

‘Away with the Atheists’: Anti-Christian *Rhetorica* In Pre-Christendom

An Essay in *Rhetorica Christiana*

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In 313 CE the Roman Emperor Constantine along with his imperial colleague issued the Edict of Milan and established the legal basis for the toleration of Christianity within the Roman Empire, both East and West. This event served as a critical component of what can be called the “Rise of Christendom”. “Christendom” here means “the portion of the world in which Christianity is the dominant religion”.¹ As such this word ‘Christendom’ includes within it an aspect of demographics, that is, being a dominant religion among a population, and also, an aspect of geography, a region or combination of regions where this religion is dominant among the population.² Taken together these two aspects indicate ‘Christendom’ must relate to the governing system of the people and the region involved. A religion can not become dominant in a geographic region without attracting the attention of governing authorities. There must be either implicit or explicit toleration. The Edict of Milan was a new statement of explicit tolerance for Christianity by the political establishment of the Roman empire. It ended state sanctioned repression and persecution of Christians. As has been said before: “Christ founded Christianity, but Constantine founded Christendom.”³ And the history of the west was changed forever. But what did the Christian interactions with established society look like before 313 CE?

The first Jewish disciples of Jesus grew up familiar with the religious practices associated with the temple in Jerusalem, with the Law and Prophets read in the synagogues, and with the common Jewish confession of the Shema, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One” (Dt. 6:4). These were combined with distinctively Christian elements. These elements derived from interactions of individuals with Jesus and his teaching and with those that

¹ *American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition*. S.v. "Christendom." Retrieved December 11 2022 from <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/Christendom>. There is also a non-geographic meaning of ‘Christendom’ as in ‘the whole body of Christians’ or ‘the collective all of the baptized’ irregardless of where they are found. This is not the meaning used here. See also <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christendom>.

² So it should be noted that with this sense of the word it is correct to say: ‘There are Christians who live outside of Christendom.’ One could refer, as an example, to Christian individuals who lived in a country whose government is overtly hostile to religion generally or Christianity specifically, e.g. in China where the CCP allows no religious competition to the state.

³ Peel, Robert. “Impish Defense of Christianity; the End of Christendom, by Malcolm Muggeridge. .” *The Christian Science Monitor*, The Christian Science Monitor, 18 Feb. 1981, <https://www.csmonitor.com/1981/0218/021801.html>.

immediately followed. Distinctively Christian doctrines, confessions, and worship were active among the believers in the earliest period. For example, the confessions of Jesus as “Lord” and the “Son of God” and “the Christ” reflected the convictions of Jesus as having died and risen, now sitting at the right hand of God the Father. Baptism, the Eucharist, and the singing of hymns as worship to the risen Jesus, among others, were also new and distinctively Christian.

Many of these distinctive Christian elements were considered unwelcome religious innovations by traditional Jews. Jewish first century society, especially in Judea, was familiar with and lived with many religious divisions. Josephus and the New Testament speak of at least three primary sects, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Essenes (Acts 5:17; 15:5; 26:5; *War* 2:119–166; *Ant.* 13:171–173; 18:11–22). There was additional fractioning along the lines of the “hellenistic Jews”, who were Greek speaking and probably had experience with living outside of Judea and the “Hebrews” who were probably residents of Judea or the immediately surrounding areas and usually spoke Aramaic (Acts 6:1). In addition, there were politically active groups primarily interested in casting off the heavy weight of Roman political and military oversight. In spite of all these divisions, Jewish society was fundamentally highly conservative, being proud of and centered upon the traditions of Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, or stated another way, upon the Torah and the Temple. Anything that ran contrary to this foundation of the Jewish faith was typically met with a negative response from the religious authorities and the people.

Among all this religious diversity of opinion it was natural for Jewish society initially to identify the new Christian movement as yet another Jewish “sect” (Acts 24:5; 24:14; 28:22). This was not necessarily a pejorative term. But at the same time this sect was an innovation which generally predisposed the people to be suspicious about it and to disfavor it even as they tried to learn more about it.⁴ But when it was seen that the Jewish Christians continued to honor the temple rites and make use of Moses and prophets it was tolerated to a degree among the Jewish population but with varied opinions, thousands joining the new movement in Jerusalem alone (Acts 21:17-26), but many others rejecting and opposing it.⁵ The acceptance of the Christian faith by several thousand people made it impossible to completely ignore this new sect. And so it continued to be a matter of discussion and debate. And periodically the authorities made efforts to suppress it verbally or even with force.

⁴ Acts 28:22: The Jews in Rome said to Paul, “it is known to us that it (the Christian sect) is spoken against everywhere.”

⁵ Jerusalem is estimated to have had somewhere between 100,000 and 500,000 residents at the time. The lower end of the estimates seems most probable.

One way suppression could be attempted was through public discrediting of the movement. As an example, early on, even before Saul's conversion, it seems the believers in Judea referred to themselves collectively as "the Way" (Acts 18:26; Acts 9:2; 19:9; 19:23; 22:4; 24:14; 24:22) likely as a reflection of prophetic texts important to the new believers, many derived from Jesus' own teaching.⁶ The term 'church', which appears only twice in the gospels, also rapidly became a common term used to speak of the believers collectively, both at the scope of the local assembly as well as the believers distributed world wide. To speak of individuals within the church some generic form of "believers"⁷ or "saints"⁸ appear to have been commonly used in pre-Pauline Jerusalem as well as by Paul. But there is no indication that in the earliest days after Pentecost these saints and believers referred to themselves individually or collectively as "Christians". So it is not certain but is a probable suggestion that the term "Christian" itself was a slur created by Jewish opponents in Syria to discredit the new sect (Acts 11:26; 26:28).⁹ To name a group, especially a religious group, after a particular individual, was an attempt at derision.¹⁰ However, the name was eventually adopted, re-interpreted, and self-applied by the believers to themselves during the course of the first century.

Blasphemy Against the One

Beyond such "name calling" derision, the primary moral charge used by Jewish authorities against the new faith was the accusation of blasphemy. Jesus himself is accused of such by the Jewish authorities in the Gospel texts of Mt. 26:65, Mark 14:64, and John 10:33. This charge was also part of the sentencing of Jesus to crucifixion largely in relation to the claim by Jesus of being the Son of God. The accusation of blasphemy was also made toward individual Christians in the years following. Not infrequently this is tied to a Christian confession of Jesus

⁶ For example: in John 1:23, John the Baptist quotes Isaiah, "I am the voice of one calling out in the wilderness, 'Make the way of the Lord straight,'" There are multiple other texts, even just in Isaiah, which foretell of the coming of the way of the Lord. In John 14:4-6, Jesus is recorded saying, "Where I am going you know the way ... I am the way, the truth and the life." This term never appears to have been common among the Greek speaking believers and so fell out of use rapidly.

⁷ "Those who believe(d)", present participle in Acts 2:44; 5:14 and 4:32, aorist participle or the noun "believers" in Acts 10:45. Some form of this is found in multiple places in Paul.

⁸ Acts 9:13; 9:32; 26:10. This is a common term in the Pauline letters.

⁹ Acts 11:26: "The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch." The word "Christian" is rare in the New Testament. It is used in Acts 11:26 and then in Acts 26:28 where Herod Agrippa says to Paul: "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" It appears one more time in 1 Pet. 4:16.

¹⁰ Just as we name members of a cult after the name of their individual charismatic leader.

Christ as the risen Son of God sitting at the right hand of the Father. This was at once a confession of the belief both that Jesus rose from the dead and that he is enthroned as Lord of all things fulfilling his claim to be the Son of God as well as specific Old Testament prophetic passages (Ps. 110:1; 8:6; 45:6). This was a step too far for many Jews.

In Acts 7 Stephen claims to see “the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:54-59) and was accused of being a blasphemer and was stoned to death. Some 10 to 15 years later, Herod Agrippa, grandson of Herod the Great, had James, the son of Zebedee, beheaded for being a Christian.¹¹ And some 20 years later yet, James the brother of Jesus, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, was martyred by Jewish authorities upon his public confession that Jesus “is sitting in heaven on the right hand of the great power, and he will come on the clouds of heaven.”¹²

In spite of these condemnations and even violent suppressive efforts by Jewish political and religious authorities, the Christian faith spread quickly to the great cities of the empire far and wide via the convenient means of travel and transport provided by the grand network of Roman roads and the to and fro voyages of Mediterranean ships. This combined with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE by the Romans placed the sect of Christians largely beyond the influence of Jewish authorities and even the scope of Judaism and the synagogue itself as more and more Gentiles gathered into the church.¹³ However, as the Christian population grew in the cities, the stage was set for the next phase of societal conflict which would be with Roman civic authorities and the wider pagan population of society and its conservative religious practices.

A Suspicious Superstition

Roman religion in the late Republic was made up of a bewildering mixture of ideas and practices not all of which are pertinent here. But overall there was the core idea that there were many gods and could be many different religious practices but not all practices were equal. In

¹¹ Eusebius, and Kirsopp Lake. “II.8.” In *The Ecclesiastical History* 1, 1:127. Harvard University Press, 1980.

¹² Eusebius, and Kirsopp Lake. “II.23.” In *The Ecclesiastical History* 1, 173. Harvard University Press, 1980. There are several ancient reports for this incident from Josephus to early Christian authors, not all independent. See the overview and discussion of these sources at “James, Brother of Jesus.” Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, December 11, 2022. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James,_brother_of_Jesus.

¹³ The intellectual and religious conflict would continue for centuries although we only catch glimpses of it here and there mostly in Christian patristic sources until much later periods. For examples of ongoing exegetical disagreements especially over common Christian exegetical claims see Nispel, Mark D. “Jewish/Christian Conflict and Origen's Use of the Christian *Testimonia* Proof Text Tradition,” 2003.

the public sphere some were integrated into the governance of the state via recognition and regulation by the law. This core of legal and regulated religion formed as it were the 'state religion' or the religious practices required of a citizen. "Proper, respectful *religio* brought social harmony and prosperity."¹⁴ Further, "religious law centered on the ritualized system of honors and sacrifice that brought divine blessings." To be pious was to follow the state's religious law which was to perform the necessary duties, sacrifices, prayers etc. To neglect the necessary or lawful was to be "impious".

Roman religion also involved the private sphere (the household). Private household ceremonies having to do with ones family and the spirits of ones ancestors were very common and traditional. These practices were a private duty for the benefit of one's own family. And in this setting the *pater familias* was effectively the priest for his family, the representative or embodiment of the *genius* of the family ancestors.

It was also a common conviction, at least by the powerful political class, that a Roman citizen was not to fear the gods. It was inappropriate to respond to them with excessive emotion, fear, or dread. Excessive emotion could lead to a religious fervor, a doing of more than was 'necessary.' This type of behavior was suspicious and dangerous and was viewed with concern for societal destabilization. Such practices were referred to with the pejorative, *superstitio* (superstition). The introduction of anything new or unfamiliar was viewed with such suspicion as it was not ordered or controlled by law and tradition. Roman religion was to be practical, duty filled, and lawful not emotional and unpredictably individualistic.

In spite of this religious conservatism, Julius Caesar and those who followed as emperors introduced an important innovation into Roman politics at the end of the period of the Republic. Caesar was a successful general in the Roman army, attaining the status of *divus*, or one having become divine, based upon his accomplishments in battle but also in part upon his own promotion of the Julian family claim to divine heritage.¹⁵ Ultimately this claim to divine status was certified by the senate via official deification in 42 BCE after his death. A temple in the Roman Forum was raised by Augustus to the honor of Caesar the divine in the decade

¹⁴ "Religion in Ancient Rome." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, October 30, 2022. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_ancient_Rome. "Roman religion was practical and contractual, based on the principle of *do ut des*, "I give that you might give". Religion depended on knowledge and the [correct practice](#) of prayer, rite, and sacrifice, ..."

¹⁵ This was supported shortly after his death by interpretation of what came to be called the *sidus Iulium*, the Julian comet, which conveniently appeared in the sky at the end of his life and was regarded by some as Caesar's soul traversing the heavens. Coinage, a well established method of propagation of state messaging, still exists from that period with Caesar's image juxtaposed with the image of the famous *sidus Iulium* which appeared in 44 BCE.

afterwards.¹⁶ These events established a pattern and it was too good and too useful as a political device to let go. The idea and practice of posthumous deification of the emperor became a such a commonplace that the emperor Vespasian, some 110 years after Caesar's death, is reported by Suetonius at the end of his life to have quipped "O dear, I fear I am becoming a god."¹⁷

Closely related to this new practice of imperial deification, Augustus also established a formal imperial cultus or worship. This required acknowledgment of the divine genius of the emperor, that is, his divine family spirit or life force, through offering of incense or *sacrificium* and oaths of loyalty.¹⁸ Ruler worship, while common in the east, was not a traditional religious or political practice for Romans and thus not easily accepted. So Augustus established and required these cultic actions in the provinces while exempting the citizens of Italy. Temples and altars were erected in many cities and official priests served these altars. It became an important act of acquiescence or acknowledgement of the emperor's authority and of loyalty to him, and by extension to Rome. It was a type of imposition of the Roman state religion on top of whatever local provincial religions might exist. This was a method of asserting political control via required religion. Refusal to participate was a form of disrespect to the emperor, a form of rebellion against the Roman state and the lawful cultus of pagan gods with which it was intertwined. Local provincial authorities were often only too happy to acquiesce in order to keep good relations with Rome and its superior military power. Herod the Great, for example, established three such temples to honor Augustus, one in in Caesarea, one in Samaria-Sabaste, and one in Paneon, in an attempt to promote friendly relations with Rome.¹⁹ All of the context above set the stage for several centuries of ongoing conflict between the monotheistic confessions and practices of the Jewish and Christian faiths with the Roman state.

Jewish authorities had generally developed an uneasy but mostly functional relationship with Rome ever since the latter established control of the region during the late Republic around 63 BCE.²⁰ But Rome had been familiar with the Jews even before this. There was

¹⁶ Of course this honor to Caesar was also politically convenient for Augustus who desired to promote his own title as "son of the divine", being the adopted son of Caesar.

¹⁷ Suetonius, *The Life of Vespasian*, 23.4.

¹⁸ One can easily discern this public cult was built on the pattern of the common Roman household or domestic practice of worshiping or honoring the family ancestors through religious ceremony. See the discussion of the domestic Roman cultus as the basis for the public Augustan imperial cultus at "Roman Imperial Cult." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, December 22, 2022. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_imperial_cult.

¹⁹ See Antiq. 15: 363-364 where Josephus describes one of these Herodean temples.

²⁰ This state of control transitioned to full provincial rule in 6 CE.

already a native Jewish population that had established itself in Rome and populated the ‘Jewish quarter’ in the city, similar to what we find in Alexandria in Egypt.

There was regular interaction between Rome and Jewish leaders as there was between Rome and all their provinces. Roman authors even occasionally expressed appreciation for the antiquity of their religion especially in regard to the ancient nature of the writings of Moses who could be compared favorably with Homer in terms of antiquity. On this basis as well as some successful political maneuvering by their elites, the Jews were successful in gaining some legal concessions from Rome permitting them to follow their own religious customs.²¹ These concessions and the periodic conflicts were part of the ongoing uneasy and uneven struggle for status in the empire by the Jews and by extension the first Christian Jews.

However, these concessions and the mostly functional relationship coexisted with the fact that the Romans generally viewed the Jews and their religion with suspicion. The Romans considered the Jewish monotheistic religion a *superstitio*, as not conforming to Roman traditional state religion. In fact, some of the very declarations of Rome quoted by Josephus as positive examples of Rome granting the Jews some religious freedoms explicitly state that Rome was granting such concessions “on account of the superstition they (the Jews) are under”.²²

In regard to the imperial cult specifically, some of the emperors in the first century went considerably farther than Augustus and caused conflict with the Jews. For example, Caligula, around 40 CE, as an extension of the imperial cult commanded an image of himself to be erected in the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, with force of the military if necessary. This was a step too far for the majority of Jews being viewed as a desecration of the Temple. The risk of Jewish popular resistance and uprising in response to this order was apparent immediately to Jewish leaders in Judea and Alexandria who interceded. Only after their pleading did Caligula relent and avoid a military clash.²³ In spite of this reprieve, ongoing clashes with Rome would ultimately lead to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 CE.

Meanwhile as Christians emerged from within the Jewish community in the first century, they inherited and actively confessed Jewish monotheism against the paganism of surrounding

²¹ *History of the Jews in the Roman Empire* (2022) *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_the_Roman_Empire (Accessed: December 31, 2022).

²² See Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XIV 185-267; 301-323; XVI 160-178; XIX 278-311 as examples provided by Josephus of declarations in favor of Jewish traditional practices.

²³ In general, there seems to have been Jewish discomfort with the imperial cultus requirements. But it seems the Jewish population generally made the offerings required by the relatively new imperial cult under the rational that these were token offerings and did not constitute the honor due to the Lord God alone.

culture. And so they were on a similar path to conflict with Roman society and religion, being viewed as a troublesome new sect within an already bothersome and strange minority religion. This made them a target too for the traditional disparaging notion of being a *superstitio*. And on occasions when things went farther Christians too endured conflict with Roman authorities.

Circa 50 CE, only a little more than 15 years after the crucifixion of Jesus, the Jews were noted by Suetonius to have been expelled from Rome by the emperor Claudius for constantly making disturbances in the city with “Christ being the instigator”.²⁴ Generally this statement from Suetonius is interpreted as describing ongoing early conflicts between Jews and Christian Jews within the city which resulted in disturbances to the wider city population.²⁵ Acts 18:2 mentions this expulsion reporting that Paul met Aquila and his wife Priscilla in Corinth, who had recently come there “because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome”.²⁶

Only 15 years later the first documented violent persecution of the Christians who resided in Rome was based upon this Christian reputation for causing trouble. In 64 CE, a major fire broke out in the city of Rome and burned a significant portion of the city over the course of several days. Part of the city’s population believed the emperor Nero had ordered the fire to be started. It was rumored that he did this because he wanted to clear space within the city in order to rebuild parts of it in the way he wanted them to be, to his personal benefit. He already had a well known reputation for cruelty and murder especially in the name of political power. So the idea was only modestly shocking. Due to this suspicion among the people, Nero, according to Tacitus, went out of his way to establish his blamelessness by resorting to traditional religion. He propitiated the gods by sacrifice and prayer. He had the Sibylline books consulted. But his public relations problem persisted. So Nero needed a culprit.

The fire had broken out in an area near the Jewish quarter of the city. The Jews were too many to be blamed in total. So, he blamed a smaller troublesome sect within the Jewish

²⁴ Suetonius, *Claudius*, 25. “Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome” (*Judaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit*). The famous statement of Suetonius is brief and not explicitly clear and so lends itself to multiple interpretations as to who exactly was expelled and exactly how the *impulsor Chrestus* caused the tumults in Rome. But the incidents were frequent and large enough to have gained the attention of the emperor.

²⁵ Tacitus and Josephus do not report this expulsion. Dio Cassius in his *Roman History* states the Jews were not driven out of Rome, due to their large number. It has also been suggested that this report, the silence of Tacitus and Josephus, and Suetonius’ report along with Acts 18:2 can be reconciled if Claudius ordered the expulsion of all the Jews but ultimately relented because of the difficulty in implementing it due to the large number of Jews in Rome and instead ultimately implemented restrictions on the behavior of the Jews remaining within the city by ordering that “they not hold meetings” (See *Roman History* 60.6).

²⁶ χαρίζεσθαι πάντας τοὺς Ἰουδαίους ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰώμης.

community. In reporting this event, Tacitus states that Christian beliefs were a “deadly superstition” which had started in Judea with Christ and had later spread to Rome.²⁷ In relation to the fire, Nero had a number of these Jewish Christians arrested, convicted, and executed.

*Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination.*²⁸

Suetonius too writing in circa 120 CE records this punishment of Christians by Nero calling Christians “a class of men given to a new and injurious superstition”²⁹ Pliny the Younger, writing in the early second century, wrote some 60 years later regarding the conditions of his own time as he experienced them in the province of Bithynia in Asia Minor. And he too states that Christian beliefs are a “depraved and excessive superstition.”³⁰ So it is safe to conclude from these examples that by the early second century it had become a widely held opinion and verbal commonplace in Roman society, or at least among the conservative powerful elites, to refer to the Christian faith as a dangerous and deadly superstition.

Pliny also provides us with more information about the state of Christians within society around 112 CE. He offers a direct glimpse into the clash between Christians, now largely Gentile and independent from the Jewish community, and the imperial cult. In a letter to Emperor Trajan, he reported that in Asia Minor the Christian faith had spread from the cities even into the villages and countryside and that the old pagan temples were “almost deserted.” In response to his findings, Pliny arrested and put on trial many who were accused of being Christians. He asked those accused if they were Christians, and if they denied being so, demanded them to prove it by having them offer incense and wine to the pagan gods and by paying homage to an image of the emperor and finally by cursing Christ. Those who would not do so were imprisoned. Pliny reported that he had found success by this method and saw activity returning to the pagan temples and an increase in business for those who sold provisions for making sacrifices there.

²⁷ Tacitus adds the details that this movement was started by Christ in Judea and that the Roman Pontius Pilate had managed to curtail this movement for a time. But afterwards it emerged again and spread from Judea to Rome.

²⁸ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44. “*exitiabilis superstitio*”, “destructive superstition”, comparing the results of the Christian beliefs to a deadly war or a plague.

²⁹ Suetonius, *Nero*, XVI. “*genus hominum superstitionis novae ac maleficae*”

³⁰ Pliny, *Letters to Trajan*, X, 96. “*superstitionem pravam et immodicam*”

Away With the Atheists (Atheist / ἄθεος)

In addition to the Roman and Greek notion of *superstitio* the Greeks had a notion which was nearly the opposite of it, namely, “atheist” (ἄθεος), literally one without god. The term had no literal equivalent in classical Latin. The Greek word in its most strict sense meant someone who denied the gods “to be” at all. One who denied all gods was an “absolute atheist”.³¹ In his essay *De superstitione*, Plutarch explicitly contrasts the notions of “atheism” with “superstition” as being on opposite ends of a religious spectrum. The former is “unbelief in the divine”³² which is “to not acknowledge the gods (to exist)” which in turn leads to not respecting the gods.³³ This is the sense of the word “atheist” as we commonly use it in English today.

But in a modified sense, the Greeks could also use the term “atheist” to describe a person who allows that some gods of some type may exist but at the same time deny that the traditional gods of the temples and rites of daily life actually exist or that they should be revered as gods. Socrates, for example, was accused of corrupting the youth of Athens by teaching them “not to acknowledge the gods which the state acknowledges” even though he granted that some gods may exist.³⁴ Such an atheist was one who denies the traditional lawful gods of common civic life. In this secondary sense, “atheist” or “godless” was close in usage to the Latin “*impius*.”³⁵

Josephus reports that the Jews were reproached “as atheists” by some Greek opponents most certainly due to their monotheistic rejection of the traditional pagan gods.³⁶ So in all likelihood the early Jewish Christians were also subjected to this accusation at the very least in common with their Jewish neighbors. Beyond this precedent, the vigorous Christian monotheistic rejection of idols would have made it likely that even as more and more Gentiles

³¹ In Plato’s *Apology* 26c, Socrates says he is not an atheist in this sense though his opponents claim he is.

³² “τῆ ἀπιστία τοῦ θεοῦ” and “αὐτῆ τοῦ μὴ νομίζειν θεοῦς”. This latter phrase uses the exact terms used by Socrates in Plato’s *Apology*.

³³ Plutarch, *De superstitione*, 165b. Whereas “*superstitio*” believes the gods exist but leads to fearful emotion expecting injury from the gods. Following Aristotle’s doctrine that “virtue is the mean between two extremes (vices)”, Plutarch says that “piety lies in between” these extremes (ἐν μέσῳ κειμένην τὴν εὐσέβειαν) (171f).

³⁴ *Apology* 26b. “θεοῦς διδάσκοντα μὴ νομίζειν οὐς ἢ πόλις νομίζει”.

³⁵ The Greek “ἄσεβής”, to not be worshipful or to be ungodly, was the common translation for the Latin “*impius*”. ἄσεβής and derivatives are common in the Septuagint and New Testament.

³⁶ Josephus, *contra Apionem*, II.148. “ὡς ἀθέους”.

joined the church and it became completely distinct from the Jewish religion this accusation of “atheism” would have easily been adapted and applied to the Christians as well.

So, for example, Paul echoing the Jewish Shema and a Christian bi-partite creedal pattern states:

We know that an idol is nothing in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is only one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.³⁷

Such language that an idol is “nothing” and “there is no God but one” is echoed in other places such as Gal. 4:8 where Paul states “you were slaves to those which by nature are not gods.”³⁸ And in Ephesus it is reported that the locals complained about their economic interests being hurt by Paul’s preaching in that he had “persuaded and turned away a considerable number of people, saying that gods made by hands are not gods at all.”³⁹ This language explicitly stating idols are “not gods” or “are nothing” and the confession that “there is no God but one” is exactly the language one would expect could generate a response which consisted of the accusation of being an “atheist”, or “god denier”.⁴⁰ However, we do not have any explicit examples of Christians being called “atheists” in the first century and when they were it is likely that often the pagans making that accusation did not distinguish clearly between Jew and Christian.

³⁷ 1 Cor 8:4-6. Note the similarity of Paul’s pattern “one God, the Father, from whom are all things” and the similarity to the later formal creedal pattern of Nicea, “I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things.” See JND Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Continuum, 1972) for the history of early Christian eastern creedal types following this pattern between Paul and Nicea.

³⁸ τοῖς φύσει μὴ οὖσι θεοῖς

³⁹ Acts 19:26, λέγων ὅτι οὐκ εἰσὶν θεοὶ οἱ διὰ χειρῶν γινόμενοι. This was an explicit contrast made already in Old Testament texts which contrast the idols “made by hands” and the temple or dwelling place of God “made without hands.” And Christ himself was referred to as the stone cut “without hands” as a fulfillment of Dan. 8:32. See Mark D Nispel, “‘Made Without Hands’: An important Theme in Early Christian Soteriology and Ecclesiology.”, an unpublished paper, 2015.

⁴⁰ The rejection of idols and things associated with idols affected not only Christian language and teaching but also the practical daily life of Christians within the church and between Christians and their pagan neighbors. Part of the decision of the apostolic council in Acts 15 was the directive that Gentile believers “abstain from things contaminated by idols” (Acts 15:20). And specifically the question of eating “meat sacrificed to idols” was an important one within the church itself between Jew and Gentile Christians (Acts 21:25) because it was related to the difficult question regarding the status of the Jewish law within the church as applied to Gentile Christians.

However, one hundred years or so after Paul in the middle of the second century Justin Martyr defends Christians against the charge of being “atheist”, indicating that this had become common enough to justify a defense.⁴¹ “Hence we are called atheists. And we confess that we are atheists, so far as gods of this sort (i.e. the pagan gods) are concerned, but not with respect to the most true God.”⁴² In the mid third century, another hundred years later, Origen quotes Celsus the contemporary pagan philosopher as saying that Christians were comparable to barbarians such as Scythians because they had no gods either.⁴³

Interestingly, this response to Christian teaching generated a rhetorical counter response, a turn of phrase as it were. Already in the first century Paul demonstrated that the adjective ἄθεος (atheist, without God) wielded against the Christians could be turned about and used as a retort from a monotheistic point of view. This is what Justin Martyr described as “with respect to the most true God.” Paul states that Gentile Christians before their conversions were “without God” (Eph 2:12).⁴⁴ Paul is not suggesting that these believers used to be Epicureans who denied that all gods exist. But he was instead changing the subject reference of “God” within the word “without God” from the pagan “gods” to “the one true God” of Christian confession. That is, before they believed in Jesus they were without God or apart from God or atheist even while claiming many gods who, from the Christian point of view, are nothing.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 5 and 6. See also Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV.16.

⁴² The common popular association of Christians with the idea of “atheism” in the second century, for example, is seen in the tract “Alexander the False Prophet” written by a popular pagan author Lucian of Samosata. Alexander was a priest of Asclepius but via his own innovations he founded a popular new cult involving sacred snakes with human heads. This new religion became known and even wide spread in the Roman world at this time and endured for at least a century. Lucian denounces Alexander in his tract. So this is a glimpse into the broader popular religious culture in the second century in which Christianity operated. In this tract, Lucian at one point puts these words into the mouth of Alexander: “If there be any atheist or Christian or Epicurean here spying upon our rites, let him depart in haste.” (chapter 38). Epicureans were widely considered “atheists” because of their denial of the existence of the traditional gods and maybe all gods. So one can see that “atheist”, “Christian”, and “Epicurean” is a list of synonyms of those who deny the existence of the gods. Alexander, according to Lucian, equated Christians and Epicureans as atheists and demanded all such skeptics depart from the scene of his religious rites. Since Christianity was not the topic of this tract, this is simply a glimpse at a popular rhetorical commonplace at that time.

⁴³ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 7.62.

⁴⁴ ἄθεοι ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ.

⁴⁵ It is not certain that Paul originated this monotheistic usage of the word in order to reject polytheistic religion. But the word does not occur in the Septuagint. It only occurs this one time in the New Testament. It only occurs twice in Josephus neither time in this sense. So it seems possible that Paul or some other Christian in his circle created this clever turn of phrase.

Similarly, in the second century the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* presents the trial scene of the venerable old Christian Polycarp by Roman authorities and a pagan crowd in Smyrna, not far from Ephesus. The crowd is portrayed as having cried out their displeasure with the local Christians in general and Polycarp specifically with the cry: "Away with the atheists" after which Polycarp was brought before the proconsul.⁴⁶ In agreement with the description given by Pliny 30 or 40 years earlier of such proceedings, the proconsul advised Polycarp to swear allegiance and offer incense to the genius of the emperor, declare Caesar is Lord⁴⁷, curse Christ, and he would be freed. At this point Polycarp stated "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?" The proconsul advised Polycarp to repent and to denounce the Christians along with the crowd and join in the rejection of the atheists. Instead, Polycarp

looked upon the whole multitude of lawless Gentiles that were in the stadium, and waved his hand to them; and groaning and looking up to heaven he said, 'Away with the atheists.'

He then confessed again to being a Christian and he was martyred by fire.

Conclusion

This scene from the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* would periodically replay within the empire, granted with variation, for the next 150 years until the end of pre-Christendom. It would lead to controversy within the church in the third century over how to treat those who acceded to the demands of the mob and to the threats of violence from Roman authorities. It would also lead to a remembering and honoring within the church of men and women who resisted and remained faithful to their confession to the end as a martyr of the Christian faith. But throughout that period the primary rhetorical arguments against the Christians faith would remain largely the same and provide important means of social pressure against the Christians to conform to the tradition and consensus of pagan society. But the tide was turning and the rhetorical response to the charge of atheism pointed to the day some time in the future when Christians would no longer be the religious minority and Christendom would emerge.

⁴⁶ 3.2. Αἶρε τοὺς ἀθέους.

⁴⁷ "Τί γὰρ κακόν ἐστὶν εἰπεῖν· Κύριος Καῖσαρ?"

Version Table

Version	Date	Description
1.0	Jan 16, 2023	Initial Version