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# MORE THAN AN "IMMODERATE SUPERSTITION": CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN THE FIRST THREE CENTURIES

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MORE THAN AN “IMMODERATE SUPERSTITION”:  
CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN THE FIRST THREE CENTURIES

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THESIS

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By

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Lexington, Kentucky

2013

## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### MORE THAN AN “IMMODERATE SUPERSTITION”: CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN THE FIRST THREE CENTURIES

Only recently have scholars given particular attention to the development of the racial discourse present in early Christian apologetics. This study is aimed at understanding the Latin and Greek literary antecedents to the development of a Christian discourse on race and identity and examining in detail the apex of this discourse in the work of third century apologist Origen of Alexandria. Origen’s work represented the apex of an evolving discourse that, while continuing to use traditional vocabulary, became increasingly universalizing with the growth of the Roman Empire. By understanding how Christians in the first three centuries shaped their attitudes on race and identity, scholars can better comprehend the place of Christianity within the cultural framework of the Roman Empire.

**KEYWORDS:** Race, Identity, Origen of Alexandria, Roman Empire (c. 50 – 300 CE), Early Christianity

Edward Mason  
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## Chapter One: Introduction

### The Problem

Until the earlier part of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the status of Christianity in the Roman Empire was very problematic.<sup>1</sup> There seemed to be an unbridgeable cultural gap between Christianity and Romanity<sup>2</sup>. The Romans attacked Christianity as a seditious threat, believing that disregard for the traditional forms of Roman religion was dangerous to the existence of the empire. When Pliny wrote to the emperor Trajan that Christianity was *superstitionem pravam et immodicam* “a perverse and immoderate superstition”, it was a serious charge against Christianity’s legitimacy and religious status.<sup>3</sup> Tacitus, although noting that some were sympathetic towards the Christians, still believed that Christianity was a *exitibilis superstitio* (destructive superstition).<sup>4</sup> The polemicist Celsus believed that Christians exhibited a disregard for *pietas*, the sense of duty that was necessary for the existence of the empire. Celsus delegitimated

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars have discussed this issue at great length, unfortunately this paper will only be able to address a fraction of the date available. For more information on this topic see in particular, Robert Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, (New York: Knopf, 1987); Luke Timothy Johnson, *Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Simply describing who the “Christians” and the “Romans” were is an understandably difficult task in itself. The difficulties in explaining the complexities of what it meant to be Christian is well known during this period, but it should also be stated that what it meant to be Roman was hard to pin down as well. See John Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, trans. Janet Lloyd, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 1 – 3.

<sup>3</sup> Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae*, 10.96 (*Plinius Minor*, Konrad Mueller (ed), Bibliotheca Teubneriana. [Leipzig: Teubner, 1995], 356.)

<sup>4</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44.3 (*Annales* Erich Koestermann (ed), Bibliotheca Teubneriana, [Leipzig: Teubner, 1969],356.)



Christianity, claiming that it was the invention of “only ten sailors and tax-collectors of the most abominable character, and not even all of these.”<sup>5</sup>

On the one hand, some apologists such as Tatian responded to his opponents with the same religious polemical rhetoric: “And what sort of thing is your instruction (διδάγματα)? Who would not disdain your public festivals (πανηγύρεις), which are held for demons (δαιμόνων) and pervert humans to dishonor (ἀδοξίαν)?”<sup>6</sup> These authors adopted a long-standing tradition of religious polemic in the ancient world. They employed a similar rhetoric as their opponents to deny the legitimacy of their opponent’s religion. But many, if not most, Christian writers also adopted a very different rhetorical strategy. They claimed Christians were good Romans and Christianity was beneficial for the empire. Christianity, according to these apologists, would ensure the divine favor necessary for the continued existence of the empire.

Recently, scholars have started to examine the rhetorical opposition between Christian and Roman identity, challenging the sharp distinction that many Christian and non-Christian Romans themselves drew.<sup>7</sup> During his discussion of Roman religion, John

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<sup>5</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 2.46 (*Contra Celse*, Marcel Borret (ed) Source chrétiennes 132, [Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1967], 338.)

<sup>6</sup> Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 22.1 (*Tatiani Oratio Ad Graecos*, Miroslav Marcovich (ed) [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995], 44.) Tatian actually refers to Christianity as “barbarian wisdom”, which in itself is a unique and interesting ethnic statement about religion.

<sup>7</sup> Identity itself, just like ethnicity and culture, is also problematic to address. Inherent in the notion of identity is a dichotomy between “us” and “them”. These binary distinctions only serve to obscure the vast number of complexities that make up identity formation. Perkins believes as much, stating, “to define someone as a ‘Christian’ or an ‘elite Greek Roman’ is to elide and occlude the many other components (sexual, ethnic,

Scheid proposed “Dans quelle mesure le christianisme a-t-il été romanisé ? S'agit-il d'une ultime naturalization d'un culte étranger? Ce sont des questions qu'on peut se poser. Mais elles ne sont plus de notre ressort.”<sup>8</sup> Perhaps an examination of the connection between Christianity and Roman identity through the third century can help answer Scheid’s question about the how Roman Christianity was. The discourse of Roman identity itself had evolved over the centuries spanning the transition from polis-state to world-state<sup>9</sup>. As the empire became larger, an understanding of what it meant to be Roman spread throughout the Mediterranean, and this process was also

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economic, political, religious) that contribute to and complicate the subject’s identity.” (Judith Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities in the Early Christian Era*, [New York: Routledge, 2009], 2.) Philip Harland argues that collective identity often “best corresponds to our subjects answering the question Who are *we*? as well as What distinguishes us from other groups in society? and Where do we draw the lines (or boundaries) between our group and others?” (Philip Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of the Early Christians: Associations, Judeans, and Cultural Minorities*, [New York: T & T Clark, 2009], 6.) Lastly, sociologist Richard Jenkins stated that collective identity is “our understanding of who we are and of who other people are, and reciprocally, other people’s understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us).” (Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity*, [New York: Routledge, 2004], 5.) These are the issues that ancient authors were seeking to answer when they constructed their formations of who they were. The whole process of identity formation is built around ethnicity and culture, making all of these processes interconnected through a very complex web of identity formation.

<sup>8</sup> “To what extent was Christianity Romanized? Is it the final naturalization of an alien cult? These are the questions that could arise. But they are no longer our responsibility.” John Scheid, *Religion et piété à Rome*, (Paris: Albin Michel, 1983) 127. Scheid, however, also makes the argument that much previous scholarship has not seen Roman religion in its proper light due to the prominence of Christianity.

<sup>9</sup> “Using the term ‘religion of the polis’, or ‘polis-religion’ for short, helps us avoid the clearly anachronistic term ‘state religion’ (which would then have to be clearly differentiated from ‘private religion’).” Jörg Rüpke, *Religion of the Romans*, trans. Richard Gordon, (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 19. See also, Gregory Woolf, “Polis-religion and its Alternatives in the Roman Provinces,” in Clifford Ando (ed) *Roman Religion*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 41 – 44.

transformative. This process of self-identification defined culturally how the Romans understood themselves and was expressed through art, literature, and social rituals.<sup>10</sup> Over this period of time the discourse of identity dramatically shifts, and it is exactly this shift in discourse of ethnicity/identity that focuses our investigation.

We will examine how numerous non-Christian Roman authors developed self-identifying tropes and discourses that over time created a common sense of identity built around cultural fields such as religion, race, and virtue. In particular, since much of the discourse of identity was tied to ethnic terminology and the specifics this terminology entailed, a discussion of race is vital for truly understanding the connection between Christian and Roman identity. Christian authors such as Origen found themselves in the middle of this dialogue about race and identity, not passively but as active participants. Thus, understanding the discourse on Christian/Roman identity requires an analysis of Roman and Christian ethnography. Furthermore, the sense of identity which late antique culture cultivated was first and foremost mutable.<sup>11</sup> Over time, coinciding with the developing cultural unification brought about by imperial rule, the relationship between Christianity and Romanity became more and more interconnected by many Christian authors. This discursive process was in a constant

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<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed examination, see Emma Dench, *Romulus' Asylum: Roman Identities from the Age of Alexander to the Age of Hadrian*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> See Denise Buell, "Rethinking the Relevance of Race for Early Christian Self-Definition," *Harvard Theological Review*, 94, 4 (2001), 460. Here Buell argues that what exactly constituted Romanity was in fact "something to be argued for, not merely asserted" and that the perception of what it meant to "be Roman" changed over time.

state of evolution, eventually culminating in the claim that Christians were not simply Romans but that they were actually the best Romans. Our examination will hopefully shed some light on the murky interconnectivity between Roman and Christian identity in the period before the church and the state were institutionally integrated.

One of the most important fields for understanding this process is religion, which was associated with race in antiquity. Of course, race and ethnicity are very problematic methodologically. There is often a disconnect between what modern readers think of the word “race” and its historical use. As Benjamin Isaac stated, “The term race is therefore no longer used in the sense of ‘a tribe’ or ‘a people,’ as is common in some of the older literature, for we no longer accept the idea that a nation or people can be seen to have a common ancestor.”<sup>12</sup> But the Romans, both Christian and non-Christian, did have this understanding, and this construction of race is essential to our analysis. Aaron Johnson stated, “Racial identities are, at the very outset, dependent on ways of speaking. The identifications by which we make sense of ourselves and others, and by which we organize our social worlds, are fundamentally derived from particular vocabularies and their attendant conceptual categories.”<sup>13</sup> It is exactly this discursive

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<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Isaac, *Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 25 – 26.

<sup>13</sup> Aaron Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 25. See also later on pg. 29 when he states, “This emphasis upon the rhetoric and the representation of identities within texts, combined with the recognition that the markers of ethnic difference are not all necessary in every occurrence of ethnic identity formation, is also important for the study of ancient ethnicities because it allows us to adapt our modern understandings to the ancient conceptions of peoplehood. We need not force the ancient articulations into an

element of race that is important for the present study, since the heart of the issue is how early Christian authors fit into this discourse.

### **Methodology and Historiography**

While scholars have often seemed divided on the particular cultural fields that constitute ethnicity, they usually have agreed that race is a central construction of identity.<sup>14</sup> Some anthropologists have defined ethnicity as “composite of shared values, beliefs, norms, tastes, behaviors, experiences, consciousness of kind, memories, and loyalties”; in essence stating that ethnicity is culturally defined.<sup>15</sup> Anthony Smith provided six key points that he believed constituted a race – 1) a collective name; 2) a common myth of descent; 3) a shared history; 4) a distinctive shared culture; 5) association with a specific territory; 6) a sense of solidarity. For him, groups that shared these characteristics would have considered themselves of the same race.<sup>16</sup> Ethnicity is something that is socially constructed rather than being a natural category.

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anachronistic modern framework; nor need we neglect evidence that does not quite fit within rigid classifications. In other words, a discursive approach to ethnicity allows for sensitivity to the ancient literary phenomena.”

<sup>14</sup> See Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, (Boston: Little Brown, 1969), 10 – 15; Thomas H. Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*, (Boulder: Pluto Press, 1993), 20- 22; Colin Renfrew, “From Here to Ethnicity”, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (1998), 275 – 277.

<sup>15</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2000), 80.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony Smith, *Ethnic Origins of Nations*, (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 1987), 23 – 30. Jimmy Sanders also pointed out that culture was one of the most defining characteristics of race. Jimmy Sanders, "Ethnic Boundaries and Identity in Plural Societies", *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002), 327 – 328.

But although we today recognize racial definition as a cultural construction, in the ancient world it was judged a natural category.<sup>17</sup> Edward Anson defined race according to the criteria of Herodotus, stating that it encompassed particular things such as a common ancestry, shared religion and similar language.<sup>18</sup> For instance, Richard Wellington Husband long ago argued that language is the most important feature of the early Roman ethnographic discourse.<sup>19</sup> Denise Buell has particularly emphasized the relationship between race and religion:

Religion played a key role in the imperial period as a central marker of ‘what was to count as “Roman” and what was not.’ And since the content of the rituals and festivals used to demonstrate Romanness could and did shift over time, we

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<sup>17</sup> The ancient vocabulary of race itself is rather problematic. The primary vocabulary in Greek are ἔθνος and γένος, with the Latin equivalent of gens/genus. Perhaps it is for this very reason that Johnson laments how few scholars have taken it upon themselves to carefully discuss this issue. (See Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argumentation in Eusebius*, 34 – 35. He does list a few exceptions: J.K. Ward, “Ethnos in Politics: Aristotle and Race,” in J. Ward and T. Lott (eds), *Philosophers on Race* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) 14 – 37; C.P. Jones “ἔθνος and γένος in Herodotus,” *Classics Quarterly* 46 (1996) 315 – 320.) Certainly there are instances where terms such as γένος can simply refer to manner or type, but this was also the common Greek vocabulary for ethnography. Smith has stated that the term γένος is used to discuss “kinship-based” groups, whereas ἔθνος is used when discussing “cultural rather than biological” differences. He concludes, however, that both terms carry a strong racial connotation. While the philological issues surrounding race in antiquity were extremely complex due to the constantly evolving definitions of race and ethnicity, it remains that the racial discourse is clearly tied up in this vocabulary.

<sup>18</sup> Edward Anson, “Greek Ethnicity and the Greek Language”, *Glotta*, Bd. 85 (2009), 6.

<sup>19</sup> Certainly Husband’s argument has been convincing, as scholars to this day place a much weight (oftentimes very rightfully so) on the role that language played in the racial discourse. See Richard Wellington Husband, “Race Mixture in Early Rome,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 40 (1909). See also Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, “To be Roman, Go Greek: Thoughts on Hellenization at Rome”, *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (1998).

should recognize that Romanness was a work-in-progress, something to be argued for, not merely asserted.<sup>20</sup>

For all the scholars mentioned, it is important to understand that religion is mentioned as one of the important facets of race. Jonathan Hall argues that this is the major point Herodotus was trying to make when discussing ethnicity. He believes that the historian was defining ethnicity along the lines of religion as a subset of culture.<sup>21</sup> Although Smith does not outright mention religion as one of the major components of race, he mentions both a “common myth of descent” and a “distinctive shared culture.” Both of these elements are bound up in religion, particularly in the ancient world, and it is through this ethnogenetic mythology that race and religion were tied together.

In late antiquity however, race was a not a static concept and it is important to understand how views on race/ethnicity shift over time.<sup>22</sup> Buell argues at great length that we must accept the Christian discourse on race as one that is malleable and in a constant state of evolution; she argues that “Christians depicted Christianness as having an ‘essence’ (a fixed content) that can be acquired. Christians could define conversion as both the transformation of one’s ethnicity and the restoration of one’s true

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<sup>20</sup> Denise Buell, “Rethinking the Relevance of Race for Early Christian Self-Identification,” *Harvard Theological Review*, 94, 4 (2001), 460. Buell makes the same argument in her book, but here she very succinctly (and openly) states that this is the case.

<sup>21</sup> Jonathon Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 44 – 45.

<sup>22</sup> See Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity*, 33; in particular see Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) upon which this work owes a great debt.

identity.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, as Buell has pointed out, Christianity presented itself as a universally inclusive religion while at the same time using ethnographic *topoi*; Christian authors were able to do this because race was culturally constantly redefined characteristic.

Building upon this notion, Buell agreed that these words should retain their racial connotation. She argued that “genos and ethnos appear to be the preferred terms in the Roman imperial period for Christians and non-Christians alike to refer to ethnoracial groupings, but there is a considerable variety in what might constitute an ethnoracial group in antiquity.”<sup>24</sup> However, she differed slightly with the take of Smith or Hall in arguing that those in the Roman period did not necessarily have a very fixed differentiation between the terms γένος and ἔθνος. Her argument was that since ancient authors had no strong sense of difference between these words, ethnic terminology should simply be translated as “people”, “race”, or “ethnicity”. Building on Buell’s interpretation, I will be translating these words (as well as the Latin *gens/genus*) as “race” when applicable. Following Buell and allowing the vocabulary to maintain its racial characteristics, the ancient texts will be properly contextualized. This will allow the translations of the texts to be seen in their proper cultural context.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Buell, *Why this New Race*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Buell, “Rethinking the Relevance of Race”, 456 n. 20.

<sup>25</sup> Culture is another problematic term to discuss, as mentioned in Wallace-Hadrill, “Mutatio Morum: The Idea of a Cultural Revolution”, in N.T. Habinek and S. Schiesaro (eds) *The Roman Cultural Revolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 8. There are a wide variety of definitions offered for the word. Clifford Gertz has stated it is “system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life.” Clifford Gertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, (New York: Basic



The construction of religion, race and identity in late antiquity was first and foremost literary, and the texts that constructed these concepts were themselves highly constructed. Late antique authors were constrained in their expression by the mimetic limits of the late antique educational system, *paideia*, which carries with it the connotation of literature and socialization that embodied the education of late antiquity.<sup>26</sup> *Paideia* created a literary ethos in which the reproduction of literary tropes was encouraged, and “traditional” rhetorical forms were copied even as the meaning of those forms shifted. Romans, both Christians and non-Christians equally participated in the literary and social *paideia* and employed more often than not, the same literary terms and clichés. Thus, the same cultural vocabulary – like race – although reproduced throughout the period we are examining, shifted meaning without shifting form. Schott demonstrated how important this connection between *paideia* and identity formation is by stating that it “refers simultaneously to the act and content of education and may

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Books, 1973), 89. Additionally, Jeremy Schott states: “‘Culture,’ [unlike race] in contrast, is not considered geographically bound or biologically determined. One may become ‘acculturated’; that is, one may access a new cultural identity through various performances, such as learning a particular koine (such as American English) and participating in certain ideological expressions (such as ‘being patriotic’). If ethnicity is considered inherited, culture is perceived as to some extent elective.” Jeremy Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 5. Schott concludes that culture is something elective rather than inherited. Just like race, culture is discursive and evolves over time as various elements influence it.

<sup>26</sup> See Werner Jaeger’s extensive (and exhaustive) work, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, Vol. 1 - 3, trans. Gilbert Highet, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939 – 1944). Here Jaeger discusses *paideia* at great length in his three volume work on the subject, explaining how the term evolved from the archaic period of Greece to the classical period.

best be rendered as ‘acculturation.’”<sup>27</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I am mostly concerned with the literary culture of late antiquity as it is through writing that these authors define the discourse on identity and race. As David Rankin wrote, this was “a world where *paideia* was understood as not only education in the conventional sense but also as ‘culture’ in the modern.”<sup>28</sup> Schott agrees with Rankin’s assessment of *paideia* as culture, stating, “theoretically, elective; no matter one’s ethnos, one could ‘become Greek’ by acculturating oneself through rigorous education and the mimetic practice of Greekness via writing, declamation, and other performances.”<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, it is this understanding of culture that will come to define how Romans, and Christians as well, fashioned their ideas on identity and race. The reification of culture must be understood as a vital part of the late antique discourse on identity, and we will examine the evolution of that discourse.

Scholars have spent a great deal of time examining ethnic and identity formation and there are many seminal studies of race and identity during the Roman period. A.N. Sherwin-White asserted the existence of racial strife in the Roman Empire, stating that especially between the Romans and Jews in the eastern provinces there existed a strong racial animosity. Sherwin-White associated cultural characteristics such as religion with

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<sup>27</sup> Schott, *Christianity*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> David Rankin, *From Clement to Origen: The Social and Historical Context of the Church Fathers*, (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 3.

<sup>29</sup> Schott, *Christianity*, 6. See also, 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*, Simon Goldhill (ed) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 299 – 303.

race. However, he recognized that there is “no genuinely racial or racist connotation” and that the “distinction is political, social and religious, national rather than genetic.”<sup>30</sup> J.P.V.D. Balsdon provided another important study of Roman ethnography. He sought to examine the attitudes that Romans held about other races and reciprocally, how those races felt towards the Romans.<sup>31</sup> Many scholars writing about identity have dealt specifically with the relationship between Greeks living under Roman rule and the Romans who ruled them.<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Isaac’s analysis focused more on the shifts in the literary imagery of race, raising questions about evolving “stereotypes in ancient literature” and “what they show about mentalities.”<sup>33</sup> What these studies share is the recognition that race is tied closely to culture and religion is a cultural phenomenon that binds it to race.

But scholars like Isaac have also noted that Roman identity is an inherently slippery historical problem because it shifts constantly. As John Scheid wrote:

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<sup>30</sup> A.N. Sherwin-White, *Racial Prejudice in Imperial Rome*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1967), esp. 86 – 99.

<sup>31</sup> J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *Romans and Aliens*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

<sup>32</sup> Barbara Borg, *Paideia: The World of the Second Sophistic*, (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004); Simon Goldhill, *Being Greek Under Rome: Cultural Identity, the Second Sophistic, and the Development of Empire*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Konstan, D. and Saïd, S. (eds) *Greeks on Greekness: Viewing the Greek Past under the Roman Empire*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 2006); Simon Swain, *Hellenism and Empire: Language, Classicism, and Power in the Greek World, AD 50 – 250*, (New York: Clarendon Press, 1996); and Timothy Whitmarsh, *Greek Literature and the Roman Empire: The Politics of Imitation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>33</sup> Isaac, *Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, 41. Isaac concludes that those in antiquity did not possess the same types of views on racial prejudice as modern people do, however, modern society does owe “some of the elementary concepts of discrimination and inequality that are still with us.” *Ibid.*, 516.

The cultural identity of a 'Roman' differed from one period to another. From the first century BC onward, he might have been a native of a city in Italy – a city in Umbria, Etruria, or Magna Graecia – and soon even of a city overseas. Under the Empire, there were 'Romans' throughout the Roman world; some were descended from emigrants from Rome and Italy, others were naturalized foreigners (*peregrini*).<sup>34</sup>

Scheid is not the only scholar to note this phenomenon. Richard Hingley also discussed this problem, stating that identity was flexible and, above all, "vulnerable to alternative readings."<sup>35</sup> However, scholars have seemed to agree that identity was an evolving cultural issue.

Scholarship on the process of Romanization illustrates the plastic nature of identity in great detail.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, some have even argued that using the term Romanization only causes problems.<sup>37</sup> Although it is true that classical authors did not make use of the term, scholarship has demonstrated that it can be a useful tool at explaining the process of identity formation during the imperial period. T.J. Cornell argued that this goes back to the early years of Rome, where a central feature of identity formation was incorporating other peoples in Italy.<sup>38</sup> Isaac agreed with

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<sup>34</sup> Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Hingley, *Globalizing Roman Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), esp. 71. See also, J.C. Barrett, 'Theorising Roman Archaeology', in K. Meadows, C. Lemke and J. Heron (eds) *TRAC 1996: Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Theoretical Archaeology Conference Sheffield*, (Oxford: Oxbow, 1996), 6.

<sup>36</sup> I would like to thank Dan Gargola for providing me direction and bibliography in researching this topic.

<sup>37</sup> Syme has referred to the term as "anachronistic and misleading." Robert Syme, 'Rome and the Nations', in *Roman Papers IV*, E. Birley (ed), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 64.

<sup>38</sup> T.J. Cornell, *The Beginnings of Rome: Italy and Rome from the Bronze Age to the Punic Wars (c. 1000 – 264 BC)* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 41.

Cornell's statement, arguing that it is that exact process of incorporating other peoples which led to Romanization through "ethnic disintegration or decomposition."<sup>39</sup> Greg Woolf provided the most erudite account of this process in his study of provincial Gaul. Here he gave a very succinct and beneficial definition of Romanization: "Romanization is a convenient shorthand for the series of cultural changes that created an imperial civilization, within which both differences and similarities came to form a coherent pattern."<sup>40</sup> As Woolf pointed out, "becoming Roman" is not simply the adoption of various Roman customs and beliefs by one people, but rather involves a very complex system of processes that result in acculturation.

Some of these questions of Romanization and Roman identity have been also addressed by early Christian scholars.<sup>41</sup> This is not to say that previous scholars have been uninterested in race, as scholarship does stretch back some time.<sup>42</sup> More recently however, several scholars have made very insightful advances into the study of Christian

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<sup>39</sup> Isaac, *Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Greg Woolf, *Becoming Roman: The Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 7. See also pg. 11 where he further explains this process by stating, "Becoming Roman was not a matter of acquiring a ready-made cultural package, then, so much as joining the insiders' debate about what that package did or ought to consist of at that particular time."

<sup>41</sup> I would like to thank David Hunter for providing helpful direction and bibliography in this research.

<sup>42</sup> See Adolf von Harnack, "The Tidings of the New People and of the Third Race', in *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, Adolf von Harnack, trans. James Moffat (New York: Harper and Bros., 1962), 240 – 278. Harnack, however, goes to great lengths to dismiss the ethnic elements of early Christian authors.

identity and ethnicity.<sup>43</sup> Buell in particular has done a great deal to point out the role that ethnicity played in the rhetoric of early Christianity. She stated that “early Christian texts used culturally available understandings of human difference, which we can analyze in terms of our modern concepts of ‘ethnicity,’ ‘race,’ and ‘religion,’ to shape what we have come to call a religious tradition and to portray particular forms of Christianness as universal and authoritative.”<sup>44</sup> She referred to the method used by early Christian authors as “ethnic reasoning”, and argues for a fixity-fluidity dialectic in the conception of race. Furthermore, Buell argued that even though Christianity viewed itself as a universalizing system, Christians did not refrain from using ethnic arguments in its apologetics. But she provided a sweeping survey of all literature during the early Christian period, meaning in essence she is unable to fully devote a great deal of attention to any specific author.<sup>45</sup> Johnson’s book on the other hand argued specifically about the ethnic arguments in the work of Eusebius (the *Praeparatio Evangelica* in particular). To a great degree, he furthered the work of Buell. He even agreed that his own “ethnic argumentation” is similar to Buell’s notion of “ethnic reasoning.”<sup>46</sup> His argument was that Christianity contended for an ethnic identity the same as other

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<sup>43</sup> See in particular, Buell, *Why This New Race*; ‘Rethinking the Relevance of Race for Early Christian Self-Definition’; Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argumentation in Eusebius*.

<sup>44</sup> Buell, *Why this New Race*, 2.

<sup>45</sup> This claim was made of Buell’s work in Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*. Harland’s criticism was specifically Buell’s lack of archeological evidence. However, Harland’s work on small groups and local associations is too narrow for the present study.

<sup>46</sup> Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argumentation in Eusebius*, 2. As Johnson points out, other scholars use a variety of terms to explain this process, for instance G. Byron uses the term “ethno-political rhetoric.” G. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature*, (New York: Routledge, 2002).

groups did, because they were a part of the late antique landscape. Thus, they used the same cultural material to define themselves. Understanding the role that ethnicity played in the process of Christian identity formation is vital for understanding what it meant to be a Christian during this time period.

Jeremy Schott also agreed with Buell and Johnson; he believed that it would be problematic draw sharp differentiations between ethnicity and culture in late antiquity. He stated that it is impossible to make “fast distinctions between constructions of ethnic and cultural identity, on the one hand, and religious identity, on the other hand.”<sup>47</sup>

Although Schott was dealing with the period immediately following this paper, as he was explaining how Christianity went from a minority religion to the imperial religion under Constantine. Thus, his insight that Christian identity was culturally based remains relevant to this study. Lieu made similar claims, arguing for a fluid, non-static identity formation process during the second and third centuries. Perhaps one of Lieu’s most important insights was that the construction of Christian identity was primarily textual.<sup>48</sup>

It is in this way that the focus on *paideia* becomes so important. Just as Perkins discussed how Christians were responding to the same concerns as non-Christians,<sup>49</sup>

Lieu believed that “the Christian rhetoric of identity, even when making universalist

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<sup>47</sup> Schott, *Christianity*, 8.

<sup>48</sup> Judith Lieu, *Identity*, esp. chapter 2 “Text and Identity”; see also Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 21.

<sup>49</sup> Perkins argues that the circumstances of the earlier imperial period and the possibility the for disempowerment under the Romans led both Christians and pagans to use the same criteria to construct their identities. Perkins, however, believes that their formulations were entirely different. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*.

claims, is articulated in the terms also used in Graeco-Roman ethnography and identity formulation.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, Lieu believed that it is due to cultural concepts learned from *paideia* which Roman authors, both Christian and non-Christian, that the process of identification occurred. This seems to be the scholarly consensus on the topic. Harland even provided a very clear example of how the contemporary model of the family played a vital role in how Christian congregations were constructed.<sup>51</sup> Relying upon the foundation that they have built, it is possible to ask new questions about the development of identity in late antiquity.

The case of Origen is one area where new questions can be asked and examined. This is because Origen represents the climax of the pre-Constantinian evolution of Christian identity. By Origen’s time, ethnic discourse had shifted to reflect the growing cultural universalism of the empire and Origen’s work represents critical evidence that Christian authors followed that evolution as well as their non-Christian contemporaries. As Schott stated, it was “during this time in the fourth century that ‘religion’ was emerging as both the primary marker of ethnic and cultural identity and the central

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<sup>50</sup> Lieu, *Identity*, 20. See also D. Buell, “Rethinking the Relevance of Race for Early Christian Self-Definition”.

<sup>51</sup> Harland, *Dynamics of Identity*, 182. This all leads Harland to conclude, with which I agree, that “The attention to shared modes of identity construction, negotiation, and communication is not meant to suggest that Christians were not unique. However, Christians were unique or distinctive insofar as every association, minority group, or ethnic group was unique or distinctive, each in its own way.” 185.



basis for (Christian) Roman imperial power.”<sup>52</sup> However, it is worth asking how the third century constituted an important step in this development.

Furthermore, the major works about the life and work of Origen have not often discuss his ethnic and political views; and have not often discussed Origen’s construction of identity, particularly racial identity.<sup>53</sup> The most recent author, Crouzel offered a very informative and invaluable look into the exegesis and theology of Origen. However, like other scholars, his work was almost entirely about the religious thought of Origen.<sup>54</sup> Joseph Trigg very briefly touched upon the relationship between Christianity and the Roman Empire. However, as this was not the focus of his work, the time spent was only short few pages focused mostly about the role of Christians in the Roman military.<sup>55</sup>

This is no surprise because of the immeasurable impact of Origen’s contribution to Christian theology and exegesis. But, one of the rare exceptions to this scholarly focus, Gerard Caspary, did touch on the connection between Christianity and

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<sup>52</sup> Schott, *Christianity*, 14.

<sup>53</sup> Pierre Nautin, *Origène: sa vie et son œuvre*, (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977); Jean Daniélou, *Origen* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955); Henri Crouzel, *Origen*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989); Joseph Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-century Church*, (Atlanta: J. Knox, 1983).

<sup>54</sup> See, John Clark Smith, *The Ancient Wisdom of Origen*, (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1992); Benjamin Drewery, *Origen and the Doctrine of Grace*, (London: Epworth Press, 1960); Carl V. Harris, *Origen of Alexandria’s Interpretation of the Teacher’s Function in the Early Christian Hierarchy and Community*, (New York: American Press, 1966); Eugene Gallagher, *Divine Man or Magician?: Celsus and Origen on Jesus*, (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982).

<sup>55</sup> Trigg, *Origen*, 235 – 237.

imperialism.<sup>56</sup> He stated, “For Origen the birth and expansion of the Empire is intimately bound up with the spread and the very survival of the Church.”<sup>57</sup> However, despite the connection that Caspary made between the two, his discussion did not include the complex role that ethnicity played in shaping Origen’s view of Christian and Roman identity. In addition to this, due to the scope of works such as Buell’s and Lieu’s, they were unable to devote specific attention to authors such as Origen. Thus, by building upon the framework of previous scholars, it allows me to add nuance to the field by asking questions about how the evolving imperial rhetorics of nature and convention and the virtues of citizenship were appropriated by early Christian apologists and climaxed in the work of Origen to create a Christian Roman identity.

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<sup>56</sup> Gerard Caspary, *Politics and Exegesis: Origen and the Two Swords*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) esp. 125 – 182, “Theology of Politics”

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

## Chapter Two: Race and Identity in the Roman Empire

### The Inheritance of Romulus: Roman Antecedents on Race

Romans, both Christians and non-Christians, shared a literary ethnographic tradition. As mentioned, one of the elements of the traditional ancient ethnography was geography. This was something that continued into the early imperial period. For instance, Vellius Paterculus wrote that after one crossed the Rhine River, the people there only had the appearance of being human.<sup>58</sup> According to Balsdon, this allowed one to make any claim one wanted about those in the northern extremities.<sup>59</sup> Races living on the periphery of the Roman borders were often described in negative ways, thus allowing the Romans to demonstrate the superiority of the Roman race over them as “others”. Second century Alexandrian Claudius Ptolemy wrote that the racial physiognomy of Africa owed their darker complexions on their proximity to the sun, directly demonstrating for him that race is a function of geography.<sup>60</sup> Similarly Cicero believed that geography played a key role in the defining of ethnicity. He stated that the tendency towards trickery inherent in the Carthaginians was due to their proximity to the sea (*natura loci*, “by nature of the place”); the ports called for involvement with

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<sup>58</sup> qui nihil praeter vocem membraque haberent hominum ([The Germans were those] who only had the voice and limbs of men.) Vellius Paterculus, *Historiae Romanae*, 2.117.3; (At illi, quod nisi expertus vix credat, in summa feritate versutissimi natumque mendacio genus) 2.118.1 (*Historiarum Libri Duo*, William Watt (ed), Bibliotheca Teubneriana [Leipzig: Teubner, 1978], 80 – 81).

<sup>59</sup> J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *Romans and Aliens*, 59. For another detailed description of Roman ethnography, see A.N. Sherwin-White, *Racial Prejudice in Imperial Rome*.

<sup>60</sup> Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, 2.2.56 (*Tetrabiblos*, F.E. Robbins (ed) Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940], 122.)

merchants and foreign peoples which corrupted their nature.<sup>61</sup> For these authors, Rome was at the heart of the world and its geographic influence on various races diminished as proximity from the city did.

At this earlier period, Rome was the imperial center and there was a particularly strong notion that the further one got from the city itself, the less Roman (and less civilized) things were. This is an idea that would shift over time as Roman headquarters changed from the city of Rome to the *praetorium*, wherever the emperor might reside. This is a shift that coincides with the change of Rome from an Italian state to a Mediterranean state. The growth of the empire necessitated the evolution of the racial discourse, but even in imperial times the traditional literary construction of racial identities continued to be reproduced. Using geography as an element of Roman ethnography allowed Roman authors to define those outside the empire as racially different from them. This allowed them to simultaneously define Romans as superior and explain differences between Romans and the “other.”<sup>62</sup>

But as important as was geography, genealogy was no less important. Roman authors such as Livy and Virgil felt compelled to trace Roman lineage to a divine source.

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<sup>61</sup> Cicero, *De Lege Agraria*, 2.95 (*M. Tulli Ciceronis Orationes*, Vol. 4, Albert Clark (ed), Oxford Classical Texts [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1905])

<sup>62</sup> For instance, the term “barbarian” changed greatly over time. Herodotus was able to write about the Persians, whom he certainly did not believe were uncivilized, as τοὺς βαρβάρους in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE (Herodotus, *Histories*, 8.9). However, by the Roman imperial period, the term did in fact carry a derogatory connotation. For more on this development, see Greg Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians: Ethnography and Empire in the Roman West*, *Blackwell Bristol Lectures on Greece, Rome and the Classical Tradition*, (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), esp. chapter two, “Explaining the Barbarians”.

Virgil, writing towards the end of the first century BCE, would have been setting precedents for the way in which Augustus's new state would have viewed itself. The *Aeneid* would have been a way for the state to propagate a shared descent myth in order to bind Romans together. This is remarkably important for understanding the relationship between race and religion; for the Romans religion was an agreement to follow a certain set of laws and customs between a progenitor and a divinity and thus the progenitor from whom the Romans traced their lineage was vastly important. Livy argued that city itself was founded through direct consultation with the gods (*auspicato inauguratoque*). He further clarified, *nullus locus in ea non religionum deorumque est plenus* ("There is not spot in [the city] which his not full of religion and the gods.")<sup>63</sup> As Smith stated, possessing a shared descent myth is important for group unity. It need not be that Romans actually believed these genealogical myths per se, but rather that they allowed Romans the opportunity to present a shared heritage that could be traced back to ancient times. Later on, one of the more damning claims thrown at Christianity by pagans would be a lack of an ancient genealogy in their religion – Christians lacked a legitimate progenitor. The mere fact that Christians would go to such great lengths, as seen in the *Epistle of Barnabus*, to prove this wrong demonstrates the degree to which both Roman and Christian authors valued genealogy.

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<sup>63</sup> Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, 5.52.2 (*Titii Livi Ab urbe condita, vol. 2*, Robert Conway and Stephen Johnson (eds), Oxford Classical Texts, [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974], 385 - 386).

Livy and Virgil shared a similar founding myth story. They both claim that the Romans come from Trojan stock; Aeneas himself is even believed to have divine parentage.<sup>64</sup> According to Virgil and Livy, Aeneas' mother was none other than the goddess Venus, and she made it her task to ensure that Aeneas completed his task of founding Rome. Thus, Virgil can simultaneously claim that the Roman Empire has an ancient foundation but also that this can be traced to the gods; additionally, he can demonstrate that Augustus himself is from divine stock. In this way, Virgil is making a very strong connection between imperial authority and religion. It was not just Aeneas to whom Roman authors attributed divine parentage. Roman mythology states that Romulus' father was the god Mars. Furthermore, Romulus was given favor by the gods when he and his brother used augury to ascertain the exact location in which to found the city of Rome.<sup>65</sup> Both mythologies have specific purposes, but regardless of whether the particular mythology traces the founding back to Romulus or Aeneas, it is clear that the authors of these myths wish to demonstrate the divine lineage of Rome. This in turn connects the cultural field of genealogy to that of religion in the ethnographic discourse.

Imperialism transformed the discourse of race. As Roman became a Mediterranean rather than Italian designation, imperial authors had to reconfigure

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<sup>64</sup> Livy, *Ab Urbe Cond.*, 1.1 (Conway, Johnson 1:5); Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1.297 – 331 (*Opera*, R.A.B. Mynors (ed), Oxford Classical Texts, [London: Oxford University Press, 1969], 112 - 113).

<sup>65</sup> Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, 1.85 (*Dionysii Halicarnasei Antiquitatum Romanarum quae supersunt, vol. 1*, Karl Jacoby (ed), Bibliotheca Teubneriana, [Leipzig: Teubner, 1885], 145).

traditional tropes and rhetorics to reflect the changing Roman demographic. Roman foundation myths had often involved early Romans assimilating other racial groups. Livy wrote that the Romans were not reluctant to mix with other races.<sup>66</sup> But by the second century, Florus, detailing the early history of Rome, wrote that “Since the Roman people united in itself the Etruscans, the Latins, and the Sabines, and traces the same descent from all alike, it has formed a body made up of various members and is a single people composed of all these elements.”<sup>67</sup> Florus began to revalue racial identity in the imperial period as a race of all races. By the end of the second century, the Roman race was firmly universal and no longer biological. Aelius Aristides wrote:

You have cause the word ‘Roman’ to belong to not a city, but to be the name of a sort of common race (γένους ὄνομα κοινού τινος), and this not one out of all races, but a balance to all the remaining ones. You do not divide the races (τὰ γένη) into Greeks and barbarians... you have divided people into Romans and non-Romans (Ῥωμαίους τε καὶ οὐ Ῥωμαίους).<sup>68</sup>

Aelius Aristides illustrated the continuity of literary form and the transformation of literary meaning in this period of cultural and demographic change. He Aristides is using the traditional vocabulary for race (τὰ γένη) while at the same time defining incorporating the universalizing rhetoric which had developed as imperialism spread.

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<sup>66</sup> Livy, *Ab Urbe Cond.*, 1.9.4 (Conway, Johnson 1:13).

<sup>67</sup> corpus fecit ex membris et ex omnibus unus est. Florus, *Epitomae Historiae Romanae*, 2.6.1 (*Epitome of Roman History*, Edward Seymour Forster (ed), Loeb Classical Library, [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984], 233).

<sup>68</sup> Aelius Aristides, *Orationes 14*, 26.63 – 65 (*Aristides ex recensione Guilielmi Dindorfii*, Wilhelm Dindorf (ed), [Leipzig: Hildesheim G. Olms, 1964], 348.) (Translation from Charles Berh, *Aelius Aristides: The Complete Works*, Vol. 2 [Leiden: Brill, 1981], 86).

The Romans were a *genos*, but not defined in the same way as a *genos* would have been by authors such as Herodotus.

As mentioned earlier, religion, as a component of race, is based upon the contract between a progenitor and a divinity (or divinities for that matter). According to Mary Beard, Roman authors believed that “each foreign race had its own characteristic religious practices.”<sup>69</sup> By extension, each race also had its own distinct gods. The Romans themselves had no clearly Roman liturgies; rather they borrowed and annexed various religious practices from various other races. However, the Romans believed that they practiced their religion better than others – this was clear, according to Livy, in the simple fact that the city became so great.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, it is through this process that Dionysius of Halicarnassus gives the lineage of the Romans to the Greeks rather than to barbarians. It was his belief that the Greeks, being subjects under Rome for so long would have been “barbarized if the Romans had indeed been barbarians,” since conquering races are able to impose their religious rites upon the conquered.<sup>71</sup> He is using religion in this instance to demonstrate that the racial makeup of the Romans is actually Greek, using the traditional ethnographic dichotomy between Greek and barbarian.

Religion becomes very important in determining the superiority over other races as well, as Roman authors used the religious component of race as yet another factor in

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<sup>69</sup> Mary Beard, John North, and S. Price, *Religions of Rome, Vol. 1*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 212.

<sup>70</sup> Livy, *Ab Urbe Cond.*, 5.55 (Conway, Johnson, 1:390 - 391).

<sup>71</sup> Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Rom. Ant.*, 7.70.1-5 (Jacoby, 3:111).



differentiating between themselves and the “other.” Other races, such as the Druids or the Egyptians, would often be derided as subject to *superstitio*.<sup>72</sup> More specifically, the Egyptians were often mocked more than others based on their religious practices, especially worship of animals.<sup>73</sup> To be certain, this was an accusation that would be made against the Christians on many occasions. As mentioned in the introduction, Pliny referred to Christianity as *superstitionem pravam et immodicam*<sup>74</sup> and Suetonius referred to it as “a race (*genus*) holding a new and criminal superstition.”<sup>75</sup> He was attempting to demonstrate the otherness of Christians as being distinct from Romans based upon their religious practices, and expressed that different using racial vocabulary. Religion was one of the ways in which Roman authors could draw a line separating themselves from others; it defined the Romans as Romans and everyone else as the “other”. Furthermore, the superiority of Roman religion was demonstrated by its empirical results.

Religion was one of the most important virtues by which the Romans claimed superiority over other races; it was because of religion that the Roman Empire was the *populo victore gentium*.<sup>76</sup> Maintaining the *pax deorum* and thus the favor of the gods

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<sup>72</sup> Tacitus, *Histories*, 4.54.4 (*Histoires*, Henri Goelzer (ed), Collection des universités de France, [Paris: Societe d’édition “Les Belles lettres”, 1921], 260); 4.81.2 (Goelzer, 285); 5.13.1 (Goelzer, 313).

<sup>73</sup> Juvenal, *Satires*, 15.1 - 6 (*Saturae*, J. Willis (ed) Bibliotheca Teubneriana, [Leipzig: Teubner, 1997], 200)

<sup>74</sup> Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae*, 10.96 (Mueller, 356).

<sup>75</sup> Suetonius, *Nero*, 16.2 (*Kaiserbiographien*, Otto Wittstock (ed), *Schriften und Quellen der Alten Welt*, Bd. 39. [Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993], 338) .

<sup>76</sup> Pliny the Younger, *Panegyricus Traiani*, 51.3 (Schuster, 411).

was seen to be largely responsible for success of the Romans. According to Cicero, Rome was perhaps even inferior to other races in certain regards. However, it was with regard to *religio* that Rome excelled over all others and enjoyed its power in the world.

He stated:

Moreover if we care to compare our national characteristics with those of foreign peoples (*externis*), we shall find that, while in all other respects we are only the equals or even the inferiors of others, yet In the sense of religion, that is, in reverence for the gods (*religione id est cultu deorum*), we are far superior.<sup>77</sup>

This belief is echoed in Polybius, who stated that it was due to their reverence of the gods that the Roman state was even held together.<sup>78</sup> It was very much ingrained in the minds of Roman authors that success was due to favor of the gods and thus the favor of the gods must be maintained. Roman religion was very much focused on *orthopraxy* rather than *orthodoxy*, as it was the practice of the religion that would insure the favor of the gods. It is imperative to understand that Roman authors viewed religion not as we do today (i.e., as expressed by theology) but rather they understood religion as a set of rites and rituals with material effects. Rome was great because Romans paid due service to the gods, and not only their own gods. The Roman penchant to incorporate other's gods into their reverential circle paralleled their incorporation of non-Romans through citizenship. This is why the charges of sedition leveled at Christians by Celsus

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<sup>77</sup> Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, 2.8 (*De Natura Deorum*, O. Plasberg (ed), Bibliotheca Teubneriana, [Leipzig: Teubner, 1917], 53.) (Translation from *De natura deorum*, Harris Rackham (trans.), Loeb Classical Library, [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951], 131).

<sup>78</sup> ἐν τῇ περὶ θεῶν διαλήψει. Polybius, *Histories* 6.56.6 -7 (*Polybii Historiae*, vol. 2, T. Büttner-Wobst (ed), *Bibliotheca Teubneriana*, [Leipzig: Teubner, 1889], 306).

carried so much weight. But by jeopardizing this process, the Christians were guilty of *superstitio* and endangering the very safety of the Roman state.

### **Citizenship, Pietas, and the Romans**

According to Cicero, Romulus believed that it was important to add citizens to Rome, even if they were enemies.<sup>79</sup> Citizenship carried with it certain benefits and privileges, such as the right to vote, hold office, and have legal recognition. In a humorous, albeit telling, episode from Petronius' *Satyricon*, there is a provincial man who sells himself into slavery in order to obtain citizenship, as he sees this being the easiest route. Indeed, the man believed it "better to be a Roman citizen than a tributary king."<sup>80</sup> Although this example is from a satirical account, it demonstrates the high value placed on Roman citizenship. According to Suetonius, Nero even granted citizenship to Greek dancers.<sup>81</sup>

Over time Roman citizenship evolved as the geographical expansion of the empire transformed the demography of the Roman elites. Although Cassius Dio could write in the third century that Caracalla "belonged to three races (ἔθνεσιν), having none of their good aspects and all of their bad aspects," the universalizing dynamic of Rome reached its culmination with that same Caracalla.<sup>82</sup> In 212, Caracalla issued the

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<sup>79</sup> Cicero, *Pro Balbo*, 31 (*M. Tulli Ciceronis Orationes*, vol. 5, William Peterson (ed), Oxford Classical Texts, [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 19189]).

<sup>80</sup> Petronius, *Satyricon*, 57 (*Petronii Arbitri Satyricon Reliquiae*, Konrad Mueller (ed), Bibliotheca Teubneriana, [Leipzig: Teubner, 1995], 51).

<sup>81</sup> Suetonius, *Nero*, 12.1 (Kaiserbiographien, 374).

<sup>82</sup> Cassius Dio, *Historiae Romanae*, 78.6 (*Cassii Dionis Cocceiani Historiarvm romanarvm qvae svpersvnt*, Philip Bossevain (ed), [Berolini: Weidmannos, 1895]).

*Constitutio Antoniniana*, thus effectively granting universal citizenship to all inhabitants of the Roman Empire.<sup>83</sup> This law was the climax of the process of redefining foreigners as Romans. As Perkins noted, this process was also part of the realignment occurring in the ethnic discourse in late antiquity.<sup>84</sup> Although traditional ethnographic rhetoric had not changed, nonetheless a redefinition of race as a convention was supplanting the biological or natural definition of race. This would allow the Romans to see themselves diffusing the characteristics that made them Roman citizens throughout the world.

Although citizenship shifted from to natural to conventional, virtue retained its ties to nature. As Woolf stated, “Roman identity was based to a unusual degree on membership in a political and religious community with common values and *mores* (customs, morality, and way of life.)”<sup>85</sup> Virtue, and moreover specifically the virtue of *pietas*, played a fundamental role in defining the character of Romanity. For the Romans, piety not only had a religious sense but also implied duty to the empire.

J.P.V.D. Balsdon notes that “the Romans were the gods’ own people” due to their piety

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<sup>83</sup> On who this does and doesn’t include, see, A.N. Sherwin-White, *The Roman Citizenship*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 218 -227; 380 – 386. See also A.H.M. Jones, “Another Interpretation of the *Constitutio Antoniniana*,” *Journal of Roman Studies*, 26, 2 (1936), 223 – 35.

<sup>84</sup> “Cultural identities defined by common geographical borders or blood were ceding ground to those based on shared education, cultural practices, and perspectives. The emphasis on education and culture, on *paideia* and *humanitas*, that inscribed the cultural identities of both elite Romans and Greeks, contributed to the formation of a trans-empire alliance, a cosmopolitan elite identity that incorporated the leading people across the empire.” Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities*, 27. See also Greg Woolf, “Becoming Roman, Staying Greek: Culture, Identity and the Civilizing Process in the Roman East,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, 40 (1994), 130.

<sup>85</sup> Woolf, *Becoming Roman*, 120.

and devotion.<sup>86</sup> *Pietas* (duty) over time evolved into primary characteristic of Roman identity: duty to the state and its religion was the way the empire continued on and thrived in the world. The success of Roman *religio* was largely due to Roman regard for *pietas*, connecting the racial component of religion to the overall sense of Roman identity. Virgil's Aeneas testifies to the centrality of *pietas* in the Roman constellation of virtues. "*Pius Aeneas*" is driven above all by duty (*pietas*) throughout the text;<sup>87</sup> he embodies Aeneas complete and utterly unflinching devotion to his state and mission. Cicero wrote that virtues like moderation and courage, and especially *pietas*, had an important role "in protecting human society."<sup>88</sup> Cicero, championing proper regard for *pietas* in his heavily Stoicizing work *De Officiis*, wrote that the proper Roman "will entirely give himself to the state so that he may further the interests of everyone."<sup>89</sup> For Cicero, and others such as Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, it was this regard for *pietas*, and more specifically the Stoic conception of *pietas*, that led Romans to prefer a life of service rather than a pleasure-filled, selfish existence.

Stoicism supplied the Romans with literary models with which to universalize Roman virtue. Stoicism associated virtue and nature and emphasized that living according to nature was one's duty. Seneca clarifies this, writing, "Virtue is according to

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<sup>86</sup> Balsdon, *Romans and Aliens*, 2.

<sup>87</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1.305 (Mynors, 112).

<sup>88</sup> *in hominum societate tuenda*, Cicero, *de officiis*, 1.5.15 (*De Officiis*, M. Winterbottom, (ed), Oxford Classical Texts, [New York: Oxford University Press, 1994], 7).

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.25.68 (Winterbottom, 11).

Nature, vice is opposing and hostile.”<sup>90</sup> This is directly echoed in the writing of Marcus Aurelius, who believed that nothing in accord with Nature could possibly be bad.<sup>91</sup> They believed all of the things that made the Romans so great, and even all of the things that made people good. Seneca believed that *pietas, humanitas, liberalitas, iustitia, fides* all came from Nature as opposed to the law books.<sup>92</sup> Indeed, the only laws that promoted virtue were those that were in accord with nature.

Marcus Aurelius, a Stoicizing Roman, wrote, “For Universal nature has made rational beings for the sake of one another to help one another”<sup>93</sup> and Cicero claimed that man was endowed by Nature with a universal character, and even claimed that is why we “are inclined by nature to have a regard for others.”<sup>94</sup> Seneca held that virtue was possible for *universis singulisque* (for each and every person).<sup>95</sup> Ultimately, all human beings participated in virtue for, as Marcus Aurelius explained, “If the mind is common to us all, then reason (λόγος) is also common, because we are reasoning beings (λογικοί).”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Seneca, *Epistulae*, 50.8. (*Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, vol. 1*, L.D. Reynolds (ed) Oxford Classical Texts, [London: Oxford University Press, 1965], 132).

<sup>91</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 2.17. (*The Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius*, A.S.L. Farquharson (ed), [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968], 33).

<sup>92</sup> Seneca. *De Ira*, 2.28.2 (*Dialogues, vol. 1*, A. Bourguery (ed), *Collection des universites de France*, [Paris: Societe d’edition “Les Belles lettres”, 1922], 53).

<sup>93</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 9.1 (Farquharson, 171).

<sup>94</sup> Cicero, *De Legibus*, 1.31 (*De Legibus*, J.G.F. Powell (ed), Oxford Classical Texts, [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006], 23).

<sup>95</sup> Seneca, *De Clementia*, 2.5.3 (*Moral Essays, vol. 1*, John W. Basore (ed), [New York: Heinemann, 1928], 440).

<sup>96</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 4.3 (Farquharson, 51 – 52).

Because virtue was natural, it was universal and it only remained for the Romans to associate imperial universalism with the universalism of Stoic virtue. For Marcus Aurelius, the fellowship of virtue created the universal basis for imperialism. Men were rational creatures (λογικοί) who, through the shared participation reason, could create κοινωνία (fellowship) throughout the empire.<sup>97</sup> The Roman Empire was, fundamentally, an Empire of virtue. Thus when he uttered, “My city and fatherland as Antoninus is Rome, but as a man, the universe,” he could have clearly seen his identity as a Roman as one belonging to the universe rather than simply a state with fixed boundaries.<sup>98</sup> There was a certain tension between the universalizing ideas, which Stoicism brought with it, and the empire itself. He further clarifies this when he makes the connection between the state and reason.<sup>99</sup> For Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic concept of being πολίτης τοῦ κόσμου was not just a rhetorical flourish but was rather a way of reconfiguring Roman identity in a universal, imperial culture.

This is the reason why authors such as Pliny could believe that Rome was divinely chosen as the power that could bring culture and humanity to the world. He believed that Roman imperialism created a political structure that unified races through virtue. He wrote that it was Rome’s duty to “to unite the scattered empires of the earth (*sparsa imperia*), to bestow a polish upon men's manners, to unite the discordant and uncouth

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.29, 30 (Farquharson, 92).

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.44 (Farquharson, 116).

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*, 4.3, (Farquharson, 51 – 52) see also 2.16 (Farquharson, 32) where the emperor demanded submission to the government. He stated, “The end (τέλος) of all rational beings (λογικῶν ζώων) is to follow the reason (λόγῳ) and the law (θεσμῶ) of the oldest city and citizenship (πολιτείας).”

dialects of so many different nations by the powerful ties of one common language, to confer the enjoyments of discourse and of civilization (*humanitatem*) upon mankind, to become, in short, the *patria* of all nations of the earth.”<sup>100</sup> Thus, imperialism is related to Roman identity through this universalizing aspect of virtue. According to Tacitus, the Romans spread their empire for the benefit of those they conquered – for the Gauls, dominion by Rome brought safety from the Germanic barbarians.<sup>101</sup> However, imperialism also brought with it Roman virtues such as *pietas* that made the empire so powerful. Just as their devotion to *religio*, the Roman devotion to *pietas* was perceived as a fundamental aspect of their success and thus of their identity. Attaching universal virtue to the evolving expansion of the empire reaffirmed Rome’s status as a civilizing power while at the same time providing a framework for universalizing the imperial mission. The Roman Empire could be seen as a universalizing mechanism for Nature to spread virtue through the world.<sup>102</sup> This was the universalizing imperial rhetoric that Christians inherited. Thus, it is not surprising that Christian writers would appropriate the same rhetorical apparatus as non-Christian Roman authors.

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<sup>100</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 3.5.39 (*Naturalis historiae*, vol. 1, Karl Mayhoff (ed), Bibliotheca Teubneriana, [Leipzig: Teubner, 1967], 376).

<sup>101</sup> Tacitus, *Histories*, 4.73 (Goelzer, 277).

<sup>102</sup> “Roman rule is presented as providing the conditions for human beings to realize their potential fully, by becoming civilized, and so truly human.” Woolf, *Becoming Roman*, 57.



## Chapter Three: Race and Identity in Christianity

### A “New Race”: Christian Antecedents on Race

A lack of *pietas*, therefore, a claim leveled at the Christians, was not merely an accusation of irreverence but rather was a grave accusation that they placed the Roman Empire itself in danger by insulting the gods, but challenged the very foundation of the imperial ideal. During this period of tension between Christianity and the Roman Empire, the open profession of being Christian was sufficient to be executed for treason against the Roman state. The bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, was executed in 155 by the Roman government for the mere admission that he was a Christian (Χριστιανός εἶμι.)<sup>103</sup> To the Roman sources, this was not an accusation of political sedition so much as for *flagitia* (abominations) and *odium humani generis* (hatred of the human race).<sup>104</sup> In addition to the accusation that Christians did not do their service to the empire, a variety of other polemics were leveled against Christianity. In the times leading up to the life of Origen, these claims against Christianity would result in periodic persecutions throughout the empire. The much earlier example of Nero using Christians as torches to light his parties is only the beginning, as the claim that they disregarded *pietas* for the

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<sup>103</sup> *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 10.1 (*Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Herbert Musurillo (ed), [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972], 11); 12.1-2 (Musurillo, 10 – 11). Although, chapter nine of the text clearly points out that his execution was only certain after he refused to burn incense on behalf of the emperor, which would have been seen as an act of outright sedition against the emperor. This can be seen more clearly in the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan, where Trajan orders that Christians who refuse to recant their religion “must be punished (*puniendi sunt*)”. Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae*, 10.97.2 (Mueller, 357).

<sup>104</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, 15.44.5 (*Annales, vol. 1*, Erich Koestermann (ed), Bibliotheca Teubneriana, [Leipzig: Teubner, 1969], 356); 15.44.4 (Koestermann, 356).

empire provided ample ammunition for Roman officials to claim that Christian disregard for the gods was the source of various plights.

On the other hand, early Christian authors were also heavily indebted to the traditional ethnographic discourse, and many of the apologists define Christianity in racial terms. But Christian authors also wrote during the imperial period when universalism and imperialism were reshaping ethnographic discourse. Consequently, like their fellow non-Christian Romans, although heavily indebted to earlier ethnographic literature, their cultural context reflected the changing culture of the empire. When the second-century apologist Aristides claimed that there were τρία γένη (three races), “worshippers of the so-called gods and Jews, and Christians,”<sup>105</sup> he was employing the similar ethnographic vocabulary and categories as his opponents. Likewise, when Clement of Alexandria wrote that Christians were the “one race (γένος) of the saved people,”<sup>106</sup> he made a traditional racial distinction based on religion. Clement goes on to give further evidence that he is making a racial distinction in the text when he discuss that the form of worship of the Christians is different from other races such as the Jews or Greeks. It is important to note, as Buell has explained that Clement’s use of religious practice was a marker for race according to the traditional

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<sup>105</sup> Aristides, *Apologia*, 2.2 (*Apologia*, Carlotta Alpignano (ed), Biblioteca Patristica, [Firenze: Nardini Editore, 1988], 58).

<sup>106</sup> Clement, *Stromata*. 6.5.42.2 (*Stromata*, Otto Stählin (ed), *Griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte*, Bd. 15 [Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1985], 452).

Roman ethnographic discourse.<sup>107</sup> This emphasis on practice is important here, because it is through religious practice that authors such as Clement can differentiate Christians from other races, just as Roman authors had previously done. In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, Christians are described as “a pious and devoted race (τοῦ θεοφιλοῦς καὶ θεοσεβοῦς γένους) of Christians.<sup>108</sup> Since the common discourse about race for those in late antiquity focused so heavily on aspects such as religion, Christians would see themselves as belonging to a different race than their contemporaries. Christians from all over the empire during the earliest periods of Christian existence were defining their religious practice as characterizing a *genos* (race) and they are doing so using the parameters set forth by the cultural *koine* of their time.

With imperial expansion, the ethnographic discourse became less attached to geography. And since Christian authors were all imperial, there is no surprise that the category of geography was also transformed from a category of difference to a category of likeness. Christians lived in the empire and shared Roman space. Many indeed, according to the sources of Christian persecutions, were actually citizens; this included even some of the earliest Christians such as Paul.<sup>109</sup> In *Acts*, Paul even appealed to the emperor, thus demonstrating from the earliest time of Christianity a connection between Roman citizenship and Christianity.

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<sup>107</sup> Buell, *Rethinking the Relevance of Race*, 461. See also Judith Lieu, *Image and Reality: The Jews in the World of the Christians in the Second Century* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 107.

<sup>108</sup> *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 3.2 (Musurillo, 4).

<sup>109</sup> While not explicitly about genealogy, the sheer fact that Paul is using ethnic ideas implies that he was working within the *koine* of the time. Acts 22.28.

Roman authors created a genealogical mythology that employed Aeneas, Romulus and Numa. Aeneas was child of a god, who brought an exiled people to their new *patria*; Romulus was said to found Rome through augury; and Numa received Rome's laws from a divine source. Judaism claimed its legitimacy from a covenant with God made by Abraham and transferred to his descendants. Aristides made a first and abortive attempt to trace the Christian race specifically to Jesus. He claimed in his apology that the Christians were the best race because their progenitor actually was god.<sup>110</sup> But this apologetic strategy of claiming Jesus as a progenitor was a rhetorical dead end.

Far more successful was the effort of Christian apologists to appropriate the Jewish genealogical tradition in order to discover a source of legitimacy. Tatian understood this genealogical imperative when he claimed that Christian doctrines were actually the oldest of all.<sup>111</sup> He was keenly aware that it was important for a religion to have a strong lineage and to be able to appeal to an ancient, divine source. Tertullian also claimed that the Christians were "supported by the writings of the Jews, which are

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<sup>110</sup> Aristides, *Apologia*, 2.4 (*Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 9*, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (trans.) [Grand Rapids: Eedermans, 1951], 264) Although the Greek of this part of the text does not survive, the Syriac reads: "The Christians, then, trace the beginning of their religion from Jesus the Messiah; and he is named the Son of God Most High. And it is said that God came down from heaven, and from a Hebrew virgin assumed and clothed himself with flesh; and the Son of God lived in a daughter of man. This is taught in the gospel, as it is called, which a short time ago was preached among them; and you also if you will read therein, may perceive the power which belongs to it."

<sup>111</sup> Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 31. (*Tatiani Oratio Ad Graecos*, Miroslav Marcovich (ed), *Patristische Texte und Studien*, [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995], 57).

the oldest around.”<sup>112</sup> Christian authors legitimated themselves with the acquired genealogy and wisdom of an accepted and legitimate racial source, following the traditional association of genealogy and religion.

But Christians also tried to establish their credentials not solely with Jewish mythology, but by creating a link between their Jewish origins and their gentile origins. Justin Martyr made this connection by stating that Plato was indebted to Moses for many of his beliefs.<sup>113</sup> Justin Martyr sought to link Christianity with *paideia*, to legitimate it as the basis of Greek wisdom. Just as with the Romans, the claim to *paideia* was an illustration of the growing power of culture in the racial and religious discourse of the second century.

### **Citizenship and the Christian Racial Discourse**

Culture, as we have seen, was connected increasingly to Romanity and to citizenship through virtue. Roman polemics charged them with being bad citizens of the empire. Their claims attacked Christians as impious, lacking civic as well as religious virtue. The Christians answered that they were, on the contrary, model citizens. Justin Martyr claims that Christians do not separate themselves from others; they are the same as all other races. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Martyr has the titular character state, “you do not separate yourselves from them at all, neither do you

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<sup>112</sup> antiquissimis Iudaeorum instrumentis sectam istam esse suffultam. Tertullian, *Apologia*, 21 (*Opera Catholica*, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 1, [Turnholti: Brepols, 1954], 122).

<sup>113</sup> Justin Martyr, *Apologia*, 59. (*Iustini Martyris Apologiae Pro Christianis*, Miroslav Marcovich (ed), [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994], 115.)

distinguish your way of life from that of the gentiles.”<sup>114</sup> Here Justin is making an appeal to a shared culture with other inhabitants in the Roman Empire – the Christians are just like everyone else, with the exception that they have the correct religion.

And just like other citizens, Christians conformed to the requirement to be good and obedient subjects and citizens. *1 Peter*, likely written at the end of the first century, instructed Christians to be subject to emperors and other imperial officials.<sup>115</sup> Thus, from earliest Christianity, Christians advertised their loyalty and virtue as Romans. Athenagoras explained that Christians were in fact good citizens who would never commit the crimes of which they were accused; he stated that if any Christian truly transgressed the law, “spare no class among us, prosecute our crimes, destroy us root and branch, including women and children.”<sup>116</sup> This is claim echoed across many other texts as well, the *Acts of the Scilitan Martyrs* states that Christians argued to imperial officials that they committed no crimes and always paid their taxes.<sup>117</sup> This argument states the Christians are ideal citizens – their behavior could be seen as a model for other citizens even. The apologists were concerned with demonstrating that Christianity was not at all opposed to Romanity. While they often disagreed to the extent that Christians epitomized the characteristics and values of Romans, they all maintained that Christians were good Romans as well.

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<sup>114</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 10.3 (*Dialogus cum Tryphone*, Miroslav Marcovich (ed), [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997], 87.)

<sup>115</sup> *1 Peter* 2.13 – 14, 18.

<sup>116</sup> Athenagoras, *Legatio*, 3.1 (*Legatio*, William R. Schoedel (ed. and trans.), Oxford Early Christian Texts, [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972], 9.)

<sup>117</sup> *Acts of the Scilitan Martyrs*, 6 (Musurillo, 86).

### **Pietas and the Christians**

Christians claimed that they were good citizens using the same rhetorical framework as did traditional Roman sources: they had the same intense focus on civic *pietas* as other Romans did. Tertullian claimed that although the Christians refuse to worship and sacrifice to the emperor, they do “respect him and offer sacrifices to the true God for [the emperor].”<sup>118</sup> The author of 1 Clement stated that God gave “the power to reign (τὴν ἐξουσίαν τῆς βασιλείας)” and that Christians should pray for the emperor’s “health, peace, harmony, stability, in order that they can easily conduct the government (ἡγεμονίαν) [God has] given him.”<sup>119</sup> Athenagoras similarly claims that Christians offer “rational worship as an unbloody sacrifice” to the empire, thus regarding their duty with diligence that is expected from a Roman citizen.<sup>120</sup> Not only does Athenagoras argue that the Christians are performing their duty for the empire, but he staunchly argues that they do this better than all others. Buell agrees here, stating that Athenagoras “elaborates Christianness in light of the concept of proper religiosity (piety) and its consequences for the stability of the empire, arguing that Christians are pious.”<sup>121</sup> Here Athenagoras is clearly using Roman self identifying vocabulary to make a case that Christians behaved just as Romans should: they are good Romans.

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<sup>118</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, 30. (CCSL 1:142).

<sup>119</sup> 1 Clement 61.1 (*Épître aux Corinthiens*, Annie Jaubert (ed), Sources chrétiennes 167, [Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971], 198.)

<sup>120</sup> δέον ἀναίμακτον θυσίαν τὴν λογικὴν προσάγειν λατρείαν. Athenagoras, *Apol.* 13.4 (Schoedel, 28).

<sup>121</sup> Buell, *Why this New Race*, 51.

From Justin Martyr on, the apologists answered attacks on their piety not only with asserting their loyalty and civic virtue, but by answering their accusers that they were more pious than them. Christian piety was – for the apologists – the highest virtue because it had the greatest efficacy. They countered the claims of impiety with counter claims that Christianity was better for the empire and its citizens. Tertullian, for example, not only maintained that he was a loyal Roman subject and that Christians were not guilty of offending or harming any religion (*nec nos pro certo rei sumus laesae religionis*), that that on the contrary, “On the contrary it has been recoiled upon you, who... by your assault upon it, commit against the true God the crime of real irreligion (*crimen verae inreligiositatis*).”<sup>122</sup> Despite persecution, Tertullian concludes that Christians are in fact Romans and that their persecutors are the enemies of Romanity. While he maintains that the Roman Empire has not treated Christians properly, the heart of his argument is that Christians are Romans.

Christian authors, just like their non-Christian counterparts, furthermore, argued that the virtues which identify Christians come from nature, albeit through God. Justin Martyr stated, Christians are “born rational (*λογικοί*) and contemplative (*θεωρητικοί*).”<sup>123</sup> Thus, Christians appropriated the same Stoic vocabulary as non-Christians, which associated nature and virtue through the exercise of *pietas*. Christianity can thus be seen as a parallel universalizing system to imperialism. Clement

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<sup>122</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, 24.1 – 2 (CCSL 1: 133) (Translation from *Apology*, T.R. Glover (trans.), Loeb Classical Library, [London: W. Heinemann, 1931], 131).

<sup>123</sup> Justin Martyr, *1 Apology*, 28.3 (Marcovich, 74).



asserted that through Christianity, the entire human race should be “marshaled under one God and the one *logos* of God.”<sup>124</sup> Relying on the Stoic vocabulary of *logos* and nature, Clement presented Christianity as a form of universal reason in which the human race could achieve the goal of universal virtue.

The Romans, with the evolution of race and identity shifting the discourse from biology to convention, used a Stoicizing system which demonstrated universalizing virtues that defined them. The very same rhetoric that led Roman authors to using this apparatus influenced Christian authors as well. Thus, Christianity as a universalizing system was connected to the process of the cultural diffusion of *paideia* through imperial rule. A literary connection between the Roman Empire and Christianity, and imperialism as a Christianizing mechanism, would not be fully elaborated until the conversion of Constantine. However, the seeds of this were sown in the work of many early Christian authors. In particular, the organic connection between imperial and Christian universalism is put forward by Origen of Alexandria, who most fully expressed this new universalizing discourse.

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<sup>124</sup> Clement, *Protrepticus*, 12.120.2-3 (GCS 12:84).

## Chapter Four: The Evolution of Race and Identity in Origen

### Origen and the *Genos* of Christians

In order to understand fully Origen's role in this process, one must first understand the historical context in which he was writing. He is influenced by the intellectual tradition of the apologists, such as Justin Martyr and Clement, that preceded him, but attention must also be given to his personal experiences with the Roman Empire. According to Eusebius, among other sources, the Roman emperor Septimius Severus had forbidden the conversion to Christianity at the end of the second century under grave penalties.<sup>125</sup> It is during the Severan period that his view of Christian Roman identity crystallized. Sometime during the first decade of the third century, Origen's father was reportedly martyred during Septimius Severus's persecution. According to Joseph Trigg, this was an event that "confirmed his veneration of martyrdom and left him with a life-long sense of obligation."<sup>126</sup> During the reign of Caracalla, Origen experienced Alexandria under siege by the emperor.<sup>127</sup> While it is not certain whether he fled the city or remained during the conflict, this event likely influenced his views of the empire. On the other hand, according to Eusebius, he was invited to Arabia by the provincial governor and even to Antioch by the empress.<sup>128</sup> Thus, he not only experienced imperial hostility firsthand, but the potential for

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<sup>125</sup> Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 6.1 (*Histoire ecclésiastique*, Gustave Bardy (ed), Sources chrétiennes 41, [Paris: Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1955], 82).

<sup>126</sup> Trigg, *Origen*, 5.

<sup>127</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Ecc.*, 6.19.16 (SC 41: 118).

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.21.3 (SC 41: 121)

Christian- Roman accommodation. Origen was, within his lifetime, recognized as the intellectual equal of his non-Christian contemporaries and it was he who, perhaps more than any other apologist, proved in his own person, that Christianity was intellectually respectable.

Origen's great set-piece apologetic was *Contra Celsum*. Celsus was a second-century anti-Christian polemicist whose *True Doctrine* may or may not have been influential, but so far as we know, was the only systematic anti-Christian text written. It rested its attack on Christianity's legitimacy by rehearsing that claimed that Christianity lacked a progenitor and covenant: ἔτι νῦν περιστέλλοντες καὶ θρησκείαν ὁποῖαν δὴ, πάτριον δ' οὖν.<sup>129</sup> Celsus employed religious practice (θρησκείαν) as a recognizable element of religion, but Celsus emphasized even more that Christianity was little more than the fraudulent invention of "only ten sailors and tax-collectors of the most abominable character, and not even all of these."<sup>130</sup>

### **The Ethnographic Discourse in Origen**

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<sup>129</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 5.25 (SC 147: 74) "Now the Jews became an individual nation, and made laws according to the custom of their country; and they maintain these laws among themselves at the present day, and observe a worship which may be very peculiar but is at least traditional." (Translation from *Contra Celsum*, Henry Chadwick (trans.), [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965], 283.) According to Frede, this may have actually made the situation worse for Christians by offending the tradition sense of the identity based upon tradition. See Michael Frede, "Celsus' Attack on the Christians", in J. Barnes and M. Griffin (eds), *Philosophia Togata II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 218 – 240; Michael Frede, 'Origen's Treatise Against Celsus', in Mark Edwards, *Apologetics in the Roman Empire*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 131 – 156.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.46 (SC 132: 338).

Like Celsus, Origen conceived of religion in ethnographic terms, used traditional ethnographic vocabulary and was just as heavily invested in the cultural rhetoric of his time. But writing in the third century, Origen's work incorporates both the traditional racist elements of earlier authors based on genealogy, and the newer, imperialist concept of race bound to universal virtue and culture.

On the one hand, his response to Celsus's attack on the racial origins of the Jews is a typical example of traditional racist discourse and is little more than a continuation of the first-century polemics between Josephus and the so-called "Egyptian" anti-Semitic authors, particularly Apion. Celsus employed the polemical canard that the Jews were merely leprous Egyptians and not a legitimate race with a historical progenitor at all. Origen answers both that Celsus already acknowledged the Jews as a race and that Josephus had already answered this attack on Jewish racial origins.<sup>131</sup>

Like previous apologists, Origen assimilated the Jewish genealogy into the Christian racial cultural history. Origen responded by asserting that "in the case of Moses and Jesus" there were "whole nations (ἔθνων ὅλων)" established,<sup>132</sup> and that Celsus himself "believed in barbarian and Greek stories about the antiquity of [the Jews] whom he mentioned, while it is only this nation (ἔθνους) whose histories he regards as untrue."<sup>133</sup> On the contrary, Origen claimed that Josephus, in *On the Antiquity of the*

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<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.5 (SC 136: 22).

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.51 (SC 132: 406; Chadwick, *Contra Celsum*, 106).

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.14 (SC 132: 114; Chadwick, *Contra Celsum*, 16).

*Jews*, gives more than ample evidence to attest to the lineage of the Jews and its legitimacy. The discussion of the Jews in Origen's work is emblematic of the shift in the discourse of race – Origen is not making a biological claim about race but rather one regarding the Jewish holy text. Since the discourse on race had shifted from biology to convention, this was entirely in keeping with the ethnographic *koine* of his time.

But if his answer to Celsus about the Jews rehearsed older models, his ethnographic response to Celsus's attacks on Christianity illustrated the new and powerful cultural construction of religion that earlier apologists had been developing.<sup>134</sup> Christian Roman identity was based on the same ethnographic vocabulary as the discussion of the Jews: he makes numerous references to the τὸ Χριστιανῶν γένος (the race of Christians), but race, as we have seen, had evolved.

### **Roman Pietas in Origen**

Origen agrees with the Roman notion that it is the duty of man to live virtuously, but claimed that Jesus was the “only way to piety (εὐσεβείας).” Furthermore, Origen argued:

It is not true that we avoid setting up altars and images because this is a sure token of an obscure and secret society... We avoid things which, though they have the appearance of piety (τὰ φαντασίᾳ εὐσεβείας), make impious (ἀσεβεῖς) those who have been led astray from the piety which is mediated through Jesus Christ (τῆς διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εὐσεβείας).<sup>135</sup>

Origen portrayed Christians as possessing the same sense of duty in which Roman authors took pride. He, no less than other Roman authors, employed the rhetorical

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<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.39 (SC 150: 102) Celsus calls Christians δειλὸν γένος “a cowardly race”.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.20 (SC 150: 218; Chadwick, *Contra Celsum*, 466 – 467).

construction of identity based in natural virtue and universal reason as a cornerstone of not only his ontology but also his apologetic. Origen wholly accepts this view of Seneca and the other Stoics, stating that there are two laws, the written law and the law of nature, and according to him the law of nature comes from God and supersedes the written law codes. He states there are two laws: the law of nature, which is governed by God (τῆς φύσεως νόμου, ὃν θεὸς ἄν νομοθετήσαι) and the laws of the cities (τοῦ ἐν ταῖς πόλεσι γραπτοῦ).<sup>136</sup> It is not the laws that keep us from committing murder or stealing; it is that our natural inclination towards virtue endowed by God. It is through this Stoicizing rhetoric that Origen can argue that Christians actually embody the virtues more, considering how their construction of a universalizing Nature fits so closely with the concept of God in Origen's work. It is through this emphasis on universal virtue that Origen is able to construct his rhetorical defense based on the very same evidence that Roman authors use to define themselves.

The imperial universalizing of natural reason is embraced by Origen, who endeavors to explain that Christians fulfill these virtues even more than any other Romans. He frames Christianity as a universal system over and over again in his apology to Celsus. He states that "it is impossible to see any race of men (γένος) which has avoided accepting the teaching of Jesus."<sup>137</sup> Later on, Origen will write that there is an

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<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.37. (SC 147: 110)

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.13 (SC 132: 332; Chadwick, *Contra Celsum*, 80).

“untold number of both Greeks and barbarians who believe in Jesus.”<sup>138</sup> Through his emphasis on natural virtue, he created a universal system similar to the Romans. He made no attempt to hide the fact that he desired that humanity to be united as one Christian race united by natural virtue. Having a basis that rhetorically unites Christianity with Romanity, especially since it states this flows directly from Nature, it is no surprise whatsoever that Origen sees such a strong relationship between Christians and Romans. For him, it is only logical that Christianity is the best expression of Roman identity.

Celsus employed the conventional charges that Christians disregarded *pietas* and placed the Roman state in danger. He argued that Origen’s God had not fulfilled his promises, stating that the Jews were “left no land or home of any kind” and that the Christians were “sough out and condemned to death.”<sup>139</sup> He pursued the unsurprising accusation that the Christians’ lack of *pietas* offended the gods and brought disasters on the empire. Origen’s answer unsurprisingly begins, like Athenagoras, with the conventional apologetic of civic obedience. Christians did not commit crimes or other offenses to the state – they are the ones that behave and act like proper citizens.<sup>140</sup>

Because of this, Origen believes the Christians form a στρατόπεδον εὐσεβείας (an army

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<sup>138</sup> The full quotation reads, “But when we accept the testimony of the disciples who both saw the wonders of Jesus and show clearly their good conscience... we are called *silly people*. He cannot show that there is, as he says, *an untold number of men, Greeks and barbarians, who believe in Asclepius*. If he considers this impressive, we produce clear evidence that there is an untold number of both Greeks and barbarians who believe in Jesus.” *Ibid.*, 3.24 (SC 136: 26; Chadwick, *Contra Celsum*, 142).

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.69 (SC 150: 334; Chadwick, *Contra Celsum*, 505.)

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.70 (SC 150: 335).

of *pietas*) that send up prayers to God on behalf of the empire. In this way, Christians, as ideal Romans, do more good for that emperor than “the soldiers who go out into the lines and kill all the enemy troops that they can.”<sup>141</sup> Christianity thus not only preserves the traditional view of *pietas* that Roman authors viewed as imperative, it actually surpasses other forms.

According to Origen, Christian piety was actually superior to any other form. Origen wrote that if the Romans become Christian, not only will they defeat their enemies in battle but even in time they will not be forced to fight because of the divine guardian over them. It is of importance to note that Origen’s claim here does not differ at all from the traditional Roman view of the *pax deorum*; proper religious practice will result in divine favor. It is for this reason that he was able to appeal to desire for victory present in the Roman Empire. This connection between favor of the gods and victory is present in many Roman authors’ rhetoric of the empire. Certainly, there existed in the empire a rhetoric of victory based upon favor of the gods. Despite the fact that Christians did not serve in the army, they fulfilled their duty and obligation to the Roman state better by forming an army of piety that sent up prayers to God. Essentially, using this rhetoric of *pietas*, Origen is stating that Christianity is the most true expression of Roman virtue, and stating that the Christians brought victory to the Roman Empire.

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<sup>141</sup> “Indeed, the more pious (εὐσεβέστερός) a man is, the more effective he is in helping the emperors. *Ibid.*, 8.73 (SC 150: 346; Chadwick, *Contra Celsum*, 509).



However, Origen goes beyond previous apologists in his claims that Christian piety exercised material powers because Christianity was not simply part of God's providential plan for mankind, but that it was providentially connected to imperial fortunes.<sup>142</sup> Further, he even believes that the spread of the empire itself was a way to herald in Christianity. This is because Origen believed that imperialism was the divine mechanism through which Christianity spread. He stated:

For 'righteousness arose in his days and abundance of peace' began with his birth; God was preparing the nations (τὰ ἔθνη) for his teaching, that they might be under one Roman emperor, so that the unfriendly attitude of the nations (τῶν ἐθνῶν) to one another, caused by the existence of a large number of kingdoms, might not make it more difficult for Jesus' apostles to do what he commanded them when he said, 'Go and teach all nations'. It is quite clear that Jesus was born during the reign of Augustus, the one who reduced to uniformity, so to speak, the many kingdoms on earth so that he had a single empire (μιᾶς βασιλείας). It would have hindered Jesus' teaching from being spread through the whole world if there had been many kingdoms, not only for the reasons just stated, but also because men everywhere would have been compelled to do military service and to fight in defence of their own land. This used to happen before the times of Augustus and even earlier still when a war was necessary, such as that between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, and similarly in the case of other nations which fought one another.<sup>143</sup>

Origen was not simply noting the coincidence of the spread of empire and Christianity, rather he was the Roman Empire was necessary for Christianity. It is only after the world was brought under μιᾶς βασιλείας that the message of Christianity could even be spread. In this way, Origen is even arguing that the *Pax Romana* itself was providentially orchestrated and maintained. Even more so, Origen was claiming that the success of emperors past had been contingent upon divine favor of the Christian God:

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<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.50 (SC 147: 142, 144).

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.30 (SC 132: 322; Chadwick, *Contra Celsum*, 92).

Augustus was successful not because he maintained the *pax deorum* per se, but rather because the Roman Empire and Christianity are providentially connected. Synchronicity between Christianity and the Roman Empire is something seen throughout Origen's writings. He elsewhere states that there is a direct connection between the spread of Christianity and the spread of empire.<sup>144</sup> Although other earlier authors noted the coincidence between the birth of Christianity and the Roman Empire, Origen represents a more fully developed example of this rhetoric.<sup>145</sup> It is with Origen that we see the results of the shifting discourse on race culminate with an appeal to spread of Christianity via the Roman Empire.

Origen's views on Roman identity are the culmination of centuries of evolution which built towards universalization. Origen represented the apex of the cultural evolution in the ethnic discourse that came along with universal empire. It is for this reason that he believed Christians best served the empire through worship of their god. Thus, he framed Christianity as the universal religion for the universal Roman Empire. To be sure, several other early Christian writers taught that Christians would be beneficial for the empire, the unique aspect here is how Origen is building a construction of Christian/Roman identity based on the causal association of imperialism

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<sup>144</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Luke*, 21.1 (*Origenes Werke vol. 9*, Max Rauer (ed), *Griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte*, Bd. 35, [Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1932], 136 – 137).

<sup>145</sup> See Hippolytus, *Commentary on Daniel*, 4.9.2 – 3 (*Commentaire sur Daniel*, Maurice Lefèvre (ed), *Source chrétiennes* 14, [Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1947], 278; “Melito. (ap. Eusebius, *Historia Ecc.*, 4.26.7 – 8 [SC 31: 210]) However, both authors in this instance merely note the connection between the Roman Empire and the birth of Christianity; there is no overt argument of causation present.

with Christianity. It was a very important consideration in order to understand Christian identity within the larger Roman context and to see them not only as synchronous, but providentially so. This critical connection between Roman imperialism and Christian virtue made possible the Christian, Roman model of Eusebius.

### **The Inheritance of Origen: Eusebius**

Eusebius is heavily indebted to Origen's ideas on race. This can be seen in his pre-Constantinian work just as it can in the material following the conversion of the emperor in 312.<sup>146</sup> For instance, Eusebius refers to Christianity as “νέον ὁμολογηθέν ἔθνος (an admittedly new race).<sup>147</sup> Likewise, the connection between εὐσεβεία and *pietas* is also present in the work of Eusebius, who claimed that the Christian practice of piety is actually ancient and true.<sup>148</sup> These are all elements found in the work of Origen and demonstrate the profound effect that Origen had on Eusebius. To be sure, this construction of a Christian Roman identity in the work of Origen has incredibly far reaching consequences in late antiquity – with the amount that the work of Eusebius influenced the empire, understanding that his foundation was in the work of Origen is fundamental. In light of this, philosophical and rhetorical context

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<sup>146</sup> For the specifically pre-Constantinian views on race, see Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argumentation in Eusebius*.

<sup>147</sup> Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.*, 1.4.2 (SC 31: 4). For more on this subject, see Johnson. However, his book focuses on the wrong period of Eusebius as I am discussing currently, as his focus is on the pre-Constantinian writings of Eusebius whereas we are examining the connecting between Eusebius's and Origen's rhetoric of empire and universalization.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.4.15 (SC 31: 20).

that Origen uses to build his case for Christianity in the Roman Empire cannot be understated.

Eusebius saw the empire as a vast Christianizing mechanism in light of the conversion of Constantine. Eusebius even stated that the world could not have been prepared for Christianity without the Roman Empire. As Eusebius stated, “[The emperor] who is dear to God participates in the present life, has been adorned with natural virtues.”<sup>149</sup> It was the task of the emperor to bring these virtues to his subjects, in this way, the emperor acted as God’s representative on earth. As Eusebius explained, “[The emperor], in imitation of God, directs all administration of all.”<sup>150</sup> The emperor was an imitation of god and imperial rule was a mundane imitation of divine rule. This is surely the culmination of the ideas present in Origen about the connection of Christian and Roman identity – if Christians are the best Romans, should not the best of Romans be a Christian?

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<sup>149</sup> Eusebius, *De laudibus Constantini*, 5.1 (Eusebius Werke, vol. 1, I.A. Heikel (ed), *Griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller 7*, [Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1902], 202).

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.6 (GCS 7: 199).

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

### Conclusion

To conclude, other authors have addressed the same issue with the same answer, but the difference is the method in which they build this answer. Tertullian argues similarly to Origen, that while they do not offer sacrifices to emperor, they do a service for him in worshiping their God. Athenagoras argues the same thing, that Christians offer the service of their reason to the empire; however, he wrote the *Legatio pro Christianis* in the late 170s before the *Constitutio Antoniniana*. Thus, Athenagoras was not to appeal to universalizing claims to the extent Origen was able to. Origen clearly shows a reliance upon the traditional views of Roman authors in constructing his concept of Christian identity. Furthermore, he demonstrates the culmination in the shifting racial discourse on identity.

However, unlike earlier authors, Origen views the Roman Empire and Christianity as concurrent streams. Christianity benefits the empire and, hopefully, the empire would benefit Christianity as well. For Origen, it was not simple enough to answer the claim by Trajan that Christianity was a dangerous and pernicious superstition, rather he demonstrated the Christians were not such while simultaneously creating a direct connection between Christianity and the empire through universalizing ethnic claims. This would be an apologetic that would defeat the oppositions claims while at the same time utilizing them for constructing a positive notion of Christian identity. Thus, Origen created a rhetoric of culture that uses religion to unify rather than divide. It is through this that differences between Christians and Romans are leveled and that people are

universally connected. The Christian race understands *pietas* or any other virtue the same as the Romans because they are being guided to virtue by God through the λόγος, the same as the Roman race that expresses these virtues. Thus, it is through the construction of race in a traditionally Roman fashion and the exposition of various inherently Roman virtues that Christians can claim to be partakers in Roman identity. Christianity was not attempting to tear down the present Roman understanding of the world or create a new way of life; Christianity rather was the Roman way of life, but only a more perfect expression of it.

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