

LECTURE 8: CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS BEFORE CONSTANTINE

Ante-Nicene Christian apologists

[period before the first ecumenical council of the church at Nicea in A.D. 325; at that point Christianity was officially tied to the Roman empire under Constantine; a time of official intolerance for Christianity, punctuated with periods of intense persecution]

The primary purposes of the apologists of this period were to demonstrate the truth of Christianity over Judaism and over the pagan religions, and to show why the church should be tolerated by the Roman state. There are very few extant patristic writings from the first century, and these are directed primarily to the church. The second century has been called the age of the apologists; and these apologetic writings continue into the third century.

[For more information on the earlier apologists, see Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century*, 1988.]

Hostility from the Roman Empire

(1) Attacks against Christians in the Roman Empire under Nero and Domitian

Nero (A.D. 54-68; persecution started A.D. 64)

- Peter and Paul executed in Rome
- Christians tortured and killed after fire of A.D. 64

Domitian (A.D. 81-96)

- John exiled to Patmos
- Prominent Christian citizens persecuted

(2) Settled policy under the empire in the second and third centuries

Charges:

- Linked to Jewish revolts
- Atheism
- Refusal to acknowledge the emperor
- Immorality/incest
- Cannibalism

(3) Opinions about Christians evident in correspondence between Pliny the Younger and emperor Trajan (A.D. 111-113)

(4) Attitudes about Christians evident in the brief statements of Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius, “a novel and mischievous superstition,” “hatred of the human race”

(5) Many waves of persecution

[These usually were limited to a particular class or area; but several covered very wide areas and reached thousands of Christians; they were interspersed with periods of relative peace; the church grew tremendously during these two centuries, proving Tertullian’s statement that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”]

Trajan (98-117): Simeon, brother of Jesus, crucified in Jerusalem; Iganitius bishop of Antioch, thrown to beasts in Rome

Hadrian (117-138): persecuted “moderately”; Christianity progressed; still many martyrs, including Telephorus, minister of church in Rome

Antoninus Pius (138-161): liked Christians, but upheld law against them; Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna martyred

Marcus Aurelius (161-180): encouraged persecution; worst since Nero; thousands beheaded and thrown to beasts; Justin Martyr and six others scourged and beheaded in Rome; persecution throughout provinces; records from Lyons and Vienne in south Gaul; used horrible tortures to make Christians deny faith —didn’t work; citizens beheaded, others thrown to beasts; in the amphitheater Christian slave girl Blandina encouraged others, last to die, tied in net and killed by wild bull; bodies burned and thrown in Rhone (“Now we shall see whether there will be a resurrection of their bodies!”)

Septimius Sevarus (193-211): renewed bitter persecution for eleven years; most known from north Africa and Egypt; in Alexandria “many martyrs were daily burned, crucified, or beheaded”; Origen’s father Leonidas killed; noble lady Perpetua and her slave Felicitas torn by beasts in Carthage

Decius (249-251): edict to restore Roman religion, destroy Christian movement; captured and killed bishops and prominent Christians; many martyrs and confessors; Origen tortured on rack, died as result

Valerian (253-260): renewed persecution; first banish and confiscate property, then torture and death; Cyprian martyred

Diocletian and successors (284-305 abdicated; successors in West continue to 313 and in East to 323): last two years of Diocletian’s reign, terrible persecution; tried to enforce state religion; churches closed, writing burned, Christians dispossessed, made slaves; some Christians tortured, killed; worst persecutions under successors in divided empire: Maximian in the West, and Galerius in the East; churches burned; widespread use of torture and death; first effort to entirely eradicate the church by persecution; detailed descriptions in Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History*; time of great faithfulness and

steadfastness of thousands of Christians; toleration finally granted by Constantine in the West in 313, and throughout the empire in 324, when Constantine became sole emperor and declared himself a Christian

Quadratus

Ca. A.D. 125

[Brief quote in Eusebius *Church History* 4:3:2]

Quadratus a citizen of Athens; called by Eusebius, “a disciple of the apostles”; apology directed to emperor Hadrian

Quadratus speaks of authenticity of Jesus’ miracles, that some of those cured and raised from dead were still alive and could be consulted

Aristides

Ca. A.D. 140

Also from Athens; called by Eusebius “our philosopher”; originally addressed to Hadrian (in Armenian fragments); later Syriac copy (recently discovered) addressed to Antoninus Pius

Aristides wrote that Christianity should be recognized throughout the whole Roman empire; that false rumors should be stopped; he demonstrated the existence of God through the beauty and majesty of the universe; underscored the foolishness of paganism; and claimed that Christians possess the purest knowledge of God and lead the purest lives

Justin Martyr

Ca. A.D. 155

Most important second century apologist; native of Samaria; later moved to Ephesus; was follower of Plato until saw bravery of Christians in face of death; did not believe charges against Christians; shown contradictions of Platonism; became Christian himself

Wrote *Against Heresies*, especially directed against Gnostics, whom many took as Christians; not now extant; idea taken up again by Irenaeus

His *Apology* addressed to Antoninus Pius (A.D. 138-161); also wrote *Second Apology*, partially preserved in Eusebius; his *Apology* prompted by the martyrdom of Polycarp in A.D. 155 or 156; Justin points out the unfairness of Polycarp’s trial; the practices of the Christians (including the

Eucharist); emphasizes the eternal judgment of fire (Grant sees here the influence of the Synoptic Gospels), obviously alluding to the death by fire suffered by Polycarp

Later wrote *Dialogue with Trypho*; debate format with fictitious Trypho, a Jew; strong evangelistic thrust at Jews; especially noteworthy is his interpretation of OT prophecies as fulfilled in Christ

Arrested under Marcus Aurelius; imprisoned in Rome, scourged, beheaded

Tatian

Ca. A.D. 110-172

Assyrian from Nisibitis on the Euphrates; ca. 150, came to Rome; converted by reading the Bible

Soon wrote *Diatessaron* (Gk. “through the four [gospels]”), first attempted gospel harmony; based on John’s chronology; later nearly eradicated by church officials

Became pupil of Justin Martyr; learned about philosophy, but openly despised Greek philosophers (not as Justin); ca. 160, wrote *Address to the Greeks*, mocks Greek philosophy; Christianity older and more reasonable

After Justin killed, returned to Syria; founded ascetic, somewhat Gnostic sect “Encratites”; thus never a “saint”

Melito of Sardis

Late 2nd century

Bishop of Sardis during reign of Marcus Aurelius; in 175 wrote *Petition to the Emperor*; lists OT books (Protestant canon except for Esther; no Apocryphal books)

Philosophical opponents of Christianity

Neo-Platonism developed in late 2nd and through 3rd centuries; combined Greek philosophy with Oriental mysticism; purpose was to save paganism; degraded empirical knowledge; monistic—everything is God, emanations from the One; happiness is attained by union with the One through asceticism, meditation, and magic

Ammonius Saccas (ca. 175-243); reared a Christian but rejected it; started schools in Alexandria and Rome

Plotinus (204-269); student of Ammonius Saccus; an Egyptian; followers gathered notes (6 Enneads of 9 sections each, in *Great Books*); notes obscure and intricate; accepted Greek gods, but explained them away; opposed exclusive claims of Christianity

Porphyry (232-304); disciple of Plotinus; in 270 wrote *Against Christianity*; strong attack against the Bible; blasted allegorism in OT interpretation, would make Bible mean nothing; claimed discrepancies in Bible and lives and teaching of Christ and the apostles; according to Jerome, he claimed Daniel written in 2nd century B.C., not a prophecy; somewhat answered by Christian writers (Methodius of Tyre, Apollinaris of Laodicea, Eusebius of Caesarea); 448, all copies burned by order of Roman emperors

Athenagoras

Late 2nd century

Christian philosopher in Athens; wrote *Apology* to Marcus Aurelius and son Commodus; denies charges of atheism, cannibalism, incest; notes good, peaceful lives of Christians; good discussion on Trinity

Wrote *On the Resurrection of the Body* for philosophers in Athens; argues from philosophical "common ground": justice of God, purpose of creation, man's need of body and soul; does not mention Christ's resurrection

Irenaeus

Wrote ca. A.D. 180

Bishop of Lyons after the previous bishop was martyred under Marcus Aurelius; active as a missionary throughout Gaul, learned Gallic (Celtic)

Wrote five books against Gnosticism: *Against Heresies*; now our main source of information about the early heresies

Also wrote *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, an apologetic for the faith designed for teaching catechumens; this was rediscovered in an Armenian translation in 1904

Tertullian

Ca. A.D. 160-220

Carthage lawyer and scholar; converted when about 20 years old; wrote mostly in Latin (developed Latin theological vocabulary)

Wrote *Apology* to Septimius Severus, pointing out the absurdity of persecuting the Christians

Also wrote *Against Marcion*, opposing Gnosticism, and *Against Praxeas*, opposing patri-passianism; this second work was the most advanced so far in elucidating the doctrine of the Trinity

Later converted to Montanism, thus never a "saint"; a vivid writer; source of saying, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

Clement of Alexandria

Ca. A.D. 155-220

Sought philosophical truth all over empire; settled in Alexandria; became head of school there; scholar in philosophy and classics

Fought Gnostics; put faith ahead of knowledge; fully adopted allegorical method in practice; wrote *Exhortation to the Heathen* (against mystery religions)

Origen

Ca. A.D. 185-254

Enthusiastic Christian youth; father martyred when Origen a teenager; worked hard to support family; very scholarly

Appointed head of school for catechumens; traveled widely; learned Hebrew in Palestine; many students in Alexandria; converted many; strict ascetic; very productive writer; started school in Caesarea; later returned to Alexandria

Careful study of text of LXX (the *Hexapla*, took 28 years to produce; written to aid apologetics with the Jews; destroyed by Moslems in 7th century); followed allegorical method of interpretation; tended to speculate in philosophical areas

Wrote *Against Celsus*, a pagan writer ca. 150 who tried to refute Christianity (Bible contradictions, etc.); Origen replied, defended Christianity; blamed faults on Gnostics and heretics

Lactantius

A.D. 240-320

Official under Diocletian; tutor of Constantine's eldest son; "the Christian Cicero"; wrote long and eloquent work on church history, *Divine Institutions* (ca. 310)

Eusebius of Caesarea

Fl. A.D. 325

A confessor (tortured for faith); bishop of Caesarea; headed school there after persecutions over; wrote several works, including *Preparation for the Gospel*, and *Demonstration of the Gospel*; especially his *Ecclesiastical History* (the first extant church history since the book of Acts); his *Onomasticon* is first "Christian" geography, gives many geographic names; prepared 50 Bibles for Constantine