The Routledge Companion to Early Christian Thought

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How did early Christianity appear to pagan observers within its Greco-Roman cultural context? Such a question underscores the difference between “insider” and “outsider” perspectives. As Robert Wilken notes, “The Christians ‘read’ themselves quite differently than their contemporaries ‘read’ them.” On the one hand, “insider” texts “present the life of Jesus and the beginning of the church as the turning point of history.” On the other hand, “outsider” texts view “the Christian communities as small, peculiar, anti-social, irreligious sects, drawing their adherents from the lower strata of society.”

This present essay will trace the literature written by “outsiders,” individuals loyal to Greco-Roman society and its ideology that directly engaged and challenged Christianity in the second and third centuries. Such a task is not without its difficulties. The pagan perceptions of Christianity that survive are often found in offhand references or fragmentary sources. Many of them are extant only because they were “quoted (selectively) and paraphrased (tendentiously) by Christian authors.” Moreover, both Christianity and pagan philosophy were “moving targets,” since both “were in continuous change and development throughout the period.”

Furthermore, most of these pagan materials are found in literature addressed to upper-class readers. Thus one senses that a certain “social prejudice” frequently characterizes the polemics. On the other hand, one should not assume that a “hard-and-fast” boundary fell between intellectual critics and popular perceptions. Sometimes the cultural elite adapted the simplistic prejudices of their social milieu, and at other times they shaped popular opinion. As a Christian apologist, Justin Martyr felt compelled to insist that judgment be given only “after an exact and searching enquiry, not moved by prejudice or by a wish to please superstitious people, nor by irrational impulse or long prevalent rumors.”

Before the Decian suppression of Christianity, persecutions were usually prompted by popular opposition. Christian sources recognized this role of public opinion, and
they frequently decried the role of the *famae*, the *rumores*, and the *suspiciones*.7 The acta *martyria* often highlight the decisive role played by hostile crowds. Popular opposition linked with official persecution, due to the wide latitude permitted to the provincial governors in sentences *extra ordinem*, as well as the function of *delatores* in the Roman legal system.8 The cases (below) of Marcus Cornelius Fronto and Sossianus Hierocles demonstrate that such popular opposition could be aggravated by those deemed to be intellectual elites. During this period the “outsider” views embodied in intellectual critiques, state policies, and popular prejudices were inseparably intertwined.

One should not assume that these “outsider” perspectives are irrelevant to the study of early Christianity as it “really” was or came to be. Wilken explains, “For the attitudes of outsiders not only defined the world Christians inhabited; they were also a factor in making Christianity what it eventually became. What is said critically by pagans in one generation will be mirrored positively by Christians in the next.”9 Christian apologists often felt compelled to define themselves in a manner that responded to an agenda set by “outsiders.”10 Pagan critiques served as dams that altered the flow of Christian development, thereby changing the terrain of Christian self-identity. For example, pagan opposition caused second-century apologists to portray Christianity as a philosophy comparable to other philosophical schools. “There is no doubt,” comments Marta Sordi, “that the apologists’ decision to present Christianity in these terms was also dictated by the historical situation of the times.”11 Pagan and Christian apologists participated in an intergenerational chess match that spread from Justin Martyr to Celsus to Origen to Porphyry. In turn, Porphyry’s polemic provoked rejoinders from a wide company of Christian defenders.12 This ideological debate never checkmated the progress of Christian apologetics, but it did change the defensive strategy.13

Furthermore, early Christian doctrines frequently developed in direct response to pagan critiques, and (in turn) the classical tradition was transformed by Christian influence.14 For example, philosophical criticisms sometimes prompted the further integration of Platonism into Christianity.15 Wilken argues that the pagan opponents caused Christians “to grasp the implications of Christian belief earlier than would have been possible if they had talked only among themselves – in short, to understand the very tradition they were defending.”16 Pagan critics forced Christians to find “their authentic voice,” and without them “Christianity would have been the poorer.”17 Wilken lists the following examples of tenets forged within the furnace of pagan opposition: the relationship of faith and reason, the relation of God to the world, creation *ex nihilo*, the relation of Christianity to Judaism, the status of Jesus and his relation to God, the historical reliability of the Scriptures, the role of civil religion and the civil position of Christianity, and the revelation of God in history.18 One might append the Christians’ discussions of free will and divine impassibility. In addition, Christianity clarified its relationship to Judaism partly in response to pagan criticisms.19
Early Greco-Roman references

While glancing back to the reign of Nero, Suetonius (a second-century *equestrian* and biographer) narrates that “Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition (*superstitio nova ac malefica*).”\(^{20}\) While discussing the reign of Claudius, Suetonius asserts, “Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome.”\(^{21}\) The word *Chrestus* in this passage is sometimes interpreted as an alternative spelling (or corruption) of *Christus* (“Christ”).\(^{22}\) This *Christus–Chrestus* debate shows no signs of abating, although the burden of proof appears to lie upon those who read Christianity into the passage.\(^{23}\)

Tacitus, another early second-century Roman historian, narrates how Nero used Christians as scapegoats when he was accused of setting fire to Rome.\(^{24}\) It is noteworthy that this accusation of incendiaryism seemed credible to many Roman residents, who seemed convinced that Christians were capable of various “abominable vices” or “atrocities” (*flagitia*).\(^{25}\) Christians were known for their “hatred of the human race” (*odio humani generis*).\(^{26}\) The pernicious superstition (*exitabilis superstitio*) was plaguing Rome, “where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue.”\(^{27}\) Tacitus had already leveled this accusation of *superstitio* against the Jews, and he seems to have viewed Christianity as a “superstition” of Jewish origin.\(^{28}\)

Around the year 112, Pliny the Younger sent a letter to the emperor Trajan, asking advice concerning the proper treatment of Christians. At the time, Pliny was the governor of Pontus and Bithynia.\(^{29}\) He complained that Christianity, as a “contagious superstition,” had spread beyond the cities to the villages and rural districts.\(^{30}\) Pliny had never been involved in the *cognitio* (legal investigation) of a Christian, so he posed a series of questions.\(^{31}\) Should age be taken into account? Could one be pardoned by recanting the Christian faith? Were Christians to be punished merely for the sake of the name itself (*nomen ipsum* = “Christian”), or was it necessary to find them guilty of affiliated offenses (*flagitia cohaerentia nomini*)?

For his part, Pliny ordered the accused to worship the gods, offer sacrifices, and curse Christ.\(^{32}\) Those who publicly recanted were summarily discharged. But if they disregarded his thrice-repeated threats and persisted in their Christian commitments, Pliny executed them or sent them on to Rome (in the case of Roman citizens). “For whatever the nature of their creed might be,” Pliny did not doubt that “pertinacity and inflexible obstinacy (*pertinacia et inflexibilis obstinatio*) deserved punishment.”\(^{33}\) Upon further investigation, Pliny could find no proof of criminal or conspiratorial activity within the Christian assemblies. Rather, the Christians sang hymns to Christ “as to god,” took an oath (*sacramentum*) not to commit crimes, and shared an innocent, common meal. He discovered “nothing more than depraved and excessive superstition” (*superstitio prava et immodica*).\(^{34}\) Both Trajan’s reply to Pliny and the later rescript of Hadrian sought to curb the abuses of *delatio* (informing) against Christians.\(^{35}\)

Some philosophically minded writers of the second century appreciated the courage manifested by Christian martyrs in the face of death. Among these authors were Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and Galen. Epictetus maintained that someone who was
not improperly attached to life or material possessions would not manifest fear. He contended that the antidote to fear was a mental framework which allows one to “set the will neither upon dying nor upon living at any cost, but only as it is given one to live.” Epictetus noted that the same mindset can be produced by “madness” (mania) or by “habit” (ethous), as with “the Galileans.” Many scholars have interpreted Epictetus’s “Galileans” as a reference to Christians.

Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History* includes a letter purportedly written by Marcus Aurelius to the Council of Asia. The letter states:

> But you drive them into tumult, for you confirm them in the opinion which they hold by accusing them as atheists (athēon), and they too when so accused might well prefer apparent death rather than life for the sake of their own God.

*(Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.13.3)*

This same material is found in Justin Martyr’s *Apology*, but he ascribes it to Antoninus Pius. Benko notes, “Whether the letter is a complete Christian forgery or whether Christian interpolators have altered an originally genuine text is still a subject of scholarly debate.”

The extant text of Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations* includes an offhand reference to Christians. The emperor admired the soul which is “ready and resolved” to “be released from the body.” This readiness must “arise from a specific decision, not out of sheer opposition like the Christians.” For his part, Marcus Aurelius espoused “reflection and dignity” rather than “histrionic display.” While he valued certain traits found among Christian martyrs, he still viewed their final moments as too emotional and melodramatic. One should stalwartly face death but not play the stage-heroics of a theatrical martyr.

Galen, the famous Roman physician and philosopher, praised “the people called Christians” for their contempt of death, restraint in cohabitation, self-control in food and drink, and keen pursuit of justice. In these matters, they were not inferior to “genuine philosophers.” On one level, Galen treated Christians as adherents of a philosophical school, as when he compared “the followers of Moses and Christ” with “physicians and philosophers who cling fast to their schools.” Galen sympathetically admired the Christian conduct of a life, since they acted in the same way “as those who philosophize.” Nevertheless, they were merely playing the part, since they lacked a rational foundation.

According to Galen, Christian virtue rested upon parables, miracles, and tales of rewards and punishments in a future life. In “the school of Moses and Christ,” one hears talk of “undemonstrated laws, and that where it is least appropriate.” Galen grumbled that the “followers of Moses and Christ” order their pupils “to accept everything on faith.” For him, “Christians were neither dangerous conspirators nor abominable cannibals, but were rather adherents of an inferior philosophical school.” Although they did not pose a serious threat to society, they had been hoodwinked by a simplistic belief system.
The brunt of speeches and satires

In his public speeches, Crescens attacked Christians as “impious” and as “atheists.”

According to the reconstruction of many scholars, Crescens’s contemporary, Marcus Cornelius Fronto, delivered a speech accusing Christians of incestuous banquetting and of infanticide. Fronto’s tirade may provide a backdrop to the persecution of Christians in Lyons and Vienne c. 177, as well as the response embodied in Athenagoras’s Plea.

In one of his speeches, the orator Aelius Aristides referred to “those impious people of Palestine.” They “do not believe in the higher powers” but have “defected from the Greek race, or rather from all that is higher.” “But they are cleverest of all at housebreaking, in upsetting those within and bringing them into conflict with one another, and in claiming that they can take care of everything. They have never spoken, discovered, or written a fruitful word; they have never added adornment to the national festivals, never honored the gods.”

Benko wavers in his assessment of this material from Aristides, which “may or may not refer to Christians.” The charges of antisocialism and disturbing family life certainly parallel common perceptions of Christians. According to pagan censures, Christians were affiliated with “the repudiation of pleasure, the breaking of home and family ties, the ruined of business, the abandonment of religion, and the avoidance of civic duties.” From the pagan perspective, Christian commitment subverted familial bonds and preyed on the emotionally vulnerable. Pagans resented the disruptive force of Christianity upon the Roman commonwealth and upon traditional family values. “Many a pagan first heard of Christianity as the disintegrating force that had wrecked a neighbor’s home.”

Apuleius’s Metamorphoses is a comic tale of the protagonist’s alteration into a donkey by magic, his adventures as an ass, and his eventual transformation back into a human through the benevolence of Isis. While living as a donkey, Lucius was sold to a baker and his wife. Apuleius wrote that this woman did not lack “a single fault,” but “her soul was like some muddy latrine into which absolutely every vice had flowed.” She was “cruel, and perverse, crazy for men and wine, headstrong and obstinate, grasping in her mean thefts and a spendthrift in her loathsome extravagances, an enemy of fidelity and a foe to chastity.” Furthermore, “she scorned and spurned all the gods in heaven, and, instead of holding a definite faith, she used the false sacrilegious presumption of a god, whom she would call ‘one and only’.” In this god’s honor she invented “meaningless rites to cheat everyone and deceive her wretched husband, having sold her body to drink from dawn and to debauchery the whole day.” This passage may disparage Christian women (or perhaps Jewish women), yet its contemptuous tenor reveals an uncritical adaptation and satirical exploitation of popular prejudice.

In his Apology, Apuleius describes a certain Aemilianus who mocked divine matters and despised the gods:

For I learn from certain men of Oea who know him, that to this day he has never prayed to any god or frequented any temple, while if he chances to pass
any shrine, he regards it as a crime to raise his hand to his lips in token of reverence.

(Apuleius, Apology 56)\textsuperscript{61}

Whether this “atheist” was a Christian cannot be established with certainty, although V. Hunink argues that “much is to be said” for this theory.\textsuperscript{62}

Lucian of Samosata was another famous literary wit who ridiculed Christians, along with many others who came within the cross-hairs of his satirical sights.\textsuperscript{63} Peregrinus Proteus, the protagonist and namesake of one of Lucian’s satires, was a huckster and a swindler. After murdering his father, Peregrinus slipped away to Palestine to learn “the wonderful wisdom of the Christians,” and he quickly rose among their ranks. Lucian mocked the “credulity” of the Christians, yet he also satirized “the fanatical masses who wanted to see the Christians sentenced to death for atheism.”\textsuperscript{64} When Peregrinus was imprisoned, his fellow believers visited him and luxuriously supported their “new Socrates.”\textsuperscript{65} Peregrinus was able to amass a sizeable fortune through Christian beneficence, but he was finally excommunicated from the church when he ate meat sacrificed to idols. He eventually became a Cynic philosopher and wandering teacher before his dramatic demise via self-immolation.

In one passage, Lucian characterizes the Christians as follows:

The poor wretches have convinced themselves, first and foremost, that they are going to be immortal and live for all time, in consequence of which they despise death and even willingly give themselves into custody, most of them. Furthermore, their first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another after they have transgressed once for all by denying the Greek gods and by worshipping that crucified sophist himself and living under his laws. Therefore, they despise all things indiscriminately and consider them common property, receiving such doctrines traditionally without any definite evidence. So if any charlatan and trickster, able to profit by occasions, comes among them, he quickly acquires sudden wealth by imposing upon simple folk.

(Lucian, Peregrinus 5)\textsuperscript{66}

Lucian briefly returns to the subject of Christians in his account of Alexander of Abonoteichus. “Pontus was full of atheists and Christians who had the hardihood to utter the vilest abuse of [Alexander].”\textsuperscript{67} Within the narrative, “death to the Epicureans” and “death to the Christians” are interchangeable exclamations with “death to the atheists,” because of a shared disregard for the traditional gods.\textsuperscript{68} Lucian manifests a surface-level understanding of Christianity, which he merely employs as a foil within his satirical caricaturizations.\textsuperscript{69} As M. J. Edwards surmises, “Satire seeks, not truth, but the characteristics and the probable: it depicts living creatures, not as individuals, but as representative[s].”\textsuperscript{70}
Celsus, Porphyry, and Hierocles

Most of the pagan critics described above did not make “a serious effort to study Christian teachings or to observe Christians in action.” All this changed with Celsus, who wrote an entire treatise against Christianity in True Doctrine, probably composed in the 160s or 170s. Although the work is now lost, much of it can be reconstructed from Origen’s reply in Against Celsus. The True Doctrine reveals that Celsus was a traditional conservative who believed that “religion was inextricably bound to the unique customs of a people,” that behind all the traditional religions was “an ancient doctrine that has existed from the beginning,” and that the “old doctrine” was the “true doctrine.” Christianity was dangerous because it unraveled the social fabric of traditional piety that wove together religion, society, and politics. Celsus raised anti-Christian polemic to a whole new level, since he personally examined the Jewish and Christian scriptures and even recognized internal quarrels among Christians.

Celsus castigated the Christians for their unsocial behavior and for practicing their religion in secret. “They wall themselves off and break away from the rest of mankind.” They rejected Hellenic paideia and culture by turning to “barbarian” beliefs. They shirked their civil responsibilities, such as cooperating with the emperor and fighting as his “fellow-soldiers” and “fellow-generals.” They were like ungrateful tenants who gave nothing back for the use of property.

Celsus opposed the fideistic gullibility and incredulous dogmatism he alleged was among Christians. They “vulgarly discuss fundamental principles and make arrogant pronouncements about matters of which they know nothing.” Therefore, claimed Celsus, adherents represented “wool-workers, cobblers, laundry-workers and the most illiterate and bucolic yokels.” They convinced “only the foolish, dishonourable and stupid, and only slaves, women, and little children.” Instead of giving “a reason for what they believe,” Christian teachers repeated stock expressions such as “Do not ask questions, just believe!”

Celsus argued that Jesus was a magician and could not have been divine. Why, asked Celsus, would a god need to eat, as Jesus did? Why would a god, who should be unafraid of death, need to flee to Egypt as a child? Why would a god permit himself to be arrested? How could an immortal god suffer and die? Why would the Son of God require an angel to move the tomb stone? If Jesus were God, why would the men who tortured him go unpunished? Celsus concludes that “the Christians are the losers, since they worship neither a god nor even a demon, but a dead man!”

Celsus attacked the biblical writings as fables. He maintained that the original belief in Jesus’ resurrection was based upon sorcery-formed delusion, wishful thinking, and female hysteria. The disciples later fabricated Jesus’ prophecies of his death and resurrection to make it appear that the entire plot was foretold. Celsus argued that Christians also foisted Jesus upon the Hebrew prophecies, since “the prophecies could be applied to thousands of others far more plausibly than to Jesus.” In addition, the idea of a virgin birth was borrowed from pre-existing myths.

Celsus claimed that Christian theology was riddled with internal contradictions. Why was an omnipotent, sovereign God unable to control his creatures? How could
humans be made in the image of an incorporeal God? Why would an omnipotent God need a day of rest after creation? How could God create the world, leave it to evil, and only return to its rescue centuries later? Why would he come to an out-of-the-way corner of the earth like Palestine? How could an immutable God change and take on human form?

Celsus complained that Christianity was unoriginal and yet had the brazenness to claim exclusivity. While the Jewish religion could rightfully claim ancient roots, Christians freely picked their teachings and rituals from other sources. Not only did the Christians refuse to admit their free borrowing, they even claimed that “they alone know the right way to live.” But the multiplicity of Christian schisms raised an epistemological specter. How could all of the schismatic groups claim exclusive truth?

Porphyry of Gaza, who had been tutored by Origen, later became a pupil of Plotinus, a Neoplatonic philosopher whose lectures criticized “Christians of many kinds” and especially Gnostics. Porphyry’s *Philosophy from Oracles* included various anti-Christian pieces. For instance, Augustine preserved Porphyrian oracular materials concerning a pagan husband’s concern for his Christian wife. “Let her go as she pleases, persisting in her vain delusions, singing in lamentation for a god who died in delusions, who was condemned by right-thinking judges, and killed in hideous fashion by the worst of deaths.”

Porphyry also composed a multi-volume work (or collection of works) eventually known as *Against the Christians*. Modern scholars have attempted to reconstruct some of the contents, based upon secondary excerpts. T. D. Barnes has described *Against the Christians* as “the largest, most learned and most dangerous of all the ancient literary attacks on Christianity.” Porphyry “could not be laughed off as an ignorant and ill-informed critic.”

Porphyry derided Christianity as “an irrational and unexamined *pistis,*” and he called Christians “impious” and “atheists” for throwing aside their ancestral gods. He portrayed the apostles and evangelists as “poor country bumpkins (rusticani et pauperes) who performed second-rate magic merely ‘for profit’.” He maintained that the evangelists manipulated and misquoted the prophecies of the Hebrew scriptures, that the Gospels contradicted one another, and that Paul was erroneous and inconsistent in his own writings. Porphyry argued that the book of Daniel was written as *prophecy ex eventu* in the second century BCE.

Lactantius reports hearing two anti-Christian polemicists speak at Diocletian’s court immediately before the outbreak of the “Great Persecution,” and some modern scholars believe that one of the pair was Porphyry. The other was most probably Sossianus Hierocles, governor of Bithynia. Scholars debate the dating of Hierocles’ work, *Lover of Truth,* although Michael Simmons argues that an edition was circulating in the Eastern provinces by c. 303. Hierocles depicted Apollonius of Tyana (a pagan wonder-worker) as a holy-man possessed with divine qualities, while he portrayed Jesus as a brigand, and a leader of low-class disciples. Hierocles contrasted pagan “well-established judgment” with “the easy credulity of Christians.” “For whereas we reckon him who wrought such feats not a god, but only a man pleasing to the gods, they on the strength of a few miracles proclaim their Jesus a god.” Simmons notes how the *Lover of Truth* reveals significant information concerning the
background of the pagan–Christian conflict leading into the Great Persecution, the relationship between pagan intellectuals and the religious policies of the Tetrarchy, the polemical focus upon miracles and prophecy, and the development of the apologetic genre in the late Roman Empire. Celsus, Porphyry, and Hierocles embodied the “increasingly hostile attack upon Christianity by some of the best representatives of the cultured classes of the Roman Empire.” These opponents caused Christians to clarify the issues, refine many arguments, and take positive corrective measures. One should not assume that “this response would have been formulated in the absence of the challenge.”

Recurring themes

Intellectual opponents caricatured Christianity as appealing to those deemed as social inferiors. In the words of Celsus, Christianity appealed to women, slaves, and children. Critics also highlighted the “barbarian” character of Christianity, in contrast with the cultural achievements of the Greeks. As a corollary to such “social prejudice,” pagans frequently looked down upon the Christian Scriptures, which seemed “uncouth and barbaric” and “grated on the sensibilities” of the educated. “It is difficult,” explains A. H. M. Jones, “for us to appreciate how serious an obstacle this was.” Christian authors sought to ease the tension by employing allegorical interpretation. And when pagan polemicists insisted upon the superiority and antiquity of Greco-Roman culture, Christian apologists countered that the classical Greek writings borrowed from Moses.

At the same time, there was no hard-and-fast boundary between the clamor of the ignorant masses and the intellectual critiques of the literary elites. The intellectual critics were not immune to adopting (or even inciting) popular accusations. For instance, Marcus Cornelius Fronto accused Christians of incest and cannibalism. Pliny asked Trajan whether the Christians were to be punished merely for the sake of the name itself (“Christian”), or was it necessary to find them guilty of affiliated offenses (flagitia cohaerentia nomini)? Pliny, it is true, made the effort to investigate Christian meetings before jumping to rash conclusions, and he found no evidence of such flagitia. But his question still manifests that he was a man of his times.

Christians often felt persecuted merely for the sake of the name, the nomen Christianum. Justin Martyr protested, “By the mere statement of a name, nothing is decided, either good or evil, apart from the actions associated with the name.” But the name “Christian” was often associated with the undesirable traits of superstitio and obstinatio, as well as a wider “complex of guilt,” including the purported flagitia of incest and cannibalistic infanticide (“Oedipean intercourse” and “Thyestean banquets”). Tertullian complained, therefore, that the only thing necessary to incite public hatred was “the confession of the name of Christian, not an investigation of the charge.”

Like the pagan masses, the pagan literary figures were suspicious of Christian secrecy. According to Celsus, Christians conducted their business and instruction “in secret.” Pagans spoke of the Christians’ “mysterious intimacy,” including their nocturnal gatherings. Their lack of altars, images, and temples within worship was
a telltale sign of a secret society. Minucius Felix’s pagan interlocutor insisted that Christians are “a furtive race which shuns the light, mute in the open but garrulous in the corners.” Secrecy was cousin to conspiracy, and although the Christians were secretive, they were well-organized.

The Greco-Roman critique often focused upon six recurring themes – Christianity as a superstitio, as “atheism,” as a novel sect, as a “blind faith,” as a magical movement pandering supernatural wonders, and as the source of scandalous doctrines. First, we have seen that Pliny, Suetonius, and Tacitus all agreed that Christianity was a superstitio. Among the educated, the term superstitio designated irrational, fanatical, exotic, idiosyncratic, or degenerate religion. “Superstition” was associated with irreligion and impiety (asebia). True religio “promoted and engendered virtue, justice, public morality, whereas superstition did not.” Therefore, in the Greco-Roman world, impiety carried political undertones of sedition. As Cicero explained, “In all probability the disappearance of piety towards the gods will entail the disappearance of loyalty and social union among men as well, and of justice itself, the queen of all the virtues.”

Second, pagan critics such as Crescens, Lucian, and Porphyry accused Christians of “atheism.” Minucius Felix’s pagan interlocutor exclaims, “They despise the temples as no better than sepulchers, abominate the gods, sneer at our sacred rites.” Faithful Christians also refused to participate in the imperial cult, a central facet of public ritual. They would not take an oath by the emperor’s Genius, nor sacrifice to the gods on his behalf. Tertullian repeats a common anti-Christian accusation in his Apology: “You do not worship the gods … and you do not offer sacrifice for the emperors.”

Third, critics came to view Christianity as a novel sect. Galen closely associated Christianity with Judaism (“the followers of Moses and Christ”), and he merged criticisms common to both. Other pagan authors, however, began to discriminate between the two, and they used the schismatic origin of Christianity to their argumentative advantage. Judaism was “vindicated by its antiquity,” even if it exhibited some of the same exclusivistic, antisocial tendencies as Christianity. Christianity, however, was a religious upstart recently founded by a seditious leader, and Christians possessed neither an ethnic identity nor a national history. Celsus disparaged Christianity as a rebellious sect from a people who themselves were rebels (the Jews).

Fourth, Greco-Roman critics attacked Christianity as a blind faith. Galen complained that Christianity relied upon faith and revelation rather than upon proof, logic, and demonstrable laws. Celsus “had no respect for religions that were based on faith alone, because in his opinion faith was a poor substitute for experienced truth.” Porphyry likewise condemned the Christians’ “mindless and unexamined faith.” Hierocles ridiculed “the easy credulity of the Christians.” From the pagan perspective, Christians naively adopted the “stupid fables” of the Jewish scriptures and then added their own fantastic fabrications.

Fifth, pagan “outsiders” depicted Christianity as a magical movement. Certain Christian rites such as exorcisms, glossolalia, healings, praying “in the name of Jesus,” and making the sign of the cross could all be viewed as magic. Celsus depicted Jesus
himself as a magician who had learned his trade in Egypt. Since both Christians and pagans conceded supernatural wonders, the debate centered upon the source of power. Porphyry concluded that Christians “have performed some wonders by their magic arts,” but adds that “to perform wonders is no great thing.”

Sixth, pagan intellectuals critiqued the scandalous nature of specific Christian beliefs. For example, the Christian doctrines of incarnation, crucifixion, and atonement were “ludicrous” to Porphyry, who maintained absolute divine transcendence, immutability, and impassibility. Pagan philosophers considered “resurrection in the flesh” to be “a startling, distasteful idea, at odds with everything that passed for wisdom among the educated.” According to Porphyry, the soul could not be saved until it was liberated from the body with its sensations and passions. “Platonism,” notes Simmons, “could teach a final salvation in and from the body, but never, as Christians professed, of the body.”

Christian apocalyptic material that predicted the fall of Rome (and sometimes gleefully) would have been an automatic affront to Roman officials. The Christian doctrine of eternal punishment was also scandalous, and divine wrath was “held to be monstrous by the educated pagan.” Celsius mocked the belief that “God applies the fire like a cook,” so that “all the rest of mankind will be thoroughly roasted and they alone will survive.” Celsius reasoned that if all religions claimed the exclusive route to salvation, how would the earnest seeker ever choose? “Are they to throw dice in order to divine where they may turn, and whom they are to follow?”

Pagans also opposed the notion of the particularity of God’s revelation in Jesus of Nazareth. Porphyry was willing to grant that Jesus was a devout man, but he recoiled when Christians claimed Jesus as “the sole and universal source of salvation.” Porphyry hunted for a soteriological via universalis, and he recommended living in accordance with the nous, participating in theurgical purifications, and rejecting bodily passions. Christian authors could borrow aspects of this philosophical program, but they still emphasized God’s redemptive works in history and particularity in Jesus Christ and thereby downplayed argumentation based upon human reason confined to the abstract. But this Christian response lies beyond the purview of this essay.

Further reading

Primary sources

R. M. Berchman, Porphyry Against the Christians, Leiden: Brill, 2005. (An introduction to Porphyry and his polemical material against Christianity, followed by translations of fragments and testimonia.)


Secondary sources

S. Benko, “Pagan Criticism of Christianity During the First Two Centuries,” Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt 2.23.2, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980, pp. 1055–1118. (A compilation and critical analysis of the primary source critiques of Christianity from Suetonius to Galen, as well as a synopsis of Celsus’s polemic.)

G. Clark, Christianity and Roman Society, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. (A concise yet rich study that includes a chapter on “Christians and Others,” which discusses how pagans viewed early Christianity.)


Notes


5 Justin, First Apology 2; trans. L. W. Barnard, St. Justin Martyr: The First and Second Apologies, New York: Paulist, 1997, p. 23. One notes how Justin turned the charge of “superstition” back upon his opponents.


7 Cf. Tertullian, Apology 7.8–14.


13 On Christian assemblies as collegia (clubs) or burial societies, see Pliny, Letters 10.33–34, 10.96; Wilken, Christians as the Romans Saw Them, pp. 31–47.


17 Wilken, *Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, p. 205.

18 Wilken, *Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, p. xvi.


28 Tacitus, *Histories* 5.5.

29 According to R. MacMullen, Pliny’s trouble with Christians concerned only Pontus (see MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, p. 135, n. 26).


34 Ibid.


36 Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.7.4–6.


38 Some have deemed the text to be a reference to Galilean Zealots, but compare Lucian, *Peregrinus* 13; Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 11.3; cf. Origen, Against Celsus 8.65; R. Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians*, London: Oxford University Press, 1949, p. 15. Julian “the Apostate” reused the label “Galileans” as a reference to Christians. Clark theorizes that Epictetus may have confused Jews and Christians in *Discourses* 2.9.20–21 (see Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, p. 27).


40 Justin, *First Apology* 68.

46 Galen’s commentary on Plato’s work; trans. Walzer, Galen on Jews and Christians, p. 15.
48 Galen’s commentary on Plato’s work; trans. Walzer, Galen on Jews and Christians, p. 15.
52 See Sordi, Christians and the Roman Empire, pp. 195, 198.
54 Benko, “Pagan Criticism of Christianity,” p. 1098.
55 Colwell, “Popular Reactions against Christianity in the Roman Empire,” p. 61.
56 Origen, Against Celsus 3.55. From the Christian standpoint, the local assembly (ἐκκλησία) functioned as an alternative family, offering practical aid, spiritual community, and mutual support (see Clark, Christianity and Roman Society, p. 21).
58 Colwell, “Popular Reactions against Christianity in the Roman Empire,” p. 62.
60 T. D. Barnes overstates the case when he argues that the baker’s wife is “unambiguously and unmistakeably depicted as a Christian” (Barnes, “Pagan Perceptions of Christianity,” p. 233).
64 Sordi, Christians and the Roman Empire, p. 161.
65 Lucian, Peregrinus 12; cf. Justin, Second Apology 10; Athenagoras, Plea on Behalf of Christians 8.2.
68 Lucian, Alexander 38. See Sordi, Christians and the Roman Empire, p. 162. “Death to the … ” is a dynamic translation of ἐξος.
69 Benko argues that Lucian viewed the Christian movement as a philosophical school or a new oriental mystery, or perhaps a blend of both (Benko, “Pagan Criticism of Christianity,” p. 1097).
74 Frede, “Origen’s Treatise *Against Celsus*,” p. 133.
75 Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.1.
77 Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.2.
79 Origen, *Against Celsus* 8.55
86 Origen, *Against Celsus* 2.55.
88 Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.37.
89 Origen, *Against Celsus* 4.40.
90 Origen, *Against Celsus* 6.61.
98 See R. M. Berchman, *Porphyry Against the Christians*, Leiden: Brill, 2005, pp. 1–6. Berchman argues that Against the Christians was originally a “collection of several works,” perhaps including *Philosophy from Oracles*.
100 Barnes, “Pagan Perceptions of Christianity,” p. 238.
101 Barnes, “Pagan Perceptions of Christianity,” p. 239.
102 See Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, p. 121; Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 1.2.2.

104 Porphyry, Against the Christians frgs 9–10.
105 Porphyry, Against the Christians 12, 15, 16.
106 Porphyry, Against the Christians 21, 30–33.
109 Simmons, “Graeco-Roman Philosophical Opposition,” p. 848.
111 Ibid.
112 Simmons, “Graeco-Roman Philosophical Opposition,” p. 849.
113 Simmons, “Graeco-Roman Philosophical Opposition,” p. 861.
117 See J. M. Schott, “Porphyry on Christians and Others.”
126 Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.3. Cf. the reappearance of “secrecy” in Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.1, 7; 8.17, 39.
130 Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society*, pp. 20, 24.


139 Ste Croix downplays the role of emperor-worship proper in “Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?,” p. 10.


142 This turn of phrase comes from Wilken, “Christians as the Romans (and Greeks) Saw Them,” p. 120. See Orig, *Against Celsus* 3.1, 4.31.


148 Simmons, “Porphyry of Tyre’s Biblical Criticism,” p. 100.


154 Simmons, “Porphyry of Tyre’s Biblical Criticism,” p. 100.


