put to the promotion of Christian allegiance and the penalizing of unbelief or different religious stances. I would argue that Christianity can make its best contribution to the wider society and culture if Christians are simply allowed to proclaim and live out their faith in all areas of their lives. This will allow them to philosophize, conduct scholarly work, create music and art, operate businesses and farms, teach, practice medicine, and participate in good government, all on the basis of their Christian faith. The society will benefit, and Christians will know that the continued viability of their faith rests on their faithfulness to what they profess. Undoubtedly, Christianity had a profound impact on European culture in many areas, including laws, art, music, a sense of the worth of the individual, and morality. But I propose that Christians can bestow these benefits on any society wise enough to appreciate them, wise enough to allow people the freedom to make their own religious choices and allow religions to live or die by their ability to commend themselves to the human conscience.

⁴³ Sadly, in Justin's case these warnings were not heeded. Along with several other Christians, he was arraigned before the Prefect of Rome, Junius Rusticus (162-168 CE) and beheaded for refusing to worship the traditional gods. See "The Martyrdom of the Holy Martyrs," *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1: 305-6.