

CHAPTER 1

The Creation of Key Religionized Categories in Early Christianity

In Roman imperial culture before Constantine (r. 306–337), Christianity was a diverse phenomenon (Fredriksen, 2014). Identities were largely ‘evolving and fluid’ and the distinctions and boundaries between different social groups ‘whether those traditionally termed heretical and orthodox, or Jew and Christian’ were not yet that clear (Carleton Paget & Lieu, 2017, p. 2). Christianity was a work-in-progress with no official form, and the process of configuring Christianness in a largely non-Christian world was ongoing (Buell, 2005, p. 26). From this perspective, it makes more sense to speak about Christianities, even though precisely that plurality would be denied by those seeking to establish a single Christian norm.

In this setting, where Christians found themselves in a minority position, apologists took on the task of creating a sense of Christian self-understanding. They sought to define what is true and false worship, what is the Christian norm and what deviates from it, who belongs and who does not, and how a Christian ought to live faithfully in a largely non-Christian society (García Soormally, 2019). Operating ‘within their particular cultural and rhetorical contexts’, they used a variety of discursive strategies they shared with their neighbours, and they did so in ways that served their project of self-making (Knust, 2006, p. 13).

Typically, selfing (the configuration of identity) and othering (the making of alterity) go hand in hand: ‘Wherever we look for the emergence of “the self” there looms the spectre of “the other”’ (Lieu, 2004, p. 269). This also holds true when we discuss early Christian patterns of religionization understood as the process of selfing and othering predicated on imagined religious difference. Christian apologists constructed and projected their Christian way of life while simultaneously delegitimizing that of others (Stroumsa, 1998, p. 175). That effort of religious (de)legitimization also intersected with ethnicization, gendering, and even sexual slander (Drake, 2013, p. 54). In the course of this process, non-Christians were labelled, categorized, and essentialized as the ‘others’ of Christianity, while Christianness was imagined as the ultimate religious standard.

Religionization may take varying expressions. One common pattern of religionization follows the logic of dichotomization; the religious other is projected as the reverse image of the self. The emerging traditions of *adversus nationes* [against the nations], *adversus haereses* [against heretics], and *adversus Iudaeos* [against the Jews] contrast ‘true’ Christianness with respectively ‘superstition’, ‘heresy’, and ‘Jewishness’. Here, the ‘idolater/superstitious fool’ (later the pagan), ‘the heretic’, and ‘the Jew’ are turned into useful enemies to think

with and to contrast with what being a ‘true’ Christian entails. As mere foils in the service of Christian identity construction they do not tell us a lot about real others or about Christian interaction with those who are labelled as belonging to other religious groups (Kahlos, 2007; Lieu, 2004; Rebillard, 2012). The way Christianity’s others are labelled does, however, shed light on those features which early Christians considered salient about their own faith. That also holds true for the second pattern of religionization, which follows a logic of encompassment. While often operating with the same categories as the logic of binary construction, here the ‘putatively subordinate category is adopted, subsumed or co-opted (←) into the identity defined and, as it were, owned by those who do the encompassing’ (Baumann & Gingrich, 2004, p. 26). According to this logic, the other is projected as an inferior or incomplete, albeit not completely different, version of the self. Here, there is room for overlap between Christians and non-Christians, but this overlap reinforces the truth of Christian tradition. The logic of encompassment seems benign, but also presumes a stratified schema of superiority and inferiority, which is expressed in terms of promise and fulfilment, potential and realization, shadow and light, seed and fruition. At the lower level of knowledge one may find the traces of what is realized, fulfilled, and encompassed at a higher level. Typically, the logic of encompassment elevates a particular term, for example Christian peoplehood or Christian worship, and turns it into a seemingly generic and universal term, which includes everyone, without those who find themselves at a lower level of knowledge realizing that this is the case. Only those who have access to the fullness of truth are in the know. Others tend to remain fixated on what is particular, tribal, or partially true.

Religionization makes us believe that these social categories – Christian, Jew, heretic, superstitious fool/idolater – describe reality as it is (Metz, 2021). These categories are indeed constructed as taken-for-granted categories rather than as malleable categories that are rhetorically forged in the crucible of ideological and sometimes political battles. So there is always a risk that we uncritically adopt these categories of religious difference as ‘our categories of social analysis’ and that we forget that they actually obscure the multi-layered nature of people’s identities and the messiness of social reality (Brubaker, 2002; Rebillard, 2012, p. 2). In the period under scrutiny – the second and third centuries CE – the boundaries between Christian and Jewish social life, Christian and pagan-Roman culture, orthodox Christianity and Christian heresies were anything but clear. Where apologists projected difference and boundaries, social reality did not show discrete religious entities. In fact, apologetic statements about what Christians do or do not do (e.g. attend the games) are usually statements about what they should or should not do to distinguish themselves from others; in reality Christians often did not follow through. The categories of otherness too are discursively created and non-descriptive. Accordingly, when analysing the work of Christian apologists, we have to differentiate between the rhetorical production of difference between Christians and various others and how people actually behaved and what they believed (Lieu, 2004).

The religionized constructs discussed in this chapter form the first basic foundation for the later Medieval Christian map of the world; these constructs will make a profound impact on how Christians imagine, relate to and, in a later stage of history, governed those who deviate from Christian normativity. When power dynamics began to shift, and Christians (or at least those Christians who conformed to the norm) found themselves in the majority, these imagined rhetorical boundaries gradually translated into boundaries of social experience (Lieu, 2004, p. 103). For now, however, let us focus our attention on the time when Christians were one religious minority living in a world full of gods.

1 *Religio* and Its Counterpart *Superstitio*

In their effort to construct a sense of Christianness ‘in the midst of great and interconnected diversity’ (Carleton Paget & Lieu, 2017, p. 2), early Christian writers made use of existing rhetorical strategies and existing terms, the meaning of which they contested, redefined,

and adapted to fit their apologetic goal. Two terms that play a key role in the construction of Christian self-understanding are the contrasting terms *religio* and *superstitio*. To understand how Christian apologists adopted and adapted the distinction between *religio* and *superstitio*, I briefly revisit the shifting layers of meaning in both terms during Late Antiquity and explore how Romans used these terms.

Religio in Antique Times

In antique times, the Latin notion *religio* and its plural *religiones* did not necessarily revolve around beliefs, worship practices, or the gods, namely those things which we would nowadays associate with religion (Nongbri, 2013, pp. 25–30). *Religio* was not limited to some kind of separate realm of human life or a bounded institution or set of institutions; the notion *religio* had a much broader scope. Before it was a system of beliefs, ritual practices, and temples revolving around the gods, *religio* belonged to the realm of experience and emotion (Schilbrack, 2017, p. 833) and it pointed to a sense of restraint, a feeling of having to tread carefully. As Dumézil puts it, ‘*religio* first pointed to scruple: [...] the concerned hesitation before a manifestation that one must above all understand in order to adapt to it’ (Dumézil, 1966, p. 54, my translation).

Religio could also be attributed to any object, person, or place that invoked a sense of awe, restraint, or even anxiety. Anything that caused Romans to act carefully – ‘any bond or boundary, any oath, prodigy or omen, any law or tradition or prohibition’ – could be *religiosus* (Barton & Boyarin, 2016, p. 27). Especially the uncanny, the unknown, and the perilous could evoke the emotions of *religio* – and could make Romans ‘behave with particular circumspection’ (Barton & Boyarin, 2016, p. 22): entering a forest, dealing with death. Cultic obligations were also *religiosi* (Smith, 1963, p. 24) and Romans were obliged to observe them, since they were expected to honour the gods and give them their dues. In all of this, neither external authorities – kings or magistrates – nor gods or spirits or other transcendent forces were necessarily seen as the source of the restraint. Further, the transgression of some religious boundaries could evoke a terrible sense of shame or of being tainted. This explains why the Romans ‘approached such boundaries as we might approach an electrified fence’ (Barton & Boyarin, 2016, p. 22). Those feelings were also called *religio*. Transgression could exclude the transgressor from the community. To overcome this situation of exclusion and to be liberated from the feeling of shame and the taint of transgression, ritualized acts of expiation were needed.

Antiquity and Ethnicity of Religio

Over time, however, *religio* came to refer mainly to various worship practices or the performance of ancient rituals to please the gods and to keep the peace (King, 1999, pp. 35–36). Thus, *religio* became more or less synonymous with *traditio*, doing what one’s ancestors have always done, with an emphasis on continuity. In *De natura deorum*, Cicero (106–43 BCE) derives *religio* from *relegere*, ‘to retrace or re-read’ (Cicero, *De natura deorum* II.72, trans. Rackham, 1933). This notion is synonymous with the Greek *álegein*, meaning to heed or to care for. It was an obligation to do as one’s ancestors had done, hence the opposition of *relegere* to *neglegere*, to neglect. A religious person is one who keeps the traditions of his ancestors while an irreligious person is one who neglects these traditions (Hoyt, 1912, p. 127). Significantly, the older a *religio/traditio* (the longer its ancestral history) the more authority it had and the more respect it deserved. Thus, antiquity indexed proper *religio*, and piety was the correct attitude towards antique *religio* (Fredriksen, 2006b, p. 235).

Another possible etymological root of *religio* is the verb *religare*, meaning ‘to bind together’ or ‘to tie together’, indicating a shared reverence for the same gods. From this perspective, *religio* is a power that holds people together. In ancient Mediterranean culture,

religio intersected with peoplehood or ethnicity (kinship, genealogy, shared language and/or territory and customs). ‘Ancient gods’, Paula Fredriksen explains, ‘run in the blood’ (Fredriksen, 2006b, p. 238). To practise *religio* therefore implied ethnic belonging, and to be ‘a Jew, Egyptian, or Greek, or an Antiochene, Athenian, or Roman was to practice the traditional rites of one’s ancestors’ (Schott, 2008, p. 8). The gods were attached to people and vice versa. So, next to antiquity, ethnicity understood as peoplehood also ‘indexed proper religion’ (Fredriksen, 2006b, p. 235). People belong together because they share *religio* as *traditio* and this sense of belonging is reproduced by performing ancient rituals together. Peoplehood, therefore, is also made religiously. Given that there are many people, there are also many gods and many ways to worship the gods, and in this sense there was a variety of *religiones*.

Pax Romana, Pax Deorum

In the Roman Empire (from 27 BCE), the term *religio* referred primarily to public rituals performed for the benefit of the state (Cantwell Smith, 2008, p. 9). For the state (and the city) to flourish it was important to maintain good relations with the gods and render them their dues: ‘processions, hymns, libations, blood offerings, communal dancing, and drinking and eating – all these public forms of worship expressed and created bonds that bound citizens together and, by establishing or maintaining the necessary relations with powerful numinous patrons (both imperial and celestial), contributed to the common weal’ (Fredriksen, 2003, p. 44). *Pax Romana* – Roman peace – depended on *pax deorum* – peace of the gods: ‘the concordat between heaven and earth [...] guaranteed the well-being of city and Empire’ (Fredriksen, 2006a, p. 601). To refrain from paying respect to the gods was not only an affront but could also endanger the community. Consider in this regard Cicero, who was convinced that

in all probability the disappearance of piety towards the gods will entail the disappearance of loyalty and social union among men as well, and of justice itself, the queen of all the virtues [atque haud scio an pietate adversus deos sublata fides etiam et societas generis humani et una excellentissima virtus iustitia tollatur]. (De natura deorum I.4, trans. Rackham, 1933)

As the Roman Empire expanded, it implemented the policy of absorbing the gods and the *religiones* of other people, rather than destroying or forbidding them. One way to do this was by building temples that incorporated the local tradition into the Roman religion. Thus, Roman deities found their way to the provinces and some local deities travelled to the centre of the empire; for example the cult of Isis, an Egyptian goddess, and that of Mithras, a Persian sun god, became highly popular in Rome. The Roman world was full of gods, and these gods were not only Roman (Stroumsa, 2015, p. 4). This diversity of gods simply reflected the fact that Rome had conquered many people. Romans perfectly understood that different people were bound to different gods (ethnicity) and had to maintain different ancestral obligations (antiquity). For Romans it was even normal to ‘show respect to the gods of others too; and in many circumstances – situations calling for political politesse; military or diplomatic engagements; visions of or visitations from divinities other than one’s own – such a show of respect was a simple matter of courtesy and common sense. After all, any god is more powerful than any human’ (Fredriksen, 2006b, pp. 235–236). While conquered people could continue to practise ancestral cultic traditions, they were also expected to conform to Roman *religio* (Text Box 1).

Text Box 1: Jewish Participation in Pagan Worship?

Jews were a minority living in a world that was full of gods. For a long time, scholars projected the image of Jews as an isolated and perhaps even marginalized people, who did not fully participate in Roman life, which they associated with idolatry. Often this picture entailed understanding the Jewish cult as *religio licita*, that is a legal religion which was tolerated. According to Guy Stroumsa and Paula Fredriksen, both ideas need nuance.

First of all, for Jews idolatry or *idolatreia* is associated with the nations (gentiles, later pagans) and is restricted to a sharply defined domain in contrast to Jewish worship or *latreia* (*avoda* in Hebrew). *Latreia* consists of temple sacrifice or, after the destruction of the temple, prayer, whereas the former refers to sacrifice to or worship of idols, in other words an idol cult (Stroumsa, 1998, p. 179). This restricted definition provided Jews with the space to participate in the Roman world. To be Jewish did not mean isolation. Indeed, social history shows that ‘Jews attended theatrical and athletic events, got good gymnasium educations where they could, joined Gentile armies, and lived public lives as municipal leaders. [...] Ancient Jews, as ancients generally, lived in a world congested with gods and they knew it’ (Fredriksen, 2003, pp. 44–45). Participating in Rome’s social and cultural life implied contact with the gods and, to a certain degree unavoidably, participation in pagan worship. When it comes to actual *latreia*, Jews tended to avoid ‘overt public cult’. They did try ‘to compensate [for this non-participation] variously through dedications, patronage and prayer’ (Fredriksen, 2003, p. 44).

We know that Jews, after 63 BCE, when Judea was conquered, were exempt from participating in the imperial cult and were allowed to keep their own traditions. To explain this exemption scholars often refer to the idea that Jewish religion was *religio licita*. This reference, however, is not helpful. The problem is, first, that *religio* was not a legal category in Roman law prior to the fourth century. So the term is anachronistic. The value of this category for historical analysis is also ‘compromised [...] because of its utter wrong-headedness in obscuring the essential connection in antiquity between cult and ethnicity’ (Fredriksen, 2006b, p. 239). The exemption of Jews from imperial cult and the acceptance of their cultic exclusivism was, ‘for the most part, accepted, because [the *religio* of the Jewish people] met majority culture’s twin measure of legal and social respectability, namely, ethnicity and antiquity’ (Fredriksen, 2003, p. 42). While Jewish people were sometimes ridiculed as superstitious, a sign of their foreignness (see below), their traditions were nevertheless respected for being old and for being markers of ethnic identity.

Superstitio and Religio

Even though Romans recognized many *religiones*, they did distinguish between *religio* on the one hand and *superstitio* on the other hand. The notion of *superstitio* was initially used as a neutral term depicting more personal devotions and oaths. By the first century BCE, however, the word had received a pejorative connotation (see e.g. Cicero, *De natura deorum* I.72, trans. Rackham, 1933; Seneca the Younger [4 BCE – 65 CE], *De clementia*, trans. Basore, 1928 p. 439). It was linked to ‘all irrational, improper and perverted credulity as well as unauthorized divination, magic and astrology’ (Kahlos, 2007, p. 96). Especially, ‘[s]orcerers and seers were despised, and all the more so because the majority often came from foreign parts. [...] The Romans, faithful to their official augurs, always condemned any recourse to magic, to divination, to these practices which were regarded as puerile’ (Benveniste, 2016, p. 537). *Superstitio* could also be associated with being overscrupulous and overly attached to ritual rules. *Superstitio* was, according to Seneca the Younger, ‘the misguided idea of a lunatic [*superstitio error insanientis*]; it fears those whom it ought to love; it is an outrage upon those whom it worships’ (Seneca, *Epistle* CCXXIII.16, trans. Gummere, 1925). *Superstitio*, in this sense, was ‘not an antithesis of religion’, but rather

‘a vice that constituted a hyperbole or perverted appendix *inside* the same religious tradition’ (Kahlos, 2007, p. 95). Superstitious people participate in exaggerated cults, attach too much importance to prophecies or allow themselves to be swindled by charlatans. The elite often applied this reproach to common people [*vulgus*], to those living in the countryside [*pagani*], to slaves and women. Thus, the distinction between *religio* and *superstitio* was both gendered and classed. Even though the elite ridiculed *superstitiones* and regarded them as contrary to *religio*, in reality these practices were tolerated as long as they were ‘harmless to the Roman order’ (Kahlos, 2007, p. 97).

Text Box 2: Imaginary Binary Religionized Constructs

The distinction between *religio* and *superstitio* implies a normative judgment, which legitimized some practices and delegitimizes others. *Religio* is appropriate, whereas *superstitio* is not. To call someone superstitious ‘amounts to a dismissive way of referring to what in the speaker’s opinion appeared excessive, dishonorable, unmanly, sometimes simply new and unfamiliar, sometimes actually wicked, forms of religious action or expression. In other words, the condemnation or distance it asserted was nicely calibrated with the self-image of the Roman politico-social elite in matters relating to religious practice’ (Gordon, 2008, p. 77).

Religio

State-governed
Virtue
Disciplined, ordered, and reasonable cultic obligation
Proper posture, appropriate, moderate behaviour
Citizens
A rational, balanced mind

Superstitio

Chaotic, unruly
Vice
Irrational, improper, and perverted credulity
Excessive, shameful public behaviour
Women, slaves, country-dwellers
A feeble mind

If the notion of *superstitio* in the first century BCE was mainly reserved for individuals engaging in immoderate religious practices, by the early second century CE it had come to denote the *religio(nes)* of foreigners, and then in a pejorative way (Buell, 2005, p. 193). Roman authors used this label to denigrate foreigners and to demarcate them from Romans. Cicero, for example, emphasized that when it comes to matters of *religio*, Romans were far superior to other people.

The fate of these men may serve to indicate that our empire was won by those commanders who obeyed the dictates of religion. Moreover if we care to compare our national characteristics with those of foreign peoples, 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 [multo superiores]. (De natura deorum II.3, trans. Rackham, 1933)

This derogatory depiction of the traditions of foreign people also played a role in the genre of Greco-Roman ethnography, which cast foreigners as barbarians, that is as the negative counterimage of civilized Greeks and Romans. ‘The Greeks were virile, while Persians were effeminate, Greeks were rational, while Egyptians were irrational; Romans were pious while Jews were impious; Romans were civilized while Germans were savage and

so on' (Fredriksen, 2014, p. 24). By calling foreigners superstitious, they were immediately constructed as inferior (Fitzgerald, 2007, p. 115). Druids, Germanic people, the Egyptians as well as Jews were targeted for being involved in magical practices (Pliny the Elder [23/24–79 CE], *Natural History* 30, trans. Rackham, 1938). I call this a form of ethnoreligious othering; when *religio* is considered a marker of ethnicity, delegitimizing a people's *religio* is one way to inferiorize and essentialize them as a whole. Consider in this regard Tacitus (56–117 CE), who in book five of his *Histories* (Tacitus, *Histories*, trans. Moore, 1931), denigrates the Jewish people and their superstitions (book V.8 *superstitionem*), while nevertheless acknowledging the antiquity of their rites. The rhetoric follows the logic of dichotomy, contrasting 'us' and 'them'.

The Jews regard as profane all that we hold sacred; on the other hand, they permit all that we abhor [profana illic omnia quae apud nos sacra, rursum concessa apud illos quae nobis incesta]. (Histories V.4)

Whatever their origin, these rites are maintained by their antiquity: the other customs of the Jews are base and abominable, and owe their persistence to their depravity [Hi ritus quoquo modo inducti antiquitate defenduntur: cetera instituta, sinistra foeda, pravitate valere]. (V.5)

The ways of the Jews are preposterous and mean [Iudaeorum mos absurdus sordidusque]. (V.5)

Those who are converted to their ways follow the same practice, and the earliest lesson they receive is to despise the gods [contemnere deos], to disown their country [exuere patriam], and to regard their parents, children, and brothers as of little account [parentes liberos fratres vilia habere]. (V.5)

Typically, such ethnoreligious stereotyping would take on a gendered expression with charges of sexual misbehaviour levelled against others (Drake, 2013; Knust, 2006). Such charges played an important role in the establishment of group boundaries between Romans and non-Romans, civilized people and barbarians. No one can lead a promiscuous sexual life and be in control of their desires, a characteristic of true Romans. Tacitus continues his anti-Jewish slander:

They sit apart at meals, and they sleep apart, and although, as a race, they are prone to lust [proiectissima ad libidinem gens], they abstain from intercourse with foreign women; yet among themselves nothing is unlawful [inter se nihil illicitum]. (Histories V.5, trans. Moore, 1931)

This form of anti-Jewish ethnoreligious rhetoric was 'simply an occasional subspecies of a more general contempt for foreign customs and the obverse expression of Graeco-Roman patriotic pride' (Fredriksen, 2003, p. 47). This example does, however, make clear that religious difference functioned as an identity marker to target ethnic groups and to construct religious boundaries between self and other. Christians too would become the target of such ethnoreligious discourses.

2 Christians as Targets of Religionization

The vast majority of the people among whom Christians lived did not share their religious beliefs and practices. Christian traditions were considered new and did not clearly mark ethnicity. Some Christians kept the Jewish law, others were Romans (or gentiles) but they were all suspect because they did not respect Roman cult. Christian *religio* was frowned upon, mislabelled, and discredited. Some Romans were concerned that Roman Christians (gentile Christians), who did not respect their standing cultic obligations, would threaten the *pax deorum*. This concern may explain the occasional violent outbursts, and even the persecution of Christians for not conforming. Even though persecution was not a constant threat, it

was certainly part of the social world in which Christians lived. Thus, Paula Fredriksen and Oded Irshai:

From the late first to the mid-third century, local pagan resentments and anxieties caused by this Christian lack of respect occasionally burst forth into active aggression: gentile Christians, denounced before magistrates, would be ordered to conform to the religious protocols of the mos Romanorum or face severe sanctions, even death. After 250, imperial initiatives to restore and maintain the pax deorum brought more wide-spread pressure to bear on gentile Christians, to induce them to conform: free to worship Christ as they wished, they nonetheless also had to show honor to the gods. (Fredriksen & Irshai, 2015, p. 120)

Alongside persecution, Christians were also the target of ethnoreligious polemics. Not long after the emergence of the Jesus movement, writers such as Pliny the Younger (61–113 CE), Suetonius (69/70–140 CE), and Tacitus would label it superstitious, thereby at once delegitimizing it as a foreign and excessive practice associated with the feeble minded. Thus, Tacitus in his *Annals*:

[...] Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians [Christianos appellabat]. Christus, the founder of the name [Auctor nominis eius Christus], had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition [exitiabilis superstitio] was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease [originem eius mali], but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. (Annals Book 15, V.44; trans. Jackson, 1937)

The fact that Jesus was crucified did not help to raise the status of this novel social group. Crucifixion was a punishment ‘reserved for people of low status found guilty of heinous crimes, especially crimes against the *maiestas* of Rome’ (Knust, 2006, p. 107). Such public punishment was immediately associated with loss of status and gendered as a sign of diminished masculinity. Followers of Jesus, by implication, were feminized by association, and this would only be reinforced when they themselves were being persecuted and publicly put to trial. The othering of Christian *religio* in terms of *superstitio* was further exacerbated by anti-Christian charges of immoral (un-Roman) behaviour: Christians were accused of cannibalism, child murder, promiscuous behaviour, and even incestuous relations, all of which testified to the potentially dangerous nature of their false and evil religion. Christians, unlike Roman elites, were ‘incapable’ of controlling themselves (Knust, 2006, p. 27).

Minucius Felix (d. ca. 250), an early Christian apologetic, recorded some of these anti-Christian accusations in his *Octavius* and attributed these accusations to a Roman aristocrat, Cornelius Fronto, who told tales about Christian promiscuities. Thus, he sought to reassert ‘the “true” piety of Rome – a piety that leads to sexual and religious decency, not incest and human sacrifice’ (Knust, 2006, p. 6). Consider in this regard Fronto on Christians and their lustful religion:

They recognize one another by secret signs and marks; they fall in love almost before they are acquainted; everywhere they introduce a kind of religion of lust [libidinum religio], a promiscuous ‘brotherhood’ and ‘sisterhood’ by which ordinary fornication, under cover of a hallowed name, is converted to incest. And thus their vain and foolish superstition [vana et demens superstitio] makes an actual boast of crime. [...] To say that a malefactor put to death for his crimes, and wood of the death-dealing cross, are objects of their veneration is to assign fitting altars to abandoned wretches and the kind of worship they deserve.

On the day appointed they gather at a banquet with all their children, sisters, and mothers, people of either sex and every age [cum omnibus liberis, sororibus,

matribus, sexus omnis homines et omnis aetatis]. *There, after full feasting, when the blood is heated and drink has inflamed the passions of incestuous lust [incestae libidinis], a dog which has been tied to a lamp is tempted by a morsel thrown beyond the range of his tether to bound forward with a rush. The tale-telling light is upset and extinguished, and in the shameless dark lustful embraces are indiscriminately exchanged; and all alike, if not in act, yet by complicity, are involved in incest, as anything that occurs by the act of individuals results from the common intention.* (Minucius Felix, Octavius IX, trans. Glover & Rendall, 1931)

Such accusations will return at a later stage of our history of religionization when Christians would accuse Jews, heretics, and pagans of similar promiscuous practices.

Christian Apologists and Ethnoreligious Reasoning

Against this background, early second- and third-century apologists tried to construct an account of what it is to be a true Christian, over against others, who sometimes ridiculed them or rejected the legitimacy of their faith claims. These early Christian authors worked ‘within their particular cultural and rhetorical contexts, employing tools of rhetoric they shared with their neighbors in ways that served their own persuasive projects’ (Knust, 2006, p. 13). They thus started from the existing terms of the debate – *religio/superstitio* – while modifying their scope and meaning so as ‘to include their truth, neatly reversing the terms on their opponents’ (Beard et al., 1998, p. 227). That ‘ethnicity and antiquity indexed proper religion’ was a given (Fredriksen, 2006b, p. 235); how apologists would map their sense of Christianness onto this understanding of *religio* was something they had to creatively figure out. Refuting the charge of newness by claiming antiquity for Christian *religio* was one way to proceed; the other was to claim some sense of Christian ethnicity.

Crafting a Sense of Christian Ethnicity

In early Christian literature, apologists engage in ethnoreligious reasoning and Christians are sometimes called a new people [*laos/genos*], or the real people of God, or the New Israel or the true people of God. As a people they claim shared ancestors (genealogy), shared customs (way of life), shared values, and a shared *religio*. If *religio* constitutes a people and the bond of peoplehood is reinforced by its *religio*, then what brings Christians together [cf. *religare*] is their shared worship of the true God revealed in Christ; as I will explain below, this is a refiguration of the notion *religio* (Buell, 2002, p. 430). Christians also explicitly compared themselves to other peoples, like the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, and Jews. Sometimes they were termed ‘a third race’, clearly distinct from Greeks and Jews (Buell, 2005). Consider in this regard Clement of Alexandria (150–211/215), who said:

Do not worship as the Greeks neither worship as the Jews. But we, who worship [God] in a new way, in the third way (or form) [genei], are Christians. (Clement of Alexandria, Stromateis 6.39.4; 41.2; 41.6, quoted in Buell, 2005, p. 42)

Justin Martyr (100–165) too, in his *Dialogue with the Jew Trypho* (Justin Martyr, trans. Falls, 1948), used ethnic reasoning to establish Christianness as proper *religio*. He emphasizes their shared way of life: members of this Christian people follow Christ’s law (123), have faith in Christ (64; 116), and, importantly, change their overall way of life (119). Baptism marks and sets this change in motion; it symbolizes the acceptance of a new way of life and those who are baptized now belong to the Christian people. Here, according to Tertullian (155–220): ‘[...] we, who were not *formerly* the people of God, have been *made* [God’s] people by accepting both the new law [...] and the new circumcision [...]’

(*Adversus Iudaeos* III.13, in Dunn, 2004, p. 75, my emphasis). In a similar vein we read in Justin Martyr's *Dialogue*:

Now, since Christ was the First-born of every creature, He founded a new race which is regenerated by Him through water and faith and wood, which held the mystery of the cross. (Dial. 138, trans. Falls, 1948)

Baptism, while invisible as such, is understood as an indelible spiritual mark branded onto Christian bodies. Like cattle being branded, baptism marks adherence to Christ and thus to God's new people. It changes Christians in their essence, fixates their belonging, and transforms them profoundly and sets them apart (*Dial.* 43, trans. Falls, 1948). This sign cannot be undone; while spiritual, it is a fixed ethnoreligious mark of belonging to Christian peoplehood.

Next to a shared way of life and worship as an ethnoreligious marker, apologists also emphasize how Christians 'are united by common ties of kinship' and blood relations (Buell, 2005, p. 9). Just as the Hellenes projected a genealogy according to which they all stemmed from one common ancestor – Hellas – Christians also claimed a long genealogy; their peoplehood goes way back. Some apologists would project Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Judah as the ancestors of Christ, claiming that Christ came to restore the Hebrews and their traditions.

Therefore, as your whole people was called after that one Jacob, surnamed Israel, so we who obey the precepts of Christ, are, through Christ who begot us to God, both called and in reality are, Jacob and Israel and Juda and Joseph and David and true children of God. (Dial. 123, trans. Falls, 1948)

Christians are Hebrews, and Hebrews are the oldest of all people, they even predate the Egyptians and certainly the Greeks (see for example the *Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions*).

Other apologists, while imagining Christians as a distinct and bounded people, would rather emphasize what makes Christian peoplehood unique: this particular people welcomes others from a whole range of nations (gentiles). In so doing, the Christian people promises to achieve the reunification of all people regardless of their particular origins. Here, Christian peoplehood takes on a universal and inclusive stance. Denise Kimber Buell points out, however, that this universal and inclusive Christian claim should not be understood as a break with ethnoreligious reasoning, but rather as an adaptation and reinterpretation of it. Indeed, apologists who emphasized the universal/inclusive dimension of Christianness projected a genealogy that was also able to include gentile Christians. Rather than sticking with a particularly Hebrew genealogy, starting with Abraham or Jacob, apologists, making this universalizing claim, traced Christian peoplehood back to Adam, the first human from which all people stem (marking universality). Such a universalized ethnoreligious line of reasoning claims that at the root or in principle (i.e. in the beginning of creation cf. Genesis 1) there already was a shared connection between all human beings – whether Greek or Jewish – which precedes particular ethnic differences between people. From the very beginning, all humans descend from the same ancestor. Furthermore, within the Christian theological framework, this oneness holds a universalizing promise, that will be fulfilled in the eschaton; all will be united in Christ, the New Adam, the progenitor of a new people. Christ offers the promise of salvation to all people and thus restores them to their original calling.

A variation to this universalizing pattern of ethnoreligious reasoning is the claim that while the incarnation of the Word in Christ was a recent historical event, the *Logos* predates this particular historical event: in the beginning was the Word, and all human beings were created by God's Word and in God's image (cf. Genesis and the Gospel according to John). There can be no older and more inclusive genealogy than that. Consider in this regard Clement of Alexandria in his *Exhortation to the Greeks*:

And do not suppose that my song of salvation is new in the same sense as an implement or a house. For it was 'before the morning star' and, 'in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'. But error is old, and truth appears to be a new thing. Whether then the Phrygians are really proved to be ancient by the goats in the story; or the Arcadians by the poets who describe them as older than the moon; or, again, the Egyptians by those who dream

that this land first brought to light both gods and men; still, not one of these nations existed before this world. But we were before the foundation of the world, we who, because we were destined to be in Him, were begotten beforehand by God. We are the rational images formed by God's Word, or Reason, and we date from the beginning on account of our connexion with Him, because 'the Word was in the beginning': Well, because the Word was from the first, He was and is the divine beginning of all things; but because He lately took a name, the name consecrated of old and worthy of power, the Christ, – I have called Him a New Song. (Exhortation to the Greeks 1, trans. Butterworth, 1919)

This potential Christian inclusivity goes hand in hand with an effort to fix the boundaries of Christianness. While Christianness might in principle be open to all, one only becomes part of Christian peoplehood through the gates of baptism and faith; and that is a hard border (Buell, 2005, p. 46). Universality, inclusion, and the idea of becoming (one can become Christian by becoming in Christ) does not contradict the idea that this is a bounded people of the saved, a people of the righteous, or a God-loving people (*genos*). Only true *religio* (see below) leads to salvation; other forms of *religio* lead to perdition. This exclusivist understanding of *religio* sets boundaries between Christians and non-Christians, baptized and unbaptized; faithful and unfaithful. Hence, the worship practices of Greeks and Jews are projected as finite and inferior. Clearly, universalization does not exclude inferiorization (whether implicit or explicit) and clearly inclusion and exclusion are each other's flipsides (Ricoeur, 2010, p. 37). The pattern of religionization that is being deployed here is that of encompassment or inclusion.

Text Box 3: Ethnoreligious Reasoning as Religionization and the Making of Jewish Others

Typically, Christian anti-Jewish discourses pit Christians over against Jews as Jews. One specific way Jews are made into Christianity's other is by constructing them as tribal and particularistic people in contrast to the Christians, who are cast as inclusivist people, open to all regardless of their ethnicity. Following a logic of dichotomization, the Jewish people is marked primarily as an ethnic group, the Christian community as a group that transcends such ethnic markers. Other religionized binaries get attached to this dichotomy between Jewish ethnoreligious particularism and Christian inclusive universalism: carnal – spiritual, Law – faith, old – new. Jewish law is for Jews only, salvation in Christ is for all people.

David Horrell points out (Horrell, 2020, p. 68) that the Jew-Christian dichotomy is structural. While it may take on various expressions, and its terms may change over time – 'particular and universal', 'exclusive and inclusive', or 'ethnic and trans-ethnic' – at root the dichotomy prevails. Well into the nineteenth century, this anti-Jewish binary of Jewish ethnic particularity versus Christian spiritual universality would contribute to the distinction between national and world religions, as well as to the racialized opposition between Semitic and Aryan religions.

Such dichotomies not only hide more complex realities, but they also hide from view the similarities in the way Jews and Christians constructed their sense of religious belonging and peoplehood. One thing that is lost from view is how the Christian project of universalization adopts and adapts existing patterns of ethnoreligious reasoning (we are also a people, marked by a long genealogy, kinship, customs, worship traditions). At the same time, the fixedness of Jewish peoplehood is essentialized while the fluidity (all may become Christians) is emphasized (Buell, 2005, p. 95). That Christians assume a fixed boundary when it comes to salvation – only Christians may be saved – is downplayed.

By surfacing how both exclusionary and universalizing strategies can draw on ethnoreligious reasoning, simplistic dichotomies are challenged and the boundaries between Jews (as ethnic) and Christians (as universal) blurred. *Religio*, as understood by some Christian apologists, does not transcend *religio*-ethnic bonds, but reaffirms and alters them in accordance with faith in Christ. This is a universalizing move which conceals its own particularity or perhaps ethnicity – all may be included in a particular Christian interpretation of salvific history.

Crafting Christian *Religio* as the Most Ancient

From a Roman perspective, the more ancient the *religio/traditio* the more prestige it had. The Christian movement was new, and that newness was held against them (De Roover, 2014). Again, apologists would develop a counterargument stating that their *religio* was the most ancient of all. To that end, they projected a sacred religious history according to which Christian *religio* predates the birth of Christ and even predates Abraham. Consider again in this regard Justin Martyr, who said to the men of Greece that Christian *religio* was a restoration of ancient knowledge that had been distorted:

[...] the advent of our Saviour Jesus Christ; who, being the Word of God, inseparable from Him in power, having assumed man, who had been made in the image and likeness of God, restored to us the knowledge of the religion of our ancient forefathers, which the men who lived after them abandoned through the bewitching counsel of the envious devil, and turned to the worship of those who were no gods. (Justin Martyr, Exhortation to the Greeks 38, trans. Falls, 1948)

The strength of this discourse of restoration is that it balances innovation with continuity. Arguing for the antiquity of *religio*, Justin Martyr also emphasized the universal power of the divine *Logos*, operative throughout human history and sowing seeds among peoples and their traditions [*Logos spermatikos*].

[Christ] is the Logos of which every genus of humans partakes. Those who lived in accordance with the Logos are Christians, even though they were called godless, such as, among Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus and others like them; among the barbarians, Abraham, Ananiah, Azariah, and Mishael, and Elijah and many others [...]. (1 Apol. 46.2, trans. Falls, 1948)

On the one hand, this line of reasoning, which is also known as *consensus gentium*, affirms that even among those who worshipped many gods, rudiments of Christian *religio* could be found. That gentiles worshipped many gods, proved that they actually felt the ‘need of some god, the altar with its victims implied convictions of sin, and the lustrations betokened the conscious want of purity’ (Eadie, 1869, p. 321). On the other hand, ‘because the Christian *logos* was the original source of all truth, anything true was necessarily Christian’ (Chidester, 2000). Thus, novelty was tempered by the antiquity and universality of the *Logos* (Buell, 2005, p. 80).

In his *Apologia*, Tertullian too, despite his often antagonizing and polemical language, speaks about the human soul which is by nature Christian, and to underscore this thought, he projected the notion of *testimonium animae naturaliter Christianae*: the soul of man (his claim to universality) is capable of realizing that there is a God creator. Therefore, true worship comes naturally to the soul, even to those who do not regard Christ as their saviour.

Yes! the soul, be it cabined and cribbed by the body, be it confined by evil nurture, be it robbed of its strength by lusts and desires, be it enslaved to false gods, – none the less, when it recovers its senses, as after surfeit, as after sleep, as after some illness, when it recaptures its proper health, the soul names GOD, and for this reason and no other, because, if language be used aright, He is the one true God. ‘Great God!’ ‘Good God!’ ‘Which may God give!’ is the utterance of all men. [...] O the witness of the soul, in its very nature Christian [O testimonium animae naturaliter Christianae]! (Tertullian, Apol. XVII.5–6, trans. Glover & Rendall, 1931)

Tertullian even argued that those who call God by the names of Saturn, Jupiter, Mars or Minerva, actually worship the Christian God. A deep desire for the one true God is showcased in this albeit false worship and testifies to the profound innate knowledge of God, that admittedly only belongs to the realm of natural knowledge as distinguished from revelatory knowledge. All human beings have the potential to know God and God’s natural laws

and all are predisposed to Christian *religio*. '[T]his account both predicted and required the presence of religion among all human groups. As the Creator had given awareness of his existence to humanity, it appeared to have become *theologically impossible* that people without religion could exist' (De Roover, 2014, p. 8, emphasis by the author). At the same time, this notion reaffirmed the general thrust that there is only one true worship and all others are divergences from it. Finally, it asserted that worship of the true God was the oldest form of worship, even predating the actual incarnation. In this way, apologists sought to refute the argument used against Christians that their *religio* was novel.

3 Christians against the Nations: The Distinction between *Religio Vera* and *Falsa*

When Christian ceremonies and practices were being ridiculed by Romans, who called the Christians superstitious (often without distinguishing them from Jews!) and charged them with promiscuous behaviour, early Christian writers, trying to dismiss the charges levelled against them, turned the tables on the Romans and argued that Christian tradition was in fact *religio vera* while Roman traditions were exemplars of *superstitio* or *religio falsa*. Roman charges against the Christians who were accused of angering the gods were reversed, and became Christian charges against those who angered the Christian God with their idolatrous cults and concomitant promiscuity.

Religio as True Worship of the True God

In the course of this process of reversal [*retorsio*] Christian apologists such as Tertullian redefined the distinction between true and false *religio* as a contrast between the worship of true and false gods: Worship of other gods is false worship, coined as *superstitio* or idolatry. In line with Jewish traditions, idolatry would be rhetorically crafted as the primary identity marker of the otherness of the *ethnici* or gentiles. Following this redefinition, the object of worship now became the distinguishing factor between *religio* and *superstitio*. The result of this Christian redefinition is a binary construct in which there is one 'true' *religio* and various forms of *superstitiones* or one '*vera*' *religio* as distinguished from '*falsae*' *religiones* (false worship practices) – false because they worship false or non-existing gods.

In his *Apology*, Tertullian addresses the Roman accusation raised against the Christians that their *religio* was *superstitio*, and that their contempt for the Roman state cult endangered the *Pax Romana*. Tertullian refutes all charges, including those of cannibalism and promiscuity. According to him, Christians, just because they admit to being Christians, are treated unjustly by the Roman juridical system (*Apol.* I.4). They are treated as outlaws and denied the right to prove their innocence (*Apol.* I–II), a right that is normally extended to anyone who stands accused of crimes. Tertullian goes on to make a special plea for freedom of religion and freedom from persecution, arguing in the following way:

Let one man worship God, another Jove; let this man raise suppliant hands to heaven, that man to the altar of Fides; let one (if you so suppose) count the clouds as he prays, another the panels of the ceiling; let one dedicate his own soul to his god, another a goat's. Look to it, whether this also may form part of the accusation of irreligion – to do away with freedom of religion, to forbid a man choice of deity, [libertatem religionis et interdicere optionem divinitatis], so that I may not worship whom I would, but am forced to worship whom I would not. No one, not even a man, will wish to receive reluctant worship. (Apol. XXIV.5, trans. Glover & Rendall, 1931)

However, while making his plea for religious freedom [*libertas religionis*], he also makes a case for the superiority of the true *religio*, which is based on God's revelation in Christ, calling Roman *religio* irreligion (*Apol.* XXIV.3). According to Tertullian, there are no other gods besides the one true God and for that reason the accusation that Christians offended Roman *religiones* was simply nonsensical. Of course, he rhetorically charges, Christians did not pay respect to the Roman gods, why would they honour gods that simply do not exist (*Apol.* X.2)? It follows that 'we [Christians] cannot be thought to injure what we have proved non-existent, the charge of injury is mere madness' (*Apol.* XVII.1). It is Roman worship which revolves around 'profane idols' and 'the deification of human names' (*Apol.* XVII.2). In his words, speaking about Roman *religio*:

If they definitely are not gods, then definitely it is not a religion; if it is not a religion because they definitely are not gods, then we are definitely not guilty of injuring religion [Si enim non sunt dei pro certo, nec religio pro certo est: si religio non est, quia nec dei pro certo, nec nos pro certo rei sumus laesae religionis]. (Apol. XIV.1, trans. Glover & Rendall, 1931)

If we follow this line of reasoning, it was not Christians but rather Romans who were guilty of an offence against the true religion of the true God [*veram religionem veri Dei*] (*Apol.* XIV.1).

In the course of Tertullian's argument, we notice a significant shift from emphasizing how one worships to who one worships (the object of worship is the true God); the gentiles [*ethnici*], so he claimed, worshipped nothing but non-existing gods. This is the greatest offence against God: *Atquin summa offensa penes ilium idololatria (De spectaculis* II.90). In essence, gentile *religio* is misdirected and therefore idolatrous, and idolatry is ridiculous, stupid, foolish, and irrational. Here Christian charges against *superstitio* intersect with Jewish charges against idolatry. What is more, Tertullian, building on Jewish traditions, linked idolatry to sexual immorality, fornication, and adultery (see *On Idol.* 1). Those who are slaves to idolatry are also slaves to the flesh and to lust. In contrast, Christian *religio* indexed self-control and purity. Christians, so Tertullian claims, do not worship idols; they do not participate in the cult of the emperor and they refuse to sacrifice to the gods or eat from the food offered to idols.

Tertullian not only redefines the boundary between true and false worship in terms of the object of worship, but he also broadens the scope of false *religio* in terms of idolatry. The problem of idolatry is not simply that of idol worship; the problem is that idolatry is all-pervasive. The lure of false gods is everywhere, not just in the temples where the statues are in plain sight, but in everyday Roman life. Remember that Christians lived in a world of many gods. Tertullian regards any sin against God to be a form of idolatry, and interaction with the idolatrous majority implies great risks. Consider in this regard also *De spectaculis*, his work on the games:

The whole world is filled with Satan and his angels. Yet not because we are in the world, do we fall from God; but only if in some way we meddle with the sins of the world. Thus if, as a sacrificer and worshipper, I enter the Capitol or the temple of Serapis, I shall fall from God – just as I should if a spectator in circus or theatre. Places do not of themselves defile us, but the things done in the places, by which even the places themselves (as we have argued) are defiled. We are defiled by the defiled [Loca nos non contaminant per se, sed quae in locis fiunt, a quibus et ipsa loca contaminari [...] de contaminantis contaminantur]. (De spect. 8.94, trans. Glover & Rendall, 1931)

And further

The streets, the market, the baths, the taverns, even our houses are none of them altogether clear of idols. The whole world is filled with Satan and his angels and the places where they are worshiped are sources of defilement. (De spect. 8.94, trans. Glover & Rendall, 1931)

Tertullian, starting from the idea that idolatry is difficult to contain and all-pervasive, urges Christians to be careful as they participate in social activities and interact with *ethnici*/gentiles. Boundaries should be drawn between ‘us’ and ‘them’, not just in worship but also in social life. In his *Idolatry*, Tertullian makes this even more concrete and formulates clear admonishments concerning what Christians may and may not do and to what extent they may and may not participate in Roman life: no astrology, no participation in the spectacles, no artisan skills for the purpose of manufacturing idols, no pagan festivals, no training of the gladiators, no participation in ceremonies in which respect was given to an idol. Even money lending, because it involved an oath, was forbidden. These are all un-Christian and Christians should do not do such things (Text Box 4). Boundary making is not just about what one believes but also – or even first and foremost – about how one comports oneself (Stroumsa, 1998, pp. 177–178).

Text Box 4: Religionized Boundary Making: What Christians Should Do and What They Did

Tertullian, in his effort to create a sense of Christianness, projects a world in which there are clear boundaries between Christians and *ethnici*/gentiles. While Christians, so he claimed, were good citizens, their participation in daily Roman life ought to be restricted. Especially the contrast between true worship of the true God and idolatry is invoked to separate Christians from non-Christian gentiles and to create, at least to a certain extent, discrete and bounded social worlds.

Tertullian’s writings also make clear, however, that not all Christians would have agreed with his broad definition of idolatry and many of the Christians he addressed did not feel compelled to follow his prescriptions. Tertullian is rhetorically making a religionized contrast, which is not matched in real life. Indeed, ‘[w]hen he evokes everyday situations he consistently decontextualizes them in order to force on them his own agenda about what Christianness should entail. However, the numerous objections he feels compelled to refute show that his point of view was not shared, or at least not shared by all Christians’ (Rebillard, 2012, p. 31). While he might claim that it is un-Christian to go to the games, Christians did actually attend and enjoy them.

It is important, furthermore, to realize that Tertullian is speaking to Christians as *gentiles who live among gentiles*. These are people who until recently belonged to the majority culture and participated in what Tertullian is now labelling in the strongest of words, idolatrous. These are people who for much of their lives considered Roman *religio* and its gods to be the norm, their minds and bodies attuned to its practices. These people ‘became’ Christian and really had to unlearn some practices and acquire a new identity. Their new identity did not come naturally, it had to be built, through participation in Christian life and also by means of polemics, which casts the strongest possible contrast between Christianness and idolatry (Fredriksen & Irshai, 2015).

Tertullian seems to have realized that Christians with a gentile background might import the problem of idolatry into the Christian way of life. This is not the case, of course, for Christ-following Jews. He wants to keep this problem outside the Christian community, realizing it is becoming a problem within.

Tertullian, defending Christians in a context of contestation and persecution, argues that the rejection of idolatry as false worship of false gods does not impede their active participation in Roman society, and therefore Romans ought not to discriminate against Christians. Idolatry is a hard border, but, beyond the scope of idolatry, Christians can still be active citizens. They are really not that different at all.

[W]e are human beings and live alongside of you – men with the same ways, the same dress and furniture, the same necessities, if we are to live [...]. We remember that we owe gratitude to God, the Lord, the Creator. We reject no fruit of His labours. We are of course temperate – not to use His gifts to excess or amiss. So, not without

your forum not without your meat-market, not without your baths, shops, factories, your inns and market-days, and the rest of the life of buying and selling, we live with you – in this world. We sail ships, we as well as you, and along with you; we go to the wars, to the country, to market with you. Our arts and yours work together; our labour is openly at your service. Even if I do not attend your rituals, well, I am a man on that day as much as any other. [...] Nor do I recline to eat in public at the Liberalia, which is the habit of the beast-fighters taking their last meal; but wherever I dine, it is on your supplies. (Apol. XLII.1–5)

Text Box 5: Imaginary Patterns of Religionization and the Messiness of Daily Life

Religionization is the process of selfing and othering predicated on religious difference. Typically binaries are made based on imaginary constructs: true and good religion are contrasted to false and bad religion, here called superstition. The problem of superstition is now projected onto non-Christian gentiles. Their way of worshipping the gods is false religion. There is but one true way of worshipping and that is the worship of the one true God.

Vera religio

Christian

Christians

The object of worship: one true God

Genuine worship

Purifying

Superstitio/falsa religio

Non-Christian

Ethnici

The object of worship: many false gods

Idolatry

Contaminating

Patterns of religionization produce imaginary constructs which do not describe or match lived experience and the complexities of daily lives. At the time, there was not a 'standard' or 'norm' amongst Christians with regard to the worship of the gods. Some Christians took a firm stance and refrained from any contact with the gods. What they labelled as idol worship was a no-go. Some had a limited definition of idol worship (*idolatreia*), but others were concerned about the contagious effect of any contact with the gods. Remember that the gods were everywhere. There were also Christians who did not see a conflict between their Christian faith and their ancestral traditions and this would remain the case for a long time to come. Thus Fredriksen and Irshai, 'As late as the early fourth century, a council of western bishops felt compelled to condemn baptized Christians who served as priests in the cult of the pagan emperor (Elvira, c. 1); as late as the fifth century, some Christians worshiped the emperor's statue as if it were a god's' (Fredriksen & Irshai, 2015, p. 120). Apologists, like Tertullian, tended to condemn this reality in an effort to create a sense of Christianness. Often we learn about the messiness of daily life and the lack of boundaries precisely by reading these polemical texts and what they claimed a true Christian does and does not do. The fact that such polemics were 'needed' teaches us that the refuted practices were still part of daily life and that few Christians met the projected standard (Rebillard, 2012).

4 Crafting the Jew as Un-Christian

Early Christian apologists not only had to craft a sense of Christianness within the framework of Roman *religio*, but they also had to position themselves vis-à-vis the Jewish people and their traditions and this in a highly hybrid context where the boundaries between different religious groups were far from clear. Christians were themselves still arguing about the right way of leading a Christian life. In this process of identity making (selfing), the

figure of the Jew would come to function as the anti-Christian (othering). Interestingly, and we already saw traces of this when discussing Christian ethnoreligious reasoning, the contrast between ‘the Jew’ and ‘the Christian’, the ‘old’ and ‘new’ people of God could also be used when polemicizing against the gentiles and the heretics. Indeed, the rhetorical figure of the Jew is multifunctional. In addition, Jews could also be imagined as heretics; insiders that had gone astray or even as idolaters, ‘which is to say the ultimate outsiders’ (Freidenreich, 2011, p. 112). This underscores the volatility of these religionized categories and concomitant taxonomies.

As an imaginary construct, the Jew as ‘Jew’ does not do justice to the lived social reality of Jews, Christ-following Jews, and Christian gentiles. When crafting the contrast between Jew and Christian, old and new people of God, apologists had little interest or concerns about real Jews; their purpose was to make the claim that Christians, rather than Jews, were the true heirs of God’s blessings. This does not mean Christians and Jews did not socially interact or maintain friendly relations on a daily basis. The social logic of many apologetical texts suggests that in reality the opposite was true (Schwartz, 2001). Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that

Even if, in his inception, in his function, and in his veritable power in the Christian mind-set, the hermeneutical Jew of late antique or medieval times had relatively little to do with the Jewish civilization of his day, his career certainly influenced the Christian treatment of the Jewish minority, the sole consistently tolerated religious minority, of medieval Christendom. (Cohen, 1999, p. 5)

Jews, Christ-following Jews, and Christians from Gentiles

The first followers of Jesus were Greek-speaking Hellenized Jews and Aramaic-speaking Jews from Judea and other neighbouring provinces, and they shared both the scriptures as well as the Jewish laws regarding food restrictions, festivals, and rituals (Freidenreich, 2011, p. 87). These laws placed boundaries between Jews and gentiles and set Jews aside as a minority in the Roman world. They were foreigners with strange worship practices, often ridiculed, but also respected because their traditions were ancient and marked Jewish peoplehood. Jews, themselves, distinguished between ‘holy Jews and mundane gentiles’ and their law helped them navigate a gentile world, while maintaining their sense of being a covenanted people of God (Freidenreich, 2011, p. 87).

While the Jesus movement started as a strictly Jewish movement, which upheld Jewish beliefs and practices, many Jews, living under the yoke of the Roman Empire, rejected the claim that Jesus fulfilled the biblical messianic prophecy. Since he did not free them from oppression, Jesus could not be the Messiah. The fact that Christians, who ‘claimed to revere as Scripture the same texts as did the Jews’ and ‘claimed to be the heirs of God’s promises through the prophets of the biblical tradition’ were contradicted by many Jews, posed a profound challenge (Lieu, 2002, p. 95). Not only did apologists now have to craft a sense of Christianness in a sometimes hostile Roman setting, but they also had to struggle for legitimacy against this Jewish rejection. This rejection was all the more challenging because Jews, ticking the boxes of both ethnicity and antiquity, constituted an ethnoreligious community which was at least recognized as such in the Roman world. While Christian apologists worked hard to claim a similar status and deployed various rhetorical strategies to that end, their own traditions were not recognized as legitimate. Against this background, apologists felt compelled to construct a sense of Christianness while both dealing with this Jewish rejection and making their case vis-à-vis the Roman world. Consequently, the Christian apology against the Jews is never only about the Jews.

There is, however, more. Quite early on in the Jesus movement, there were Christ-following Jews who began to reconsider the relationship between Jews and gentiles. Some believed that gentile Christians, like the so-called God fearers in Jewish communities, while not having to uphold all the Jewish laws, would also not be able to fully participate

in the Christian life. Others were convinced that one did not have to be Jewish to obtain full membership or full participation in the community of Christians (cf. the conflict between James, Peter, and Paul). Some sought to maintain a distinction, but others sought to ignore it, stating that in the Christian community there would be ‘neither Greek nor Jew’ (Rom 10:12), that all would be saved in Christ’s name, and that the Jewish law and its prevailing food restrictions, ritual obligations, and festivals had to be reconsidered. As the Jesus movement developed, it also diversified, and evolved into ‘Jewish Christianities and Judaizing Gentile Christianities but also purely Gentile forms of Christianity’ (Fredriksen & Irshai, 2006, p. 978). This diversification raised multiple questions, theological but also more practical, about what it entailed to be a Christian, and more particularly what this would mean as regards the prevalence of the law. Boundaries were projected and contested.¹

Adversus Iudaeos

Christians were in disagreement about the ‘right way’ to be Christian and this disagreement provoked discussions about (i) how to read Scripture and its prophecies; (ii) the meaning and status of the Jewish law and (iii) the relation between Christians, who claimed to be heirs of God’s promises, and the Jews who rejected Jesus (Lieu, 2002, p. 95). As apologists sought to defend their respective position, they made their case for what they believed was religiously normative by projecting ‘the Jew’ as falling outside this norm. ‘Christianness’ was constructed over against ‘Jewishness’. This specific form of religionization gave way to a new genre known as the *adversus Iudaeos* tradition, which produced what Jeremy Cohen has called the ‘hermeneutical Jew’, an imagined Jew based on Christian-biblical and theological categories rather than on knowledge drawn from personal interaction (Cohen, 1999, p. 3). This ‘figure [is] imagined for the purpose of serving as a foil for the construction of Christian identity’ (Freidenreich, 2011, p. 114). Once again we are dealing with ‘redescription’ rather than description.

In crafting this hermeneutical Jew, apologists made use of the tradition of Roman ethnoreligious othering. They also drew on the many prophetic admonishments against Israel, casting the Jewish people as idolatrous and hence unfaithful as well as sinful. Finally, apologists could appeal to some of Jesus’ sayings about the Pharisees, scribes, priests, and Sadducees and they could turn to the Pauline corpus, especially those passages in which Paul criticizes his ‘apostolic competitors’ (see e.g. Romans 11). As Fredriksen has it, ‘these Hellenistic Jewish texts, with all their intra-Jewish arguments, were a gold mine for later Christian rhetoric *contra Iudaeos*’ (Fredriksen, 2014, p. 24). From them, an image was crafted of a people – the Jewish people – who in principle owned all the resources needed to recognize and accept God’s final revelation in Christ but who dismissed the evidence and stubbornly continued to follow the wrong path. This attitude sealed the Jews’ downfall as the once beloved, but now rejected, people of God. All the tribulations that befell them, whether the diasporic dispersion, the destruction of the temple or their expulsion from Jerusalem, were now cast as divine punishments for the rejection of Jesus, and to make matters worse, all of this had already been prophesized in their own scriptures.

As a hermeneutical abstraction, the imagined Jew ‘contained great power, serving by means of absolute contrast to focus and define the desiderata of orthodox identity’ (Fredriksen & Irshai, 2006, p. 984). Following the logic of dichotomization, Christian-ness was placed over against Jewishness, and seemingly fixed boundaries between identity and alterity were projected. Those Christians who did not accept the projected boundaries were accused of Judaizing (Text Box 6). To call someone a Judaizer, was to accuse that person of engaging in inappropriate practices, thereby at once infecting the entire community. Judaizing was cast as a fall – a lapsing into old habits, a shift from purity into impurity, from spirituality into carnality, from chastity into promiscuity (Drake, 2013, p. 2).

Text Box 6: Blurring and Constructing Boundaries: Judaizing Christians?

For a long time, there were Christians who continued to frequent both church and synagogue and observe festivals from both traditions. In the Levant, minority groups of Christ-following Jews would persist even after the fifth century (Stroumsa, 2015). While most would not have regarded that as contrary to their Christian creed and would perhaps not have considered their identity as ‘mixed or hybrid’ (Fonrobert, 2001, p. 555), to those Christian apologists charged with forging a sense of true Christian worship and accompanying lifestyle, the drawing of religionized boundaries and the formulation of clear-cut identities was key. The *adversus Iudaeos* literature projected a religious norm and defined ‘Judaism in such a way that it falls outside of those norms’ (Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, 2022, p. 6). Christian Jews who did not accept and respect these projected boundaries were charged with Judaization.

Anti-Jewish Typologies

The *adversus Iudaeos* tradition is permeated by the idea that Christ functions as the hermeneutical key for understanding the Hebrew scriptures. Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah foretold by the Hebrew scriptures. From this perspective, Christ fulfils the promises of Jewish tradition. To understand this, however, the Scripture should not be read literally but figuratively or *kata pneuma*. One example of such a reading is the hermeneutics of typology, whereby events, figures, or even statements from the Hebrew scriptures prefigure or foreshadow events, figures, and statements from the New Testament.

At its most basic level figures set up a reciprocal relationship between two moments in scripture: the first which anticipates and points to the second, and the second which explains the significance of the first. Although this is a theological method of understanding biblical narratives, it operates with historical time and describes material consequences; both figure and fulfillment are understood as actual historical persons and occurrences. A figural interpretation not only construes an incident in the Hebrew Bible as foreshadowing an incident in Christian Scripture, but could also understand the first event as pointing to a future moment beyond the biblical text. (Kaplan, 2019, p. 24)

Typological reading was not in fact a Christian invention, but was built on the tradition of Midrash; the Rabbis also interpreted ‘the Bible figuratively in order to read into it various theological and homiletical ideas made necessary by the contemporary experiences of the Jewish society caught in the whirlpool of great historic changes’ (Bokser, 1973, p. 99). Adopting Midrashic hermeneutics, apologists adapted it to their own purpose as a weapon against the Jews (Bokser, 1973, p. 99). Within a Christian theological framework, typological reading contributed to the construction of a fulfillment logic. The Hebrew scriptures, their events and figures, would only be meaningful in light of the Christ event. If the first foreshadows, the latter fulfils and illuminates the deeper meaning and significance of the first. Thus, the Hebrew Bible was transformed into a book of Christian revelation. Irenaeus of Lyon (140–220) states:

If anyone, therefore, reads the Scriptures with attention, he will find in them an account of Christ, and a foreshadowing of the new calling. (Adv. Haer. IV.26, trans. Schaff, 1978)

To drive this point home, Christian apologists depicted the Jews as overly attached to the letter of the text, and this literalist reading supposedly blinded them to the deeper, more spiritual meaning of their texts. Furthermore, Jewish literalist hermeneutics was seen as

a direct outcome of their being driven or controlled by fleshly desires. Jews did not read according to the spirit, but rather ‘understand everything in a carnal way’ [*kata sarka*] (Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 14.2). Their carnal hermeneutics translated into a life of sin and illicit sexual relations and vice versa (*Dial.* 14.2). Again we see how religionization intersects with sexualization. To make matters worse, they even use their literalist hermeneutics to legitimize their vicious life of fornication and idolatry (Drake, 2013, p. 33). Of course, the prophetic charges against Israel’s infidelity functioned as a treasury box for Christian apologists like Justin Martyr.

Jewish literal reading of scriptures supposedly also matches their literal understanding of the law and they fail to understand the deeply figurative meaning of their ritual traditions, namely that circumcision prefigures baptism, just as Passover and the sacrifice of the Lamb prefigure Easter and Christ’s crucifixion (Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 40), and the meal offerings anticipate the Eucharist (*Dial.* 41). Consequently, this once beloved people of God was now unable to fully experience God’s faithfulness and presence. Blind to the true meaning of their own scriptures, they are blind to Gods’ plan of salvation. Christians, by contrast, master allegorical readings of Scripture and metaphorical interpretations of ritual.

The reason why the Jews continue to resist the deeper spiritual meaning of the Hebrew scriptures against all evidence is because, according to Justin Martyr, they are a ‘stupidly stubborn people’ (*Dial.* 123), their hearts are hardened (*Dial.* 18), they are ‘idolatrous’ and ‘sinful’ (*Dial.* 18), and ungrateful towards God (*Dial.* 27). For that reason God gave the Jews the law in the first place: to keep them from idol worship and from turning away from God. They are, however, a weak people, and even under the law they did not obey God and did not ‘hesitate to sacrifice their children to demons’ (*Dial.* 19). Justin Martyr continues:

We, too, would observe your circumcision of the flesh, your sabbath days, and, in a word, all your festivals, if we were not aware of the reason why they were imposed upon you, namely, because of your sins and your hardness of heart (*Dial.* 18, trans. Falls, 1948).

The stubbornness lamented by the prophets continues today as the Jews hold on to a law that without faith in Christ has lost all meaning. Christians, thanks to their spiritual hermeneutics, avoid all problems of carnality and live a virtuous spiritual life.

Text Box 7: One Example of Typological Reading in a Supersessionist Frame: Jacob and Esau

Jacob is the son of Isaac and Rebecca and the twin brother of Esau. Genesis recounts how the two brothers struggled with one another even before they were born. Rebecca therefore seeks God’s counsel, and He tells her: ‘Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger’ (Gen 25:23). This prophecy follows the recurrent pattern in the Hebrew scriptures, according to which the younger son receives the blessing from the father (Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Judah and Reuben, etc.). Jacob – incited by his mother Rebecca – swindles Esau out of his rights as firstborn by using a bowl of lentils or, as traditionally translated, red pottage (Gen 25:34). He later deceives his father and receives the blessing Isaac had reserved for Esau. Upon discovering how Jacob has deceived him and his father, Esau becomes filled with great hatred for his brother and swears he will kill him.

This story plays a key role in the theological interpretation of the relation between Jews and Christians. Early on in Christian history, building on Paul’s Letter to the Romans, the church fathers placed this story in an anti-Jewish typological supersessionist framework, according to which the church usurps the place of Israel in God’s salvific plan. Crucial to the church fathers’ interpretation is the

identification of Esau (the elder brother) with Israel and Jacob (the younger brother) with the church.

Irenaeus of Lyon ponders the significance of Jacob's name. The Hebrew text contains a wordplay on the name *ya'aqov*, 'Jacob' and the verb *'aqav*, 'to take a hold of and supplant'. Placed in a Christian supersessionist framework, Jacob, the supplanter, foreshadows the coming of Christ who would supplant or supersede Esau, the symbol of the Old People of God: 'If anyone, again, will look into Jacob's actions, he shall find them not destitute of meaning, but full of import with regard to the dispensations. Thus, in the first place, at his birth, since he laid hold on his brother's heel, he was called Jacob, that is, the supplanter – one who holds, but is not held; binding the feet, but not being bound; striving and conquering; grasping in his hand his adversary's heel, that is, victory. For this end was the Lord born, the type of whose birth he set forth beforehand, of whom also John says in the Apocalypse: "He went forth conquering, that He should conquer"' (*Adv. Haer.* IV.21, trans. Schaff, 1978).

Irenaeus' typological reading of this story legitimizes the ecclesiological claim according to which the church, as the new people of God, has superseded Israel, the old people of God. Thus, Esau became the archetype of the Jew, the elder brother who lost his birthright to his younger brother; and Jacob became the prototype of the church, the younger brother, the community of the followers of Christ. The latter are the new people of God; they enjoy God's favour; the younger brother is beloved; the elder brother is rejected.

Some early Christian thinkers even traced the charge of deicide – the most vehement charge ever brought against the Jews (cf. Melito of Sardis) – to this story, stating 'And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing wherewith his father blessed him. And Esau said in his heart, "The days of mourning for my father are at hand. Then will I slay my brother Jacob"'. Esau's wrath towards Jacob is said to prefigure the Jews' hatred for Jesus and their desire to kill him.

The Supersessionist Logic

Christian apologists developed a sense of Christianness in terms of the new people of God who had inherited God's promises. This translated into fulfilment theologies, which easily slipped into replacement or supersessionist theologies, entailing an abrogation of the first covenant between God and Israel (Moyaert & Pollefeyt, 2010). According to this supersessionist logic, God's plans for the salvation of humanity once had an important part for Israel to play, but this role has now expired because God decided that physical, carnal Israel was to be replaced by the spiritual church. According to Justin Martyr, in his *Dialogue with the Jew Trypho*:

The law promulgated at Horeb is already obsolete, and was intended for you Jews only, whereas the law of which I speak is simply for all men. Now, a later law in opposition to an older law abrogates the older; so, too, does a later covenant void an earlier one. An everlasting and final law, Christ Himself, and a trustworthy covenant has been given to us, after which there shall be no law, or commandment, or precept. (Dial. 11, trans. Falls, 1948)

All the blessings and promises that God had once extended to Israel were transferred to the church.

Consider in this regard the work of Melito, Bishop of Sardis (d. ca. 180), near Smyrna. In his *Peri Pascha*, 'a paschal homily, that was [probably] read at Quartodeciman midnight vigils' (Koltun-Fromm, 2009, p. 562), Melito argues that the Jewish people has missed God's

visitation and failed to recognize Christ. For that reason, Israel was no longer God's beloved and chosen people. As Israel rejected Christ, so God rejected Israel. Thus, Melito writes:

You forsook the Lord, you were not found by him; you did not accept the Lord, you were not pitied by him; you dashed down the Lord, you were dashed to the ground and you lie dead. (On Pascha 99, ed. and trans. Hall, 1979)

And elsewhere,

The people was precious before the church arose and the law was marvellous before the Gospel was illuminated. But when the church arose and the Gospel came to the fore the model was made void giving its power to the truth and the law was fulfilled giving its power to the Gospel [...]. So too the law was fulfilled when the Gospel was illuminated and the people made void when the church arose. (On Pascha 42–43, ed. and trans. Hall, 1979)

In the end, 'the success of proselytizing efforts among gentiles – the "gentile mission" – determined the fate of the church, as gentiles quickly came to outnumber Jews within the Christ-believing community' (Freidenreich, 2011, p. 87). Against this background, Christians formulate their self-understanding by distancing themselves from the Mosaic law, abandoning Jewish practices such as circumcision, and positing a clear distinction between the elevated spiritual church of belief and the mundane, carnal Israel of ritual observance. Christian rituals were regarded as uplifting and spiritual, Jewish rituals as bloody, tribal, and carnal. One way this played out was through a reinterpretation of the food laws:

Just as the Rabbinic Sages define adherence to Biblical dietary laws as emblematic of Jewish identity and employ foreign food restrictions as a means of emphasizing the centrality of these laws, Christian authorities view the anathematization of such laws as emblematic of Christian identity and express this rejection through restrictions on Jewish food. These restrictions remind new and old Christians alike that their identity depends upon the rejection not only of Jewish dietary practices but also of social intercourse with Jews and participation in Jewish festivals. (Freidenreich, 2011, p. 118)

Belonging to the Christian people – the new spiritual people of God – would entail not upholding Jewish ritual laws, thereby at the same time underscoring the spiritual redundancy of these rituals. Not to participate in Jewish ritual becomes thereby a Christian identity marker. One could call this religious identification through ritual abstention (Colijn, 2019). Over time, commensality between Christ-followers and Jews would even become prohibited.

The Deicide Charge

Though Jesus died on the cross under Pilate (as the creed explicitly states), the gospels (Matthew and Luke more than the earlier gospel of Mark) shift part of the blame for Christ's death from the Roman authorities onto the Jewish authorities. This is especially true of Matt 27:24–27, which has Pilate stating his innocence and the people answering: 'His blood be on us and on our children'. This version of events would go on to have a devastating role and would finally give way to the terrible charge of deicide: that the Jews collectively had killed Christ, Son of God, and for that mortal sin God had turned away from his beloved people. The deicide charge – which names and classifies Jews as Christ-killers and murderers of God – would play a key part in the construction of an idealized bounded Christian self-understanding as the beloved and blessed people of God. One of the first to formulate this deicide charge, holding the Jews responsible for Christ's death, was the just mentioned Melito of Sardis.

You put these things to one side, you hurried to the slaughter of the Lord. You prepared for him sharp nails and false witnesses, and ropes and whips, and vinegar and gall, and a sword and torture as against a murderous thief. You brought forth a flogging for his body, and thorns for his head; and you bound his goodly hands, which formed you from the earth. And you fed with gall his goodly mouth which fed you with life. And you killed your Lord at the great feast. (On Pascha 79, ed. and trans. Hall, 1979)

And while you were rejoicing he was starving. You were drinking wine and eating bread; he had vinegar and gall. Your face was bright whereas his was cast down. You were triumphant while he was afflicted. You were making music while he was being judged. You were proposing toasts; he was being nailed in place. You were dancing, he was buried. You were reclining on a cushioned couch, he in grave and coffin. (On Pascha 80, ed. and trans. Hall, 1979)

And he continues:

O lawless Israel, what is this new injustice you have done, casting strange sufferings on your Lord? Your master who formed you, who made you, who honored you, who called you Israel. (On Pascha 81, ed. and trans. Hall, 1979)

He who hung the earth is hanging. He who fixed the heavens in place has been fixed in place. He who laid the foundations of the universe has been laid on a tree. The master has been profaned. God has been murdered. The King of Israel has been destroyed by an Israelite right hand. (On Pascha 96, ed. and trans. Hall, 1979)

This collective guilt calls for a just response. Thus Melito writes,

You disowned the Lord, and so are not owned by him. You did not receive the Lord, so you were not pitied by him. You smashed the Lord to the ground, you were razed to the ground. And you lie dead, while he rose from the dead, and is raised to the heights of heaven. (On Pascha 99, ed. and trans. Hall, 1979)

The fact that the Romans destroyed the Second temple, which formed the heart of Jewish cultic life, was regarded by Christian communities as a divine sign, as was the subsequent Jewish diaspora. To the mind of many Christ-following Jews, both the destruction of the temple and the Jewish diaspora confirmed their belief that they were the new people of God, in contrast to the Jews who were to live scattered over the earth. This is one of the most violent expressions of selfing and othering. Both guilt and punishment are transferred intergenerationally. To belong to this people is to be guilty and to carry the burden of divine wrath. We are dealing with a form of ethnoreligious reasoning, which projects an anti-Jewish and a Christian genealogy. He who stems from the Jewish line is cursed, he who becomes Christian finds God's blessing. The one people carries the mark of Cain, as Augustine would later call it, the other the mark of baptism.

Text Box 8: Supersessionist Patterns of Religionization between Replacement and Fulfilment

The relation between the Jewish people – Israel – and the Christian people – the church – in terms of religionization is complex. It is clear that anti-Jewish polemics are permeated by a logic of dichotomization, in which the Jew is projected as the negative image of the Christian. Stereotypical thinking here functions by means of types and antitypes. At the same time, it is also clear that the Jews, and especially God's revelation handed to them in their scriptures, is a key building block

of Christianness: Christians claim to fulfil and realize the promises given to Israel. Thus anti-Jewish rhetoric tends to vacillate between exclusion and inclusion, replacement and fulfilment, dichotomization and encompassment. To this day, it remains challenging to configure a unique sense of Christianness without lapsing into anti-Jewish patterns of thinking.

Jewish	Christian
Israel	Church
Tribal	Universal
Exclusivist	Inclusivist
Literalist reading	Allegorical reading
Wilful ignorance (stubbornness)	Knowledge
Law	Christ fulfils and supersedes the law
Carnal	Spiritual
Dietary laws excluding gentiles	Commensality with gentile Christians
Jews	No more Greek or Jew
Circumcision	Baptism

Later, we will have to return to the problematic relation between Christians and Jews. For now, suffice it to say that the formation of Christian *religio* as *vera religio* very quickly became entangled with the mislabelling and misrecognition of Jews. Significantly, the hermeneutical Jew only exists in the Christian imagination and does not in any way reflect Jewish self-understanding. In the Christian imagination, Jewish tradition after the destruction of the temple and the expulsion of the Jews from the Roman province of Judea was an anachronism. There was no recognition for the way Rabbinic Judaism, in the course of the next five centuries, continued to develop (shift from temple to synagogue, priest to rabbi, sacrifice to study and prayer) and not unlike Christian tradition undertook a long process of redaction and codification of the oral law (Mishna, Talmud) and Midrash.

While the Jew as anti-Christian is an imaginary construct, this also holds true for projected Christian self-understanding as opposed to Jewish tradition. Indeed, the religionized construction of a clear boundary between Jews and Christians does not match the lived reality. During the first four or five centuries CE, and contrary to this binary pattern of religionization, boundaries between Christian and Jewish communities at grassroots level remained porous. Forging a Christian identity which opposed the Jewish tradition conceals this, and does not reflect the messy reality of that time.

5 Making the Figure of the Heretic

Like the Jew and the idolater, the heretic is the product of religionization; the heretic too is projected as falling outside the realm of *vera religio*, the Christian realm. Typically, heretics are accused of falsely claiming the name 'Christian' for their beliefs and practices. Pretending to be Christian, they poison the one Christian truth with their false and innovative teachings. They are both insiders and outsiders and this makes them particularly dangerous. Consider in this regard Origen (185–253):

I am of the opinion that it is indeed evil for one to err in his manner of life, but far worse to go astray in doctrines and not think in accordance with the most true rule

of the scriptures. Since we are to be punished (for indulging) in moral sins, how much more when we sin because of false doctrines? For if a life of good morals sufficed men for salvation, why is it that many philosophers among the gentiles who live continently, and many among the heretics, can by no means be saved, as if the falseness of their doctrine obscured and sullied their manner of life? (Origen, quoted in Williams, 2009, p. xxxii)

The idea that heresy is a deviation from the one orthodox truth is, however, imaginary. The history of Christianity was never one of singularity and uniformity; rather it is a history of diversity, discord, and disunity (Berzon, 2016, p. 14). From the very beginning, there were many communities who claimed to be Christian and there were often disputes about the proper way of leading a Christian life in an otherwise non-Christian world. These communities did not yet have a clearly delineated sense of Christianness, for they were all in the process of identity formation. During the second century this process of selfing would translate into claims of orthodoxy, while those upholding different ideas were cast as heretical. This claimed Christian orthodoxy set the norm over against which deviation is produced, and deviation helps formulate a sense of identity. Irenaeus of Lyon, for example, enlists all the known heresies to defend and sharpen the idea of Christian orthodoxy. He catalogues them by founder, false teachings, corrupt practices and then defines Christian orthodoxy over against these multiple heresies. This is a work of creative and normative theological craftsmanship rather than of mere description. Thus, heresy is not a deviation from a previously established, stable, orthodox norm (Berzon, 2016, p. 13); orthodoxy assumes, needs, and feeds on a real (or imagined) heterodox other and vice versa.

The Notion of Heresy

Heresy (*hairésis*) did not always have such a negative connotation. The original Greek word means ‘choice’, and is used to refer to different schools of thought. These could be either medical or philosophical schools of thought (e.g. the term is applied to Stoics and Pythagoreans) and Flavius Josephus (37–100 CE) applies it to various Jewish groups, like the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the Zealots (*Ant.* 13.5.9; 18.1.2; *War* 2.8.14). Josephus, while preferring Essenes and Pharisees, does not speak in a derogatory way about these different groups. In Acts, the term is used to refer to the Sadducees, Pharisees, and Christians (see Acts 5:17, 24:5, 24:14, 26:5, 28:22). This word was, however, picked up by second-century Christian apologists to mean deviating opinions which threatened the unity of the Christian community and the continuation of tradition. In Jewish circles, too, heresy would receive a more negative connotation, and Jewish sages called Christians heretics.

The notion ‘orthodoxy’ is of an even later date. As a specific term it was probably used for the first time in the fourth century in the work by Methodius of Olympus (d. 311/12) *De resurrectione*. Thomas Jürgasch, however, points out that the fixation on what is the ‘right teaching and the right belief’ rather than the ‘right praxis’ may already be found in the early Christian communities. According to him,

The question of the correct or ‘sound’ [hygiainousa] ‘doctrine’ [didaché/didaskalia] (cf. Tit 2,1) and its counterpart, ‘heresies’ [hairéseis] or heterodoxy, was already an important topic as well as a terminological issue in the early church very early on [...]. Already in Paul, we find the admonition to keep away from those who ‘against this doctrine’ [parà tēn didachēn] cause ‘dissent’ or ‘dispute’ [dichostasíai] and ‘annoyances/traps’ [skándala] (cf. Rom 16,17) which – as it says elsewhere – lead to ‘divisions’ [schísmata] and ‘factions’ [hairéseis] (cf. 1 Cor 11,17–19; Gal 5,19–21). Especially this warning against the ‘heretical man’ [ánthropos hairetikós] (cf. Tit 2,1; 3,9–11) standing in contradiction to the right doctrine will subsequently develop into a central and frequently received motif of early Christian anti-heretical literature (cf. also 2 Pet 2,1–3; IgnEph 6,2). (Jürgasch, 2021, pp. 168–169, my translation)

Early on in its existence the community of the Christian faithful was imagined as a body, and more particularly as the earthly body of Christ joined together by the love of God. The faithful were like the limbs of Christ's body and the integrity of this body was enacted and enhanced in and through various worship practices and rituals. For the body to remain healthy, all its members would have to dedicate themselves to its moral and spiritual 'hygiene' and to the unity of the community. The apostle Paul expressed his concern about the growing disunity among the Christian communities when he wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians:

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that [...] there be no divisions [schismata] among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me [...] that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul'; or 'I belong to Apollos'; or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ'. Has Christ been divided?' (1 Cor 1:10–12 NRSV)

Especially in a context of contestation and persecution, keeping Christian communities together and strengthening Christians' sense of belonging was a difficult challenge. Even some Christians, when put to the test, faltered and rejected their Christian allegiance. Such disunity was seen as threatening and harmful to the community.

During the second century, the problem of disunity was projected onto the notion of heresy, which now became a negative category. A heretic becomes a renegade, someone who harms the community from the inside, by inventing deviating truths. According to Robert Moore, 'in the context of the small and persecuted communities of the early Christians in which the values of fraternity and loyalty must stand supreme' it was assumed that persistent deviation in worship threatened both their intellectual and their social cohesion (Moore, 2007, p. 11). The threat coming from outside (persecution) was matched by a threat coming from inside (heresy). In both cases the menace of the disintegration of the community played a role in the process of identity making. It is a typical pattern of selfing and othering: in times of crisis, the challenge is to strengthen 'right' Christian identity and keep deviation outside.

Building on the metaphor of the body, the threat associated with heresy was first imagined in terms of disease. This is in line with the passages in the gospels where Jesus claims that his opponents need a physician (e.g. Mark 2:17). Heretics were also cast as transgressive, promiscuous, and lustful (Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 26). They are enslaved by fleshly desires (or, in contrast, as extremely rigid and ascetic in an effort to control their lust) and they intentionally seek to corrupt feeble women with their treacherous teachings (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I.6.3). Gendering, sexualization, and religionization intersect.

Adversus Haereses

Apologists who invested their energy in the establishment of a boundary between heresy and orthodoxy are called heresiologists. Daniel Boyarin calls heresiologists the inspectors of religious customs. They 'tried to police the boundaries so as to identify and interdict those who respected no boundaries' (Boyarin, 2004, p. 2). More profoundly, however, they also created and crafted boundaries in a time where these were not so clear. The orthodoxy/heresy binary projects a clearly demarcated truth, understood as single, coherent, and whole, in opposition to falsehood, which is then understood as (i) a deviation and perversion of that single truth, (ii) a wilful and chosen error – malign intent is assumed, and (iii) treacherous, in other words, it often manifests itself under the guise of orthodoxy or under the pretence of orthodoxy, so it is difficult for ordinary people to recognize. The heretic is the enemy within, who tricks and seduces Christians with lies and falsities. Hence, the association with the serpent (cf. the fall of Adam) who poisons the mind and the body of Christ (Irenaeus,

Adv. Haer. I.27.4). Finally, (iv) when one leaves this kind of dissent to fester, it can bring real harm to the Christian body. In the future, accusing a theological opponent of heresy would become a way to discredit him, just like one might accuse a Christian of Judaizing.

Around 180 CE, the heresiologist Irenaeus of Lyon wrote a five-volume book, *Adversus Haereses*, to both refute a wide range of heresies and to convert heretics so that they might find salvation. Anyone who wants to take on this twofold task, Irenaeus writes, ‘must possess an accurate knowledge of their [the heretics’] systems or schemes of doctrine. For it is impossible for anyone to heal the sick if he has no knowledge of the disease of the patients’ (*Adv. Haer.* IV, preface 2, trans. Schaff, 1978). Using many metaphors, Irenaeus offers an overtly negative image of the nature of heresy, as treacherous, arrogant, and corrupt.

What makes heresy all the more problematic is that it presents itself under the pretence of truth. Thus, Irenaeus writes, ‘error [...] is never set forth in its naked deformity, lest, being thus exposed, it should at once be detected’. The error of heresy presents itself as the imitation of a precious jewel, and he continues by stating that heretics are like wolves in sheep’s clothing (*Adv. Haer.* I, preface 1.2, trans. Schaff, 1978). Elsewhere, he argues that heresy takes on the form of milk, while it is in fact a mixture of lime and water (*Adv. Haer.* III.17.4). He speaks about the arrogance of the heretics, who claim to have access to knowledge that is beyond their reach, and goes on to object to their ‘wicked, although plausible, persuasions’ (*Adv. Haer.* I.32.3). Their lies destroy the truth (*Adv. Haer.* I.8.1). Heretics twist the truth and divide it (*Adv. Haer.* I.9.4). They are innovators.

Deviation from the truth translates into moral corruption and especially sexual perversion (Knust, 2006). Heretics ‘lead lives of unrestrained indulgence’ and they lie and practise adultery. In all of this, one cannot but conclude that ‘this class of men have been instigated by Satan’ (*Adv. Haer.* I.21.1, trans. Schaff, 1978). They are slaves of desire. Irenaeus was not alone in seeing the connection between heresy and moral corruption. Justin Martyr too, to mention just one other heresiologist, calls heretics demon-inspired sex fiends (*1 Apol.* 26; *Dial.* 35). While ‘true Christians’ are chaste, false Christians are capable of ‘the overturning of the lamp stand and promiscuous intercourse and devouring human flesh’ (*1 Apol.* 26.7). Benjamin Kaplan concludes that the

error [of heretics] [...] was less a product of misunderstanding than a sinful act of malicious will. Pride drove them to claim religious authority; the desires of the flesh drove them to fabricate teachings that licensed immorality. From antiquity onwards, stereotypes circulated casting heretics as hedonistic revelers whose clandestine, nighttime gatherings were excuses for orgies. (Kaplan, 2007, p. 26)

Accusations that were previously raised against Christians were here raised against heretics too. Sometimes, however, heretics would be accused of the opposite, that is of being overly stringent when it comes to the joys of life, including sexuality. Their self-restraint went overboard. That too, could be a sign of heresy.

Heretics furthermore project ‘vain’ genealogies, which falsify the only legitimate genealogical line of Christians. They are innovators rather than heirs of tradition, born after Jesus’ ascension rather than stemming from disciples of Christ, and their origin is demonic rather than divine; Satan is their father. Irenaeus, in an effort to distinguish Christian from heretic genealogy projects Simon Magus (Acts 8:9) as the father of all heresies, all later false teachings (e.g. Marcion) go back to him: ‘from [him] [...] all sorts of heresies derive their origin’ (*Adv. Haer.* I.13.2, trans. Schaff, 1978). Thus, he wants to emphasize that heresy is a novel invention, an innovation, a deviation, which only ‘broke [...] much later’ (*Adv. Haer.* III.4.3, trans. Schaff, 1978). Heresy lacks tradition. It does not have a long history and it springs from the ‘creative’ imagination of arrogant minds. Denying them Christian lineage and excluding them from the one eternal salvific path, Irenaeus gives heretics a non-Christian name: they are Simonians, but also Marcionites and Valentinians, rather than Christians.

Against the genealogical line of heretical corruption and division, Irenaeus places the genealogical line of faithful and apostolic Christians, which is present only in those churches which can guarantee apostolic origin and continuity (Knust, 2006, p. 155).

Since, however, it would be very tedious, in such a volume as this, to reckon up the successions of all the Churches, we do put to confusion all those who, in whatever manner, whether by an evil self-pleasing, by vainglory, or by blindness and perverse opinion, assemble in unauthorized meetings; [we do this, I say,] by indicating that tradition derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul; as also [by pointing out] the faith preached to men, which comes down to our time by means of the successions of the bishops. For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of its pre-eminent authority, that is, the faithful everywhere, inasmuch as the apostolical tradition has been preserved continuously by those [faithful men] who exist everywhere. (Adv. Haer. III.2, trans. Schaff, 1978)

The orthodox norm of the apostolic tradition is, so Irenaeus claims, preserved in Rome, thanks to the twofold succession via Peter and Paul (a male line rather than the female line of the heretic). The apostolic tradition guarantees the preservation of Christian orthodoxy, which has been present in the universally founded church from the very beginning. A heretic cannot be a Christian, even though they all claim to be precisely that. Here too, ethnoreligious reasoning is part of religionization.

Text Box 9: Imaginary Constructs: Orthodoxy versus Heresy

The negotiation of the conceptual boundaries of orthodoxy goes hand in hand with the process of defining heresy. To recognize orthodoxy one needs to consider heresy; either term only makes sense in light of the other. This process of demarcation is again one of legitimization/delegitimization. It must not be overlooked that heresy is an etic label: it is a name given by Christians who claim to embody a truthful Christian life in contrast to those who deviate from this projected norm. No heretic would ever call himself thus.

The heretic, like the Jew, is an imaginary religionized construct, but this also holds true for the projected self-understanding that emerges from this binary. The idea that orthodox Christian identity, as embodied in the norm of the apostolic tradition, is marked by stability and coherence, is not confirmed by historical data. It is more correct to acknowledge that even the apostolic tradition itself is pluriform and marked by tension, something Irenaeus certainly would not want to consider. It makes much more sense to argue that plurality or heterodoxy came first, though heresiologists would not agree. For them, fragmentation and plurality are placed outside the realm of orthodoxy. Finally, both orthodoxy and heresy are in the eye of the beholder. All Christian communities considered themselves to be orthodox and others to be heretical. In the sixteenth century, this is exactly the point Castellio would make when arguing for toleration (see Chapter 7).

Heresy	Orthodoxy
Sickness, disease	The healthy body of Christ
Deviance	Norm
Division	Unity
Contamination	Remedy
Falsehood	Truth

6 Conclusion

During the second and third centuries, Christian apologists tried to construct a sense of Christianness in a context of plurality and contestation. To that end, they engaged in a process of selfing and othering predicated on religious difference, which I call religionization. Religionization produces imaginary binary constructs, that follow the demarcation of norm versus deviation. In this chapter, I have specifically examined the following antithetical pairs: *Religio* – *superstitio*; orthodoxy – heresy; and Christians – Jewish anti-Christians, as well as a series of value-laden oppositions that intersect with these binary constructs. As Christians developed an understanding of *vera religio* as being separate and even opposed to heresy, to Jewish tradition, and to superstitious/idolatrous Roman cults, they strived to create a world that was structured in accordance with their own self-understanding. To bolster their claims to *vera religio*, Christian apologists made use of ethnoreligious reasoning. They also gendered and sexualized their opponents. Furthermore, they claimed that orthodoxy is one, thereby framing plurality as deviation. In the period that I have just discussed, Christians were a minority; their traditions were ridiculed, misunderstood, and rejected and at times, Christian communities were persecuted. Soon, this would change.

In the fourth century, when Nicene Christianity became the official *religio* of the Roman Empire, the long process of Christianization set in. Before Constantine, Christians had remained beyond the fringes of legality (Stroumsa, 2015); now, the Nicene Christian norm would be inscribed into the law, and patterns of religionization that previously figured solely in Christian discourse would become expressed in disciplinary measures with material effects on the relations between Christians on the one hand and Jews, pagans, and heretics on the other.

Note

¹To get a sense of this intra-Christian diversity, consider Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with the Jew Trypho*. In it, we find an interesting passage in which the relationship between gentile Christians, Jewish-Christians, and Jews is discussed, showcasing the social reality of Christian diversity (47.1–5). The Jew Trypho asks Justin if those Christians who believe Jesus is the Messiah and want to keep the whole law of Moses can also be saved. Justin answers that they can, provided they do not expect all Christians to follow Jewish law. The gentile Christians are not bound by that law. Trypho notes that there are also Christians who disagree about this. Justin admits that there are, and that there are even Christians who do not want to meet in a house with those who keep all of the law. While this is not his personal position, Justin does state that only Jews who recognize Jesus as Messiah can be saved (see Justin Martyr, trans. Falls, 1948).

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