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**What Did It Mean to Be an Ancient Latin Christian?**

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**The Christian and Roman Identities within the Apologetic Works of Tertullian,  
Minucius Felix, and Lactantius**

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Abstract:

This thesis explores how Christian and Roman identities were categorized in the main apologetic works of Tertullian, Minucius Felix, and Lactantius. How early Christian writers conceptualize and categorize what it means to be Christian, and how that understanding affects other aspects of their identity, has been a rich and contentious area of scholarship. However, this scholarship has yet to properly discuss this topic specifically in relation to Latin Christian writings before Constantine. This thesis aims to rectify this gap in scholarship and discuss how the circumstances of these pre-Constantinian Latin authors notably and substantially influence how they conceptualize and categorize their Christian identity. Earlier scholarship has primarily either discussed how ancient Greek Christian authors categorize their Christian identity in relationship to Jewish identity, or how post-Constantinian Latin authors categorize their Christian identity in relationship to Roman identity, under the rule of a supportive Roman Empire. In contrast, this thesis examines how these three authors categorize and conceptualize their Christian identity specifically in relationship to their Roman identity, under the rule of a hostile Roman Empire. It looks exclusively at these authors' apologetic works, because within these works Christian identity is explained to and defended against a rhetorically non-Christian audience. Thus these works most clearly articulate and categorize the difference between Christian and non-Christian, and Christian and Roman. This thesis explores, among other things, how these authors both build upon and separate themselves from non-Christian Latin writings, specifically the works of Cicero; how these authors develop Latin Christian terminology to articulate their identity, specifically their use of the term *religio*; how these authors influence and actively build

upon each other as Latin Christian writers with a common cause; and finally how these authors position their Christian identity in relation to the Roman government before Constantine's support of Christianity. This thesis comes to the following conclusions. Firstly, due to how these works directly inspire each other, Tertullian's *Apology*, Minucius Felix's *Octavius*, and Lactantius's *Divine Institutes*, can collectively be treated as a unified Latin apologetic tradition. Secondly, within these works these authors gradually redefine the Latin term *religio* and correspondingly work to redefine how the worship of a deity, and the identities based on said worship, are conceptualized in Latin. Finally, there emerges from the discourse of these authors a sphere of Christian identity centred around worship, which is significantly less based on civic authority than traditional Roman worship-based identity. To demonstrate these latter two points this thesis will begin with a discussion of Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, which will look at how Cicero defines *religio* and conceptualizes identities based around worship, and how these subsequent Christian authors actively build on and alter these understandings. Subsequent chapters will analyse each author's work in turn, and discuss how their works relate to each other, how they define or redefine *religio*, how they categorise Christian identity, and how they position this Christian identity in relation to the Roman government.

### Lay Summary:

This thesis primarily examines the ancient Latin Christian works: the *Apology* by Tertullian, The *Octavius* by Minucius Felix, and the *Divine Institutes* by Lactantius. Tertullian and Minucius Felix wrote during the end of the second century and the beginning of the third CE. Lactantius however wrote his most significant works at the beginning of the fourth century. This period is known as late antiquity. All three of these writers lived within the Roman Empire, and likely originated from the region of northern Africa, around the city of Carthage. These works are considered Christian apologetics, which is to say that their purpose is to define and defend Christianity to a nominally non-Christian audience. The three works which this thesis looks at are these authors' main apologetic works. These writings are distinct from similar Christian writings of the time because they are in Latin, and they directly address the relationship between ancient Christian identity and ancient Roman culture and civic authority.

The thesis makes three central claims that are interwoven through each of the chapters. The first claim is that these three works should be studied together as, what I refer to as the Latin Christian apologetic tradition. These works should be considered a tradition, because each of them is directly inspired by the ones that come before them, and they all respond to a similar set of issues. The second claim is that these works redefine the Latin term *religio*. In pre-Christian Latin writings, the term *religio* referred to either a social obligation or, more commonly, a specific set of rituals performed in worship of the gods. In the Latin Christian writings which this thesis explores, our authors gradually change the meaning of the term *religio*, so that it refers to an abstract sense of devotion exclusively directed toward the Christian God, and associated with

morality. By changing the meaning of the language used to describe worship, these authors take part in changing the common understanding of worship. The third claim is that these authors gradually come to present Christianity as distinct from civic authority. In the ancient Mediterranean, broadly speaking, organizations which we today would call religious institutions were at that time closely tied to civic authority. This thesis argues that one of the most important developments made by these authors is that they present what it means to be Christian in such a way that it is defined by the worship of its god, but it is not based around a civic authority.

The thesis begins with an analysis of Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*. This analysis will show how the term *religio* and the nature of worship more broadly were understood before Christian authors. The following chapters will examine each of our Latin Christian authors' works in turn, and discuss how our three central claims pertain to each of their arguments.

These three claims respond and add to scholarly debates on: how to discuss ancient Christian apologetic works, the changing meaning of *religio* in the ancient world, and the changing understanding of worship and identity in the late antique world. Scholarship on these topics has not yet meaningfully looked at ancient Christian apologetic works which are primarily focused on the relationship between Christian and Roman identities. Furthermore, this Latin Christian tradition is significant due to its influence on notable subsequent Christian writers such as Augustine, and notable historical figures such as Constantine.

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## Introduction

'But,' you say, 'they are gods to us.'<sup>1</sup>  
Tertullian, *Apology*, x.3

With this line, Tertullian inadvertently strikes at the heart of a significant development in the nature of cultic worship in late antiquity. In chapter 10 of the *Apology*, after Tertullian concludes to his satisfaction that non-Christian gods are not actually real gods, he then grapples with the contention that non-Christian gods are deities in the eyes of their worshipers if not in fact. In the discussion that follows, what Tertullian seeks to disprove is not the objective divinity of non-Christian gods, but rather their subjective divinity. Not only are non-Christian deities not actually divine, suggests Tertullian, but they are not even divinities in the eyes of non-Christians. The reason Tertullian is able to make this claim with any kind of conviction is because during his time the idea of what constituted a deity was changing.<sup>2</sup> What Tertullian points to as insincere treatment of divinity is the older understandings of and methods of worshipping

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<sup>1</sup> Sed nobis, inquit, dei sunt. Tertullian, *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani Opera*, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina I (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954) 105. All translations are my own with consultation with Tertullian and Minucius Felix, *Apology. De Spectaculis. Minucius Felix: Octavius*. Loeb Classical Library 250. Terrot Glover and Gerald Rendall trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931).

<sup>2</sup> Mary Beard, "Cicero and Divination: The Formation of a Latin Discourse," *Journal of Roman Studies* 76 (1986): 33–46; Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 149-153; Arnaldo Momigliano, "The Theological Efforts of the Roman Upper Classes in the First Century B.C." *Classical philology* 79, no. 3 (1984): 199–211; John North, "The Limits of the 'Religious' in the Late Roman Republic", *History of Religions* 53 no.3 (2014): 225–245; Judith Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2005); Dale Martin, *Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocratics to the Christians* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

deities which were becoming outmoded. Tertullian is participating in this dialogue about what a deity should look like, and taking advantage of it, in order to promote the worship of the Christian god as a better, more authentic alternative. This changing understanding of deity, which is explored in the work of Tertullian and his contemporaries, is part of a wider change in the public consciousness of the late antique world on what forms of worship were valid, the role of theology and worship in the public sphere, and how one defines a community united primarily by common worship.<sup>3</sup>

Here Tertullian addresses one of the most challenging, yet engaging issues encountered in studying the ancient world, and one which has provoked significant scholarship in recent decades: the categories by which ancients perceived the world. It is important to recognise that understanding the conceptual categories of the ancient world is challenging not just because moderns cannot fully conceptualize ancient ways of thinking and perceiving the world. While this remains certainly a significant challenge to scholarly understanding, the greater problem is that our sources are themselves ambiguous, uncertain, and contradictory, as is seen in Tertullian's treatment of the changing concept of deity. To understand the conceptual categories of the ancient

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<sup>3</sup> Beard, "Cicero and Divination"; Beard et al., *Religions of Rome*, 149-153; Momigliano, "The Theological Efforts of the Roman Upper Classes in the First Century BC"; North, "The Limits of the 'Religious'"; Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*; Martin, *Inventing Superstition*; Maijastina Kahlos, *Debate and Dialogue: Christian and Pagan Cultures c. 360–430* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2007); Jeremy Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Carlin Barton, and Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); Daniel Boyarin, "The Christian Invention of Judaism: The Theodosian Empire and the Rabbinic Refusal of Religion," *Representations* 85 (Winter 2004): 21-57; Jörg Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ: On the History of Religion in the Roman Imperial Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Robert Markus, "The Problem of Self-Definition: from Sect to Church," in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition: Volume one the Shaping of Christianity in the Second and Third Centuries*, ed. Ed Sanders (London: SCM Press LTD, 1980).

world, one must recognise that they change over time, and can differ from author to author based on that writer's audience, genre and rhetorical goals. Tertullian argues that the non-Christian and particularly Roman conception of deity is not an accurate conception of deity. In so doing, Tertullian is advocating for a continued change in the development of the Roman category of deity, which affects categories of cultic practice and cultic groups. Unfortunately, other than in rare passages such as this, understanding categories in the ancient world is challenging, because these categories by their very nature exist as the assumptions behind arguments and remain often unspoken in the texts themselves, even when they are in the process of changing. Indeed, it is important to note that the issue of categorization is not a conscious pre-occupation of the ancients, but rather it is my modern attempt to conceptualize the ideological foundations on which these ancient debates were based, and because of changes within these ideological foundations the nature of these ancient debates changed.

However, issues of categorization come to the fore when they are connected to another fraught issue of scholarship, namely the study of identity. How one categorizes the identity of a group within a society has important and immediate consequences for how that group is treated by society. These consequences can inspire individuals to write about how their group identity is categorized and to advocate that their group be categorized differently. Over time this can lead to categories of identity changing and new categories of identity developing. For example early Christians responding to persecution and mistrust wrote works commonly referred to as apologetics in which they strove to defend themselves against the accusations made against them by, in part,

defining how Christians as a group should be categorised. In late antiquity this type of change occurred and the origins of this development can be found in Tertullian's *Apology*.

In this thesis I argue that the Latin Christian apologetic writers, Tertullian, Minucius Felix, and Lactantius, gradually developed categories of identity which centered around worship becoming less grounded in civic authority. This thesis will also discuss how the Latin term *religio*, which signifies worship, changed its meaning in the work of these authors, and finally how these three authors' works can be usefully treated as a distinct apologetic tradition. This introductory chapter will review how these three claims constitute original contributions to scholarship. Then it will briefly discuss the effect of the cultural setting of North Africa on these three Christian writers, and define the important terms of our argument. The final section will then provide a summary of the argument of the thesis as a whole.

### Contributions to Scholarship

Within this thesis I aim to provide three original contributions to scholarship. The first significant point that I will argue is that there emerges from the discourse of these authors a sphere of Christian identity centered around worship which is significantly less based in civic authority than traditional Greco-Roman worship-based identity. To be clear, this is not equivalent to the modern idea of 'religion,' but it is a form of identity that is created in the late antique world specifically for Christian identity to inhabit. This argument engages with scholarly debates on the development of categories of identity

within early Christian writings. By this position, I also aim to bridge the gap in this scholarly discourse between negotiation of Christian and Jewish identity in the first and second centuries, and the Christianization of the Roman Empire after Constantine in the fourth and fifth centuries. Secondly, the analysis of these authors' works aims to provide original insight into how these authors make use of the Latin term *religio*. The term *religio* and how it is used by ancient authors has been notably of interest to scholarship due to the insight it offers into ancient cultic practice and the identities attached to it, as will be discussed below. The argument of this thesis is that these authors gradually redefine the term from purely ritualistic worship to a broader understanding of worship focused around morality and connection to a divinity. Finally this thesis aims to show that these three authors can be meaningfully treated as an apologetic tradition within early Latin Christian discourse. This point aims to engage with academic discussions on the nature of early Christian apologetics in the ancient world and how modern scholarship can meaningfully treat early Christian writings as apologetics.

The first and primary scholarly debate this thesis seeks to engage with centres on discussions on the development of Christian identity in the ancient world. Scholars such as J. Z. Smith, Talal Asad and Brent Nongbri have definitively argued that the modern category identified as 'religion' did not exist in the ancient world.<sup>4</sup> Because of this, scholarship which explores Christian identity in the ancient world has significantly debated what categories of identity are applicable to ancient Christianity, and what

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<sup>4</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious" in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. M. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1998) 269-284; Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: a History of the Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

categories of identity ancient authors used to categorize Christian identity in relation to other forms of identity.<sup>5</sup> These discussions have largely fallen into two camps. Firstly, recent scholarship on ancient Christian identity has been largely dominated by exploring the relationship between Christian identity and Jewish identity within mostly first-century and second-century Greek works.<sup>6</sup> This research engages with questions surrounding the issues of the ‘parting of the ways’: to what extent was ancient Christianity distinct from ancient Judaism? If it was then in what ways did Christian identity make use of the

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<sup>5</sup> Gregory Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition: Josephus, Luke-Acts, and Apologetic Historiography*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 64 (Leiden: Brill, 1992); Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*; Denise Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Aaron Johnson, “Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius,” *Praeparatio Evangelica* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Matthew Novenson, “Beyond Compare: Some Recent Strategies for Not Comparing Early Christianity with Other Things,” in *The New Testament in Comparison* (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2020) 79–94; Eric Rebillard, *Christians and their many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa 200-450* (Ithaca and London: Cornell university press, 2012); *ibid*, “Late Antique Limits of Christianness: North Africa in the Age of Augustine.” In *Group Identity and Religious Individuality in Late Antiquity*, eds. Eric Rebillard and Jörg Rüpke, 293-317 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 2015); David Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity: An Introduction to a Unique Context and Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2017) 47-49; *ibid*, *Tertullian the African: An Anthropological Reading of Tertullian’s Context and Identities* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, Inc ; 2007); Kendra Eshleman, *The Social World of Intellectuals in the Roman Empire: Sophists, Philosophers, and Christians*, Greek Culture in the Roman World. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Isabell Sandwell, *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity: Greeks, Jews and Christians in Antioch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Boyarin, “The Christian Invention of Judaism,” 21-57; *ibid*, *Border Lines: Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Vasiliki Limberis, “‘Religion’ as the Cipher for identity: The Case of Emperor Julian, Libanius, and Gregory Nazianzus”, *Harvard Theological Review* 93, No.4 (2000): 373-400; Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016); Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*; Steve Mason, “Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 38, no. 4-5 (2007): 457–512; Adam Becker, “Martyrdom, Religious Difference, and ‘Fear’ as a Category of Piety in Sasanian Empire: The Case of the Martyrdom of Gregory and the Martyrdom of Yazdpaneh.” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 2, No. 2 (Fall 2009): 300-336.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*; Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*; Buell, *Why This New Race*; Johnson, “Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius”; Novenson, “Beyond Compare”; Boyarin, *Border Lines*; Mason, “Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism”; Claudia Setzer, “Jews, Jewish Christian, Judaizers in North Africa”, in *Putting Body & Soul Together: Essays in Honor of Robin Scroggs*, eds. Virginia Wiles, Alexandra Brown, and Graydon Snyder (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1997); William Frend, “Jews and Christians in Third Century Carthage”, in *Paganisme, Judaïsme, Christianisme: Influences et Affrontements dans le Monde Antique*, ed. by Marcel Simon (Paris :E de Boccard,1978) 185-194; Annette Reed and Adam Becker, “Introduction: Traditional Models and New Directions,” in *The Ways that Never Parted*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 95, Eds. Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Tübingen: Siebeck Mohr, 2005).

same categories of identity as Jewish identity? Where Christian and Jewish identities existed in the same individual or community how did they exist in relation to each other?

The second focus of scholarship on ancient Christian identity looks at the 'Christianization' of the Roman Empire following Constantine in the late fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>7</sup> This research engages with questions such as: to what extent and in what way can we say that the Roman Empire is made Christian at this time? what does it mean to be made Christian in this context? how does Christian identity at this time make use of Roman civic authority or classical intellectual authority? and at this time how did Christian identity relate to other group identities such as Roman or Greek?

Within the former debate there has been a tendency in more recent scholarship to resist the older commonly held assumption that Christian identity quickly developed into a distinct identity independent from Jewish identity. It concludes that in many instances Christian sources continued to make use of Jewish categories of identity and to rely on Jewish communities for Christianity's initial centuries of existence.

Nevertheless this school of thought still must conclude, no matter how gradually or partially, that the ways did eventually part and Christian identity did emerge as a distinct phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> However, the form of Christian identity that emerged from this division is uncertain and lacking in a definitive categorization. For example, in his classic article "Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History", Steve Mason concludes that "the followers of Jesus faced formidable problems

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<sup>7</sup> E.g. Sandwell, *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity: Greeks, Jews and Christians in Antioch*; Limberis, "Religion' as the Cipher for identity"; Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*; Rebillard, "Late Antique Limits of Christianness."

<sup>8</sup> Reed and Becker, "Introduction," is an exception to this. However, that argument can be seen as intentionally championing a contrarian view in order to challenge traditionally held assumptions and come to more nuanced middle ground.

explaining exactly what they were, and increasingly so as they distanced themselves from, and were disavowed by, the well-known *ethnos*.<sup>9</sup> Mason describes the Christianity which developed in late antiquity as a “new and hybrid kind of group, which drew elements from *ethne*, cults, philosophies, *collegia*, and magical systems.”<sup>10</sup> However, by the time of the Christianization, or the supposed Christianization, after Constantine, it is this very adaptability of Christian identity that allowed it to gain a prominent foothold within the Roman world. Just as there is a tendency to emphasize the gradualness of the parting of the ways, so this school of scholarship emphasises the gradualness of Christianization. Scholars have pointed out that contrary to the older view, Christianization was not largely coercive nor done with the authority of the Roman Empire. Rather it was performed by the gradual advancing of Christian identity into everyday aspects of life by means of an intellectual, social, and spiritual authority.<sup>11</sup>

There is a missing link within this narrative, because these two camps of research have developed largely in isolation from each other. The undefined and uncertain Christian identity that lived in the shadow of Judaism is a notably different creature from the Christian identity that had the support of the Roman Empire but was not merely absorbed into Roman identity. Western Latin Christian apologetic works fill in this gap. Unlike Greek apologetic Christian literature, these Latin apologetic works have been noted to be chiefly concerned with Roman identity and the interplay between

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<sup>9</sup> Mason, “Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism,” 512.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Rebillard, *Christians and their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa 200-450*, 96; Leslie Dossey, *Peasant and Empire in Christian North Africa*. Transformations of the Classical Heritage 47 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); David Riggs, “Christianizing the Rural Communities of Late Roman Africa: a Process of Coercion or Persuasion?” In *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices*, ed. Harold Drake, 297–308. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Shira Lander, *Ritual Sites and Religious Rivalries in Late Roman North Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2016) 176-214.

Roman and Christian identity.<sup>12</sup> However, scholarship on this western apologetic writing has not overlapped extensively with discussions of identity, which this thesis hopes to rectify.<sup>13</sup> However, as I hope to show, these writings are of notable importance to the history of early Christian identity, and not merely the history of early Christian apologetic literature. It is only within this context, where Christian authors are primarily responding to a hostile Roman authority while also heavily concerned with reconciling this hostility with their own Roman identity, that a key element of Christian identity can emerge.

One of the reasons behind the animosity for Christianity by non-Christian Romans was the assumption that not worshipping traditional Roman divinities equated to political sedition.<sup>14</sup> This is because drawing from the views of Cicero and others, many non-Christian Romans saw cult and civic loyalty as irrevocably intertwined. In finding ways to undermine this view and argue for how an individual could be both a Christian and a loyal member of Roman society, to say nothing of defending the intellectual validity of Christian teachings, these Christian authors redefined the role of cultic practice and ultimately separated it from civic allegiance. This is the missing link in the narrative of early Christian identity formation. By negotiating the relationship between Christian and Roman identity, these works ultimately develop Christian identity into an

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<sup>12</sup> Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 11; Martin Goodman, Mark Edwards, Simon Price, and Christopher Rowland, "Introduction: Apologetics in the Roman World," in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, Eds. Martin Goodman, Mark Edwards, Simon Price, and Christopher Rowland (Oxford: OUP, 1999) 2-3; Simon Price, "Latin Christian Apologetics: Tertullian, Minucius Felix, Cyprian," in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, 127.

<sup>13</sup> Rebillard, *Christians and their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa 200-450*, and David Wilhite's *Ancient African Christianity*, and *Tertullian the African* are notably exceptions to this; however as will be discussed below these works explore different aspect of identity than that which I explore in this thesis.

<sup>14</sup> Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*, 386; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 1-2; Daniel Williams, *Defending and Defining the Faith: an Introduction to Early Christian Apologetic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020) 23.

independent form of cultic identity which is supported by the intellectual validity of classical philosophy and which does not necessarily require the support of the Roman political state or any other national, ethnic, or civic ideological foundations such as Judaism. To be clear, I am not saying that Christians after this point did not model their Christian identity on national, ethnic, or civic ideological foundations. Scholars have persuasively argued that they did.<sup>15</sup> My point is that after this, from an intellectual point of view, Christians did not necessarily need to use these ideological foundations, because they had developed their own ideological authority. This independent ideological foundation allows Christians to draw on several sources of legitimacy and authority, and lets Christianity remain flexible enough to adapt to any new circumstance it needs to. Furthermore, by not being directly tied to the Roman state, Christian identity is not confined to the borders of the Roman world nor is it dependant on the stability of the Roman Empire. While the Christianization which follows was gradual, it depended on the redefined nature of Christian cult developed in this tradition.

Discussing the ways in which these Christian authors developed the nature of cultic worship brings us to the second contribution to scholarship this thesis hopes to make, an analysis of how these Christian authors developed the use of the Latin term *religio*. Analysis of the Latin term *religio* was previously of interest to scholarship due to the term's connection to the modern word 'religion,' which led scholars to enquire whether or not the ancient usages of *religio* were comparable to the modern ideas present in the term 'religion.'<sup>16</sup> This previous work does not fully explore the nuances of

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<sup>15</sup> E.g. Buell, *Why This New Race*; Johnson, "Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius."

<sup>16</sup> Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious"; Brent Nongbri, "Dislodging 'Embedded' Religion: A Brief Note on a Scholarly Trope," *Numen* 55 (2008): 440-460; Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 27-34.

the changing meanings and usages of the term due to its polemical goal which aims to prove that none of the meanings present in the modern term 'religion' are present in the ancient *religio*. Because of this focus, after concluding that none of the term's meanings equate to religion, the work can oversimplify how the usages of the term change over time. For example, Brent Nongbri's discussions of the ancient usages of the term demonstrate the limitations this polemical focus creates. Nongbri largely equates Tertullian and Minucius Felix's use of *religio* with the Ciceronian use of the term, and only acknowledges partial changes to this model in how the term was used by Lactantius.<sup>17</sup> This limitation is partly because, dealing with it as a subchapter within Nongbri's book, he does not have the time or space to fully explore this subject. However, this polemical stance also hinders the main goal of the work, which is to explore the categories of identity that existed before religion. Because Nongbri is concerned with proving definitively that religion does not exist prior to the modern period, he ignores or at least downplays the important changes that happened to categories of identity in the ancient world, a number of which relate to early Christian authors' use of *religio*.

Barton and Boyarin aim to explore the original meanings of cultic terms such as *religio* and spend significantly longer exploring the changing usages of the term.<sup>18</sup> They trace the history of the use of *religio* from Cicero to Tertullian. Barton and Boyarin provide several insights into the development of *religio* by these authors, as well as several other conclusions which I will address in chapters 1 and 2. One of the most significant differences between their work and the analysis of this thesis is that their

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<sup>17</sup> Nongbri, "Dislodging 'Embedded' Religion", 448-449; ; Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 27-30.

<sup>18</sup> Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*.

work is primarily focused on using Tertullian as a case study and as such they do not explore how the term is developed after Tertullian. While they conclude that the developments of Cicero and Tertullian pave the way for “the notion of *religio* as a separate sphere or dimension of life,”<sup>19</sup> their narrower focus does not fully trace how this distinct sphere of identity centered around *religio* would become manifest in later authors. This narrower focus is present in much of the scholarship which explores the history of *religio*.<sup>20</sup>

Conversely, Jeremy Schott provides a valuable analysis of Lactantius’s use of *religio* and concludes that “in the hands of Christians, *religio* begins to assume some of the semantic range of the modern ‘religion.’ We have seen this semantic shift in the case of Lactantius.”<sup>21</sup> While this does speak to the development of *religio* into the center of a distinct type of identity which this thesis argues for, Schott is perhaps too ready to use the modern term religion to explain this development. As will be discussed more fully in chapters 4 and 5, Lactantius’s *religio*, while further developing older understandings of the term and becoming a central pillar of his category of Christian identity, will still have notable differences from the modern notion of religion. Not least of these is that the form of *religio* which Schott refers to here, is applied by Lactantius exclusively to Christianity, and thus does not function as a broader category in the way that the modern category of religion does. Furthermore, unlike this thesis, Schott’s focus on Lactantius and his contemporaries does not explore how Lactantius’s notions of

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 57, also cf. 51.

<sup>20</sup> Edwin Judge, “Did the Churches Compete with Cult Groups?” In *Early Christianity and Classical Culture: Comparative Studies in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe*, eds. John Fitzgerald, Thomas Olbricht, and L. Michael White (Boston: Brill, 2003) 599; Denisa Červenková, “De religione: How Christianity Became a Religion,” *Acta Universitatis Carolinae Theologica* 4:1 (2014): 87-114; Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*.

<sup>21</sup> Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*, 167.

*religio* are being drawn from both Tertullian and Minucius Felix, and thus like Barton and Boyarin only provides part of the story.

A more complete history of the use of the term can be found in Jörg Rüpke's book *From Jupiter to Christ*.<sup>22</sup> However, although Rüpke provides the most technically detailed study on the subject, he does not explore the role of Christian apologetic ambitions in this development. The thesis of Rüpke's book is that "the crucial development that occurred during the Roman Imperial Age was not a change or increase in the number of religions, but a change in the phenomenon of 'religion' itself, and its status in society."<sup>23</sup> While this does address the development of categories of identities during this time, and I note that Rüpke does discuss all the works under consideration here, his work has a broader focus on not merely Christian authors but on all significant classical authors during this time period. Because of this broader focus he does not fully trace the continuity between Cicero, Tertullian, Minucius Felix, and Lactantius. Also this focus means that Rüpke does not discuss how the desire to defend and define Christian identity influences how these Christian authors use and develop the term *religio*. Exploring the motivations behind these developments allows us to explain not only how *religio* and the categories of identity connected to it changed over time, but why it changed specifically in the hands of these authors.

Unlike this earlier scholarship, this thesis explores how and why each of these authors, Cicero, Tertullian, Minucius Felix and Lactantius, in turn develop the usage of *religio* and how the usage of this term impacts how they categorize cultic identity. I conclude from this analysis that during this time within this tradition, *religio* gradually

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<sup>22</sup> Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

transitions from a narrow ritualistic understanding of worship, grounded on the authority of the Roman state and societal acceptance, to a Christian understanding of worship, focused around morality and devotion towards a deity. *Religio* would, in the hands of these Christian authors, serve as the means by which Christian identity could claim legitimacy and authority within Roman society. In this sense, *religio* would come to serve as the foundation for Christian identity; however, depending on the author, *religio* or at least *vera religio* may or may not be the defining aspect of their Christian identity or synonymous with Christian identity itself. Within Lactantius's writing this later understanding of worship and *religio* will become the foundation for his Christian identity centered around worship that is not based on the authority of a political state. It is important to note that *religio* was not in the ancient world a group designation, either in the hands of Christian or non-Christian authors. A Christian group had *religiones*, but they were not a *religio*. Even Tertullian who presents Christian identity as defined by the *religiones* Christians perform, does not describe the Christian group itself as a *religio*.

To briefly summarize my argument on *religio*, Cicero distinguishes *religio* as only ritual worship that is deemed legitimate by the Roman state and society with a focus on the practice of worship rather than the deity being worshiped. This legitimizing power given to *religio* allows it to become in later authors a boundary marking tool which serves as the foundation of an identity. Tertullian redefines how *religio* is deemed to be legitimate based on its object rather than its practices in order to argue that Christianity should be acceptable. This shift allows for a de-emphasis on ritual practice, and a more abstracted understanding of worship focused on one's relationship to a deity. Minucius Felix on the whole follows the classical understanding of *religio* but also, in a way that

had not previously been done in Latin discourse regarding the term *religio*, interprets cultic practice metaphorically to apply to philosophical acts of morality. He does this to retain as many cultic elements as possible within Christianity while arguing for the moral and philosophical virtues of Christianity. This has the result of understanding *religio* and by extension the worshiping of a god, as not merely relating to ritual actions but to moral teaching and many other aspects of life. Lactantius incorporates both elements of the two prior authors to both define the legitimacy of *religio* based on its object and take a metaphorical approach to cultic practice which relates it to moral behavior rather than ritual worship.

Lastly, I will make the argument that the apologetic work of Tertullian, Minucius Felix, and Lactantius, can be treated as a distinct Latin apologetic tradition. Here it is appropriate to define how this thesis uses the term ‘apologetics’. Many scholars have rejected the idea that early Christian apologetics constituted a genre in the ancient world.<sup>24</sup> However, as the term has continued to be used by scholars, it has become necessary to define not only what is meant when a specific work is referred to as apologetic, but what if anything connects multiple works that are united under the designation of apologetics. Recently the trend in scholarship is to treat the distinction of apologetic as an entirely etic category created by moderns in order to categorize a

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<sup>24</sup> Williams, *Defending and Defining the Faith*, 27-33; Silke-Petra Bergjan, “How to Speak about Early Christian Apologetic Literature? Comments on the Recent Debate.” *Studia Patristica* 36 (2001): 177-183; Goodman et al. “Introduction”, 1-2; Price, “Latin Christian Apologetics”, 113-114; Élisabeth Pinto-Mathieu, “Introduction,” in *L’Apologetique Chretienne: Expressions de la pensée religieuse, de l’Antiquité à nos jours* Ed. Didier Boisson and Élisabeth Pinto-Mathieu (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2012) 9-10; Bernard Pouderon, “Aux Origines du ‘Genre’ de l’apologie,” in *L’Apologetique Chretienne: Expressions de la pensée religieuse, de l’Antiquité à nos jours*, eds. Didier Boisson and Élisabeth Pinto-Mathieu, 15-34 (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2012); Jean-Claude Fredouille, “L’Apologetique Chrétienne Antique: Naissance d’un Genre Littéraire.” *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 38 (1992): 219-234; Sara Parvis, “Justin Martyr and the Apologetic Tradition”, In *Justin Martyr and His Worlds*, eds. Sara Parvis and Paul Foster (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) 115-127.

group of ancient Christian writings which were not necessarily perceived as connected in antiquity. This approach defines a work as apologetic either based on the intentions of its author to use the writing to defend Christianity from external attack<sup>25</sup> or based on the text's rhetorical audience.<sup>26</sup> For the purposes of this thesis I would synthesize these approaches to define early Christian apologetics as: *early Christian works written with the intended purpose of defending Christianity against external attack and defining Christianity to a rhetorical non-Christian or at least partially non-Christian audience.*

It is important to distinguish between the rhetorical audience of these texts and the actual historical readership of them. Who actually read early Christian apologetic texts is largely the realm of speculation. However, it is widely conceded that most likely they were read by an almost entirely Christian or at least partially Christian audience.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, these works on a rhetorical level still present Christianity in a manner that would be accessible to and even potentially acceptable to a non-Christian Greco-Roman audience. It is because of this quality that this thesis looks exclusively at apologetics, because it is through these works that Christian identity is contrasted explicitly with non-Christian identities. While the non-Christian is rejected, both sides receive full consideration. The rhetorical audience of the work necessitates that the positions of both sides are thus explored. Within this approach, the different ancient genres of each of these texts are seen as different strategies the authors employ in

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<sup>25</sup> Fredouille, "L'apologétique chrétienne antique," 219-221, 234; Goodman et al., "Introduction: Apologetics in the Roman World," 8; Bergjan, "How to Speak about Early Christian Apologetic Literature?" 183; Pinto-Mathieu, "Introduction," 9; Williams, *Defending and Defining the Faith*, 32.

<sup>26</sup> Bergjan, "How to Speak about Early Christian Apologetic Literature?" 177-178; Price, "Latin Christian Apologetics: Tertullian, Minucius Felix, Cyprian", 105-106.

<sup>27</sup> Goodman et al. "Introduction," 8-9; Price, "Latin Christian Apologetics: Tertullian, Minucius Felix, Cyprian," 105-106; Bergjan, "How to Speak about Early Christian Apologetic Literature?" 177-178; Parvis, "Justin Martyr and the Apologetic Tradition," 123; Williams, *Defending and Defining the Faith*, 8, 33-36.

order to accomplish the same rhetorical goal.<sup>28</sup> It is thus within this context that the negotiation between Christian and Greco-Roman non-Christian identities is seen most fully expressed, and thus these works are the focus of this thesis. While it is very difficult to know with any certainty how these textually constructed identities related to Christian identities on-the-ground, as it were, it is nevertheless a valuable historical enterprise to consider these textual realities with the view that they affected if not fully reflected lived ancient Christian realities.<sup>29</sup>

However, while the need to have a non-Christian rhetorical audience does limit what works could be considered apologetic, there is still the concern expressed by some that such a definition of apologetic works is overly broad and includes too many different writings that bear no connection to one another.<sup>30</sup> Thus it is necessary to discuss the works under consideration not merely as apologetics but as a distinct self-contained apologetic tradition. This is the final original claim of this thesis: that Tertullian's *Apology*, Minucius Felix's *Octavius*, and Lactantius's *Divine Institutes* can be taken together as a distinct apologetic tradition. For our purposes an apologetic tradition is understood as a group of texts between which a definitive and direct line of inspiration and imitation can be drawn and which all share a common apologetic rhetorical goal. The reception history of Tertullian's *Apology* through Minucius Felix's *Octavius* and Lactantius's *Divine Institutes*, I argue, constitutes its own distinct apologetic tradition.

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<sup>28</sup> This approach to genre of apologetics as rhetorical strategies is effectively used in Cecilia Ames, "La Apología y el Diálogo en los primeros apologistas latinos: Tertuliano y Minucio Félix," *Circe de Clásicos y Modernos* 12 (December 2008): 49-50. <https://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=36795734&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>29</sup> Eshleman, *The Social World of Intellectuals in the Roman Empire* 6-7.

<sup>30</sup> Williams, *Defending and Defining the Faith*, 27-28; Parvis, "Justin Martyr and the Apologetic Tradition," 115.

The connections between these authors' works will be discussed in detail in the chapters on each of the authors, but here I will provide a rough overview of the topic. To begin with, the *Octavius* borrows heavily in the content of its arguments and its literary form from both Tertullian's *Apology* and Cicero's philosophical dialogue *On the Nature of the Gods*. Minucius's work is itself written in the genre of a philosophical dialogue in a manner clearly modelled on Cicero's work, and the speech of Minucius's character Caecilius borrows heavily from arguments made within Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*.<sup>31</sup> In chapter 3 on Minucius Felix, I will explore more fully the parallels between these two works, but for now it is sufficient to say that a number of scholars have also observed that *On the Nature of the Gods* is an important influence for *Octavius*.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless the *Octavius* also heavily draws from Tertullian's *Apology*, as most of the arguments Tertullian makes in that work can be found repeated or referenced within the speech of the character Octavius which makes up the majority of Minucius's dialogue. Although strictly defined this tradition only includes Tertullian, Minucius Felix, and Lactantius, Cicero is an important influence on each of these authors. As such there will be a chapter analyzing his *On the Nature of Gods* and how it serves as a foundation for this Latin Christian tradition.

The connection between Lactantius and Minucius Felix and Tertullian, while separated by a greater span of time, is far more direct. Lactantius not only draws arguments from both Tertullian's *Apology* and the *Octavius* within his *Divine Institutes* but explicitly cites both authors and works by name with the clear and overt implication

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, vi.1; Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, III. ii 5.

that all three works are united in a common rhetorical purpose.<sup>33</sup> In this way Lactantius both participates in this tradition and reifies it. As such this thesis claims that these three works can meaningfully be considered a distinct Latin Apologetic Christian tradition. While other scholarship has discussed these authors in concert with each other it has yet to fully establish their work as united tradition, which can be meaningfully considered as a group.

However, if one is persuaded by the above argument it might then be asked why I am limiting this tradition to merely these three works and authors, and not including the seemingly connected Latin Christian authors Augustine, Arnobius, and Cyprian. Other than the lack of clear literary connections described above, the circumstances of Augustine, Arnobius, and Cyprian make them stand apart from this tradition in ways too significant to ignore. Beginning with Augustine, it is true that he likely read at least Tertullian and Lactantius if not all three of these Christian authors and he does engage with the interplay between Christian and Roman identities. What is more, while Augustine has been very extensively researched, how he is influenced by this broader Latin tradition remains a topic for discussion. However, while some of Augustine's work has been considered apologetic in its purpose and content, his position as a post-Constantine Christian writer places him beyond the scope of this study. Unlike our authors Augustine did not experience the Roman Empire as a source of persecution, indeed he was involved in the Christianization of the Roman Empire with the support of a Christian Roman imperial authority. This difference in circumstances means that the way in which he negotiates Christian and Roman identities is significantly different from

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<sup>33</sup> *Divine Institutes*, 5.1.21-23 p.440; 5.4.3 p.451.

pre-Constantinian authors and thus his work is too far distinct from the tradition that is studied here.<sup>34</sup> Also due to the extensive length and depth of Augustine's work, as well as the amount of research done on it, it would not be feasible to include him and keep this thesis within a reasonable length. However, there is still research that needs to be done to fully explore the influence Tertullian, Lactantius, and possibly Minucius Felix had on Augustine's works and theology, particularly in regard to Augustine's *City of God*.

Secondly, Arnobius wrote an apologetic Christian work in Latin between the time of Minucius Felix and Lactantius; however his lack of connections to these authors means that he cannot be said to meaningfully contribute to this tradition. Arnobius the elder was a rhetorician who lived in North Africa during the late third and early fourth centuries and wrote a Christian apologetic work entitled *Against the Nations*. According to Jerome, he was a convert who had previously spoken out against Christianity and who at the behest of his bishop wrote his work to prove his sincerity to the Christian cause. Jerome also states that Arnobius was the teacher of Lactantius.<sup>35</sup> Whether or not this narrative is credible, the surviving work has been broadly seen as consistent with the views of a new convert who is still broadly unfamiliar with the details of Christian teaching.<sup>36</sup> Arnobius's work certainly does not express any familiarity with the works of Tertullian and Minucius Felix, and his connection to Lactantius is uncertain at best, given that in Lactantius's surviving work he never mentions him. As such while Arnobius

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<sup>34</sup> As I will discuss in detail in the beginning of chapter 5, Lactantius's *Divine Institutes* with the exception of a few passages can largely be considered a pre-Constantine work.

<sup>35</sup> Jerome, *Epistles* 70.5. Williams, *Defending and Defining the Faith*, 285-286; Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 176, 181.

<sup>36</sup> Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 177.

and his work is worthy of consideration on its own, indeed more consideration than it has yet received, he cannot meaningfully be said to be part of this tradition.

Conversely, Cyprian is, of these three authors whom I am not considering, the one most well connected to this apologetic tradition. The reason that he is not included is not a question of connection but rather of content. Lactantius directly cites Cyprian within the same passages in which he cites Minucius Felix and Tertullian,<sup>37</sup> and Cyprian is almost certainly familiar with Tertullian and possibly even Minucius Felix. However, Cyprian's work does not engage with the primary focus of this thesis which is the negotiation of Christian and Roman identities. His work primarily addresses either theological issues or inter-church conflict and does not engage with the contrasting of Christian identity against non-Christian identity for a non-Christian rhetorical audience. Indeed Lactantius, in his comments on Cyprian, himself speaks to this when he states that "Beyond a power of words, however, Cyprian cannot go in satisfying those who do not know God's sacred mystery, because what he spoke of is both mystical and prepared for the ears of the faithful alone."<sup>38</sup> Lactantius is addressing the fact that Cyprian, while rhetorically very skilled, does not genuinely engage in apologetic writing insofar as he is unwilling to write for a non-Christian audience.<sup>39</sup> Given this absence of apologetic writing for our purposes it is not useful to consider him part of this tradition.

### The Influence of the Setting of North Africa

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<sup>37</sup> *Divine Institutes*, 5.1.26 p.441, 5.4.4-7 p.451-452.

<sup>38</sup> Lactantius, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, Translated Texts for Historian 40, Trans. Anthony Bowen and Peter Garnsey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003) 5.1.26, p.284.

<sup>39</sup> John McGuckin, "Does Lactantius Denigrate Cyprian?" *Journal of Theological Studies* 39 no.1 (1988): 119, 123.

Before this introduction defines the key terms of this thesis, it is worth briefly discussing one other factor which unites our three authors, namely the setting of North Africa. The influence of the North African setting is relevant to my argument because scholars have noted that in late antiquity North Africans had a specific and complex relationship with Roman Government and Roman identity.<sup>40</sup> This relationship significantly informs how these apologetic writers define the role of Christian identity in the Roman world and their position toward Roman government. However, before I discuss that it is worth very briefly establishing these authors' North African connections.

Tertullian and Lactantius were both certainly born in the Roman province of North Africa or *Africa Proconsularis*, and, although it is possible he was from Italy, given the connections between their works, Minucius Felix may have been North African as well. As I have already briefly mentioned and will discuss in more detail in chapter 3, Minucius Felix's work, the *Octavius*, is closely modeled on Tertullian's *Apology*. Also, although Minucius Felix presents the dialogue as occurring during a trip to Ostia,<sup>41</sup> the names of the characters in the dialogue have been tentatively identified with records of people from North Africa, supporting the possible connection between Minucius Felix

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<sup>40</sup> Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 10-16, 45-51, 62-63; Adrian Sherwin-White, *The Roman Citizenship*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973) 415-417; Jon Lendon, *Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 7; Niall Finneran, *The Archaeology of Christianity in Africa* (Charleston: Tempus Publishing, 2002) 38; Maureen Tilley, "North Africa," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Origins to Constantine*, eds. Margaret M. Mitchel and Frances M. Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 383-385; Brent Shaw, "Who Are You? Africa and Africans", in *A Companion to Ethnicity in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Jeremy McInerney (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014) 531-532, 538.

<sup>41</sup> Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, II.1-4.

and North Africa.<sup>42</sup> Lactantius went on to pursue his career outside the province, but scholars have argued that all three of these authors bear the influence of their North African upbringing within their work.<sup>43</sup>

One significant influence of the setting of North Africa for these authors is the history of ancient Christian persecution in the region. One of the main motivations for Christian apologetic writing is responding to persecution against Christians by Roman authorities. However, the idea that ancient Christians suffered under empire-wide persecution has come under significant critique from historians,<sup>44</sup> and the general conclusion is that persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire was sporadic and heavily localized. Nevertheless, one time and place where there is strong evidence of persecution is turn of the third century North Africa.<sup>45</sup> Tertullian certainly lived through persecution, and it heavily affected his ideology as well as his stance toward the relationship between Roman authority and Christian identity. Given the changes in dating the *Octavius*,<sup>46</sup> it is hard to say whether or not Minucius Felix personally experienced persecution. However, while there are occasional references to legal accusations against Christians,<sup>47</sup> the text largely describes conflict between Christians

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<sup>42</sup> Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 136-137.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 122-126, 136-140, 183-194, provides a detailed analysis of the North African influence each of these authors; William Frend, "Some North African Turning Points in Christian Apologetics", *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 57, no. 1 (2006): 10, also discusses the distinct North African influence on these works.

<sup>44</sup> E.g. Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented the Story of Martyrdom* (New York: Harper-One, 2013).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012) 122-144. Finneran, *The Archaeology of Christianity in Africa*, 19-20; Tilley, "North Africa," 391-392; Robert Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of Saint Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 106-107.

<sup>46</sup> Wilhite, *Introduction to North African Christianity*, 136-141; Théodore Reinach, "Date du dialogue Octavius de Minucius Felix." *Comptes rendus des séances de l'année - Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* 65, no. 1 (1921): 22.

<sup>47</sup> Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, XXXVIII.1-6.

and non-Christians in the form of social tension and animosity,<sup>48</sup> suggesting that for Minucius Felix persecution was likely a memory rather than a lived reality. Lactantius did experience persecution under the reign of Diocletian, although not by virtue of being a North African, but rather because Lactantius was likely present in Diocletian's court in Nicomedia at the beginning of the Great Persecution.<sup>49</sup> However, likely the cultural memory of persecution in North Africa did affect how Lactantius responded to it and conceptualized his experience of it.

Another important aspect of North Africa that affected them was the role of 'Romanization' in the region. North Africa was a heavily Romanized province, in some ways more so than any other Roman province.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, North Africa and specifically the city of Carthage was historically one of the most renowned enemies of the Roman Empire. The celebrated history of the Punic wars was a significant legend in ancient Rome's culture. In late antiquity, the well-to-do North African had to reconcile within themselves being thoroughly Roman with also having their own distinct North African culture, a culture which was historically Rome's greatest enemy, while also being currently ruled over by the Roman government as a foreign power. In the time of these Christian authors, this duality manifested as local African elites using Roman culture as a tool for their own advancement and the promotion of their own African culture. These figures would adopt Roman cultural practices and Roman worship to help them advance in public office within the Empire, then from this position of power

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<sup>48</sup> This is elegantly presented through the drama of the dialogue which presents Christianity as causing social tension between friends *Octavius*, I.1-IV.6.

<sup>49</sup> Anthony Coleman, *Lactantius the Theologian: Lactantius and the Doctrine of Providence* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, LLC, 2017) 12-17.

<sup>50</sup> Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 14.

they would promote their own African culture and authority within the region.<sup>51</sup> These Christian authors employed a similar strategy. They made use of Latin rhetoric inspired by Cicero as well as knowledge of Roman history, myth, and worship in order to critique these very same subjects. Thus they promoted Christianity as superior to Roman culture by means of distinctly Roman terms. This focus on Roman-ness is seen as notably distinctive to this Latin tradition and is not found in Eastern Greek apologetics.<sup>52</sup>

### Key Terms: Influence, Identity, Civic, Cult, and Philosophy

Turning now to the theoretical terms that will be the foundation of my analysis, this section will define for the purpose of this study the concepts of ‘identity,’ ‘cult/cultic practices,’ ‘philosophy,’ and ‘civic authority/civic groups’. Identity is the primary theoretical category of analysis which this thesis uses to describe what is at stake in the arguments of these ancient authors. However, it should be understood that identity as a reified abstract idea is a modern concept. Discussion of ancient authors’ treatment of identity, therefore, for the purposes of this thesis is an attempt to describe and conceptualize the motivations behind the arguments of these authors. While identity refers to something very important to these ancient authors, it would not have been understood by them through this term. The categories of cult, philosophy, and civic authority are my attempts to reify and conceptualize aspects of or categories of identity

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 10-16, 45-51, 62-63; Sherwin-White, *The Roman Citizenship*, 415-417; Lendon, *Empire of Honour*, 7; Finneran, *The Archaeology of Christianity in Africa*, 38; Tilley, “North Africa,” 383-385; Shaw, “Who Are You? Africa and Africans,” 531-532, 538.

<sup>52</sup> Goodman et al., “Introduction”, 2-3; Price, “Latin Christian Apologetics: Tertullian, Minucius Felix, Cyprian,” 127-128; Ames, “La Apología y el Diálogo en los primeros apologistas latinos,” 46.

that the ancient authors under discussion emphasize or draw differences between. To a degree to define any such concept definitively is inherently a modern reconstruction. However, it is my hope that these reconstructions come close enough to reflecting ancient realities that they provide useful tools for analysis.

To begin with, for the purposes of this thesis, I understand works that have influenced each other as texts which include parts where the author is clearly copying and potentially reinterpreting the written arguments if not exact language of another author. Where this can be successfully demonstrated, I take it as evidence that the author has read the previous text, and written their own text, at least partially, as a response to that previous text. In these instances, ideas and arguments of the previous text are either copied, expanded upon, and/or contested in the newer text. Where parts of the newer text take significantly different or contradictory approaches to the same topic, this is taken as evidence of intentional disagreement between the two authors. Within the context of this approach, specific instances of intertextuality are defined by the intentions of the author rather than the reader. These instances can, but in many cases do not, involve an explicit marked citation or reference to the previous author, or merely the clear copying of their argument. These arguments are often taken from their original context and altered for the sake of their new context. Where this decontextualization is done, it is most likely not done with the intention to deceive or alter the original text, but either due to a misunderstanding of the original text or a desire to make it applicable to a new context. I do not propose this as a universal definition of influence or intertextuality,<sup>53</sup> but rather I propose this narrow understanding of the

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<sup>53</sup> For some recent more detailed discussion of the nature and definition of intertextuality see Jessica Mason, *Intertextuality in Practice* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019) ProQuest Ebook Central,

concept to explain how the specific texts under consideration within this thesis, are related to one another.

Secondly, identity is challenging to define given the sheer range of fields of study, methodologies and disciplines in which it is used as a tool of analysis.<sup>54</sup> Within this thesis the term ‘identity’ shall largely refer to the idea of social identity or social categorization, drawn from the work of Henri Tajfel.<sup>55</sup> Tajfel’s approach to identity explicitly does not focus on individual identity or the identities formed by inter-individual contact, but rather focuses on the identity of social groups and how identity is formed by membership in a social group.<sup>56</sup> Tajfel defines social identity as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.”<sup>57</sup> He explains social categorization as “the ordering of social environment in terms of groupings of persons in a manner in which makes sense to the individual.”<sup>58</sup> The advantage of Tajfel’s approach is that it explores how group identities progress towards both distinctiveness and social acceptability through the adoption and

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<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ed/detail.action?docID=5904663> and Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>54</sup> For a good summary of the myriad fields and ways in which identity is used see Vivian Vignoles, Seth Schwartz, and Koen Luyckx, “Introduction: Toward an Integrative View of Identity”, in *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, 2 vols. Eds. Seth J. Schwartz, Koen Luyckx, and Vivian L. Vignoles (New York: Springer, 2011) 1-2.

<sup>55</sup> Much has been written on the subject of identity since Tajfel, and much of which has developed Tajfel’s initial theories. However, this thesis makes use of Tajfel’s ideas directly, for much of the development of the theories of Tajfel brings out aspects of identity that bear little relation to this thesis, such as Tajfel’s most influential student, John Turner whose work serves to make Tajfel’s theories relevant to the field of Psychology. Furthermore, Tajfel’s treatment of the relationship between identity and social groups, and how a social group perceived as inferior relates to a social group perceived as superior, brings out most directly the issue of categories of identity which is the concern of this thesis.

<sup>56</sup> Henri Tajfel, “Social Categorization, Social Identity and Social Comparison”, in *Differentiation between Social Groups*, ed. Henri Tajfel, European Monographs in Social Psychology (London: Academic, 1978) 61.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 63.

<sup>58</sup> Tajfel, “Interindividual Behavior and Intergroup Behavior”, in *Differentiation between Social Groups*, 50-51.

rejections of social categories of identity.<sup>59</sup> Notably, this research explains how group identities which perceive themselves as inferior to other groups develop strategies for reversing or undermining that relationship. Tajfel outlines three of these possible strategies: firstly the inferior group can adapt itself, through reinterpretation of its characteristics, to be more like the superior group. Secondly, the inferior group can reinterpret its perceived neutral or negative characteristics to be seen positively. Finally, the inferior group can establish new characteristics that positively define them as distinctive.<sup>60</sup>

As this thesis will explore, all of these strategies manifest in different ways in the Early Christian Latin apologetic tradition in their negotiation of the relationship between their Christian and their Roman identities. To describe but a few ways in which they use these strategies: these authors adopt the characteristics of the superior group by making Christianity more Roman and making a display of their Roman education. They reinterpret their negative or neutral characteristics positively by redefining *religio* and the nature of cult and cultic practice to better resemble their group identity. Finally they establish a new positive characteristic by creating a new less civic form of identity centered around worship. Subsequent thinkers have questioned whether or not Tajfel's approach can be applied as well to ancient perspectives as it can to a modern one, given the differences in the potential for social mobility and different positions toward group membership in the ancient world.<sup>61</sup> However, in these ancient Christian

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<sup>59</sup> Philip Esler, "An Outline of Social Identity Theory", in *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, eds. J. Brian Tucker and Coleman Baker (London: T&T Clark/Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014) 20-22, 25.

<sup>60</sup> Tajfel, "The Achievement of Group Differentiation", in *Differentiation between Social Groups*, 93-97; summarised by Esler, "An Outline of Social Identity Theory," 23-24.

<sup>61</sup> Andrew Clarke and J. Brian Tucker, "Social History and Social Theory in the Study of Social Identity," in *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, 31.

circumstances Christian group identity was voluntary and was a source of individual self-esteem, which are the essential qualities needed for Tajfel's method of understanding of group identity to work.<sup>62</sup> Thus through this understanding of categories of identity, early Christian texts can be usefully examined to understand the motivations behind the texts, and how and why these authors change and develop Christian identity.

It is important to distinguish this approach to the study of identity from the study of individual identity. By narrowing down a specific method of using the term identity in a way that is of specific interest to this study by distinguishing it from the other methods in which it could be used, I also respond to accusations that the idea of identity is so broad that it lacks usefulness as a tool of analysis.<sup>63</sup> Much of the discussion of identity in history and the social sciences revolves around the multifaceted nature of an individual's identity.<sup>64</sup> The distinction between this method and the method of this thesis is referred to as the difference between personal identity and social identity.<sup>65</sup> An individual can, without contradiction, claim to be a Canadian, an agnostic, a liberal, a UK resident, an academic, white and male. All of these identities exist within this individual at the same time, although depending on circumstances some are more or less relevant to them at any given moment. Indeed an individual must necessarily have multiple kinds of identity by virtue of being a person. This identity is an individual's personal identity. A group identity, by contrast, is categorically limited. Tajfel argues that

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity'", *Theory and Society* 29 (2000) 1-47; Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic, 1991); Ali Rattansi, and Ann Phoenix, "Rethinking Youth Identities: Modernist and Postmodernist Frameworks", *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, 5 (2005): 97-123.

<sup>64</sup> For an example of this analysis see Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity* and also Wilhite, *Tertullian The African*.

<sup>65</sup> Vignoles et al., "introduction", 7-9; Esler, "An Outline of Social Identity Theory," 21-23.

the categorization of social groups is a necessary tool for the human individual in order to make sense of their social environment, which in turn serves to guide the individual's actions and defines the individual's place in society.<sup>66</sup> Further he notes that groups which exist together must necessarily compare themselves to each other, which links the individual's social identity to social categorization, for it is through categorization that this comparison is made.<sup>67</sup> Because of this compulsion to categorization, unlike the multifaceted identity of an individual, a group identity, where the group is sufficiently large that all of its members do not personally know each other, necessitates categorization.

It is the collective categorization of group identity, rather than the categorical relevancy of a group identity to the individual, that is the focus of this thesis. I take this approach because a focus on individual identity ignores an important historical reality which is central to the motivations behind Latin Christian apologetic writings. The argument for studying the multifaceted nature of individual identity is well founded. This method helps historians avoid stereotyping their subjects, avoid creating false dichotomies between different identities such as Christian and Roman, and allows them to better understand the complicated motivations and demands upon their subjects. As such it is important that this work has been done and continues to be done. However, there is an important historical reality which this method overlooks, and which this study aims to explore. We must remember that stereotyping is not a phenomenon unique to the modern world. When ancient non-Christians, from elite Roman officials to the common layman, were confronted with Christian groups and their relative strangeness,

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<sup>66</sup> Tajfel, "Social Categorization, Social Identity and Social Comparison," 61-63.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 64.

they understood these groups by forcing them into a pre-existing category. Since non-Christians were usually working on imperfect if not erroneous information, the resulting understanding was likely a far cry from how Christians understood themselves either as a group or individual, and likely had more to do with the assumptions made by non-Christians than any facts about Christian themselves. However, just because this understanding was inaccurate does not mean that it was not historically significant. The categories outsiders forced upon Christians significantly affected how they treated Christians and whether, or the degree to which, Christians were persecuted.<sup>68</sup>

Correspondingly, early Christian apologetic literature, as I will argue over the course of this thesis, concerned itself not primarily with the relationship of Christianity to the self, but rather the relationship of Christianity to society and the world as a collective. These works were focused on how Christianity was categorized as a social group identity among other social group identities, rather than as an aspect of the individual. The study of early Christianity as a group identity is not an attempt to promote stereotypes about early Christianity, undermine the work which has been done on Christianity as an individual identity, or suggest that there was only one universal early Christian identity. The categorization of Christian identity as a group identity, does not alter the multifaceted nature of Christian identity for ancient individual Christians. Categorization of Christianity as a group identity by these authors should not be taken as necessarily authoritative for the members of their Christian communities as a whole, but rather presents an outward face these authors aimed to construct for their Christian groups in order to better fit into Roman society. Furthermore, as this thesis will show,

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<sup>68</sup> I will discuss the circumstances and motivations for ancient Christian persecution in chapter two.

different authors employed significantly different strategies for constructing this outward face.

It should also be noted that this thesis is about the categories that are applied to being Christian; it is not about differentiating Christian identity from other identities that share the same category.<sup>69</sup> The negotiation between being Christian and being Roman in these texts is not about distinguishing Christians from Romans, but about allowing people to be both Christian and Roman in a way where one did not undermine the other. What is at stake in these Latin apologetic writings is not who does or does not get to legitimately call themselves 'Christian' but the idea of how Christians as a collective should be conceived of by themselves and others. The two questions are related to each other. By defining Christians as a collective in a certain way, one inherently excludes from Christianity people who would define it differently and do not meet one's criteria for membership. However, the answers to these two questions manifest differently because motivations behind asking these questions are different. Separating Christian identity from identities that share the same category involves an individual defining the criteria for Christian identity in order to include those who the individual does consider legitimate Christians and exclude those they consider illegitimate. The answer that is arrived at ultimately derives from that individual's own conception of legitimacy and illegitimacy. Deciding what type of identity of Christian identity is, in the context of this Latin apologetic tradition, I will show is not motivated by a desire to define the criteria for its membership or decide who is or is not a legitimate Christian. The motivation for defining Christian identity in these particular writings, is to present

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<sup>69</sup> For an example of this type of analysis see Boyarin, *Border Lines*.

Christian identity in such a way that it would be acceptable to an external Roman authority. The answer that is here arrived at does not derive primarily from these authors' own conception of legitimacy but rather with concepts of legitimacy and illegitimacy of the broader Roman world.

One might fairly ask why I am being so bold as to try to understand how these authors conceptualized not only Christian identity, but Christian identity and Roman identity in relation to each other. However, as I have written this thesis it has become increasingly clear to me that within these texts neither Christian nor Roman identity can be understood in isolation from the other. The self cannot be conceptualized without contrasting it against the other.<sup>70</sup> Indeed one of Tajfel's notable insights into the development of group identity and social categorization was that: "No group lives alone – all groups in society live in the midst of other groups. In other words, the 'positive aspects of social identity' and the reinterpretation of attributes and engagement in social action only acquire meaning in relation to, or in comparisons with, other groups."<sup>71</sup> Christian and Roman identities were not by any means mutually exclusive; all three of the authors under consideration considered themselves to varying degrees both Christian and Roman. Nevertheless these identities represented a point of contrast for each other. Finding room for both Christianity and *Romanitas* within themselves therefore requires necessarily applying to each of them differing categories. As discussed in the beginning of this introduction this method is challenging due to the difficulties of conceptualizing how the categories of the ancient world differ from our own

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<sup>70</sup> Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity?'" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage, 1996) 4; Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 47; Wilhite, *Tertullian the African*, 39-40.

<sup>71</sup> Tajfel, "Social Categorization, Social Identity and Social Comparison," 64.

and how they change over time. However, nevertheless by focusing on them research can provide meaningful insight into ancient texts and the history of the ancient world more broadly.

When discussing Roman identity in relation to these authors, it should be noted that it was likely Tertullian who coined the term *Romanitas*. The suffix *-itas* in Latin is used to turn an adjective into a noun representing an abstract concept. For example the words *liberitas* and *cupiditas* turn the adjectives *liber*, meaning free, and *cupidus*, meaning greedy, into the words for freedom and greed. The term *romanitas* building on the adjective *romanus* turns the word into an abstract concept which could roughly be translated as ‘Roman-ness.’ In this way, Tertullian is the first to reify the very idea of Roman identity. However, closer examination of this text complicates the issue. The earliest known use of the term occurs in Tertullian’s *On the Philosopher’s Cloak*,<sup>72</sup> and it is the only use of the term in Tertullian’s surviving works.

In the beginning of chapter four of this text, Tertullian is seeking to mock Carthaginians who adopt Roman customs and specifically the wearing of the toga. He comments that: “what now, if *romanitas* is the prosperity of all, you are to a degree Greek yet not in an honourable way.”<sup>73</sup> It is telling that in reifying the concept of Roman-ness into an abstract idea, Tertullian is also seeking to undermine it. The invention of the very term itself is likely an act of mockery, a forced and unnatural combination of language meant to make fun of the very thing or idea it is referring to. Tertullian goes further yet by commenting that the origin of much of Roman culture is in fact Greek and

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<sup>72</sup> Wilhite, *Ancient Latin Christianity*, 46.

<sup>73</sup> “quid nunc, si et romanitas omni salus nec honestis tamen modis ad Graios estis?” Tertullian, *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani opera* (Turnholti: Brepols, 1954) iv.1 p.741. Translation is my own.

that it is not worth copying in the first place. As Tertullian himself points out, it can be unclear what 'Roman' as a cultural signifier is referring to when its most distinctive quality is existing on top of other cultures. And yet, Tertullian's comment alludes to the power and influence which Roman identity and cultural signifiers had. The fact that so many Carthaginians were adopting Roman dress and customs as a way of gaining social prosperity, which moves Tertullian to write treatises critiquing this behavior repeatedly and at length, speaks to the power and importance these practices had for Tertullian and his community. As I will argue in chapter 2, Tertullian himself tries to capitalize on the social power of Roman identity explicitly in his *Apology*. Although not simple to define or neatly categorize, Roman identity had a power and authority that was impossible to ignore. In this way, Tertullian's first comment on *romanitas* embodies the complexities of discussions of Roman identity, within all of these Latin Christian authors.

Within the apologetic works, Roman identity is both ubiquitous and elusive. Through numerous cultural references, the use of Latin, and rhetoric influenced by Cicero these authors allude to Roman identity.<sup>74</sup> However, rarely in these works is the term 'Roman' used. More often Roman-ness is referred to obliquely by, for instance, the use of the second person in Tertullian's *Apology*,<sup>75</sup> or through coded references in Lactantius's *Divine Institutes*.<sup>76</sup> This begs the question does Roman identity exist within these texts at all, or do these works only construct Christianity against an amorphous vaguely Roman tinted other. However, I argue that Roman identity not only exists in

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<sup>74</sup> Examples of this within these authors' works will be shown and discussed throughout this thesis.

<sup>75</sup> E.g. *Apology*, v.1-3; vi.7-9; ix.1-8; xiii.8-9.

<sup>76</sup> E.g. *Divine Institutes*, 5.5.1-6.13, discussed in part below.

these texts but plays an important role. The stated and implicit motivation behind each of these works, is to critique the persecution of Christians by the specifically Roman government.<sup>77</sup> Regardless of the motivations for these persecutions, they manifested through the specifically Roman systems of law enforcement and it was with the Roman government, in particular, that these authors wished to negotiate. It is for this reason that when these authors critique non-Christian forms of worship there is a strong emphasis on Roman deities and Roman forms of worship. These authors wish to undermine the authority by which they are persecuted within the specifically Roman system of justice, and it is against this authority that they contrast their Christian identity and the authority by which they justify their worship.

However, this is not to say that Roman and Christian identity are binaries within these works. On the contrary, all of these authors were comfortable and sometimes even insistent that they were both Christian and Roman at the same time.<sup>78</sup> Roman identity was a tool which they could use to elevate themselves and Christianity. In the Roman Empire of late antiquity Roman identity was widespread but sometimes surface deep.<sup>79</sup> The varying peoples of the Empire had the identity of their native cultural group as well as Roman identity added on top of it, sometimes as an afterthought. But Roman identity was associated with the power of the Roman state and those who sought power or legitimacy could work to achieve it by embracing their Roman identity.<sup>80</sup> The result

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<sup>77</sup> In chapter 2 I will discuss the historical circumstances of persecution broadly and how it affected Tertullian specifically. Likewise in subsequent chapters I will touch on how persecution affected and motivated each work.

<sup>78</sup> E.g. Tertullian, *Apology*, xxxv.1-12; Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, xxxi.6. These passages will be discussed in greater detail below.

<sup>79</sup> Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 49-51; Ibid, *Tertullian the African*, 125-126; Emma Dench, *Romulus' Asylum: Roman Identities from the Age of Alexander to the Age of Hadrian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 4.

<sup>80</sup> Wilhite, *Tertullian the African*, 153-154; Ibid, *Ancient African Christianity*, 62-63.

however was a Roman identity constructed from the outside for the purpose of being used as such a tool. The Christians were no exception to this. While they wished to undermine the authority by they were persecuted by the Roman state, this did not account for all of Roman cultural identity or authority. Where Roman cultural authority had the power to support or elevate Christianity, these authors did not hesitate to use it. As a result, in these works Roman identity exists as a somewhat contradictory phenomenon. It is both an other against which Christian identity is defined, and a tool to be embraced for the purpose of survival and elevation. This contradiction is best understood as an act of reconstruction. These authors wish to critique and undermine any aspect of Roman-ness which is hostile or incompatible with their Christian identity, but they also emphasize and elevate anything that is compatible with Christian identity. They do this in order to reshape Roman identity into something they can embrace alongside Christianity. This reconstructed Roman identity might be understood as artificial, however this was the reality of Roman identity in this time and it is no less Roman identity because of it.

Having defined categories of identity as a tool of analysis, the rest of this section will define the specific categories of identity relevant to my argument: civic authority, cult, and philosophy. As already mentioned, these definitions are, building on earlier scholarship, my attempt to reconstruct conceptions of group identity to the extent that I am able. To begin with it is necessary to define civic groups and civic authority, and discuss how the role of this authority was used in ancient identity debates. An individual can be said to have civic identity if they live under the authority of a government, to some extent identify themselves with a community defined by that government, and

either participate within or have strong views about the functioning of that government.<sup>81</sup> However, as a group identity within the ancient world, for our purposes civic identity needs to be more narrowly defined. A civic group can be understood, for the sake of this study, as a group whose collective identity shares the same category as the civic government or claims the same authority as civic government. If a group identity is civic, within the context of the material at issue here, it is either an extension of or a rival to civic government. This understanding is not to be understood as a useful universal definition of politics, but merely an understanding of civic participation as it is understood by the texts this thesis will be analysing. It does not effectively apply to group identity beyond the time period of the Roman Empire, or even to groups which were not the focus of elite Roman discourse such as Judaism. Within this understanding civic identity was closely tied to cultic identity. Participation in Roman government necessitated participation in Roman cultic practice, and particularly in late antiquity, emperor worship which blurred the lines between civic loyalty and worship.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, a cultic group could be seen as also a civic group, although as I will demonstrate, this is not necessarily the case. This association between civic groups and cultic groups has been seen as one of the driving motivations for the persecution of Christians, and correspondingly Christian apologetic writing.<sup>83</sup> However, the reason I distinguish between civic and cultic groups is because it will be one of the innovations of the Latin

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<sup>81</sup> See a fully discussion of the nature of civic identity see Daniel Hart, Cameron Richardson, and Britt Wilkenfeld, "Civic Identity," in *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, 772-775.

<sup>82</sup> Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 62-63; Ittai Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2004) 188-189; Lendon, *Empire of Honour*, 8-10; Sherwin-White, *The Roman Citizenship*, 397, 403-408.

<sup>83</sup> Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*, 381-386; David Kling, *A History of Christian Conversion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020) 53-54.

Christian apologetic tradition, specifically in the writing of Lactantius, to distinguish between civic authority and cult.

To be apolitical, in the sense that I am arguing that Lactantius's Christian identity is apolitical, is for group identity to necessitate the complete rejection of participation in state government. Chapter 5 on Lactantius will argue that, for Lactantius, being Christian necessitates the complete rejection of civic participation and instead requires that Christian identity, as understood to be a unity of cult and philosophy, exists outside of government authority and is legitimized by its own merits. This is not to be confused with the modern division of religion from politics. For Lactantius the cultic worship of polytheistic deities is still closely tied to civic participation in the Roman state. Although Lactantius does separate worship from civic participation, it is only Christian worship that is thus separated. This is because for Lactantius only Christian worship can be paired with wisdom and philosophy, and cult and philosophy can be unified into a distinct identity. It is only through this unity that a form of identity centered around worship is able to stand independently of the support of a political state. The reason that Lactantius's Christianity is not a rival to Roman government, is because he rejects the category of government for Christian identity. Rather by this unified form of identity Lactantius uses the legitimizing power of an intellectual philosophical truth to argue that cultic worship independent of a national history or a civic body ought to be still authoritative if it is grounded in objective truth. This anti-government form of Christian identity would be short lived, for common Christians if not for Lactantius himself, due to Constantine's acceptance of Christianity. However, this capacity for Christian identity, as understood to be defined by the worship of their God and supported by an objective

truth, to exist outside of the support of a political state, would continue to define Christianity.

A cult or a cultic group can largely be defined as a social group which collectively engages in cultic practices. Defining cultic practices in late antiquity is more challenging however, for, as this thesis will endeavour to demonstrate, the ancient understanding of cultic practice used by Christians changed over the course of the period under consideration. Broadly speaking in the beginning of this period cultic practice can be understood as any ritual form of worship which was directed toward a deity. However, by Lactantius in the early fourth century, cultic practice, embodied in his use of the umbrella term *religio*, was presented more as a form of devotion which could include any action performed because of a person's relationship to a deity and not merely ritualistic forms of worship. However, a cultic group as a social category of identity had many implications in the ancient world, which the early Christian needed to negotiate. Originally cultic practice was closely tied to ethnic and national identity. Each ethno-national group had its own deities and forms of worship and how or what one worshiped corresponded closely to one's ethnicity.<sup>84</sup> An influential example of this division of identity is the views of celebrated ancient historian Herodotus who presented the world as divided into different *ethne* each with their own language, geography, and practices of worship passed down from their ancestors.<sup>85</sup> What constituted an ethnic group and

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<sup>84</sup> Buell, *Why this New Race*, 2; Wilhite, *Tertullian the African*, 131, 148-149; Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*, 62-77, 309-310; Johnson, "Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius," 8-9; Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*, 393; Sherwin-White, *The Roman Citizenship*, 11-14; Judge, "On This Rock I will build my *ekklesia*": Counter-cultic Springs of Multiculturalism", in *Early Christianity and Classical Culture*, 619-620; Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*, 5-8; Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 78-79.

<sup>85</sup> Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*, 5-8; Figueira, Thomas, and Carmen Soares (Eds.), *Ethnicity and Identity in Herodotus*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2020) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315209081>

the boundaries that distinguished varying ethnic groups from each other could be unclear. However, distinction and legitimization could be established by demonstrating that one's choice of deities and the means by which they are worshiped is derived from a tradition of one's ancestors which has been preserved from antiquity, the greater the antiquity the greater the claim to legitimacy.<sup>86</sup>

However, even before Christianity began this model of cultic identity was being undermined, as several groups such as Greeks and Romans began to use expanding empires to spread the worship of their gods to multiple different ethnic groups.<sup>87</sup> This development first meaningfully occurred with the spread of Greek culture, philosophy, and the worship of Greek gods following the conquest of Alexander the Great, which also resulted in the claims of Greek intellectuals to culturally possess a universal truth that applied to all peoples.<sup>88</sup> This universalist approach to cultic worship often attempted to show how all other nations were originally derived genealogically from the ancient author's own national identity, or in some other way to claim that only the author's own group identity possessed the authority of truth or antiquity.<sup>89</sup> This is seen for example in the numerous universal histories, such as the *Babyloniaka* by the Babylonian Berossos<sup>90</sup> or the *Periodos ges* by Hecataeus of Miletus,<sup>91</sup> written in the Hellenistic period, which scholars have linked to the spread of Greek culture, worship, and philosophy among

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<sup>86</sup> Schott, *ibid*; Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*, 72.

<sup>87</sup> Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 80-82.

<sup>88</sup> Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*, 16-17, 27.

<sup>89</sup> Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*, 5-8; Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*, 241-249; Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*, 18-19, 103; Buell, *Why This New Race*, 138-144; Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica*, 6-8; Peter Van Nuffelen, "Theology versus Genre? The Universalism of Christian Historiography in Late Antiquity," *Historiae Mundi: Studies in Universal History*, eds. Peter Liddel, and Andrew Fear (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010).

<sup>90</sup> Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*, 104-105.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 390.

Hellenised peoples during this period.<sup>92</sup> In this context philosophy began to bleed into discussions on cultic practices such that practices which lacked an intellectual foundation could be rejected as superstition, and morality and cultic practice began to become more closely connected in Greco-Roman discourse.<sup>93</sup>

The spread of the Roman Empire likewise changed the nature of identity and the implications for cultic practice. Within the Roman Empire the various ethnic groups continued to practice their ancestral forms of worship. However, they did so on top of or in some way combined with practicing Roman cult, the latter of which was seen as a form of civic loyalty.<sup>94</sup> Also at the time, we see the rise of elective cults such as the cult of the goddess Isis, the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus, the cult of Mithras, and indeed one might say even Christianity, which while potentially historically connected to a particular ethnicity was by now practiced by anyone who chose to join the cultic group. Thus the non-Roman cultic practices that were still practiced in the Roman Empire served to define cultic groups but were not necessarily tied to ethnicity.<sup>95</sup> However, these new or perceived as new cultic groups could be regarded with suspicion and indeed even could be made illegal by the Roman government.<sup>96</sup> The ideological foundation for this view

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<sup>92</sup> Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*, 16-28; Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*, 17-19, 103.

<sup>93</sup> Martin, *Inventing Superstition*; Kahlos, *Debate and Dialogue: Christian and Pagan Cultures c. 360–430*, 174-177, 193.

<sup>94</sup> Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*, 386; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 1-2; Williams, *Defending and Defining the Faith*, 23.

<sup>95</sup> Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*, 250-260; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 14-16; Van Nuffelen, "Theology versus Genre?," 171-172.

<sup>96</sup> However, prosecution of these groups was neither guaranteed nor consistently enacted. Usually these groups were only prosecuted if they were the subject of substantial popular enmity or they ran afoul of a particular emperor's policies on cults, such as that of Diocletian. Even then these laws were only sporadically enforced. This is best seen in the history of the persecution of Christianity. See e.g. Candida Moss, "Political Oppression and Martyrdom," in *The Early Christian World*, 783–795. 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2017). The exceptions to this lack of commitment, occurred when the practices of a cultic group were believed by Roman authorities to be not only illegitimate but also to be actively violent and

can be seen in the works of Cicero,<sup>97</sup> and will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 1. It is within this setting of changing and multifaceted cultic groups that Christian worship develops and negotiates its own place. Depending on the goals and ideologies of the particular Christian author in question, the Christian form of cultic practices can have different and wide ranging implications, with the associations of an ethnic group, to a philosophical school, to a civic group. Each of the chapters will explore what the category of cultic practice and cultic groups means to each of these authors.

Another identifier which Christian authors negotiated in this period which needs to be defined for the purposes of this thesis is philosopher and philosophical groups. Unlike cultic groups in late antiquity, the role of philosophers as a social category or group, as opposed to their teachings, has been notably under researched. An excellent recent analysis of this topic is that of Michael Trapp in his book *Philosophy in the Roman Empire: Ethics, Politics, and Society*.<sup>98</sup> Trapp defines the category of *philosophia* in the ancient world as the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom for the purpose of human happiness:

On the understanding which they all shared, that there was indeed such a thing as an objectively right and satisfying style of life and state of being for humans, uniquely capable of fulfilling their essential nature and bringing them true happiness, then *philosophia* was the sole fully effective means of identifying that style of life and state of being.<sup>99</sup>

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criminal in their own right, such as the druids of Britain and Gaul, or the cult of Bacchus. See Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution*, 167-170.

<sup>97</sup> Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*, 39-49; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 10-12, 187-190.

<sup>98</sup> Michael Trapp, *Philosophy in the Roman Empire: Ethics, Politics, and Society* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007) 1-22, 215-233.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

Insofar as all forms of knowledge available to a human being could potentially influence their happiness, there was no aspect of reality that lay outside of the potential for the study of *philosophia*. The pursuit of knowledge and wisdom was within this understanding a means to ultimately achieving human perfect happiness.<sup>100</sup> It is important to note that this pursuit of knowledge included the study of theology which was, before Christianity, primarily of concern to philosophical groups rather than cultic groups, although Jewish theological discourse did also begin to blur this line.<sup>101</sup> It is also worth emphasizing that this *philosophia* had an authority and importance beyond the satisfying of the curiosity of an idle few. Rather it claimed to be a fundamentally necessary science for any well informed person on being happy.<sup>102</sup>

Therefore, theoretically a philosophical group, within the ancient understanding, was any group of people who strove to achieve human happiness through the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. However, this categorization could arguably be applied to any group of people who wanted to be happy and was open to learning new things. Furthermore this definition does not communicate the fact that *philosophi* was a contested title in antiquity. Unlike being a Christian, a person did not become a philosopher simply by believing oneself to be, rather the title required work to attain and maintain.<sup>103</sup> Rather on a social level a person or a group was a philosopher or philosophical group based on whether their pursuit of happiness led them to a lifestyle that went beyond what was performed by common practice and whether or not they had

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 2-3,

<sup>101</sup> Judge, "On This Rock I will Build My *Ekklesia*," 620, 633-634.

<sup>102</sup> Trapp, *Philosophy in the Roman Empire*, 6-10.

<sup>103</sup> Eshleman, *The Social World of Intellectuals in the Roman Empire*, 1-7

a sufficient degree of intellectual clout to justify this behavior in the eyes of others.<sup>104</sup>

This intellectual legitimacy and authority was also derived from a connection to a historical philosophical school.<sup>105</sup> Therefore, for the purposes of this work, one can broadly define philosophers in the ancient world as those who pursued and guided others towards an ideal human life by means of an established intellectual authority. A group was more or less a philosophical group therefore based on the extent to which their stated goals aimed to achieve an ideal human life, and the intellectual authority by which they claimed to be able to guide others. Due to the way their behavior puts them at odds with traditional society and due to their claims to authority, ancient philosophers and ancient Christians had a very similar social role which was significant to both parties.<sup>106</sup>

However, one way in which ancient philosophy was categorically different from ancient Christianity was the former's potential connection to civic government.

Philosophers were of a dual mind as to their relationship to civic authority. On the one hand they wished to claim an authority independent from the political system, while on the other hand they felt that their advice ought to influence political decisions.<sup>107</sup>

Philosophers were treated by Roman civic authority with similar ambiguity. To figures like Vespasian and Domitian philosophers were a sufficiently political nuisance or threat to be expelled from the capital.<sup>108</sup> However, in other cases philosophy was seen as a

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<sup>104</sup> Trapp, *Philosophy in the Roman Empire*, 233-245; Eshleman, *The Social World of Intellectuals in the Roman Empire*, 3.

<sup>105</sup> Eshleman, *The Social World of Intellectuals in the Roman Empire*, 2-3.

<sup>106</sup> Trapp, *Philosophy in the Roman Empire*, 257; Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*, 388; Eshleman, *The Social World of Intellectuals in the Roman Empire*, 1-2.

<sup>107</sup> Trapp, *Philosophy in the Roman Empire*, 218-225.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 226-227.

prerequisite to public office,<sup>109</sup> and for figures like Cato the younger philosophy was significant for influencing his political positions.<sup>110</sup> However, although philosophical teachings could have significant political implications, either to the harm or benefit of philosophers, philosophical groups on the whole seem to be in theory categorically distinct from civic groups.<sup>111</sup> This meant that philosophers were not by virtue of being philosophers seen as a rival to civic leaders, and also philosophers did not in and of themselves possess civic authority.

However, as well as civic influence, the Roman Empire also exercised another form of influence over its subject peoples that cannot be described as cultic or civic, although it derives from both, which could be considered cultural. 'Culture' is a profoundly broad term that is notoriously difficult to pin down, but which, for the purposes of this thesis, can be said to include things such as dress, language, food, and the behavioral traits and mannerisms that mark an individual as belonging to a particular historical or ethnic group. Roman cultural practice can broadly be considered any signifier of Roman identity that existed outside of the categories of cult and civic participation. Roman cultural influence has been seen to be under researched in comparison to Roman civic authority,<sup>112</sup> but nevertheless it had a significant impact on the power of Roman authority and the lived experiences of people in the empire.<sup>113</sup> I will discuss in more detail in later chapters the connection between Roman cultural

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<sup>109</sup> Paul Zanker, *The Mask of Socrates: the Image of the Intellectual in Antiquity*, Trans. Alan Shapiro (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 277-282; Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992) 38-40.

<sup>110</sup> Trapp, *Philosophy in the Roman Empire*, 227-229.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 229-230, 233.

<sup>112</sup> Dench, *Romulus' Asylum*, 3-4, 26-27; Eric Gruen, *Culture and National Identity in Republican Rome* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1992).

<sup>113</sup> Richard Bauman, *Human Rights in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 2000) 96; Sherwin-White, *The Roman Citizenship*, 397, 415-416.

practices and other signifiers of Roman identity such as cult and civic loyalty. For now it is sufficient to say that they represented particular forms of Roman identity that could be accepted or rejected depending on the degree a thinker chose to be Roman or not.

### Overview of the Argument of the Thesis

This final section will briefly trace the argument of the thesis as a whole. Chapter 1 on Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* discusses how Cicero laid the foundation for this apologetic tradition, by providing later writers with his understanding of the philosophical nature of theological truth, and of *religio* as the foundation for traditional cultic groups. These ideas the later Christian authors could then critique, alter, and build upon for their own ends. Cicero in this text puts forward the position that there is a single empirically correct theological truth, which could be used to determine correct cultic practice, i.e. *religio*. This truth can be attained through human philosophical enquiry, but it is not yet discovered. Cicero does this, I argue, in order to provoke philosophical speculation in his readership. However, later Latin Christian apologists will argue, based on this position, that Christian theology is this empirical truth, and because they possess this correct theological truth, their cultic practices which derive from this theology are also correct and valid. Furthermore, Cicero creates a distinction between *religiones*, which are legitimate cultic practices, and *superstitiones*, which are illegitimate cultic practices. If a group of people do not practice correct *religiones*, then they can be seen as harmful to the Roman state, because they are failing to pacify the gods, which is believed to be necessary to secure the success and safety of the nation.

Later Christian apologists, however, argue that Christian cultic practices are correct and legitimate, that is they are *religiones*, because they are grounded on theological truth, and, in a reversal of Cicero's original logic, ought be deemed socially acceptable because of this. By thus changing source of legitimacy for *religio*, these apologists undermine the civic associations of *religio*, and correspondingly begin to separate cultic practice from civic authority.

Following chapter 1, discussions on subsequent authors' works will include sections corresponding to the three central claims of this thesis. Although not necessarily in this order, these sections are: a section discussing the role each work plays within the ancient Latin Christian apologetic tradition, a section discussing the work's use of the term *religio*, a section discussing how this author categorizes Christian identity, and finally a section on the relationship of Christians with Roman civic authority in the work. To begin with, chapter 2 on Tertullian's *Apology* will first discuss these historical circumstances and the importance of the work. Secondly, I will argue that Tertullian changed the source of legitimacy for *religio* from antiquity and social approval, as Cicero presented it, to the theological legitimacy of the deity being worshiped. This change also had the effect of changing the meaning of *religio* from referring to a specific preapproved set of ritual practices, to a more abstract notion of devotion defined by the object it was directed toward, rather than the practices involved. Finally, this chapter will argue that Tertullian categorised his Christian group as an elective cultic group, defined by their *religiones*, and categorized Roman identity purely as allegiance to Roman civic authority.

Chapter 3 will discuss how these developments found in Tertullian's work, were continued and altered in Minucius Felix's dialogue, the *Octavius*. While Minucius Felix draws the genre and structure of his work from Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, there are enough direct and substantial parallels in the arguments of the texts to warrant treating the *Octavius* as directly inspired by Tertullian's *Apology*. Secondly, Minucius Felix interprets the term *religio* metaphorically to refer to the philosophical goal of morality. Finally, Minucius Felix defines Christian groups as a philosophical identity, and in so doing further separates Christian identity from civic authority. As argued above, philosophers occupied a space in the ancient world whereby their socially unorthodox behavior was seen as acceptable, because philosophy was seen as an individual pursuit and not the concern of society at large, and they had the legitimizing power of philosophical truth. By presenting Christianity as a philosophy, Minucius Felix can secure the same protections for Christians as philosophers enjoy, and avoid all accusations of political rebelliousness, which comes with the association of Christianity and cultic worship.

I will then discuss how all of these developments come to a head in Lactantius's *Divine Institutes*. Due to the much greater amount of material to discuss, and the importance of this work to the argument of my thesis, this discussion will be broken up between chapters 4 and 5. To start with, chapter 4 will discuss how Lactantius actively draws on both Tertullian's *Apology* and Minucius Felix's *Octavius*, and in so doing participates within and reifies this Latin Apologetic tradition. Secondly, Lactantius, directly quoting from Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, explicitly argues for a differing understanding of *religio*, which defines it, in the manner of Tertullian, based on its

theological object, rather than the practices involved in it, such that any action done out of devotion towards the correct deity is counted as a *religio*. Thirdly, Lactantius categorises Christian identity as the ideal unity of Roman philosophy and cult, in an effort to claim both the cultural authority sought by Tertullian, and legitimacy provided by the claim to philosophical truth sought by Minucius Felix. By uniting these forms of identity together Lactantius seeks to present Christianity as an ideal form of Roman identity, on account of the fact that it unites together all of the aspects of Roman culture which he argues are contradictory and disconnected without the influence of Christianity. Finally, chapter 5 will discuss how Lactantius presents Christian identity as apolitical. Lactantius closely associates both social injustice and false worship with the creation of government, and presents Christianity as able to achieve justice on earth because, among other reasons, it does not promote the injustice of inequality which Lactantius presents as inherent to governmental authority. By presenting Christianity as apolitical and as the ideal unity of philosophy and cult Lactantius continues the process begun by Tertullian, and makes Christianity into a Latin form of cultic identity which is legitimized on its own terms and separated from civic authority.

As discussed I hope these arguments provide three original contributions to scholarship and shed light into this somewhat under researched corner of early Christian history. Firstly, discussing how these authors build on each others' works aims to show how scholarship can explore the connections between early Christian apologies. Based on this, scholarship can perform research on early Christian apologies as interconnected groups of texts. Secondly, this analysis seeks to provide a more detailed and nuanced account of how the term *religio* changes in the hands of these

Christian authors, from its older Ciceronian world. A better understanding of the usages of *religio* provides insight into how the idea of worship changed and developed in late antiquity. Finally and most significantly this thesis argues that this Latin Christian Apologetic tradition gradually developed Christian identity into a distinct sphere of identity centered around worship and separated from civic authority. This argument hopes to show how, even prior to Constantine, contact and negotiation with Roman culture and Roman authority, rather than Greek or Jewish culture, played an important part in the development of early Christian identity. The idea of worship and the forms of identity which centered around it did change in late antiquity in the hands of Christian authors, these Christian authors specifically. Acknowledging that the modern notion of 'religion' did not exist in the ancient world should not be an end to the study of categories of identity in the ancient world, nor should acknowledging that Christian thinkers drew heavily on older classical ideas, be an end to studies on innovations of early Christian authors, but rather a beginning for it.

## Chapter 1

### Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*: Truth, *Religio*, and the Foundations of Latin Christian Apologetics

Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* provides a foundation for the Latin Christian apologetic tradition. Out of several elements of his argument that are directly responded to by later Latin Christian authors, the most important for the purposes of this thesis are the ways in which worship is legitimized. These methods of legitimization significantly inform how later Christian authors, who draw from this text, construct their views on Christian and Roman identities. Two sources of legitimacy within this text emerge as particularly influential for Christian authors: how Cicero understands the nature of truth regarding the topic of divinity, and how Cicero characterizes legitimate forms of worship, which he refers to through the Latin term *religio*. I will argue below that for Cicero these were two distinct although related topics. In discussing Cicero's use of *religio* however, I want to emphasise that Cicero's ideas are not copied wholesale into the work of subsequent thinkers. In contrast to scholarship on Cicero's use of the term *religio*, which has argued for this view,<sup>114</sup> I argue that Cicero's uses of *religio* provide a starting point but not an end point for later Christian authors. Cicero in many ways represents the culmination of traditional Roman views on philosophical theology,<sup>115</sup> and in this way Cicero's understandings serve as a sort of control group for our study. These ideas serve as a starting point from which the innovations of Christian authors can be measured. However, scholars have noted that in other ways Cicero's views in *On the*

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<sup>114</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 27-29; Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*, 46.

<sup>115</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William V. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 303-304; Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 27-28; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 187-190; Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion*, 39-52.

*Nature of the Gods* were notably innovating on traditional Roman understandings.<sup>116</sup> From these innovations Christian authors will take inspiration, expanding and further developing these ideas. As such Cicero represents an important starting point for understanding how early Latin Christian authors conceptualise their own theology and worship.

*On the Nature of the Gods* was written during the two years prior to Cicero's death in 43 BCE, at a time when Cicero was politically inactive during the rule of Julius Caesar. The work as it survives is incomplete and it is speculated that it was never properly finished or revised by Cicero and not published until after his death.<sup>117</sup> The dialogue describes how Cicero the character, once visited the home of Pontifex Cotta and listened to him discuss the nature of the gods with Gaius Velleius and Quintus Lucilius Balbus. While Cicero the character is present throughout the dialogue and provides narration, he does not participate in the discussion. The work is divided into three Books, each of which focuses on a different character who champions a different philosophical school. Within Book 1 Velleius argues for the Epicurean view of divinity. After a critique of Platonic and Stoic ideas of divinity and a historical overview of earlier philosophers, Velleius argues for the existence of divinities that have a human form, are eternal, rational, happy, and at leisure. Cotta in the latter half of this Book critiques this concept of divinity. Within Book 2 Balbus argues for the Stoic concept of divinity. Balbus provides extensive arguments for the existence of divinity, the providence of the gods, and the effectiveness of divination, citing human foreknowledge of future events, the

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<sup>116</sup> Beard, "Cicero and Divination," 33–46; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 10-14, 187-190; Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion*, 39-52.

<sup>117</sup> Harris Rackham, "Introduction to *On the Nature of the Gods*," in *Cicero, On the Nature of the Gods*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1933) xiii.

advantages humans gain from the natural world, the fear nature and the gods inspire in humans, and the order and regularity of the world. He then argues that the universe itself is divine, rational, and wise, and presents the traditional Greco-Roman gods as manifestations of this divine intelligence. Within Book 3, Cotta champions the method of Academic Skeptic, and critiques Balbus's Stoic position as well as more widely held assumptions of Greco-Roman divinities. Cotta does not provide much of his own position on the nature of divinity, except to argue that given the uncertainty of the topic the best course of action is to follow traditional methods of worship given that they have been demonstrated to mostly maintain the gods' favour.<sup>118</sup> However, about one third of this Book has been lost and so the argument remains incomplete. The dialogue ends as the characters part to return their own homes and the character of Cicero reflect that Balbus's argument was the most convincing.<sup>119</sup>

The first section of this chapter will discuss in greater detail why Cicero's work and *On the Nature of the Gods* specifically is relevant to an exploration of Latin Christian authors. Next, the chapter will argue that Cicero presents the nature of theological truth as a philosophical matter which can be fully grasped by the human intellect from observations of reality. This is in contrast to the later Christian views which, while some hold that philosophical enquiry can aid in the pursuit of truth, believe that theological truth can only ever be fully understood with the aid of divine revelation. However, in spite of his differing approaches to it, Cicero does hold that there is a singular empirical truth on the nature of divinity, but that current philosophy has yet to fully discover it. Later Christian authors will use this as a foundation to argue that

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<sup>118</sup> Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, III.ii-iv.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, III.xl.95.

Christian theology is the empirical theological truth that non-Christian philosophers failed to discover.

The next section of this chapter will explore Cicero's use of the term *religio* and how it influences both how later Christians use the term, and Christian identity formation. If there is intended a single position on the nature of the gods which Cicero intended for his audience to believe and take away from this work, it would be this: Philosophy cannot definitively prove that the gods exist, what their nature is, or their relationship to mankind. However, the nature and the existence of the gods is important for foundational virtues which ought to continue to exist. Therefore, in order that virtues continue to exist it is best simply to follow ancestral tradition on matters involving the worshiping of deities. For Cicero, *religio* becomes the term that is used to refer to a range of different ritual practices done usually but not necessarily for the gods, but it is only used to refer to practices which Cicero believes are acceptable and worth continuing. There are several factors which academics have pointed to as the defining element which for Cicero and other Latins distinguishes what is legitimate *religio* and what is not.<sup>120</sup> However, what a close analysis of Cicero's text reveals is that for him there is no hard and fast rule to determine this; rather what matters is whether or not a practice is deemed to be acceptable to elite Roman society. In Cicero's view, *religio* becomes a method for the measuring and regulating of theological truth, based on acceptability to Roman sensibilities. He uses *religio* to begin to promote the idea of a centralized and moralized form of worship that supports the Roman state. This tool of

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<sup>120</sup> See Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 27-28; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 187-190; Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion*, 39-52; John Wynne, *Cicero on the Philosophy of Religion: On the Nature of the Gods and On Divination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019) 58-62.

*religio* will be taken up by the Latin apologetic tradition; however, unlike Cicero Latin Christian apologists will use it as an independent source of legitimacy. This rhetorical source of legitimacy will eventually become completely untied from the state and ultimately evolves within the theology of Lactantius into the ideological foundation of an independent sphere of worship.

### What Has Rome to Do with Jerusalem?: The Influence of Cicero on Latin Christian Apologetics

As I discussed above, Cicero, as a primary example of classical Roman elite discourse, can, for the sake of our analysis, serve as a point of contrast by which to measure the innovations of later Christian views. However, the simpler answer to the question of why his work is relevant to a discussion of later Latin Christian writings, which is also more pertinent to the content of this chapter, is just that Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* is very influential to Latin Christian authors and particularly Latin Christian apologetics. This has been largely agreed upon by scholarship<sup>121</sup> and is born out by a careful reading of the texts. I will discuss in subsequent chapters how each of these authors were individually influenced by this work; however, here I shall outline more generally the effect this text had on Latin Christian apologists. Notably, many of

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<sup>121</sup> Ilona Opelt, "Ciceros Schrift *De natura deorum* bei den lateinischen Kirchenvätern," *Antike und Abendland* 12 (1966): 141–55; Momigliano, "The Theological Efforts of the Roman Upper Classes in the First Century BC" 211; Wilhite, *Tertullian the African*, 22; Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 28-29; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 187-193; Gábor Kendeffy, "Lactantius as Christian Cicero, Cicero as Shadow-like Instructor," In *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Cicero* Vol. 2, ed. Kyriakos Demetriou and William Altman, (Brill: Leiden, 2015) 56-92; Barton, and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*; Jed Atkins, "Tertullian on 'The Freedom of Religion,'" *Polis, The Journal for Ancient Greek and Roman Political Thought* 37 (2020) 148-149.

the polemics that these Christian authors repeatedly use against classical Roman beliefs and worship, were earlier used by the characters of Cicero's dialogue to critique each other's philosophical theologies. These arguments include critiques of views deeply grounded in Roman and broader classical tradition. For example among these polemics are arguments against the idea of anthropomorphism of the gods,<sup>122</sup> the rejection of the understandings of deities made popular by classical poets,<sup>123</sup> the refutation of the very concept of deified human beings,<sup>124</sup> and critiques of the number and variability of classical Greco-Roman gods.<sup>125</sup> The fact that many Christian critiques of Roman worship and deities predate Christianity and are a part of the philosophical Roman discourse on their own gods, suggests that in many ways even as Christian writers develop away from classical ideas they are in other ways continuing a tradition grounded within Roman culture.

However, one element of Cicero's treatise which scholars have focused on as particularly influential to Latin Christians is Cicero's use of the term *religio*. The third section of this chapter will discuss in greater detail Cicero's use of the term *religio*, and how he both changes and preserves aspects of its meaning. For our purposes here it is simply important to note that scholars have commonly understood the form of *religio* which is presented in Cicero's *On Nature of the Gods* to be the same understanding of

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<sup>122</sup> Cf. *On the Nature of the Gods*, I.xxvii.75-78; Tertullian, *To the Nations*, 10.25-10.30; Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 1.11.26-29.

<sup>123</sup> Cf. *On the Nature of the Gods*, II.xxiv.63; Tertullian, *Apology*, xiv.2-6; Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, xxiv.1-8; Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 1.5.1-14.

<sup>124</sup> Cf. *On the Nature of the Gods*, III.xxi.53; Tertullian, *Apology*, xi.1-9; Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, xxi.1-11, xxix.4-5; Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 1.15.1-33.

<sup>125</sup> Cf. *On the Nature of the Gods*, III.xxi-xxiii.54-60; Tertullian, *To the Nations*, xv; Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, vi.2-3; Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 1.3.16-21.

*religio* used by the Latin Christian authors Tertullian, Minucius Felix, and Lactantius.<sup>126</sup>

As I will argue in subsequent chapters this view is an oversimplification of the Christian authors' use of the term. However, it is true that in their use of the term, they do draw from Cicero and *On the Nature of the Gods* specifically. What is more, this is most likely a direct influence, coming from each of these authors familiarity with Cicero's work.<sup>127</sup>

The specific element of Cicero's use of *religio* that makes it so influential is the contrast Cicero creates between it and the term *superstitio*. In older sources these two terms were often used as synonyms; however Cicero creates a distinction between them.

*Religio* is used to only refer to practices which are deemed to be legitimate, and *superstitio* is used to refer to practices perceived to be illegitimate. This dichotomy is used prominently by these Latin Christian authors in their apologetic works to argue for the legitimacy of their own practices and attack the validity of non-Christian worship.<sup>128</sup>

Therefore, for these reasons and others which will be made clear over the course of this and subsequent chapters, it is important to include a discussion of Cicero in order to best understand the tradition of Latin Christian apologetics.

### The Nature of Theological Truth in Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*

The nature of truth might seem for some to be an overly abstract place to begin a close analysis between these texts. However, in order to understand the developments

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<sup>126</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 28-29; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 187-193; Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion*, 46-47.

<sup>127</sup> Barton and Boyarin, *Ibid*, 46.

<sup>128</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 27-28; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 187-190; Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion*, 39-52.

Latin Christian writers make to the nature of religious identity, it is crucial to understand not merely the content of their theology but the methods they have for legitimizing their theology and the contrast between these methods and traditional Roman means of legitimization. The connection to an abstract theological truth is something that both Cicero and our Latin Christian authors use to legitimize their own arguments and delegitimize others. However, the understanding of the nature of theological truth is for Cicero notably different than it is for later Latin Christians. This difference has important implications both for their arguments and also how they understand the identity associated with worship. Rather than debate and intellectual exploration leading individuals closer to truth, as Cicero champions through his dialogue, for Latin apologists truth is something possessed by only one side of a debate to be shown to the other. However, Cicero's suggestion of an empirical theological truth that is not attained by philosophers will become the basis of a key element of the Christian apologist's argument. Corresponding to the claim that they possess empirical theological truth, is the increased connection by Latin Christians between correct forms of worship, i.e. *religio*, and beliefs about the nature of the gods. By means of this the Christian authors will legitimize their own practices, that is their *religiones*, by connecting them to empirically true theological beliefs. However, for Cicero, and within traditional Roman views more broadly, these are two distinct subjects.

Indeed, it is useful for understanding the approach Cicero takes to theological truth in *On the Nature of the Gods* to understand the intellectual context in which this work was written. The 40s BCE of the Late Republican period in which this work is written, was largely agreed by scholars to be a period of significant self-reflection for

Roman elite regarding their own beliefs about divinity and their own forms of worship.<sup>129</sup> Alongside Cicero's works on this subject were comparable works by Varro and Nigidius Figulus.<sup>130</sup> These works strove to intellectually explore, categorize, and interrogate the traditionally loosely associated collection of ritual practices and beliefs which made up what modern scholars classify as 'Roman religion.' Based on this it has been argued that at this time 'Roman religion' develops into "a separate identity, with specific rules, claiming relative autonomy from other activities and institutions."<sup>131</sup> Specifically Mary Beard has argued that "It was now possible for members of the Roman elite to proclaim a particular stance in relation to religious activity; it was no longer simply 'something they did'... 'Religion' had now been defined as a subject of Roman discourse."<sup>132</sup>

Scholarship can best understand the debates of Cicero and his contemporaries, when we attempt to understand how these ancient Roman elite themselves understood these discussions. Cicero was participating in a philosophical debate on the nature of deities, and the validity of traditional forms of worship. This discussion, for Cicero and his colleagues, although currently of particular interest to philosophers, was merely one intellectual issue of many, rather than a distinctive sphere of identity. However, the process of self-reflection on the nature of deities and worship, as independent intellectual topics, lays the foundation for these to become more independent aspects of

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<sup>129</sup> Beard, "Cicero and Divination," 33–46; Beard et al., *Religions of Rome*, 149-153; Momigliano, "The Theological Efforts of the Roman Upper Classes in the First Century BC"; North, "The Limits of the 'Religious' in the Late Roman Republic," 225–245.

<sup>130</sup> Momigliano, "The Theological Efforts of the Roman Upper Classes in the First Century BC," 199-200.

<sup>131</sup> Beard et al., *Religions of Rome*, 149.

<sup>132</sup> Beard, "Cicero and Divination," 46.

identity. These more independent aspects of identity are not yet manifested in the works of Cicero but will be in the later Christian authors which build on his work. It is important to note however that even in these later Christian authors, there still is not the idea of 'religion' with all of its modern connotations, but rather a distinct sphere of identity focused on the nature of worship and divinity.

However, within Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* this development had yet to occur, and these topics were merely philosophical subjects for discussion. The framing of the dialogue as a whole presents the subject of the nature of the gods as a philosophical issue for which there is no clear solution. At the very beginning of the dialogue, just after introducing his subject matter, the narrator describes the importance of approaching this topic with Academic Skepticism given the range of philosophical views:

On this topic, various are the most learned men and discrepant are their opinions. It ought make a strong argument that the origin and starting of philosophy on this point, is ignorance, and that Academic philosophers wisely withheld assent on beliefs of things uncertain.<sup>133</sup>

Thus it is clearly established from the very beginning that there is no singular doctrine or school of thought that can accurately explain this subject. The dialogue suggests that the only way to come to a clear solution is to consider all the differing opinions and decide on which one is more likely. Rather than simply loyalty towards his own school of

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<sup>133</sup> De qua tam variae sunt doctissimorum hominum tamque discrepantes sententiae. Magno argumento esse debeat causa et principium philosophiae esse adhuc inscientiam, prudenterque Academicos de rebus incertis adsensionem cohibuisse. Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum Livre Premier*, Collection Latomus 107, ed. M. van den Bruwaene (Bruxelles: Latomus Revue D'etudes Latines, 1970). I.i.1 p.49. All translations are my own with consultation with *On the Nature of the Gods; Academics*, Trans. Harris Rackham. Loeb Classical Library 268. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933).

philosophy, it has been suggested that Cicero's choice of taking a Skeptic approach on this topic is a particular strategy based on the particular subject at hand.<sup>134</sup> This is supported by the sentence quoted above. Cicero does not begin with the abstract philosophical principle of Academic Skepticism and citing the disagreement of his topic as evidence for it, which would rhetorically suggest he was promoting the idea for its own sake. Instead Cicero uses a result clause, which suggests that his focus is on the subject of the nature of the gods and Academic Skepticism is simply the best strategy available for him to understand this topic given the state of the discourse around it.

This is further supported later in Cicero's introduction to the text where he reiterates the same point: "but now, in order that I might free myself from all ill-will, I will place before you the view of philosophers on the nature of the gods. Indeed on this topic it seems proper to call together all peoples to judge which of these views is true."<sup>135</sup> While it is implied here that there is one true solution to these questions, it has not yet been fully discovered. Therefore, the philosopher seeking the truth of these issues must consider all views on these points, in the hopes that truth will be arrived at through the process of debate. It is worth noting that here Cicero promotes debate not as a means for one party to persuade another of the truth, but as a good in and of itself and as a means by which all parties can discover a truth that none of them had fully understood before. Likewise at the end of the dialogue the character Cotta concludes his great refutation by emphasising that he does not intend to disprove anything but merely show the complexity of these issues and difficulties at arriving at any solid

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<sup>134</sup> Wynne, *Cicero on the Philosophy of Religion*, 51.

<sup>135</sup> Sed iam ut omni me invidia liberem, ponam in medio sententias philosophorum de natura deorum. Quo quidem loco convocandi omnes videntur qui quae sit earum vera iudicent. I.vi.13 p.61.

understanding of them: “These are more or less the points I have to say on the nature of the gods, not in order that I might disprove this view but that you might understand that these things are obscure and difficult to have explained.”<sup>136</sup> This statement is the final sentence of Cotta’s speech, the last of the major speeches of the dialogue. Rhetorically the sentence parallels the opening line of the work to provide concluding force to the dialogue.<sup>137</sup> It represents the conclusion of Cotta’s position on the subject and, if one holds that Cotta’s views are the closest to that of Cicero himself, perhaps represents Cicero’s own concluding thoughts on the subject, although the final comments of the narrator of the dialogue complicates this view.<sup>138</sup> However, Cicero’s phrasing here, “On the nature of the gods” (“*de natura deorum*”), evokes both the title of the treatise and the narrator’s earlier introductory statement,<sup>139</sup> which gives this comment a concluding force within the dialogue. Therefore, based on this analysis I argue that the way the introduction and conclusion of the dialogue frames the text, presents the subject matter as a yet unsolved problem on which there is multiple perspective but no one clear solution.

Furthermore, as far as scholars can tell, the presentation of theological truth as an unresolved debate accurately reflects the condition of Cicero’s audience and community on this subject. Among the Roman intellectual elite of this time theological belief, as distinct from the action of worship which will be discussed below, was largely

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<sup>136</sup> Haec fere dicere habui de natura deorum, non ut eam tollerem sed ut intellexeretis quam esset obscura et quam difficilis explicatus haberet. Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum Livre III*, Collection Latomus 175, ed. M. van den Bruwaene (Bruxelles: Latomus Revue D’etudes Latines, 1981), III.xxxix.93 p.163.

<sup>137</sup> Pease, *M. Tulli Ciceronis De natura deorum*, Bimillennial edition (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1955) 1224.

<sup>138</sup> *On the Nature of the Gods*, III.xl.95; I will discuss this passage in greater detail below.

<sup>139</sup> *On the Nature of the Gods*, I.vi.13.

determined by one's philosophical school of which there were many, and few of them were in any form of agreement on the subject.<sup>140</sup> The point of this work was not to promote or defend a particular position within this debate. Rather the purpose of the dialogue was to collect, analyze, and critique a number of commonly held views and arguments which were likely already being made within the elite intellectual discourse, in order to promote further and more advanced discussion.

This same attitude toward debate on the subject of divinity is found within the substance of the dialogue's arguments as well, for within the dialogue when arguments are refuted it is not done from a position of knowledge but rather from a position of analysis and criticism. This is done largely through the arguments of the character of Cotta the Academic philosopher who within the dialogue does not on the whole promote his own theology but rather critiques and analyses the theologies of the other speakers. Cotta effectively states as much himself before he begins his initial refutation of the arguments of the character Velleius, his largest speaking role up until that point in the dialogue: "Velleius, unless you had said your position clearly you would have heard nothing from me. For in judging things, usually it is not easier for me to find the truth of an argument, than it is for me to find the errors in it."<sup>141</sup> Here Cotta is effectively embodying the principle of Academic Skepticism that Cicero refers to in the beginning of the text.<sup>142</sup> Cotta withholds his own view and instead merely critiques the view of others,

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<sup>140</sup> Phillip Levine, "The Original Design and Publication of the *De Natura Deorum*", *HSCP* 62 (1957): 7–36; Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 255; George Boys-Stones, "Ancient Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction," in *Ancient Philosophy of Religion: The History of Western Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 1 eds. Oppy and Trakakis (Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2009): 1–22.

<sup>141</sup> "Vellei," nisi tu aliquid dixisses, nihil sane ex me quidem audire potuisses. Mihi enim non tam facile in mentem venire solet quare verum sit aliquid quam quare falsum. *On the Nature of the Gods*, I.xxi.57 p.121.

<sup>142</sup> I.i.1. The role that Cotta's Skepticism plays in the dialogue as a whole is well outlined in Wynne, *Cicero on the Philosophy of Religion*, 51.

not in order to prove them wrong and his own view right, nor to argue for an absolute Skepticism, but rather to better achieve the truth by finding errors in each other's arguments.

This approach is seen in action later in the text in Cicero's critique of Epicurean and Stoic theologies. Cotta contrasts the theology of Epicurus with a story of Simonides who when asked his views on this same subject could not answer because "so many acute and subtle ideas were coming to his mind that he doubted which of them were most true and despaired of truth altogether."<sup>143</sup> In contrast to Simonides's philosophical uncertainty, Epicurus's firmly stated views on the matter were "not only not worthy of philosophy but did not rise to the level of common sense."<sup>144</sup> Here Cotta and by extension Cicero, refute an argument on a subject even where he does not claim to have true knowledge on that subject, based purely on the classical philosophical view that admitting ignorance is preferable to false opinion.<sup>145</sup> A similar strategy is employed in Cotta's refutation of Stoic theology. While Cotta is less cutting in his remarks on Stoic theology, nevertheless he uses logic and rational enquiry to find fault rather than promoting his own views. For example he refutes the Stoic concept of deity by arguing that deity by its nature requires virtue, but virtues are dependant upon the human conditions of being imperfect beings that face genuine challenges and hardships, which are antithetical with divinity.<sup>146</sup> This argument could be used to critique any classical understanding of divinity and thus would be nearly impossible to use while promoting a

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<sup>143</sup> quia multa venirent in mentem acuta atque subtilia, dubitantem quid eorum esset verissimum desperasse omnem veritatem. *On the Nature of the Gods*, I.xxii.60-61 p.123.

<sup>144</sup> non modo philosophia dignum esset sed mediocri prudentia. I.xxii.61 p.123-124.

<sup>145</sup> Wynne, *Cicero on the Philosophy of Religion*, 70-71.

<sup>146</sup> *On the Nature of the Gods*, III.xv.38-39.

rival position. Several of Cotta's arguments function in this manner, not promoting any particular views but offering logical problems that stand in the way of any classical philosophical theology from being able to assert itself as truth. Therefore, this method of critique shows that this work does not promote a particular theology, but holds that theological truth can only be achieved through logical enquiry and has yet to be fully discovered.

The structure of the work presents defences for multiple viewpoints on the issue of divinity and in turn offers refutations of those defences without coming to any clear answer. This framing of the issue was intended by Cicero to provoke his audience into considering these issues for themselves and coming to their own conclusions. This approach is based on the understanding that his audience was largely composed of philosophers or well educated people who were interested in philosophy, and they value intellectual debate both in and of itself and as a means to arriving at truth. This understanding is contrary to the view of the Christian apologist which presents the truth as already attained and as being held by one side of a debate only. However, a result of this is that Cicero makes several critiques of traditional Roman worship which Christian apologists borrow for their own polemic. The development of these Christian thinkers is to gradually transition discourse on the nature of divinity from an unresolved intellectual issue to an objective truth supported by a tradition. In Cicero's account the only traditions which could make such a claim would be those backed by the authority of a political state; however Latin apologetics will gradually develop a similarly authoritative tradition which is not grounded necessarily in a political state.

However, while the work does imply that complete theological truth has yet to be fully discovered, it also implies that it does exist. Cicero, or at least the narrator of the dialogue, holds that there is a single empirical true position on the nature of the gods which while not yet fully understood is used to judge the opinions on the matter. Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* is not, as some scholars have argued,<sup>147</sup> an exercise in Cicero's encyclopaedic philosophy. That is to say that he does not here present multiple contradictory philosophical view points within the work for the sake of preserving in Latin and educating his Latin audience in, an encyclopedic knowledge of the schools of Greek philosophy. As has been recently and persuasively argued by John Wynne, Cicero's choice of contradictory philosophical schools in *On the Nature of the Gods* is part of a strategy in order to best explore his central question.<sup>148</sup> A careful reading of Cicero's work shows that its intention is to advance the pursuit of theological truth as much as it is able. In the introduction of the treatise, while describing the amount of differing opinion on the subject, Cicero alludes to the existence of a singular theological truth within this great diversity of thought:

For there is no topic of which there is so much disagreement, not only among the unlearned but even among the learned; these positions are so various and in such disagreement among themselves, that while it is surely possible that none of these happen to be true, it is certainly not possible for more than one to be true.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 303-304; Jörg Rüpke, *Religion in Republican Rome Rationalization and Ritual Change*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012) 186-204.

<sup>148</sup> Wynne, *Cicero on the Philosophy of Religion*, 80-81.

<sup>149</sup> Res enim nulla est de qua tantopere non solum indocti sed etiam docti dissentiant; quorum opiniones cum tam variae sint tamque inter se dissidentes alterum fieri profecto potest ut earum nulla, alterum certe non potest ut plus una vera sit. I.ii.5 p.53.

Here Cicero emphasises the importance of the singular nature of theological truth. Even if none of the theologies are true and theological truth turns out to be merely the confirmation of atheism, as he admits to be possible, this still represents a singular theological truth albeit an atheistic one. It is important to emphasise that although Cicero leaves the dialogue open ended for his readers to come to their own conclusions, and although he acknowledges and stresses that great disagreement on this subject, this does not mean that he believes the nature of divinity to be a purely subjective matter. There is for Cicero a singular theological truth that this dialogue works toward advancing. It is simply that it has yet to be fully discovered by philosophy due to the variety of opinions on it.

However, since this truth is only attainable by means of human reason and intellectual exploration, the text analyses, critiques, and refutes arguments in order to get at truth through a process of interrogation of probabilities. Within the introduction to this work Cicero explains that he wishes to allow for debate and dialogue on these topics and not have a single viewpoint, even his own, represent an absolute authority on the subject. This is not because Cicero does not believe there is a singular true viewpoint, but because he acknowledges that dogmatic thinking hinders the pursuit of truth: “for in disputation it is not so much authority as the importance of rational argument that should be sought for.”<sup>150</sup> He goes on to explain and defend the importance of the Academic doctrine of probability:

For we do not hold that there are not things which seem to be true, but we claim that all things which are true are connected to certain falsehoods with

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<sup>150</sup> Non enim tam auctoritatis in disputando quam rationis momenta quaerenda sunt. I.v.10 p.59.

such similitude that there is in them no certain knowledge by which to judge them and to give assent to them. And from this it follows that many things are probable, which although not perceived, nevertheless have a certain distinguished and lucid appearance to them by which to guide the life of the wise man.<sup>151</sup>

This is the guiding principle behind the understanding of theological truth within *On the Nature of the Gods*. There is no clearly articulated thesis about what the nature of the gods is, nor is the work purely critical; rather several views are presented, analysed, and criticized in order that the wise reader can exercise the best possible judgement on these matters and truth can be worked towards through this process.

We see this in action in Book 3 of the dialogue where Cotta judges and critiques the positions of the other characters based on their proximity to truth even when not claiming to understand fully this truth himself. This implies a final true conclusion on this subject, which could be attained by human reason. For example Cotta claims that there is more truth in customs passed down from antiquity, than in the theories of the Stoics: “I will demonstrate that I have learned better things on the worshiping of the immortal gods according to pontifical law and the way of our ancestors, from the small sacrificial vessels which Numa left to us... than from the arguments of the Stoics.”<sup>152</sup> The way in which Cotta frames this critique of the Stoic position shows that, while he does not claim to possess full understanding of the subject, he can still make value judgements on

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<sup>151</sup> Non enim sumus ii quibus nihil verum esse videatur sed ii qui omnibus veris falsa quaedam adiuncta esse dicamus tanta similitudine ut in hiis nulla insit certa iudicandi et adsentiendi nota. Ex quo exstitit et illud, multa esse probabilia, quae quamquam non perciperentur tamen quia visum quendam haberent insignem et inlustrem his sapientis vita regeretur. I.v.12 p.61.

<sup>152</sup> Docebo meliora me didicisse de colendis diis immortalibus iure pontificio et more maiorum capedunculis quas Numa nobis reliquit... quam rationibus Stoicorum. III.xvii.43 p.77.

arguments based on their proximity to truth. A similar value judgement is made by the character of the narrator regarding Cotta's own speech, at the very end of the dialogue as a whole: "thus we departed, such that it seemed to Velleius that the discourse of Cotta was truer, while to me it seemed that Balbus's discourse was more approximate to the semblance of truth."<sup>153</sup> Here again there is a value judgement based on how close a claim comes to an empirical truth even if that truth is not fully understood, although this statement does seem to directly contradict Cotta's earlier statement on Stoic theology.

This is indeed a surprising final line to the dialogue as a whole, given that the structure of the work has emphasised the validity of Cotta's critiques rather than the arguments of either of the other speakers. Much could and has been made of this comment and how it reflects upon what Cicero the author, as distinct from the character of the narrator, genuinely believes to be more true.<sup>154</sup> For our purposes however, what matters is not what Cicero theologically believes to be true, but rather the role of truth within the dialogue. Theological truth is not fully agreed on by the characters in Cicero's dialogue or the philosophers of Cicero's time, but is agreed by all to exist, and through their debate, discourse, and disagreement they can work toward more fully discovering

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<sup>153</sup> Ita discessimus ut Velleio Cottae disputatio verior, mihi Balbi ad veritatis similitudinem videretur esse propensior. III.xl.95 p.163.

<sup>154</sup> E.g. Momigliano, "The Theological Efforts of the Roman Upper Classes in the First Century BC," 208; John Glucker, "Cicero's Philosophical Affiliations" in *The Question of Eclecticism: Studies in Later Greek Philosophy*, eds. J.M. Dillon and A.A. Long (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988) 34-69; Woldenmar Görler, "Silencing the troublemaker: *De Legibus* 1.39 and the continuity of Cicero's scepticism" in *Kleine Schriften zur hellenistisch-römischen Philosophie*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2003) 240-267; Joseph DeFilippo, "Cicero vs. Cotta in *De natura deorum*," *Ancient Philosophy* 20, no.1 (2000): 169-187; John Wynne, "Learned and Wise: Cotta the Sceptic in Cicero's on the Nature of the Gods", in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy 47, ed. Brad Inwood (Oxford, 2014; online edn, Oxford Academic, 17 Nov. 2016), <https://doi-org.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198722717.003.0007>; Wynne, "Marcus' Stance on the Central Question," in *Cicero on the Philosophy of Religion*, (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019) 264-278.

it. However, this implication of an empirical theological truth that is not attained by philosophers will become the basis of a key element of the Christian apologists' argument. Christian writers will argue that their theological views are empirically true; however that classical philosophy can only partially discover this truth, because in order to be fully discovered it had to be revealed to humanity by God.

Finally, the relationship between Cicero's understanding of theological truth and his understanding of the practice of worship, which he describes with the term *religio*, is worth discussing. Scholars have noticed that *religio* is a more reflective term than other Latin terms which refer to the practice of ritual worship such as *cultus* or *sacra*, in that ancient Latin writers are more explicit about how they define the term and more self-conscious about how they use it.<sup>155</sup> Nevertheless, scholars still understand the term, to refer mainly to ritual action as opposed to theological thought, and in Cicero's work it represents the identity making power of Roman orthopraxy, rather than any kind of theological orthodoxy.<sup>156</sup> Specifically, it is important here to emphasise that for Cicero *religio* and theological belief were notably distinct from each other. As I have discussed, theological belief among Cicero's intellectual elite was highly various and unprescribed, in contrast to this the practice of worship or *religio* was highly prescribed within Roman society. One of the key innovations of Christian authors, beginning with Tertullian, is to closely link correct understanding of the nature of divinity with correct worship in order to legitimise the Christian forms of both. However, for Cicero these are two different things. Later in this chapter I will argue that for Cicero *religio* is legitimized by the

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<sup>155</sup> Rükpe, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 192-193; Wilhite, *Tertullian the African*, 150-152; Nongbri, "Dislodging 'Embedded' Religion," 448-449.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

Roman state, but it is important to note however this does not mean that the Roman state makes binding decisions on the nature of legitimate theology. What they decide is what forms of worship they will allow to be practiced within their empire. These decisions have the additional effect of deciding what deities, they will allow people to worship within the empire; however it does not mean that the Roman state regulates beliefs about deities within the empire. Questions about what the nature of divinity is, what role deities have in the functioning of the universe, whether the gods care about human beings and why, and similar inquiries, are not the purview of the Roman state. Rather for Cicero these matters are best addressed by philosophy.

However, because thought can never be truly divorced from action, *On the Nature of the Gods* implies that theological beliefs inform how *religio* is performed, although later Latin Christian apologists will make a far greater connection between *religio* and theological belief, than the one made here. Returning again to the very beginning of the text, in describing the topic and importance of his philosophical enquiry, Cicero states that: “the nature of the gods is a very uncertain inquiry which is both interesting for what it implies for our understanding of the soul, and it is necessary for the moderation of worship (*religio*).”<sup>157</sup> For Cicero, while the practice of worship was prescribed in a way that theological belief was not, nevertheless theological belief was important as one affected the other. Cicero’s observation here is that the virtue of piety requires more than just dutiful but mindless action, and correct belief about the nature of the gods will inevitably lead us to the correct practice by which they ought to be

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<sup>157</sup> Perobscura quaestio est de natura deorum quae et ad agnitionem animi pulcherrima est et ad moderandam religionem necessaria. I.i.1 p.49.

worshiped.<sup>158</sup> Our belief about the nature of divinity affects the frequency and methods by which individuals worship. This is what he is alluding to as the “moderation of worship (*moderandam religionem*).” For Cicero, the worship of the gods needed to be moderated because if one worshiped the gods too much one was engaging in *superstitio*, whereas if one did it too little one engaged in *impietas*. “*Moderandam religionem*” represented the ideal middle ground which is mostly what ancestral custom prescribed, and which empirical theological truth would inspire in people.<sup>159</sup>

Indeed for Cicero, it is the practice which is important and that needs to be prescribed, and correct belief is merely a means to discovering correct action. The reason for this is that the action of worship is, within the Roman understanding, more than just a means of identity formation or personal spirituality. If the gods are real then they pose a real and substantial concern to Roman society, and the Roman state thus needs to prescribe the correct worshiping of them. As Clifford Ando argues the Romans did not have faith in their religion, rather they had empirical knowledge of how the world worked which informed their orthopraxy of worship.<sup>160</sup> This understanding of Roman worship can be seen within *On Nature of the Gods* itself where Cotta defines the nature of *sanctitas* or ‘holiness’: “however holiness (*sanctitas*) is the science of worshiping the gods, but I do not understand why they should be the object of worship if they neither provide any goods nor can be hoped upon to provide any.”<sup>161</sup> This is written in the context of Cotta’s critique of the Epicurean theology which claims the gods are entirely

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid, 54-55.

<sup>159</sup> This is the central thesis of Wynne’s *Cicero on the Philosophy of Religion*.

<sup>160</sup> Clifford Ando, *The Matter of the Gods: Religion and the Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) 13-15.

<sup>161</sup> Sanctitas autem est scientia colendorum deorum qui quam ob rem colendi sint non intellego, nullo nec accepto ab his nec sperato bono. I.xli.116-117 p.175.

idle. This argument relies on the tradition both that worship is done on the basis of empirical knowledge of the gods and explicitly for the sake of reward or at least the avoidance of negative consequence. However, disasters and misfortune continue to occur which are believed to come from the gods; thus the practices done to appease the gods are imperfect. They are still functional as Roman society continues to survive and also to a degree thrive at this time, but they are imperfect. However, if the Romans had a complete empirically true theology than it would inform the perfect performing of *religio*, but this has yet to be fully discovered. Therefore, Cicero states that scientific enquiry into the nature of gods is not merely spiritually rewarding but necessary for regulating correct *religio*.

Lacking a fully discovered empirical theology however, Cicero concludes that it is best simply to continue prescribing what has been shown to mostly work. For this reason Cotta advises continuing to worship the gods according to ancestral tradition with an Academic philosopher's suspension of judgement until such a truth can be fully discovered.<sup>162</sup> Therefore, for Cicero the order of legitimacy is this: *religio* is legitimized by the Roman state; the decisions of the Roman state are ideally informed by philosophy;<sup>163</sup> and finally it is the role of philosophy to discover the empirical truth of the nature of the gods and how to worship them. By means of claiming a divinely revealed theological truth, Christian authors beginning with Tertullian will cut out the intermediate steps and argue that *religio* is legitimised by the empirical truth of Christian teaching.

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<sup>162</sup> Wynne, *Cicero on the Philosophy of Religion*, 70-72.

<sup>163</sup> On the Cicero's views on the role of philosophy in Roman government see among others Catherine Steel, *Reading Cicero: Genre and Performance in Late Republican Rome* (London, 2005); Yelena Baraz, *A Written Republic: Cicero's Philosophical Politics* (Princeton, 2012); Jed Atkins, *Cicero on Politics and the Limits of Reason: The Republic and the Laws* (Cambridge, 2013).

This position will eventually allow *religio* to develop into a distinct sphere of legitimacy and identity.

### Cicero's Development of *Religio*

While Cicero's understanding of theological truth is a form of legitimacy which notably influences later Christian authors, by far the most tangible form of legitimization which Cicero uses in *On the Nature of the Gods* and which significantly influences Latin Christian authors is Cicero's use of the term *religio*. *Religio* for Cicero is an umbrella term which means any specific ritual actions usually though not necessarily done for the sake of deities.<sup>164</sup> As will be discussed momentarily, it is widely acknowledged to be one of the key innovations of Cicero which influences Christian authors that, *religio* as a term, comes to apply only to legitimate practices in contrast to other illegitimate practices which are referred to as *superstitio*. One important association Cicero makes, which is significant for Christian theology, is to connect *religio* with morality. For both Cicero and Latin Christian authors, *religio* is not only relevant to morality but is foundational to it. For without the existence of distinctly legitimate forms of worship, virtues which depend upon correct worship either could not exist or would be radically different. However, one of the key means by which Cicero's *religio* was determined to be legitimate represents a fundamental point of contrast between him and later Christians. One of the things that gives Cicero's *religio* legitimacy was that it was acceptable to and provided support for the Roman state. Later Christian authors,

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<sup>164</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 27-28; Ando, *The Matter of the Gods*, 2.

notably Lactantius, would separate the legitimacy of *religio* from the Roman state and present it as the foundation for an apolitical sphere of identity centered around worship.

However, before I begin discussing how Cicero makes use of *religio*, it is worth providing a brief history of the term to show Cicero's place in the ongoing evolution of how the term was used. The word is first found in the writings of comic playwrights as early as the second century BCE where it refers to a social duty or sense of scruples.<sup>165</sup> For example in Plautus's play *Curculio*, a character says that "he called me back immediately, and invited me to dinner. It was a *religio*; I could not refuse."<sup>166</sup> I use my own translation here, for the translations of this passage that I have encountered, do not accurately account for what *religio* here refers to. One early twentieth century translation renders "*religio fuit*" as "I had scruples,"<sup>167</sup> and a modern twenty first century edition likewise translates this phrase as "it would have been against my principles."<sup>168</sup> Both of these translations alter the subject or grammar of the phrase, in order to identify *religio* with the scruples of the character making the claim. However, I argue that here *religio* refers not to the scruples of the character, but to the obligation itself. A more accurate translation might render this phrase, "It was a social obligation," or more poetically, "it was my duty." Through this interpretation, one can see a continuity between Plautus's use of it, to refer to social actions which people are obligated to do for each other, and Cicero's use of *religio*, to mean the ritual actions which people are obligated to do for the gods.

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<sup>165</sup> I draw these examples from Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 27.

<sup>166</sup> Revocat me ilico, vocat me ad cenam; religio fuit, denegare nolui. Plautus, *Casina. The Casket Comedy. Curculio. Epidicus. The Two Menaechmuses*. ed. and trans. Wolfgang de Melo. Loeb Classical Library 61. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011) I.349-350 p.268. Translation is my own, with consultation with Wolfgang de Melo, *ibid*.

<sup>167</sup> Paul Nixon, *Plautus with an English Translation*, 5 vols. (London: William Heinemann, 1917).

<sup>168</sup> de Melo, *Casina. The Casket Comedy. Curculio. Epidicus. The Two Menaechmuses*, 269.

However, at this time *religio* can also refer not only to the obligations themselves, but to the emotional and moral sense of obligation possessed by an individual. For example, in Terence's play *The Woman of Andros* two characters remark:

Chremes: But there remains for me still one small concern (*scrupulus*), which sits badly with me.

Pamphilus: You deserve it, with your *religione*, you hateful man. You seek a knot in a tangle of weeds.<sup>169</sup>

Here *religio* is qualified with "your" and associated with *scrupulus* from the line above. In this line *religio* is not, as in Plautus, the social obligation itself, but rather the sense of social obligation possessed by the character Chremes. What is more, the following phrase "you seek a knot in a tangle of weeds," identifies *religio* with an excessive concern, which seeks trouble needlessly. This is the meaning that Cicero aims to strip away from *religio*, in order that it can refer primarily to the actions themselves, and to the results of a good and moderate degree of concern. However, later Latin Christian authors, notably Minucius Felix and Lactantius, will return to the idea that *religio* refers to the moral state of an individual, but, drawing from Cicero, they will argue it only refers to what is good and valid.

The meaning of *religiones* as social obligations between humans or the emotional and moral states associated with these obligations, over time came to refer to the obligations humans had toward the gods, namely the obligation to worship them. By

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<sup>169</sup> *Chremes: at mi unus scrupulus etiam restat qui me male habet.*

*Pamphilus: dignus es cum tua religione, odium. nodum in scirpo quaeris.*

Terence. *The Woman of Andros. The Self-Tormentor. The Eunuch.* Ed. and trans. John Barsby. Loeb Classical Library 22 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001) I.940-941, p.160. Translation is my own with consultation from John Barsby, *ibid.*

the time of Cicero the word was used most commonly as an umbrella term to refer to every act of reverence or ritual which was involved in worship.<sup>170</sup> However, much like Terence's character Pamphilus, writers of Cicero's time could consider *religio* to be an excessive and undesirable degree of concern. For example, Lucretius would argue that *religio*, understood as an excessive fear of the gods, was a burden to mankind which ought to be alleviated by means of philosophy. He comments that without the aid of philosophy: "the human life lies on the ground ignominiously before our eyes, oppressed under the heavy weight of *religione*."<sup>171</sup> Likewise he comments that: "As I teach on great matters and arts, so I proceed to free the mind from the knot of *religionum*."<sup>172</sup> Here again *religio* is associated with a mental state of excessive concern, although in this case directed toward worshiping the gods. This view would be echoed by later classical Roman authors who considered *religio* to be interchangeable with its synonym *superstitio*.<sup>173</sup> Meanwhile other contemporaries of Cicero still understood *religio* as concern for one's obligations, but treated it more neutrally such as Julius Caesar, who understood *religio* to serve as a corrective to the fear of material danger.<sup>174</sup> For example Caesar in his book *Civil War* comments that "terrified soldiers in a civil conflict, will likely look to their fear more than their *religioni*."<sup>175</sup> Here we see again *religio* refers to a duty or obligation but this time with a more civic association. Cicero's use of *religio*,

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<sup>170</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 27-28.

<sup>171</sup> Humana ante oculos foede cum vita iaceret in terris oppressa gravi sub religione. Lucretius. *On the Nature of Things*. trans. William Rouse, rev. Martin Smith. Loeb Classical Library 181 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924) I.60, p.6. Translation is my own with consultation from Rouse, *ibid*.

<sup>172</sup> Quod magnis doceo de rebus et artis religionum animum nodis exsolvere pergo. *Ibid*, I.931-932, p.76-68.

<sup>173</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 28; Barton, and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*, 40-42.

<sup>174</sup> Barton, and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*, 42-43.

<sup>175</sup> Perterritus miles in civili dissensione timori magis quam religioni consulere consuerit. Caesar, *Civil War*, ed. and trans. Cynthia Damon. Loeb Classical Library 39 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016) I.67, p.94. Translation is my own with consultation from Damon, *ibid*.

therefore, is broadly representative of how it was used by his contemporaries. His use of the term mostly serves to underscore changes that were already occurring, such as a focus on *religio* as worship rather than other social obligations. Cicero's primary innovation compared to earlier uses of the term was in creating a hard distinction between *religio* and *superstitio*, and the promotion of *religio* to a positive good in and of itself, while *superstitio* was seen as inherently negative.

Although in Cicero's time, the term came to be associated almost exclusively with worshiping or honoring deities, it was still notably grounded in a societal understanding of the world. *Religio* at its core even in the time of Cicero still referred to a social obligation. This is true even when the objects of that obligation are deities and that obligation consists of worshiping them. For gods and men were seen as, in a way, part of shared community.<sup>176</sup> It is the foundation of a social order shared by humans and gods which for Cicero makes *religio* a valid system of ritual worship with legitimacy, in contrast to *superstitio* which was understood as a groundless fear of the gods.<sup>177</sup> It has been suggested that it was the social connotations of *religio*, its role as a taboo, social prohibition, and attentiveness to social boundaries, which is what led Cicero to develop it the way that he did.<sup>178</sup> The role of social obligation is seen within Cicero's own text. In Book 1, where Cotta defines the nature of piety, *pietas*, in the context of critiquing Epicurean theological claims that gods are idle and alien to human beings, he defines piety in strictly social terms: "What is more, how is piety (*pietas*) owed to one from whom you have received nothing or what can be owed at all to someone of whom there

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<sup>176</sup> Ando, *The Matter of the Gods*, 3; North, "The Limits of the "Religious" in the Late Roman Republic," 231.

<sup>177</sup> Rükpe, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 188.

<sup>178</sup> Barton, and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*, 52.

is no merit? For piety (*pietas*) is justice towards the gods; what can be the moral duties binding us with them, since mankind has nothing in common with the divine.”<sup>179</sup> For Cicero *pietas* has been understood to mean a proper relationship between an individual and superior being either human or god.<sup>180</sup> However, what is important to note here is that what makes worship functional for Cicero is that it is grounded on social obligations and customs. The only reason one ought to worship the gods is because men and gods are part of the shared society governed by social custom and laws. The result of this is that conversations about *religio* in this period among the Roman elite, are ultimately concerned with what is socially acceptable and what are people’s social obligations to the gods.

An analysis of *On the Nature of the Gods* shows that *religio* for Cicero is an umbrella term which means specific ritual actions usually though not necessarily done for the sake of deities. However, in his usage the term also develops a legitimatizing role as it only refers to legitimate instances of these practices. The clearest definition of *religio* within this work occurs in the middle of Book 2 from the character Balbus, who argues that regardless of his philosophical reservations the *religiones* of ancestral traditions must be honored:

But although we scorn and repudiate these fables, divinity pervades nature and the elements. It can be understood that Ceres pervades through the earth, Neptune through the sea, others through other elements, whoever and whatever they might be, they are called by the traditional names and we owe

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<sup>179</sup> Quae porro pietas ei debetur a quo nihil acceperis aut quid omnino cuius nullum meritum sit ei deberi potest? Est enim pietas iustitia adversum deos; cum quibus quid potest nobis esse iuris cum homini nulla cum deo sit communitas? I.xli.116 p.175.

<sup>180</sup> Rükpe, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 187.

these gods worship and veneration. However, the worship of the gods is greatest, purest, holiest, and most full of piety when we venerate them with pure incorruptible integrity in both thought and speech. For not only true philosophy but also the ways of our ancestors separates superstition (*superstitionem*) from true worship (*religione*).<sup>181</sup>

Here explicitly Cicero creates the distinction between *religio* and *superstitio* based on their legitimacy. This distinction is the quintessential Ciceronian innovation in the use of *religio* which Christian writers will both make use of and attack. However, also there is tension here between different forms of legitimacy, between what philosophy holds to be true and what piety decrees is owed to deities. This passage comes at the end of a refutation of popular understanding of anthropomorphic deities found in classical myths, from which one could draw the conclusion that traditional worship is nonsense.

However, instead he concludes that traditional practices ought to be followed and any truth to be found in traditional myths ought to be sought out. Furthermore, the “non enim... etiam,” rhetorical structure of the final sentence in this quote suggests that ancestry overrules philosophy as a determiner of legitimacy. The implication is that philosophy itself is a not sufficient justification of this view, but that the support of ancestral tradition confirms the position.

The character speaking here is the Stoic philosopher Balbus, and while it has been argued that the three characters of the dialogue use the term *religio* differently

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<sup>181</sup> Sed tamen his fabulis spretis ac repudiatis deus pertinens per naturam cuiusque rei, per terras Ceres, per maria Neptunus, alii per alia, poterunt intellegi qui qualesque sunt quoque eos nomine consuetudo nuncupaverit, quos deos et venerari et colere debemus. Cultus autem deorum est optumus idemque castissimus atque sanctissimus plenissimusque pietatis ut eos semper pura, integra, incorrupta et mente et voce veneremur. Non enim philosophi solum verum etiam maiores nostri superstitionem a religione separaverunt. Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum Livre II*, Collection Latomus 154, ed. M. van den Bruwaene (Bruxelles: Latomus Revue D'etubes Latines, 1978) II.xxviii.71 p.99.

from each other,<sup>182</sup> nevertheless I argue the circumstances of this instance support the idea that this is Cicero's genuine view on the matter. Of the three speakers in the dialogue Balbus is the most inclined to reject tradition in favor of philosophical understandings. For example he rejects the idea of human like deities entirely and equates deities mostly entirely with the celestial bodies which bear their names<sup>183</sup> and with the natural elements they are associated with as seen here. Therefore, it is all the more surprising that this concession to tradition comes from him. Unlike many other arguments of Balbus, this is one not refuted but arguably supported by Cotta and it represents one of the few points on which all three speakers agree.<sup>184</sup> This is likely because the necessity of following traditional forms of worship, was something that Cicero himself believed in or was something that social pressure made all elite Romans conform to. However, it is this tension that later Christian authors will exploit and indeed this will represent a point of contrast between the classical Roman understanding and the views of the Latin Christian apologists who, at least from Minucius Felix onward, attack ancestry as a source of legitimacy. Furthermore Latin Christian apologists tend to be uncritical in their approach to this text, and attribute any argument presented within this text as reflecting the views of Cicero.<sup>185</sup>

The relationship between later Christian views and Cicero's understanding of *religio* is well articulated in the continuation of this passage in which Cicero not only defines his terms but describes their etymologies:

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<sup>182</sup> Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 187.

<sup>183</sup> *On the Nature of the Gods*, II.xv.39-xvi.44, xxiv.63-xxviii.71.

<sup>184</sup> *On the Nature of the Gods*, III.ii.5-6.

<sup>185</sup> This uncritical approach is seen in *Divine Institutes*, 4.28.1-6.

Indeed those who for whole days pray and sacrifice in order that their children will outlive (*superstites*) them are called superstitious (*superstitiosi*), from which afterwards the Latin word was derived. However, those who diligently review and reread (*relegerent*) all the lore pertaining the worship of the gods, these are called devout (*religiosi*) from reading (*legendo*), just as elegant (*elegantes*) comes from 'to pick out' (*eligendo*), diligent (*diligentes*) from 'to care for' (*diligendo*), intelligent (*intellegentes*) from 'to understand' (*intellegendo*); for all these words carry in them the same force of 'to select' (*legendi*) which is in worship (*religioso*). Thus it came about that superstition (*superstitioso*) is a term of fault, while devotion (*religioso*) is a term of praise.<sup>186</sup>

Here again Cicero explicitly defines *religio* in contrast to *superstitio* based on legitimacy. Had we only Cicero's account to inform us, we might think that Cicero is indeed describing the older traditional meanings associated with these two terms. However, in light of how Cicero's contemporaries made use of these terms we can understand that Cicero is in fact using this etymological claim, to argue that these terms should have these connotations.<sup>187</sup> Some scholars have understood that even as Cicero preserves several older understandings of *religio*, his usage of it is a reinvention of it meant to radically focus and simplify its meanings to that which he holds to be socially

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<sup>186</sup> Nam qui totos dies precabantur et immolabant ut sibi sui liberi superstites essent, superstitiosi sunt appellati, quod nomen patuit postea latius. Qui autem omnia quae ad cultum deorum pertinerent diligenter retractarent et tamquam relegerent, sunt dicti religiosi ex legendo ut elegantes ex eligendo, tamquam a diligendo diligentes, ex intellegendo intellegentes; his enim in verbis omnibus inest vis legendi eadem quae in religioso. Ita factum est in superstitioso et religioso alterum vitii nomen, alterum laudis. II.xxviii.72 p.100-101.

<sup>187</sup> On how Cicero justifies new ideas see among others Emma Dench, "Cicero and Roman Identity," In *The Cambridge Companion to Cicero* ed. Catherine Steel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 122-137.

beneficial.<sup>188</sup> The etymology of *religio* with *relegere* does associate it with its main source of legitimacy, ancestry, by connecting it to the reselecting of ancient customs and rereading of ancient lore, as Lactantius notes when he quotes part of this passage.<sup>189</sup>

However, the extended passage shows that the emphasis of Cicero's etymology does not present the validity of antiquity as a hard and fast rule; rather this passage emphasises the role of consideration and selectivity when determining what is a *religio* as opposed to *superstitio*. This is seen in the emphasis that Cicero places on the root word *legere*, 'to select' which is presented as the quintessential element of several different societal virtues. While there are guidelines for determining the legitimacy of a form of worship, ultimately for Cicero this legitimacy comes from whether or not a practice is accepted by upper class Roman intelligentsia. For example it is worth briefly noting that among the negative qualities associated with *superstitio* is an excessive degree of commitment which offends Cicero's sensibilities and likely the sensibilities of elite Roman culture more broadly but that later Christian authors will not have issue with.<sup>190</sup> *Religio* originally referred to a social obligation and the gods were understood as part of Roman society; therefore, it should be unsurprising that for Cicero *religio* should be legitimized by what society or the leaders of society choose to be legitimate. This understanding of selective legitimacy based on cultural acceptance is notably distinct from the exclusive legitimacy based on objective truth that Latin Christian apologists promote, but the former idea does influence and lead to the creation of the latter.

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<sup>188</sup> Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion*, 43-44.

<sup>189</sup> *Divine Institutes*, 4.28.1-6.

<sup>190</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 28; Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion*, 42-43.

As well as Cicero's definitions of these terms, Cicero uses the term *religio* throughout this work as a means of judging and determining the legitimacy of practices of worship. For example, while criticizing Epicurean theology Cotta argues that rather than simply doing away with *superstitio*, as their philosophy claims to do, their positions are faulty because they do away with not only *superstitio* but *religio* as well: "For all of these views remove not only superstitions (*superstitionem*) in which there is an inane fear of the gods, but even devotion (*religionem*) which preserves pious worship of the gods."<sup>191</sup> Once more *religio* is contrasted with *superstitio* based on the position that one is a positive good and the other is not. Scholars note that *religio* here, for Cicero, represents the ideal middle ground between excessive superstition and the impiety of the denial of gods' existence which is what Cicero argues the Epicurean theology amounts to.<sup>192</sup> It is also worth noting that *superstitio* and not *religio* is associated with fear. This is directly contrary to the interpretation of Barton and Boyarin who throughout their book insist on translating and interpreting *religio*, even within Cicero and Tertullian's work, as a form of fear.<sup>193</sup> While in some instances *religio* can be understood as 'fear of the gods,' particularly when used by authors like Lucretius who consider it to be a burden to mankind,<sup>194</sup> here Cicero separates *religio* from any notions of fear by making this contrast between it and *superstitio*. The rhetorical structure of the sentence suggests that fear, *timor*, is a defining quality of *superstitio*, but chiefly not of *religio*, which rather is defined as *deorum cultu pio*, "pious worship of the gods." The

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<sup>191</sup> Horum enim sententiae omnium non modo superstitionem tollunt in qua inest timor inanis deorum sed etiam religionem quae deorum cultu pio continetur. I.xlii.117 p.175.

<sup>192</sup> Wynne, *Cicero on the Philosophy of Religion*, 70; Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion*, 43-44.

<sup>193</sup> Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion* cf. 39, 43, 55.

<sup>194</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 28.

clear implication here is that *religio* is a positive good that in and of itself is worth maintaining in society and individuals. For Cicero *religio* is a virtue, which both individuals and societies are better for having. *Religio* is not the defining aspect of virtue itself, as it will be for Lactantius,<sup>195</sup> but it is still a positive moral quality in and of itself. It is not merely indirectly good by averting the wrath of the gods or preserving Roman culture and society. This position will also be true of later Christian authors, including Tertullian, who promote *religio* as a positive good rather than as a form of fear.

In another example, Cicero addresses a theological point that will in time become a criticism made by later Christian apologists against classical gods, using the presence or absence of *religio* within a philosophical theology to determine whether or not a theology was legitimate. Continuing on from the passage quoted just above, Cotta proceeds to further explain his point by describing other philosophical theologies which lack *religio*:

What of Prodicus of Cos who said that men project godhood onto the things that favour them; what room for worship (*religionem*) does this leave? Or the view that brave, famous, and powerful men after death pass into godhood, and these themselves are those whom we are accustomed to worship, pray to, and revere; is this not lacking completely in devotion (*religionum*)?<sup>196</sup>

Here *religio* once again is a means of judging legitimacy. Its absence is enough to render a stance toward the divine illegitimate. This is based on the premise that

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<sup>195</sup> See *Divine Institutes*, 5.14.9-10.

<sup>196</sup> Quid Prodicus Chius qui ea quae prodessent hominum vitae deorum in numero habita esse dixit, quam tandem religionem reliquit? Quid, qui aut fortis aut claros aut potentis viros tradunt post mortem ad deos pervenisse eosque esse ipsos quos nos colere, precari venerarique soleamus, nonne expertes sunt religionum omnium? I.xlii.118-119 p.179.

everyone will continue to worship classical deities, but one only ought to do so in the correct way. In this usage *religio* not only means the ritual actions which are performed during worship but the proper attitudes which one ought to take toward the gods.<sup>197</sup> Just as *religio* can be understood as a social obligation, so it carries with it a social relationship. It is not enough to do one's social obligations to the letter if one does them disrespectfully or without at least the pretense of feeling. *Religio* implies not only ritual action, but also that that action is done with the correct behavior. Furthermore, because Cicero has defined legitimacy based on social acceptance, if a position is deemed socially disrespectful it is dismissed out of hand.

However, in a way which notably differs from later Christian authors for Cicero *religio* implies a relationship between divinity and mankind which is far more dependant on a mutual give and take. Continuing Cotta's refutation of Epicurean theology based on its lack of *religio*, he later in Book 1 argues that Epicurus removes all *religio* from the human heart by denying to deities the benevolence and love which are fundamental to any decent understanding of goodness human or divine:

The love and friendship of humans are gracious. Therefore, how much more so would be those of the gods, who are in need of nothing and love each other, and who look after mankind. For if it is not thus, why do we revere and pray to the gods, why are pontiffs in charge of sacrifices and augers in charge of auguries? Why are the immortal gods the greatest... for what can be holy (*sanctitas*) if the gods do not care for human affairs?<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> On the performative element of Cicero's *religio* and the relationship between action and performance see Wynne, *Cicero on the Philosophy of Religion*, 55.

<sup>198</sup> *Hominum caritas et amicitia gratuita est. Quanto igitur magis deorum qui nulla re egentes et inter se diligunt et hominibus consulunt. Quod ni ita sit quid veneramus, quid precamur deos, cur sacris pontifices*

The nature of *religio* is within Cicero's writings, in contrast to the writings of later Christian authors, grounded on reciprocity.<sup>199</sup> While humans ought to have a particular attitude of respect and reverence towards the gods, this is because doing so is ultimately favorable to humans as doing so maintains a positive relationship between gods and humanity. However, nevertheless this still has notable implications for Christian views on the gods. Cicero's transactional relationship to the gods only works if the gods care enough about humans to engage in it. Correspondingly, views on the gods which do not consider them open to relationship are not according to Cicero in keeping with *religio*. Cicero uses the term *sanctitas* to describe this relationship in its entirety, which he had previously defined as "the science of worshiping the gods,"<sup>200</sup> which is the culmination of all knowledge man has on the gods. This claim is basically that all of human understanding of the gods, the knowledge upon which all legitimate worship is based, is grounded on the assumption that there is the foundation of goodwill between man and the divine. This opens the door for Christian authors, beginning with Tertullian, to judge whether a form of worship is a *religio* based on the deity in question rather than the form of worship involved.

Cotta's critique of theology based on whether or not it possessed *religio* was applied to more than just Epicurean theology, but also other elements of ancient classical culture. For instance in Book 3, in the context of critiquing the Stoic allegorical interpretations of classical myths and deities, he critiques the number and variability of

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cur auspiciis augures praesunt? quid optamus a deis immortalibus?... Quae enim potest esse sanctitas si dii humana non curant? I.xliii.122-123 p.181.

<sup>199</sup> For analysis of the role of reciprocity in ancient world see Daniel Ullucci, *The Christian Rejection of Animal Sacrifice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>200</sup> *On the Nature of the Gods*, I.xli.116-117.

gods, describing the many different forms of Jove, Vulcan, Apollo etc. across the Mediterranean world and the various myths about them.<sup>201</sup> Cotta then goes on to argue those with true *religio* ought to suppress such stories and variation:<sup>202</sup>

And these and other similar stories of this kind have been collected from ancient Greece. These stories you understand ought to be suppressed in order that true worship (*religiones*) is not confused; however your school not only does not refute them but in truth it even confirms them by interpreting to what end each one pertains.<sup>203</sup>

Here again Cicero uses *religio* to restrict that which he believes ought to be legitimate, based on the proper attitude one ought to take towards divinity. It is notable that this could be seen as a contradiction of his earlier claim that ancestry determines legitimacy. The narratives that Cicero claims should be suppressed are ancient but depict the deities in a light that discourages proper reverence. In determining what is and is not legitimate Cicero often approaches these questions with a preconceived notion of what is proper, because these narratives are deemed as unbecoming they are rejected even in spite of their antiquity and their potential philosophical merit. It is possible that here the character of Cotta is, for the sake of criticism, embodying the view of the elite Roman individual who is more concerned with propriety than with the value of tradition, and this criticism did not fully reflect Cicero's true views. Regardless of his true opinions this passage points to an element of circular thinking within Cicero's mindset: *Religiones*

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<sup>201</sup> *On the Nature of the Gods*, III.xxi-xxiii.54-60.

<sup>202</sup> For more on the interpretation of this passage and how it relates to the earlier argument on Euhemerism see Pease, *M. Tulli Ciceronis De natura deorum*, 1133.

<sup>203</sup> Atque haec quidem et eius modi ex vetere Graeciae fama collecta sunt. Quibus intellegis resistendum esse ne perturbentur religiones, vestri autem non modo haec non refellunt verum etiam confirmant interpretando quorsum quidque pertineat. III.xxxiii.60 p.111.

are the legitimate practices of worship; practices can be determined to be *religiones* only if they are legitimate, but a practice is only legitimate if it is a *religio*. In the end *religiones* are defined by what is acceptable to Roman society, while ancestry and philosophical merit influence this decision, it is ultimately decided on a case by case basis by what is acceptable to Roman sensibilities. It is this embarrassment with elements of their own culture and treatment of *religio* based on reverence to deity that Christian authors will exploit to argue for their own legitimacy and superiority.

### The Connection between *Religio* and the Roman State for Cicero

The connection Cicero draws between *religio* and the authority of the Roman state, is the greatest point of tension between Cicero's views and later Christians. It was one of the fundamental purposes of Christian apologetic literature to describe and influence the relationship between those who partake in Christian worship, and the Roman state. Largely because of the association Cicero draws with *religio* and the authority of the Roman state, one of the ways that these apologists seek to describe and influence the relationship their relationship to the Roman state, is through their use of the word *religio*. The relationship between Christian identity and the Roman state each of these authors describes varies between each writer. This will be the main subject of the subsequent chapters of this thesis; however Cicero's view that the *religio* is grounded on the authority of the Roman state will represent a foundation upon which these later authors will develop their ideas.

To begin with, both Cicero and the character Cotta emphasise the importance of the authority of the state when discussing matters concerning *religio*, and Cicero limits the refutations which Cotta makes explicitly in order to respect the authority of the Roman state. In the introduction of the work, Cicero states that the reason for this treatise as for his philosophical treatises generally, is to advance the glory of the Roman state and the Roman people: “firstly for the sake of the nation I thought that expounding philosophy to our people, brought great esteem to the glory and renown of the state.”<sup>204</sup> While this sentiment concerns philosophy generally and not debates around *religio* or theology specifically, its place within this work suggests that, even only as a branch of philosophy, the matters under discussion ultimately exist to serve the Roman state and the Roman people. This sets the tone for the references to the Roman state later in the text which specifically concern *religio*. For example towards the end of Book 1 Cotta rejects out of hand the idea that the worship of gods is nothing but a tool of the state: “What of those who say that the whole concept of the immortal gods is a fiction created by clever men for the sake of the state, so that worship (*religio*) could lead those who cannot be led by reason; does it not do away with all worship (*religionem*).”<sup>205</sup> Once again the mere absence of *religio* is enough for Cicero to invalidate an idea, but it is noteworthy that Cicero does not actually have an argument for why this is not true, he simply argues that such views discourage proper worship. This idea that Roman deities are merely a “fiction created by clever men for the sake of the state” is notably the

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<sup>204</sup> Primum ipsius rei publicae causa philosophiam nostris hominibus explicandam putavi, magni existimans interesse ad decus et ad laudem civitatis res. I.iv.7 p.55.

<sup>205</sup> Quid ii qui dixerunt totam de dis immortalibus opinionem fictam esse ab hominibus sapientibus rei publicae causa ut quos ratio non posset eos ad officium religio duceret, nonne omnem religionem funditus sustulerunt? I.xlii.118 p.175-179.

accusation that Lactantius will make against classical worship.<sup>206</sup> As I will discuss below this is because Cicero does believe that *religio* exists to be of service of the state, although he does not likely believe that the entire notion of the immortal gods is a fiction.<sup>207</sup> As such his objection here is mainly to the rhetorical affect of this idea rather than its content.

Cotta makes this point on the service to the state provided by *religiones* in the very beginning of his own speech at the start of Book 3. In the context of describing his own background and biases in the argument at hand, Cotta makes one of his few claims of positive belief, namely that the *religiones* of the Roman people were created for the sake of the wellbeing of the state:

All the forms of worship (*religio*) of the Roman people can be divined into rituals and auspices... of these forms of worship (*religionum*) I have thought that none should be condemned, and to me it is thus persuasive that Romulus by the auspices and Numa by the creation of rituals, had laid the foundations of our state, none of which could be as it is without the great pacifying of the immortal gods.<sup>208</sup>

Here the skeptic who questions and critiques nearly every theological position posed him, directly and positively endorses the classical Roman view that it is Roman *religiones* that support their state.<sup>209</sup> In the sense Cotta could be playing into his role as

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<sup>206</sup> *Divine Institutes*, 1.22.1.

<sup>207</sup> Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion*, 50.

<sup>208</sup> Cumque omnis populi Romani religio in sacra et in auspicia divisa sit... harum ego religionum nullam umquam contemnendam putavi mihi que ita persuasi Romulum auspiciis, Numam sacris constitutis fundamenta iecisse nostrae civitatis quae numquam profecto sine summa placatione deorum immortalium tanta esse potuisset. III.ii.5-6 p.35.

<sup>209</sup> On the classical foundation for the idea that Romulus and Numa established Roman ritualistic worship, see Pease, *M. Tulli Ciceronis De natura deorum*, 985-986.

the supporter of traditionalist views over those of philosophy; however as this position is also echoed in the speech of Balbus, as will be discussed in a moment, this claim remains one of the few uncontested theological positions which they discuss. While as discussed above *religio* is also associated to both attitude and morality, its value is also fundamentally understood to be instrumental. Unlike later Christian authors for Cicero the value of *religio* is not the moral and spiritual good of the individual but the practical and cultural support it offers to the state.<sup>210</sup> Indeed part of the morality of *religio* is that one is supporting the state by maintaining its cultural legacy and preserving the favour of the gods.

However, understanding this claim to be the one belief that Cicero would not compromise on, is complicated by Cotta's further statement. Cotta goes on to qualify this statement by stating that this is the view of a pontiff who is duty bound to hold such views, which he contrasts with the more proven beliefs of philosophers:

There you have it, Balbus, what Cotta the pontifex feels. Now do this for me, I would like to understand what you think, for I ought to accept the theory of worship (*rationem... religionis*) of you, a philosopher, even if I ought to believe the statements handed down by our ancestors even with no rationale.<sup>211</sup>

Here he implies that while there is an obligation to stick to the views of ancient tradition, these views are without intellectual validation or proof. The rhetorical structure of this sentence emphasises that it is the philosophers and not tradition which possesses

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<sup>210</sup> Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion*, 45.

<sup>211</sup> Habes, Balbe, quid Cotta, quid pontifex sentiat. Fac nunc ego intellegam tu quid sentias; a te enim philosopho rationem accipere debeo religionis, maioribus autem nostris etiam nulla ratione reddita credere. III.ii.6 p.35.

reason, *ratio*, without which its claims can only be accepted on faith. Given the philosophical criticism that Cicero makes against the existence of deities and traditional views about them, one could question whether Cicero himself believes in the value of *religio* or whether this is simply the view of the character Cotta. The way it is presented here makes *religio* seem more a social obligation than something Cicero truly values. However, later authors, including our Latin Christian apologists, do interpret this text as suggesting that Cicero himself values Roman *religio*. Indeed Lactantius quotes this passage, as evidence for the faultiness of Roman *religio* which was not supported by philosophy but only the authority of antiquity, with the implication that Cicero himself supports this view.<sup>212</sup> That said it is commonly held that Cicero does believe that worship is of value even if that value is largely grounded on the understanding of it as a social phenomenon or a method of civic participation.<sup>213</sup> The rest of the dialogue also supports this notion.

One finds within the speech of the character Balbus, arguments grounded on factual evidence which support this classical Roman view on the value of *religio* to the Roman state. In the context of arguing for the existence of divinity, Balbus argues that it does exist, based on historical examples of when the performing of *religiones* was seen to bring success to the Roman state, or conversely when not performing *religiones* led to adversity to the Roman state: “Caelius writes that G. Flaminius<sup>214</sup> having neglected worship (*religione*) was slain at Trasimene with a great wound to the state. The ruin of

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<sup>212</sup> *Divine Institutes*, 2.6.8.

<sup>213</sup> Robert Goar, *Cicero and the State Religion* (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1972); Atkins, *Cicero on Politics and the Limits of Reason*, 215-216.

<sup>214</sup> G. Flaminius was a consul and general during the second Punic war who was known for his distain for divination, and as such is often used rhetorically as a cautionary tale in the time of Cicero, Pease, *M. Tulli Ciceronis De natura deorum*, p.565.

these men can demonstrate the nation of these generals is advanced by those who perform worship (*religionibus*).<sup>215</sup> This passage expresses the classical Roman view on the reciprocity of Roman worship, specifically it is seen as a benefit to the state. While this could be seen as merely evidence for the contractionary nature of Roman worship, this still serves as identity forming. While Romans, based on this account, mainly worship for the sake of a material end, it still served to define them as a people for it is by the honoring of this relationship that they in contrast to others, succeed as a people and nation. It is given this close relationship that some have argued that within Cicero's thoughts "The criminalization of religious derelictions becomes thinkable."<sup>216</sup> This is claimed explicitly as a point of distinction between Romans and others slightly further on in the text: "if we wished to compare our qualities with those of foreign places, we would in all other affairs discover ourselves either equals or even inferiors. It is in worshiping, that is the cult of gods, (*religione, id est cultu deorum*) that we find ourselves much superior."<sup>217</sup> By the phrase "*religione, id est cultu deorum*" Cicero is clarifying what he means by *religio* to refer to the specific practices by which the gods are appeased which result in Roman success. This Roman-centric view of *religio*<sup>218</sup> is an argument that is very commonly refuted by Latin Christian apologists. However, nevertheless the construction of an identity centered around correct or superior *religio* foresees how these same authors will construct their identity.<sup>219</sup> The greatest difference between the

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<sup>215</sup> C. Flaminius Coelius religione neglecta cecidisse apud Trasumenum scribit magno cum rei publicae vulnere. Quorum exitio intellegi potest eorum imperiis rem publicam amplificatam qui religionibus paruisent. II.iii.8 p.33-35.

<sup>216</sup> Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 11.

<sup>217</sup> Si conferre volumus nostra cum externis, ceteris rebus aut pares aut etiam inferiores reperiemur, religione id est cultu deorum multo superiores. II.iii.8 p.35.

<sup>218</sup> On the Roman view that piety leads to military and national success see Pease, *M. Tulli Ciceronis De natura deorum*, 566-567; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 218, 222-223.

<sup>219</sup> Buell, *Why This New Race*, 42.

construction of identity seen here and the later Christian one is that here the superiority of *religio* serves to validate civic/national identity whereas within the Christian apologetic tradition civic and national aspects of identity become secondary to an identity centered around *religio*.

In contrast to this Christian development, the speech of Balbus continues to associate *religiones* with civic participation. For example Balbus cites the importance of *religio* for commanders going into battle in a way that emphasises their commitment to the state which they hope to benefit by their piety: “But truly among the ancestors such was the power of worship (*tanta religionis vis*) that certain generals, with veiled heads and by clear words, offered even themselves as sacrifices to the immortal gods for the sake of the state.”<sup>220</sup> The emphasis here is on the extreme commitment to worship found in ancestors as opposed to people today, as highlighted by the phrase “*tanta religionis vis fuit*.” However, it is worth noting that extreme commitment is not seen as a motivation in and of itself but rather is fundamentally tied to the desire to serve the state. Since the worship of the gods is irrevocably tied to the gods offering rewards to the community, piety to the gods is irrevocably tied to serving and supporting the state.

Unsurprisingly therefore Balbus strongly associates commitment to *religio* with commitment to civic office. Balbus is here describing how in historical periods Roman consuls had a strong commitment to *religiones*:

As a man of the greatest wisdom and of no mean distinction, he could have hid his misdeed from all, but he preferred to confess rather than worship (*religionem*) in the state to be in doubt; these consuls found it preferable to

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<sup>220</sup> At vero apud maiores tanta religionis vis fuit ut quidam imperatores etiam seipsos dis immortalibus capite velato, verbis certis, pro re publica devoverent. II.iii.10 p.35.

give up the greatest of authority, rather than to hold it for a moment in conflict with worship (*religionem*).<sup>221</sup>

Here interestingly the desire for high office and commitment to *religio* are potentially in conflict, but *religio* seems to serve as a stand in for the integrity of both the state and the individual. This functions in two ways. Firstly since *religiones* were understood to have real material repercussions, violating them or causing lack of faith in them could pose a genuine threat to the state. Secondly commitment to *religiones* was seen as essentially Roman and so for a consul to fail to perform them proved a lack in their ability to accurately represent the Roman people. In either case the commitment to *religiones* is presented as fundamental to faithfully performing civic office and supporting the state.

Although some have argued that the text of *On the Nature of the Gods* is evidence for a Roman notion of religion as a distinct sphere of identity,<sup>222</sup> the importance placed on the authority of the state is evidence against the idea. I argue that for Cicero worship cannot be separated from civic participation or other spheres of life. Barton and Boyarin have even gone so far as to argue that the restriction of legitimate *religio* to only those that support the Roman state is a step toward the construction of the sacred as a distinct sphere:

It was Cicero's assertion of the right of a limited group within the Republic to define "the sacred" that caused *religio* to be made into a particular and separate sphere of life. Only if one accepts that there are those who are

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<sup>221</sup> *Vir sapientissimus atque haud sciam an omnium praestantissimus peccatum suum quod celari posset confiteri maluit quam haerere in re publica religionem; consules summum imperium statim deponere quam id tenere punctum temporis contra religionem.* II.iv.11 p.39.

<sup>222</sup> Beard et al., *Religions of Rome*, 149; Beard, "Cicero and Divination."

authorized to limit and define the sphere of “the sacred” could there ever be some sphere of the “nonsacred,” some “secular” or “political” sphere.<sup>223</sup>

I contend that it is the fact that *religio* was decided upon by civic leaders as well as ritual specialists which makes the Roman and specifically Ciceronian notion of *religio* not a distinctive sphere of identity. In understanding how such distinct spheres of identity can originate, what is important is not that these matters were decided by “a limited group” but the means of legitimacy that this group has. The fact that civic authority is used to set apart practices of worship from other practices, means that worship becomes an aspect of civic life. It is only when Christians set apart practices of worship from other practices, by the authority only of their God or of an individual’s connection to their God, that worship can become a distinct sphere of life. Thus, this thesis looks at means of legitimacy as the foundation for different categories of identity and the basis for how they are differentiated. The legitimacy of *religiones* was as much decided by a limited group in the ideology of Tertullian as it was in Cicero. The difference in their thinking which has the potential to construct *religio* as a distinctive sphere of identity, is what the authority for this limited group is based on and how *religiones* are legitimised, as I will show more fully in the next chapter.

Due to this dependence on historical examples this argument could be seen as less of a philosophical argument grounded on basic logical principles, and more an example of the authority of tradition. However, all of these examples serve to justify a philosophical point that divinity does genuinely exist. In this sense there is not a clear line between philosophical argument and arguments grounded on ‘the ways of the

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<sup>223</sup> Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion*, 51.

ancestors' as Cotta will later imply. Both the philosophical argument and the unfounded traditionalist claims, use historical understanding of the value of *religiones* to argue that these *religiones* are of value to the Roman state. Indeed it has been argued that Cicero's rhetoric on the preservation of ancestral custom, is largely done to maintain stability of the Roman community during a time of civil war and in fact Cicero cuts back any forms of worship that do not support the political state.<sup>224</sup> Certainly concerning the association between *religiones* and the Roman state Balbus seems to present the traditional Roman view. Namely Balbus argues that the Roman state is supported by the performance of traditional *religiones* and neglect of them directly results in misfortune. This becomes one of the major sources of critique of Latin Christian apologists. In doing so they will begin to develop a system of *religiones* not necessarily tied to a political state.

### Conclusion

Analysis of the dialogue *On the Nature of the Gods* shows that for Cicero *religio* was grounded on the authority of the Roman state, and it was a tool by which the Roman state and Roman society more broadly defined and legitimized itself. Because of the close connection drawn between worship and the authority of the state it is not accurate to think of a distinct sphere of identity centered around worship within Cicero's own time. This is partly because *religio* was fundamentally social within Cicero's thought. *Religio*, understood to mean worship, was an umbrella term which at the time

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<sup>224</sup> Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion*, 45-46.

of Cicero referred to any ritual practice directed toward the gods. However, the term originally was used to mean a scruple or social obligation, and it preserves some of this meaning in the sense of worship as a social obligation directed toward the gods. Notably in Cicero unlike other Latin writers at the time, *religio* was used to refer to only practices deemed legitimate. In this sense it becomes a boundary marker used by Cicero to define and describe what is acceptable to elite Roman society. However, later Latin Christian apologists will use this legitimizing authority of *religio* to argue for the legitimacy of Christian identity. Gradually over time these Christian authors will begin to separate the authority of *religio* from the Roman state, and make correct worship an authorizing principle in and of itself. Therefore, it is these later Christian authors and not Cicero who begin to construct a distinct sphere of identity centered around worship.

Part of the inspiration for these later Christian views is based on Cicero's presentation of the nature of theological truth. Within this dialogue theological truth is presented as a speculative intellectual issue. The framing of the dialogue suggests that theological truth is a matter of philosophical debate without a clear solution. The characters within the text do not critique varying theologies from a perspective of knowledge but rather from logic and analysis. However, the dialogue also makes plain that while it is yet undiscovered there is a singular empirical theological truth. Arguments within the text are judged and critiqued based on their approximation of truth, and it is clear that the path to this truth lies through debate and analysis of philosophy. The purpose of this implication of the dialogue was likely to allow for discussion and debate among the text's readers without proscribing a specific doctrine. However, the implication of an objective theological truth that is yet undiscovered allows

later Christian apologists to argue that complete theological truth can only come through divine revelation. This view of course does not come exclusively from Cicero, but when writing in a Latin apologetic discourse to a rhetorically Roman audience, it is the association with Cicero that Latin Christian apologists build on. This claim of objective truth will allow Christian writers to argue for the legitimacy and superiority of Christian identity over that of classical philosophy. Furthermore, this provides them with a foundation upon which to claim a legitimacy not founded on the state, and ultimately to create an identity centered around worship and theology. However, in order for Christian writers to do this they need to draw a link between worship and theological truth, which for Cicero were fundamentally distinct.

It is through this trajectory that Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* serves as a starting point from which Latin Christian apologists will develop a new form of identity. The views expressed in this dialogue effectively amount to a culmination of many classical Roman perspectives on theology and worship, which are in many places radically different from that of later Christian views. However, these views are reformulated and in some places actively critiqued in such a way that they provide a foundation and inspiration for significant developments to occur. Without this as a starting point we could neither see how these developments came to be, nor have a standard by which to measure the degree to which these developments created something new. As such I have hoped to have shown how Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* is relevant to an analysis of the changes in the nature of identity within Latin Christian apologetic works.

## Chapter 2

### Tertullian's *Apology*: Christian Identity as a Roman Cult

Tertullian's categorization of Christian identity and his views on the Roman Empire as a civic authority provide an interesting starting point for the development of these subjects by later authors. On the one hand his views lay the foundation for ideas that will be further developed by later authors, most notably by Lactantius; but on the other hand, Tertullian's position, particularly that taken in his *Apology* is somewhat unique among these authors. In Tertullian's other works, his position on the Roman government is the same general combination of animosity, disapproval and resignation found in other pre-Constantinian apologists,<sup>225</sup> including Latin apologists such as Lactantius and Minucius Felix. However, in the *Apology* he explicitly outlines a potentially positive relationship between Christians and the Roman government, while simultaneously denouncing and completely rejecting Roman cultural practices. Although Tertullian in this work argues that Christian cultic identity has inherently a civic loyalty to the Roman state, this isolation of civic loyalty from any cultural and religious associations is the first step towards creating the idea of an apolitical Christian identity focused on worship.

Tertullian's *Apology* has been broadly understood as following the structure of traditional forensic rhetoric, borrowing its form either from Cicero's speeches, Justin

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<sup>225</sup> Price, "Latin Christian Apologetics," 126-128; Ames, "La Apología y el Diálogo en los Primeros Apologistas Latinos," 58-59.

Martyr's *Apology* or both.<sup>226</sup> However, focusing on the weight of its arguments, for our purposes the text can be understood as consisting of an introduction followed by two central arguments and a conclusion. Within the introduction of the text, consisting of Chapters 1 through 10, Tertullian describes how Christians are unjustly persecuted and the motivations for this injustice. Within this section Tertullian also briefly explains away some of the false accusations made of Christians, such that they perform incest and cannibalism. In the following two sections Tertullian dedicates most of the text to addressing, what he considers to be the two most important accusations made against Christians, namely that of not worshiping Roman gods and rebelling against Roman civic authority. Firstly, in chapters 11 through 27 Tertullian argues that it is right for Christians not to worship non-Christian gods because these are not genuine divinities and not worthy of worship. Next in chapters 28 through 38 he argues that in spite of rejecting Roman gods Christians are still loyal members of the Roman Empire. This section is the most important to my argument and I will break it down in greater length below. In the final part of the text consisting of chapters 39 to 49, Tertullian describes how he believes Christian groups ought to be understood. In doing so he rejects a few more misconceptions about the nature of Christianity, but mostly focuses on articulating the true nature of Christian identity.

My analysis will focus on the second section of the *Apology*, and will show that Tertullian reduces Roman identity to merely civic allegiance to the Roman state.

Tertullian does this in order to construct a form of Roman identity that is not only

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<sup>226</sup> Eric Osborn, "Tertullian as Philosopher and Roman," in *Die Weltlichkeit des Glaubens in der Alten Kirche: Festschrift für Ulrich Wickert zum Siebzigsten Geburtstag*, ed. Barbara Aland and Christoph Schäublin (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997) 238; Atkins, "Tertullian on 'The Freedom of Religion,'" 148-149; Parvis, "Justin Martyr and the Apologetic Tradition," 124-127.

acceptable to Christians but also allows provincial residents of the Empire to reject Roman culture in favour of their own without abandoning Roman identity or violating Roman law. Conversely Tertullian presents Christian identity as primarily defined by *religio*. As a group defined by their *religiones*, a Christian group could be seen both as having a civic loyalty to the Roman state, and as having a legitimate and cultural authority in their own right.

The argument of this part of Tertullian's *Apology* can roughly be broken into three parts. Firstly Tertullian in chapters 28 and 29 argues that the claim that pagan gods have authority higher than that of the Roman state is an act of willful ignorance. He makes this argument to show that Roman civic authority is independent of the claimed authority of the Roman gods. Secondly in chapters 30 to 34 he argues that Christians are in fact loyal to the emperor and the Empire. It is here that he carefully outlines a form of civic allegiance to the Roman state that he argues is supported by Christian doctrine and does not violate his broad understanding of idolatry. Finally in chapters 35 to 36 he argues that Christian allegiance to Roman authority, as a merely civic authority, ought to be considered sufficient to possess a Roman identity. In doing so he is nominally arguing that Christian identity ought to be acceptable to Roman authority, but in practice he is also presenting a form of Roman identity that is acceptable to Christians.

This understanding of Tertullian's argument and how he constructs the political relationship between Christian and Roman identity both builds on earlier scholarship and provides a new perspective on how to understand it. Scholars have not broadly

considered Tertullian as a political thinker,<sup>227</sup> as on the face of it he rejects the role of civic participation in Christian life. Older research on Tertullian's work has primarily considered how it can shed light on more modern theological concerns, or it explores the significance of Tertullian's influence and reception history.<sup>228</sup> However, in discussing how Tertullian negotiates the relationship between Christian and Roman identity, a discussion which often looks at the *Apology*, it has been widely argued that Tertullian makes use his education in Latin rhetoric and his knowledge of Roman history, myth, ritual etc. to criticize Roman culture and delegitimise Roman claims to superiority.<sup>229</sup> Although this position serves rhetorical, theological and apologetic purposes in his works, it also can be read as a stance toward the Roman Empire as civic government. Scholars note that within the colonial setting of Roman North Africa, Roman identity could be used as a tool to elevate one's self and one's group to a position of authority and then from that position to reject Roman culture in favour of one's own.<sup>230</sup> This

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<sup>227</sup> Atkins, "Tertullian on 'The Freedom of Religion,'" is a notable exception to this rule. However, Atkins comments on the lack of scholarly analysis of Tertullian's political views 172.

<sup>228</sup> Robert Roberts, *The Theology of Tertullian* (London, the Epworth Press, 1924); James Morgan, *The Importance of Tertullian in the Development of Christian Dogma* (London, Kegan Paul Trench, Trubner & co., Ltd, 1928); Gerald Bray, *Holiness and the Will of God: Perspectives on the Theology of Tertullian* (London: Marshal, Morgan, and Scott, 1979); Cahal Daly, *Tertullian the Puritan and his Influence* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1993); Matthew Steenberg, "Impatience and Humanity's Sinful State in Tertullian of Carthage," *Vigiliae Christianae* 62, no. 2 (2008): 107-132.

<sup>229</sup> Jean-Claude Fredouille, *Tertullien et la conversion de la culture antique* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1972); Mark Burrows, "Christianity in the Roman Forum: Tertullian and the Apologetic Use of History," *Vigiliae Christianae* 42, no. 3 (1988): 209-235; Osborn, "Tertullian as Philosopher and Roman"; Buell, *Why This New Race*, 149-151; Wilhite, *Tertullian the African*; Marianne Dirksen and Beate Britz, "Five Brave Pagan Women in the Work of Tertullian," *die Skriflig* 48 no.2 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v48i2.1777>; Carly Daniel-Hughes and Maia Kotrosits, "Tertullian of Carthage and the Fantasy Life of Power: On Martyrs, Christians, and Other Attachments to Juridical Scenes," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 28, no. 1 (Spring, 2020): 1-31; Atkins, "Tertullian on 'The Freedom of Religion'"; Alexander Perkins, "Tertullian the Carthaginian: North African Narrative Identity and the Use of History in the Apologeticum and Ad Martyras," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 28, no. 3, (Fall 2020): 349-371.

<sup>230</sup> Wilhite, *Tertullian the African*; Daniel-Hughes and Kotrosits, "Tertullian of Carthage and the Fantasy Life of Power"; Perkins, "Tertullian the Carthaginian"; David Cherry, *Frontier and Society in Roman North Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Claude Lepelley (ed.), *Aspects de l'Afrique Romaine*:

reading of Tertullian shows him fighting Roman imperial rule, which persecutes his group, by using the ideological tools provided by that same Roman authority, while simultaneously trying to create a cultural space where he can exist not only as a Christian but as a North African. It has also been argued that Tertullian attempts to go further than this by subjugating Roman culture to Christian universalism through his depiction of Roman history, culture, ritual, and government.<sup>231</sup> Finally scholarship has also begun to explore how this manifests in Tertullian's use of Latin terminology and the categories that these terms represent.<sup>232</sup>

However, building on and extending these arguments, I contend that Tertullian does all of these things by limiting the form of Roman identity which he approves of, to purely civic allegiance. By reducing Roman identity to civic allegiance Tertullian is accepting Roman identity only insofar as it allows him to claim legitimacy and authority within Roman colonial society, while rejecting Roman culture and customs. This allows Tertullian to create the cultural space where he can be both Christian and African and likewise better able to subjugate Roman authority to his Christian universalism. The first section of this chapter will discuss the legal and historical circumstances of the persecution of Tertullian's Christian community in order to contextualize his apologetic arguments. This is followed by a section discussing the role and importance of Tertullian's *Apology*. The next section will further contextualize Tertullian's argument by discussing the meaning and importance of the term *religio* for his work. The following

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*Les Cites, La Vie Rurale, le Christianisme* (Bari: Edipuglia, 2001); Claude Briand-Ponsart and Yves Moderan (eds.), *Provinces et Identités Provinciales dans l'Afrique Romaine* (Caen: CRAHM, 2011).

<sup>231</sup> Burrows, "Christianity in the Roman Forum."

<sup>232</sup> Buell, *Why This New Race*, 149-151; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 218-225; Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*.

central section of the chapter shall explore how Tertullian categorizes the nature of Christian identity in the *Apology*. The final section will then analyse the key passages within chapters 28 to 36 of the *Apology*, as well as certain other passages from the text which best show how Tertullian constructs the relationship between Christian and Roman identity.

### The Legal and Historical Circumstances of Tertullian's Persecution

The circumstances of ancient Christian persecution have been much discussed in scholarship on ancient Christianity,<sup>233</sup> and a discussion of Christian apologetic writings which respond to persecution requires a discussion of the circumstances of persecution. Understanding why Christians felt that they were threatened helps us to understand why they chose to defend themselves the way they did and the logic behind the answers provided by the apologists. Early Christian persecution was not a single continuous unified campaign. Rather between the late second to early fourth century the circumstances under which a Christian could be punished by the state for being

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<sup>233</sup> E.g. Fergus Millar, "The Imperial Cult and the Persecutions." In *Rome, the Greek World, and the East* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2019) 298-312; Candida Moss, "Political Oppression and Martyrdom," in *The Early Christian World, 783–795*. 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2017); Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: how Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (New York: Harper-One, 2013); Candida Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions*, 1st ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); Danny Praet, "Violence against Christians and Violence by Christians in the First Three Centuries: Direct Violence, Cultural Violence and the Debate about Christian Exclusiveness," in *Violence in Ancient Christianity: Victims and Perpetrators* Ed. Albert Geljon, and Riemer Roukema (Boston: BRILL, 2014); G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* ed. Michael Whitby and Joseph Streeter (Oxford University Press, Oxford: 2006); Timothy Barnes, "Legislation Against Christians," *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 58, Parts 1 and 2 (1968) 32-50; William Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Oxford: Alden Press, 1965).

Christian were sporadic and various. And within this period there were gaps of several decades in which Christians were not legally harassed at all.

For the purpose of this chapter we need to look at the most unexplained period of ancient Christian persecution, the sporadic and legally ambiguous persecution of Christians that occurred prior to 250. Prior to Decius's order to sacrifice in 250, there was no specific law or edict that made being Christian illegal or that prevented Christians from practicing their form of worship. Furthermore, based on Trajan's response to Pliny,<sup>234</sup> which we will discuss in more detail momentarily, governors were encouraged not to seek out Christians. Nevertheless, in this period in a variety of places across the Roman Empire, including Tertullian's community in Carthage around the year 200,<sup>235</sup> there is evidence that people, acting seemingly on their own initiative, brought Christians before the Roman government and accused them of the 'crime' of being Christian. As has been persuasively argued, the persecution of this period cannot be understood as top-down,<sup>236</sup> as the role of Roman officials, from local governors to the emperor himself, was purely responsive. Rather this persecution with its sporadic manifestation and legal ambiguities, must be understood as the result of popular enmity against Christians.

Nevertheless, it is worth briefly discussing the legal circumstances behind this persecution and the thought processes of its adjudicators. Our best evidence for the legal treatment of Christians during this time, comes from the much discussed

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<sup>234</sup> *Letters*, 10.96-97.

<sup>235</sup> As well as Tertullian's own writings responding to this persecution, this episode of persecution is evidenced by the martyrdom accounts *the Scillian Martyrs* and *the Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*. For academic discussion of this episode of persecution see: e.g. *Finneran*, *The Archaeology of Christianity in Africa*, 19-20; Tillley, "North Africa," p.386-392; Wilhite, "Ancient African Christianity," 80-95.

<sup>236</sup> Millar, "The Imperial Cult and the Persecutions;" Praet, "Violence against Christians and Violence by Christians in the First Three Centuries," 40-42; Barnes, "Legislation Against Christians," 50.

correspondence between Pliny and Trajan. As has been persuasively argued,<sup>237</sup> the Pliny-Trajan correspondence on Christians is best explained not as a universal ruling on the juridical procedure for dealing with Christians, but as a short term temporary fix for dealing with a local provincial case of civil unrest. As a result, these letters should not be taken as indicative of how Christians were treated across the Empire. Indeed, there was likely not a singular universal Christian experience with Roman authority across the Empire at this time, nor was there likely a single universal juridical procedure for dealing with Christians in the first three centuries CE. But, in spite of what Pliny or Trajan might have believed, Pliny's Christian situation turned out to be far from unique or temporary. We do not know to what extent other governors or officials across the Empire were influenced by Pliny or came to use a similar process independently. It is likely, given the sporadic nature of Christian persecution in this time that many took a completely different approach. However, we do know that Tertullian, who was living nearly a century later on the opposite side of the Empire, was able to claim that the procedure Pliny describes was universal.<sup>238</sup> He would not have been able to persuasively do this if what was happening in the Carthage of his day was visibly different from what Pliny was describing.

Therefore, if to some extent Pliny's letter reflects how Christians were treated in Tertullian's Carthage, were Christians arrested, as Tertullian critiques, merely for the name Christian?<sup>239</sup> Perhaps this is true but it is necessary to qualify what this means.

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<sup>237</sup> James Corke-Webster, "The Early Reception of Pliny The Younger in Tertullian of Carthage and Eusebius of Caesarea," *The Classical Quarterly, NEW SERIES* 67, No. 1 (May 2017): 247-262.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid, 253-256.

<sup>239</sup> Following De Ste. Croix I do not agree with Sherwin-White's interpretation that Christians were arrested for obstinacy alone, for this does not explain why they were arrested prior to their display of obstinacy.

Tertullian's claim that people arrested Christians for the name Christian alone without any knowledge of what the name meant,<sup>240</sup> does not make sense. Christian as a moniker without meaning, could not logically provoke anyone to anything. If people arrested Christians for the name Christians, it must be because they believed that Christian membership necessitated criminal action or the Christian organization was itself criminal. The argument of Tertullian's *Apology* is that Christians were not doing anything illegal and that the name Christian should not imply any criminal action. It is all very well for the objective historian to agree with Tertullian on this point, insofar as the actual facts on the ground are concerned. However, evidently if Christians were being arrested then non-Christians must have believed that Christian membership necessitated criminality. For this reason it is necessary to look not at what Christians actually did that might have been illegal but how Christians were perceived from the outside, and what potentially criminal implications the name Christian might have had. This is why categorization is important to understand not just Tertullian's *Apology* but apologetic work more broadly. An understanding of the type of group Christians were perceived to be helps to explain the implications of the Christian name that made it illegal.

We can best understand these perceptions by looking first at the popular enmity towards Christians, before looking at how adjudicators perceived Christians in their response to this unrest. It is difficult to neatly categorize the motivations for this popular enmity, and it is perhaps best understood as an amalgam of a number of different sources of tension and misunderstandings between Christians and non-Christians.

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<sup>240</sup> *Apology*, ii.3-iii.8.

Some people perhaps genuinely believed the rumours that Christians performed incest, cannibalism, and other blatantly criminal acts.<sup>241</sup> Others might believe they conspired against the Roman government in the name of Christ their king.<sup>242</sup> Yet more perhaps hated them for their refusal to partake in traditional cult, believing this refusal to result in social, economic, and natural disasters. Indeed, we must not forget how strange and alien Christianity must have seemed to the non-Christians of this period, and given the ubiquitousness of non-Christian worship, Christians' refusal of it must have resulted in social tensions and misunderstandings. In any event by the time of Pliny, it seems to be taken for granted that being Christian meant being part of a criminal organization, even if what that organization did was unclear.

Understanding the motivations of the local governors who sided with this popular enmity and agreed to execute Christians is a bit easier because we have the example of Pliny. We, of course, cannot know the exact thoughts of the officials in Carthage during Tertullian's time, but as is the case when studying ancient history, we have to work with the evidence we have and extrapolate from it. If Pliny can be taken as indicative then, local elites did not necessarily believe all of the rumours about Christians criminal activities nor did they believe that Christians conspired against the emperor.<sup>243</sup> Rather the objection that makes being Christian worthy of execution seems to be their rejection of traditional cult, including not only the imperial cult but more generally worship of 'the

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<sup>241</sup> E.g. Tertullian, *Apology*, viii.1-9. For academic discussion of these accusation see among others Moss, *The Myth of Persecution*, p.181-185.

<sup>242</sup> Moss, *The Myth of Persecution*, 176-180

<sup>243</sup> Pliny, *Letters*, 10.96.

gods' as a whole.<sup>244</sup> Indeed Christians seem to be blamed for broader neglect of traditional cult among the general populous.<sup>245</sup>

Based on this motivation, and the more responsive role that civic leaders seem to have during this period, Fergus Millar has argued that the persecutions of Christian at this time “cannot be explained in political terms” and “were motivated by feelings which we must call religious.”<sup>246</sup> This distinction between ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ cannot meaningfully be made within the Roman world, and the persecution of Christians was an excellent example of how that worked in practice. As Millar himself argues the reason neglect of traditional worship provoked fear in Pliny and others was because of “the loss of the protection which [the gods] extended to the cities and to the Empire as a whole.”<sup>247</sup> This protection did not concern the spiritual well-being of Roman citizens, but rather it was a matter of the physical and practical disasters which were to some extent within the purview of civic leaders to pre-emptively prevent. Similarly it is inaccurate to claim that the matter was not ‘political’ given that it was initiated by politicians. The fact that popular enmity against Christians manifested through the legal mechanisms of provincial governors, as opposed to more private expressions of hatred, suggests that those acting on it believed the matter warranted the authority of civic leaders.

Millar also argues that “we also need no longer believe that each cult in the Empire was either a *religio licita* (tolerated religion) or a *religio illicita* (forbidden religion).”<sup>248</sup> While this might be true on a purely legal level, it was not true rhetorically.

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<sup>244</sup> For a good interpretation of Pliny’s letter see Millar, “The Imperial Cult and the Persecutions,” 304-307.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid, p.312.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid, 298-299.

There was within the Roman Empire no formal list of legal and illegal forms of worship. Nevertheless, due to the fear of the wrath of the gods the accusation of *irreligio* or *superstitio* carried the rhetorical implication of illegal and political dissent. Conversely right *religio* carried with it the implication of loyalty to the Roman state, if one was engaged in a markedly Roman form of worship, or simply support of one's community through placating the divine.<sup>249</sup> It is telling that Pliny himself refers to Christianity as a *superstitio*,<sup>250</sup> for this shows that this kind of rhetoric and rumour had the power to influence those who would have say over the life and death of Christians. A purely legalistic analysis of Christian persecution misses the point that evidently a sufficient manifestation of popular enmity rightly directed could result in executions through a legal institution even without explicit written legal support. While some Christian apologists did write their apologies in the style of a legal defence, apologists like Tertullian, Minucius Felix, and Lactantius were not attempting to address a specific law; rather they were attempting to counter the general belief that Christianity was illegitimate and potentially illegal.

### The Role and Importance of Tertullian's *Apology*

The reason that this thesis focuses on Tertullian's *Apology* and not his other works, is not only due to the influence this work would have on subsequent Latin Christian authors, but because it represents the culmination of a number of apologetic

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<sup>249</sup> Preat, "Violence against Christians and Violence by Christians in the First Three Centuries," 42-43; Barnes, "Legislation Against Christians," 50.

<sup>250</sup> Pliny the Younger. *Letters, Volume II: Books 8-10. Panegyricus*. Translated by Betty Radice. Loeb Classical Library 59 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969) 10.95.8-9.

arguments found throughout Tertullian's corpus. There were several works beyond Tertullian's *Apology*, that have been considered apologetics and which share common themes or arguments with the *Apology*, such as *To the Nations*, *On the Philosopher's Cloak*, *On the Testimony of the Soul*, and *To Scapula*.<sup>251</sup> These works are identified as apologetics based on the rhetorical audience. *On the Philosopher's Cloak* and *On the Testimony of the Soul* both share common arguments with the *Apology*, both take a defensive stance toward Christians or Christian teachings and a hostile stance toward either paganism broadly or Roman culture specifically. However, these treatises also are primarily concerned with particular elements of Christian doctrine or practice, and only indirectly address the issues that arise from contrasting Christians against an external rhetorical audience. *To Scapula* is one of Tertullian's later works and it presents a summary of certain arguments of the *Apology*.<sup>252</sup> However, unlike the *Apology*, it is written for a particular individual as a response to specific circumstances, and does not contain the same scope either in terms of theology or issues of identity, found in the author's earlier works.

The most interesting comparable work to the *Apology* is Tertullian's *To the Nations*. The content of this work is found nearly repeated in the *Apology* with slight changes in argument and structure.<sup>253</sup> This repetition has led to several speculations as to the relationship between these two works. Among these ideas is that *To the Nations* is an earlier draft of the *Apology*.<sup>254</sup> In light of this, the differences between it and *To the*

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid, p.107.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid, p.111

<sup>253</sup> Ames, "La Apología y el Diálogo en los Primeros Apologistas Latinos," p.53 n.6.

<sup>254</sup> Carl Becker, *Tertullians Apologeticum: Werden und Leistung* (München: Kösel, 1954) p.58; Price, "Latin Christian Apologetics: Minucius Felix, Tertullian, and Cyprian," p.106.

*Nations* become significant for understanding the influences on Tertullian's *Apology* specifically. The most notable change between *To the Nations* and the *Apology* is that the former is addressed to non-Christians as a whole, whereas the *Apology* is addressed specifically to Roman magistrates and tailors its critique accordingly. Whereas *To the Nations* has rhetorically a general audience, the *Apology* concerns itself primarily with the charges of treason and sacrilege, which would more directly concern Roman governors. Although there are common arguments in these texts, their differing rhetorical audience makes these texts very different works. Another notable difference between these two works is the change in title. The title *Apologeticus* is not previously found in Latin literature, and Tertullian is most likely basing his works on Greek apologia.<sup>255</sup> While there are a number of Greek apologia which Tertullian could be drawing from, the most like candidate is Justin Martyr's *Apology*.<sup>256</sup> Like Justin's work, Tertullian's *Apology*, unlike *To the Nations*, also makes use forensic rhetoric and is directed at a specifically Roman political authority. By making this change, he actively made the work more concerned with Roman culture, legality, and politics, which is reflected in a narrowing of its rhetorical audience.

On the subject of making his *Apology* more consistent with a Roman rhetorical audience, it is worth noting Tertullian's choice to write in Latin. Tertullian is known as the first Latin theologian and he create a theological terminology in Latin which was profoundly influential for subsequent authors. However, given the Greek influences on Tertullian's works it is not immediately obvious why he chose to write in a different language. Tertullian by all accounts was a highly educated individual who knew both

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<sup>255</sup> Price, "Latin Christian Apologetics: Tertullian, Minucius Felix, Cyprian," 116.

<sup>256</sup> Parvis, "Justin Martyr and the Apologetic Tradition."

Latin and Greek, and it is believed that he wrote a number of works originally in Greek which are now lost.<sup>257</sup> However, he was, even in the ancient world, primarily known as a Latin writer.<sup>258</sup> His decision to write in Latin can largely be understood as a product of the lingual circumstances of early third century Carthage. While Timothy Barnes has argued for the Greek origins of the Christian community in Carthage,<sup>259</sup> more recent scholarship emphasises that Roman North Africa and Carthage specifically was primarily a Latin community.<sup>260</sup> Even if we do accept Barnes's idea that the first Christians in North Africa were Greek speaking, the spread of Christianity within North Africa would quickly necessitate translation into Latin. Latin was the language of trade in North Africa and would likely be more broadly understood among a community of diverse ethnic backgrounds than one of the native languages of North Africa such as Punic or Libyan.<sup>261</sup> Therefore Tertullian wrote in Latin perhaps simply because that was the language most readily grasped by his Christian community in Carthage. His use of Latin was consistent throughout nearly all of his works, and is not limited to his apologetic works. Thus, the choice to write in Latin cannot be seen as merely a method of appealing to Roman authority. However, given that Tertullian rejects so much else of Roman culture, it is telling that he accepts the Latin language so readily. As I have argued that could be understood on purely practical grounds, but it is nevertheless revealing that Tertullian is accepting enough of Roman identity and institutions to

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<sup>257</sup> Tim Denecker, *Ideas on Language in Early Latin Christianity : From Tertullian to Isidore of Seville* (Boston: Brill, 2017) 12; Wilhite, *Tertullian the African*, 19-20; Timothy Barnes, *Tertullian: a Historical and Literary Study*, Revised with corrections and a postscript (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) 68-69.

<sup>258</sup> Barnes, *Tertullian*, 253.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid*, 68, 277.

<sup>260</sup> E.g. Wilhite, *Tertullian the African*, 29, 46, 128-130; Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 14.

<sup>261</sup> Wilhite, *Tertullian the African*, 28-29, 46.

spread Christianity by the same of language that Roman authorities used to facilitate their rule and trade.

### Tertullian's Use of *Religio*: a Redefining of Cult

In order to complete Tertullian's rhetorical goals of presenting Christianity as authoritative within the Roman social-cultural world, he needs to define Christianity by building upon already existing Roman concepts, although he alters them to best suit his purposes. For this work the most notable of these concepts is the Roman view of cultic groups, which Tertullian redefines largely through redefining the Latin word *religio*. Interestingly enough, as one of the first Latin Christian writers, Tertullian is the first known author to use the word *religio* in reference to Christianity. However, this usage of the term would be picked up by Minucius Felix and would be common by the fourth century.<sup>262</sup> Tertullian's word choice was not accidental however. It would become a significant part of the rhetorical strategy of the *Apology* and his articulation of the nature and importance of Christian identity.

In chapter 1 I discussed the history of the term which led up to Cicero's use of it, as well as changes Cicero makes to the term's usage, and I will not restate all of that here. I will provide a brief history of how the term developed between the time of Cicero and Tertullian. This overview cannot pretend to be completely comprehensive, as there is a significant quantity of Latin literature within the first two centuries CE. Rather I will look briefly at a few select usages by popular writers within this time. This is a largely

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<sup>262</sup> Červenková, "De religione," 87-88.

under-researched area and most scholars who discuss the history of the term focus on the changes Cicero and Tertullian make to its use. Indeed broadly speaking during this time *religio* is used in a manner in keeping with its usage prior to Cicero and the changes introduced by Cicero. However, there are some subtle but notable developments during this time which inform how Tertullian and later Christian authors would use the term.

We see in works written in the decades following Cicero, such as the poetry of Virgil and Ovid or the history of Livy, that the older understanding of *religio* still remains prominent. For example in Livy's *History of Rome*, *religio* is still equated with *superstitio* and regarded negatively as superstition.<sup>263</sup> Broadly within this time *religio* still primarily means ritual actions done for the worship or respect of a divinity. There are also within the writings of Virgil more abstract usages of the term, such as to refer to a place which is sacred to a god,<sup>264</sup> or to refer to the emotional state of awe or reverence associated with worship or holy places.<sup>265</sup> Also notable within the works of Livy is the older use of *religio* to refer to a social obligation or the obligations from oaths made to the gods.<sup>266</sup>

By the first century CE, we see these more abstract usages continue, as well as the changes that Cicero introduced becoming more common. For example in the writings of Seneca the term is used exclusively to refer to positive aspects of worship

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<sup>263</sup> E.g. Livy, *History of Rome, Volume I: Books 1-2*, trans. B. O. Foster. Loeb Classical Library 114 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919) 1.31.6 for equating *religio* to *superstitio*; Livy, *History of Rome, Volume II: Books 3-4*, trans. B. O. Foster. Loeb Classical Library 133. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922.4.30.9 for regarding *religio* negatively as superstition.

<sup>264</sup> E.g. Virgil, *Eclogues. Georgics. Aeneid: Books 1-6*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough. Revised by G. P. Goold. Loeb Classical Library 63. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916) 2.364-365; Virgil. *Aeneid: Books 7-12. Appendix Vergiliana*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough. Revised by G. P. Goold. Loeb Classical Library 64 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1918) 7.607-608, 8.597-598.

<sup>265</sup> E.g. *Aeneid*, 7.170-172, 8.349-350.

<sup>266</sup> E.g. *History of Rome*, 1.31.6, 1.31.8, 1.45.7, 2.5.3, 2.36.3, 2.62.2, 3.20.4, 3.22.8, 4.30.13, 4.31.4.

and the correct obligation to worship divinities without any association with superstition or *superstitio*. Notably within the letters of Seneca *religio* is treated as a philosophical virtue,<sup>267</sup> in a manner that will be picked up again by Minucius Felix. Also significantly in keeping with Cicero, Seneca begins to treat *religio* as an obligation which can be violated with punishable results.<sup>268</sup> This same treatment of the term is found in Tacitus, who uses phrases such as *inreligio* or *contra religio* to refer to actions taken which violate the will of the gods or the obligation to worship.<sup>269</sup> Tacitus implies in many of these instances that these actions also carry legal penalties. However, perhaps the most historically significant example of this is when Pliny in his famous letter concerning Christians, refers to Christian practice as a *superstitio*,<sup>270</sup> and it is implied that this is one of the reasons it is considered illegal.

It is against this accusation that Tertullian chiefly pursues his argument that Christian practice is a *religio*, *superstitio*'s antecedent. But going back to Tacitus, he treats *religio* in keeping with earlier usages such as referring to it as the virtue of showing right behavior towards the gods,<sup>271</sup> an oath or vow,<sup>272</sup> or more neutrally as social obligation or treatment of respect towards things that are not necessarily divine.<sup>273</sup> Notably we will discuss this lattermost use of the term within Tertullian's

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<sup>267</sup> Seneca, *Epistles, Volume III: Epistles 66-92*, trans. Richard M. Gummere. Loeb Classical Library 77 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920) 90.3; *Seneca. Epistles, Volume III: Epistles 93-124*, trans. Richard M. Gummere. Loeb Classical Library 77 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925) 120.10.

<sup>268</sup> E.g. *Letters*, 104.28.

<sup>269</sup> E.g. Tacitus. *Histories: Books 4-5. Annals: Books 1-3*, trans. Clifford H. Moore, John Jackson. Loeb Classical Library 249 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931) 1.73, 2.50, 3.24.

<sup>270</sup> *Letters*, 10.95.8-9.

<sup>271</sup> E.g. *Annals*, 3.63

<sup>272</sup> E.g. Tacitus. *Annals: Books 4-6, 11-12*, trans. John Jackson. Loeb Classical Library 312. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937) 12.24, 12.34.

<sup>273</sup> E.g. Tacitus. *Annals: Books 13-16*, trans. John Jackson. Loeb Classical Library 322. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937) 16.4.

discussion of the Roman emperor and the Roman Empire.<sup>274</sup> Tacitus also follows Cicero in treating *religio* as a distinctly ancestral form of worship, validated by its antiquity. This same range of meanings seems to continue largely unchanged within the second century. For example Fronto uses *religio* to refer to the moral and ritual obligation to worship, and the right attitude to have while worshiping the gods.<sup>275</sup> Similarly Apuleius by the term *religio* refers to ritual worship,<sup>276</sup> social obligation,<sup>277</sup> and in its adjectival form to a devote and loyal person.<sup>278</sup> In one notable instance in his *Metamorphoses*, Apuleius associates *religio* with *conscientia* in a manner similar to how Tertullian will later connect these ideas.<sup>279</sup> Nevertheless during this time period *religio* is almost exclusively used as a positive good and loses part of its association with *superstitio* and illegitimacy

Therefore, this overview has shown that by the beginning of the third century CE the changes to *religio* begun by Cicero had become widely accepted and, the most broadly used meanings of *religio* were obligation, correct worship, and due reverence. It is because of the legitimizing power of the association between these meanings of obligation, worship, and respect, that Tertullian latches onto the term as a defining feature of his Christian identity, in order to argue for what he sees as Christianity's rightful place in the Roman world. However, contrary to what some scholars have

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<sup>274</sup> *Apology*, xxxiii.1, discussed below: 168-169.

<sup>275</sup> Fronto, *Correspondence, Volume I*, trans. C. R. Haines. Loeb Classical Library 112. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919) ad M. Caesar 5.51, *Ad Antoninum Pium*, 6.

<sup>276</sup> E.g. Apuleius. *Metamorphoses (The Golden Ass)*, Volume I: Books 1-6. Ed. and trans. J. Arthur Hanson. Loeb Classical Library 44 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) 1.13; *ibid*, *Metamorphoses (The Golden Ass)*, Volume II: Books 7-11. Ed. and trans. J. Arthur Hanson. Loeb Classical Library 453 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) 9.5, 11.16, 11.20.

<sup>277</sup> E.g. *Metamorphoses*, 10.3, 10.8.

<sup>278</sup> E.g. *Metamorphoses*, 2.6, 3.15, 8.30, 9.13, 11.25.

<sup>279</sup> *Apology*, xxxix.1, discussed below: 138-140.

suggested,<sup>280</sup> Tertullian does in fact change how the term is used from Cicero's understanding of it. In order to best suit Christianity, Tertullian notably changes the source of authority by which *religio* is legitimized in order to best serve his rhetorical goals.

Cicero also, as discussed in the last chapter, developed a significant civic dimension to his understanding of *religio*, based on its legitimizing distinction. Not performing proper *religio* or engaging in *superstitio* could be seen as offensive to the gods and result in the gods' disfavour which could be harmful to the state. Thus legal regulation of *religio* was needed. Conversely, the success of the state was due to the favour of the gods. Since Rome was a very successful state, its national identity was in part defined by a positive relationship to its deities.<sup>281</sup> However, Cicero's distinctions were applied not merely to Roman customs, but to foreign cultures under Roman rule. According to Cicero's ideology, other cultures' *religiones*, in the sense of forms of ritual worship, were legitimate only if they had an established antiquity. However, in practice Romans allowed any *religiones* that were not seen as disruptive to the rule of the Roman government.<sup>282</sup> For Cicero *religio* was both subjective to the individual while also constituting the establishing characteristic of a group of people within the Roman social order.<sup>283</sup> As a result, Cicero establishes the idea that Roman *religiones* could be narrowed down to those aspects which support civic authority. Thus cultic forms of identity such as those based around *religio* in the ancient Roman world had civic

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<sup>280</sup> Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion*, 46; Nongbri, "Dislodging 'Embedded' Religion," 448-449; Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 28-29; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 190-191.

<sup>281</sup> Červenková, "De Religione," 89-92; Perkins, "Tertullian the Carthaginian," 357-359.

<sup>282</sup> Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 10-17.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid*, 187-190.

associations which was part of the reason for Christian persecution.<sup>284</sup> Paradoxically Tertullian leans into this civic association in order to argue that Christian identity is inherently linked to civic loyalty to the Roman state. However, the changes that Tertullian makes to the legitimization of *religio* become significant to the developing the idea of an apolitical form of Christian identity by Lactantius.

One of the main distinguishing features which separates Cicero's use of *religio* and Tertullian's, is that Tertullian comes to define the legitimacy of a *religio* based on the object of worship rather than the practice of worship itself. For Cicero and Romans generally, as the last chapter discussed, the legitimacy of a *religio*, a practice of worship or the obligation to worship, was an independent issue to whether or not the deity worshiped by that particular practice was metaphysically genuine or not. The latter was a philosophical issue determined by intellectuals, which was separate from or even subordinate to the acceptability of a practice or the validity of the obligation, which was a social issue determined by common consensus or decree of state.<sup>285</sup> Tertullian explicitly calls out this dichotomy which he considers to be a hypocrisy, and instead suggests that a *religio* is legitimate only if its object is legitimate. After concluding his argument that non-Christian gods are not genuine gods, based on his interpretation of classical literature and the testimony of peoples claimed to be possessed by these deities, he makes the claim that:

All this testimony from them in which they deny themselves to be gods, in which they all respond that there is no other god aside from the one to whom we are dedicated, is appropriate testimony sufficient to refute the charge of

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<sup>284</sup> Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 1-4; Williams, *Defending and Defining the Faith*, 23.

<sup>285</sup> Červenková, "De Religione," 102; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 190-193.

offending public, and especially of violating the Roman obligation to worship (*Romanae religionis*). For if they are certainly not gods, then there is certainly no obligation to worship (*religio*); if there is no obligation to worship (*religio*), since they are certainly not gods, then we are certainly not violating the obligation to worship (*religio*). But on the contrary the reproach will rebound onto you, who worshiping a falsehood, not only neglect the true worship of the true God, but what is more, by assaulting it you in truth commit the crime of true impiety (*inreligiositatis*).<sup>286</sup>

This passage represents the conclusion to the first of the two central arguments of the *Apology*, that Roman gods have no right to be offended by the lack of Christian worship because they are not genuine gods.

Having established the metaphysical point that Roman gods are not genuine divinities, he makes the novel move to assert that because of this their *religiones* are also invalid. This novelty is evidenced by Tertullian's emphatic and redundant phrasing. Notice the way Tertullian repeats himself here: "*Si enim non sunt dei pro certo, nec religio pro certo est: si religio non est, quia nec dei pro certo.*" This could be an effort to make clear a point that would be unfamiliar to his audience. Furthermore this redundant phrasing provides emphasis to his point and suggests it is logically self-evident. While

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<sup>286</sup> Omnis ista confessio illorum, qua se deos negant esse quaque non alium deum respondent praeter unum, cui nos mancipamur, satis idonea est ad depellendum crimen laesae publicae et maxime Romanae religionis. Si enim non sunt dei pro certo, nec religio pro certo est: si religio non est, quia nec dei, pro certo, nec nos pro certo rei sumus laesae religionis. At e contrario in vos exprobratio ista resultabit, qui mendacium colentes veram religionem veri dei non modo neglegendo, quin insuper expugnando, in verum committitis crimen verae inreligiositatis. Tertullian, *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani Opera*, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954) xxiv.1-2 p.133. All translations are my own with consultation with Tertullian and Minucius Felix, *Apology. De Spectaculis. Minucius Felix: Octavius*. Loeb Classical Library 250. Terrot Glover and Gerald Rendall trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931).

this rhetorical tone is present throughout this work, here it could be used in an effort to persuade those who he knows do not think this way. More importantly however by defining *religio* based on its object rather than the actual practices involved, Tertullian is able to categorise Christian practices as *religiones* even if they are actually radically different from practices traditionally associated with *religiones*. This not only allows Tertullian to avoid the accusation of *irreligio* toward Roman gods, but also allows him to argue that only Christian practices are genuine *religio* for theirs is the only genuine God. This claim to a monopoly on cultic legitimacy would be unlikely to persuade any devout Roman pagan, but it does allow him to reaffirm to himself and his fellow Christians what he perceives to be the self-evident superiority of Christian worship. Thus Tertullian changes the usage of *religio* to assert the authority and legitimacy of Christian identity. This would also provide Christians with a source of legitimacy that theoretically did not require the acceptance of the Roman state.

This potential however would not be fully explored until Lactantius, for Tertullian does still attempt to argue that Christian *religio* has legal as well as theological validity even if persecutors refuse to admit it. Later within the same chapter Tertullian argues that since Christian practices are genuine *religiones* to deny Christians the right to worship is a violation of Roman law and common practice:

For consider if this also should not be added to the charge of impiety (*inreligiositatis*), to do away with the freedom of worship (*libertatem religionis*) and to prohibit the option of divinity, so that it is not permitted for me to worship whom I would, but I am forced to worship whom I would not. No one wants to be worshiped by the unwilling, not even a human being... but we

alone are prevented from having a form of worship (*religioni*) of our own. We offend the Romans, nor are we considered Romans who do not worship the Roman god.<sup>287</sup>

This demonstrates how Tertullian uses *religio* within his legal defence of Christianity. Under the Ciceronian understanding of *religio*, different peoples are allowed their own provided they are deemed legitimate. Tertullian has argued for an understanding of legitimate *religio* that includes Christianity earlier in this chapter of the *Apology*, and therefore he concludes that legally Christians should be accepted and have a place within the legitimate civic order of the Roman Empire. Having a valid *religio* within the Empire, Tertullian implies, ought to make Christians valid Romans.<sup>288</sup> Contrary to the way *religio* was treated earlier, here *religiones* are things that are not just possessed by Christians but all different people. This shows how Tertullian is drawing on the older model for understanding *religio* even though he imposes his own onto it in order to make his own legal defence.

The phrase “*libertatem religionis*” has attracted a lot of scholarly attention due to its potential to refer to an ancient parallel to the modern notion of ‘freedom of religion.’<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Videte enim, ne et hoc ad inreligiositatis elogium concurrat, adimere libertatem religionis et interdicere optionem divinitatis, ut non liceat mihi colere quem velim, sed cogar colere quem nolim. Nemo se ab invito coli volet, ne homo quidem... Sed nos soli arcemur a religionis proprietate! Laedimus Romanos nec Romani habemur, quia nec Romanorum deum colimus. xxiv.6-9 p.134-135.

<sup>288</sup> Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion*, 110.

<sup>289</sup> Atkins, “Tertullian on ‘The Freedom of Religion;’” Timothy Shah, “The Roots of Religious Freedom in Early Christian Thought”, in *Christianity and Freedom, Volume 1: Historical Perspectives* eds. Timothy Shah and Allen Hertzke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) 33-61; Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014), 78; John Rist, *Human Value: A Study of Ancient Philosophical Ethics* (Leiden: Brill, 1982) 159; Rodrigue Bélanger, “Le plaidoyer de Tertullien pour la liberté religieuse”, *Studies in Religion* 14.3 (1985), 281-291; Elaine Pagels, *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Viking, 2012), 131-132; Robert Wilken, “The Christian Roots of Religious Freedom”, in *Christianity and Freedom, Volume 1: Historical Perspectives* eds. Timothy Shah and Allen Hertzke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) 64-65; Lester K. Born, *Liberty, Dominion, and the Two Swords: On the Origins of Western Political Theology (180-398)* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 68.

It has even been argued that Tertullian's phrase could have played some small part in influencing the early modern political theorists John Locke and Thomas Jefferson on the subject.<sup>290</sup> More historically grounded research into this passage however has pointed out that, regardless of whatever its modern reception history might have been, Tertullian does not here assert any universal or human right to religious toleration. Rather here Tertullian is merely describing a negative freedom, the freedom from the external compulsion to engage in worship.<sup>291</sup> Furthermore, Tertullian is not describing an abstract philosophical principle, but a specific Roman policy.<sup>292</sup> What Tertullian is referring to here is a Ciceronian understanding of *religio*, which holds that any distinct ethnic or cultural group has their own *religio*, which are all equally valid within the Empire provided that none of them are harmful to the Roman state. Tertullian is critical of this position both because he believes it is hypocritical in light of the persecution of Christianity, and because he does not believe it. As he goes on to argue immediately following this passage, only Christian *religio* is true and valid: "Well it is that He is God of all, to Whom we all belong whether we wish it or not. But among you it is lawful to worship anything other than the True God, as if He were not rather the God of all, to Whom we all belong."<sup>293</sup> While Tertullian does aim to build on traditional Roman understandings to present Christianity as valid, he nevertheless changes them to suit his own theological claims.<sup>294</sup> It is not enough for him to assert that Christianity is a

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<sup>290</sup> Wilken, "The Christian Roots of Religious Freedom," 79-83.

<sup>291</sup> Rükpe, *from Jupiter to Christ*, 224-225; Atkins, "Tertullian on 'The Freedom of Religion,'" 147-150; Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion*, 110.

<sup>292</sup> Rükpe, *Ibid.*

<sup>293</sup> Bene quod omnium deus est, cuius, velimus ac nolimus, omnes sumus. Sed apud vos quodvis colere ius est praeter deum verum, quasi non hic magis omnium sit, cuius omnes sumus. xxiv.10 p.135.

<sup>294</sup> Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion*, 111.

legitimate Roman *religio*, but as the Christian God is the only true God, he implies that Christianity ought to be the only true Roman *religio*.

Tertullian however is aware of the changes he is making to Latin terminology and in some instances plays on the ambiguity created by the multiple meanings of the term. For example in chapter 35, in his discussion of the relationship between Roman civic festivals and loyalty to the Roman state, he uses the term *religio* not merely to mean devotion toward a legitimate source of authority as he has used it thus far. Rather he also builds on some of its older meanings having to do with scruples and cultic rites. On this point I disagree with Barton and Boyarin who argue that: “like many modern translators of paradoxical Latin words (*religio*, *sacer*, *fides*, *conscientia*, etc.), Tertullian deprived those words of their multidimensional depth and interest.”<sup>295</sup> In the beginning of the chapter Tertullian says:

Therefore, on account of this are Christians public enemies, because they do not say the emperors honors in vain, feigned or foolhardy ways, and also because as people of true morality (*religionis*) they celebrate the emperors’ festivals in a manner in keeping with one’s conscience (*conscientia*) rather than with shamelessness.<sup>296</sup>

While you can read into this passage the same meaning of *religio* and *conscientia* as used previously,<sup>297</sup> Tertullian juxtaposes those meanings with other senses of the terms in order to provide nuance to his position. Although acknowledging the one true

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<sup>295</sup> *Imagine No Religion*, 59

<sup>296</sup> Propterea igitur publici hostes Christiani, quia imperatoribus neque vanos neque mentientes neque temerarios honores dicant, quia verae religionis homines etiam solemnia eorum conscientia potius quam lascivia celebrant. xxxv.1 p.144.

<sup>297</sup> I will discuss Tertullian’s distinctive use of *conscientia* below.

devotion to the emperor motivated by recognition of universal truth, could drive someone to avoid licentious behaviour, so could genuine scruples motivated by reflecting on one's actions. Tertullian artfully allows for both meanings here.

Likewise later in the chapter, in discussing the contradiction of disorderly, immodest, and unlawful behavior being conducted in festivals to honour the emperor, whom he perceives as an embodiment of lawful orderliness, Tertullian comments sarcastically: "will *religio* be reckoned as an occasion for indulgence."<sup>298</sup> Again, since participation in such rites is considered part of dedication to the gods and the emperor for the Romans, and avoidance of such idolatry is part of true loyalty for Tertullian, you could read *religio* as devotion in this passage, but, given that the festival was considered a sacred rite, you could also read *religio* as ritual. The dual meaning adds greater subtlety to Tertullian's argument. Finally in addressing the ill-will felt toward Christians more directly, he says that:

And yet in this *religio* of a secondary majesty, of which Christians are charged with a secondary sacrilege for not celebrating with you the festivals of Caesars, in such a way that the reason for the occasion of celebrating should persuade us to greater indulgences than dignity permits, if they are celebrated in a way in which neither modesty, nor shame, nor chastity allows.<sup>299</sup>

Here Tertullian contrasts the meaning of *religio* in the sense of scruples, ritual, and devotion in one phrase. This emphasizes the irony that rituals to the gods should

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<sup>298</sup> Occasio luxuriae religio deputabitur. xxxv.3.

<sup>299</sup> Tamen in hac quoque religione secundae maiestatis, de qua in secundum sacrilegium convenimur Christiani non celebrando vobiscum sollemnia Caesarum, quo modo celebranda occasio voluptatius magis quam digna ratio persuasit, si nec modestia nec verecundia nec pudicitia permittunt. xxxv.5 p.145.

necessitate going against one's scruples. However, it also points out the irony that loyalty to the emperor means honoring him through rituals like a god such that a person could be accused of sacrilege for refusing them. Contrary to Barton and Boyarin's interpretation of this passage<sup>300</sup> Tertullian is aware of these multiple meanings and is playing off them, to critique not the Roman emperor by proxy but the specific aspect of Roman culture that he considers immoral. While Tertullian may believe in one true *religio*, which involves one genuine set of loyalties, one genuine set of rituals, and one genuine moral code, he nevertheless plays with these multiple meanings in order to make his case.

In changing the use of the term *religio*, Tertullian both builds on Cicero's use of *religio* and inverts it. Tertullian is nominally claiming to operate within this Ciceronian model. He appeals to Roman civic authority to judge the legitimacy of the *religio* of his group and does so by arguing that, contrary to the accusations made against them, Christians are not a threat to the rule of Roman government. But he undermines Roman authority ironically by taking the Ciceronian model to its logical extreme. He reduces Roman *religio* and Roman identity to merely civic allegiance and argues that people can and should reject all other forms of Roman cultural expression. While this practice of limiting *religio* to the legitimate is grounded on Cicero's idea. Tertullian begins the process of diverging from Cicero's thought by changing the source of the legitimacy of *religio* from social acceptance to objective truth. The change in sources of authority allows *religio* to develop into a distinct sphere of identity, removed from the approval of Roman society and eventually, in the hands of later writers, from the Roman state.

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<sup>300</sup> Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion*, 113.

Therefore, although he nominally submits Christian *religio* to be judged legitimate by Roman civic authority, in his mind Christian *religio* is unassailable and Romans are ultimately subject to a Christian authority. This represents the most fundamental change between the Ciceronian model of *religio* and Tertullian's: for Cicero there are multiple legitimate forms of *religio*, while for Tertullian the Christian *religio* is the only objectively legitimate one.

On this point I am in agreement with Denisa Červenková who argues that Tertullian develops Christian identity into the category of a *religio* in order to both present it as inherently implying loyalty to the Roman Empire, and argue that it is legitimized through its connection to truth and the worship of the true God.<sup>301</sup> Furthermore she argues that, while *religio* does have a rhetorical significance that accounts for its prominent use in the *Apology* and less prominent use in Tertullian's other works, his understanding of Christian identity is consistent across his works.<sup>302</sup> *Religio* for Tertullian represents an important tool by which Christianity is legitimized both metaphysically and within Roman society, as such it becomes central to his categorization of Christian identity as a whole.

### What does it Mean to be a Christian for Tertullian?

Arguably one of the central purposes of the *Apology* is to define Christian identity in relation to outsiders and this theme implicitly underpins many of the central arguments of the text. However, there is one passage toward the end of the text in

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<sup>301</sup> Červenková, "De Religione," 93-104.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid, 105-111.

which Tertullian explicitly expresses directly how he defines Christian identity. In chapter 39 after refuting the two main accusations against Christianity which take up the majority of the text, i.e. explaining what Christianity is not but is wrongly accused of being, he then spends the rest of the text explaining what Christianity is. The chapter opens with the line:

I will now reveal the business of the Christian faction, which, if I have not quite refuted that it is evil, I will show to be good, if ever I have revealed the truth. We are a society with a conscience of devotion both united in discipline and bound in hope.

*Edam iam nunc ego ipse negotia Christianae factionis, quo minus mala refutaverim, bona ostendam, si etiam veritatem revelaverim. Corpus sumus de conscientia religionis et disciplinae unitate et spei, foedere.*<sup>303</sup>

The primary characteristics that Tertullian is trying to here associate with Christianity, are cultic worship and morality, which are represented in the phrase “*conscientia religionis*.” Tertullian wishes to emphasise here the value of Christianity not just as a personal creed but as a healthy and morally upright community that is primarily distinguished from other aspects of Roman society by its *religio*.<sup>304</sup> However, for the clearest understanding of this quotation and the form of identity that Tertullian is trying to describe by it, it is necessary to discuss this passage term by term, focusing on the nouns Tertullian uses to refer to Christian identity.

Within the first sentence Tertullian primarily describes Christianity ironically in order to contrast its upright character with the mental image that persecutors have of it.

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<sup>303</sup> xxxix.1 p.172-173.

<sup>304</sup> Červenková, “De Religione,” 100-102, 111.

Thus the primary nouns he uses to describe it are *negotium* and *factio* which while they can be used neutrally, neither are without negative connotations. Firstly *negotium* has the primary meaning of business, work, or occupation, but also has another meaning of difficulty, pain, trouble, or annoyance.<sup>305</sup> Tertullian is playing on these double meanings to ironically suggest that he will show the truth behind the trouble caused by Christians or the truth behind the horrible acts they engage in, which of course is that they are completely baseless and that Christians' practices are normal and morally upright. *Negotium* is also a broad and neutral term that does not reveal much about what the activities it refers to entail. It is often used to refer to selective and chosen labours such as government office or a commercial business.<sup>306</sup> The use of this term begins the suggestion found in all of these nouns, that Tertullian's Christianity is an elective self-selecting community. Secondly the term *factio* has the meaning of a group of political dissidents or conspirators.<sup>307</sup> The use of this term and its applicability to Christians will be discussed far more extensively in the next chapter, but here is used ironically as is evidenced by the fact that not two pages later Tertullian argues explicitly that Christianity is not a *factio*.<sup>308</sup> The point of these terms is to ironically emphasize the rhetorical thrust of the sentence. They represent the negative mental image that opponents of Christianity have of Christians which having now been refuted will be contrasted against the positive terms he uses to genuinely describe Christian identity.

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<sup>305</sup> *TLL* 9.1.496.9-498.10; P. G. W. Glare and Stray Christopher (eds.), *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, Second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 1168-1169.

<sup>306</sup> *TLL* 9.1.498.10-499.44; Glare and Stray Christopher (eds.), *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1168-1169.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid*, 670; *TLL* 6.1.135.55-136.25; W. Jeffrey Tatum, "Factio (Roman Republic)," *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History* (Hoboken, NJ, USA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2013); Robin Seager, "Factio: Some Observations," *Journal of Roman Studies* 62 (1972): 53-58.

<sup>308</sup> xxxix.21.

The first of these Tertullian places at the very beginning of the next sentence. *Corpus* originally means 'body,'<sup>309</sup> but in this instance it is used to refer to a group of people in a very neutral way. This term has the sense of a self-selecting group gathered together for a common purpose, rather than an ethnic or racial group. It would not be used to define a group that one was born into, a group connected by social-othering, or a shared characteristic that its members could not change.<sup>310</sup> In this instance *corpus* could be used to describe an elective cult, which is probably the closest comparable group identity to what Tertullian is here trying to describe. However, this is complicated by the monotheistic exclusivity and the universalist claim to authority that Tertullian attributes to it. Also *corpus* is not commonly used to describe a philosophical group, due to its emphasis on collective rather than individual identity. *Corpus* in and of itself does not carry much in the way of specific connotations,<sup>311</sup> but serves here mostly as a blank canvas upon which Tertullian can place defining characteristics. This brings us to the two most significant terms in this sentence, *conscientia* and *religio* which are the primary terms which here Tertullian uses to describe Christian identity.

*Conscientia* for Tertullian represents an important theological concept which significantly informs his understanding of Christian universalism and correspondingly the acceptance of it is an important part of his Christian identity. The ancient Latin term *conscientia* carries the meanings of both of its English cognates 'consciousness' and 'conscience.' The term can mean an awareness of an action, particularly a shared or commonly held awareness of an action. The term also has the sense of a moral

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<sup>309</sup> *TLL* 4.999.73-75; Glare and Christofer (eds.), *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 448-449.

<sup>310</sup> *TLL* 4.1021.40-1022.80; Glare and Christofer (eds.), *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 448-449.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*

awareness of the rightness of one's own actions and a corresponding emotion of guilt or satisfaction.<sup>312</sup> However, in Latin writings primarily from late antiquity the term likewise has the slightly more nuanced meaning of knowledge or doctrine.<sup>313</sup> In Tertullian's usage the term has a very particular theological meaning that is significant to our understanding of Christian identity. Tertullian argues in his work *On the Testimony of the Soul*, and mentions in the *Apology*,<sup>314</sup> that the soul in its unborn state has an innate knowledge of the metaphysical nature of the universe.<sup>315</sup> Here Tertullian is building on a Stoic idea that the human conscience is universal and informed by nature.<sup>316</sup> This knowledge is present in everyone however it is suppressed by the promotion of non-Christian worship and theology by demons and daemon influenced people.<sup>317</sup> This innate knowledge has both a moral and practical dimension. Tertullian in the *Apology* repeatedly appeals to the *conscientia* of persecutors at the beginnings of his arguments. He is appealing both to a shared morality common to all men, in the sense of a universal conscience, within his arguments on the morality of persecution, but also, within his theological arguments, to a shared knowledge of the theological facts which all people innately possess.

For example in the beginning of chapter 10 of *Apology* Tertullian begins his argument on the nature of non-Christian gods by appealing to the *conscientia* of

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<sup>312</sup> TLL 4.364.23-268.24; Glare and Christofer (eds.), *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 411.

<sup>313</sup> TLL 4.368.24-77.

<sup>314</sup> For example see his comment "O testimonium animae naturaliter christianae" *Apology* xvii.6.

<sup>315</sup> Henry Chadwick, "Tertullian, Minucius Felix," in *The Church in Ancient Society, The Church in Ancient Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 118; Eric Osborn, *Tertullian, the First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1996) 80; Johannes Stelzenberger, 'Conscientia' bei Tertullianus, in *Vitae et Veritati, Festgabe für Karl Adam* (Düsseldorf, 1956); Michel Spanneut, *Tertullien et les Premiers Moralistes Africains* (Gembloux, 1969) 12-15.

<sup>316</sup> Spanneut, *Tertullien et les Premiers Moralistes Africains*, 12-15.

<sup>317</sup> *On the Testimony of the Soul*, i-iii.

persecutors: “‘but to us,’ you say, ‘they are gods.’ We appeal to and we direct you to your conscience (*conscientiam*); let it judge us, let it condemn us.”<sup>318</sup> Here Tertullian is not appealing to their ‘conscience’ in a moral sense, but rather to a common understanding of divinity grounded on shared knowledge. Tertullian’s position which he goes on to argue, is that non-Christian Romans do not treat their gods or holy places in a manner truly befitting true divinities or holy places. This is because non-Christian Romans unconsciously know that these are not real gods or holy-places and thus do act accordingly. Christians therefore are those who acknowledge the truth of their *conscientia* and let it guide their actions.<sup>319</sup> Thus a society of people defined by “*conscientia religionis*” are those who perform *religiones* based on their *conscientia*, the theological common sense present in all people but only acted upon by a few.

Tertullian’s use of *religio* has already been discussed at some length and I will not repeat myself now; in this instance however it is simply worth pointing out that it is ambiguous whether *religio* refers to ritual actions performed for a god, morality, or devotion toward objects worthy of devotion. However, paired with *conscientia* it does carry a particular meaning important to understanding of Tertullian’s Christian identity. *Conscientia* here refers to the knowledge of the truth of Christianity, clarified by *religio* as having to do with correct worship, morality, and devotion. The role of *religio* also implies action: of all those who possess *conscientia* unconsciously, Christians are the ones who actively acknowledge it and choose to act on this knowledge. Much like Cicero before him, as was discussed in the last chapter, Tertullian does not have faith in

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<sup>318</sup> ‘Sed nobis,’ inquitis, ‘dei sunt.’ Appellamus et provocamus a vobis ad conscientiam vestram; illa nos iudicet, illa nos damnet. x.3 p.105-106.

<sup>319</sup> I make an argument similar to this in the Major research paper of my Master’s Degree: *The Category of Religion in the Apologetic Writings of Tertullian*, 45-47 (unpublished).

his religion but rather knowledge of how the world works and actions which correspond to it. It is simply that Tertullian is proposing that a different understanding of the world is true; the actions which he goes on to describe serve merely to emphasize the truth of Tertullian's claim. *Religio* also has civic connotations as I will discuss in the final section of this chapter, but implies an unity and a loyalty that undermines accusations against seditiousness of Christians.<sup>320</sup>

The final two descriptors that I will discuss from this sentence are the two noun phrases "*disciplinae unitate*" and "*spei foedere*," which serve to further refine Tertullian's characterization of Christian communities, specifically highlighting their moral uprightness and unity. However, in some ways these phrases are the most obscure parts of this sentence, the particular meanings of which are somewhat unclear.

*Disciplina* carries much of the same range of meanings as its English cognate discipline; however this does not help us much to narrow down Tertullian's meaning here. *Disciplina* can mean teaching, instruction, training, or a branch of study such as a philosophical school or sect, or it could mean a particular system, practice or method, or the orderly and moral conduct of an individual or group.<sup>321</sup> Within the works of Tertullian *disciplina* has been understood to mean both rules or practices which for Christians come either from scripture or nature, and which for Christian communities can have the force of law.<sup>322</sup> However, the phrase "*disciplina unitatis*" has also been seen to refer merely to the basic lifestyle of a Christian and has the implication of shared fraternal love and positive reciprocal relationship to God.<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> Červenková, "De Religione," 110.

<sup>321</sup> TLL 5.1.1317.28-1326.74; Glare and Christofer (eds.), *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 550.

<sup>322</sup> Spanneut, *Tertullien et les Premiers Moralistes Africains*, 16-17.

<sup>323</sup> Červenková, "De Religione," 110.

In this context *disciplina* is likely meant largely to emphasize the cohesiveness and morality of Christian groups. It also suggests that for Tertullian it is behavior inspired by knowledge rather than knowledge or belief itself which defines a Christian. *Disciplina* also carries the association of a philosophical group.<sup>324</sup> This is consistent with Tertullian's repeated use of the term *secta* to refer to Christian groups which has a similar association.<sup>325</sup> For Tertullian Christian groups are akin to philosophical groups in the sense conferred by these words, namely that they have a doctrine of knowledge not commonly believed by all which informs their morality and actions in a manner that differs from common practice. However, as I discuss below Tertullian is keen to separate Christian groups from the associations of the term *philosophia*. *Unitas* emphasises the uniformity and collectivity of Christian groups for this moral discipline, and firmly suggests that Christians are of one mind and action the things Tertullian is describing.<sup>326</sup> It is claims to unity which Tertullian uses to support his claim to theological truth.

Finally "*spei foedere*" remains the most mysterious and obscure phrase within this sentence. *Foedus* refers to a formal agreement either between individuals or groups such as a contract or treaty.<sup>327</sup> Qualified by *spes*, which has the meaning of hope or expectation,<sup>328</sup> this seems to suggest that Christians are bound by some agreement on which their hopes rely. It is likely that this is a reference to the expectation of salvation which they are owed by God, but nevertheless this remains unclear. These two final

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<sup>324</sup> TLL 5.1.1323.7-1324.72; Glare and Christofer (eds.), *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 550.

<sup>325</sup> Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 15, 194; Červenková, "De Religione," 106, 110.

<sup>326</sup> On meanings of *Unitas* see Glare and Christofer (eds.), *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 2094.

<sup>327</sup> TLL 6.1.1002.23-1006.28; Glare and Christofer (eds.), *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 718-719.

<sup>328</sup> Glare and Christofer (eds.), *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1803-1804.

noun phrases therefore emphasize that Christian groups are characterised by unity in thought, action, fellow-feeling, moral discipline, and the shared promise of salvation. Putting together the entire sentence then, within this passage Tertullian defines Christian groups as self-selective groups defined by their universalist cultic devotion, and further characterized by their shared affection, unity, morality, and the promise of salvation. In terms of pre-existing categories of identity Tertullian is describing Christianity as an elective cultic group but with a universalist claim that results in a greater assertion of authority than such a group would normally possess. The final two noun phrases serve to add further detail and refute the misconceptions others have about Christians.

Having established what Christians are, Tertullian then goes on to describe what Christians are not. Specifically Tertullian argues that Christian groups are neither a *factio*<sup>329</sup> or a *philosophia*.<sup>330</sup> These passages will be discussed in greater depth in chapter 3 on Minucius Felix in order to best contrast the differences between their two arguments. For here it is sufficient to say that these passages continue to reinforce the view of Christianity as a cultic group. Also Tertullian while he emphasises that Christians have a civic loyalty to the Roman state and should not be considered a threat to it, leans into the civic implications of a universalist cultic group in order to argue for the authority and not just the legitimacy of Christianity.

The final category of identity worth briefly discussing, is Tertullian's use of racial language and categories in relation to Christian identity. While Tertullian within the *Apology* and other works does on occasion use racial language to describe aspects of

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<sup>329</sup> *Apology*, xxxix.21-xli.5.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid*, xlvi.2-18.

Christian identity, on the whole he dismisses the category in favor of a more self-selective group identity. For instance in chapter 1 of the *Apology* Tertullian makes a few suggestions of racial identity but largely in a figurative sense:

May it be permitted that if only by the hidden way of secret writings, truth may reach your ears... It knows itself to go as a stranger over the earth, among foreigners it easily finds enemies, but yet it knows itself to have a race (*genus*), a home, a hope, gratitude, and dignity in heaven.<sup>331</sup>

Here while Tertullian does make use of potentially racial terms such as *genus* and does make reference to the concept of a homeland and foreignness, they are here heavily abstracted. It is worth noting here that the subject of the latter sentence which is being described by these terms, although not stated, is truth as an abstract notion rather than the persons of Christians specifically. Rather than defining Christian identity racially the terms seem mostly used to metaphorically express Christians' relationship with others. The impetus of which is to associate Christian identity with ties to spiritual realities beyond common civic and racial identities of the earth.

A similar disregard for a racial understanding of Christian identity can be seen in Tertullian's comments on the difference between Christians and Jews within the *Apology*. While Tertullian discusses this point at far greater length in his other works, those discussions are largely based on theological debates over the nature of scripture, and are meant mostly to address internal Christian debates. His comments within the *Apology* however, while brief, nevertheless more directly address how Christians and

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<sup>331</sup> Liceat veritati vel occulta via tacitarum litterarum ad aures vestras pervenire... Scit se peregrinam in terris agere, inter extraneos facile inimicos invenire, ceterum genus, sedem, spem, gratiam, dignitatem in caelis habere. i.1-2 p.85.

Jews should be understood by the world at large and thus more directly addresses issues concerning categories of identity. In the *Apology* Tertullian states Christians are in fact distinct from Jews because: “neither with regard to dietary exceptions, nor ritual days, nor the mark of the body itself, nor connection to the name, do we have anything to do with the Jews.”<sup>332</sup> Tertullian's claim to the divergence of Christian and Jewish identities is not merely grounded on Christian theological superiority, although he also makes this claim at length in other works. Rather he asserts a strong cultural difference grounded on traditional markers of Jewish identity which are absent among Christians. None of the points of difference that Tertullian lists here are necessarily racial. Thus Tertullian present Christians and Jews as distinctive cultural groups, rather than explicitly categorizing either as a racial group.

Furthermore in Tertullian's comments on Christian theology and how it differs from the views of others, he emphasises the self-selectiveness of Christian identity. For instance in describing the Christian theology on the events of the day of judgement and their apparent absurdity, he states that: “at one time even we ourselves laughed at these things. We are of you. Christians are made, not born.”<sup>333</sup> Tertullian seeks to draw a point of common humanity between himself and his perceived pagan interlocuter. This is a rhetorical strategy commonly employed in this work, although usually through the idea of *conscientia* and Christian universalism; however here it is done inversely to suggest that Tertullian understands pagan incredulity. The argument is that although it sounds absurd, those who hear him out to the end will come to see the truth of it just as

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<sup>332</sup> Neque de victus exceptionibus neque de solemnitatibus dierum neque de ipso signaculo corporis neque de consortio nominis cum Iudaeis agimus. xxi.2 p.123.

<sup>333</sup> Haec et nos risimus aliquando. De vestris sumus: fiunt, non nascuntur Christiani. xviii.4 p.118.

he did. This firmly supports the idea that for Tertullian Christian identity is not a born attribute but something that is acquired through both knowledge and participation in ritual and community. The comment “we are of you” implies that racially and to a degree culturally Christians are pagan in their origins. While everyone according to Tertullian has some innate understanding of Christian truth, not everyone is Christian, to become Christian one must consciously acknowledge this truth and live according to it. Thus Christians are made not born for to possess the identity requires an active choice and intellectual consideration. This also supports the view that for Tertullian Christianity is not favored to one race, but is universally open to all who choose to become Christian.

The final thing to discuss in regards to Tertullian and racial understandings is his infamous “third race” comment regarding Christianity. Tertullian makes this comment in chapter 8 of Book 1 of his *To the Nations*: “clearly then we are called the third race (*tertium genus*)... If this at any rate has any meaning among you, I wish you would reveal to us the first and second in order that the third may be made clear.”<sup>334</sup> Within the chapter Tertullian goes on to speculate as to what could constitute a first or second race and what would make Christians a third. It is clear that Tertullian is responding to a specific accusation made against Christians which he like other Christians at the time interpreted as an insult,<sup>335</sup> but it is also clear that Tertullian does not know what the phrase means, and correspondingly he criticizes it as meaningless.<sup>336</sup> In this way Tertullian not only rejects the racial understanding of Christianity, but seems not even to

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<sup>334</sup> Plane, *tertium genus dicimur. Cynopennae aliqui vel Sciapode vel aliqui de subterrane<o> antipodes? Si qua istic apud vos salte<m> ratio est, edatis velim primum et secundum genus, ut ita de tertio constet. To the Nations* I.viii.1 p.21.

<sup>335</sup> Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*, 261-262.

<sup>336</sup> I make an argument similar to this in the Major research paper of my Master’s Degree: *The Category of Religion in the Apologetic Writings of Tertullian*, 30.

fully comprehend it. He goes on to say “truly reconsider lest that those who you call the third race, obtain the first place, since in fact there is not any race that is not Christian.”<sup>337</sup> Here Tertullian although rhetorically on the back foot takes the opportunity to assert his universalist claim, and in so doing undermines the view that Christian identity is racial in that their identity is present across differences of race. Denise Buell has astutely noted that Tertullian rejects the designation ‘third race’ and indeed racial categories for Christian identity more broadly in order to present it as compatible with Roman identity. Tertullian is keen to present Christians as ideal Roman citizens and characterizes them as a cultic and not distinctly as a racial group in order that Christian identity can exist alongside Roman racial or civic identity.<sup>338</sup> However, while Tertullian is keen to seamlessly fit Christian identity into the Roman socio-political world, he also wants to claim for Christianity a universalist cultic authority and reject any claim that Roman culture might have on Christians. This creates a tension within his work, which complicates our understanding of his civic allegiance to Roman authority.

### Tertullian’s ‘Loyalty’ to the Roman Empire

Before I begin analysing Tertullian’s argument on Christian civic allegiance towards the Roman Emperor and Roman Empire in detail, it is worth considering where this argument fits in the *Apology* as a whole to show its significance as well as its rhetorical purpose. In contrast to *Ad Nationes*, the *Apology* is aimed at refuting the

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<sup>337</sup> Verum recogitate, ne quos tertium genus dicitis, principem locum optineant, siquidem non ulla gens non Christiana. Itaque quaecumque gens prima, nihilominus Christiana. *To the Nations* I.viii.9-10 p.22.

<sup>338</sup> Buell, *Why This New Race*, 149-151.

accusations against Christians which led to Christian persecution specifically by Roman authorities. To this end Tertullian takes up a legalistic framework in order to demonstrate that Christians are innocent before the Roman law.<sup>339</sup> After the initial sections where Tertullian criticizes the illegal and unjust treatment of Christians in court (chapters 1 to 6), and addresses the specific and faulty rumours against Christians (chapters 7 to 9), Tertullian spends the majority of the rest of the text addressing what he feels are the two primary accusations against Christians: “*irreligio*” toward the gods (chapters 10 to 27), and “*titulum laesae... maiestatis*” against the emperor (chapters 28 to 38). For the former Tertullian argues that Christians cannot commit *irreligio* toward gods that are not actual gods. Tertullian here constructs *religio*, used in the sense of devotion and loyalty grounded in moral and ritual actions, as an objective rather than subjective category, that can only genuinely be inculcated in people when its object itself is objectively worthy of such devotion and loyalty. Correspondingly *irreligio* is used in the sense of disloyalty and disrespect toward beings or persons whom one is objectively obliged to serve. While he would concede that if Roman gods were genuine gods, then Christians would be in the wrong and committing *irreligio* against them, he repaints the Roman model of the divine order of the world in order to put Christians in the right. He argues that worshipers of Roman gods themselves do not have *religio* toward their gods and therefore they are not genuine gods. In his argument regarding offense against the emperor, Tertullian will continue to build on this meaning of *religio*. However, he expands the term to apply not merely to humans’ relationship to the gods but also to their relationships to human authorities.

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<sup>339</sup> Williams, *Defending and Defining the Faith*, 21, 24-25; Parvis, “Justin Martyr and the Apologetic Tradition,” 123, 127; Ames, “La Apología y el Diálogo en los Primeros Apologistas Latinos,” 52-53.

With respect to the charge of *laesae maiestatis* against the emperor, Tertullian has to take a different but related tack. Rather than challenge the emperor's right to be offended, as he did with the Roman gods, he completely denies the accusation. As others have noted, a careful study of Tertullian's works reveals that in spite of any conflicts he might have towards it, he does view the Roman state positively.<sup>340</sup> He argues that Christians' actions neither are intended to be, nor ought to be, offensive toward the emperor, and indeed the emperor is not actually offended by them. To make this case, which could seem rather contrary to the evidence, Tertullian has to prove three things. Firstly Christians are in fact loyal to the emperor and the empire, and reflect it in their actions. Secondly the emperor is, contrary to the actions of his government, in favour of Christians and willing to accept their loyalty. Finally the way in which Christians express their loyalty, or in his words their *religio*, toward the emperor and empire is in fact the correct way of doing so. This is understandably a difficult argument to make but he does so by building off his earlier arguments and repainting the divine order by which traditional Roman worshippers understand how the world works. Just as he did with his earlier point, he uses traditional Roman worshippers' own actions and behaviors to reinterpret how they see their world and argues for his own Christian perspective of it. In the final section of the *Apology* (chapters 39 to 50) Tertullian describes the truth of Christians' character and the reality of their beliefs in order to fully show their innocence, as I have already discussed. In this he significantly relies on what he has established here: the image of the Christian as the loyal and peaceful Roman and the divine model of the universe in which such a thing is feasible.

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<sup>340</sup> Osborn, "Tertullian as Philosopher and Roman," 244.

This divine model of the universe could be seen as undermining the authority of the Roman state, but it nevertheless emphasises both the legitimacy of the Empire and the authority it has over the Christian citizens of it. The system of authority that Tertullian is arguing for here is an attempt to insert the authority of the Roman political state and the person of the emperor beneath the authority of the Christian God, but above that of the rest of humanity. In the *Apology* Tertullian presents the natural order of authority in the universe to be first the Christian monotheistic God, then the emperor and the Roman state, then the rest of humanity, followed last by demons, evil spirits and pagan gods. *Religio* for Tertullian consists of, among other meanings, the acknowledgement of this order and subsequent devotion to those above one through the appropriate moral and ritualistic means. Christians are defined by, among other things, this *religio*, and correspondingly have a more genuine devotion to the emperor and the Roman state than those who do not have this *religio*. A result of this is that while the emperor himself is not divine, in Tertullian's view, the emperor and the authority of the Roman state do in a way carry a divine mandate as they were set up to rule humanity by God. Tertullian's rhetorical methods often involve contrasting this perspective, which he presents as objectively true, against the pagan belief in the order of authority being first demons i.e. pagan gods, then the emperor and Roman state, and finally the rest of humanity. Tertullian argues that this is both an inaccurate depiction of how the world actually operates (metaphysically, civic, and practically), and an insult to the emperor insofar as it makes him subject to the lowest order of beings. Furthermore by worshiping him and his *genius* as a god, pagans lower the emperor to the level of demons, further insulting him. It is worth noting that within this model of authority,

*religio*, in this sense of ritualistic loyalty, can equally apply to both Christians' relation to God and the Christians' relation to the emperor as fellow Romans. Indeed Tertullian's argument rests on the claim that Christians are defined by both.

Tertullian begins this argument in chapters 28 and 29 by analysing how the Roman government treats its gods, with the goal of showing that traditional Roman worshipers' ideas about the authority of their gods and the actual authority that such gods hold within the Roman government do not correspond. He starts with this point to provide a basis of evidence traditional Roman worshipers would accept from which he can begin to undermine traditional Roman assumptions and lay the foundation for his more radical claims. Having a point of contact between the Christian and Roman is central to the rhetorical goals of a Christian apologetic work.<sup>341</sup> In the beginning of chapter 28, after he concludes his argument on why Christians refuse to sacrifice to pagan gods, Tertullian claims that daemons, the intelligence behind pagan gods, manipulate the Roman government into forcing Christians into idolatry. They do this by calling upon an authority greater than pagan gods, namely the office of the emperor:

Ought there be at hand the right of the free man to say: 'I do not want Jove to be favourable to me; who is he to you? Let angry Janus meet me with whichever face he wants; what is it to you?' but you have been influenced certainly by those very same spirits, so that you compel us to sacrifice for the wellbeing of the emperor (*pro salute imperatoris*), and the necessity is imposed upon you to compel us, just as we are obliged to face the danger.<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Osborn, *Tertullian, the First Theologian of the West*, 84.

<sup>342</sup> Ne prae manu esset iure libertatis dicere: Nolo mihi lovem propitium; tu quis es? Me conveniat Ianus iratus qua velit fronte; quid tibi mecum est? formati estis ab eisdem utique spiritibus, ut nos pro salute

Here he ironically proposes that a free man legally ought to have the right to call the wrath of gods upon himself, but that Roman non-Christians are only truly forced to make Christians sacrifice when the wellbeing of the emperor is at stake. He juxtaposes and equates the Roman government's obligation to ensure that people are sacrificing "*pro salute imperatoris*" and the Christians' obligation to resist idolatry to the point of martyrdom. This comparison both serves as the beginning of his critique of the place of the Roman gods in their government and his acknowledgement of the genuine authority of the Roman emperor. It is here implied that if the Roman gods were genuinely in the highest position of authority people would sacrifice to them willingly and the gods would not need to rely on a yet higher position of authority, that of the emperor, in order to force people to worship them. However, Tertullian emphasizes that this is in fact a clever ploy as people are genuinely obligated to serve the emperor, so much so that he equates it to Christians' absolute obligation toward martyrdom. As I will argue below, Tertullian will continue to emphasize that both the Christian God and the Roman emperor have genuine authority, and that it is the same obligation to serve one's betters that motivates people to loyalty toward both of them.

He then launches into a reflection on how traditional Roman worshipers both rightly and wrongly elevate the emperor and government above their own gods. By separating the authority of the Roman government from the authority of pagan gods, Tertullian allows for loyalty to the former while rejecting the latter. This serves his Christian apologetic purposes while also allowing an acknowledgement of the authority of the Roman state yet still rejecting its culture. Following his earlier more sarcastic

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imperatoris sacrificare cogatis, et inposita est tam vobis necessitas cogendi, quam nobis obligatio periclitandi. *Apoloogy*, xxviii.1-2 p.139-140.

point, in a slightly more formal tenor he acknowledges that he is now changing the subject to discuss Christians' alleged disloyalty to the emperor:

We come, therefore, to the second [charge,] the indictment of offense against a more august majesty (*augustioris maiestatis*), since with greater dread and shrewder fear you heed Caesar than the Olympian Jove himself, and rightly too, if only you knew... indeed in this you will thus be found disloyal (*inreligiosi*) to your gods, since you devote more fear to human rule.<sup>343</sup>

The use of the term *maiestas* here has been seen to refer both to the specific law by which insulting the person of the emperor was made illegal,<sup>344</sup> and as a title of respect by Tertullian that acknowledges the authority and sovereignty of the Emperor.<sup>345</sup> Here Tertullian uses *inreligiosi* to represent a lack of due respect and fear toward the divine, but it is here used to demonstrate its lack of teeth within the Roman religious system. Tertullian clearly believes that it is wrong for the authority of human beings to be above that of the divine. However, there is a paradox in this critique, as he still wishes to emphasize that traditional Roman worshipers are right to do so, for pagan gods lack the authority of God and are in fact lesser than humans, and than the emperor, as the leader of all human beings, most of all. It is based on critiques like this that Tertullian argues that Roman worship of their gods, and Roman *religio*, can only ever be an act of

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<sup>343</sup> Ventum est igitur ad secundum titulum laesae augustioris maiestatis, siquidem maiore formidine et callidior timiditate Caesarem observatis quam ipsum de Olympo louem, et merito, si sciatis... adeo et in isto inreligiosi erga deos vestros deprehendemini, qui plus timoris humano dominio dicatis. xxviii.3-4 p.140.

<sup>344</sup> Atkins, "Tertullian on 'The Freedom of Religion,'" 170.

<sup>345</sup> Osborn, "Tertullian as Philosopher and Roman," 244; Roy Kearsley, *Tertullian's Theology of Divine Power. Rutherford Studies in historical Theology*, ed. David Wright and Donald Macleod (Edinburgh: Paternoster Press, 1998) 17-18, 21.

willful ignorance for their own actions and emotions constantly contradict that belief.<sup>346</sup>

One of the results of this argument is that the authority of the pagan gods and the authority of the Roman government and emperor, are rendered mutually exclusive. Since the traditional Roman worshipers' lack of respect toward their gods is taken as evidence that they lack authority, the fact that traditional Roman worshipers do show respect toward their emperor and the imperial government correspondingly stands as evidence that it does have genuine authority.

Tertullian then argues that, contrary to Roman beliefs, sacrificing to Roman gods '*pro salute imperatorum*' is not an example of *religio*, for Roman gods cannot provide aid to the emperor, and the emperor is in fact superior to these beings. Having earlier described his view that Roman gods are in fact daemons or fallen angels, he refers back to this claim in order to show disparagingly how their nature makes them antithetical to the task of supporting the emperor:

Let us first be sure these beings, those to whom sacrifices are offered, can bestow wellbeing to the emperors or to any person, and thus sentence us to the crime of treason (*maiestatis*), if the nature of the worst spirits, angels or daemons, can in any way do good, if the corrupt can save, if the damned can liberate, if indeed, in your conscience (*conscientia*), the dead can protect the living.<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> A similar rhetorical strategy is employed when Tertullian earlier in the *Apologeticus* when he criticizes the Romans for deciding a god's divinity in the senate. "Nam, ut supra praestrinximus, status dei cuiusque in senatus aestimatione pendebat. Deus non erat, quem homo consultus nolisset et nolendo damnasset." xiii.3 p.111.

<sup>347</sup> Constet igitur prius, si isti, quibus sacrificatur, salutem imperatoribus vel cuilibet homini inpertire possunt, et ita nos crimini maiestatis addicite, si angeli aut daemones, substantia pessimi spiritus beneficium aliquod operantur, si perditii conservant, si damnati liberant, si denique, quod in conscientia vestra est, mortui vivos tuentur. xxix.1 p.140.

Once again Tertullian uses *maiestas* to show that it is not that he holds that it is wrong to punish those who offend the emperor but that in this particular instance the charge is unjust.<sup>348</sup> Also here Tertullian makes use of his concept of *conscientia*, the idea that inherently in all people is the subconscious knowledge of the truth of the metaphysical nature of the world, which motivates people's actions even where they directly contradict their conscious beliefs. In this case it is the belief that sacrifice to Roman gods has a benefit to the Roman state. This meaning is emphasized by his use of ridiculing language which juxtaposes the true nature of Roman gods with what they are believed to accomplish. This passage places terms of opposite meaning immediately next to each other: "si perditii conservant, si damnati liberant, si... mortui vivos tuentur." Tertullian uses this phrasing to make his position seem both obvious and objectively true. He implies that just as certainly as anyone can tell the difference between a dead man and a live one, or an imprisoned man and a free one, so too they should and are able to see the difference between a true and false god. Tertullian asserts that traditional Roman worshipers can, on some level, perceive the true nature of these beings and can see this inherent contradiction for what it is.

It is for this reason that he argues that the perceived beneficent role of pagan gods in the Roman state must necessarily be an act of willful ignorance. He continues to argue that traditional Roman worshipers' treatment of their gods continues to betray this lack of genuine belief. He comments on how the images of false gods which are supposed to provide protection for the emperor and those that these spirits ought to protect, are in fact guarded by the emperor's military, made of materials from the

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<sup>348</sup> Osborn, "Tertullian as Philosopher and Roman," 244; Kearsley, *Tertullian's Theology of Divine Power*, 17-18, 21.

emperor's mines, housed on the emperor's land, and subject to the emperor's wrath. He ironically observes that the true crime of Christians is that they alone take the wellbeing of the emperors seriously enough that they do not entrust it to false gods.<sup>349</sup> He concludes by saying: "but it is you who are devout (*religiosi*), who seek for it where it is not, who ask for it from those who cannot give it, who disregard Him in whose power it is."<sup>350</sup> Here Tertullian uses three successive relative clauses of a roughly parallel structure to emphasize the inherent futility to Roman worship. His position is that because Roman beliefs are inherently untrue, so too their worship is inherently insincere and ineffective. It is worth emphasizing that *religio* here is not directed toward the gods but toward the emperor. Because of Tertullian's concept of *conscientia*, and because for Tertullian *religio* is objective rather than subjective, Roman sacrifices *pro salute imperatorum* are inherently insincere because they are inherently ineffective and therefore they do not have the ritual based devotion which they are obligated to have towards their superiors. It is against this that Tertullian contrasts his image of Christians. In the very next line he asserts: "furthermore you fight against those who know how to ask for it, who indeed can attain it since they know how to ask for it."<sup>351</sup> Here again he uses a succession of relative clauses to emphasize and juxtapose what he perceives as the inherent difference between Christian and Roman worship. Based on this argument and set of concepts it is Christians alone who are not only willing, but actually capable of the proper ritualist devotion owed toward the emperor.

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<sup>349</sup> xxix.2-4.

<sup>350</sup> Sed vos religiosi, qui eam quaeritis ubi non est, petitis a quibus dari non potest, praeterito eo in cuius est potestate. xxix.5 p.141.

<sup>351</sup> Insuper eos debellatis qui eam sciunt petere, qui etiam possunt impetrare, dum sciunt petere. Ibid.

Building from this, Tertullian then argues in chapters 30 to 34 that, contrary to expectations, Christians indeed are favourably disposed toward the emperor, and perhaps more shocking, Tertullian asserts that the emperor is inherently well disposed toward the Christian God. The beginning of chapter 30 starts with this assertion: “For we for the wellbeing of the emperors (*pro salute imperatorum*) call upon the eternal God, the true God, the living God, whom the emperors themselves prefer to have well-disposed toward them, more than the rest of the gods.”<sup>352</sup> Tertullian uses the trope phrase “*pro salute imperatorum*” to show a point of similarity between Christian and Roman worship. Tertullian uses this phrase to show that Christian worship does support the emperor. However, the rest of the passage does not merely equate Christian and Roman worship, but emphasizes the difference in their object of worship to show Christian superiority. His language here contrasts the genuine and positive aspects of the Christian with negative aspects of Roman gods which made them unable to provide the wellbeing of emperors. Tertullian argues that pagan gods were historical figures who were falsely elevated to the position of god, and are thus long dead human beings in contrast to “the living God.” Likewise, the pagans’ gods only falsely possess the title of god in contrast to “the eternal God, the true God.” It is this objective effectiveness which Tertullian asserts, despite all cultural and historical differences to the contrary, puts the Roman emperor and the Christian God in good standing. The logic is that since Roman gods are so ineffectual, it is only with the support of the Christian God that the Roman Empire and the office of emperor could achieve dominance. God has set up the Roman government in order to rule over mankind, and

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<sup>352</sup> Nos enim pro salute imperatorum deum invocamus aeternum, deum verum, deum vivum, quem et ipsi imperatores propitium sibi praeter ceteros malunt. xxx.1 p.141.

therefore Christians ought to, and according to Tertullian do, respect the authority of the Roman government qua government.

Whether or not Tertullian is genuinely as loyal to the Roman Empire as he claims to be in this work has been the subject of scholarly debate. Scholars such as Geoffery Dunn and Dennis Groh point to Tertullian's other works such as *To the Martyrs* and *On the Philosopher's Cloak* in which Roman authority is presented in far less balanced terms. They suggest that Tertullian's hard and fast rules on idolatry correspond to a segregationist's rejection of all things Roman including the Roman state.<sup>353</sup> In this view the arguments of the *Apology* are believed to be insincere and were only written due to the necessity of providing Christians with a defence against an external and overwhelmingly powerful social and civic power. Roy Kearsley has argued that the arguments of the *Apology* were sincere, but that over time Tertullian became more cynical and aggressive toward the Roman state, until the point where he would have recanted his earlier loyalty.<sup>354</sup> However, other scholars such as Eric Osborn and others have taken a more subtle approach which better serves to explain the complexity of Tertullian's position. These scholars acknowledge that subordinating of the authority of the Roman state under the authority of God does allow Tertullian to reject nearly all aspects of Roman culture, while it also allows for civic loyalty toward the Roman state in spite of this.<sup>355</sup> By understanding how specifically Tertullian categorises the nature of Roman identity and its relationship to his understanding of Christian identity, as the

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<sup>353</sup> Dennis Groh, "Tertullian's Polemic against Social Co-Optation," *Church History* 40.1 (1971) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3163101>; Geoffrey Dunn, *Tertullian* (London: Routledge, 2004) 41-43.

<sup>354</sup> Kearsley, *Tertullian's Theology of Divine Power*, 46-48.

<sup>355</sup> Osborn, "Tertullian as Philosopher and Roman," 241-244; Osborn, *Tertullian, the First Theologian of the West*, 84-85; Atkins, "Tertullian on 'The Freedom of Religion,'" 170-172; Burrows, "Christianity in the Roman Forum," 211-213.

method of this thesis aims to do, the reasons and complexities behind these subtleties and tensions within Tertullian's work are better explained.

Tertullian's claim that the Roman government has the support of the Christian God, is not completely out of the blue, for even in the beginning of this section when he first outlines the charges leveled against Christians, he is careful to emphasize that the charge of treason is the more unjustified of two since Christians are loyal to the emperor: "'the gods,' you say, 'you do not worship and you do offer sacrifice to the emperors.' It follows that we do not sacrifice for others for the same reason that we do not sacrifice for ourselves, [namely] not ever worshipping the gods. Thus sacrilege and treason we are charged with at the same time."<sup>356</sup> Here Tertullian engages in his standard rhetorical ploy of using indirect speech to put words in the mouth of his opponent in order to then refute this position. Tertullian's fictional Roman accuser associates the not worshipping of pagan gods with the not supporting of the emperor. By pointing out that not sacrificing to pagan gods includes not sacrificing to the emperor without actively singling out the emperor, Tertullian is able to show the faulty assumptions of this argument. He distinguishes not worshipping Roman gods from disloyalty to the Roman government, and with his usual irony notes that it is only under their mistaken view that traditional Roman worshipers see these as connected. While it may seem a counterintuitive claim, Tertullian is careful throughout the *Apology* to never present the Christian as anything other than a loyal Roman.

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<sup>356</sup> Deos, inquitis, non colitis, et pro imperatoribus sacrificia non penditis. Sequitur ut eadem ratione pro aliis non sacrificemus, qua nec pro nobis ipsis, semel deos non colendo. Itaque sacrilegii et maiestatis rei convenimur. x.1 p.105.

Just as Tertullian separates loyalty to the emperor from the worship of gods, so Tertullian separates the office of the emperor from the faulty beliefs of traditional Roman worshipers. This has the interesting and bizarre effect of isolating the emperor from Roman culture, the acts of his government and people, and effectively making him, if not a Christian, then profoundly sympathetic to Christian views. For instance Tertullian argues that the office of emperor would inherently lead a person to recognise the true monotheistic God:

They know who has given them authority, they know, as humans, who has given them the breath of life; they perceive Him to be God alone in whose power alone they are, against whom they are second, after whom first, before all and above all gods. Why not? Since above all humans, living and dead, they stand superior. They consider how far the force of their authority prevails, and thus they comprehend God; against whom they cannot prevail, through Him they understand themselves to prevail.<sup>357</sup>

This passage makes clear that Tertullian is likely aware of how contrary this position may seem. His comment of “quidni?” half way through the passage seems to suggest that he is trying to encourage his readers or listeners to keep an open mind and hear him out. Nevertheless he stands firm in this position. Lacking examples of Roman behavior on which to base his views, he bases his argument on a rigid logicity, which does work if you accept his assumptions. While all traditional Roman worshipers

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<sup>357</sup> Sciunt quis illis dederit imperium; sciunt, qua homines, quis et animam, sentient eum esse deum solum in cuius solius potestate sunt, a quo sunt secundi, post quem primi, ante omnes et super omnes deos. quidni? Cum super omnes homines, qui utique vivunt mortuis antistant. Recogitant quousque vires imperii sui valent, et ita deum intellegunt: adversus quem valere non possunt, per eum valere se cognoscunt. xxx.1-2 p.141.

partially know the truth of the order of the world through their *conscientia*, the position of emperor gives an individual keener insight into this truth. In this passage Tertullian carefully balances the exaltation and limitation of the role of emperor, in order to praise, or at least not insult, the emperor while nevertheless maintaining his theological position. He emphasizes that the limitations of an emperor are the limitations inescapable for any human being. While emperors are second before God, they are first among humans.<sup>358</sup> Although they cannot prevail against God, they prevail through God. Through this careful phrasing Tertullian is able to maintain his claim of loyalty to the emperor while arguing for his diminished importance. For in Tertullian's hierarchy the emperor stands in a key position of authority as the foremost leader of human beings, and in Tertullian's mind to genuinely acknowledge that authority, one must acknowledge its limitations and its source. Since the divine represents both of these Tertullian argues that the emperor, at least qua emperor, must acknowledge the true nature of God.

Tertullian continues this logic to argue that civic participation and Christian identity are inherently distinct with the implication that civic authority is inherently subservient to the divine. It is only at this point that Tertullian allows Christianity a victory over the Roman Empire as a civic body. What makes the Christian God distinct from non-Christian gods is that He is not touchable by a mere civic authority:

Finally let the emperor conquer heaven, carry in heaven captive in his triumph, send a standing guard to heaven, impose tax on heaven. He cannot. Therefore, he is great who is less than heaven. For [the emperor] is His whose is heaven and all of creation. Thence is the emperor, whence was the

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<sup>358</sup> Osborn, *Tertullian, the First Theologian of the West*, 85-86.

man before he was emperor, thence comes his power from whence came his spirit.<sup>359</sup>

Here Tertullian walks a fine line between praising yet diminishing the emperor while maintaining God as a source of ultimate authority, by his careful balance of praise and critique. Tertullian both separates Roman authority from matters of the divine, in that Roman government has no power over the divine. However, the converse is not true and so civic authority and the divine cannot be considered wholly separate. It is worth noting here however that he repeatedly uses the language of *caelo* rather than *deus*. His choice of language is theologically ambiguous. Even earlier when using the term *deus* he leaves open the possibility of a pagan philosophical monotheistic god rather than a distinctly Christian God, which would be implied by language such as *Dominus*. The distinction that he wishes to highlight is not between the emperor and the Christian god specifically, or even necessarily a monotheistic god, but any divinity at all. Emperors are taken as the human embodiment of this distinction: as the highest authority among humans they are the closest to the divine however they are categorically distinct, lesser, and subservient.

The implications of this claim are alluded to in an earlier passage which discusses the relationship between emperors and Christians:

The whole story of Christ was told to Caesar, at that time Tiberius, by Pilatus, and at that point from his own conscience (*conscientia*) he was Christian.

However, the Caesars too would have believed about Christ, if either they

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<sup>359</sup> Caelum denique debellet imperator, caelum captivum triumpho suo invehat, caelo mittat excubias, caelo vectigalia impoant. Non potest. Ideo magnus est, quia caelo minor est ; illius enim est ipse, cuius et caelum est et omnis creatura. Inde est imperator, unde et homo antequam imperator; inde potestas illi, unde et spiritus. xxx.2-3 p.141.

were not necessarily of this world, or if Caesars could have been Christians.<sup>360</sup>

The role of emperor is thus a paradoxical one for Tertullian. Emperors know the truth of Christianity from their *conscientia* but for Tertullian knowledge is not enough to be a Christian. Because emperors are inherently civic leaders, they are only concerned with matters of this world and cannot direct themselves to the divine matters, whose participation would make them Christian.<sup>361</sup> It is unclear whether Tertullian believes that only emperors qua emperor cannot be Christian, and an emperor could hypothetically be privately Christian. However, his emphatic language here and elsewhere seems to suggest a hard and fast distinction.

For example later in the *Apology* he will argue that Christians as a group should not be considered a threat to the public: “for us, left cold by flames of glory and public honors, it is not necessary to conspire; nothing is more alien than the state. We acknowledge one republic of all people, the world.”<sup>362</sup> Just as Caesars cannot be Christians, so for Tertullian, Christians cannot be civic leaders. Tertullian’s somewhat florid metaphor here of Christians being untouched by fire, could be reminiscent of martyrdom, such as the Martyrdom of Polycarp, where Christians are more literally left untouched by fire and are correspondingly elevated beyond worldly matters and the civic and legal concerns which led them to martyrdom. While the *Apology* concerns itself almost entirely with the role of Christians in this world, it is worth remembering that

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<sup>360</sup> Ea omnia super Christo Pilatus, et ipse iam pro sua conscientia Christianus, Caesari tunc Tiberio nuntiavit. Sed et Caesares credidissent super Christo, si aut Caesares non essent necessarii saeculo, aut si et Christiani potuissent esse Caesares. xxi.24.

<sup>361</sup> I make an argument similar to this in the Major research paper of my Master’s Degree: *The Category of Religion in the Apologetic Writings of Tertullian*, 20.

<sup>362</sup> At enim nobis ab omni gloriae et dignitatis ardore frigentibus nulla est necessitas coetus, nec ulla magis res aliena quam publica. Unam omnium rempublicam agnoscimus mundum. xxxviii.3 p.149.

for Tertullian ultimately to be Christian involves embracing death through martyrdom and escaping worldly concerns such as civic life.<sup>363</sup> However, with a hard and fast distinction such as this, one should be hesitant to take Tertullian at his word. It is important to understand the rhetorical effect of isolating Christians from involvement in the Roman state. For Tertullian's apologetic argument this serves two purposes: firstly this demonstrates that Christians are not a threat to the Roman Empire, for they inherently are isolated from its worldly concerns, but secondly and conversely the Roman Empire categorically has no right to concern itself with the divine matters which define Christians as Christians. Indeed it has been noted that by separating themselves from concerns over wealth and the esteem of public office, Tertullian's Christians culturally separate themselves from Roman customs and weaken the power of Roman social norms over them.<sup>364</sup> However, given the objective universalist nature of Christian truth, the emperor must still acknowledge the truth of Christianity and acknowledge that the source of authority comes from the Christian divinity. Therefore, while Tertullian isolates Christianity from Roman civic authority, he also renders Roman civic authority lesser and subservient to Christianity.

Although Tertullian's claims of a nearly Christian Roman emperor may be rather outlandish, it has been pointed out that his projecting of his own ideals of justice onto a fictitious image of the emperor was part of a wider literary movement at the time motivated by the circumstances of Roman rule. Carly Daniel-Hughes and Maia Kotrosits in their article "Tertullian of Carthage and the Fantasy Life of Power" discuss Tertullian

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<sup>363</sup> Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*, 254-255. Also this position is clearly stated in Tertullian's other works *To the Martyrs*, *On Flight in a Time of Persecution*, and *the Scorpion*.

<sup>364</sup> Groh, "Tertullian's Polemic against Social Co-Optation," 8-9, 14.

not as a church father or even an apologist but as a colonial Roman subject working within the literary traditions of his time. Daniel-Hughes and Kotrosits make use of a post-colonial methodology in order to explore the motivations behind Tertullian's argument. This methodology also can and has been used to explore issues concerning identity within Tertullian's works, such as David Wilhite's *Tertullian The African*. This method can allow a nuanced and complex understanding of identity and particularly when studying ancient Roman history, allows for an insightfully complex understanding of Roman identity in relation to non-Roman identity within the Empire. For this reason, this thesis draws insight from scholarship that has made use of this method. However, this thesis does not fully commit to this methodology because it is the goal of this work to understand Christian group identity on its own terms rather than understanding it exclusively as a product of Roman rule. We will draw on the insights of post-colonial scholarship where it is useful and applicable to the argument of this thesis.

Daniel-Hughes and Kotrosits argue that within the provincial circumstances of individuals like Tertullian, the daily bureaucratic functions of government would only provide a tenuous link between people and the mysterious central authority of the empire. Meanwhile in those same places Roman propaganda would continuously promote the image of the person of the emperor as a symbol of the myth of Roman conquest and dominance, and as a representation of the body of the people. This served not only as a means of intimidation for provincial peoples but as a means of participation in Roman identity. Faced with an often arbitrary and seemingly unjust legal system, people fantasized juridical scenes about overcoming injustices and projected their ideal model of Roman justice onto the image of the emperor. While Roman

authority and propaganda may have sparked fantasies about the emperor, they by no means controlled them; fantasies and rumour gave these stories a life of their own.<sup>365</sup>

Tertullian's image of the emperor is ultimately only his own fantasy within an era of many such fantasies. However, it allowed him, who rejected nearly all aspects of Roman culture, to construct for himself a form of Roman identity that he could reconcile with Christian identity.

Returning to the text, after arguing that Christians are in fact loyal to the emperor and the emperor is accepting of them and their God, he argues that the method and manner of Christian prayer is more morally acceptable than Roman sacrifice.

Throughout he continues to emphasize how the difference between Christian and Roman pagan ritual is that Christian ritual is objectively more effective. In describing Christian prayer he deliberately points out and celebrates the little ways in which it differs from pagan Roman prayer as proof of its moral superiority:

looking upward to that place, Christians, with outstretched hands because we are innocent, with head laid bare because we are not ashamed, and then without a prompter because it is from the heart, we pray, always praying for all the emperors.<sup>366</sup>

The details of Christian prayer that he emphasizes here, bared head and lack of scripted formula, are the very points of contrast that culturally separate the Christian practice of prayer from traditional Roman sacrifice.<sup>367</sup> This continues the idea that one

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<sup>365</sup> Daniel-Hughes and Kotrosits, "Tertullian of Carthage and the Fantasy Life of Power," 1-31.

<sup>366</sup> Illuc sursum suspicientes Christiani manibus expansis, quia innocuis, capite nudo, quia non erubescimus, denique sine monitore, quia de pectore oramus, precantes sumus semper pro omnibus imperatoribus. xxx.4 p.141.

<sup>367</sup> Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion*, 64.

can, and Christians should, completely reject the customs and mores of Roman worship while supporting the Roman government. By isolating loyalty to the Roman Empire from all other aspects of Roman-ness, Tertullian allows for a Roman identity that does not change one's cultural customs. He argues that it is the sincere loyalty to the emperor and the genuine divinity of the deity it is directed toward, rather than ritual details of Roman customs, that makes Christian prayer effective.<sup>368</sup> He contrasts this with the rituals of pagan sacrifice which he argues are only so much pollution which leaves "even the conscience (*conscientia*) unclean."<sup>369</sup> While Tertullian's argument has already allowed Christians to maintain their own culturally distinct forms of worship within the culturally fluid Roman Empire, he is never content merely to leave it at that. Since he has argued that the Christian method of worship is universally and objectively effective and true, he then takes the further step of arguing that Roman ritual is universally corrupt and offensive to the universal *conscientia*.

Tertullian then provides a defence against the accusation that he is merely making this up to protect Christians. Tertullian says that those who doubt him should look into the Christian scriptures which say explicitly that Christians should pray for kings, those in power, and their persecutors.<sup>370</sup> This argument is clearly meant to provide a concrete foundation for a hard to believe position, namely that Christians have such whole-hearted respect for the emperor. It does this in two ways: it provides hard evidence to use against those who challenge the loyalty of Christians, and it provides textual authority to Christians who do not believe they should be loyal to the Empire.

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<sup>368</sup> *Apology*, xxx.5.

<sup>369</sup> *Etiam conscientiam spurcam*. xxx.6 p.142.

<sup>370</sup> xxxi.1-3.

Tertullian further backs this up by appealing to the logic of self-interest. He argues that Christians, like any other of its citizens, suffer from disaster when the Empire is shaken. Furthermore Tertullian says this is all the more true as he believes that the world will end when the Roman Empire does.<sup>371</sup> While Tertullian rejects the idea of eternal or universal Roman rule, he still holds that loyal Christians love and support the Roman state to the best of their abilities.<sup>372</sup> This brief passage suggests that Tertullian is not entirely reliant on his own assumptions for his positions, but also sees the need for concrete evidence and a more simple logic.

The same however cannot be said for the following section in which Tertullian must carefully distinguish Christian loyalty to the emperor as a civic leader, and the worship of him or his genius as an object of divinity:

But also we swear, not as it were for the genius of Caesars, but for their health, which is more august than all genii. Do you not know that genii are called daemons and are named from a diminutive of daemon? We observe the judgement of God on emperors, who put them in command of nations. We know the will of God is in them and we want the safety of those who God desires, and we have from that a great oath. But yet the daemons, the genii, we are accustomed to swear to them in order to drive them out of people, not to swear to them in order to confirm on them the honor of divinity.<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> xxxi.1-xxxii.1.

<sup>372</sup> Osborn, "Tertullian as Philosopher and Roman," 244.

<sup>373</sup> *Sed et iuramus, sicut non per genios Caesarum, ita per salute eorum, quae est augustior omnibus geniis. Nescitis genios daemonas dici et inde diminutive voce daemonia? Nos iudicium dei suspicimus in imperatoribus, qui gentibus illos praefecit. Id in eis scimus esse, quod deus voluit, ideoque et saluum volumus quod deus voluit, et pro magno id iuramento habemus. Ceterum daemonas, id est genios, adiurare consuevimus, ut illos de hominibus expellamus, non deierare, ut eis honorem divinitatis conferamus.* xxxii.2-3 p.143.

Here Tertullian emphasizes that the honoring of the emperor as the leader of nations and the honoring of him as a divine being are two different things, and it is possible to perform one without the other. By associating the desire to consider emperors divine with daemons, he allows the figure of the emperor to maintain as much honor as possible. If genii are merely pests, driven out by Christians, than the emperor is no lesser for the loss of it. Further by pointing out that the emperor has been placed in his position by God, he maintains the divine mandate while not himself possessing divinity. It is toward this figure, supported by divinity but not himself divine that Tertullian asserts Christians have *religio* and *pietas*. Immediately following this passage Tertullian says:

But what more [need] I [say] about Christians' devotion (*religione*) and faith (*pietate*) in the emperor? He who it is necessary that we must respect as our Lord elected him, so that it is with merit that I would say that Caesar, instituted by our God, is more ours than yours.<sup>374</sup>

Note the use of *Dominus* rather than *Deus* to refer to God, in contrast to his more neutral language earlier. Whereas the pagan emperor can only perceive his relationship to God vaguely, Christians understand the divine force which supports the emperor to be distinctly Christian.

Here Tertullian wishes to emphasize the Christian-ness of God in order to subject Roman authority to Christian divinity. In this model of authority Christians can embrace their Christian identity even when expressing their *religio* toward the emperor. This is an example of Tertullian using *religio* to refer not merely to Christian attitudes towards God,

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<sup>374</sup> Sed quid ego amplius de religione atque pietate Christiana in imperatorem, quem necesse est suspiciamus ut eum, quem dominus noster elegit, ut merito dixerim: noster est magis Caesar, a nostro deo constitutus. xxxiii.1-2 p.143.

but more generally as a form of devotion. For, in the context of this argument *religio* is understood not as what is due toward the divine, but merely what is due to those of greater authority. However, as Tertullian partially defines Christians as the only people who possess genuine *religio* toward either man or god, he bizarrely tries to steal the Roman emperor from Roman worshipers. The reason why this is even remotely feasible is because he is committed to arguing that his Christian model of authority in the world is objectively true of all people. Tertullian therefore concludes by emphasizing that it is for the good of the emperor, the Empire, and the divine that anything is praised only within its proper place. The divine and the human authorities must be separated, for the human is inherently subservient to the divine.<sup>375</sup>

Finally, Tertullian concludes this part of the *Apology* by arguing that Christians have every right to be considered Roman, since they have *religio* toward the emperor and the Empire. Here Tertullian isolates Roman identity to the bare bones of loyalty to the Roman state and emperor in order to claim the benefits of it for Christians. However, by demonstrating how individuals who participate in all the cultural forms of Roman identity, who “perform the rites for the wellbeing of the emperors (*pro salute imperatoris*) and swear by his genius,”<sup>376</sup> perform in fact the very acts of violent disloyalty that Christians are wrongly accused of, he makes the case that following Roman customs is the least important aspect of Roman identity.<sup>377</sup> Here Tertullian uses the trope formula *pro salute imperatoris* to emphasize that what Roman law perceives as disloyalty toward the emperor, and actual instances of disloyalty toward the emperor, are notably

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<sup>375</sup> *Apology*, xxxiii.2-xxxiv.2.

<sup>376</sup> *Sacra faciebant pro salute imperatoris et genium eius deierabant*, xxxv.10 p.146.

<sup>377</sup> *Apology*, xxxv.7-11.

different. Tertullian argues that since Romans themselves can be enemies to Rome, being suspected of being an enemy of Rome should not categorically discount Christians from being considered Roman. However, he argues that is why divinity calls upon Christians to demonstrate their true *religio* in order to distinguish themselves from those whose *religio* is merely a mask for their true intentions.<sup>378</sup> Admittedly this argument is not without Tertullian's customary irony and sarcasm, but it is nevertheless telling that he chooses to make it all. In the *Apology*, as in many of his other texts, Tertullian is keen to swear off any and all distinctly Roman customs or mores, any distinguishing aspects of Roman-ness, from Christian life. Still he feels the need to provide Christians with a defence not only against Roman persecution, but against those who would deny them the title of Roman. While Tertullian wants to avoid any aspects of Roman-ness related to the worship of Roman gods, or even tangentially related to worship of the gods as seen in works such as his *On Idolatry* or *On the Philosopher's Cloak*, he is not willing to abandon Roman identity entirely. Therefore, Roman and Christian identities are not mutually exclusive for Tertullian, but it is only in reducing Roman identity to merely civic alliance that he is willing to embrace it.

### Conclusion

Within the *Apology* Tertullian aims to defend Christians against the accusation that they offend Roman civic authority by arguing that Christians in fact perform for the Roman authority what it ought to expect from them. This rhetorically serves both as a

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<sup>378</sup> *Apology*, xxxvi.1-3.

defence of Christians to Roman legal authorities, but also as a defence of the Roman civic authority to dissatisfied Christians. He does this by cutting back what it means to be Roman to merely a civic loyalty and acceptance that Roman government has the blessing of the divine, while rejecting nearly all public displays of Roman identity. In this way he is writing not merely a Christian living under Roman persecution but as a colonial resident of the Roman Empire, trying to justify his own way of life. The relationship of Tertullian's Christianity with the Roman state is predicated on his categorization of Christian identity. Tertullian categorizes Christian groups as elective cultic groups that are neither distinctively philosophically or racially characterised. Deviant cultic groups at the time had notably political implications; however rather than avoiding political affiliation so as to avoid perceived deviancy, Tertullian emphasises that civic loyalty is inherent in Christian identity. This serves both to argue for Christians' legitimacy and to establish their authority as the only true cult of the Roman Empire.

To make this latter claim Tertullian develops the meaning of the cultic term *religio* in order to best serve his purposes. After the term was developed by Cicero it referred to the entirety of ritualistic worship which was considered legitimate. Tertullian uses its legitimizing power to validate Christianity, but also develops the term's meaning to refer to a more abstract notion of devotion rather than merely ritualistic worship. This devotion is understood to be owed toward anything that is in a higher position of authority to oneself which includes both the Roman emperor and the Christian God. Furthermore Tertullian's understanding of *religio* applies exclusively to Christians. Therefore, Tertullian argues that not only are Christians, as they are defined by their *religio*, inherently loyal to the Roman state, but they alone are the only true loyal

citizens. In this way Tertullian aims to claim not only the distinctiveness of Christianity but the authority of Roman identity as well. However, in order to make Christian and Roman identities compatible, given his rejection of most of Roman culture, Tertullian reduces Roman identity to exclusively civic allegiance toward the Roman state.

No later Latin apologist will go so far to reduce Roman identity to merely its civic loyalty. However, this dual acceptance and rejection of Roman-ness as a basis for Christianity will serve as a basis for the views of Minucius Felix and Lactantius. Likewise, the manner in which Tertullian metaphysically justifies the rule of the Roman Empire as well as his abstraction of the term *religio*, will be further developed and expanded on by Lactantius, as a key justification for his particular combination of Roman and Christianity identities. Having separated Roman cultic practice from Roman civic loyalty, Tertullian unknowingly begins the process whereby Christian identity at least in part defined by cult can be completely separate from any form of civic allegiance, and legitimized purely by virtue of its connection to deity.

### Chapter 3

#### Minucius Felix's Octavius: Christian Identity as a Roman Philosophy

In his critique of Roman gods and the Roman Empire, Minucius Felix borrows many arguments from Tertullian, which could lead the uncaredful reader to think that their apologetic works depict a similar or identical relation between Christian identity and Roman identity. However, in spite of the intertextual connections between these works, there is a fundamental difference in how these two authors present Christian groups which informs how they see Christian identity in relation to the Roman Empire and authority. Over the course of this chapter I will endeavour to show that Tertullian presents Christians as a cultic group while Minucius Felix presents Christians as a philosophical group that only secondarily has cultic practices. Whereas, as I discussed in my chapter on Tertullian, Tertullian presents the Christian appeal to Roman authority nominally within the model that Cicero argues foreign cults ought to use, Minucius Felix presents the Christian position as a defiant intellectual movement, politically nonthreatening but intellectually critical of the ideological authority of the traditional Roman position. This difference in categorization is reflected in the different literary methods employed by these authors. Tertullian's *Apology* takes the form of a quasi-legal defence. The criticisms he makes against Roman cults, beliefs, and policy are set up as a defence against the accusations made against Christians which led to them being executed by Roman legal authorities, by challenging the hypocrisy and legitimacy of the accusers. In contrast, Minucius Felix's *Octavius* is presented as a philosophical dialogue between Christian and pagan view points where the legitimacy is a matter of

dialectic. Because primarily Minucius Felix treats the legitimacy of Christians within the Roman world as an intellectual issue, he treats less seriously the accusation that Christians pose a legal threat to the Roman Empire and is in some ways bolder in his criticism of Roman authorities. By comparing the apologetic arguments of these two authors, this chapter will show that their differing responses to Roman authority are rooted primarily in differing understandings of the nature of Christian groups. After a discussion of these authors' choice of genre, the second section of this chapter will establish that Minucius Felix presents Christian groups as philosophical groups, while Tertullian presents them as cultic groups. The next section will discuss the authors' use of the term *religio* and how it is consistent with their presentations of the category of Christianity. The last section will then look at three passages from *Octavius* which address the relationships between Christian groups and Roman civic authority<sup>379</sup> and which have parallels to arguments made in Tertullian's *Apology* in order to show how these differences manifest in their writing.

The text takes the form of philosophical dialogue in the style of Cicero. After the drama of how this dialogue occurred is recounted in the first five chapters, Caecilius gives a lengthy speech attacking Christians and Christian teaching and arguing for the legitimacy of traditional forms of Roman *religiones* in chapters 5 through 13. His main arguments are that of Skepticism, that since perfect knowledge of divine matters is impossible, it is best to simply follow tradition and that Romans are superior for incorporating nearly all gods into the pantheon. He then critiques Christians for philosophizing about life after death. Then, after a brief interlude by Minucius the

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<sup>379</sup> Marcus Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, ed. Bernhard Kytzler (Leipzig: Teubner, 1982) xxix.4-5; *ibid*, xxxi.6; *ibid*, xxxiii.1.

character, in chapters 14 and 15, Octavius gives a longer speech, comprising a majority of the text, in which he counters Caecilius's argument point by point, in chapters 16 through 38. He begins by arguing that knowledge of the divine is knowable and that all people have at least a partial understanding of it by virtue of their humanity. He then provides an extensive critique of various aspects of Roman and non-Christian worship. Following this, in chapters 28 to 38, he counters many of the accusations made against Christians and concludes his speech by describing the true nature of what being Christian means. The work as a whole concludes by Caecilius converting to Christianity and the three of them continuing on their journey. The structure and genre of the text emphasises Christianity as a philosophical issue.

The precise date of the *Octavius*, and indeed of the life and career of Minucius Felix, are uncertain. The debate as to whether Tertullian's *Apology* or Minucius Felix's *Octavius* came first is an old concern,<sup>380</sup> that even now has no clear resolution. However, one current scholarly position which has broad support, is that Minucius Felix's work came after Tertullian, at some point during the mid third century.<sup>381</sup> Other than showing who is drawing from whom, the date of the work is relevant for understanding the role of persecution in relation to this text. By all accounts, Tertullian lived through a time of persecution in North Africa during the turn of the third century, and the *Apology* and the form of Christian identity presented therein was in part a

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<sup>380</sup> E.g. Reinach, "Date du dialogue *Octavius* de Minucius Felix."

<sup>381</sup> Wilhite, *Introduction to North African Christianity*, 136-141; Frend, "Some North African Turning Points in Christian Apologetics," 6; Chadwick, "Tertullian, Minucius Felix," 123; Jean-Claude Fredouille, "L'apologetique latine pré-constantinienne (Tertullian, Minucius Felix, Cyprien)," In *L'apologétique Chrétienne gréco-latine a l'époque pré-nicénienne*, edited by Antonie Wlosok (Genève: Fondation Hardt, 2005) 50.

response to this persecution.<sup>382</sup> However, if Minucius Felix did live and write during the middle of the third century, then it follows that he unlike Tertullian likely had little to no personal experience with persecution. This claim is consistent with how the *Octavius* presents the issue of persecution. The opening drama of the dialogue presents the issue of tension between Christians and non-Christians as a social and intellectual concern. In this drama the three characters are walking down the beaches of Ostia, when the two Christians, Octavius and Marcus, mock their non-Christian friend, Caecilius, for making a devotional gesture toward a statue of the God Serapis.<sup>383</sup> Some time later while sitting by the shore, tensions come to a head when Caecilius, still smarting from his insult, claims that he is tired of being mocked by Octavius and would have it out with him once and for all,<sup>384</sup> which of course incites the debate that makes up most of the work. At no point during this narrative is it said or implied that the Christian characters are under threat of violence or legal sanction for being Christian. Indeed their open mocking of Caecilius speaks to a brazenness about being Christian that seems inconsistent with a group suffering under threat of persecution. Rather the conflict between Christians and non-Christians, which this narrative presents, is entirely social and intellectual. This form of conflict seems more consistent with Christians and non-Christians living with each other after a time of persecution rather than during one. Towards the end of the dialogue there is a reference to the persecution of Christians,<sup>385</sup> however this point does not have a prominent role in the argument.

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<sup>382</sup> Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions*, 122-144; Finneran, *The Archaeology of Christianity in Africa*, 19-20; Tilley, "North Africa," 391-392; Markus, *Saeculum*, 106-107.

<sup>383</sup> *Octavius*, II.4-III.1.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid*, IV.3-5.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid*, XXXVIII.1-6.

Therefore, unless Minucius Felix is actively downplaying the severity of the Christians' current situation, analysis of the text suggests that it was written after the persecution of Tertullian's time or was in some other way separated from it. Simon Price argues that due to the sporadic nature of Christian persecution, the lack of reference to it in this text is not sufficient grounds to attribute to the *Octavius* a third century origin.<sup>386</sup> However, even if we follow Price in attributing a late second century origin to the text, we must still acknowledge that, unless one of them is radically misrepresenting their situation, there is a fundamental difference in circumstance between these two authors.<sup>387</sup> This difference in circumstance plays a notable role in how these authors categorise their Christian identity. Tertullian categorises Christians as a legitimate cultic group and as inherently good Roman citizens, because, living under threat of persecution, he is primarily concerned with addressing the legal accusations leveled against Christians which center around being an illegitimate cult and being rebellious towards Roman civic authorities. However, Minucius Felix presents Christians as a philosophical group, because he is concerned with addressing social accusations leveled against Christians. Whereas Tertullian nominally strove to defend Christians in court, Minucius Felix strove to defend them in social spaces among friends and family, where the morality and intellectual legitimacy of Christianity was of greater concern than whether or not Christians were breaking the law.

The intertextual influence of Tertullian's *Apology* upon the *Octavius*, or potentially the influence of Minucius Felix upon Tertullian's *Octavius* depending on when you date

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<sup>386</sup> Price, "Latin Christian Apologetics," 112.

<sup>387</sup> It is possible this is difference in space rather than time. If Minucius Felix was from Rome or Italy rather than North Africa, he would have avoided persecution in a way consistent with this analysis.

the text, is significant and has been well observed.<sup>388</sup> There are a notable number of places within these works, where the two authors makes use of similar or identical arguments both in specific points within the works and in broader strategies across the works. One of the specific points of comparison between these works is their description of the crimes of incest and cannibalism which Christians are falsely accused of. Like Tertullian but in contrast to earlier apologists, Minucius describes a scandalous banquet in which these acts are supposed to occur.<sup>389</sup> The details of this fictional gathering match so closely between Tertullian and Minucius Felix that some have argued they could both be drawing from a third source.<sup>390</sup> Another point of close textual connection is the argument regarding common phrases as a defence of monotheism. Tertullian and Minucius Felix argue that both Christians and non-Christians alike make use of common phrases such as “if God wills it” or “God is good” with reference to a singular unspecified God. The existence of these phrases these authors suggest implies the existence of a singular monotheistic God.<sup>391</sup> There is also a number of parallels in argument between these authors in their critique of traditional Roman worship. Both authors argue that Romans’ gods are wrongfully plundered from their enemies, that Roman gods were once historical human beings, and that the Roman Empire grew by means of sacrilege rather than due to its *religio*, to name but a few.<sup>392</sup> Similarly, the demonology which Minucius presents in his *Octavius* clearly borrows from both the *Apologies* of Tertullian

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<sup>388</sup> E.g. Agnes Nagy and Suisse Genève, “Les candélabres et les chiens au banquet scandaleux. Tertullien, Minucius Felix et les unions œdipiennes,” *Studia Patristica* 65 (2013): 407-417; Chadwick, “Tertullian, Minucius Felix;” Friend, “Some North African Turning Points in Christian Apologetics,” 6-7; Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 136-137.

<sup>389</sup> C.f. Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, xxxi.1-5; Tertullian, *Apology*, viii.1-9.

<sup>390</sup> Nagy and Genève, “Les candélabres et les chiens au banquet scandaleux. Tertullien, Minucius Felix et les unions œdipiennes.”

<sup>391</sup> Cf. Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, xviii.11; Tertullian, *Apology*, xvii.5-6.

<sup>392</sup> Cf. Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, xxi-xxvi.7; Tertullian, *Apology*, xxv.1-14.

and Justin Martyr.<sup>393</sup> It is because of these parallels and others, that these texts are widely considered to be drawing from each other.

However, I contend that the *Octavius* is also very heavily drawing from Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*. The *Octavius* is very clearly a philosophical dialogue in the style of Cicero's dialogues. Through the character of Marcus, Minucius Felix recounts a debate had between his two friends Caecilius and Octavius during a trip the three of them took to Ostia, in which they argue for and against the legitimacy of Christianity in contrast to the worship of Roman gods. Like a classic Ciceronian dialogue, rather than the characters engaging each other with questions and answers like a Socratic dialogue, each character defends their position and critiques the position of the interlocuter through lengthy speeches. However, there are also more direct parallels to Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, other than *Octavius*'s structure and subject. In the *Octavius* the non-Christian interlocuter Caecilius makes use of an argument it is impossible to have perfectly true understanding of divine matters, and therefore the best course of action is to follow ancestral tradition pertaining to worship.<sup>394</sup> While the context of this argument in each of the dialogues is notably different which affects the way the author likely intends the reader to receive the position, the parallel is nevertheless clear. Furthermore many readers of Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, have agreed that, given how Cotta is positioned to justifiably critique the other interlocuters, rhetorically Cotta's argument is presented as the most authoritative one. As such, by presenting it as the view that he intends to refute and by making use of

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<sup>393</sup> C.f. Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, xxvi.8-xxviii.6; Tertullian, *Apology*, xxii.1-xxiii.19; Justin Martyr, *Second Apology*, v.

<sup>394</sup> Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, v.2-vi.1.

Cicero's take on the genre of the philosophical dialogue, Minucius Felix presents this dialogue as in many ways a continuation of Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, and a refutation of the championing of traditional Roman worship within that dialogue. As such Minucius Felix's *Octavius* is strongly influenced by both Tertullian's *Apology* and Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*.

Scholarship which has looked at Minucius Felix's *Octavius* has largely agreed that the purpose of this work is both to negotiate between Christian and Roman identities, although the latter is only indirectly identified as Roman, and to depict Christian teaching as supported by philosophy. Unlike Tertullian's *Apology*, which is explicitly written as a response to persecution and contrasts the Christian with the Roman non-Christian, on the face of it Minucius Felix's *Octavius* is set up merely as a debate between Christians and non-Christian Skeptics. However, it is nevertheless agreed that although often more alluded to than explicitly named, the accusations made against Christians come from a traditional Roman perspective.<sup>395</sup> It is also agreed that central to Minucius Felix's apologetic argument is the incorporation of philosophy into Christian beliefs and the presentation of Christian groups as philosophical groups. Henry Chadwick observes that Minucius avoids discussions of ritual, cult and holy texts, and rather primarily focuses on responding to arguments of major philosophical schools at the time, and that Christians are the inheritors of traditional pagan philosophy.<sup>396</sup> Likewise Jörg Rüpke discusses that central to Minucius's argument is that Christians are perceived as philosophers.<sup>397</sup> Finally William Frend argues that by the time of

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<sup>395</sup> Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 139-140; Tilley, "North Africa," 392.

<sup>396</sup> Chadwick, "Tertullian, Minucius Felix," 122-123.

<sup>397</sup> Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 216; this argument is reliant on the passage Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, xx.1, which I will analyse below.

Minucius Felix Christians were no longer merely defending themselves but going on the attack, which necessitated the presentation of Christianity as the natural conclusion to pagan philosophy, supported by reason and pagan poets and philosophers.<sup>398</sup> Building on this treatment of Minucius Felix, I wish to show how positioning Christian groups as philosophical groups changes the way Christian groups stand in relation to Roman authority compared to the apologetic work of Tertullian.

### Christians as Philosophers

Before discussing how Minucius Felix treats Roman authority, it is worth discussing how he conceptualizes Christian groups. Specifically I will argue that Minucius Felix presents Christians as a philosophical school and that this is an explicit departure from Tertullian's views. In Octavius's speech in defence of Christians, his first and most substantive argument, both in terms of length and argumentative focus, is that matters of the divine can be intellectually understood and that classical philosophy and Christian teachings agree on this understanding.<sup>399</sup> At the end of this argument he states that:

I have related the opinions of nearly all philosophers, whose glory is well-known, it is permitted [for them] to describe God as one being with many names, so that any one at all might imagine that either from now on

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<sup>398</sup> Frend, "Some North African Turning Points in Christian Apologetics," 6-7.

<sup>399</sup> Minucius Felix, *Octavius* xvi.1-xx.6.

Christians are to be the philosophers or those who are now Christians at that time were philosophers.<sup>400</sup>

The point that Minucius is trying to make here is not merely that Christians and philosophers agree about monotheism. Rather his suggestion is that as those who continue to advance the ideas of classical philosophers, Christians ought to be the ones who inherit the title, social role and legacy of philosophy, or conversely that the title of Christian should have the same social implications as the title of philosopher. This defence serves two purposes. Intellectually Christian teaching is given legitimacy and support by laying claim to the tradition of classical philosophy. But also, legally and socially he argues that Christian groups should be not treated as political rebels or superstitious zealots, but rather they should be treated in the same way philosophical groups are treated. That is to say, they should hold to their own beliefs and practices, and be able to intellectually critique Roman authority and Roman cultic practice without incurring legal sanction or social ostracization.

The social role of philosophers in the ancient world is an unfortunately under researched area; however Michael Trapp in his book *Philosophy in the Roman Empire: Ethics, Politics, and Society* provides a useful discussion of it.<sup>401</sup> Socially speaking one of the most common places to find philosophers was within an educational setting where they taught young people on the verge of adulthood and advised them to embrace the life encompassing commitment of philosophy. Legally philosophers were

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<sup>400</sup> *Exposui opiniones omnium ferme philosophorum, quibus inlustrior gloria est, deum unum multis licet designasse nominibus, ut quivis arbitretur aut nunc Christianos philosophos esse aut philosophos fuisse iam tunc Christianos.* Marcus Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, xx.1 p.18. All translations are my own with consultation with Tertullian and Minucius Felix, *Apology. De Spectaculis. Minucius Felix: Octavius*. Loeb Classical Library 250. Terrot Glover and Gerald Rendall trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931).

<sup>401</sup> Trapp, *Philosophy in the Roman Empire*, 1-22, 215-233.

thus grouped within a broader category of teachers and other providers of *paideia*. However, philosophers themselves emphasised that their role went beyond their educational setting.<sup>402</sup> The social role that philosophers strove for, in contrast to the one that they actually possessed, was a contradictory one. Philosophers wished to be seen as esteemed educators whose social scope and authority exceeded traditional educators; specifically, they wished to claim the authority of leaders for both local communities and for humanity at large, without holding any formal office of civic authority. Trapp concludes that the social role that philosophers wanted was one which did not actually exist within classical society.<sup>403</sup>

There are ambiguities and contradictions in this understanding of philosophical identity, which likely corresponds to ambiguity and uncertainty within the views of ancient philosophers, and contradictions between the views of different philosophers and different philosophical schools. However, based on this it is still possible to draw some general conclusions, which should be taken as broad generalisations rather than hard-and-fast rules. Philosophers mostly worked within an educational setting, but from this position they generally still sought to wield the authority of intellectual truth, which could have social and political implications. However, generally speaking, philosophers did not inherently paint themselves as a civic group either opposed to or subservient to the government. In short, professional philosophers broadly wanted a social authority as intellectuals that did not have political consequences. I will show that Minucius Felix in his comments on the social role of Christians argues that Christians should have much the same authority and place in society.

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<sup>402</sup> Ibid, 18-21.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid, 22, 215-225.

That was how philosophers thought of themselves, but how philosophers were considered by others and particularly by the civic institutions of the Roman Empire is a significantly more complicated question. There were some instances, such as under the reigns of Vespasian and Domitian, where philosophers were seen as a sufficient threat, or at least a nuisance, to warrant being expelled on mass from the capital, as well as there being a few cases where particular philosophers were singled out and exiled.<sup>404</sup> However, these seem to be the exceptions rather than the rule. While philosophers and philosophical groups could be seen as potentially a source of disorder, on the whole they were perceived as awkward non-aligned agents rather than anything akin to a government faction or rebel group. Where they did come into conflict with civic power it was usually over specific circumstances, where specific members of the Roman educated elite came into conflict with each other.<sup>405</sup> Thus philosophical groups, on a categorical level, should not be seen necessarily either as having a civic weight behind them, or as being rebels persecuted or contained by the government. Trapp concludes “that *philosophia* provided a detached, independent vantage point on real-life choices and decisions, and could thus furnish some of the preconditions for active opposition without being in itself necessarily and essentially oppositional.”<sup>406</sup> Insofar as philosophy motivated the actions of civic leaders or sought to hold politicians accountable for their actions, it did so as a non-aligned external force, that was categorically distinct from a civic group.<sup>407</sup> It was likely the security, legitimacy, and authority that this non-aligned form of identity allowed for, which Minucius Felix sought for by presenting Christianity as

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<sup>404</sup> Ibid, 226-227.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid, 226-227, 232-233.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid, 229.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid, 229-233.

the heirs of philosophy. As a philosophy or a categorical equivalent Christianity was freed from accusations of civic rebelliousness, while simultaneously able to critique Roman government with authority.

This apologetic strategy was completely rejected by Tertullian who instead preferred to present Christian groups as cultic groups. Tertullian is of course famous for his rejection of classical philosophy in chapter 7 of his work *On the Prescription of Heretics* where he denounces: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"<sup>408</sup> However, in his *Apology* he addresses the same issue far more explicitly, through a discussion of not merely how Christians should perceive themselves, which is the subject of *On the Prescription of Heretics*, but how Christians ought to be perceived by outsiders. In the final section of Tertullian's *Apology*, after he has addressed the two major legal accusations against Christians, he discusses how Christian groups ought to be understood by others and refutes a number of false understandings they have about Christian groups. The last of these false understandings is the argument that Christian teaching is "not at any rate a matter of divinity, but more a kind of philosophy (*philosophiae*)."<sup>409</sup> After critiquing the hypocrisy of referring to Christian teaching as a type of philosophy but then denying them the liberties that philosophers enjoy, specifically in regards to philosophers not being forced to perform sacrifice or persecuted for attacking Roman gods and *superstitiones*,<sup>410</sup> he then states that it is right that Christians and philosophers be treated differently: "But rightly so. For philosophers

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<sup>408</sup> Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis? Tertullian, *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani Opera*, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina I (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954) vii.9 p.193. Translation is my own.

<sup>409</sup> "non utique divinum negotium existimat, sed magis philosophiae genus," Tertullian, *Apology* xlvi.2 p.160.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid, xlvi.3-4.

are not to be termed Christians. The name of philosophers does not drive out daemons, does it? Since philosophers classify daemons as second to the gods.”<sup>411</sup> Here he makes his point quite explicitly and it should be clear that, while at times his writings are influenced by philosophical ideas, Tertullian is strongly against the idea that Christians should be regarded as philosophers.

Given the influence of Stoic teaching on Tertullian’s thought, it has been debated by scholars the degree to which Tertullian was as genuinely anti-philosophical as he appears to be here.<sup>412</sup> The general conclusion to these arguments was that Tertullian was not anti-rationalist and in places he even uses references to philosophy in support of his arguments, although he argued that no philosophical enquiry was needed after divine revelation.<sup>413</sup> His rejection of philosophy within these passages therefore should not be seen as a rejection of rationality or philosophical teachings, but rather of the social category of a philosophical group insofar as it was applied to Christian groups. However, from his rejection one can see what kind of group, he does perceive Christians to be. The point of distinction that Tertullian draws between Christians and philosophers is not that they disagree, in fact earlier in the text he points out that they do agree on many points,<sup>414</sup> but rather that it is through cultic ritual that Christians have power and significance that non-Christians do not. In drawing attention to how Christians and philosophers are differently treated, Tertullian focuses on this cultic practice. His point is not merely that Christians are legally persecuted and philosophers

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<sup>411</sup> “Sed merito; Philosophi enim, non Christiani, cognominantur. Nomen hoc philosophorum daemonia non fugiunt. Quidni? Cum secundum deos philosophi daemonas deputent” Ibid, xvi.4-5 p.161.

<sup>412</sup> Osborn, “Tertullian as Philosopher and Roman,” 233-241; Fredouille, *Tertullien et la conversion de la culture antique*, 338-357; Dunn, *Tertullian*, 31-34.

<sup>413</sup> Osborn, “Tertullian as Philosopher and Roman,” 234-237; Fredouille, *Tertullien et la conversion de la culture antique*, 338-357; Dunn, *Tertullian*, 32-33.

<sup>414</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, xxi.10-14.

are not, but that Christians and not philosophers are forced to perform Roman cultic practice and not to criticize it. "But rightly so" he argues, for he believes it is through the avoidance of pagan rituals and the practicing of Christian rituals that Christians are able to achieve their metaphysical power to drive out daemons. As I discussed in chapter 2 on Tertullian, he presents one of the unique aspects of being Christian as that Christians correctly identify the metaphysical hierarchy of the world in which pagan gods who are daemons, are at the lowest rank. The other is that Christians have true *religio* which refers both to a set of rituals but also to their devotion toward the metaphysical hierarchy of the world. It is the lack of awareness of this hierarchy and the lack of cultic ritual able to drive out daemons which Tertullian points to as the distinguishing features between philosophers and Christians. Therefore, Tertullian separates Christian groups from philosophical groups by incorporating cultic elements into Christian identity.

This differing focus has implications for how Christians relate to Roman civic authority which manifest in both these authors' claims to universalism and rejection of national and racial identities. Both authors reject categories of national distinction as a means to characterise Christianity. The result of this is that they must associate Christian identity with other categories of identity in order to position themselves within the Roman world. How they express this rejection of national/ethnic boundaries betrays how they differently conceptualise the nature of Christian identity and its role within the Roman state. After refuting the false accusations and misconceptions about Christians, character Octavius discusses the true nature of Christian teachings and practices. After describing the metaphysical nature of their God and how they worship him through

ritual, he argues that Christians should not be considered an ethnic or national group.<sup>415</sup> Specifically he argues that Christians are not part of Jewish ethnic groups, but before that he makes the argument more broadly:

Nor do we flatter ourselves with our numbers: we seem many to ourselves but to God we are exceedingly few. We distinguish races (*gentes*) and nations (*nationes*); to God this world in its entirety is one household (*domus*). Although kings come to know all things about their kingdoms through the accounts of their ministers, God does not work through official reports: we live not only in his eyes, but in his folds.<sup>416</sup>

He then goes on to argue how Christian teaching is supported by the teachings of classical philosophers with the implication that Christian groups are the continuation of these philosophical traditions. However, already within the passage, he is identifying Christian identity based on a philosophical perspective.

Minucius Felix begins the subject of national or ethnic identity from a discussion of the growth of their numbers, which brings up the implications of their universalism. Anyone can join a Christian group and so from that perspective they seem to have a large number of people as they can and do take a large swath of different peoples. However, because anyone can join a Christian group, the amount of people who do join is exceedingly few compared to those who could join. He then explains why Christians would accept anyone, because they see the world through God's perspective in which

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<sup>415</sup> Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, xxxii.1-xxxiii.5.

<sup>416</sup> Nec nobis de nostra frequentia blandiamur: multi nobis videmur, sed deo admodum pauci sumus. Nos gentes nationesque distinguimus: deo una domus est mundus hic totus. Reges tantum regni sui per officia ministrorum universa noverunt: deo indicii opus non est; non solum in oculis eius, sed in sinu vivimus. Ibid, xxxiii.1 p.31.

national and ethnic distinctions are irrelevant: “We distinguish races (*gentes*) and nations (*nationes*); to God this world in its entirety is one household (*domus*).” It is worth noting it is from God’s perspective rather than Christians’ perspective that this universalism derives. This implies a philosophical perspective rather than a cultic one, as it is implied that Christians achieve the perspective of the divine rather than merely serve or placate the divine. Christians do not lose national or ethnic identity when they join a Christian group or take on a new national or ethnic identity. Rather when they become Christian they gain a greater metaphysical understanding of the world, and can see the world through God’s perspective in which national and ethnic boundaries are immaterial. Minucius Felix’s universalism is thus rooted in the intellectual understandings of a philosophical tradition.

In the last several decades there has been a rich exploration within scholarship on how early Christians use ethnic categories to conceptualize their own identity.<sup>417</sup> The general consensus is that while early Christians did not restrict themselves to traditional models of ethnicity in their understanding of Christian identity, especially in their universalist positions, they built upon these earlier models in how this identity was referred to and conceptually framed. Minucius Felix here could be seen as consistent with this understanding. Insofar as the Christian group is referred to as a *domus*, it could imply that it is rooted in ties of kinship, family, or ancestry consistent with an ethnic group,<sup>418</sup> although, by referring to all of humankind as one household, it undermines those very forms of difference. Since all of humankind is one household, ethnic

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<sup>417</sup> E.g. Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*; Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*, 241-265; Buell, *Why This New Race*; Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius’ Praeparatio Evangelica*; Wilhite, *Tertullian the African*, 125-148.

<sup>418</sup> Glare and Christopher, *Oxford Latin dictionary*, 572.

distinctions among humans become irrelevant. However, this passage could also be seen as an effort to avoid the question of ethnic association entirely. It is clear from the context of his argument and the historical context more broadly that Christian identity carried ethnic associations which some Christian authors wished to avoid.<sup>419</sup> By the universalist and somewhat unconvincing claim that they perceived the whole world as one large family united, Minucius Felix dodges the question of whether or not Christian identity carries with it ethnic baggage, Jewish or otherwise. Since ethnic identity in the ancient world and Christian texts specifically was often constructed by contrasting oneself with a differently ethnic other,<sup>420</sup> by promoting this universalist position in which such otherness is denied, so too does Minucius Felix deny the connotation of ethnicity to his Christian identity. Still his silence is in some ways as telling as what he does say. Whereas some early Christian writers such as Eusebius will argue that Christians are the continuation of Israelite or ancient Hebrew people,<sup>421</sup> Minucius Felix chooses only to address the issue in order to distinguish Christians from contemporary Jews and suggest that they are of an intellectual persuasion to which such ethnic divisions are irrelevant.

Compare this to Tertullian's presentation of Christian universalism, which comes on the heels of his attempt to argue the civic neutrality of Christians but nevertheless uses civic language to describe Christian universalism: "for us, left cold by the flames of glory and public honors, it is not necessary to conspire; nothing is more alien than the

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<sup>419</sup> Buell, *Why This New Race*, 141-142; Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*, 309; Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica*, 6-8.

<sup>420</sup> Wilhite, *Tertullian the African*, 125; Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica*, 9.

<sup>421</sup> Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica*.

public. We acknowledge one state (*republicam*) of all people, the world."<sup>422</sup> As I discuss in chapter 2 on Tertullian, this passage both defends Christians against the accusation of being political rabble-rousers and diminishes the authority of the Roman state over Christians. However, it is worth analysing how focused on civic authority Tertullian's Christianity is, even within this claim. Minucius Felix uses the distinctly apolitical, personal, and non-threatening term *domus* to refer to how God perceives the world without borders. In contrast Tertullian uses the distinctly civic language of *unam omnium rempublicam*. While this argument is brought up to defend Christians from the accusation of conspiring against the Roman state, it could also be read as suggesting the opposite: Christians do not seek worldly offices and have no need to conspire against the Roman state for at the end of days there shall be one republic of all people with Christians as its leaders. This is admittedly an extreme reading of this passage but is consistent with Tertullian's other views that the world will end with the fall of the Roman Empire, and during the end of the world Christians will be elevated above all.<sup>423</sup>

Roy Kearsley argues that Tertullian, in spite of his professed alliance to the Roman state within the *Apology*, presents his Christian group as a civic entity that is fundamentally at odds with and in conflict with the Roman Empire. He suggests that Tertullian uses imperial language to refer to the Christian God and Christian practices, in order to present their God as the true possessor of the Emperor's claims to power

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<sup>422</sup> At enim nobis ab omni gloriae et dignitatis ardore frigentibus nulla est necessitas coetus, nec ulla magis res aliena quam publica. Unam omnium rempublicam agnoscimus mundum. Tertullian, *Apology* xxxviii.3 p.149.

<sup>423</sup> See *Apology* xxxii.1 on the fall of the Roman Empire as a sign for the worlding ending; *On Spectacles* xxx on Christians being elevated above others in the Second Coming. Furthermore Kearsley, *Tertullian's Theology of Divine Power*, 26-28 and Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*, 62-63 both agree Tertullian takes delight in the prospect that at the end of the world the Roman state will be destroyed and that Christians elevated above it.

and the Christian community as rival “shadow-empire.”<sup>424</sup> This argument rests on the position that Tertullian was either insincere in his *Apology* or at some point in his life radically changed his views on the Roman Empire. While there is textual evidence to support either position, I would contend that it is not necessary to consider Tertullian’s views on the Roman Empire irreconcilable. As Wilhite reminds us, in North Africa even those who violently and militaristically opposed the Roman Empire could and often did consider themselves to be Romans, seeking control over Rome rather than independence from it.<sup>425</sup> While Tertullian had many qualms with the Roman Empire, and advised Christians to stand up against Roman officials, this does not mean that Tertullian did not consider himself or his fellow Christians to be Roman. The fact that Tertullian uses civic and at times imperial language to refer to the Christian community does not necessarily make it an independent rival power to the Roman Empire, but rather an extension of it. In this light, Tertullian’s attacks on the practices of the Roman Empire could be seen as desires for reform within it, and that Christians not be the enemies of the Roman Empire but the agents of this reform. The “one republic of all people” is not necessarily a rival Christian civic community but rather the completion and perfection of Roman imperialism brought about through Christianity. Nevertheless, Tertullian is also aware that in the eyes of Roman imperial authority there is not a meaningful distinction between rebelling to seek radical change and rebelling to seek independence. Thus, he is still clear and explicit that Christians do not take part in public affairs or have any desire to do so, while simultaneously using imperial language to present Christians as a positive civic force. To be clear, for Tertullian this would only

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<sup>424</sup> Kearsley, *Tertullian’s Theology of Divine Power*, 146-148.

<sup>425</sup> Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 49-50.

ever be an unfulfilled power fantasy,<sup>426</sup> but within the Latin tradition this idea becomes very important when we come to the views of Lactantius.

In contrast Minucius Felix distinctly argues that the relationship between God and the world is not that of king and subject and that Christians do not represent a civic intermediary between God and man: “Although kings come to know all things about their kingdoms through the accounts of their ministers, God does not work through official reports.”<sup>427</sup> The distinction he draws between “liv[ing] not only in his eyes, but in his folds”<sup>428</sup> is the distinction between God as a personal force of governance and God as a more nebulous metaphysical underpin of existence. By emphasising this, Minucius Felix argues that Christian’s relationship to God does not require a hierarchical civic authority which would put them at odds with the Roman state. Whereas Tertullian presents Christian identity as underlying and building upon a form of Roman civic identity that is nevertheless at times in conflict with the Roman state, Minucius Felix presents Christian identity more in line with a philosophical school which is intellectually critical of Roman authority but not rebellious against it.

### Minucius Felix’s Use of *Religio*

The manner in which Minucius Felix uses this cultic language represents a point of contrast between his apologetic work and that of Tertullian. Specifically in regards to the term *religio* there is a subtle but notable distinction between these two authors which

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<sup>426</sup> Daniel-Hughes and Kotrosits, “Tertullian of Carthage and the Fantasy Life of Power.”

<sup>427</sup> Reges tantum regni sui per officia ministrorum universa noverunt: deo indiciis opus non est. Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, xxxiii.1 p.31.

<sup>428</sup> Non solum in oculis eius, sed in sinu vivimus. Ibid.

is rooted in how they categorize Christian groups. As the last chapter discussed, Tertullian in his *Apology* co-opts the term *religio* to present Christian communities as cultic groups while simultaneously rejecting all non-Christian cultic practices. From the second century onward some Christian writers aimed to present Christian groups as cultic groups. However, they faced challenges in doing so, as at that time Christians lacked the traditional infrastructure and organization of such groups: temples, priests, altars, sacrifices, etc. Second century Christian texts made up for this by applying cultic language metaphorically to Christian activity and behavior, and thus created and defined themselves by a reimagined form of cultic identity which was applied more broadly than traditional cultic identity to nearly all aspects of life.<sup>429</sup> Scholars theorize that they especially sought to present themselves as these cultic groups in order to avoid being perceived as a political faction, which the phrasing of their name in Greek and Latin would otherwise imply.<sup>430</sup> I would contend that Tertullian and Minucius Felix can be seen as a continuation of this trend and of this model of early Christian self-characterization.<sup>431</sup> However, through the adoption and redefinition of the term *religio* Tertullian's apologetic strategy relies far more heavily on presenting Christian groups as cultic organizations and calling upon the Roman methods for how foreign cultic groups should be treated, as I discussed in my last chapter. In contrast Minucius Felix, although

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<sup>429</sup> Edwin Judge, "Was Christianity a Religion?" in *The First Christians in the Roman World: Augustan and New Testament Essays*, ed. James R. Harrison; WUNT 229 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr Siebeck, 2008) 404–409; Judge, "Did the Churches Compete with Cult-groups", 597-618; John Kloppenborg, "Second Century Constructions of Christianity", *SNTS Leuven* (2021): 1-29.

<sup>430</sup> i.e. Kloppenborg, "Second Century Constructions of Christianity," 27-28, Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 94-96.

<sup>431</sup> For a good example of these authors co-opting and metaphorically interpreting cultic language to refer to Christian practices and behaviors see Tertullian, *Apology*, xxxix.1-21 and Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, xxxii.1-3.

he does present Christianity as having cultic elements,<sup>432</sup> presents Christian groups as more akin to philosophical schools and correspondingly presents their relationship to Roman authority differently.

Minucius Felix is not without his own changes and manipulations of cultic language and particularly the term *religio*; however the nature of his innovations can be easily missed due to the influence of Cicero on the text. When discussing the usage of *religio* and other cultic language in this dialogue, much like in Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*, it is important to take note of which of the characters are speaking and to what purpose. As such a blanket understanding of the use of *religio* cannot be accurately applied to the text. However, due to the obscurity of *Octavius* among discussions of early Christian texts and the tendency for scholarship on *religio* to only discuss this work in passing, these complexities have been ignored. Previous scholarship tends to see Minucius Felix's use of *religio* as copying Cicero's use of the term.<sup>433</sup>

This view is not without foundation within Minucius Felix's work, as indeed when *religio* is used by the character of Caecilius it is used consistently with Cicero's understanding of the term. For example, in Caecilius's argument on the validity of Roman worship he makes the claim that:

Our ancestors devoted themselves to the task of either observing auguries, instituting sacrifices, or consecrating temples. Behold the books of history; they will reveal that all rituals of worship (*ritus omnium religionum*) were

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<sup>432</sup> Again see *Octavius*, xxxii.1-3.

<sup>433</sup> Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine no Religion*, 46; Nongbri, "Dislodging 'Embedded' Religion," 448-449; Ibid, *Before Religion: a History of the Modern Concept*, 28-29; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 190-191.

instituted either in order that divine favour may be won back, imminent wrath might be averted or that current excited rage and violence might be calmed.<sup>434</sup>

*Religio* here is largely equated with ritual (*ritus*), or at least ritual that is directed toward the gods. *Religio* or its plural serves as an umbrella term to describe the various things that are listed above: observing auguries, instituting sacrifices, or consecrating temples, etc.. Here Minucius Felix presents *religio* as it would have been understood by someone like Cicero. It is because of passages like this that scholars believe that both Tertullian and Minucius Felix are simply copying Cicero's understanding of *religio*. However, the fact that this passage is put in the mouth of the pagan interlocuter, suggests that Minucius Felix is doing something a bit more rhetorically interesting here, and setting up a position that he intends to complicate further on.

Another insight from the mouth of Caecilius is the non-Christian perspective on Christian cultic practices or the lack thereof, or at least the way in which Minucius Felix presents this perspective. He addresses some of the chief concerns over Christian cultic practice: namely that Christians lack the traditional infrastructure of cult, and more broadly shun most practices that have any traditional association with cult:

Nevertheless you truly are hung up on these things and anxiously abstain from honest pleasures: you do not go to spectacles, you do not take part in processions, and you remove yourselves from public banquets; you abhor the sacred games (*sacra certamina*), the meat of chosen offerings and drink

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<sup>434</sup> *Maiores nostri aut observandis auguriis aut extis consulendis aut instituendis sacris aut delubris dedicandis operam navaverunt. Specta de libris memoriam: iam eos deprehendes initiasse ritus omnium religionum, vel ut remuneraretur divina indulgentia vel ut averteretur imminens ira aut ut iam tumens et saeviens placaretur. Minucius Felix, Octavius, vii.1-3 p.5.*

tasted of by altars. Thus you shrink from the gods whom you deny! You do not bind the head with flowers, you do not adorn the body with scents, you reserve unguent for funerals, you refuse garlands even for graves, you are sickly, trembling, and worthy of pity.<sup>435</sup>

While the thrust of this passage is to condemn Christians as pleasure hating zealots, there is a secondary connotation that Christians reject all things traditionally associated with cultic practice. This is made evident by the comment “thus you shrink from the gods whom you deny”, which associates all of the practices described above not just with enjoyment but the worshiping of non-Christian deities. It is unclear to what extent Christians of Minucius Felix’s time did actually avoid all of these practices. However, it is worth noting that Tertullian within his larger body of work does argue that Christians should avoid many of the practices described here.<sup>436</sup> It is not that Christians change these practices or do them to a different deity, rather their connection to their god necessitates the complete rejection of all practices that are traditionally associated with cult. The implication of this is not that Christians are a rival cultic group, but that they are a type of group that necessitates the rejection of any and all cultic practice. This could hypothetically be in keeping with the type of philosophical group Minucius Felix is presenting Christians as. However, as Octavius’s speech demonstrates, Minucius Felix

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<sup>435</sup> Vos vero suspensi interim atque solliciti honestis voluptatibus abstinetis; non spectacula visitis, non pompis interestis; convivia publica absque vobis; sacra certamina, praecerptos cibos et delibatos altaribus potus abhorretis. Sic reformidatis deos quos negatis! Non floribus caput nectitis, non corpus odoribus honestatis; reservatis unguenta funeribus, coronas etiam sepulcris denegatis, pallidi trepidi, misericordia digni. Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, xii.5-6 p.10.

<sup>436</sup> See Tertullian’s *On Spectacles*, *On Idolatry*, and *On the Crowns of Soldiers*. However, it should be noted that Rebillard, *Christians and their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa 200-450*, 10-33, argues that Tertullian’s condemnation of these practices was evidence that Christians of the time were engaging with them.

does not completely reject cultic practice, as Caecilius accuses Christians of doing, but rather he includes an adapted form of cultic practice befitting his model of Christianity.

Through the character Octavius, Minucius Felix presents an altered understanding of cultic practice and specifically *religio*. His use of the term partially builds on the abstracted understanding of *religio* established by Tertullian, but pushes into further levels of abstraction that connects it more closely to philosophy than to cult. In the final part of Octavius's argument in defence of Christians, he describes the true nature of what it means to be Christian and begins with commenting on the nature of cultic practice for Christians:

Therefore, he who cherishes innocence, supplicates to God; he who maintains justice, pours a libation to God; he who abstains from fraud, appeases God; he who takes a man away from danger, slays the best victim. These are our sacrifices, these are the sacred rites of God: thus among us the more devout (*religiosior*) is he who is more just.<sup>437</sup>

Notably this passage, in its use of *religio*, in some ways parallels the Ciceronian use of the term: a number of cultic practices dedicated toward appeasing divinity are listed and *religio* is used as an umbrella term to categorise all of them. However, rather than take literally the concept of *religio* as cultic practice, the concept is applied to Christianity almost metaphorically. As Christians lacked most of the trappings of a cultic group, and are said to have rejected most of the practice traditionally connected to cult, cultic practices are abstracted from what they would normally involve, to apply to a group

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<sup>437</sup> Igitur, qui innocentiam colit, deo supplicat; qui iustitiam, deo libat; qui fraudibus abstinet, propitiat deum; qui hominem periculo subripit, optimam victimam caedit. Haec nostra sacrificia, haec dei sacra sunt; sic apud nos religiosior est ille qui iustior. xxxii.3 p.30.

more focused around morality than sacrifice. Rhetorically the passage makes use of a repeating phrase structure which emphasises the connections between distinctly cultic practices and moral tenants. Also the redundancy and strong emphasis of this rhetorical structure could suggest that the point being made is either unfamiliar to his audience or not likely to be accepted. This is likely because this degree of abstracting the nature of cult was likely at odds with how cultic practice was traditionally understood, which was only loosely connected to morality.

This description of cultic practice as a metaphor for virtuous behavior, is a notably more overt redefining of the nature of cult than we see in Tertullian. While it makes for effective rhetoric, from a definitional point of view it is hard to see how 'abstaining from fraud' could be comparable to 'slaying a victim.' This is likely because unlike Tertullian, Minucius Felix presents Christianity as being more focused on philosophical goals such as morality, ultimate human happiness, and the intellectual pursuit of truth, than cultic practice. Unlike Tertullian or Lactantius, for Minucius Felix *religio*, while part of being a Christian, is not a defining part of being a Christian. Rather for Minucius Felix cultic practices are subservient to if not wholly subsumed within philosophical practices. However even so, Minucius Felix still uses this argument in order to defend the claim that Christians have *religio* and have cultic practices, claiming *religio* allows him to lay claim to a legitimacy that would otherwise be denied to Christians. Thus Minucius's use of the word *religio* notably differs from, yet still builds on Tertullian's use of the term. Tertullian abstracts *religio* and the idea of cultic practice, from Cicero's model which was limited to ritual worship, to refer to more abstract concepts of worship such as devotion and loyalty. In Tertullian's apologetic writings

*religio* becomes an important aspect for defining what a Christian is, and providing Christians with cultic affiliations without cultic infrastructure. For to Tertullian Christians are defined by the devotion to God and loyalty to the Roman state in a manner that mirrors, but is mutually exclusive to, cultic groups' ritualist reverence to their divinities, including the cult devoted to the Roman emperor. This differs from Minucius Felix's use of *religio* to refer to any moral practice inspired by a Christian's relationship to God, the difference being that Tertullian's model still preserves the idea of Christians as an altered form of cult, whereas Minucius Felix alters cult to the point where it becomes philosophy.

This distinction has yet to be properly observed by scholarship which tends to present Cicero, Tertullian, and Minucius Felix as using the term identically. Most recently Carlin Barton and Daniel Boyarin reassert the traditional view when they argue that "It was Cicero's philosophical works... that gave Tertullian, Minucius Felix, Lactantius, and Ambrose the version of the word *religio* that would eventually evolve into our 'religion.'"<sup>438</sup> Barton and Boyarin do not speak further of Minucius Felix's use of *religio*, and while they discuss Tertullian's use of the term at far greater length, they also argue that at least within his apologetic works Tertullian sticks to the Ciceronian model.<sup>439</sup> This is in line with the earlier analysis of both Brent Nongbri and Jörg Rüpke who argue that Minucius Felix and Tertullian both use the term *religio* in the manner of Cicero to refer to ritual. However, Nongbri and Rüpke also argue that Tertullian and Minucius Felix do add a wrinkle to the Ciceronian model. They refer to *vera religio* in contrast to *falsa religio* or *superstio* as a method of boundary making between the

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<sup>438</sup>Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*, 46.

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

Christians and non-Christians. The genuine ritual or *vera religio* is reserved not merely for those with legitimacy but only for genuine Christians.<sup>440</sup> However, for those engaging in detailed analysis of the relation between these three ancient Christian authors, a more nuanced understanding is necessary. This shows that Tertullian and Minucius Felix, while they base their work on the classical tradition of Cicero, alter and adapt it to suit their purposes. For Tertullian adaptation involves using *religio* to define Christians and as a boundary marker to distinguish the true Christian from the non-Christian. For Minucius it is to achieve legitimacy in the Roman world by presenting Christians as a valid philosophy which also has the legitimization of a valid *religio*.

#### Minucius Felix's Roman Identity and Relationship to Civic Authority

As a philosophical group, Minucius Felix's Christians are intellectually critical of elements of Roman rule; however they do not constitute a threat or resistance to the rule of Roman government nor does adopting Christian identity necessitate excluding or rejecting the Roman identity of Christians. Therefore, in his response to accusations of conspiracy, Minucius Felix demonstrates a dismissiveness rooted in the assumptions that Christians are also loyal Romans and that their behavior does not in anyway constitute resistance to the Roman government. These passages stand in contrast to similar passages from Tertullian's *Apology* which although they share similar arguments, take the accusation that Christians could be a threat to Roman civic

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<sup>440</sup> Nongbri, "Dislodging 'Embedded' Religion," 448-449; Ibid, *Before Religion*, 28-29; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 190-191.

authority far more seriously, with the implication that they could oppose Roman rule if they chose to do so.

This interpretation is consistent with current scholarly understandings of ancient Roman identity both within the region of North Africa and beyond. David Wilhite in discussing Romanization and Roman identity in North Africa emphasises the importance of hybridity for understanding it. He makes the point that resistance to Roman authority and embracing Roman identity partially or completely, are not binary. Conversely, provincials living under Roman imperial rule who completely embraced Roman identity could inhabit non-Roman identities as well.<sup>441</sup> Based on their particular goals, Romans varyingly contrasted their identity with those they conquered, or claimed that provincials were indeed Romans. Correspondingly, they regularly redefined what was required to constitute a Roman identity.<sup>442</sup> Likewise Emma Dench holds that “Roman identity is a particular kind of plurality, based on both the incorporation and transformation of other peoples and cultures; local and Roman identities may be asserted simultaneously, but the tension between them may be made very obvious.”<sup>443</sup> For North Africans like Tertullian and Minucius, *Romanitas* was unescapable yet modular. Roman identity was an unavoidable part of both these authors and the world around them. However, Roman identity was flexible enough that they could assert other identities like African or Christian which set them in opposition to Roman authority or divinity without compromising their *Romanitas*.

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<sup>441</sup> Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 49-51.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid, *Tertullian the African*, 125-126.

<sup>443</sup> Dench, *Romulus' Asylum*, 4.

Acknowledging this aspect of these thinkers is important not only for understanding their views on Roman identity, but for understanding how they present Christian identity as well. Eric Rebillard argues that one cannot properly understand North African Christians to be members of a world separate from the pagan society they lived in. One must acknowledge that they were far more likely fully integrated on the local level with that pagan society and did not see their Christianity as excluding them from membership in other associations.<sup>444</sup> While there may well have been a shared sense of common identity within Christian groups, it was “one of the many affiliations that mattered in everyday life”<sup>445</sup> and Christian identity varied based on the individual, as is shown from the variation even between Tertullian and Minucius Felix. Likewise Simon Price argues that Rome is central to the contemporary world of Tertullian and Minucius Felix. Unlike their Greek eastern contemporaries, for these western Latin writers, the critique of Rome is fundamental to their apologetic enterprise. This focus on Rome thus marks a point of similarity between Tertullian, Minucius Felix and Lactantius. Although figures like Tertullian write to proud Carthaginians using what were clearly meant to be stirring references to their pre-Roman past,<sup>446</sup> Tertullian and Minucius Felix both build on Roman customs even as they critique them to show that Christianity is the next logical move for Roman culture.<sup>447</sup> Therefore, it is important to understand that these authors negotiate their Roman identity through the ways in which they construct Christian identity. The different strategies they use to do this represent places in which groups could safely reject or resist Roman authority and culture.

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<sup>444</sup> Rebillard, *Christians and their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa 200-450*, 32-33.

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>446</sup> Such as in his works *On the Philosophers Cloak* and *To the Martyrs*.

<sup>447</sup> Price, “Latin Christian Apologetics,” 126-128.

Whereas in his *Apology* Tertullian presents a form of Roman identity purely linked to civic participation that is compatible with his model of Christian identity, Minucius Felix does not feel the need to make this concession. For to Minucius Felix the Roman identity of Christians is self-evident and does not need to be curtailed in order to be acceptable. Passages of *Octavius* clearly borrow from Tertullian's arguments on the civic neutrality of Christians and their claim to Roman identity. However, the diminished focus on these arguments in the text as a whole and the way in which they are phrased demonstrate a dismissiveness for the accusation that Christians constitute a threat to the rule of Roman government. For example, in the culmination of Tertullian's argument on why Christians are not committing treason against the emperor by not worshipping him, he argues that civic leaders ought to be honored as the highest of human beings, but not as gods. Minucius Felix makes the same theological point, in a differing context which de-emphasises its importance to the argument and its connection to Roman authority.

When addressing the accusation that Christians worship a mere human being, Minucius Felix throws back the accusation upon non-Christians who deify their civic leaders; however at least initially this is not made in reference to the Roman emperor:

It is true that the Egyptians elect for themselves a human whom they worship: they propitiate only him, they consult him on all things, they slay victims for him. Even he, who to the rest is a god, clearly to himself is a man, want it or not: for his own conscience (*conscientia*) he cannot deceive, although he beguile others. Indeed it is not false and debased flattery to fawn on kings and princes as great and elect men, which is right to do, but it is to

fawn on them as gods. Because to the truly distinguished man honor is truer and to the great man it is sweeter to be offered affection. Thus they call upon the divinity of [their leaders], to their images they supplicate themselves, to their Genius, which is a daemon, they implore themselves; and through the Genius of Jupiter it is safer to swear falsely to them than to [regard them] as kings.<sup>448</sup>

The way in which this critique is phrased is careful to both allude indirectly to the Roman practices of deifying emperors, while distancing that association from the theological point. Minucius Felix begins the rebuttal not with a reference to Roman emperors, but to the Egyptian practice of deifying pharaohs. This is a practice which would be equally foreign to Christian, Roman, and African readers, and provides a mutually alien other,<sup>449</sup> which Minucius Felix can disparage in support of his point. From this he then presents his more general theological point, grounded within an example that both sides can mutually agree deserves critique. Only then does he bring up the worship of Roman emperors through the allusion to the worship of the Genius of Jupiter.<sup>450</sup> In the final sentence Minucius Felix agrees with Tertullian's claim that the genii of civic leaders are daemons, and implies through association that the Roman emperor ought to be esteemed merely as the highest of human beings, rather than divine. But unlike Tertullian, he leaves this point merely as an implication. This is because, unlike for

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<sup>448</sup> Aegyptii sane hominem sibi quem colant eligunt; illum unum propitiant, illum de omnibus consulunt, illi victimas caedunt. Et ille, qui ceteris deus, sibi certe homo est, velit nolit; nec enim conscientiam suam decipit, si fallit alienam. Etiam principibus et regibus, non ut magnis et electis viris, sicut fas est, sed ut deis turpiter adlatio falsa blanditur, cum et praeclaro viro honor verius et optimo amor dulcius praebeatur. Sic eorum numen vocant, ad imagines supplicant, Genium, id est daemonem, inplorant, et est eis tutius per Iovis Genium peierare quam regis. Minucius Felix, *Octavius* xxix.4-5 p.28.

<sup>449</sup> Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, 8.

<sup>450</sup> That this is a reference to the worship of Roman emperors is attested to by Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, 7.

Tertullian, it is not fundamental to his apologetic argument to explicitly outline the relationship between Christians and Roman civic authority. For as a philosophical school, Minucius Felix's Christians can critique Roman cultic practices on intellectual grounds without necessarily positioning themselves as enemies of Roman civic authority. Therefore, he is careful that Christian positions on the validity of Roman civic authority, be only vaguely alluded to rather than explicitly stated, lest they seem more threatening than they should otherwise.

This passage represents other notable departures from Tertullian's arguments. Minucius Felix uses the term *conscientia* here not in the sense of Tertullian's use of the term which implies a universal subconscious understanding of Christian doctrine, but more simply in a way more consistent with the English cognate conscience. What Minucius Felix is referring to here is not necessarily a Christian notion but rather a more general intuitive understanding that oneself is not a god, which could be understood as a merely logical or intuitive supposition. Further, this passage discusses in one paragraph what for Tertullian is the culmination of a quarter of his *Apology*.<sup>451</sup> For Tertullian, the civic authority of the emperor as distinct from divinity is an important sticking point for Christian-Roman relations as it represents one of the major legal accusations made against Christians. However, Minucius Felix's change in focus means that this same argument takes a different place, and a greatly diminished importance. That Minucius Felix references Genius worship at all might however be in reference to Tertullian, as it is not a common form of Roman worship or a common target of attack for apologists.<sup>452</sup> Minucius Felix makes this argument, not in response to the accusation

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<sup>451</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, xxviii.1-xxxvi.4.

<sup>452</sup> Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, 188.

that Christians do not worship the Roman emperor, but conversely to the accusation that they do worship a mere human being. This is one of several accusations and misconceptions about Christians that the character Octavius addresses within this section of his speech<sup>453</sup> such as the claim that Christians worship the head of an ass or that they worship the physical shape of the cross. Since Minucius Felix is treating the debate between Christians and Romans as an intellectual issue, rather than a legal defence, the subject of Christian civic loyalties is very low on his list of issues to address and indeed intentionally put off.

This being said, Minucius Felix does within this same section of the text address the issue of Christian-Roman identity and the civic allegiance of Christians, with the point of arguing that Christians ought to be treated as full Romans. The last of the misconceptions and false accusations made about Christians which he addresses before he begins to describe the positive aspects of Christian identity and teaching is the mistreatment of Christians under the law and the accusation that they are factionalists or *factiosi*:

Neither should we now be reckoned among the lowest plebians (*plebe*) if we decline your public offices and purples, nor are we factionalists (*factiosi*) if we, gathered together quietly, all understand the good to be the same thing as we do individually, nor are we 'talkative in corners' if you are either ashamed or afraid to hear us publicly.<sup>454</sup>

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<sup>453</sup> Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, xxviii-xxxi.

<sup>454</sup> Nec de ultima statim plebe consistimus, si honores vestros et purpuras recusamus, nec factiosi sumus, si omnes unum bonum sapimus, eadem congregati quiete qua singuli, nec in angulis garruli, si audire nos publice aut erubescitis aut timetis. Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, xxxi.6 p.30.

Here Minucius Felix rebuts three contradictory extreme views of Christians by contrasting them both with each other and with how Christians genuinely act. In countering the first point, that Christians are not full Roman citizens for not participating in Roman government, he could be seen as attributing to Christians a full Roman identity that has been denied to them through persecution.

In this way he would be mirroring arguments made by Tertullian.<sup>455</sup> However, the way in which he phrases the accusation shows that he is not concerned with the same issue as Tertullian. Whereas Tertullian is concerned that Christians “*Romani* negamur.”<sup>456</sup> Minucius Felix is concerned that “de ultima statim *plebe* consistimus.” Rather than Roman identity as a whole, Minucius Felix is worried that Christians are seen as lesser status. The defence he makes here is that Christians are still of equal status to any other comparable Roman, which should not be denied simply because they do not choose to participate in public offices. This argument rests on the assumption that Christians are self-evidently Roman and are thus due the same status as any other Roman.<sup>457</sup> Although writers both ancient and modern have emphasized the role of civic participation, even in its more abstracted provincial form of Roman identity had a fundamental cultural component.<sup>458</sup> Since the lack of perceived Roman identity could result in dire legal and social consequences by the hands of elite,<sup>459</sup> Minucius

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<sup>455</sup> Tertullian, *Apology* xxxv.1-xxxvi.4.

<sup>456</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, xxxvi.1.

<sup>457</sup> This point is in keeping with the social understanding of early Christians which argues that they would be largely culturally indistinguishable from those around them; see Rebillard, *Christians and their Many Identities in Late Antiquity*, 32-33; Mathew Novenson, “Beyond Compare: Some Recent Strategies for Not Comparing Early Christianity with Other Things,” in *The New Testament in Comparison: Validity, Method, and Purpose in Comparing Tradition* ed. J. Barclay & B. White. The Library of New Testament Studies (T & T Clark, 2020) 18-20.

<sup>458</sup> Dench, *Romulus' Asylum*, 3-4.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid*, 32-33.

Felix is keen to assert the self-evidence of Roman identity even in light of a lack of civic participation. However, while he is worried that their lack of participation in Roman public life will lead people to think that they are of a social stratum that does not have a right to such participation, unlike for Tertullian, their actual Roman identity is not in dispute.

The second view that Minucius Felix counters here is the accusation that Christians are a threat to Roman civic authority; however he does so only to argue that such a position is self-evidently false. The accusation is that Christians are *factiosi*: “nor are we factionalists (*factiosi*) if we, gathered together quietly, all understand the good to be the same thing as we do individually.”<sup>460</sup> While derived from the simple Latin word *facere*, “to do,” the word *factio* and adjectival form *factiosus* lack the neutrality of its English cognate faction. Rather it remains a wholly disapproving way of referring to a group of civic agents bound in cooperation for undesirable ends. It is associated with influence, collective actions, and intrigue. It is also used almost always in the singular and never applied to noble Roman families. It is not therefore a term to refer to a number of rival partisan groups in conflict with each other, but rather it remains a method of othering. It refers to a vaguely defined ‘them’ who stand in opposition to an equally vaguely defined ‘us,’ and who seek to bring things about through clout and influence in contrast to us whose civic influence is based on gratitude and friendship. When used to refer to a smaller group, as here, it can mean something close to dissension. It is largely defined by the maliciousness of the people who compose it, and

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<sup>460</sup> Nec factiosi sumus, si omnes unum bonum sapimus, eadem congregati quiete qua singuli. Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, xxxi.6 p.30.

contrasted with civic unions of *boni*, “good men.”<sup>461</sup> Therefore, shallow though the argument may seem, both Minucius Felix and Tertullian are, from a common definitional point of view, quite right simply to counter it by asserting the goodness of people in Christian groups.

The implication remains however that Christians are part of a political other, involved in intrigue and with malicious and possibly violent intentions, whose extremely passionate group identity will inherently lead them into conflict with others. By bringing this up within the same sentence as the accusation that Christians should not be considered full Romans given how little they participate in public affairs, he points out and mocks the self-contradicting nature of the accusations against Christians. He also counters this position by contrasting it to the facts of Christian behavior, namely that their meetings are quiet and peaceful and inconsistent with political rabble rousers. He further argues that they are not united by a hatred of others but a common understanding of the good. Neither, he argues, is this common understanding predicated on their group identity, but instead reflects their personal beliefs which they all hold individually. Minucius Felix’s description of the Christian group is vague here; however insofar as it emphasizes individual belief over collective identity it suggests a more philosophically rather than civically grounded group.

Contrast this with Tertullian’s response to the same accusation, which oddly overemphasises the civic participation of Christian groups in an effort to make them seem loyal to the Roman state:

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<sup>461</sup> Tatum, “Factio (Roman Republic);” Seager, “Factio,” 53-58; Glare and Christofer, *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 670.

When the honest and when the good come together, and when the pious and when the chaste congregate, it must not be called a faction (*factio*), but rather an assembly (*curia*). But on the contrary, the name of faction (*factionis*) is apt for those who conspire in hatred of the good and honest, who... suppose Christians to be the cause of public disaster from the drawn of time, every misfortune of the people.<sup>462</sup>

Rather than arguing that Christians are not a *factio* on account of their civic neutrality, which he elsewhere emphasises,<sup>463</sup> Tertullian presents Christians as a civic body but one whose good intentions put them on the right side of law. The distinction that Tertullian is drawing here between a *factio* and *curia* is that between an illegitimate illegal association of conspirators and a legitimate group with legal authorization. The description of Christian groups as a *curia* presents Christians as well meaning Roman citizens, loyal to and involved within the state. Those who are defined by hatred of such a group, Tertullian argues, are clearly more factionalist than Christians. By turning his accusation upon the perceived enemies of Christians, Tertullian does more than refute this allegation. He is using the term *factio* to other his opponents, in the same way they are presumed to have used it against him. Since *factio* is usually conceived of in the singular, throwing the term onto someone else positions Christians within the accepted in-group of the Roman government by othering a third party and uniting Christians and Roman authority against a common enemy.

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<sup>462</sup> Cum probi, cum boni coeunt, cum pii, cum casti congregantur, non est factio dicenda, sed curia. At e contrario illis nomen factionis accommodandum est, qui in odium bonorum et proborum conspirant, qui... existiment omnis publicae cladis, omnis popularis incommodi a primordio temporum Christianos esse in causam. Tertullian, *Apology* xxxix.21-xl.1 p.153.

<sup>463</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, xxxviii.3.

Given the civic neutrality that Tertullian in other parts of the work attributes to Christians, as well as the legal persecution that he describes, this passage is not without Tertullian's customary irony. However, what is worth noting is that Tertullian, in trying to deny the accusation of being a *factio*, does not deny that Christians are extremely passionate about their group identity or that this leads them into conflict. He is merely able to deny that Christians are disloyal to the Roman state. For writers like Tertullian 'Christian' is a comprehensive category which supersedes other relationships or alliances. Given that in some of his other works he argues that the best thing you can do to become a Christian is to be violently executed at the hands the Roman state,<sup>464</sup> the sincerity of this apologetic argument is debatable. This represents a difference between Tertullian and earlier apologists, as well as Minucius Felix, who present Christian identity as something that is useful in this life.<sup>465</sup>

In contrast Minucius Felix argues Christian gatherings are quiet and peaceful, and more importantly that their collective identity is merely a reflection of individual beliefs: "nor are we factionalists (*factiosi*) if we, gathered together quietly, all understand the good to be the same thing as we do individually."<sup>466</sup> Whereas Minucius Felix grounds Christian identity intellectually on personal beliefs, Tertullian, even when countering views of factionalism, presents Christian goodness as much a product of group identity as individual identity. This distinction is subtly implied even in the way they phrase this allegation. Minucius Felix uses the substantive adjective *factiosi* as opposed to merely using the noun *factio* as Tertullian does. The difference is the *factiosi*

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<sup>464</sup> See for example *To the Martyrs*, *On Flight in a time of Persecution*, and *The Scorpion*.

<sup>465</sup> Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*, 254-259.

<sup>466</sup> Si omnes unum bonum sapimus, eadem congregati quiete qua singuli. Minucius Felix, *Octavius* xxxi.6 p.30.

applies to Christians as individuals whereas *factio* applies to the Christian group as a collective noun. By saying *factiosi* and not *factio* Minucius argues that not only is his Christian group not a *factio*, but that the individuals are not inclined to become one. This further emphasises Christianness as an aspect of individuality rather than collective identity. This is because Minucius Felix presents Christians as far more defined by their philosophical views than does Tertullian.

The final politically based accusation that Minucius Felix addresses is the claim that Christians are conspiratorial, which he counters by arguing they should have the same position as other philosophers: “nor are we ‘talkative in corners’ if you are either ashamed or afraid to hear us publicly.”<sup>467</sup> The phrase “*in angulis garruli*” does not seem to appear as an idiom in other Latin works but in this context seems to imply a secretive and conspiratorial behavior with the understanding that those talking are plotting against those who would otherwise hear them. Minucius Felix counters this accusation by arguing that Christians are not so by choice or hostile intent but rather by circumstance. The implication here is that fear and hatred of Christians has provoked any secretiveness on their part. Rather it is his desire that Christians should be able to speak and proselytize<sup>468</sup> freely within the kind of open market of ideas that would benefit philosophers which implies that Christians are or at least should be fully integrated into Roman society. As noted above, Rebillard persuasively argues that North African

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<sup>467</sup> Nec in angulis garruli, si audire nos publice aut erubescitis aut timetis. Ibid.

<sup>468</sup> While the Christian church did expand dramatically during this time (see Kling, *A History of Christian Conversion*, 53-54), based on existing writings it is hard to assess to what extent there was active missionary work. What is more common is what is seen here “that Christians did not deny the desirability of mission, but nor did they generally affirm it, seems to reflect the general attitude of patristic authors” Martin Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2011) 107, doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198263876.003.0005.

Christians would have been fully integrated into pagan society and likely indistinguishable from those around them.<sup>469</sup> However, one of the most likely distinguishing features about such Christians was their regular and possibly somewhat secretive meetings and their distinct greetings to each other in public.<sup>470</sup> This could understandably lead to the type of accusations of secretiveness that are seen here. I have made much of this passage,<sup>471</sup> however it is worth noting how indeed brief and dismissive it actually is. While Tertullian is greatly concerned with how Christians are perceived under the law, Minucius Felix, insofar as his views are reflected in this text, does not seem greatly worried about legal persecution. Rather his focus is on debating the validity of Christian teachings intellectually.

### Conclusion

The Christian identity of Minucius Felix and the Christian identity of Tertullian differ in that Minucius Felix's Christianity is grounded in the intellectual validity of Christian teaching, whereas Tertullian's Christianity is grounded in a divinely ordered hierarchy which could be seen as contrary to Roman civic authority. As such, Tertullian constructs a purely civic form of Roman identity which does not conflict with the spiritual restrictions of his Christianity, in order to show that Christians are loyal to the Roman state. In contrast, Minucius Felix is dismissive of the accusations that Christians are enemies of Roman civic authority and instead focuses on intellectually defending the

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<sup>469</sup> Rebillard, *Christians and their Many Identities in Late Antiquity*, 32-33.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid, 12-20.

<sup>471</sup> Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, xxxi.6.

validity of Christian teachings. Furthermore, the passages discussed in this chapter demonstrate that Minucius Felix takes for granted that Christian identity does not preclude or substitute Roman identity. This is because Minucius Felix presents Christians as philosophers. Therefore, if he can defend the intellectual validity of Christian teaching as a philosophy, he can in effect establish a place in Roman society where they can be critical of Roman cultic practices and refuse to practice them, while maintaining their own ritual practices in tandem with their Roman identity and right to remain unmolested. This apologetic strategy is completely contrary to that of Tertullian, who wholly rejects the idea that Christian groups are philosophical groups, instead presenting them as cultic groups, which could more directly be perceived as in conflict with Roman civic authority. These strategies are also reflected within these authors' choice of genres and are also consistent with their use of cultic language and particularly *religio*. Minucius Felix heavily abstracts the understanding of *religio* to refer to philosophical claims to morality, whereas Tertullian only abstracts *religio* to refer to devotional practices towards a deity, such that it can be applied to Christian practices even without the traditional infrastructure of cult. Thus Tertullian dedicates far more of his argument to defending Christians from the accusation that Christians are disloyal to the Roman state, which he takes more seriously than Minucius Felix.

Arguing that these two authors are fundamentally at odds with each other on this issue, might not do much to suggest that they are part of a shared Latin apologetic tradition. Nevertheless I hope this chapter has also shown that the inter-textual connections between these works and the fact that they make use of some of the same or parallel arguments, demonstrates a connection between these two works. Likewise,

although they take differing positions, they do so as differing rhetorical responses to the same problem and accusations made against them, which shows they are reacting to the same opponents and given the specificity of some of their argument, perhaps even reacting to each other. Furthermore, contrary though these positions might seem to each other, they will both be incorporated into a single position within the apologetic arguments of Lactantius.

## Chapter 4

### Lactantius's *Divine Institutes*: Christian Identity as Perfected Roman Identity

Lactantius's *Divine Institutes* in many ways represents the culmination of the Latin Apologetic tradition, that has been outlined over the course of this thesis, and notably it is the last apologetic work written before Constantine's legalization of Christianity in 313. The *Divine Institutes* is in a unique historical position as it bridges Diocletian's Great Persecution and the acceptance of Christianity by Constantine. It is also written by a man who has direct dealings with both these emperors. As such, how one ought to perceive the Roman Empire as civic body, is a significant subject of this work. However, it is one of the central points of this thesis to explore how these Christian authors categorize Christianity identity in relationship to the Roman polity. Therefore, before I can discuss in full Lactantius's position towards the Roman government, it is necessary to explore how he categorizes what it means to be a Christian. This is no less a weighty subject. Lactantius's categorization of Christianity unsurprisingly constitutes the central thesis of *Divine Institutes*, and it actively combines the positions of both Tertullian and Minucius Felix. At the same time, Lactantius within this work builds on his forebears in macro ways, having to do with how Christianity is to be understood, and in significant yet micro ways, such as the meaning of the term *religio* and how cultic language is used in relation to Christian practice. Given this breadth of material the discussion of the *Divine Institutes* shall span two chapters. This first deals with Lactantius's categorization of Christianity, and the second will describe how Lactantius relates this Christianity to the Roman government as civic institution. In

this chapter, I will argue that Lactantius categorizes Christianity as the ideal unity of cult and philosophy, and that this categorization is the central component of his apologetic strategy to present Christianity as legitimate and superior to its rivals. In the next chapter, I will argue that the goal behind this categorization of Christianity is to present Christianity as an ideal apolitical version of Roman culture, in an effort to reconcile Christian and Roman identity while rejecting Roman civic institutions.<sup>472</sup>

The *Divine Institutes* was written between 303 and 310 with revisions made in around 324,<sup>473</sup> and it is divided up into seven books. The stated purpose of the work is to provide a comprehensive refutation of non-Christian philosophy and worship, and a survey of Christian theology and ethics in order to demonstrate that Christianity succeeds where non-Christian and specifically Roman pagan traditions failed. The work is nominally modeled on traditional Roman accounts of civil law, but unlike those texts this work is almost exclusively focused on theological issues. The text is arguably one of the first attempts at a systematic account of Christian theology, not only defending Christianity against the accusations of outsiders but providing an explanation of Christian beliefs from first principles in an attempt at a complete account of Christian thought. Unlike earlier apologetic works, the ambition of this work was not only to provide Christians with arguments by which they could defend themselves, but to provide a textual foundation by which any defence could be constructed. The *Divine Institutes* is meant to be for traditional Christian apologetics what traditional Roman civic institutes are to forensic rhetoric. Forensic rhetoric provides a specific defense on a

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<sup>472</sup> For a definition of apolitical in the context of my argument see the introduction chapter p.39, or the beginning of the next chapter, p.267-268.

<sup>473</sup> I will discuss the debates concerning the dating the work and the revisions made to it, at the beginning of the next chapter.

certain issue and in a certain case, but in order to do so it must base itself on a legal foundation which is codified in civic institutes. Likewise the *Divine Institutes* was meant not only as a defense in and of itself, but as a basis upon which theological disputes could be argued. This significantly grander ambition makes this work distinct within ancient Christian apologetics.

Also, as will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, the *Divine Institutes* is distinct for its historical time period and potential audience. The writing of the *Divine Institutes* took place between the greatest period of persecution for ancient Christianity, and the legalization and acceptance of Christianity, both of which were instigated by emperors with whom Lactantius was personally acquainted. This unique historical circumstance provides multiple perspectives by which the work can be read and interpreted. Furthermore, Lactantius's connections to elite Roman pagan society mean that this apologetic work more than any other had a chance of being read by non-Christians. I will discuss in the next chapter the intended audience of the *Divine Institutes* in greater detail, but it is worth just briefly noting that this work is distinct for its potential to appeal to educated non-Christian Romans.

In Book 1 Lactantius makes the central claim of his argument, and provides an overview of his critique of paganism. The central claim of the work, as stated in Book 1, is that philosophy and worship can only exist successfully when they are perfectly united together and this only occurs in Christianity. In the rest of the Book Lactantius argues that first non-Christian philosophy fails to achieve wisdom because it does not receive wisdom from the worshiping of God, and second the non-Christian traditions of worship fail because they lack the philosophical insight to recognise true Divinity. Books

two and three continue these themes. Book 2 describes in greater depth the origins of the tradition of Roman worship and how it fails due to a failure of knowledge of true Divinity. Book 3 describes more fully the failures non-Christian philosophy to find wisdom because wisdom is a quality of God, only achieved by worshiping him. In Book 4 Lactantius describes how Christianity is the ideal unity of worship and wisdom and how these things are perfectly embodied both in the person of Christ and the Christian tradition.

Books 5 through 7 discuss in greater detail reasons for Christianity's successes and describe at length the details of his theology and ethics. Book 5 is focused on the theme of justice, the ethical nature of justice abstractly, how it is achieved by Christianity but not the Roman state, and why the persecution of Christianity is the most extreme injustice. Book 6 focuses on the topic of virtue and how Christianity is able to instill virtue through the unified medium of philosophy and cult, where non-Christian traditions divided between philosophy and cult fail in this. It is also in Book 6 that he provides a more fulsome account of his ethical philosophy. In Book 7 Lactantius provides a description of how the theological claims of his Christianity fully support these ethical claims of justice and virtue. He describes how Christianity teaches of how after death the good will be rewarded and the evil punished which encourages ethical behavior. He then describes in more detail how the end of days will begin with the fall of Rome and how Christ will return to reign for a thousand years. Book 7 is also notable for including a later addition to the text in which Lactantius praises Constantine at length. As I will show more fully in these two chapters, within this text there is clearly a focus on Roman identity and the categorization of Christian identity.

This chapter will begin by discussing Lactantius's position within the Latin apologetic tradition. Lactantius cites prior authors of Latin apologetic with the implication that their works are all united by a common purpose. This self-aware approach could be seen as making Lactantius an inauthentic participant in this tradition; however, it is these passages which meaningfully codify this tradition. Furthermore these passages also show how Lactantius considers it essential to the goal of his work both to present it in a way that would persuade elite Romans while not subjecting it to Roman categories of identity. The purpose of these sections is to establish two points: firstly that the Latin apologetic tradition finds its culmination in the *Divine Institutes*, and secondly that Lactantius is striving to reconcile Christian and Roman identities.

The method by which Lactantius makes this reconciliation possible, is seen in how he categorises Christian identity in relation to Roman identity and the Roman political state. Therefore, the next and central section of this chapter will demonstrate how Lactantius categorises Christian identity. I contend that it is the central thesis of the *Divine Institutes* that Christianity is the ideal unity of philosophy and cult and that this form of identity is only legitimately found in Christianity. This categorization of Christianity is designed to appeal to imperialistic Romans by presenting Christianity as an ideal and unified version of Roman culture, which alone is objectively true and alone is able to unify these distinct forms of identity. This view unifies the positions of Tertullian and Minucius Felix who present Christianity as a cult or a philosophy respectively.

By Roman imperialism I am referring to the desire of those within positions of Roman authority during this time period to claim that Roman culture is superior to the

culture of others, and that Romans should be the arbiters of the cultural legitimacy of other groups. In more general contexts, by imperialism I am referring to the ideological justification of one group for imposing its culture onto another cultural group.<sup>474</sup> For the purposes of this thesis I wish to focus entirely on the ideological aspect of this imperialism, and not the practical or tangible methods by which this was done. During late antiquity a number of cultural groups tried to make intellectual claims to universalism, the idea that their culture underpinned or was the historical origin of all other prominent cultures.<sup>475</sup> It is the contention of this thesis that Lactantius partially categorizes Christian identity in such a way as to become a tool by which Roman culture could lay claim to an ideological superiority. Through monotheism Christianity provides an ideological tool by which a single group can lay claim to universal authority. Through Christian theology, which unites philosophy and worship, diverse and unrelated cultural manifestations are bound into a singular tradition that can potentially be shared and imposed on others more simply. Furthermore by connecting all of these manifestations directly to a claim to universal truth, Christianity allows for the potential of a centralized cultural authority, imposing cultural legitimacy onto the other cultures of the world, not tied to a specific cultural group. In the time of Lactantius these potentials were not fully manifest, and it is debatable whether they could or ever have been fully manifested at all, but potential for such ideological tools nevertheless speaks to their appeal.

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<sup>474</sup> I hasten to add that I often still use the adjective 'imperial' to refer simply to things related to empire or the emperor such as the imperial cult.

<sup>475</sup> Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*, 5-8; Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*, 241-249; Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*, 18-19, 103; Buell, *Why This New Race*, 138-144; Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica*, 6-8; Van Nuffelen, "Theology versus Genre? The Universalism of Christian Historiography in Late Antiquity."

Another important aspect of Lactantius's categorization of Christianity, which will be addressed in the final section of this chapter, is his redefining of the term *religio*. Building on developments begun by Tertullian, Lactantius defines and legitimises *religio*, an umbrella term for various forms of worship, by the object of worship rather than the practices involved in worship. Based on this, Lactantius uses *religio* in the more abstract sense of 'devotion' rather than 'worship'. As such, *religio* comes to imply any action performed in the name of deity rather than merely a specific set of ritual actions traditionally associated with worship. Not only does this redefinition allow Lactantius to present Christianity as a cult, but it allows him to better unify philosophy and cult and present Christianity as the ideal form of this unity. This use of *religio* becomes significant in how Lactantius presents Christianity as an ideal form of Roman identity. Therefore, Lactantius's categorization of Christian and his redefining of *religio* will become central to the purpose of his argument, which is the reconciliation of Christian and Roman identities.

While much has been written about how Lactantius combines and reconciles Christianity and Roman culture,<sup>476</sup> what has yet to be fully explored is the role of

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<sup>476</sup> Christopher Ocker, "Unius arbitrio mundum regi necesse est: Lactantius' Concern for the Preservation of Roman Society," *Vigiliae Christianae* 40 (1986): 348–364; Christiane Ingremeau, "Les Institutions divines de Lactance," *Vita Latina* 132 (1993): 33–40; Ibid, "Lactance et la justice dans le livre V des Institutions divines" in *Regards sur le monde antique: Hommages à Guy Sabbah*, ed. M. Piot 153–162 (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2002); Ibid, "Lactance et la justice: du livre V au livre VI des Institutions divines" in *Autour de Lactance: Hommages à Pierre Monat* Ed. Jean-Yves Guillaumin and Stéphane Rattii 43–52 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2003); Oliver Nicholson, "Hercules at the Milvian Bridge: Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, I.21.6–9" *Latomus* 43 no.1 (1984); Ibid, "Civitas Quae Adhuc Sustentat Omnia: Lactantius and the City of Rome," in *The Limits of Ancient Christianity: Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture in Honor of R. A. Markus*, ed. William E. Klingshirm and Mark Wessey, 7–25 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Martin Edwards, "The Flowering of Latin Apologetic: Lactantius and Arnobius," in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire*, edited by Martin Edwards, Martin Goodman and Simon Price, 197–221 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Elizabeth Digeser, *The Making of A Christian Empire: Lactantius and Rome* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000); Ben David Wayman, "Lactantius's Power Struggle: A Theological Analysis of the

categories of identities within this process, and this is the aspect I wish to address.<sup>477</sup>

This method of analysis, which has not been fully applied to Lactantius, offers meaningful insights into two major debates that center around Lactantius and his work.

There has been a substantial amount of research into the life, times, and works of Lactantius within a variety of contexts and disciplines.<sup>478</sup> Two major topics which have

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*Divine Institutes*, Book V.” *Political Theology* 14 no.3 (2013): 304–324; Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 182-188.

<sup>477</sup> For what I mean by ‘categories of identity’ see my introduction, pages 27-33.

<sup>478</sup> Theologically he has been used to explore modern questions of theology, contrast modern theology to the historical, and understand the historical development of theological concepts: Joseph Hallman, “The Mutability of God: Tertullian to Lactantius”, *Theological Studies* 42/3 (1981): 373–393; Pierre Monat, *Lactance et la Bible : une propédeutique latine à la lecture de la Bible dans l’Occident constantinien* (Paris: Etudes augustinienes, 1982); Albrecht Bender, *Die natürliche Gotteserkenntnis bei Laktanz und seinen apologetischen Vorgängern* (New York: Peter Lang, 1983); John McGuckin, “The Christology of Lactantius”, *Studia Patristica* 17 (1982): 813–820; Ibid, “Spirit Christology: Lactantius and His Sources,” *Heythrop Journal* 24 no.2 (1983): 141–148; Peter Garnsey, “Lactantius and Augustine” in *Representations of Empire: Rome and the Mediterranean World* (Oxford: British Academy, 2002); Coleman, *Lactantius the Theologian*; Jason Gehrke, “Lactantius’s Power Theology,” *Nova et Vetera* (Denver, CO.) 17, no. 3 (2019): 683–715. Literary analysis of Lactantius primarily focuses on Lactantius’s use of language, the structure and composition of his work, as well as how he makes use of sources and what are the sources he was in fact using: Louis Swift, “Lactantius and the Golden Age”, *The American Journal of Philology* 89 no.2 (1968): 144–156; Robert Maxwell Ogilvie, *The Library of Lactantius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978); Monat, *Lactance et la Bible*; Nicholson, “Hercules at the Milvian Bridge,” 133–42; ibid, “The Source of the Dates in Lactantius’ *Divine Institutes*”, *Journal of Theological Studies, New Series*, 36/2 (1985): 291–310; McGuckin, “Does Lactantius Denigrate Cyprian?”, 119–24; Christiane Ingremeau, “Lactance et le sacré: l’Histoire Sainte racontée aux païens... par les païens.” *Bulletin de l’Association Guillaume Budé* 48, no. 4 (1989): 345–354; ibid, “Les Institutions divines de Lactance,” 33–40; Jackson Bryce, *The Library of Lactantius* (New York: Garland, 1990); Kendeffy, “Lactantius as Christian Cicero,” 56-92; Jean-Yves Guillaumin, “Arts libéraux et philosophie chez Lactance (Institutions divines 3,25)”, in *Autour de Lactance: Hommages à Pierre Monat* ed. Jean-Yves Guillaumin and Stéphane Rattii, 27–42 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2003); Stefan Freund, “Christian Use and Valuation of Theological Oracles: The Case of Lactantius’ *Divine Institutes*”, *Vigiliae Christianae* 60 no. 3 (2006): 269–284. Historical studies of Lactantius consists of a range of work which has explored how to exactly date Lactantius’s writings, the cultural, political and social circumstances that gave rise to his work, and most significantly uncovering the influence he had upon figures and writers of his own time: Timothy Barnes, “Lactantius and Constantine”, *Journal of Roman Studies* 63 (1973): 29–46; Pierre Monat, “Le classement des manuscrits par l’analyse factorielle. Recherches pour l’établissement d’un stemma: Lactance, Institutions divines, livre IV”, *Revue d’Histoire des Textes* 5 (1975): 311–330; Christopher Mackay, “Lactantius and the Succession to Diocletian”, *Classical Philology* 94 no.2 (1999): 198–209; Garnsey, “Lactantius and Augustine”; Eberhard Heck, “Constantin Und Lactanz in Trier Chronologisches”, *Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte* 58, no. 1 (2009): 118–130; W. Brian Shelton, “Lactantius as Architect of a Constantinian and Christian ‘Victory over the Empire,’” in *Rethinking Constantine: History, Theology, and Legacy*, eds Edward Smither, 26–36 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014); Mark Edwards, *Religions of the Constantinian Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Blandine Colot, *Lactance: penser la conversion de Rome au temps de Constantin*. Biblioteca della «Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa» vol. 31 (Firenze: Olschki, 2016).

emerged from this discourse are whether Lactantius promotes religious tolerance,<sup>479</sup> and Lactantius's relationship with Roman culture and Empire.<sup>480</sup> This work, which explores Lactantius's stance toward the Roman Empire as a civic body based on how he categorizes identity, informs both of these discussions. Furthermore, my method of analysing how Lactantius categorizes identity has not yet been fully employed in the exploration of these topics and can offer useful insights.

The next chapter will discuss how my work fits into the discussion on Lactantius's position towards the Roman government, and reconciliation of Christian and Roman identity; however here I will address how my work informs discussions on Lactantius and religious tolerance. These studies can be divided between those who approach it theologically and those who approach it historically. The theological approach to this subject largely centers on discussions of whether Lactantius can be understood to promote the modern virtue of religious tolerance, often in an attempt to understand modern theological virtues as universal or transhistorical.<sup>481</sup> While it might certainly be valuable to try to find inspiration for ethical behavior among sources that are not

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<sup>479</sup> John Bowlin, "Tolerance Among the Fathers", *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 26 (2006): 3–36; Maijastina Kahlos, "The Rhetoric of Tolerance and Intolerance: From Lactantius to Firmicus Maternus", in *Continuity and Discontinuity in Early Christian Apologetics*, ed. Jörg Ulrich, Anders-Christian Jacobsen, and Maijastina Kahlos, 79–95 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009); Thomas Hughson, "Social Justice in Lactantius' *Divine Institutes*: An Exploration", in *Reading Patristic Texts on Social Issues: Issues and Challenges for Twenty-First Century Christian Thought*, ed. Johan Leemans, Brian Matz, and Johan Verstraeten, 185–205 (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2011); Anthony Coleman, "Lactantius and 'Ressourcement': Going to the Sources of Religious Liberty in the Civic Order", *Vox Patrum* 61 (2014): 209–219; Ramsay MacMullen, "Religious Toleration Around the Year 313", *Journal of early Christian studies* 22, no. 4 (2014): 499–517; Elizabeth Digeser, "Lactantius, Porphyry, and the Debate over Religious Toleration," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 88 (1998): 129–146; *ibid*, "Lactantius on Religious Liberty and His Influence on Constantine," 90–102 (Cambridge University Press, 2016); *ibid*, "Lactantius", in *Great Christian Jurists and Legal Collections in the First Millennium*, ed. Philip L. Reynolds, 239–251 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019) <https://doi-org.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/10.1017/9781108559133>

<sup>480</sup> See footnote 520.

<sup>481</sup> Bowlin, "Tolerance Among the Fathers", 3–36; Hughson, "Social Justice in Lactantius' *Divine Institutes*," 185–205; Coleman, "Lactantius and 'Ressourcement,'" 209–219.

necessarily modern, all of these studies have to grapple with the fact that ‘religious tolerance’ is a modern concept. As such, attempts to find it in Lactantius threaten to devolve into flagrantly anachronistic arguments. The historical approach to this subject addresses this issue far more directly. These studies consider toleration as a product of Lactantius’s historical point in time. These discussions look specifically at Lactantius’s argument on the value of patience (*patientia*) during times of persecution in the *Divine Institutes*, as well as circumstances created in 313 by Constantine’s legalization of Christianity.<sup>482</sup> However, understanding how Lactantius categorizes Christian identity in relation to other forms of identity would better inform this discussion. As this chapter will demonstrate, Lactantius presents Christianity as a unity of philosophy and cult, in a way that he argues makes it categorically superior to the non-Christian forms of these things which are categorically either philosophy or cult but not both. This categorical superiority means that for Lactantius Christianity and non-Christian cult or non-Christian philosophy are not on an even footing, and as such an understanding of toleration between equals is not available to him.

### The *Divine Institutes* and the Latin Apologetic Tradition

Lactantius’s approach to Latin apologetic writing is far more self-aware than that of either Tertullian or Minucius Felix. This simultaneously puts Lactantius in dialogue with these writers, while also at times putting him at odds with them. Not only does

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<sup>482</sup> Kahlos, “The Rhetoric of Tolerance and Intolerance” 79–95; MacMullen, “Religious Toleration Around the Year 313,” 499–517; Digeser, “Lactantius, Porphyry, and the Debate over Religious Toleration”; *ibid*, “Lactantius on Religious Liberty and His Influence on Constantine”; *ibid*, “Lactantius.”

Lactantius actively build on the works of both Tertullian and Minucius Felix, but he explicitly identifies them as an inspiration and predecessor to his own work. However, in other ways this fact only serves to highlight how Lactantius in many places diverges from this tradition. While the *Divine Institutes* is written for the same purpose and covers much of the same subject matter as both Tertullian's *Apology* and Minucius Felix's *Octavius*, it also expands into areas and models not found in either work. Furthermore, as will be shown repeatedly over the course of this chapter, one common theme of Lactantius's work is that it employs explicitly and self-consciously the strategies Tertullian and Minucius aims to employ implicitly. This, as well as the fact that this work was written about a century after Tertullian's *Apology* and probably Minucius Felix's *Octavius*,<sup>483</sup> gives Lactantius's participation in this tradition an air of artifice. However, while this might be seen as making Lactantius an inauthentic participant in this tradition, in many ways it is Lactantius who creates the tradition in the first place. By citing both Tertullian and Minucius as predecessors to his work, he unites what are at least at face value arguably two very different authors in terms of genre and content under a shared purpose in which he also participates. This common purpose is the intellectual defence of the Christian position against persecution, and the attempt to persuade elite Roman pagans of the Christian cause. Hence he refers only to Latin Christian writers who actively engage with Roman culture. What is more, Lactantius over the course of the *Divine Institutes* draws from both their works and reconciles the points in which they disagree with each other into unified positions equally inspired by both authors. Therefore, Lactantius actively constructs a Latin 'apologetic' tradition, and positions

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<sup>483</sup> Frend, "Some North African Turning Points in Christian Apologetics," 6; Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 136.

himself as the culmination of it, while at the same time diverging from this tradition by his approach to his work and its extended scope. This section will demonstrate this by analysing the passages in which he directly refers to Tertullian and Minucius Felix.

For our purposes these passages also serve to help compare Lactantius to these earlier writers by showing us what Lactantius thinks of them and therefore how he might or might not draw from their arguments. Toward the very end of chapter 1 of Book 5 Lactantius makes this comment:

Wisdom and truth in consequence have no proper champions, and scholars who came to their rescue were inadequate to defend them. Among those known to me in this capacity, one notable advocate was Minucius Felix. His book, called the Octavius, makes plain how good a vindication of truth he could have made if had devoted himself totally to the subject. Septimius Tertullian also had skill in every sort of writing, but his eloquence was uneven, and he was rather rough and not at all lucid: even he failed to win enough publicity.<sup>484</sup>

Lactantius sets up this discuss of these authors' work in order to justify his work. He treats them therefore, much as we scholars often do today when discussing our forebears in order to justify our own work, with a gracious yet slightly polemical tone aimed to show their works' limitations and how this current work succeeds where they did not. In so doing however he implicitly implies that each of their works was written for the same purpose as his own, and are united in the fulfilment of this common purpose. As Lactantius believes that his work succeeds where these have fallen short, it is meant

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<sup>484</sup> Lactantius, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, trans. Bowen and Garnsey, 5.1.21-23 p.283.

to represent the culmination of each of their ideas and arguments. This claim is fitting as Lactantius draws several ideas from both of them over the course of the work. However, the shortcomings that Lactantius identifies in the work of Minucius Felix and Tertullian also show us what strategies and methods Lactantius thinks are important to achieve this goal.

To begin with, Lactantius's comment on Minucius Felix potentially demonstrates to what degree he is willing to incorporate Roman identity into Christianity. Lactantius gives to Minucius Felix a backhanded compliment, the negative implication of which is that Minucius Felix and his work is lacking in commitment to and presentation of what Lactantius perceives to be Christian truth: "what a fitting champion of the truth he could have been, if he had fully directed himself to the study of it."<sup>485</sup> It is challenging based on this one brief comment to identify what aspect of Minucius Felix's work Lactantius objects to. But, as I will discuss below, given Lactantius's criticism and rejection of classical philosophy, Minucius Felix's commitment to presenting Christianity as a continuation of classical philosophy would likely have provoked the disagreement of Lactantius. As Lactantius is here critical not of Minucius Felix's abilities but his commitment, it would make sense that what he has issue with is either the degree to which Minucius Felix makes Christian identity subject to *Romanitas* or the insufficient degree to which he advocates for Christian positions. Conversely the positive implication of Lactantius's statement is that, while the content is lacking, his methods provide a good defence of truth. One of the most distinctive aspects of Minucius Felix methods, which he has in common with Lactantius, is the use of Roman and classical

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<sup>485</sup> Lactantius, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, trans. Bowen and Garnsey, 5.1.22 p.283.

sources in defence of Christianity as a means of showing how Christianity is in keeping with Roman cultural identity. Lactantius could be suggesting that this is essential to defending Christianity; however that Minucius Felix takes it too far by making Christian identity into merely a form of classical philosophy.

On the other hand Lactantius's criticism of Tertullian potentially shows what Lactantius thinks of those who are fully committed to the truth but do not engage enough with classical culture to properly defend it against Roman authority. Lactantius's criticism of Tertullian is more direct but also more specific, which suggests broader agreement with Tertullian on other matters. What Lactantius criticizes is not the content of Tertullian's works but rather his lack of eloquence: "Septimius Tertullian also had skill in every sort of writing, but his eloquence was uneven, and he was rather rough and not at all lucid: even he failed to win enough publicity."<sup>486</sup> This suggests that he does not simply view Tertullian as a completely incompetent writer, but rather that there are specific rhetorical failings that undermine Tertullian in this particular purpose. Given that they are discussing the defence of the Christian position to Roman authority, it makes sense that this particular rhetorical failing is what Lactantius perceives of as a lack of elite classical Latin style which would appeal to Roman authorities. Therefore, Lactantius attributes this lack of eloquence as resulting in a lack of public reception and correspondingly a lack of success. For Lactantius rhetorical skill, and specifically elite Roman rhetorical style, is necessary for defending and presenting Christianity, in spite of his own critics of empty rhetoric.<sup>487</sup> Furthermore this speaks to a desire of Lactantius to be well received among those who value Roman rhetorical style. Also given

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<sup>486</sup> Ibid, 5.1.23.

<sup>487</sup> *Divine Institutes* 3.1.1-10.

Lactantius's compliment of Tertullian's skill, it possible that his perceived failing was not a lack of education in rhetorical methods or a lack of ability but a less intentional stylistic failing. It is possible that what Lactantius is objecting to in Tertullian's writing is a notably African style of Latin which would not impress among a Roman audience.

Another interpretation of this comment is that Lactantius does not have an objection to the rhetorical style of Tertullian's writings but rather Lactantius had heard that Tertullian while a good writer was not a skilled public speaker. Hence he says that "Tertullian also had skill in every sort of writing, but his eloquence was uneven," and it is from this shortcoming that Lactantius attributes his lack of greater recognition. If this is the case then it means that Lactantius cannot find a cause for criticism within Tertullian's work and approves of it in both style and content. Nevertheless on this point not only does Lactantius still have an opportunity to outdo Tertullian but doing so gives Lactantius a greater claim to Roman cultural identity than Tertullian. Rhetorical skill in both spoken and written form was highly valued by elite Roman culture, and represented a means by which provincials could rise within society and in doing so more fully embrace *Romanitas*.<sup>488</sup> This indeed was, prior to the Great Persecution, exactly what Lactantius had done, having been invited to the court of Diocletian due to his success as a rhetorician.<sup>489</sup> Lactantius does not here take the opportunity to brag, but on this account he is more successful than Tertullian, and in the eyes of some could be seen as more Roman because of it. Perhaps Lactantius is hoping that his renown as a rhetorician will help promote his work to reach a broader audience than Tertullian. This is indeed what does happen and, although at the time of writing Lactantius could

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<sup>488</sup> Dench, *Romulus' Asylum*, 32-33; Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 62.

<sup>489</sup> Coleman, *Lactantius the Theologian*, 12.

not have known this, his success would return him to Nicomedia and give him the ear of the new Roman Emperor.<sup>490</sup> Therefore, whether Lactantius is critical of Tertullian's written or spoken rhetorical skill, he aims to improve upon it and through doing so provide himself with a better chance to sway those who value elite Roman culture.

Lactantius continues to discuss Tertullian's work slightly later in this Book when discussing the second purpose of the *Divine Institutes*, demonstrating again not only how Lactantius constructs a Latin apologetic tradition but the methods he considers essential for his work. In chapter 4 of Book 5 Lactantius states:

A version of this was argued by Tertullian in his book called *Apologia*; even so, because there is a difference between merely responding to attacks, when defence and denial is the sole form, and setting up something new [*instituire*], which is what I am doing, when full doctrinal content has to be in place, I have not shrunk from the labour.<sup>491</sup>

Lactantius here presents Tertullian as an attacker of the enemy's position but one who lacked foundation. What he is referring to is likely that Tertullian attacks pagan positions by drawing out their logical inconsistencies rather than refuting them with Christian doctrine. It is worth noting that Lactantius does not push this point polemically but seems to imply that it was the result of Tertullian's historical period. Tertullian lived in a time when there was not a fully fleshed out Christian doctrine and thus the only option which was available to him was "defence or denial." Therefore, Tertullian does not 'set up anything' as Lactantius is trying to do. The use of *instituire* is a clear reference to the

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<sup>490</sup> Ibid, 22-24.

<sup>491</sup> Translation from Bowen and Garnsey, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, 5.4.3 p.290. For the Latin text see . Lactantius, *Divinarum Institutionum Libri Septem*, eds. Eberhard Heck and Antonie Wlosok. *Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2005) 451.

title of Lactantius's work and how he uses genre to define this work. He is not merely engaged in a defence but the establishment of an institution of Christian teaching. This is further emphasized by the reference to the necessity (*necesse est*) of the totality of established doctrine (*doctrinae totius substantiam*) which suggests that establishing the basis of a fully fleshed out theology is necessary for a proper rebuttal of pagan teachings. This point reinforces the fact that although Lactantius positions this work as the culmination of Latin Christian apologetic, he does not consider it merely as a defence. Unlike Tertullian, it is not enough for him merely to persuade Christians to turn away from Roman practices. Lactantius wishes to supplement and augment these practices with his own teachings. This passage presents Christian identity not merely as a denial of Roman cultural practices, as Tertullian presents Christian identity, but as an independent and rival cultural force in its own right.

The theme that the Christian position should stand on its own and not be entirely subject to Roman cultural norms is evidenced here by the fact that Minucius Felix is not discussed in this passage. Whatever his perceived lack in commitment to truth is, it has disqualified him from being among those who have attacked the pagan position. This is in spite of the fact that Minucius Felix within his work attacks both classical philosophy and Roman worship of gods at length. It is possible that Minucius Felix has entrenched himself too deeply within the classical philosophical tradition for Lactantius's liking, so he does not consider him to be attacking from the Christian side. It should be noted that Lactantius's disapproval of Minucius Felix does not imply a lack of familiarity. In Book 1 of the *Divine Institutes* Lactantius cites Minucius Felix in order to refute why the god Saturn, who they both argue was merely a historical human being, was said to be born

from the earth and sky.<sup>492</sup> This reference would not be worth mentioning except to show that Lactantius has indeed fully read Minucius Felix's *Octavius* and is conscious of the details of his arguments. Therefore, Lactantius's rejection of Minucius Felix as a defender of truth, is likely rooted in the details of his argument which presents Christianity as a Roman philosophy.

Both in chapter 1 and chapter 4 of Book 5 where Lactantius refers to Tertullian and Minucius Felix, he also references Cyprian. I will not analyse these passages in detail; however they are worth briefly discussing, both to show Lactantius's presentation of the Latin Apologetic tradition and what methods he considers important for his work. It has been noted that unlike the works of Tertullian and Minucius Felix, Lactantius in writing the *Divine Institutes* draws very little from the work of Cyprian.<sup>493</sup> However, in chapter 1 Lactantius praises Cyprian's skill for eloquence, stating that it won him great distinction in rhetoric, but he critiques him because "Beyond a power of words, however, Cyprian cannot go in satisfying those who do not know God's sacred mystery, because what he spoke of is both mystical and prepared for the ears of the faithful alone."<sup>494</sup> Lactantius continues this same line of criticism further on in chapter 4 when discussing Cyprian's work *To Demetrius* where:

He failed to exploit the material as he should have done, because Demetrianus should have been rebutted with arguments based in logic, and not with quotations from scripture, which he simply as silly fiction and lies...

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<sup>492</sup> 1.11.55-62.

<sup>493</sup> McGuckin, "Does Lactantius Denigrate Cyprian?," 121-124.

<sup>494</sup> Lactantius, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, trans. Bowen and Garnsey 5.1.26 p.284.

hence my own approach to the task, under the inspiration of God, and my approach also to preparation of a path for others to follow.<sup>495</sup>

The critique of Cyprian is that, although he is stylistically and theologically the best of the three, he does not sufficiently engage with *Romanitas* or write in a way that would be acceptable to non-Christian audiences. It has also been pointed out that there is some irony hidden in here for those who know the history of Cyprian. Given that Cyprian spent much of his career dealing with the problem of Carthaginian *traditores*, those who handed over scriptures to persecutors to be burned, it could be seen as problematic that Cyprian shares biblical texts with non-Christians without due consideration. The pointedness of this irony could suggest that Lactantius is attempting to justify his own theological openness to non-Christian communities.<sup>496</sup> In any event the main thrust of this criticism is the emphasis on the importance of making Christianity known to non-Christians in a way that would be acceptable to them even if this incorporates *Romanitas* into Christianity.

The previous treatment of Minucius Felix could be seen to suggest Lactantius is working for the edification of Christians foremost. However, his treatment of Cyprian counters this view, as it suggests that he is writing for audiences who require the support of Greco-Roman sources and would not be moved by Christian sources alone. These passages suggest that the intended audience of the *Divine Institutes* were Christians who also deeply valued Roman culture, as he identifies the use of non-Christian sources over Christian scripture as an explicit strategy he employs in order to appeal to his intended audience. Lactantius's treatment of Cyprian shows that for

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<sup>495</sup> Lactantius, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, trans. Bowen and Garnsey 5.4.4-7 p.290.

<sup>496</sup> McGuckin, "Does Lactantius Denigrate Cyprian?," 119-121.

Lactantius Roman identity is fundamentally important to both Christianity and the construction of his work. That he here exclusively limits himself to Latin authors speaks to this fact, but that he identifies this absence of Roman culture as the most major failing of Cyprian, demonstrates this unequivocally.

Scholarship which has analysed these passages tends to explore the question of whether or not they constitute evidence that Christian apologetics were understood as a genre among ancient writers. As discussed above, works that are often dubbed apologetics make use of a range of ancient genres that on a purely formal basis would not have been classified together.<sup>497</sup> These passages, together with comparable passages from Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, constitute the exception to this rule. It is rightly pointed out that these references cannot by themselves constitute a distinctive genre within the ancient world, especially given that these works take many different forms.<sup>498</sup> However, whether or not Lactantius believes that all these works have a common 'genre,' I would contend that he does succeed in uniting them together as a common tradition. Even if they do not share the same genre, as Lactantius points out, they do all share a common purpose and at least Lactantius, Tertullian, and Minucius Felix share a common method for pursuing their purposes. What is more these works actively build on each other. As I discussed in chapter 3, Minucius Felix borrows extensively from Tertullian's argument. Lactantius borrows extensively from both authors, although as mentioned above this is a more complicated process. However, by

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<sup>497</sup> Bergjan, "How to Speak about Early Christian Apologetic Literature?" 180-181; Fredouille, "L'apologétique chrétienne antique," 234; Goodman et al. "Introduction," 1-2; Price, "Latin Christian Apologetics," 113-114; Pinto-Mathieu, "Introduction," 9; Parvis, "Justin Martyr and the Apologetic Tradition," 115; Pouderon, "Aux origines du 'genre' de l'apologie," 33-34; Williams, *Defining and Defending the Faith*, 27-29.

<sup>498</sup> Bergjan, "How to Speak about Early Christian Apologetic Literature?" 181-183; Fredouille, "L'apologétique chrétienne antique," 234.

explicitly citing Tertullian and Minucius Felix he is making clear that his work intends to start where they left off. By doing this explicitly Lactantius is formalizing this process and presenting these three works as a unified tradition bent toward to a common end.

Lactantius, in his self-aware approach to apologetics, positions himself as the great reconciler between Christian and Roman identities by means of his work the *Divine Institutes* and to this end he constructs his chosen genre and apologetic tradition. Lactantius positions his work as completing the task set out by a number of Latin Christian writers who discussed the relationship between Christian and Roman identities. As such he assesses their success or failure based on to what extent they would write in a way that could be acceptable to non-Christian Roman audiences while staying true to Christianity. He models the genre of his text on Roman legal texts which could be meant to resonate with non-Christian Roman elite audiences while incorporating the arguments and methods of earlier Christian texts, particular Tertullian's *Apology* and Minucius Felix's *Octavius*. Finally, although he explicitly disparages the possibility that non-Christian Romans will read his work, it is clear from the way he writes his work that he intends to persuade those who deeply value Roman cultural works. Therefore, he is likely writing to those who could be considered Christian but have a Roman education and who value Roman identity and who struggle to reconcile the Christian and Roman aspects of their identity. These last three sections have shown that the driving purpose behind the composition of the *Divine Institutes* was to reconcile Christian and Roman identities. Therefore, the type of identity that Lactantius understands Christianity to be ought to be understood in light of this goal.

### The Unity of Cult and Philosophy

The rhetorical methods used in the *Divine Institutes* is intended to make a non-Christian Roman audience listen to Lactantius's message, but categorization of Christianity is the tool by which he aims to persuade them to value Christianity over any other comparable identity. It is the central thesis of the *Divine Institutes* that Christianity should be understood as the ideal unity of both philosophy and cult. This categorization is set up to appeal to Roman imperialism by presenting Christianity as a form of identity that Lactantius's audience could reconcile with their Roman culture. Because Lactantius is against forcible conversion to Christianity and advocates for *patientia* in the face of persecution, some have suggest that Lactantius promotes an idea of toleration. However, I suggest that how he categorises Christian identity explains these facts more fruitfully. Lactantius was against forcible conversion because his concept of Christianity was fundamentally apolitical and he is in favour of dialogue as the ideal form of philosophy he believes Christian truth will inherently win any such argument. Also Lactantius's categorization of Christianity combines the views of both Tertullian and Minucius Felix, which based on his references to them in his text, seems intentional. The methods by which Lactantius believes that this categorization will persuade non-Christian Romans is best seen by comparing it to Tertullian's and Minucius Felix's categorizations of Christian and the apologetic strategies they served. By combining Tertullian's and Minucius Felix's categorization of Christianity Lactantius aims to achieve both their goals at the same time: achieving both legitimacy and authority within the Roman world.

At the very end of chapter 1 of Book 1 of the *Divine Institutes*, Lactantius concludes his introduction by saying:

The cause of wickedness is ignorance of self. If a man can learn the truth and so sort out that ignorance, he will then know his life's purpose and how he should be living. I can summarise this knowledge as follows: no religion should be adopted without wisdom in it, and no wisdom should be accepted without religion in it. [*neque religio ulla sine sapientia suscipienda sit nec ulla sine religione probanda sapientia*]<sup>499</sup>

The phrasing of this argument is designed to emphasise the mutual connections between *religio* and wisdom (*sapientia*). The “*neque... nec*” sentence structure already suggests through juxtaposition that things that are compared are parallel, but this is further emphasised by the parallel verbal structure of each phrase. The phrase “*nec ulla sine religione probanda sapientia*” is written to exactly parallel the preceding phrase “*neque religio ulla sine sapientia suscipienda sit*” as closely as possible within the grammatical limitations that Latin will allow. In the latter phrase he deliberately places the subject *sapientia* at the end of phrase so that the order of words *religio* and *sapientia* can remain the same as the preceding phrase even though grammatically they are in opposite places. This phrasing suggests *religio* and *sapientia* are not merely two connected yet different things, but together represent two aspects of a unified thing. The parallel verbal structure suggests that *religio* and *sapientia* are two sides of the same coin, and that the legitimate form of both of them will need to be a unified form of them both.

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<sup>499</sup> Translation from Bowen and Garnsey, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, 5.4.3 p.60. For the Latin text see Lactantius, *Divinarum Institutionum Libri Septem*, 6.

That this is the final line of the first chapter of the first Book emphasises the centrality of this argument to not only this Book but the work as a whole. This indeed proves accurate as this becomes Lactantius's thesis and the crux of his argument. The purpose of his work as discussed above is to attack pagan traditions and defend Christianity from them. His attack of pagan tradition is grounded in that pagan worship (*religio*) is theologically bankrupt because it lacks logic and truth. Christian worship (*religio*) he argues in contrast is grounded on philosophical ideas i.e. *sapientia* which provide its worship and devotion with legitimacy. This is what he argues over the course of Books 1 and 2. Conversely Lactantius also argues that classical and contemporary philosophy strives after a wisdom (*sapientia*) which it cannot achieve due to its lack of knowledge and worship of God. For only God can provide humans with true wisdom, as human intellect by itself is not up to the task, and only through the acknowledging of God's divinity and worshiping him can God's wisdom become known to humans. Furthermore, through teaching knowledge of one's relationship with God and correspondingly the prospects of heaven and hell that awaits souls after death, Lactantius argues that Christian teaching can provide the virtue and happiness promised falsely by classical philosophy. This is what he argues over the course of Books 3 and 4. Book 5 discusses the subject of justice with particular emphasis on the injustice of the persecution of Christians, and how in light of this and in light of the legitimacy of the Christians position, Christians should interact with the Roman world. The final two Books discuss the correctness of Christian doctrine in more detail and Lactantius's predictions for the future. Therefore, the unity of worship and philosophy

represent the crux of Lactantius's attack on non-Christians' legitimacy, his defence of Christianity and the foundation for his understanding of Christian doctrine.<sup>500</sup>

Furthermore it is this unifying power of Lactantius's form of identity that would ultimately become the main feature of his model of Christian identity, as well as his main challenge when it came to arguing for it. It could hypothetically provide philosophical and divine legitimacy to a centralised culture and a centralised cultural authority. This was likely originally meant to appeal to the imperialism of elite educate Romans who were also attracted to Christianity. However, this would ultimately become a very powerful weapon when Lactantius directs his work to Constantine. The importance of Lactantius's form of identity is seen in his discussion of his intended audience, where the unity of worship and philosophy is explicitly brought out. In Book 5 chapter 1, following from a discussion of his intended audience, Lactantius states:

Most people waver, especially those of any attainment in literature.

Philosophy, oratory and poetry are all pernicious for the ease with which they ensnare incautious souls in beguiling prose and the nice modulations of poetical flow. They are honey, hiding poison, and that is why I wish to combine wisdom with religion, so that all that empty learning is no obstruction to enthusiasts, and the scholarship of letters not only does no harm to religion and justice but actually assists them as far as possible – provided the scholar of literature becomes more learned in the virtues and wiser in the truth.<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>500</sup> For further structural analysis of the *Divine Institutes* as a whole see Ingreneau, "Les Institutions divines de Lactance."

<sup>501</sup> Lactantius, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, trans. Bowen and Garnsey, 282.

Here it is stated that the unity of worship and philosophy is meant as a way to assist with the reconciliation of Greco-Roman classical teaching and Christian identity. The reason why this unity is appealing to Christians who would be swayed is because they deeply value classical tradition. Lactantius specifically identifies his audience as those who are familiar with Greco-Roman literature extensively and who value those sources enough to weigh their teachings against their Christian identity. At the heart of many of his criticisms of classical tradition is the position that Christian devotion and theology does better the things that are vainly attempted by Roman worship and philosophy. Christian identity is presented as an improved version of Roman cultural identity. One of the greatest of these improvements is that it represents a unification of diverse classical traditions. In this passage Lactantius does not discourage Roman education or familiarity with classical poetry, philosophy, or rhetoric, but rather argues that these things need the correcting influence of proper Christian interpretation. Indeed insofar as classical sources are able to be beneficial to Christian virtues as suggested here, Lactantius is reconciling them into a single tradition. This is true to Lactantius's own methodology which regularly makes use of classical sources to prove his points. However, the same principle also works the other way around. By arguing that Christian identity makes better use of classical sources than Roman identity, Romans who value those sources but who are not as inclined toward Christianity will be more easily swayed to the Christian position. The unifying of worship and philosophy is meant therefore to assist in the reconciling of Christian and Roman identity.

Lactantius's argument for this unity however is not merely employed as a defence of Christian identity, it is also the basis for an attack on classical tradition. At

the beginning of Book 4 where Lactantius makes his most explicit case for the unity, he argues the following:

Since therefore philosophy and a religion of gods are, as I have said, different things and far apart, in that those who profess the philosophy are one thing, offering no access to gods, and champions of the religion are another, making no pretence to learning, the one is plainly no true wisdom and the other no true religion. That is why philosophy has not been able to understand the truth, nor had the religion of the gods been able to give the logical account of itself which it lacks. Where, however, wisdom is linked with religion in an inseparable bond, each is bound to be true, because in worship we need to exercise intelligence – we must, that is, know what we are to worship and how – and in exercise of our intelligence we must worship – that is, we must fulfil what we know in real earnest.<sup>502</sup>

Here Lactantius argues that while truth requires both wisdom and worship, the same is not true for the false forms of these things. The fundamental root of the error is that these things are divided. This criticism and Lactantius's claim that only Christians can unify worship and philosophy, should not be read as based on reality but rather based on rivalry with non-Christian philosophical and worship based traditions. Lactantius wishes to lay claim to the authority and legitimacy provided by the unity of philosophy and cult while undermining those who would otherwise make the same claim. He argues that both classical philosophy and non-Christian worship are fundamentally lacking a key aspect to make them functional and that each has what the other lacks:

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<sup>502</sup> Lactantius, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, trans. Bowen and Garnsey, 228.

for *religiones deorum* it is the rationality of philosophy, and for *philosophia* it is emotional devotion of worship. However, he suggests that this lack, rather than making these complementary to each other, makes them mutually exclusive and therefore faulty, in contrast to Christian identity in which both these aspects support each other.

It is this mutual exclusivity which he goes on to emphasise as the key failing of these two aspects of Greco-Roman culture. Thus further on in this passage Lactantius argues:

No one should be worried at a philosopher taking up a priesthood of the gods: it is a frequent event, and a possible one; but when it happens, philosophy is not united with religion; instead, philosophy will pause amid the ritual, as will religion when the philosophy is being practiced.<sup>503</sup>

Here it is clear that Lactantius is criticizing not merely non-Christian practices but categories of identity directly. What he has issue with is not that philosophers are not pious or that pious non-Christians know nothing of philosophy, but rather that for non-Christians these identities are not successfully unified. He argues that because of this not unified identity these two things cannot exist simultaneously and thus neither may benefit from the other. The criticism can be read either as willful ignorance of the attempts of the other traditions to unify philosophy and cult for those who do not know of them, or more likely as a pointed criticism against them for those who do know of them. However, in order to make this critique Lactantius must define a firm distinction between philosophy and cult, where there likely existed merely more informal and uncertain distinctions. He then undermines this very same distinction by claiming that Christianity

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<sup>503</sup> Ibid.

transcends these distinctions. In this way, Lactantius's categorization of identity is paradoxical and somewhat inconsistent. Lactantius is not accurately presenting the nature of identity as it existed within his time period. Rather through his work, he is making arguments which adapt how identity is understood for the purpose of defending and attacking his opponents.

Another area in which Lactantius is speculated to be in conflict with his opponents is over the issue of tolerance. The argument that Lactantius promotes tolerance revolves around two points: Lactantius's promotion of the virtue of *patientia* in the face of persecution and his potential influence on Constantine's legalization of previously persecuted cults such as Christianity. Firstly Lactantius argues in the *Divine Institutes* that Christians should endure persecution with *patientia*; in this instance the term has the meaning of patience or endurance, as endurance, virtuous behavior or persuasion are the only true defence of *religio*.<sup>504</sup> However, he also argues that people in positions of civic authority should exercise *patientia*; in this context the term is usually translated as 'forbearance,' towards people who practice different *religiones* and not force them to practice any particular *religio*. This is because genuine *religio*, for Lactantius, must by definition be voluntary. Any action or confessed belief that is motivated by forcible coercion cannot be true *religio*. As such civic leaders and others can only meaningfully spread a particular *religio* by means of persuasion and debate.<sup>505</sup> It has been noted that this position is partially drawn from a similar argument made by

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<sup>504</sup> *Divine Institutes*, 19.20-26. Kahlos, "The Rhetoric of Tolerance and Intolerance," 87-89.

<sup>505</sup> *Divine Institutes*, 5.19.9-14, 5.20.5. Elizabeth Digeser, "Lactantius on Religious Liberty and His Influence on Constantine," in *Christianity and Freedom* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 94-95; *Ibid*, "Lactantius," 239, 245-246; Kahlos, "The Rhetoric of Tolerance and Intolerance," 84-89; Shelton, "Lactantius as Architect of a Constantinian and Christian 'Victory over the Empire,'" 31.

Tertullian in his *Apology*.<sup>506</sup> This argument is obviously used by Lactantius to criticize persecution of Christians; however it also suggests that if circumstances were reversed, a Christian emperor should not rightfully force his subjects to adopt Christianity. Rather Christianity should only be promoted by means of persuasion and debate.<sup>507</sup> Digeser has argued that this position expressed across the *Divine Institutes* constitutes “an original and comprehensive argument for religious toleration.”<sup>508</sup> Digeser and others have also proposed that Constantine read this argument within the *Divine Institutes* and it served as an inspiration for his legalization of Christianity in 313 which ended forcible participation in Roman cultic practices and allowed previously persecuted cultic groups to practice openly.<sup>509</sup>

The effect of Constantine’s legalization of Christianity and Lactantius’s positions, if Digeser and others are right about the inspiration for the edict, might be comparable to the modern notion of religious tolerance. However, a closer inspection of positions and notably how he categorises Christian identity, demonstrates that Lactantius’s intention was not nearly as comparable. To begin with, as I will argue in chapter 5, Lactantius’s vision for Christian identity, at least at the time of writing the *Divine Institutes*, was fundamentally apolitical and he argues that civic institutions almost inherently lead to social conflict and idolatry. Therefore, one can understand his rejection of forced conversion on practical as well as ethical grounds. Lactantius was against the idea of forcible conversion, with the understanding that any organization which had the means

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<sup>506</sup> Digeser, “Lactantius on Religious Liberty and His Influence on Constantine,” 93; Kahlos, “The Rhetoric of Tolerance and Intolerance,” 85-86.

<sup>507</sup> Digeser, “Lactantius on Religious Liberty and His Influence on Constantine,” 94.

<sup>508</sup> Digeser, “Lactantius, Porphyry, and the Debate over Religious Toleration,” 129.

<sup>509</sup> Digeser, “Lactantius on Religious Liberty and His Influence on Constantine,” 93; Ibid, “Lactantius,” 239; Shelton, “Lactantius as Architect of a Constantinian and Christian ‘Victory over the Empire,’” 26-28, 36.

of bringing it about, would categorically not be Christian or possess true justice or true *religio*. Similarly Lactantius was in favor of persuasion and debate as a means of spreading Christianity, not because he valued free and open discourse in and of itself, but because he believed it was the best method for effectively spreading Christianity. When Lactantius argues for the inherently voluntary nature of *religio*, it is tempting to believe that he values the individual's freedom to decide their own identity; however this is not necessarily the case. Lactantius believes that Christianity is objectively right. Therefore, any dialogue between a Christian who can sufficiently and intelligently explain himself and a pagan who is patient enough to listen with an open mind, will inherently result in conversion to Christianity. This understanding does not value individual agency or the freedom of choice between multiple equally valid beliefs. Even Digeser concedes that inherent in the modern notion of toleration is an acceptance of disagreement and value of diversity which is not found in the *Divine Institutes*; rather religious liberty is promoted in this work only as a means of creating universally Christian world.<sup>510</sup> Maijastina Kahlos also acknowledges that Lactantius's perspective which demands a monopoly on truth undermines any notion of toleration within his work.<sup>511</sup> Likewise Mark Edwards suggests that in light of the exclusivity Lactantius places on true *religio* scholars should be hesitant to accept him a proponent of religious toleration.<sup>512</sup> A study of how Lactantius categorises Christian identity, should lead to a greater exploration of this line of enquiry, and question the broadly held view that Lactantius has a view comparable to the modern notion of toleration.

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<sup>510</sup> Digeser, "Lactantius on Religious Liberty and His Influence on Constantine," 94-95.

<sup>511</sup> Kahlos, "The Rhetoric of Tolerance and Intolerance," 99.

<sup>512</sup> Edwards, *Religions of the Constantinian Empire*, 28.

The implications of Lactantius's method of unifying philosophy and cult goes beyond the goals of either of the strategies of Tertullian or Minucius Felix, who, even when they did not hope to persuade Roman pagans, strove to present Christian identity in a way the Roman pagans would recognise. Tertullian, for instance, chooses to present Christians as a cultic group which he argues ought to be treated in the same way as other cultic groups which Roman law acknowledges as legitimate. Furthermore, as earlier chapters have argued, Tertullian builds on the association between cult and civic authority and makes use of imperial rhetoric to argue that Christian identity should not only be accepted by non-Christian Romans but be a corrective influence on the Roman Empire and Roman culture. This is the same goal that the *Divine Institutes* aims to achieve. However, unlike Lactantius, Tertullian believes that the only way to accomplish this goal is to distance Christian identity from philosophy, lest Christians be pigeonholed into a category that undermines their authority.

In describing how Christian identity ought to be understood in the later part of his *Apology* Tertullian sums up in one line his definition of Christian identity: "We are a society (*corpus*) about a common understanding of devotion (*conscientia religionis*) both united in discipline and bound in hope."<sup>513</sup> The term Tertullian is using here, *conscientia*, has a very particular meaning and usage within Tertullian's works particularly when paired with *religio*. Tertullian in his attack on non-Christian worship, argues that it can only ever be an act of willful ignorance because deep down "the testimony of the soul is naturally Christian."<sup>514</sup> When Tertullian therefore refers to a person's *conscientia* he is referring to a subconscious understanding found in all people that, among other things,

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<sup>513</sup> Corpus sumus de conscientia religionis et disciplinae unitate et spei foedere, *Apology*, xxxix.1 p.150.

<sup>514</sup> Testimonium animae naturaliter christianae. *Ibid*, xvii.6 p.117.

there is only one God and He has only one correct *religio* which, as I have argued, should be understood as both ritual worship and more abstractly as devotion. Tertullian therefore defines Christians as those who consciously acknowledge this fact and are united in the ritual and moral behaviors that follow such a revelation. Notably however Tertullian does not define Christians by intellectual understanding of God or the understanding and agreement with Christian philosophical beliefs. To be clear Tertullian is not the complete fideist that some have taken him for,<sup>515</sup> he does believe that Christian truth can and should be defended through rational and logical argument and does not hesitate to do so himself. However, for Tertullian knowing the intellectual aspects of Christian truth is an accidental rather than definitive characteristic of the true Christian.

This puts Tertullian in disagreement with Lactantius who does consider intellectual and philosophical agreement with Christian teaching to be a necessary and definitive characteristic of the true Christian. This is because Lactantius does not make use of Tertullian's understanding of *conscientia*, and therefore thinks that worship by itself is insufficient without philosophical rationality to guide faith toward the correct Deity. However, Tertullian does not support this kind of intellectual approach, largely because understanding Christians largely by means of their *religio* is part of Tertullian's strategy for securing Christian legitimacy and authority. This is seen in Tertullian's rejection of philosophy as a category for understanding Christianity. In his *Apology* he seeks to refute those who "believe that [Christianity is] not at any rate a matter of divinity, but more a kind of philosophy."<sup>516</sup> In his refutation, what he points to as the

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<sup>515</sup> This point has been argued extensively by Wilhite, *Introduction to North African Christianity*, 110-111.

<sup>516</sup> Non utique divinum negotium existimat, sed magis philosophiae genus. *Apology*, xlvi.2 p.160.

main differences between Christians and philosophers have to do with cultic practice and the spiritual power of cultic practices which is, he believes, the Christians' ability to control and exorcize daemons. He goes on to argue that philosophers do not meaningfully seek the truth but merely glory and thus are lesser than Christians.<sup>517</sup>

Tertullian therefore not only aims to present Christian as a cultic group rather than a philosophy, but does not conceive cult and philosophy to be reconcilable. Philosophy in the ancient world was in many ways a permit to act outside of socially acceptable conventions, and if accepted as a philosophy Christianity would potentially be allowed exist freely.<sup>518</sup> However, it could also limit the authority and importance that Christianity could have within mainstream culture. Thus having to choose between one or the other, Tertullian chooses cult, because he believes that the spiritual and civic authority that could be allotted to Christians seen as a legitimate form of worship, outweighed the glory and intellectual approval that would be provided if they were seen as a philosophical group. However, this strategy, while it theoretically defends them within the letter of Roman law, seems unlikely to persuade elite Roman pagans to support the Christian cause, or indeed to convince them that Christians are not troublesome to the Roman state. This is likely because it was not meant to. As has been noted by others, unlike Lactantius, Tertullian's aim was less to reconcile the Christian and non-Christian than to draw boundaries between them.<sup>519</sup> Tertullian's strategy was meant most likely for an internal Christian audience to persuade them that not only are they legally in the right but that they deserve a greater authority within the Roman world.

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<sup>517</sup> Ibid, xlvi.3-7 p.198-200.

<sup>518</sup> Edwards, *Religions of the Constantinian Empire*, 27.

<sup>519</sup> Kahlos, "The Rhetoric of Tolerance and Intolerance," 82-83.

This is the exact opposite to the strategy taken by Minucius Felix who presents Christians as a philosophical group in order to better appeal to an elite non-Christian Roman audience. He is willing to undermine Christian claims to authority in order to better achieve legitimacy. Thus Minucius Felix undermines the importance of the cultic elements of Christian identity which could be seen as threatening to the Roman state or culturally alienating, and instead focuses on the intellectual and philosophical aspects of Christian identity which would more likely find sympathy among elite non-Christian Romans educated in philosophy. Furthermore by presenting Christians as philosophical groups he presents them as part of a category that elite non-Christian Romans would recognise and be comfortable with. In his description of Christians as philosophers he emphasises the continuity between Christianity and classical tradition: “from now on either Christians are to be the philosophers or those who are now Christians at that time were philosophers.”<sup>520</sup> In contrast, Tertullian by defining Christian identity by *religio* seemingly presents the Christian in a guise familiar to Romans. However, as cultic group Tertullian’s Christian cult is not a form of *religio* that most Roman would recognise and is meant for legal classification rather than cultural acceptance.

One manner in which Minucius Felix’s presentation of Christian identity is closer to that of Lactantius than to Tertullian, is that, while for Tertullian presenting Christians as a cultic group defined by *religio*, requires the rejection of philosophy, Minucius does incorporate some aspects of cult and *religio* into his philosophical Christian. However, the difference between Lactantius’s and Minucius’s approaches is that, while Minucius Felix combines *philosophia* with Christian *religio* he does not treat the two equally.

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<sup>520</sup> Aut nunc Christianos philosophos esse aut philosophos fuisse iam tunc Christianos. *Octavius*, xx.1 p.18.

Instead he gives far more emphasis to *philosophia* and treats *religio* as a secondary accidental aspect of Christian identity. What is more, Minucius Felix does emphasise the importance of this union the way Lactantius does. He passes off Christian identity as a philosophical identity which also happens to involve cultic worship whereas Lactantius is presenting the unity of philosophy and cult as the main selling feature of Christianity. This is partially because in the fourth century new forms of culturally accepted identity are available to Lactantius, that would not have been available to Minucius Felix. Due to the changing circumstances of the early fourth century, rather than mitigating the unity of philosophy and cult as a complicating factor that needs to be downplayed, Lactantius is able to emphasize it as a benefit and source of validation.

Another reason for this categorization of identity is that Lactantius is actively seeking out an audience who are both Roman and Christian and trying to achieve both the goals of Tertullian and Minucius Felix simultaneously. He wishes to build up the importance of Christian identity to undecided Christians by laying claim to the spiritual and civic authority of cultic practice, while presenting Christians as legitimate and culturally acceptable to elite non-Christian Romans through the support of classical philosophy. He aims to make this identity more appealing yet by arguing for these two differing forms of identities as one category, with each aspect correcting the limitations of the other. The downside to this approach is that Lactantius cannot present Christian groups under a guise that non-Christian Romans would already be familiar with. He makes up for this by incorporating into his work extensive references to classical Roman sources, in order that, although the argument might be presenting something different, it is done in a way that would be familiar to non-Christian Romans.

Lactantius's Use of *Religio* and the Redefining of Cult

In order to make his argument, Lactantius needs to redefine the terms he is using to best fit his case. Most notable among these is the term *religio*, which, in keeping with the developments of Tertullian, Lactantius expands upon in order to best suit his purpose. A consequence of this is that Lactantius is promoting a new understanding of cult and cultic practice, and the means by which it ought to be legitimized. This new understanding of cult expands the nature of worship and devotion not merely to ritual action but to all aspects of life, in a manner that benefits the conjoining of philosophy and worship.

Like many other developments on the nature of identity in the *Divine Institutes*, Lactantius does not make this change implicitly or covertly, but rather explicitly outlines a new understanding of the term *religio* which is at odds with how it is classically understood. This occurs when toward the end of Book 4 Lactantius refutes Cicero's etymology of the word:

Since things are as we have explained, it is plain that man can have no hope of life unless he casts away his silliness and his miserable mistakes and recognises and serves God; he must renounce this temporal life and teach himself the rudiments of justice in order to cultivate true religion. We are born on the following terms, that we present our just and due obedience to God who creates us, and that we acknowledge and follow him alone. This is the chain of piety that ties and binds us to God: hence the word religion, and not

as Cicero takes it, from re-reading. [*Hoc vinculo peitatis obstricti deo et religati sumus, unde ipsa religio nomen accepit, non ut Cicero interpretatus est a relegendo*]<sup>521</sup>

The etymology that Lactantius is contesting here represents a differing definition of *religio* as well as differing understandings of how it is legitimized. While etymologies may not seem particularly significant to us moderns, in the ancient world this form of argumentation would carry significantly more weight.<sup>522</sup> As discussed in chapter 1, Cicero defines *religio* as a set of ritual practices belonging to a certain ethnic or cultural group, often but not necessarily dedicated to a deity or set of deities. The legitimacy of Cicero's *religio* is determined by its antiquity.<sup>523</sup> Hence it is derived from 'rereading' as Cicero's *religio* is based on ancient sources which are regularly and repeatedly referred back to. Lactantius however, like Tertullian before him, breaks from this understanding to argue that the legitimacy of *religio* should be determined by its object.<sup>524</sup> The importance of the object is emphasised by the preceding line: "Him alone we accept as valid; Him we follow." For Lactantius if the deity to which the *religio* is dedicated is genuine then the *religio* is legitimate regardless of its novelty. Hence he argues the word derives from 'to bind' for it is by the connection to its object that it is legitimized and defined.

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<sup>521</sup> Translation from Bowen and Garnsey, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, 4.28.1-3 p.275-276. For the Latin text see . Lactantius, *Divinarum Institutionum Libri Septem*, 425.

<sup>522</sup> Pierre Monat, "Lactance contre Junon: de la polémique au dialogue avec les païens," in *Hommages à Jean Cousin: Recontres avec l'antiqué classique*, eds. Félix Gaffiot (Paris: Université de Besançon, 1983) 262.

<sup>523</sup> Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, III. ii 5 288-291. Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 10-13; Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*, 45-46; Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*, 105-106.

<sup>524</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 30; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 187-191.

By changing the focus of *religio* from traditional ritual practices to ritual practices dedicated to a certain object, Lactantius changes not only how it is legitimized but what it can consist of. In contrast to Cicero, Lactantius's legitimization of *religio* is fundamentally ahistorical as he defines it based on its association with an ahistorical immortal deity. This allows Lactantius to counter accusations that Christianity is novel and deviates from historical ancestral traditions.<sup>525</sup> By defining *religio* based on its object, the focus becomes less on the specifics of rituals involved and more on loyalty and devotion toward that object. This change in meaning is seen in how Lactantius sets up this discussion. This passage presents *religio* not merely as an aspect of life but as a guiding principle by which one ought to live. This is in keeping with attempts to unify cult and philosophy, in that by presenting cultic worship as a quintessential aspect of morality, cult becomes inseparable from ethical philosophy. This understanding is drawn out in this passage. In the first line he states that the 'knowing and serving of God' is essential to human life. He then describes this as the purpose for which humans were created, "For on this condition were we born" and refers to "renounce[ing] this temporary life." This emphasises philosophical teachings on the purpose of human existence and the value of the immaterial and everlasting. This association with philosophy and ethics is emphasised by stating that justice derives from "*cultum verae religionis*." Therefore, one cannot learn how to be just and live a good human life without cultic worship. However, this new understanding of *religio* focuses less on ritual practice and more on the moral principles by which one ought to live one's life. Hence the strong association here of *religio* with *justitia*. Therefore, by defining *religio* based on

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<sup>525</sup> Nickolas Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion Euhemerism from Antiquity to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2017) 66.

its object, Lactantius changes the focus of worship from traditional practice to devotion to deity and lived morality which allows him to more easily associate worship with philosophy.

However, as discussed above the association of cult and philosophy was not new, and even Cicero drew some connections between the two in regards to *religio*. He believed that one's choice of deities and attitude toward the gods should be tempered with reason and philosophy. The novel development occurring with Lactantius was that because of the association between cult and philosophy, *religio* as it applied to Christianity, could be used to describe any aspect of life. Such was the reach of this development that even Christianity's critics acknowledged that it was a lifestyle as opposed to just a set of rituals.<sup>526</sup> Cicero was motivated by a desire to maintain stability and there constructed a system of *religio* that emphasised maintaining tradition and formal structures.<sup>527</sup> Lactantius in contrast disrupts the Ciceronian model in order to argue for the value of Christianity, and comes up with a less solid definition and less secure system because of it. Therefore, *religio* for Lactantius meant any action or behavior performed in the worshiping of deity, as opposed to its earlier Ciceronian meaning that confined it to a specific set of preapproved ritual actions and the appropriate behaviors for those actions. Because of the strong association of worship with morality, Lactantius's *religio* could apply to all aspects of life, whereas Cicero's was confined to the temple.

Lactantius states his views in regards to the meaning of *religio* in a way that ties it back to the unity of philosophy and cult with which he had begun the Book:

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<sup>526</sup> Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 1-2, 192-193.

<sup>527</sup> Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*, 43-46.

Religion is of course worship of what is true, and superstition is worship of what is false. And what you worship is absolutely important, more so than how you worship or what you should pray. But because worshippers of gods think they are religious when in fact they are superstitious, so they cannot distinguish religion from superstition or explain the meaning of the words. We have observed that the word religion comes from the bond of piety because God has bound man to him and tied him with piety: we simply have to serve him as master and obey him as father. [*hominem sibi deus religaverit et pietate constrinxerit, quia servire nos ei ut domino et obsequi ut patri necesse est*]<sup>528</sup>

Here Lactantius is explicitly stating what he implied earlier in the chapter: that the legitimacy of *religio* ought to be based on its object rather than in its practice. This method of defining practices of worship based on their object is found throughout his work.<sup>529</sup> This method allows him to definitively argue that only Christian worship is legitimate for only it has the correct object of worship, and no amount of ritual can make the worship of anything else worthwhile. Also by undermining the methods by which legitimacy is understood he can redefine the terms to exclusively support his position. Thus Lactantius aims to control not only what is considered legitimate but the methods by which things are legitimized. This is seen in his attack not only on the practices of non-Christians but on their ability to interpret their own language. Thus he critiques them for being unable to discern the significance of the term *religio*. Furthermore he

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<sup>528</sup> Translation from Bowen and Garnsey, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, 4.28.11-12 p.275-276. For the Latin text see Lactantius, *Divinarum Institutionum Libri Septem*, 427.

<sup>529</sup> Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 191.

takes his new definition of *religio* and refers it back to his united category of identity, through his reference to the understanding of God as both Lord and Father. This kind of association ties together the Book as a whole and allows him to present for his ideas as a complete system that is both innovative and tied into traditional methods of categorization.

Lactantius's definition of *religio* based on its object, as well as how he uses the category to attack traditional Roman positions, are grounded in Tertullian's use of the term. Where the two differ relates mainly to how they use the term to categorise Christian groups. This passage from Tertullian's *Apology* illustrates this well:

All this testimony from them in which they deny themselves to be gods, in which they all respond that there is no other god aside from the one to whom we are dedicated, is appropriate testimony sufficient to refute the charge of offending public, and especially of violating the Roman obligation to worship (*Romanae religionis*). For if they are certainly not gods, then there is certainly no obligation to worship (*religio*); if there is no obligation to worship (*religio*), since they are certainly not gods, then we are certainly not violating the obligation to worship (*religio*). But on the contrary the reproach will rebound onto you, who worshiping a falsehood, not only neglect the true worship of the true God, but what is more, by assaulting it you in truth commit the crime of true impiety (*inreligiositatis*).<sup>530</sup>

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<sup>530</sup> Omnis ista confessio illorum, qua se deos negant esse quaque non alium deum respondent praeter unum, cui nos mancipamur, satis idonea est ad depellendum crimen laesae publicae et maxime Romanae religionis. Si enim non sunt dei pro certo, nec religio pro certo est: si religio non est, quia nec dei, pro certo, nec nos pro certo rei sumus laesae religionis. At e contrario in vos exprobratio ista resultabit, qui mendacium colentes veram religionem veri dei non modo neglegendo, quin insuper expugnando, in verum committitis crimen verae inreligiositatis. xxiv.1-2 p.133.

Tertullian defines whether or not an obligation to worship is valid, that is to say whether or not it is *religio* as opposed to *superstitio*, based on whether the object it is directed to is genuine or not. As with Lactantius, this strategy allows Tertullian to claim the legitimacy of *religio* solely for Christian practices. This defence is designed to be a logical refutation by equating Christian identity with true *religio* and thus dodging the charge of *irreligio*. Furthermore defining *religio* based on its object allows Tertullian to define Christian identity based around *religio* even if it lacks traditional practices or the infrastructure of a traditional cultic group. This is a logical and quasi-legal defence that was meant to reaffirm Tertullian himself and his fellow Christian as morally in the right, but was not likely meant to persuade anyone who would value Roman ritual worship. Although Tertullian does try to ground his work in the Roman sources, i.e. the testimony of Roman gods in which they claim not to be gods, this is more intended to show the bankrupt nature of the Roman pagan position rather than to persuade non-Christian Romans of his cause. Hence he describes this testimony in general terms rather than citing a specific source. Whereas, Lactantius redefines *religio* in dialogue with classical Roman sources in order to persuade elite non-Christian Romans to consider the value of Christian identity and the unity of philosophy and cult, Tertullian does it in order to persuade fellow Christians that they ought to be acceptable by Roman legal and cultural standard and lay claim to the moral superiority.

Lactantius's redefinition of terms however applies not only to *religio* but to its opposite *superstitio* which he redefines in order to best use it to attack non-Christian worship. Historically the terms were interchangeable; however Cicero repurposed the terms so that *religio* represented that which was legitimate while *superstitio* that which

was illegitimate.<sup>531</sup> As discussed, under the Ciceronian model practices were illegitimate which lacked historical precedent; however *superstitio* was also negatively associated with practices which were foreign i.e. non-Roman and which involved an excessive degree of emotion and dedication. Indeed even a practice that would otherwise be considered a *religio* might be deemed a *superstitio* if performed excessively. Early Christianity was denounced as *superstitio* by non-Christian Romans on all three of these grounds: novelty, a foreign origin, and an excessive degree of emotional commitment.<sup>532</sup> Lactantius likewise objects to this. After the passage quoted above he quotes a passage from *On the Nature of the Gods*,<sup>533</sup> which discusses this subject and then critiques Cicero for considering that the same practices done to the same beings should be deemed varyingly *superstitio* or *religio* based merely on the frequency and intensity with which they are done.<sup>534</sup> This represents an important distinction between how Cicero and Lactantius contrast *superstitio* and *religio*. While both take these terms which prior to Cicero had been interchangeable and distinguished one as legitimate and the other as illegitimate, the association each term is given are different. For Lactantius defines legitimacy as grounded on the truth of the divinity the worship is directed towards, regardless of either its antiquity or emotional excess. While *religio* and *superstitio* even within the fourth century could still be used synonymously in their older meanings,<sup>535</sup> here Lactantius leverages their boundary-making force to promote Christianity identity. Therefore, *superstitiones* are any ritual practice directed at a deity

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<sup>531</sup> Martin, *Inventing Superstition*; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 188; Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*, 46-47.

<sup>532</sup> Martin, *Inventing Superstition*; Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*, 40-42.

<sup>533</sup> II.xxviii.71-72 p.192-193.

<sup>534</sup> *Divine Institutes*, 4.28.7-10 p.426-427.

<sup>535</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*, 28-30.

other than the Christian God. This also limits the term *religio* exclusively to Christian practices. What Lactantius is countering here is the measure of emotional excess as a source of illegitimacy when the deity involved is grounded in truth, while providing himself the means to lay sole claim to legitimate forms of worship.

Lactantius not only develops new definitions of these terms but grounds these definitions with more traditional Roman understandings of these ideas. This is later on in this same chapter as Lactantius describes how his understandings of *religio* and *superstitio* are in fact based upon the original definitions of these terms:

Superstitious was the word for people who used to develop novel rituals to divert honours from gods to dead people who they thought had been elevated human rank to a place in heaven; religious was kept for those who worshipped the long-established public gods. Hence Vergil's line "a superstition vain, and ignorant of the ancient gods" [*Aeneid* 8.187]. But since we find that the ancient gods were also consecrated after death in same fashion, superstitious is the word for those who worship quantities of false gods, and religious is for us who pray to the one true God.<sup>536</sup>

In this passage Lactantius refers to and builds upon traditional Roman understandings of *superstitio* and *religio* even as he changes and subverts them, which speaks to his desire to appeal to an audience grounded on traditional Roman beliefs and perspectives. His reference to Vergil betrays a desire to maintain a foothold in classical culture and use those sources to support his argument. Lactantius here describes how *superstitio* and *religio* were traditionally understood by non-Christian Romans so that he

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<sup>536</sup> Lactantius, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, trans. Bowen and Garnsey, 277.

can present his own definitions as grounded upon these earlier understandings. In this way he does not present his arguments as so novel as to offend traditional Roman sensibilities; however he nevertheless undermines the traditional Roman position by leveling the accusations they level on others at themselves and their own past. By comparing Roman antiquity to actions which non-Christian Romans perceive as contemptable in the present, Lactantius attacks and undermines traditionally minded Romans' own understanding of their culture by means of their own terminology and means of their understanding of other cultures. This serves the dual purpose of attacking traditional Roman customs and showing the methods used to legitimize those customs are faulty and that what they support is as guilty as what they attack. This paves the way for Lactantius to push Christian practices as well as the methods by which they are legitimized.

### Conclusion

Lactantius combines the positions of Tertullian and Minucius Felix, to present Christian identity as a unity of philosophy and cultic worship which improves on the isolated forms of these things found in Roman classical tradition. The argument is also grounded in a new understanding of cult and a redefinition of the term *religio*. This new definition builds on Tertullian's definition but contrary to Tertullian makes it compatible with philosophical identity and separates it from any civic associations. All of this is constructed as a strategy to appeal not merely to Christian audiences but neither only to Roman civic leaders. Rather Lactantius's main target audience are well educated Romans who value Roman cultural authorities heavily but are nevertheless attracted

enough to Christian identity to critically engage with his work. To better appeal to Christians, he presents his work as the culmination of all Latin apologists that have gone before him, most notably Tertullian and Minucius Felix. However, to better appeal to those who value Roman traditions, he models his text on Roman civic institutes in a manner not dissimilar to how traditional Christian apology is modeled on forensic rhetoric.

The significance of Lactantius's arguments are both manifold and are foundational in how he influences our conceptions of the thinkers before and after him. Lactantius unites the diverse and contrary works of Tertullian and Minucius Felix into a single tradition, not merely by citing them as predecessors to his work, but by combining their ideas together. Furthermore, his attempt at unifying cultic practice and philosophy has a notable influence on subsequent Christian identity, most notably Augustine's later more successful attempts at unifying Christian teachings and classical philosophy. While scholarship has explored the influence of Lactantius on Augustine,<sup>537</sup> it has yet to fully examine this influence in regards to categories of identity. Lactantius's work constitutes a notable and important development in how identity is understood in the late antique world.

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<sup>537</sup> Garnsey, "Lactantius and Augustine."

## Chapter 5

### Lactantius's *Divine Institutes*: Christian Identity as Apolitical Roman Identity

Lactantius's *Divine Institutes* was written almost entirely during and as a reaction against Diocletian's 'Great Persecution.'<sup>538</sup> As such, for the most part the text's treatment of Roman civic authority is, as you would expect, unceasingly critical and condemnatory of an authority known for its cruelties and injustice toward Christians and whom it could not hope to sway. It is therefore the most profound irony of the text that its author should happen to outlive the time of conflict by which it was inspired and the final work should include additions made after the original version was completed dedicating it to and exhorting the Emperor Constantine whose office, authority, and empire the text spends so long condemning. The relationship to Roman identity and Roman civic authority in the *Divine Institutes* must thus be understood from these two perspectives: the one which originally inspired the work, and the one which the work would ultimately be used for.<sup>539</sup> In the former pre-Constantinian perspective, Lactantius writes to fellow Christians and those inclined toward the Christian position with the goal of persuading them that Roman identity is not incompatible with Christian identity and that where Roman philosophy or literature contradicts Christian views, the Roman position is wrong. In this tract, he disparages any hope that Roman civic authorities

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<sup>538</sup> On the date of the *Divine Institutes* see Elizabeth Digeser, "Lactantius and Constantine's Letter to Arles: Dating the *Divine Institutes*," *Journal of early Christian studies* 2, no. 1 (1994): 33-52; Heck, "Constantin Und Lactanz in Trier Chronologisches," 118–130; Coleman, *Lactantius the Theologian*, 17.

<sup>539</sup> On the two perspectives of apologetic writing see Jean-Claude Fredouille, "Tertullien dans l'histoire de l'apologetique," in *Les Apologues chrétiens et la culture grecque*, eds. Bernard Pouderon and Joseph Doré (Paris, 1998) 279 and Kahlos, "The Rhetoric of Tolerance and Intolerance: From Lactantius to Firmicus Maternus," 79.

would be persuaded by his arguments, and insofar as he is writing to a non-Christian Roman audience, he directs his arguments toward Romans as private individuals rather than toward civic authorities. In the latter post-Constantinian mode, Lactantius dedicates and directs his arguments to Emperor Constantine with the goal of persuading him and other elite Roman non-Christians to support more fully the Christian cause and adopt Christianity as an ideology of Empire. In both these modes Lactantius makes his arguments for those who value Roman identity that Christian cult and philosophy represent an improved and more unified version of their traditional Roman pagan counterparts which nevertheless build on classical Roman tradition. I discuss this important context here, and not in the previous chapter, because this chapter concerns itself primarily with Lactantius's relationship to the Roman Empire as a civic authority, as presented in the *Divine Institutes*.

In the latter mode however this argument has greater significance because it packages Christian identity as an improved form of Roman imperialism which unites together the diverse and contradictory aspects of Roman cult and philosophy into a single ideology. This ideology encourages a unified culture centered around Christian cultic worship, but with its literary and philosophical roots in the classical tradition. Furthermore, its universalist monotheistic dedication to a single God mirrors a civic loyalty toward a single seat of power. This latter reading of the *Divine Institutes* however requires the ignoring of several passages which imply that Roman civic authority and Christians will forever be enemies, and is only glimpsed from the brief passages added to the text after the rise of Constantine. Therefore, while the latter reading is historically

highly significant, my textual analysis of the work will naturally focus on the pre-Constantinian rather than the post-Constantinian mode.

However, before I move on, it is worth briefly discussing the dating and transmission history of the work, in order to explain in more detail the differences between the pre- and post-Constantinian versions of the *Divine Institutes*. The text comes to us through a number of manuscripts which are classified into two families, commonly known as the short and the long version. The long version contains in addition to the text of the short version, dedications to Constantine at the beginnings of Books 1 through 5, and passages in Books 1 (1.1.13-16) and 7 (7.26.11-17) exhorting Constantine. These two versions are commonly viewed as two different editions of the work both written by Lactantius himself, the additions to the text found in the long version having been added after the text's completion.<sup>540</sup> The dating of the additions however has been a more contested issue. The traditional view promoted by Eberhard Heck and others is that the first edition was written roughly between 305 and 310 during the Great Persecution while the second edition was written in 324 at the very end of Lactantius's life after Constantine was formally proclaimed as sole Emperor.<sup>541</sup> However, Elizabeth Digeser argues based on textual parallels to learned pieces of writing, that the second edition could have been written as early as 313.<sup>542</sup>

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<sup>540</sup> Barnes, "Lactantius and Constantine," 40; Monat, "Le classement des manuscrits par l'analyse factorielle. Recherches pour l'établissement d'un stemma: Lactance, Institutions divines, livre IV," 311-330; Digeser, "Lactantius and Constantine's Letter to Arles: Dating the *Divine Institutes*," 43-44; Karl-Heinz Schwarte, "Lactantius," in *Dictionary of Early Christian Literature* eds. Siegmund Döpp and Wilhelm Geerlings, trans. Micheal O'Connell (New York: Crossroad, 2000) 366-367; Shelton, "Lactantius as Architect of a Constantinian and Christian 'Victory over the Empire,'" 27.

<sup>541</sup> Eberhard Heck, *Die dualistischen Zusätze und die Kaiserreden bei Lactantius* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1972); Ibid, "Constantin Und Lactanz in Trier Chronologisches," 118-130; Hubertus Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Press, 2007) 182.

<sup>542</sup> Digeser, "Lactantius and Constantine's Letter to Arles;" Ibid, *The Making of a Christian Empire*, 134, 169-171.

For our purposes the dating of the second edition is relevant only insofar as it speaks to the motivation of Lactantius in writing the additional passages in Books 1 and 7. The traditional view suggests that Lactantius at the end of his life returned to the *Divine Institutes* many years after its completion and dedicated it to Constantine out of a genuine gratitude to him for his policies toward Christians enacted between 310 to 324. This view also suggests the second edition is unfinished and it implies that Lactantius would have made further changes to the work, had he not been hampered by his extreme old age.<sup>543</sup> This view is based on the position that the additional passages are in contradiction to Lactantius's positions in other parts of the work and further work is needed to better integrate them into the work as a whole. Digeser however proposes that the additions were made to the work in a somewhat clumsy attempt to adapt the work into a tool to educate Constantine's court in Christianity.<sup>544</sup> I do not wish to cast my lot in wholly with either side of this debate except to argue that, despite the differences in tone, the additional passages within the *Divine Institutes* are necessarily in contradiction with Lactantius's earlier positions. Also these passages do not necessarily imply that he would choose to rescind these earlier positions, particularly his stances toward the Roman Empire as civic institution, had he the time and energy to do so.<sup>545</sup>

The place of Roman government within Lactantius's theology has been of notable interest to contemporary scholarly discussions of the *Divine Institutes*. Although

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<sup>543</sup> Nicholson, "Civitas Quae Adhuc Sustentat Omnia," 23; Digeser, "Lactantius and Constantine's Letter to Arles," 52; Heck, "Constantin Und Lactanz in Trier Chronologisches," 128-130.

<sup>544</sup> Digeser, "Lactantius and Constantine's Letter to Arles," 50-52.

<sup>545</sup> The position that the content of the additions does not contradict Lactantius's position on government as reflected elsewhere in the *Divine Institutes* is supported by Mattias Gassman, *Worshippers of the Gods: Debating Paganism in the Fourth-Century Roman West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020) 27.

the *Divine Institutes* has largely been considered as a theological work,<sup>546</sup> it has been argued persuasively by Elizabeth Digeser that as a response to Diocletian and as an influence on Constantine this work represents a valuable historical source on religious politics of this pivotal point in the Roman Empire.<sup>547</sup> The work contains not only theological points but a historically significant political philosophy. In the preface to her monograph *The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius and Rome* Digeser writes that: “Because Lactantius, a Christian scholar, responded to the emperor Diocletian’s persecutions with a work that, in turn, influenced Constantine’s religious policy, he is an ideal lens through which to study Rome’s religious transformation.”<sup>548</sup> This is consistent with the view of many scholars who find the most engaging element of Lactantius to be the complex relationship between Roman and Christian identity within his work.<sup>549</sup> I will summarize this discussion, particularly as it pertains to Lactantius’s relationship to the Roman state, before suggesting how my work might add to it.

I will begin with Christofer Ocker, who in 1986, in part responding to a 1982 article by Arthur Fisher,<sup>550</sup> argued that the form of Christian justice which Lactantius describes and advocates for has an important social and civic dimension. Ocker points

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<sup>546</sup> Hallman, “The Mutability of God;” Monat, *Lactance et la Bible*; Bender, *Die natürliche Gotteserkenntnis bei Laktanz und seinen apologetischen Vorgängern*; McGuckin, “The Christology of Lactantius;” Ibid, “Spirit Christology;” Garnsey, “Lactantius and Augustine;” Coleman, *Lactantius the Theologian*; Gehrke, “Lactantius’s Power Theology.”

<sup>547</sup> Digeser, *The Making of A Christian Empire*, ix-x.

<sup>548</sup> Ibid, *The Making of a Christian Empire*, ix.

<sup>549</sup> Ocker, “Unius arbitrio mundum regi necesse est,” 348–364; Ingremeau, “Les Institutions divines de Lactance;” Ibid, “Lactance et la justice dans le livre V des *Institutions divines*,” 153–162; Ibid, “Lactance et la justice: du livre V au livre VI des *Institutions divines*,” 43–52; Nicholson, “Hercules at the Milvian Bridge;” Ibid, “Civitas Quae Adhuc Sustentat Omnia: Lactantius and the City of Rome,” 7–25; Edwards, “The Flowering of Latin Apologetic;” Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire*; Wayman, “Lactantius’s Power Struggle,” 304–324; Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 182-188; Gassman, *Worshippers of the Gods*.

<sup>550</sup> Arthur Fisher, “Lactantius’ Ideas Relating Christian Truth and Christian Society,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 43 no.3 (1982): 355–377.

out that Lactantius strongly associates the worship of faulty deities with civic and social dissolution, and that rooted in the promotion of the worship of a single God is a veiled critique of the fourfold rule of Tetrarchy. Ocker suggests that Lactantius's ideals promoted the idea of Christian monarchy.<sup>551</sup> Although Ocker's civic focus seems relatively novel it is worth noting that he is explicitly building on an extensive discussion of Lactantius's "fusion of Roman and Christian worlds."<sup>552</sup> Oliver Nicholson continues this line of enquiry by exploring the positions on Roman government within Lactantius's works. As well as reinforcing the conclusions of Ocker, Nicholson discusses how Lactantius deeply values both the city and culture of Rome even as he is equally deeply critical of those who govern it.<sup>553</sup> Nicholson concludes that Lactantius has a very low opinion of civic justice, favouring instead universal justice which is enforced morality rather than law.<sup>554</sup> Mark Edwards, writing at the same time as Nicholson, develops a similar view. He argues that Lactantius in his critique of Rome and praise of Christianity creates a distinction between the earthly and heavenly polities, in a manner that foreshadows Augustine.<sup>555</sup> As well as discussing his relationship to Rome as a Christian, Edwards explores how this relationship is further complicated by Lactantius's African identity.<sup>556</sup> This aspect of Lactantius's thought was more fully explored later by David Wilhite.<sup>557</sup>

Following Nicholson's and Edwards's arguments, Digeser explores in far greater depth the veiled civic criticism found in the *Divine Institutes* which is directed specifically

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<sup>551</sup> Ocker, "Unius arbitrio mundum regi necesse est," 350-360.

<sup>552</sup> Ibid, 350.

<sup>553</sup> Nicholson, "Civitas Quae Adhuc Sustentat Omnia," 12-19.

<sup>554</sup> Ibid, 21-23.

<sup>555</sup> Edwards, "The Flowering of Latin Apologetic," 213.

<sup>556</sup> Ibid, 220.

<sup>557</sup> Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 182-188.

at the leaders of the Tetrarchy.<sup>558</sup> Based on this textual analysis she argues that Lactantius does not reject Roman government completely but is in fact secretly arguing for a return to the principate model of Roman government created by Augustus, with a single ruler mirroring the monotheism of Christianity.<sup>559</sup> In contrast to this position, Christiane Ingremeau argues that Lactantius in Books 5 and 6 of the *Divine Institutes* promotes the view that Christian justice is a natural and universal form of justice not compatible with the civic justice of the Roman state which he critiques for its imperialism.<sup>560</sup> Likewise Ben David Wayman argues that Lactantius, through his ideal of Christian justice in Book 5 of the *Divine Institutes*, criticizes not only the current civic leaders, but civic institutions as a whole. Therefore, he concludes that Lactantius is, at least at the point in time when he wrote Book 5 of the *Divine Institutes*, opposed to any Christian monarchy, principate, or emperor, as he associates any form of power inequality with injustice.<sup>561</sup> Most recently Mattias Gassman has in a similar track argued that Lactantius's stances on Roman government in the *Divine Institutes* are not merely a response to or critique of the Tetrarchy but are rather deeply embedded within his theology and that Lactantius continues to promote anti-imperial views even after Constantine endorses Christianity.<sup>562</sup>

All of these authors agree that Lactantius believes that the Christian relationship with Roman identity and the Roman state is complicated. For Lactantius what it means to be Christian is antithetical to much of Roman culture and the current Roman state.

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<sup>558</sup> Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire*, 32-37.

<sup>559</sup> Ibid, 32-45.

<sup>560</sup> Ingremeau, "Lactance et la justice: du livre V au livre VI des *Institutions divines*," 43-52.

<sup>561</sup> Wayman, "Lactantius's Power Struggle," 305-323.

<sup>562</sup> Gassman, *Worshippers of the Gods*.

However, in spite of the many criticisms he makes, he is not fully ready to abandon what it means to be Roman. I propose that the best way to get to the heart of this complicated system is to explore how Lactantius categorizes both Christian and Roman identity in relationship to each other. This analysis will demonstrate that, in agreement with some scholars and disagreement with others, Lactantius is critical of more than just the current regime but of civic regimes as a whole. This is because Lactantius argues that the form of justice which Christianity promotes is categorically apolitical and is only challenged by a civic regime.<sup>563</sup>

As discussed in the introduction, the term apolitical here, as qualifying a group identity, refers to an identity that necessitates the complete rejection of participation in state government. Lactantius presents his Christian group identity as existing outside of government authority, and, as the ideal unity of cult and philosophy, it is legitimized not by state authority but by the authority of its own merits. This is not equivalent to, and should not be confused with, the modern separation of religion from politics, because, for Lactantius, only Christianity can be considered apolitical, and not any other group that a modern might identify as a 'religion.' To be clear, I am not saying that Lactantius does not hold political views or that he does not express these views in the *Divine Institutes*. As Digeser has persuasively shown there are several coded critiques of Emperor Diocletian and the Tetrarchy in the *Divine Institutes*,<sup>564</sup> and of course there is the exhortation to Constantine added to Book 7 of the work.<sup>565</sup> Furthermore, Lactantius was also the author of the work *On the Death of Persecutors* in which there is a far

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<sup>563</sup> See *Divine Institutes*, 5.14.11-12; 5.8.8-10 as will be discussed below.

<sup>564</sup> Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire*, 33-39.

<sup>565</sup> *Divine Institutes*, 7.26.11-17 as will be discussed below.

more explicit critique of civic figures and policies. My point is not that Lactantius does not express political beliefs in these works, but rather that Lactantius presents Christian group identity as, on a categorical level, not being connected to these political concerns. The fact Lactantius saw so much corruption and fault within the civic institutions of his time likely motivated him to try to categorically isolate Christianity from these issues. While Christians for Lactantius, insofar as they are individuals outside of their Christian identity, could hold and express political opinions, these views did not affect them insofar as they were Christian. One could argue that Lactantius's Christian identity is in fact what motivates much of his political beliefs, which puts the lie to his claim that Christian identity is categorically distinct from politics. I do not necessarily disagree with this position. I am simply arguing that Lactantius makes the claim that Christian identity is categorically apolitical; I do not argue that this claim is accurate. As with all of the authors discussed in this thesis, how Lactantius categorizes Christian identity is historically significant for understanding the development of Christian identity, independent of whether or not this categorization is accurate for the lives of Christians during this time.

However, Lactantius does not wish to abandon Roman identity. Rather, as the defenders and purveyors of true justice, Lactantius presents Christian identity as embodying the ideal of justice which Roman identity sought successfully to achieve. Thereby Christian identity represents a perfected form of Roman identity. The foundation of this argument is the position that non-Christian and specifically Roman cultic practice is a corrupting evil that is responsible for most of the world's civic and social injustices and conflicts. Lactantius builds a strong association between Roman

cult and the Roman state as a civic entity in a way that argues for the Roman state as the cause of social injustice and conflict. It should be emphasised that unlike Tertullian, Lactantius is not critical of Roman culture insofar as this culture does not involve cultic practices or philosophy he considers faulty. The way these passages are phrased shows that Lactantius is not attacking Romans in general, but specifically Roman civic and legal structures as a source of injustice. At times Lactantius presses this argument to the point where he argues that all governments or civic structures are a source of immorality.<sup>566</sup>

Some of the scholarship discussed in this chapter touches on themes of post-colonialism. As discussed in Chapter two, this thesis does make use of post-colonial methodology; however, given that the subject of this chapter does relate to elements of colonial resistance to imperial authority, I will draw on the insights of scholars that use a post-colonial methodology such as David Wilhite's *Ancient African Christianity without committing to using the methodology itself*. I do not want to argue that Lactantius is motivated only by colonial circumstances. Rather the reasons for Lactantius's anti-government position are a variety of circumstances, many of which unique to this time period. These include the exact elements of his Christian community, the influence of prior Christian authors including Latin apologetic writers, the influence of Greco-Roman philosophy on Lactantius, and his specific personal relationship to Roman civic authority.

Lactantius's anti-government position is particularly relevant to how he constructs Christian identity. Christian identity is presented as corrective to the corrupting influence

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<sup>566</sup> See *Divine Institutes* 5.6.3-5; 5.14.15-20 as will be discussed below.

of the civic and cultic elements of Roman identity. Christian identity is not presented as civic; however, but rather as the unity of philosophy and cult, and it represents the converse or mirror image of that aspect of Roman identity which unifies the civic and the cultic. Lactantius argues that contrary to how Roman civic structure and cultic practices encourage social injustice and immorality, Christian identity encourages equality through its philosophical beliefs and virtue through the motivating power of cultic devotion. He presents this in such a way that his criticism is purely aimed at attacking Roman government, and strives to accept any aspect of Roman identity which genuinely encourages morality or virtue. As already mentioned, this rejection of civic authority is complicated by Constantine. However, even the added passages praising Constantine do not go so far as to undermine his earlier criticism of government. In light of these passages his attacks could be read as a corrective for the Roman government. As such, by understanding how Lactantius categorizes Christian identity in relationship to the Roman state, we can better understand how Lactantius reconciles Christian and Roman identity.

Having argued in the last chapter that the categorization of Christianity as the ideal unity of philosophy and cult was the central component of Lactantius's apologetic argument, this chapter will argue that the goal behind Lactantius's categorization of Christian identity is to present Christianity as a perfected apolitical version of Roman culture. The first section will discuss the rhetorical implications of Lactantius's Roman audience, specifically how Lactantius uses criticism of Roman institutions to dissociate his audience from those he disapproves of while more firmly connecting them to others that are more in line with Christianity. The next section discusses more fully Lactantius's

anti-government position. Lactantius's position is that Roman government was created alongside the worship of Roman gods as a deceitful means of securing power and perpetuating a system whereby some people are unjustly elevated over others.

However, his criticism extends to more than just Roman government. The implication of this argument is that civic systems inherently create and preserve inequality, a situation which Lactantius asserts is fundamentally at odds with both justice and Christianity.

However, as the following section will explore, in spite of this position, Lactantius still aims to reconcile Christian identity with Roman identity. It is clear from comments throughout the *Divine Institutes* that he deeply values Roman culture and strives to incorporate as much of it as possible into Christianity. Furthermore, Lactantius asserts that the goal of the ancient Romans was to attain justice; however they were not able to achieve this without the aid of Christianity. He argues that the only way to achieve this justice is not by means of the external motivation of violent coercion, which is what civic institutions employ, but rather by the unity of cult and philosophy which is found in Christianity. He suggests that the Christian *religio*, in the sense of devotion, is the best way to achieve the ancient Roman goal of justice. Therefore, Lactantius presents Christianity as the ideal form of Roman identity, specifically because it is apolitical. The last section of this chapter will briefly touch on how these views persist subtly even in the passages added later to the text which discuss and praise Constantine. While he praises Constantine's rule as Roman Emperor, Lactantius implies that true justice has not yet fully come about. He does not believe that a completely just society is possible under the rule of Roman government, because he strongly believes that government

generally, and Roman government specifically, inherently bring about injustice,<sup>567</sup> and thus does not believe a Roman Christian government is feasible.

### Romans as Audience and the Rhetorical Implications

Ultimately the different approaches to treating Roman authority by the Latin Christian apologetic authors come down to apologetic strategies and intended audiences. How Lactantius's circumstances and audience affected his stance on Roman authority can be usefully understood by contrasting them to those of Tertullian. Tertullian depicts Roman people who promote non-Christian cult as a source of the cultic practices he disapproves of, while providing the Emperor with plausible deniability, because he is appealing to local North African Christians. Both for him and his audience, the local Roman elites would be their main and probably only source of contact with Roman civic authority, and correspondingly become the target for Tertullian's disapproval.<sup>568</sup> However, as discussed in chapter 2, Tertullian does not wish to part with Roman identity entirely. As such he latches onto the figure of the Emperor, who for him and his audience would be a very famous yet distant figure, as a potential source of vindication and connection to Roman identity. This kind of vindicating fantasy involving the image of the Emperor was not uncommon for those in Tertullian's circumstances.<sup>569</sup> A result of this is that the Roman Empire as a civic institution is

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<sup>567</sup> See *Divine Institutes*, 5.6.3-5; 5.14.15-20 as will be discussed below.

<sup>568</sup> Wilhite, *Tertullian the African*, 54-55, 60, 70-71; Daniel-Hughes and Kotrosits, "Tertullian of Carthage and the Fantasy Life of Power," 9; Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 62-63.

<sup>569</sup> Daniel-Hughes and Kotrosits, "Tertullian of Carthage and the Fantasy Life of Power," 1-31.

spared from blame. By contrast Lactantius's target audience was the educated elite non-Christian Romans of whom Tertullian disapproves.

In discussing Lactantius's Roman audience, it is necessary to explain what is meant by the term Roman in the time of Lactantius. The simplest answer to this question is that Romans were those who considered themselves Roman, were considered Roman by others, and correspondingly valued Roman culture. However, this definition requires further interrogation and elaboration. While historically Romans could have been described as only those who were from the city of Rome, by the Late Antique period the spread of the Roman Empire significantly complicated what Roman could be understood to mean. At the broadest level Roman could refer to anyone living in the Roman Empire, however provincial residents of the Empire could to varying degrees embrace or reject this identity. Emma Dench argues that "Roman identity is a particular kind of plurality, based on both the incorporation and transformation of other peoples and cultures; local and Roman identities may be asserted simultaneously, but the tension between them may be made very obvious."<sup>570</sup> Likewise David Wilhite emphasizes the role of hybridity when discussing and defining Roman identity.<sup>571</sup>

Like Greek identity during the Hellenistic period,<sup>572</sup> Roman identity during this period is more of a cultural influence than a moniker for a specific set of people.<sup>573</sup>

However, unlike Greek identity, Roman identity also included loyalty to and participation

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<sup>570</sup> Dench, *Romulus' Asylum*, 4.

<sup>571</sup> Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 49-51.

<sup>572</sup> Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 80-82; Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*, 5-8, 16-28; Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*, 241-249; Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*, 17-19, 103; Buell, *Why This New Race*, 138-144; Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica*, 6-8; Van Nuffelen, "Theology versus Genre? The Universalism of Christian Historiography in Late Antiquity."

<sup>573</sup> Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 80-82. Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*, 386; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 1-2; Williams, *Defending and Defining the Faith*, 23.

in Roman government. Qualities of those who embraced Roman identity included speaking Latin with rhetorical skill, obedience to Roman legal authority, education in Greco-Roman classical literature, holding civic office or priesthood in a Roman cult, or even something as simple as wearing a toga. But, individuals could be more or less Roman, and could become more Roman through adopting these cultural elements and rising in society and office. As discussed in previous chapters, this was not completely fluid in that not anything could be considered Roman, but it was modular in that to a degree people could pick and choose what they wanted such as Tertullian's focus on Roman identity as civic obedience or Minucius Felix's focus on intellectual culture. This chapter will discuss at length what being Roman meant for Lactantius. By Roman audience within this section I refer to people living in the Roman Empire who deeply embraced Roman identity through cultural signifiers and potentially civic and cultic participation.

As Anthony Bowen and Peter Garnsey remind us in their introduction to the *Divine Institutes*, Lactantius himself was a faithful servant of Rome who traveled in elite circles until middle age when struck by the Great Persecution.<sup>574</sup> However, as Wilhite reminds us, Lactantius was born a North African and even though he is capable of thoroughly embodying Roman identity he is also capable of distancing himself from it.<sup>575</sup> What is more if martyrdom accounts are anything to go by it is indeed the local Roman elite who initiated Christian persecution, likely in a move to advance their own Roman

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<sup>574</sup> Bowen and Garnsey, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, 48.

<sup>575</sup> Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 48-51; Also on the multifaceted relationship between Roman and provincial identities see Dench, *Romulus' Asylum*, 4, 32, 49 and Rebillard, *Christians and their Many Identities in Late Antiquity*, 32-33.

identity or maintain balance between Roman identities and local identities.<sup>576</sup>

Regardless of the historicity of this, Christian persecution is a form of Roman-ness that Lactantius wants to alienate himself and his audience from. As such when attributing the source of Roman cult he casts the ultimate source of the blame elsewhere. Thus Lactantius blames Roman cult on Roman rulers and institutions rather than on elite Romans themselves.<sup>577</sup> The result of this is that in contrast to Tertullian, for Lactantius non-Christian Romans are redeemable but Roman institutions are not.

When it comes to discussions of Christian persecution however, Lactantius's approach is in some ways more in keeping with Tertullian's critical treatment of non-Christian Romans more generally, but nevertheless aims to engage with Romans as his main audience. This approach is seen in Lactantius's discussion of his own audience in Book 5, which as well as trying to appeal to educated Roman pagans, engages with the issue of Christian persecution:

And because they are keen to condemn as guilty people they know very well are innocent, they refuse to accept the innocence; to condemn innocence proven would be even more unfair, no doubt, than to condemn it unheard! But, as I said, they are frightened that if they do listen they will not be able to condemn: hence their torture, murder and banishment of those who worship the supreme God, the just people, that is. Their hatred is so strong that they cannot even account for it... there are the people we now want to grapple

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<sup>576</sup> Ibid, 62-63.

<sup>577</sup> On how Lactantius relies on the Roman culture of his readers while isolating them from Roman civic institutions see Monat, "Lactance contre Junon," 259–266; Edwards, "The Flowering of Latin Apologetic," 204-206, 210-220; Gassman, *Worshippers of the Gods*, 23-27, 38-40.

with in argument, and to guide from a stupid belief to the truth, these people who find the blood of just men more palatable than their words.<sup>578</sup>

While this passage may seem a digression into discussing the persecution, it follows shortly after Lactantius's discussion of his intended audience and the purpose for his work, discussed in the last chapter, and it continues the themes established therein. Specifically he is continuing the theme of whether or not non-Christian Roman audiences would be willing to listen to his arguments. However, Lactantius also reminds us here that this work, in spite of its digressions into philosophy, is not academic in its purpose, but intended to battle with real world evils and engage in an enterprise of change or at least resistance. He nevertheless relates this subject back to the issue of audience. The people he is trying to engage with are those who deeply value Roman culture; however these cultural positions may motivate conflict with Christians which he now wishes to address. This view recontextualizes all of his earlier attempts at reconciling Roman culture with Christian identity, which were not done for their own sake but for the purpose of persuading Roman pagans to cease their hatred of Christians.

Attitudes of resistance and confrontation of a Roman authority taken in this passage might seem contrary to the tone set in the beginning of Book 1 in which Lactantius presents his work as the same genre as Roman civic institutes, presenting both as thoroughly Roman and in a position of authority.<sup>579</sup> However, what Lactantius says at the beginning of Book 5 might offer an explanation for this. Lactantius was worried that those steeped in Roman high culture would reject his work without giving it

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<sup>578</sup> Lactantius, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, trans. Bowen and Garnsey, 5.1.5-8 p.281-282.

<sup>579</sup> *Divine Institutes*, 1.1.12.

a fair hearing; this would not have been helped by him if he began Book 1 by accusing his readers of profound injustice. Instead he appeals to them through the intellectual issue of the truth of divinity and philosophy. If his readers were persuaded enough by this to read on and not so offended by his attack on classical tradition that they stopped before this point, then he can explain that what is at stake is not merely rooted in intellectual matters but has real world consequences and most importantly relates to the justice of Roman imperial policies, i.e. the persecution which is the subject of this Book. While Lactantius has negotiated with Roman identity throughout this work, it is here in Book 5 that he comes into the most heated tensions with it and with Rome as a civic body. Given that the people reading this work were likely those with some sympathy for the Christian cause, this description of hatred of Roman pagans for Christians does not likely reflect the genuine positions of those he expects to engage with this work. Rather this description is likely meant to shame people away from supporting the Empire as a civic body. While Lactantius does hope to persuade non-Christian Romans of his cause here, he does not hope to appeal to Roman civic leaders. Therefore, persuading Roman non-Christians of Christians' innocence requires also persuading them that their civic institutions are unjust.

This passage notably differs from similar passages found in Tertullian's *Apology* and Minucius Felix's *Octavius*. Although they address the same subject in a similar way, they differ in their intended recipients and what these passages attempt to persuade their recipients. Like Lactantius, both Tertullian and Minucius Felix decry how unjustly Christians are treated by the Roman legal system.<sup>580</sup> However, unlike Lactantius both

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<sup>580</sup> *Apology* 1.4-6; *Octavius* 28.1-4.

these authors emphasise that even the most hateful of Roman persecutors could be swayed from their cruelties if they were better informed about Christianity. Tertullian does this by emphasising the role of ignorance as a cause of hatred of Christians: “it is the testimony of ignorance which while used to excuse the unfairness, condemns it, since all who had previously hated, when they lose their ignorance, also cease to hate.”<sup>581</sup> By attributing the cause of persecution to ignorance Tertullian leaves open the possibility that persecution could cease if all Roman pagans were better informed. While Tertullian likely does not believe this will ever actually occur, he allows for the possibility. Minucius Felix takes this one step further by describing how this same process reflects his own conversion experience:

How unfair is it, however, to pass judgement without thought or investigation, as you do. Believe me, we ourselves regret this, for we did the same and we once thought the same blind stupid thoughts as you still do.<sup>582</sup>

Like Tertullian, Minucius Felix here grounds the cause of the hatred of Christians in ignorance, which leaves open the possibility that it could cease if Roman non-Christians were better informed. Furthermore by describing this in the first person he allows not only for the possibility that Roman pagans could cease hating Christians, but the possibility that they could become as Christian as himself, and perhaps even defenders of the Christian position like himself.

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<sup>581</sup> Testimonium ignorantiae est, quae iniquitatem dum excusat, condemnat, cum omnes, qui retro oderant, quia ignorabant, simul desinunt ignorare, cessant et odisse. *Apology* i.6 p.86.

<sup>582</sup> Quam autem iniquum sit, incognitis et inexploratis iudicare, quod facitis, nobis ipsis paenitentibus credite. Et nos enim idem fuimus et eadem vobiscum quondam adhuc caeci et hebetes sentiebamus. *Octavius*, xxviii.1-2 p.27.

Lactantius in contrast, while he does also assert that Christians would be able to defend themselves if given the opportunity, phrases the argument in such a way that it does not leave open the possibility that Roman persecutors could turn from their cruelties:

And since they are eager to condemn as guilty, those who they certainly know are innocent, they do not want to accept innocence itself, least that it might be truly a greater injustice to condemn the proven innocent than the unheard innocent.<sup>583</sup>

Lactantius here implies that the drive to hate Christians is so powerful that Roman persecutors would not allow themselves to become informed, or, if they were informed of the injustice of their own hatred, it would only inspire them toward further wrath. This difference in understanding is ironically rooted in the fact that Lactantius, more so than either Tertullian or Minucius Felix, aims to persuade Roman non-Christians. Tertullian and Minucius Felix are primarily writing to fellow Christians,<sup>584</sup> and they make these arguments to encourage Christians that they are in the right and the hatred of them is based on ignorance rather than fault. They also aim to guide their audiences on how to present themselves to outsiders, and thus encourage them to engage with non-Christians intelligently and inform of them of the truth of Christianity. Lactantius is actively writing to an audience that is partially Roman and is thus more conscious of the challenge inherent in this. He thus believes individuals can be persuaded but the

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<sup>583</sup> See *Divine Institutes* 5.1.5-8 quoted above.

<sup>584</sup> Goodman et al. "Introduction," 4-9; Price, "Latin Christian Apologetics," 105-106; Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*, 385-386; Parvis, "Justin Martyr and the Apologetic Tradition," 123; Williams, *Defining and Defending the Faith*, 8, 33-36.

Roman state cannot. To this end he describes with contempt the unceasing hatred of Christians, to alienate his Roman audience from those who persecute Christians.

### Lactantius's Anti-Government Position

This section will discuss Lactantius's position on the Roman government and argue that in the *Divine Institutes* he promotes an anti-government position. Lactantius argues that government is inherently a source of injustice within the world and that a man can only truly become just by eschewing civic participation and the world can only become fully just when rid of all government. Lactantius's argument applies to any and all government; however within it he particularly criticizes the failings of the Roman Empire. I will begin by analyzing the passages within *Divine Institutes* where Lactantius discusses the theme of government. Lactantius strongly associates the failings of polytheistic cult with the creation of government, and implies that any benefit created by government is inherently mitigated by injustice produced by its false cult. Lactantius initially makes this argument with reference to the founding of Rome and worshiping of Jupiter; however he then goes on to make his argument more broadly. In discussing justice as an abstract principle he argues that government inherently creates inequality contrary to the principle of fairness which is foundational to justice itself. Therefore, any and all government is a source of injustice. Correspondingly, to the extent that justice is a necessary aspect of Christianity, Christian identity cannot be a civic identity nor can Christianity be supported by government. Finally this section will discuss the scholarship on Lactantius's position on government. Building on the discussion in the introduction to

this chapter, I will examine in greater detail the debate as to whether Lactantius is opposed to all government or merely some aspects of Roman government. This chapter supports the view that Lactantius is opposed to all government, and it shows that understanding how Lactantius categorizes Christian identity better informs this debate.

Lactantius had good reason to dislike Roman government and its assumption that civic participation is inherently linked to worship of the traditional gods. However, by separating legitimate justice from government Lactantius was contradicting ancient and deeply held Roman beliefs. One of the major motivations of Diocletian's Great Persecution was the belief that piety towards traditional gods led to greater stability and prosperity for the Empire and impiety to them or the worship of false deities produced conflict and strife.<sup>585</sup> One of the reasons Porphyry argues that Christians should not be tolerated given their abandonment of traditional gods was that Christianity was not simply different and intellectually faulty, but it was a material threat to the nation.<sup>586</sup> Lactantius does not disagree with the position that if everyone worshipped the correct deity it would bring about peace and prosperity. Rather he objects to both the Roman government's choice of deities and, more significantly, the means by which this universal worship is brought about. Lactantius argues that it is right that Roman persecutors should value true *religio* above all else, but that it is a fundamental perversion of true *religio* to defend it by means of violence. The fact that Roman persecutors have the means and choose such violence is proof that they are wrong.<sup>587</sup> The presence of government authority on his opponents' side is for Lactantius proof of

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<sup>585</sup> Ibid, *The Making of a Christian Empire*, 5-6, 35-36.

<sup>586</sup> Ibid, 2-5.

<sup>587</sup> *Divine Institutes*, 5.19.20-23.

the fault in their position. Lactantius counters the position of Roman persecutors by turning it on its head. If the worship of the correct deity leads to peace and prosperity, then the worship of a deity that proposes persecution and violence cannot be the worship of the correct deity. However, it is within this circumstance where civic stability is tied to the correct worship of traditional cults that Lactantius has to respond through the *Divine Institutes*.

The first of Lactantius's critiques of Roman government can be found toward the end of Book 1, where he attributes the origin of Roman cultic practice to the civic goals of King Numa:

All this nonsense was started and established in Rome by that Sabine king, grossly entangling a simple and inexperienced folk in new-fangled superstitions... so that he could enforce the people's obedience not merely by command but by religious sanction also. It was certainly not difficult to persuade herdsmen. So he created priests, flamens, Salii and augurs, and sorted the gods into families, and thus he soothed the savage temper of a new people and drew them away from war to the pursuit of peace.<sup>588</sup>

*Harum vanitatum apud Romanos auctor et constitutor Sabinus ille rex fuit, qui maxime animos hominum rudes atque imperitos novis superstitionibus implicavit... ut homines ad parendum non modo imperio, sed etiam religione constringeret. Nec difficile sane fuit persuadere pastoribus. Itaque pontifices flamines Salios augures creavit, deos per familias descripsit. Sic novi populi*

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<sup>588</sup> Lactantius, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, trans. Bowen and Garnsey, 1.22.1-4 p.113-114.

*feroces animos mitigavit et ad studia pacis a rebus bellicis auocavit. Sed cum alios falleret, se ipsum tamen non fefellit.*<sup>589</sup>

It is worth noting that this book is nominally not merely about the failings of Roman cults but of non-Christian cults generally, and it is telling that Lactantius chooses to describe the origins with a historical Roman case study. This shows the importance of Roman identity to the *Divine Institutes* and how he appeals to an audience who values Roman identity. Here Lactantius also continues the theme of criticizing antiquity as a source of authority, by arguing that the peoples of antiquity were not wiser than the peoples today, and if anything the ancient Romans were more gullible. These peoples are described as unintelligent rustics: “*rudes*” and “*pastores*.” This would have contrasted Lactantius’s more urbane, well educated Roman audience.<sup>590</sup> Lactantius thus encourages his Roman audience to be unlike ancient Romans and not to participate in the cultic practices promoted by their rulers. This stance builds on the arguments of Minucius Felix<sup>591</sup> and directly disagrees with the arguments of Cicero<sup>592</sup> and traditional Roman understandings<sup>593</sup> of the legitimacy of cultic practices. Lactantius further challenges Cicero’s model for such legitimacy by undermining the authority of a government which derives part of its authority from public rites, not just in principle but by criticizing Roman government specifically.

Lactantius states that the motivation for Roman cultic practices was a king’s attempt to claim greater authority in order to get people to follow him and unite together

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<sup>589</sup> Lactantius, *Divinarum Institutionum Libri Septem*, eds. Eberhard Heck and Antonie Wlosok, 1.22.1-4 p.100-101.

<sup>590</sup> Gruen, *Culture and National Identity in Republican Rome*, 5.

<sup>591</sup> See for instance *Octavius*, vi.1 p.326; xxii.7.

<sup>592</sup> *On the Nature of the Gods*, III. ii p.288-289.

<sup>593</sup> Gruen, *Culture and National Identity in Republican Rome*, 51; Digeser, *The Making of A Christian Empire*, 34; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christian*, 14-15.

in peace. This is likely a nod to the importance of cultic practices in Roman civic authority and contemporary cultic practices which divinized the emperor while still living.<sup>594</sup> After all it was this very association that made Christians seem potentially dangerous to the Roman government and motivated persecutions in Lactantius's birthplace of North Africa.<sup>595</sup> Lactantius is critical of the idea that Roman pagans should seek to achieve civic authority by this means, for it is fundamentally grounded on falsehood and deception. A logical consequence of this is that a civic leader who falsely attempted to use connection to divinity to gain favor would only produce *superstitiones* rather than true *religiones*.

It is unclear however from this passage alone what Lactantius's views would be if the connection to divinity was not false, i.e. if it was a genuine connection to the Christian divinity. While Lactantius is critical of King Numa for his deceitfulness, he does not deny that this strategy does work, not only at unifying a single populous but seemingly a group of differing peoples, who were otherwise at war with each other, under a single civic authority. His reference to "*populi*" in the plural could be a projection back onto ancient Rome the current state of the Roman Empire which rules over many different ethnic *populi* by means of a unified civic authority and cultic practices.<sup>596</sup> Hypothetically Christian cultic practices could also serve this end without the need for Numa's deceit, but it is likely at the time this was written that the possibility of a Christian ruler was not one he would consider plausible. It is notable however that in his

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<sup>594</sup> Nicholson, "Hercules at the Milvian Bridge," 133–42; Beard et al., *Religions of Rome*, 134-135; Digeser, *The Making of A Christian Empire*, 2-5, 34; Wilhite, *Tertullian the African*, 150-157; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christian*, 1-2, 4, 17; Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 62-63.

<sup>595</sup> Buell, *Why This New Race*, 151; Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 62-63.

<sup>596</sup> Digeser, *The Making of A Christian Empire*, 3-5; Dench, *Romulus' Asylum*, 33; Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, 73-108; Wilhite, *Tertullian the African*, 153-156; Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ*, 4; Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 62-63.

phrasing Lactantius distinguishes between a ruler who commands obedience by *imperium*, civic authority, as opposed to *religio*, as Lactantius uses the term, devotion associated with cult. This could imply civic rulers who do not attempt to use false superstitions could maintain legitimate civic authority. However, this deceitful form of loyalty is here presented as foundational to the Roman state. The cultic practices referred to are ones that still existed in Lactantius's time: "*pontifices, flamines, salios, augures.*" This suggests it would be impossible or very difficult to divide Roman rule from false worship.

This approach notably differs from, yet builds on, Tertullian's treatment of Roman civic authority. Tertullian argues that Roman civic authority is only legitimate when it is divorced from the cultic practices associated with it. However, ironically, unlike Lactantius, Tertullian is explicitly open to the possibility that Roman civic authority and the Emperor personally could represent an unlikely ally for Christian communities if they ever choose to promote Christian cult. The great irony of course is that Tertullian would never live to see this possibility manifest, whereas Lactantius would. Tertullian argues that Emperors like any humans have an innate understanding of God as singular, but they also have a particular knowledge of God given their position.<sup>597</sup> As the highest rank of human beings Emperors are the closest a human power can come to God, and knowledge of the upper limitations of their own power and the ultimate source of their own power provides them with knowledge of God:

Why not? Since above all humans, living and dead, [Emperors] stand superior. They consider how far the force of their authority prevails, and thus

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<sup>597</sup> *Apology*, xxx.1-2 p.150.

they comprehend God; against whom they cannot prevail, through Him they understand themselves to prevail.<sup>598</sup>

Tertullian goes on to mockingly suggest that as a final test the Emperor could try to campaign on heaven, militarily occupy it and impose taxes on it. "They could not" for they know themselves to be one of God's created things and that all their power comes from heaven.<sup>599</sup> Tertullian's Emperor, while comparable to the way Lactantius describes Numa, is notably more innocent. In spite of his lengthy argument about why the Emperor should not be worshipped, Tertullian never says or implies that a decree from the emperor is the cause of Roman cult. Instead he suggests here that it is created by the people and occurs in spite of the Emperor's dislike of it.

Lactantius's full rejection of the Roman state is found later where he describes the origins of social and civic injustice, which he associates with the worship of traditional Roman gods. This argument occurs later on in Book 5 when Lactantius presents his Euhemerist position and argues that Jupiter was not a god but a historical human king. Both Tertullian, Minucius Felix, and Lactantius assert that the Roman gods, with particular emphasis on Jupiter and Saturn, were in fact historical people who falsely became elevated to the rank of gods over time.<sup>600</sup> All three of them give prominent place to Saturn over Jove which could be seen as a sign of their North African origins,

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<sup>598</sup> Quidni? Cum super omnes homines, qui utique vivunt mortuis antistant. Recogitant quousque vires imperii sui valent, et ita deum intellegunt; adversus quem valere non possunt, per eum valere se cognoscunt. *Apology*, xxx.1-2 p.141.

<sup>599</sup> Non potest. xxx.2-3.

<sup>600</sup> Tertullian, *Apology* x.6-10, *Ad Nationes* xii; Minucius Felix, *Octavius* xxi.3-8; Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 5.5.1-14.

given that within North Africa Saturn was worshiped as prominently as Jupiter if not more so.<sup>601</sup> Regardless of the cause, this detail links these thinkers together.

Lactantius however discusses this era of mythic history at far greater length than the other two, and attributes to the character of Jupiter himself the founding of his own cult. He claims that under the reign of Saturn there was a golden age of justice and everyone worshiped the Christian God. However, Saturn was overthrown by his son Jupiter who introduced idolatry and created a system of social injustice. Lactantius describes the laws enacted during of his reign as such:

In the name of justice they authorised for their own purposes laws of great unfairness and injustice, by which they could protect their greedy plundering from mob violence. Their advantage thus came from sheer position as much as it did from their muscle, money and malice, and since there was no trace at all in them of justice, whose due expression is fairness, kindness and pity, the inequality they now rejoiced in swelled their sense of superiority; they raised themselves above the rest with trains of henchmen, weaponry and special dress. Hence their invention of office for themselves, and purple and maces: they could use the threat of sword and axe to lord it over a cowed and petrified people with all the authority of a tyrant.<sup>602</sup>

That there was a just rulership prior to the corruption brought about by Jupiter is evidence that Lactantius does hold that there is such a thing as both good kingship and government. However, as described here most of the trappings of government are

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<sup>601</sup> Finneran, *The Archaeology of Christianity in Africa*, 39; Tilley, "North Africa," 385; David Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power, and Identity: Experiencing the Roman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010) 63-64.

<sup>602</sup> Lactantius, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, trans. Bowen and Garnsey, 5.6.3-5 p.292-293.

created for corrupt ends. While not explicitly an attack on Roman government, in the final sentence he makes reference to the practices of the Roman emperor, creating an association between the two: “purple and maces.”

Furthermore the description of the ‘offices’ created by Jupiter as well as how he used military power seems to suggest that the problem is not particular tyrannical leaders but rather the creation of seats of power. This system of hierarchy and military authority, he implies, inherently places some people above others and creates a system of injustice, which he associates with the office of emperor. Insofar as Lactantius identifies Christianity with justice and that justice by a form of egalitarianism, as he here and elsewhere seems to suggest, then to be Christian involves a sense of fairness and equality which is inherently at odds with Roman imperial authority.<sup>603</sup> Furthermore while it is Roman institutions which are called out here, it is implied from this critique that any authority which makes use of the tools Jove created is equally unjust. While Saturn’s golden age may be described as a kingship, it is hard to imagine any government as it is known in Lactantius’s time would not be subject to the same criticism, and thus at odds with Christianity.

Lactantius does not however limit himself to criticism of Roman government. By accusing Jupiter not only with the corruption of the political state but with the idolatry of the Roman cult, he strongly associates the civic and cultic failures of Rome. In the passages following this passage Lactantius draws this association far more directly:

That was the state of human life under King Jupiter: when he had conquered his father in war and put him to flight, it was no kingship he then exercised

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<sup>603</sup> Wayman, “Lactantius’s Power Struggle,” 312-314.

but an impious tyranny, of violence and armies; the golden age of justice he removed, forcing people into evil and impiety precisely by turning them away from truth and diverting them from worshipping God to worshipping him, such was the terror produced by his extraordinary power.<sup>604</sup>

Here Lactantius strongly emphasises and unites the civic and cultic failings of Rome. Just as Roman pagans falsely worship the idols of Jupiter so they follow the corrupt civic institution that was first established by Jupiter. Jupiter and his worship is the model of anything that is wrong with Rome. However, by the same token if the worship of Jupiter is stopped and replaced with the worship of the Christian God, so too will the justice this creates lead to fixing the civic faults of Rome. Likewise the phrase “no kingship but impious tyranny” could suggest that there is a form of rightful kingship that Lactantius would approve of, even if he seemingly objects to all the traditional Roman symbols associated with government as well as the exercising of any military power. However, within these passages the possibility of any civic body that supports Christians is not emphasised and remains very much an impossibility. The Roman Empire in particular is associated with the very corruption that Lactantius’s Christians are categorically at odds with and does not seem a likely ally for Christians.

Lactantius’s most unequivocal rejection of government is seen not in his critiques of any particular government but in his discussion of justice as an abstract principle. Lactantius argues that true justice is based on two foundational virtues, *religio* and *aequitas*, without either of which justice cannot exist. *Religio* as discussed in the last chapter is defined by the devotion to the correct deity. However, *aequitas* while not

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<sup>604</sup> Lactantius, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, trans. Bowen and Garnsey, 5.6.6 p.293.

explicitly grounded on worship is nevertheless foundational to Lactantius's Christian community and strongly affects how they are able to relate to government:

The second part of justice is fairness [*aequitas*]; I mean not simply the fairness involved in good judgment, which is itself a laudable thing in a just man, but the fairness of levelling oneself [*coaequandi*] with everyone else, what Cicero calls 'equality of status' [*aequabilitatem*]... That is why neither Romans nor Greeks could command justice, because they kept people distinct in different grades from poor to rich, from weak to strong, from lay power up to the sublime power of kings. Where people are not all equal, there is not fairness: the inequality [*inaequalitas*] excludes justice of itself.

The whole force of justice lies in the fact that everyone who comes into this human estate on equal terms is made equal by it.<sup>605</sup>

Once again here Lactantius is exceedingly critical of offices and divisions among mankind as the source of social moral failing and inequality. He explicitly critiques classical culture, Greeks and Romans, as being particularly guilty of this. What he is criticizing however is not Greco-Roman culture as a whole, into which, as I have discussed, he is keen to incorporate Christianity. Rather, he is critical of the forces within this culture which create hierarchies and social injustice, with a notable focus on civic hierarchies and injustice. Note how he describes the distinction between 'the private citizen' and 'the most exulted power of kings' at greater length than the two distinctions before it. He likewise uses '*denique*' to give this civic distinction special

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<sup>605</sup> For translation see Lactantius, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, trans. Bowen and Garnsey, 5.14.15-20 310-311; for the original Latin see Lactantius, *Divinarum Institutionum Libri Septem*, eds. Eberhard Heck and Antonie Wlosok, 490-491.

emphasis on the list. Thus he is notably critical of civic orders that create inequality which, given that he applies this criticism to all the differing city states of classical Greece, seems to include any form of government. Indeed, notably absent from this passage, or the work as a whole, is any discussion of a form of government or civic order, be it existent, historical, or hypothetical, which could bring about this specific aspect of justice. This silence implies that, in Lactantius's eyes, any form of government is fundamentally unjust. What is worse is that insofar as Christians are defined as just men, and justice is fundamentally absent within a civic order, to be Christian inherently implies being at odds with government.

Based on this passage, it is clear that Lactantius views this as a failing that cannot be avoided by any government and is inherent in government itself. Christianity, by contrast, succeeds at attaining justice on account of not being a civic institution. Admittedly earlier passages do suggest that Lactantius does believe there is a civic order in which justice can exist, for instance the golden age of Saturn, or the hypothetical future golden age of Christians. However, given his criticism of the government, it is possible that he imagines this civic order as a form of loosely governed anarchy maintained by the morality of individuals rather than government or laws.<sup>606</sup> In this case his position toward the Roman Empire is one which is inherently doomed to hostility, even if he does wish to engage with non-Christian Romans as individuals. In any event the Christian utopia of Lactantius seems to have very little of the social/civic structure that is commonly associated with the Roman Empire. Interestingly, this political philosophising seems unique to Lactantius among Latin Christian apologetics.

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<sup>606</sup> Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 182.

Neither Tertullian nor Minucius Felix are particularly concerned with issues of justice beyond that which relates specifically to Christian persecution. That Lactantius brings in wider issues of injustice and inequality within the Empire could be seen as a political gripe against Roman authority which goes beyond Lactantius's Christian identity.

The civic dimension of the *Divine Institutes* has not gone unnoticed by scholars, however there is still debate as to the exact position on government that the work is trying to express. The debate begins with Ocker who argued that embedded within Lactantius's theology lay a criticism of the Tetrarchy and that the work advocated for Christian monotheism.<sup>607</sup> Ocker makes several notable observations about Lactantius's position within this work: firstly that Lactantius believes that social justice is only possible in tandem with Christian worship,<sup>608</sup> secondly that Lactantius presents God as the one true ruler and that non-Christian worship and the current Roman government usurp God of this role,<sup>609</sup> and finally that Lactantius believes that overthrowing the persecutors is the only way to save true Roman society.<sup>610</sup> These observations however do not necessarily support the idea that Lactantius promoted a Christian monarchy. One could fairly conclude from this that Lactantius presented the worship of God as a substitute for participation in Roman government rather than as a mirror of its ideal form. Lactantius believed the current Roman government should be overthrown and done away with entirely rather than replaced with a different government.

Edwards and Ingremeau provide further support for the thesis that Lactantius rejects all forms of government. Edwards argues that Lactantius's ideal is a believed

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<sup>607</sup> Ocker, "Unius arbitrio mundum regi necesse est."

<sup>608</sup> Ibid, 354-356.

<sup>609</sup> Ibid, 357-359.

<sup>610</sup> Ibid, 359-360.

future where Roman government is completely replaced by means of the second coming.<sup>611</sup> He also points out that Lactantius argues that failures of world governments can be mended not by different civic virtues based heavily on ideals but on a system of natural and universal justice. It is based on this natural rather than civic form of justice that Lactantius believes Christians will come to replace Roman government.<sup>612</sup> While Edwards does not argue explicitly that Lactantius presents an anti-government position, such an argument is entirely consistent with Edward's presentation of Lactantius's ideals. Ingremeau is explicit in her argument regarding Lactantius's anti-government positions. Building on Lactantius's promotion of universal rather than civic justice, she emphasises how Lactantius condemns the Roman Empire by arguing that the laws of political states only protect their own interests rather than true justice. She goes on to argue that the true ideal of justice for Lactantius is found in Book 6 of *Divine Institutes* where Lactantius argues that justice is not and cannot be the same as the laws of a political state.<sup>613</sup> Ingremeau acknowledges the significance of Lactantius's promotion of radical equality and argues that this view is not restricted to Book 5 but consistent to his positions on justice throughout the work.<sup>614</sup> Here we have seen the foundations of the view that Lactantius promotes an anti-government position.

Digester however argues that Lactantius's position is not a critique of government merely in abstraction, but is aimed particularly against the Diocletian regime. During his reign Emperor Diocletian had taken up the family name of Jupiter as

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<sup>611</sup> Edwards, "The Flowering of Latin Apologetic," 210.

<sup>612</sup> Ibid, 212-215, 220-221, also on this point see Nicholson "Civitas Quae Adhuc Sustentat Omnia," 21-23.

<sup>613</sup> Ingremeau, "Lactance et la justice," 44-48.

<sup>614</sup> Ibid, 50.

part of a new civic theology and promoted the idea of his own divinity. Thus Digeser's view is that Lactantius's presentation of Jupiter was a coded attack on Diocletian, and the telling of how Jupiter usurped the throne from Saturn may be a reference to rumours that Diocletian was involved in the death of his predecessor and held his office illegitimately. The implication is that it will be a step back toward the golden age if Diocletian is ousted. Digeser argues that this is intended not merely for Christians, but all Romans and especially those fed up with Diocletian's rule, who are urged to reject his regime not just on religious but on ethical grounds to protect against the greed of cruel, arrogant, and regicidal men.<sup>615</sup> By associating this criticism with the humanized deity of Jupiter, Lactantius not only criticizes the Emperor's civic authority but the possibility of any civic leader to attain godhood and the legitimacy of any civic leader who attempts to do so.<sup>616</sup> Indeed this reference is hardly surprising. Lactantius's position on government was likely not formed based on first principles but as a result of his own negative experience at the court of Diocletian and his life under the Great Persecution, which has led him to believe that Roman government cannot be trusted. Furthermore living under the Great Persecution is likely what led him to the position that justice and Christian identity is best inculcated by means of philosophy and devotion and not civic engagement.

Digeser argues that Lactantius within these sections of the texts is in fact urging a different kind of Roman government. Her argument is that through a series of careful allusions Lactantius equates the rule of Saturn with the rule of Augustus, and Lactantius is advocating the return to Augustus's model of Roman government. Her position is that

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<sup>615</sup> Digeser, *The Making of A Christian Empire*, 32-33, 36-40.

<sup>616</sup> Ibid, 35-36; Roubekas, *An Ancient Theory of Religion Euhemerism from Antiquity to the Present*, 106.

Lactantius is not anti-government but rather specifically anti-Diocletian and is against Diocletian's Tetrarchy and cultic reforms, in favor of the original principate where the imperial cult did not yet worship the living Emperor.<sup>617</sup> However, while Lactantius is very anti-Diocletian and does make several coded critiques of Diocletian and his policies within the *Divine Institutes*, he also makes coded critiques of symbols of Roman imperial power more generally as seen above. This coded critique supports the idea that he is not opposed to a specific Roman governmental model but Roman government in general. Digeser's argument is grounded on the position that in the *Divine Institutes* Lactantius is not merely trying to persuade fellow Christians but Roman monotheists more broadly. As such rather than proposing a wholly anti-governmental position, Lactantius appeals to his fellow Romans by calling for the return of an idealized Roman past, which would minimize the imperial cult, allow for monotheistic worship, and restore the earthly order to a model that more closely matched the heavenly order.<sup>618</sup> As discussed in the last chapter, Lactantius is most likely appealing to an audience that is varyingly Christian and non-Christian and Roman and non-Roman. He does not have hope of persuading Roman authorities, but merely Romans as individuals. The main purpose of his work is a defence and promotion of Christian identity, which he does by presenting Christian identity as an improved form of Roman identity without the faults inherent in Roman civic institutions. Living through years of persecution led him to abandon hope in Roman government and to inculcate forms of identity that are deliberately non-political rather than promoting civic reform. As such Lactantius's position should be seen as more anti-governmental than reformist.

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<sup>617</sup> Digeser, *The Making of A Christian Empire*, 40-43.

<sup>618</sup> *Ibid*, 43-45.

More recently there has been further scholarship which argues that Lactantius has anti-governmental views. For example in his 2013 article, Wayman argues that based on Book 5 of the *Divine Institutes* the material conditions of the political state are completely antithetical to Christianity. Like Ingremeau, Wayman emphasises the importance of *aequitas* to Lactantius's understanding of justice and that this form of *aequitas* is completely adverse to the civic institutions of a state. Because of this Wayman concludes that for Lactantius the participation of Christians within government would be a complete non-starter and the idea of Christian-run government entirely nonsensical. Within this argument Christians for Lactantius can only meaningfully develop true justice which defines them as Christians while resisting civic authority.<sup>619</sup> Wayman correctly outlines Lactantius's position on government and to a degree the relationship of Christians with it. However, his argument does not take into account how Lactantius categorises Christian identity and correspondingly it does not see how Lactantius views Christianity as a perfect form of Roman culture or how he foresees a future where Christians and Romans are not in conflict.

Similarly to Wayman, Mattias Gassman has recently argued that Lactantius is wholly critical of the Roman government and is not advocating merely a change in government. Looking closely at Lactantius's discussion of the golden age in Book 5 chapter 6 of the *Divine Institutes*, Gassman explicitly attempts to counter arguments like those of Digeser which suggest that Lactantius is merely making a coded critique of the Tetrarchy. Gassman argues that this passage represents instead a critique of Roman government in its entirety. Lactantius's experience with Roman governmental power

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<sup>619</sup> Wayman, "Lactantius's Power Struggle," 310-324.

would inform him that merely a change in leadership would not address all the issues of the Roman state. Also Gassman notes that Lactantius does not present Christianity as antithetical to the Roman world, but rather Lactantius is very keen on maintaining and perpetuating Roman society and culture.<sup>620</sup> To Gassman's arguments, I would add that the ways by which Christian identity and the problems of Roman society are categorised by Lactantius suggest that Christianity is the essential tool by which Roman society can be redeemed. By presenting Christian worship as the unified form of all the means of moral and societal improvement except civic institutions, and by identifying the source of all of Roman society's problems as tied to either false worship or civic institutions, Lactantius presents Christianity as the idealized apolitical version of Roman identity. It is to this subject I now turn.

#### Lactantius's Christianity as an Apolitical Perfected Form of Roman Identity

In spite of the many criticisms that Lactantius levels at Roman culture and society, an analysis of the *Divine Institutes* as a whole will show that Lactantius deeply values both Roman culture and society and wishes to see them continue. Lactantius presents the foundational goals of both Roman society and Christianity as the attaining of justice; however he argues that only through Christian *religio* can this be brought about. Christianity represents for Lactantius the goal that Roman culture has always tried but failed to achieve. Since Lactantius ties the faults of Roman society largely to its civic and cultic systems, Christian worship is for Lactantius a different apolitical cultic

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<sup>620</sup> Gassman, *Worshippers of the Gods*, 20-23, 26-27, 38-39.

system and a perfect form of Roman culture and identity. It is this vision of Christianity that Lactantius actively creates within the *Divine Institutes* in order to best appeal to his Roman audience.

The greatest evidence for Lactantius's positive views of Roman culture occurs in Book 7 where Lactantius discusses the Roman Empire with a more sympathetic tone. In this Book he describes how the Roman Empire will fall preceding the final collapse of civilization and the eventual end of the world:

The sword will traverse the globe reaping all in its path, laying all low in its harvest, and the cause of the devastation and confusion will be this: the name of Rome, by which the world is presently ruled – I shudder to say this, but I will say it even so, because it will happen so –, the name of Rome will be razed from the earth, power will return to Asia, and once again East will be master and West will be servant.<sup>621</sup>

Here Lactantius is once again following the position of Tertullian, namely Tertullian's belief that the end of the world will come with the end of the Roman Empire.<sup>622</sup>

However, while some have read an almost perverse joy in Tertullian's argument,<sup>623</sup> in that Christians will be saved at the end of days but Roman pagans will not, Lactantius seems less optimistic. Lactantius predicts not merely the end of the world with the fall of the Roman Empire, but a great period of decay between the fall and the end, most chiefly marked by the rise of barbarian nations over the civilized lands. For Lactantius, like many Romans, the Roman part of the world was the only one that he valued.<sup>624</sup>

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<sup>621</sup> Lactantius, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, trans. Bowen and Garnsey, p.422.

<sup>622</sup> *Apology* xxxii.1 p.155

<sup>623</sup> Kearsley, *Tertullian's Theology of Divine Power*, 26-28.

<sup>624</sup> Digeser, *The Making of A Christian Empire*, 34.

Although Lactantius was anti-governmental in his views, he can never truly be said to fully be anti-Roman, for even his pre-Constantinian critiques of the Roman Empire and culture are motivated by the desire to reform them from within, and to make the Roman world worthy of the value he places in it. Indeed it has been noted that one of the criticisms that Lactantius had against the Tetrarchy was that he felt that they had betrayed the legacy of the city of Rome which he deeply valued.<sup>625</sup> All this is to say that Lactantius is greatly more invested in Roman culture and civilization than Tertullian is. While it is possible that Lactantius's outcry of horror at the fall of Rome is exaggerated for effect, given his demonstrated commitment to Roman and classical culture, it does not seem completely ungenue. Lactantius seems both invested in the wellbeing of Rome and the preservation of Roman culture, but is also deeply critical of its failings. What he wants is not the fall of Rome, although he believes that to be unavoidable, but rather that Roman culture should be improved and corrected by Christianity as a cultic, cultural and intellectual force. It is a great irony that he believes this unattainable and constructs his argument accordingly.

The understanding of Christian identity as a corrective and means to improve upon Roman virtues is also found within Lactantius's discussion of justice as an abstract principle. The points that he emphasises here however could still be seen as undermining Roman civic authority, by substituting Christian worship in its place:

Justice embraces all the virtues together, but there are two chief virtues which cannot be split off and separated from it, piety and fairness... the Romans of old, who habitually boasted of their justice, certainly boasted of

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<sup>625</sup> Nicholson, "Civitas Quae Adhuc Sustentat Omnia."

those virtues, which can, as I said, come from justice and can also be distinguished from their source.<sup>626</sup>

For Lactantius that Roman culture, and particularly ancient Roman culture, is not without some merits but it lacks true justice, which is what it has always sought after and boasted of. This justice cannot be achieved without Christianity making Christianity the completion of Roman authority. However, Lactantius's emphasis on the importance of "fairness," which he has earlier asserted is undermined by civic and legal hierarchies,<sup>627</sup> could also suggest the true form of justice offered by Christian *religio* is incompatible with Roman authority.

This connection between Christian cult and justice is presented as the goal of Roman culture and is emphasised in the following passage :

The twin arteries of justice are piety and fairness, and all justice springs from these two. Its basic beginning is in that firm source, piety, while all its intellectual energy is in the second source. Piety is simply the knowing of God, as it is soundly defined by Trismegistus, as we observed elsewhere. If, then, piety is to know God, and the nub of getting to know God is to worship him, anyone without a cult [*religio*] of God simply does not know justice.<sup>628</sup>

Lactantius here emphasises cult not merely as an expression of loyalty, which is how Tertullian defined the term *religio* when directed at a civic authority,<sup>629</sup> but understands cult and *religio* as a component part of the civic virtue of justice. True *religio* and piety

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<sup>626</sup> Lactantius, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, trans. Bowen and Garnsey, 5.14.9-10 p.309-310.

<sup>627</sup> See 5.8.8-10 and 5.6.3-5 quoted above.

<sup>628</sup> For translation see Lactantius, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, trans. Bowen and Garnsey, 5.14.11-12 p.310, the original Latin text see Lactantius, *Divinarum Institutionum Libri Septem*, eds. Eberhard Heck and Antonie Wlosok, p.489-490.

<sup>629</sup> For an example of this see *Apology* xxxiii.1.

are necessary to the successful running of a successful state, and without them justice cannot be achieved. Therefore, Lactantius presents Christian *religio* as, not merely virtue in its own right, but as the best available means by which classical Roman culture can achieve its goals. He emphasises this completive aspect of Christian identity by citing Trismegistus, and thus grounds his Christian positions in classical tradition. Although Lactantius in places rejects tradition as a source of authority, in other places he uses it to ground Christian identity in the world around it, in a way that would allow Christian and Roman identities not only to co-exist but to unite in the common goals of virtue and justice.

However, Lactantius describes the moral virtues of Christians in a way that makes them incompatible with Roman government and civic order on the whole. Earlier in book 5, after describing the lack of moral failings people would have if everyone was Christian, he makes the following claim:

Since men would contain their lust and people of means would contribute to those without as in religion [*religiosa*] duly bound. All these evils, as I have said, would thus not exist on earth if everyone took an oath in the name of God's law, if all people did what only our people do. How blessed and how golden the state of humanity would be if all the world were civilised, pious, peaceful, innocent, self-controlled, fair and faithful! There would be no need for so many different laws for the government of mankind, because the one law of God would be enough for the accomplishment of innocence, nor would there be need for prisons and warders' swords, nor for the threat of

punishment, since the wholesomeness of heavenly commandment would be working in human hearts, forming them freely to the practice of justice.<sup>630</sup>

That Lactantius so optimistically describes the prospect of this Christian utopia likely testifies to the fact that he does not expect to see this possibility within his own life. Therefore, the idea for Lactantius serves mostly as an ideal that he can use to make Christian identity appealing to others, and to provide hope to struggling Christians. He does not expect the Roman Empire to be a means by which everyone could be made to become Christian. Indeed, the Christian ideal described seems to render civic or legal authority completely redundant, and presents Christian identity as completely set apart from civic identity.

Lactantius here contrasts the laws of earthly governments with the law of God, both of which serve roughly the same purpose but through different means. However, only God's law is presented as successful. The laws of government work by means of violence and the threat of violence, whereas God's law genuinely encourages virtues. This is actively tied back to Lactantius's understanding of *religio*. This position, however, does not inherently put Christians at odds with Roman authority. *Religio* here serves as almost a substitute or a complement for civic governing authority: as law enforces justice on people from without so *religio* enforces justice on people from within. This is set up as a means of accomplishing the goals of Roman justice through differing means which could be seen as either rendering Roman civic authority redundant or providing Roman authority with another means to accomplish its goal. This understanding of

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<sup>630</sup> For translation see Lactantius, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, trans. Bowen and Garnsey, 5.8.8-10 p.296, the original Latin text see Lactantius, *Divinarum Institutionum Libri Septem*, eds. Eberhard Heck and Antonie Wlosok, 463-464.

*religio* as a means of accomplishing the civic goals of Rome in spite of Rome is a continuation of the ideas of Tertullian. What is more, Lactantius may be building on a method used by North African elites and Second Sophistic rhetoricians who constructed a form of identity that allowed provincials to challenge Roman cultural superiority without challenging their military or civic authority.<sup>631</sup> Lactantius however, depending on how he is interpreted, can be seen as playing both sides, presenting Christianity as either undermining or completing Roman authority.

Christian identity as here presented could be seen as a peace making force which Lactantius is trying to sell to Roman leaders, as something that could heal the conflicts of the Empire and bring peace and prosperity to its rulers. If they would only embrace Christianity and allow it to flourish, it would solve all their problems. Referring to Christian teachings as the “law of God” could be read as emphasising this, by providing a different legal means to accomplish the same end. However, this phrase could equally be read as suggesting that Christian law should be seen as a substitute, meant to replace Roman authority. In this understanding, Lactantius presents Christian identity as a subversive force to Roman authority, which he is selling to those with an aversion to Roman rule: if Christianity is allowed to flourish we could cast off the dictates of Roman laws and live unencumbered by government. This understanding of Lactantius’s position would make him consistent with earlier North African Christianity which is often characterized by its resistance to Roman authority.<sup>632</sup> Perhaps the best

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<sup>631</sup> Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 6, 15-16; Timothy Whitmarsh, “‘Greece Is the World’: Exile and Identity in the Second Sophistic,” in *Being Greek Under Rome: Cultural Identity, the Second Sophistic, and the Development of Empire*, ed. Simon Goldhill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 304; Preston, Rebecca. “Roman Questions, Greek Answers: Plutarch and the Construction of Identity,” in *ibid*, 88-92; Timothy Whitmarsh, *The Second Sophistic. Greece & Rome. New Surveys in the Classics* ; No. 35 (Oxford: Published for the Classical Association by Oxford University Press, 2005) 11-15.

<sup>632</sup> Tilly, “North Africa,” 387-392; Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 11.

interpretation lies between these two. Given that Lactantius's intended audience are people who are well educated in Roman culture but not necessarily Roman civic leaders, what he is trying to sell here is the idea of Christianity as a moral corrective that will bring about peace but not necessarily revolution against or domination over a Roman civic authority.

### The Effect of Constantine on Lactantius's Anti-Government Position

Finally the issue that needs be addressed before this argument can conclude is how does a post-Constantinian world affect Lactantius's views on the Roman state and Christians' place within it? This section attempts to argue that the change in circumstances brought about by Constantine does not affect Lactantius's position as much as one might think. Analysis of Lactantius's exhortation of Constantine demonstrates that these passages do not propose a view on justice or the ideal version of Roman society that is inconsistent with Lactantius's earlier views. While the post-Constantinian perspective on the *Divine Institutes* provides Lactantius's arguments with greater historical significance, it does not fundamentally alter how one interprets Lactantius's position on government or his understanding of Christian identity. In Book 7 there is one of the few clearly post-Constantinian passages in which Lactantius must reconcile his own work with the reality of the present circumstance. Specifically he endeavours to praise Constantine for his boons to Christians while simultaneously not compromising his political philosophy:

All fictions have now, most holy emperor, been laid to rest, ever since God most high raised you up to restore the abode of justice and to protect the human race. Now that you are ruler of the world of Rome we worshippers of God are no longer treated as criminals and villains; as the truth comes clear and is brought to light we are not put on trial as unjust for trying to do the works of justice. No one now flings the name of God at us in reproach, no one calls us irreligious [*inreligiosus*] any more, for we are the only religious [*religiosi*] people of them all.<sup>633</sup>

He later goes on to argue, again in the second person, that Constantine is greater than all the other emperors because he has knowledge of God, and he alone can achieve true justice whereas all other previously good emperors only achieved a likeness to justice.<sup>634</sup> This passage, like the references to Constantine elsewhere in the text, is widely agreed to be a later addition to the text made in response to the reforms of Constantine after most of the work was finished.<sup>635</sup> As such it reflects a relationship to Roman authority that is not found in the earlier text. The possibility that Roman civic powers could be an aid to Christians or supporters of justice was so far fetched as to earlier not be entertained, but is now a reality, requiring a rethinking of roles and attitude.

Likewise, Lactantius now has to grapple with the fact that Roman society has recognised Christianity but the utopia that he predicted would follow such an event has

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<sup>633</sup> For translation see Lactantius, *Lactantius Divine Institutes*, trans. Bowen and Garnsey, 7.26.10a p.439, the original Latin text see Lactantius, *Divinarum Institutionum Libri Septem*, eds. Eberhard Heck and Antonie Wlosok, 7.26.11 p.730-731.

<sup>634</sup> 7.26.15-17.

<sup>635</sup> Digeser, "Lactantius and Constantine's Letter to Arles," 52; Bowen and Garson, "Introduction," 11; Digeser, *The Making of A Christian Empire*, 134; Coleman, *Lactantius the Theologian*, 23.

yet to materialize. Nevertheless he praises what he is able to, which is the prominence now allowed to Christians and the public recognition that he believes was always their right. While these passages have been considered to be purely panegyric and lacking in political philosophy,<sup>636</sup> I would contend that what they do not say is telling. It is notable that Lactantius describes justice as not yet having come into being, although steps have been made towards it. This likely reflects Lactantius's political philosophy which does not believe justice to exist until a state of egalitarianism is achieved. Furthermore while Christians are no longer persecuted they are nevertheless still not a dominant group, hence he uses *religio* to describe them in contrast to others. Lactantius here through his praise also entreats Constantine to finish what Lactantius perceives to be the task that he has begun, namely the restoration of justice, which involves bringing about equality and spreading Christian identity to all. It is unclear if Lactantius believes these goals to be feasible; however recently what he had thought impossible did occur, so he leaves open the possibility.

Scholarship on Lactantius's views on Constantine has traditionally held that Constantine must surely represent everything that Lactantius could have hoped for; however some recent discussions have suggested that in some ways Lactantius is hesitant in his praise of Constantine. Scholars such as Ingremeau and Nicholson took Lactantius's praise of Constantine to reflect his genuine belief that Constantine had brought about Lactantius's view of justice and could support the Empire and bring about Lactantius's ideal Roman society.<sup>637</sup> However, later scholarship by authors such as

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<sup>636</sup> Bowen and Garson, "Introduction," 50.

<sup>637</sup> Christiane Ingremeau, "Les Institutions divines de Lactance: une composition architecturale" *Vita Latina* 132 (1993): 35; Nicholson, "Civitas Quae Adhuc Sustentat Omnia," 23-24.

Peter Garnsey and Anthony Bowen has seen in Lactantius's praise only "bare-bone panegyric"<sup>638</sup> and has argued that *Divine Institutes* only meaningfully reflects a pre-Constantinian perspective.<sup>639</sup> Going further than this position, Wilhite has argued that while Lactantius is never hostile to Constantine, the lack of mention of him not merely in the revised version of the *Divine Institutes* but also in *On the Death of Persecutors* could speak to a lukewarm acceptance of Constantine's support of Christianity.<sup>640</sup> Finally Gassman has argued that based on all the works Lactantius wrote after the end of the Tetrarchy there is little evidence to suggest that he changed the views he presented in the *Divine Institutes* on the Roman state or justice. Gassman suggests that Lactantius had the opportunity to rescind many of his positions criticizing the Roman state but chose not to.<sup>641</sup> It has been noted that with the rise of Constantine, the potential prospects of Lactantius and the *Divine Institutes* changed dramatically. After the Great Persecution Lactantius becomes the tutor to Constantine's son and a member of Constantine's court.<sup>642</sup> Ironically here Lactantius has taken a position under Constantine comparable to that Porphyry had held in the court of Diocletian, through which Porphyry helped persuade the emperor to undertake the Great Persecution in the first place.<sup>643</sup> Because of this Lactantius now has a new audience for the *Divine Institutes* and changes it accordingly, as he is now in a position of power to help bring about the justice he had previously discussed.<sup>644</sup> While Lactantius and Constantine could

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<sup>638</sup> Bowen and Garnsey, "Introduction," 50.

<sup>639</sup> Ibid, 43; Garnsey, "Lactantius and Augustine," 174.

<sup>640</sup> Wilhite, *Ancient African Christianity*, 185-188.

<sup>641</sup> Gassman, *The Worshipers of the Gods*, 43-47.

<sup>642</sup> Digeser, "Lactantius and Constantine's Letter to Arles," 52; Coleman, *Lactantius the Theologian*, 22-24.

<sup>643</sup> Digeser, *A Threat to Public Piety*, 89.

<sup>644</sup> Digeser, "Lactantius and Constantine's Letter to Arles," 52.

hypothetically have met prior to the Great Persecution in Nicomedia, it is unlikely that they would have acted with any thought of the other in subsequent years. Lactantius certainly did not initially write the *Divine Institutes* with Constantine in mind nor did Constantine favor Christianity over any other suppressed cultic group when he published the edict of toleration. Digeser suggests that if they did know each other, the two might have recognised the other as one who favored toleration of varying forms of worship and thus trusted each other later on when circumstances brought them together again.<sup>645</sup>

However, the reunion and opportunities presented by Constantine were likely a profound surprise for Lactantius, who had previously reconciled himself to living in opposition to the Roman government. Thus Lactantius would have had to significantly alter his political philosophy and ideas on justice in order to make the most of his position. That the passages which discuss these matters remain unchanged even within the second version of the *Divine Institutes* suggests that Lactantius chose to remain firm to the ideals he formed during the Great Persecution and the role he envisioned for Christianity. While within his new post he likely advocated to the best of his ability for his view of justice and for Christians, it seems unlikely that he would ever fully trust Roman government.

Therefore, this passage, although it praises the Roman civic leader, is carefully phrased so as to not undermine Lactantius's anti-government position unduly. Within this passage, as within the rest of the *Divine Institutes*, Christian identity and particularly Christian *religio* are presented as a corrective to the failings and limitations of Roman

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<sup>645</sup> Digeser, *The Making of A Christian Empire*, 121-122, 133-134.

identity and Roman government. These passages within Book 7 take a largely more positive view of the Roman Empire in light of their discussion of the end of the world and the contemporary benefits seen under Constantine. However, through his discussion of justice in Book 5, both in his discussion of justice as an abstract principle and his discussion of justice through the lived experience of the Christian persecution, we have seen a more critical attitude taken to Roman rule. This is almost certainly motivated by the Great Persecution of Diocletian. However, the fact that Lactantius is writing for well educated Romans means that this position does not reflect a critical approach to Roman identity as a whole but rather criticism specifically against the Roman Empire as a civic body. The way in which Lactantius presents Roman identity is not as something alien or hostile to Christian identity, but as something that is incomplete which needs the benefits of Christian identity to achieve its own goals. Just as Lactantius argues that classical forms of philosophy are unable to attain wisdom without the benefit of Christian revelation, so too Lactantius argues that Roman identity is unable to attain its own long sought for goal of justice without Christian cultic practices.

### Conclusion

Lactantius attempts to reconcile Christian identity with Roman identity. However, likely due to his experience living through the Diocletian persecution and his political philosophy, he almost completely rejects the authority of the Roman Empire as a civic entity. This position is made ironic however due to the additions made to the text after the rise of Constantine. In light of these passages, Lactantius's attempts at unifying

Roman and Christian identity can be read as an attempt to pitch Christianity to the Roman Emperor as a new form of Roman imperialism which improves upon differing and contradictory elements of Roman culture. The problem with this understanding however is that it actively ignores Lactantius's anti-government philosophy which he does not completely reverse even when addressing his work to the Roman Emperor.

Lactantius's *Divine Institutes* represents a pivotal point in the history of the relationship between Christianity and the Roman Empire. It contains representations of both its lowest and highest moments: the despair of the Great Persecution and the hope represented by Constantine's rise to power. Lactantius provides us with insight into how Christian identity adapts to the circumstances and significant persecution, and how individuals can reconcile contradictory identities within themselves. For despite the irony surrounding the *Divine Institutes* and his anti-government positions, Lactantius makes strides toward the unification and reconciliation of Christian and Roman identities. Finally, the form of Christian identity that emerges in response to this is not only a unity of early forms of Christian identity but also notably significant to the history of Christianity after this point. It is through the unity of Christian identity and the Roman identity, the origins of which are glimpsed here, that Christianity will later come to dominate the Mediterranean.

## Conclusion

Around the turn of the third century CE the Christian community in North Africa of which Tertullian was a part came under persecution from the Roman state. During this persecution Christians were arrested, imprisoned, and publicly executed in displays designed to humiliate them.<sup>646</sup> Tertullian was a Christian convert,<sup>647</sup> and a man who was likely formally trained in Latin rhetoric,<sup>648</sup> which also provided him with deep familiarity with Roman history and cultural practices. It is likely, though impossible to know for certain, that Tertullian participated in Roman cultural and indeed even cultic practices prior to his conversion. However, following his conversion and the persecution of his community, Tertullian came to renounce all things Roman and non-Christian. He argued that Christians should not wear the Roman toga,<sup>649</sup> that Christians should not participate in the Roman military,<sup>650</sup> that Christians should not attend Roman sporting, gladiatorial or even theatrical events,<sup>651</sup> and he even argued that Christians should not buy meat

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<sup>646</sup> Sara Berkowitz, "Staging Death: Performing Greek Myths in Roman Arena Executions." *Chronika* 7 (2017): 40-50; Leonard Thompson, "The Martyrdom of Polycarp: Death in the Roman Games", *The Journal of Religion* 82 (2002): 27.

<sup>647</sup> See Tertullian, *Apology*, xviii.4.

<sup>648</sup> Barnes, *Tertullian*, 24, 27; Osborn, "Tertullian as Philosopher and Roman," 234; Burrows, "Christianity in the Roman Forum," 212-213.

<sup>649</sup> See Tertullian, *On the Philosopher's Cloak*, for a critical edition of this text see Marie, Turcan (ed.), *Le manteau = De pallio / Tertullien ; introduction, texte critique, traduction, commentaire et index par Marie Turcan* (Paris: Cerf, 2007).

<sup>650</sup> See Tertullian, *On the Military Garland*, for a critical edition of this text see *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani Opera* (Turnholti: Brepols, 1954).

<sup>651</sup> See Tertullian, *On Spectacles*, for a critical edition of this text see *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani Opera* (Turnholti: Brepols, 1954).

from the same merchant that sold meat to Roman temples.<sup>652</sup> Conversely, he could be said to galvanize his Christian community into animosity against Roman authority. He celebrated those Christians who died in opposition to the Roman state, encouraged others to do so, and firmly and passionately denounced any who would compromise on this position.<sup>653</sup> Based on these works one is left with a picture of a man who has completely rejected his Roman identity and stands in passionate opposition to the Roman state. And yet, Tertullian wrote the *Apology*, which presents us with a more nuanced and complex take on his Christianity and Tertullian as a person. In the *Apology* he argues that Christians ought to be considered true Romans,<sup>654</sup> that the Roman emperor would support the Christian cause,<sup>655</sup> and that the Roman Empire is, or at least can be, a source of good in the world.<sup>656</sup> This seeming contradiction could be seen as Tertullian becoming increasingly disenchanted with Rome.<sup>657</sup> However, it is the argument of this thesis that Tertullian's position on the Roman Empire can be best understood by looking at how he categorizes Christian and Roman identities, and that this position inspires subsequent Christian writers.

Tertullian and the Latin authors who wrote the apologetic works which drew from his *Apology* are, at their core, engaged in the shared project of reconciling their Christian and Roman identities through a process of categorization. In this thesis, I have argued that through the process of categorization, these authors gradually develop

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<sup>652</sup> See Tertullian, *De Idolatria / Tertullianus ; Critical Text, Translation and Commentary*, (eds.) J.H. Waszink and J.C.M. van Winden (Leiden: Brill, 1987)xi.1-2 p.40-43.

<sup>653</sup> See Tertullian, *To the Martyrs, On Flight in a Time of Persecution, and the Scorpion*, for a critical edition of this texts see *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani Opera* (Turnholt: Brepols, 1954).

<sup>654</sup> *Apology* xxiv.9-10.

<sup>655</sup> *Ibid*, xxx.1-3

<sup>656</sup> *Ibid*, xxxi.1-xxxii.1.

<sup>657</sup> This is the argument of Kearsley, *Tertullian's Theology of Divine Power*, 46-48.

Christian identity into a form of identity centered around worship, which is not grounded on civic authority, and in so doing they create a place for themselves in the Roman world and a place for Roman identity in themselves. While the relationship between Roman and Christian identity has been discussed in relation to each of these authors and the particular works under discussion here, it is by looking at these works as steps in a process of categorization that this thesis has aimed to unite them.

To begin with, Tertullian categorises his Christian community as an elective cultic group, defined by their *religio* or legitimate cultic worship, and he reduces Roman identity to purely civic allegiance. By reducing Roman identity to purely civic allegiance, Tertullian can claim that Christians are valid Romans merely by claiming that Christians wish the Emperor well, and do not seek to undermine Roman civic authority. Furthermore, by claiming that Christian groups are cultic groups, defined by their *religio*, Tertullian is both able to emphasize that Christians are loyal to the Roman state and lay claim to an independent cultural authority. The reason that Tertullian is able to make these claims is because of the understanding of *religio*, as a signifier of legitimacy and loyalty to the Roman state, promoted by Cicero. It is based on this ideological foundation, that Tertullian rejects Roman cultural practices, champions those who oppose non-Christian worship in the form of martyrdom, and founds his apologetic strategy to create a place for Christianity in the Roman world.

Tertullian's *Apology*, and the ideological position it takes toward the Roman government, inspired other apologetic works, in which similarly the categorization of Christian and Roman identities plays an important role. The first of these was the dialogue *Octavius* by Minucius Felix, which categorizes Christian groups as

philosophical groups. This categorization does not give Christian identity the cultural authority of a *religio*, which Tertullian sought, nor does it emphasise the role of worship in Christian identity, but by presenting Christian groups as philosophical groups he does further separate Christian identity from civic authority. Unlike *religio*, philosophy was not regulated in the Roman world.<sup>658</sup> By presenting Christianity as a philosophy, Minucius Felix could provide Christians with a space where they could be both within and apart from Roman society. As philosophers, Christians could both be genuine loyal Romans, and, from a position of safety, critique Roman society and specifically Roman worship. By categorizing Christian identity as a philosophy Minucius Felix seeks to not only protect Christians against Roman authority, but to reform Roman society from within. In order to make this reform without seeming to be hostile to Roman civic authority, these Christian authors need to separate identities centered around worship from civic authority.

This same motivation is seen in the *Divine Institutes* of Lactantius, who draws from Tertullian, Minucius Felix, and Cicero, and who strives, more than either Tertullian or Minucius Felix, to separate Christian identity from civic authority. Lactantius argues that Christian identity unites together both philosophy and *religio*. By uniting worship and philosophy, Lactantius aims to claim the cultural independence that Tertullian strove for by categorizing Christianity as a *religio*, and the intellectual legitimacy which Minucius Felix sought from philosophy. His claim was that Christianity was the key to correcting the faults in Roman society. He holds that one of the most significant of these faults is the existence of Roman government. Lactantius closely equates the worshipping

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<sup>658</sup> Trapp, *Philosophy in the Roman Empire*, 226-227.

of false gods and creation of government, and argues that government inherently produces injustice and inequality. To be a true Christian and to be just, therefore, a person must avoid all civic participation. Therefore, in Lactantius's *Divine Institutes* Christian identity emerges as a form of identity that is centered around worship, but not grounded on civic authority, and which presents itself as distinctly Roman.

By means of the above argument and my analysis of these texts, this thesis has aimed to provide three original contributions to scholarship, in the form of three different yet connected claims. Firstly, I argue simply that Tertullian's *Apology*, Minucius Felix's *Octavius*, and Lactantius's *Divine Institutes* can be taken together as a distinct Latin apologetic tradition due to the direct and substantive way in which these works influence each other. Secondly, I argue that within these works, these authors develop the term *religio* to refer to any action performed as a result of one's relationship to God, as opposed to only referring to a narrow set of ritual actions socially approved of by Roman pagans, as it had meant in works of Cicero. Finally, I argue in this thesis, as I have explained above, that within this Latin apologetic tradition Christian identity is developed into a form of identity that is less grounded on civic authority and rather centered around worship and morality. As explained in my introduction, these three claims respond to and add to debates on, respectively: the nature and scholarly treatment of ancient Christian apologetics, the scholarly understanding of the use of *religio* in the ancient world, and finally scholarly understandings of the changes within identity within the late antique Mediterranean.

While not the focus of this thesis, the discussion of the term *religio* and the idea of categories of identity has touched on the topic of whether or not religion existed as an

analytical category in the ancient world. There has been much debate on this subject within scholarship, for instance Brent Nongbri,<sup>659</sup> building on the work of Jonathan Z. Smith,<sup>660</sup> has strongly argued that religion is a uniquely modern idea that contrary to how some scholars have used the term cannot be said to exist prior to the modern era. Specifically Nongbri argues that use of *religio* by Cicero, Tertullian, Minucius Felix, and Lactantius did not carry the meaning of the modern term religion. In contrast, scholars such as Mary Beard and others, have argued that Cicero's use of *religio* does bear similarities to the modern idea of religion. These scholars argue that the focus of Cicero and some of his contemporaries on philosophical topics concerning the nature of the gods, divination, and theology more broadly, represents a shift in the intellectual community of late republican Rome toward isolating subjects moderns would consider to be religious.<sup>661</sup> Likewise, Jeremy Schott has argued that Lactantius's "*religio* begins to assume some of the semantic range of the modern 'religion.'"<sup>662</sup>

On the whole, I agree with Nongbri. In none of its incarnations does the ancient use of *religio* carry the exact same connotations or range of meanings as the modern term religion, and furthermore there is no category of identity in the ancient world which directly corresponds to religion. Nevertheless I am concerned that some of Nongbri's rhetoric threatens to flatten and oversimplify the facts of case. Within late antiquity both the term *religio* and categories of identity change and develop significantly, including developments which while not producing the idea of religion would substantially inform

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<sup>659</sup> Nongbri, *Before Religion*.

<sup>660</sup> Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious."

<sup>661</sup> Beard, "Cicero and Divination," 33–46; Beard et al., *Religions of Rome*, 149–153; Momigliano, "The Theological Efforts of the Roman Upper Classes in the First Century BC"; North, "The Limits of the 'Religious' in the Late Roman Republic," 225–245.

<sup>662</sup> Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*, 167.

how religion would come to be created. Due to his limited focus and the purpose of his argument, these developments are not reflected in Nongbri's history of period. However, both Beard and Schott do explore the nature and significance of these developments. Therefore, while I would not agree that the category of religion as such existed in the ancient world, I would suggest that this point should be seen as a beginning to academic discussion rather than as an end to it. Rather than debate the applicability of modern terminology, scholars should instead focus on trying to reconstruct the categories by which the ancients viewed the world with the understanding that they will be different than but related to our own. This thesis is an attempt to begin part of this work.

These conclusions are also significant due to the legacy and effect of this Latin apologetic tradition upon subsequent historical figures and Christian thinkers, notably the reforms of Constantine and writings of Augustine. Whether or not the person of Lactantius or his writings affected Constantine's decision to end the persecution of Christians and other groups is much debated.<sup>663</sup> It is fair to say however, that to the extent that Christianity became successful in the Roman Empire, it is because either Christian identity adapted itself to become acceptable to Roman perception or Roman identity developed to be more in line with Christianity, or more likely a combination of the two. Lactantius may have been instrumental in this or merely symptomatic of a broader change, but regardless of Lactantius's direct involvement or not, his work and the works of this entire Latin apologetic tradition give us a vantage point to observe this

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<sup>663</sup> E.g. Heck, "Constantin Und Lactanz in Trier Chronologisches", 121; Digeser, *The Making of A Christian Empire*, ix-x, 121-122, 133-134; Digeser, "Lactantius and Constantine's Letter to Arles"; Digeser, "Lactantius on Religious Liberty and His Influence on Constantine;" Schwarte, "Lactantius," 366; Shelton, "Lactantius as Architect of a Constantinian and Christian 'Victory over the Empire.'"

development. From this perspective we can see that Christian identity took on many different shapes in order to present itself as appealing to Roman non-Christians, from cult, to philosophy, to both. Likewise, Christian authors grappled with their own Roman identity, and the relationship between Christian and Roman identity within themselves. However, throughout all of these varying manifestations, we see Christian authors directly and substantially engage with social identity: the intellectual sources of authority and legitimacy within the ancient world, and the methods by which identity is categorized. It is through this discourse that Christians were able to build a social and intellectual place for themselves within the ideology of the Roman Empire.

If the influence on Constantine is tenuous, we can draw a more direct connection between this Latin apologetic tradition and Augustine. Simply in terms of the structure of the works, scholars have seen Lactantius's *Divine Institutes* as a forerunner to Augustine's *City of God*.<sup>664</sup> Furthermore, Augustine likely read all three of the thinkers of the Latin apologetic tradition, and I would suggest that it is possible that Augustine's idea of the two cities was in part inspired by Lactantius's separation of Christian identity from civic participation. Scholarship on Augustine's views on 'politics' or his treatment of the Roman Empire, disagrees on the relationship between Christian identity and civic authority within Augustine's works generally, and the *City of God* specifically. Some scholars argue that Augustine unites civic authority with the salvific role of God and the Church, which results in a theologically backed civic authority.<sup>665</sup> Others however

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<sup>664</sup> Coleman, *Lactantius the Theologian*, 18-19.

<sup>665</sup> John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (Summer 1985) 248; Markus, *Saeculum*, 151-153; Peter Burnell, "the Status of Politics in Augustine's *City of God*," *History of Political Thought* 13 (1992): 13-29; Brown, Peter. "Saint Augustine and Political Society." In *The City of God: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Dorothy Donnelly, 17-34 (New York: Peter Land, 1995); Peter Burnell, "The Problem of Service to Unjust Regimes in Augustine's *City of God*," in *The City of God*:

suggest that Augustine confines civic authority purely to worldly matters, and thus separates the role of Christian identity and purpose of Christian communities from civic authority.<sup>666</sup> Analysis of the influence of this Latin apologetic tradition on Augustine, would help answer this question by elucidating how Augustine categorizes Christian identity in relation to civic authority. Augustine's influence upon subsequent Christianity is so well attested that it need not be restated here. Augustine is of course a product of his own century, and influenced by many contemporary sources, which were substantially affected by the fact that Christianity was legal and accepted in the Roman Empire. However, it is the form of Christian identity that emerged prior to Constantine and the support of an empire that would substantially inform what type of Christian identity that these later thinkers were able to conceive of it as. Specifically, it is because these authors separated Christian identity from civic authority, that Christianity did not fundamentally become only a civic power. Christianity did not become merely an aspect of the Roman Empire, whose success was tied to the Empire's civic institutions.

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*A collection of Essays*, 37-49; Daniel Strand, "Augustine's City of God and Roman Sacral Politics," in *Augustine's Political Thought* eds. Richard Dougherty, 222-244 (Boydell & Brewer, 2019).

<sup>666</sup> Herbert Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine's City of God* (London: Longman's, 1963); Robert Barr, "the Two Cities in Saint Augustine," *Laval theologique et philosophique* 18 (1982) 211-229; Paul Weithman, "Toward an Augustinian Liberalism," *Faith and Philosophy* 8 no.4 (1991): 13-29; Reinhold Niebuhr, "Augustine's Political Realism," in *The City of God: A collection of Essays*, 119-134; Herbet Deane, "Augustine and the State: The Return of Order Upon Disorder," In *The City of God: A collection of Essays*, 51-73; Peter Kaufman, "Redeeming Politics," in *The City of God: A collection of Essays*, 75-91; Jean Bethke-Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998); John von Heyking, *Augustine and Politics as Longing in the World* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2001); Thomas Smith, "the Glory and Tragedy of Politics", in *Augustine and Politics* eds. John Doody, Kevin Hughes, Kim Paffenroth, 187-213 (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005).

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