

Formation of Religious Counter-Identity:

Pagans and Christians in Late Antique Rome

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Religiosity often involves believing in sacred mysteries. In other words, many church teachings must be accepted on faith. While faith in and of itself is not likely to lead to intolerance, unquestioned religious faith and fundamentalism are associated with authoritarianism and discriminatory attitudes. Religious teachings also deal with fundamental issues regarding life and death over which there is great concern and emotion. Related to this, religious organizations often become politicized and seek to affect policy along the lines of moral or religious teachings. The politicization of religion and its extension into economic, political, and social institutions involve a struggle for resources and power. Taken together, unquestioned religious faith and the politicization of religion might lead to value conflict and intolerance between believers and nonbelievers.¹

The period of Late Antiquity in Rome was marked by tension between two religious groups, the emerging Christian minority and the disparate group of peoples who are referred to as pagan. Prior to Constantine's decriminalization of Christianity, paganism was not a homogenous religious identity to which individuals ascribed themselves. Within the Roman Empire, a myriad of deities were venerated through a countless number of rituals and lifestyles. Roman pluralism, therefore, was epitomized by an apparent lack of religious identity. Religious identity is defined, for the purposes of this analysis, as a conviction that it is not only important that one *did* worship the divine but also *how* one worshiped the divine and *which* deity one worshiped. Also part and parcel of religious identity is that other religious practices would be looked upon as inherently *offensive*. The words of Symmachus, a fourth century Roman prefect, in response to the removal of the Altar of Victory from the curia by a Christian emperor, express this lack of religious identity well. "What difference does it make by what pains each seeks the truth? We cannot attain to so great a secret by one road."² The emergence of Christianity as a

¹ Robert M. Kunovich & Randy Hodson, "Conflict, Religious Identity, and Ethnic Intolerance in Croatia," *Social Forces*, Vol. 78, No. 2 (Dec., 1999), 645, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3005570>>.

² Symmachus, *Relation 3*, 15 February 1998, 27 October 2012, <<http://people.ualgary.ca/~vandersp/Courses/texts/sym-amb/symrel3f.html>>.

powerful political force within the Roman Empire brought with it a pervasive identity which did much to influence the actions of subsequent emperors. It was soon apparent that the manner in which one worshiped the divine was being taken into consideration and that pluralism was coming to an end. The opening quotation, although taken from a journal article which analyzes ethnic conflict in modern Croatia, accurately describes how religiosity can lead to hostilities between groups with differing religious identities. The Emperor Julian, the last pagan emperor of Rome, perceived the rise of Christian political power as a threat against the established social order and tried to reverse this by creating a (ultimately unsuccessful) counter-identity among pagan intellectuals. The reasons why Christian identity was perceived as a threat and how this led to the creation of a pagan counter-identity can be understood firstly by examining pluralism within the Roman Empire prior to the adoption of Christianity by Constantine and the lack of religious identity among pagans even into the fourth century. Then, the analysis of the aspects of Christianity which were perceived as threatening to pagan intellectuals after its adoption into the Empire and the Emperor Julian's attempts to create a counter-identity during his reign emphasize the tensions brought about by dichotomy.

Religious Pluralism within the Roman Empire

Rome had a long tradition of religious tolerance, even going so far as accepting the gods of conquered peoples into their pantheon during the Early Republic. The Roman pantheon is even based upon the Greek pantheon. The god Jupiter is nothing more than the Roman version of the Greek *Zeus Pater* (Zeus the Father) and Neptune is merely a Latinized version of Poseidon. Many foreign cults thrived within the Roman Empire even during the persecution of Christianity in the second and third centuries. Mithraism and the Cult of Isis were very popular within the Empire. During the Severan Dynasty, "many Easterners held seats in the Senate, and as senators

continues to remain faithful to their national religion.”³ Cult worship with the Roman Legions was also tolerated. “A host of dedications from all over the empire bear witness to freedom of worship. Oriental legions and auxiliaries might carry the cults of their *di patrii* with them wherever they went in the West. No attempt was made to prevent the troops of the Western provinces from adopting these cults and practicing them.”⁴ Sol Invictus, which became a popular deity during the later Roman Empire and to whom it is claimed Constantine espoused, was a product of Eastern philosophy.⁵

The persecution of Christianity from the second to the first half of the fourth century would seem therefore to be an anomaly. Why was it that so many religions were tolerated and practiced within the Roman Empire and this one religion, Christianity, was not? Perhaps it is not that the religion of Christianity was being persecuted, but rather those people who identified with Christianity were somewhat unfairly lumped into a stereotype of criminality and unkempt behavior among Roman officials. Modern Historians believe that the Roman authorities looked down upon Christians because “Their growing numbers and tightly knit social coherence seemed to distance Christianity from the Imperial system, and the inward-turning secrecy of their society made it all too easy for horrible accusations ... to be whispered against them.”⁶ Pliny the Younger, a Roman governor during the reign of Trajan, wrote to the emperor in order to inquire about what punishments should be ascribed to Christians and for what crimes. “I have never participated in trials of Christians. I therefore do not know what offenses it is the practice to

³ Gaston H. Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, (Brill Archive, 1972), 40.

⁴ Allan S. Hoey, “Official Policy towards Oriental Cults in the Roman Army,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 70 (1939), 457 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/283102>>.

⁵ Halsberghe, 41.

⁶ Michael Grant, *The Antonines: The Roman Empire in Transition*, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 44.

punish or investigate, and to what extent ... whether the name itself, even without offenses, or only the offenses associated with the name are to be punished.”⁷

Trajan’s response to Pliny’s inquiry seems indicative of official attitudes toward Christianity at the time. “You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished.”⁸ In these words it is clear that the persecution of Christianity was not in an effort to root out and eradicate it because of some inherent offence taken at the very name of Christianity. On the contrary, Trajan is asking that Pliny not seek out Christians on the advice of “anonymously posted accusations,”⁹ but that he uphold the laws of the Roman Empire and enforce punishments when people are found guilty of crimes. This correspondence between Trajan and Pliny paints a very different picture from common conceptions of Roman persecution of Christianity in which every Christian found would be fed to the lions. Trajan is trying instead to differentiate between the persecution of Christians because of the mere name of Christianity and the punishment of individuals for infractions against the laws of the Roman Empire.

The second century Christian apologist, Athenagoras, writing sometime between the years 176 and 180 CE to the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, also tries to make this differentiation.¹⁰ Appealing to the emperors foremost as philosophers, he tried, given his understanding of Roman pluralism, to make a case for the Christians as existing within the confines of Roman law. He first explained the plethora of religions existing within the empire

⁷ Pliny the Younger, *Pliny on the Christians, Letters 10.96-97*, <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/pliny1.asp>>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ William R. Schoedel, “Christian ‘Atheism’ and the Peace of the Roman Empire,” *Church History*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Sep., 1973), 309 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3164388>>.

such as “The Lacedaemonian venerates Agamemnon as Zeus, and ... The Athenian sacrifices to Erechtheus as Poseidon.”¹¹ Surely then, Christianity should be treated as simply another religion amongst the vast array of religions that abound within the Empire. Athenagoras then tried to defend Christianity against charges of atheism by claiming that Christians are simply pious in a different form than pagans. He asserts that Christians “distinguish God from matter, and teach that matter is one thing and God another, and that they are separated by a wide interval.”¹² It is for this reason that Christians could not pay homage to pagan idols and why Christians could not offer sacrifices to their God. However, for Romans who were “schooled to view religion as the repository of civic values,” as the state religion of the Roman Empire surely was, “rejected the claims of a faith that emphasized trans-political aims.”¹³ Though Christians had reason within their doctrine to refuse to partake in pagan forms of worship it did not make a difference. It was the refusal to take part in these religious acts which was akin to burning the American flag in the modern age. “The ‘atheism’ of Jews and Christians was considered indistinguishable from ‘hatred of mankind.’”¹⁴

Following the Crisis of the Third Century, the Emperor Diocletian attempted to create unity within the empire by increasing patriotism toward the state. One of the ways in which he did this was by mandating that all citizens of the empire should pay homage to the imperial cult by offering a sacrifice. Many of the religious traditions existing within the Empire were willing to do so with the notable exceptions of the Christians and the Jews. Being monotheistic and believing in the sanctity of the one God above any other, paying homage to any other god was considered sacrilege. This was not a mere coincidence, but rather a directed attack against the

¹¹ Athenagoras, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 2: A Plea for the Christians*, (Christian Literature Company, 1885) 129.

¹² *Ibid*, 131.

¹³ Schoedel, 311.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

Christians. What followed, therefore, is what is today known as the “Great Persecution” which was the last and is considered to be the most severe persecution of Christianity during Late Antiquity.

In 303 CE, Diocletian ordered that “churches should be razed to the ground, the Scriptures destroyed by fire, those who held positions of honor degraded.”¹⁵ Thereafter, Diocletian issued more edicts demanding that “those in prison should be set free, if they would sacrifice, but that those who refused should be tormented with countless tortures.”¹⁶ Trying to restore the empire to its former glory after the third century crisis required that the citizens of the empire be fully behind the emperor and Christians were viewed as a subversive element within that society. Diocletian needed to resolve this conflict by having them sacrifice to the imperial cult. This line of reasoning would have made sense to a pagan of the third century as so many of the religions being practiced and even the prominent mystery cults such as Isis and Mithraism were perfectly willing to make this sacrifice to show their patriotism. Diocletian’s view of religious sacrifice was no different than how American’s today view saluting the American flag; it was simply a vow of loyalty to the state. The persecution of Christians which took place because of this edict was therefore not on any explicitly religious grounds, but rather were an attempt to root out subversive elements within society.

During the second and into the fourth century, the persecution of Christianity was not because of the feeling that Christianity ideologically wrong. The plethora of differing religious practices within the Empire led to the conclusion that this cannot be the case. As the correspondence between Pliny the Younger and Trajan show, there was often an active attempt to differentiate between the word “Christianity” and any number of crimes that had been

¹⁵ Eusebius, *Edicts Against The Christians*, January 1996, <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/persec1.asp>>

¹⁶ Ibid.

associated with that word. Just because one was a Christian did not necessarily mean that one was guilty of a crime. The letter from Athenagoras to the Emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus show that Christians themselves understood pluralism within the Roman Empire and sought to fit themselves into that arrangement. In his defense of Christianity against the accusation of atheism, Athenagoras invoked Roman understanding of the divine in all of its forms in order to rationalize the Christian perception of only one God. When Christians were being persecuted by the Roman state, it was never because of disagreement with Christian religious practices on principle, but rather because of their failure to integrate into Roman society and their apparent subversive nature. Religious identity was therefore not a factor in Christian persecution as it did not take place because of a disagreement about how Christians were worshiping the divine or because of any type of offence taken toward Christian religious practices.

Symmachus and Ambrose

The lack of religious identity among pagans lasted well after the adoption of Christianity into the Empire. The latter third century Roman Prefect, Symmachus, and his correspondence with the Emperor Valentinian II is a famous example of this. In 382 CE, the Emperor Gratian ordered the Alter of Victory to be removed from the Roman Senate House.¹⁷ In 384 CE, Symmachus sent an appeal to the new Emperor Valentinian asking that the Alter of Victory be restored because “That altar preserves the concord of all, that altar appeals to the good faith of each, and nothing gives more authority to our decrees than that the whole of our order issues every decree as it were under the sanction of an oath.”¹⁸ In essence, by removing the alter from the Senate House, *pax deorum*, or the peace of the gods, had been broken. There was a famine

¹⁷ Averil Cameron. *The Later Roman Empire*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 73.

¹⁸ Symmachus, *Relation 3*, sec. 3, <<http://people.ucalgary.ca/~vandersp/Courses/texts/sym-amb/symrel3f.html>>.

affecting Rome at the time, and Symmachus believed that the cause was the breaking of *pax deorum*. “A general famine followed upon this [the removal of the Alter], and a poor harvest disappointed the hopes of all the provinces. This was not the fault of the earth ... the year failed through the sacrilege, for it was necessary that what was refused to religion should be denied to all.”¹⁹

During the course of his plea to the emperor, Symmachus alludes to more than just his wanting the Alter of Victory returned to the Senate House. He was also trying very plainly to make a case against religious exclusionism which had become apparent since the adoption of Christianity by the emperors. He made the eloquent plea to the young Emperor Valentinian that “We look on the same stars, the sky is common, the same world surrounds us. What difference does it make by what pains each seeks the truth? We cannot attain to so great a secret by one road.”²⁰ It seems that Symmachus had no qualms with other forms of religiosity and possibly thought them necessary in seeking the greater truths of existence.

Symmachus’ argument for religious pluralism is very telling of how the elite in Late Antiquity identified themselves. During his time as a senator in Rome, Symmachus, “in harmony with the elitist mentality and legislative practice of his time he had, in fact, advanced a theoretical justification of the nonequality of the upper classes before the law.”²¹ The fact that Symmachus would push for legal inequality on the basis of monetary worth and then appeal to the emperor for religious toleration might seem hypocritical to a modern audience, but would have been perfectly reasonable to a Late Antique audience. This is indicative of a different sort of self-identification, one in which wealth and prestige were indicators of righteousness and

¹⁹ Ibid, 14.

²⁰ Ibid 8.

²¹ Lellia Cracco Ruggini, “Intolerance: Equal and Less Equal in the Roman World,” *Classical Philology*, Vol. 82, No. 3 (Jul., 1987), 187, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/270279>>.

divine favor and religious classifications were of lesser importance. Symmachus was clearly not an idealist calling for religious toleration because of any humanitarian inclinations, but rather saw *pax deorum* as having sustained the Roman Empire for his ancestors and wished for that divine favor to continue. He was asking that he be allowed to “use the ancestral ceremonies, for I do not repent of them. Let me live after my own fashion, for I am free. This worship subdued the world to my laws, these sacred rites repelled Hannibal from the walls, and the Senones from the capitol.”²²

Symmachus’ plea for religious pluralism was certainly a few decades too late to make any major difference in imperial policy making but it was quickly attacked by Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, who had been pivotal in convincing the Emperor Gratian to remove the Alter of Victory in the first place.²³ As much as Symmachus’ correspondence with the emperor illustrates the lack of religious identity and want of pluralism that he possessed, Ambrose’s petition displays the opposite about himself. Ambrose begins his plea by reminding the emperor does “owe service to Almighty God and our holy faith.”²⁴ He then reminds him that “‘the gods of the heathen,’ as Scripture says, ‘are devils.’”²⁵ Right away it is clear to Ambrose that returning the Alter of Victory to the Senate House is wrong based simply on ideological concerns. To him, the gods of all other religious beliefs are not gods at all but rather the antithesis of his God. With this mindset being the prevailing conviction, it is not difficult to understand why pluralism was impossible within a Christianized Roman Empire. Integral to his argument against the restoration of the Alter of Victory was the awareness that its presence within the Senate House would offend the Christian senators. So sensitive was the doctrine of Christianity, apparently, that “a Christian

²² Symmachus, sec. 7.

²³ Cameron, 73.

²⁴ Ambrose, *Epistle XVII*, sec. 1, <<http://people.ucalgary.ca/~vandersp/Courses/texts/sym-amb/ambrepf.html>>.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 1.

who was compelled with a choice such as this to come to the Senate, would consider it to be persecution.”²⁶

Ambrose also attacks Symmachus’ plea for religious toleration on the grounds that the divine mystery could not be reached by one road alone by claiming that the divine mystery had already been attained. “By one road, says he, one cannot attain to so great a secret ... what you seek by fancies, we have found out from the very Wisdom and Truth of God. Your ways, therefore, do not agree with ours.”²⁷ This assertion that Christianity was the answer to the great secret that Symmachus claimed divine worship was intended to answer was a great point of contention between Christianity and paganism. Christian apprehension towards pagan learning as diametrically opposed to doctrine of Christianity led to hostilities toward any philosophy that was in the least bit pagan and eventually to the destruction of the Serapeum, which housed part of the Great Library of Alexandria, in 391 CE.²⁸

Christian Identity in Late Antiquity

Christianity during Late Antiquity had a very precarious relationship with pagan learning that led to either a complete dismissal of it or an attempt to create an awkward synthesis between Christianity and pagan learning. The majority of Christians would dismiss pagan philosophy and learning out of hand but a few Christian intellectuals, most notably figures such as Saint Augustine and Saint Ambrose (mentioned above), would attempt to reconcile pagan philosophy with Christian dogma. A famous example of this would be Ambrose’s *De Officiis*, so named because of the similarities it shares with a work by the Roman orator, philosopher and statesman Cicero of the same name, in which he attempted to define the rules and responsibilities for Christian clergymen.

²⁶ Ibid, 9.

²⁷ Ibid, 8.

²⁸ Cameron, 75.

Many scholars believe that Ambrose's intended purpose for rewriting Cicero's *De Officiis* was in order to replace it as a definitive Christian guide on how to properly perform one's duties as a Christian.²⁹ During the course of *De Officiis*, Ambrose borrows heavily from Cicero's original work while subtly Christianizing the message. All the while, however, he "almost always avoids explicitly attributing sentiments to Cicero or to classical thinkers, while closely echoing their language."³⁰ This, it would seem, is in an attempt to give the pagan philosopher as little credit or attention as possible. More importantly, however, is the fact that Ambrose stresses the "superiority of biblical truth and biblical exemplars to classical ones" and even goes so far as to "[accuse] the pagans of plagiarizing from the Scriptures."³¹ By making this claim, Ambrose is asserting that biblical scripture is the origin of truth. This message was repeated by many Christian intellectuals during Late Antiquity. The first major Christian apologist, Justin Martyr, who lived during the middle of the second century, was the first known to make this claim. "He firmly rejected pagan polytheistic religion, but welcomed such pagan philosophy as was consistent with Biblical teaching. Justin explained the impressive parallels between Christianity and pagan philosophy ... by proposing that the Greek philosophers had studied the Old Testament."³²

Not only did Christian intellectuals assert that pagan philosophies were plagiarized from the Old Testament, some even suggested that the pagan learning should not be studied at all. Tertullian of Carthage, who lived from the later second until the early third century, is perhaps the best known of the early Christian anti-intellectuals.³³ He famously asked the question:

²⁹ Ivor J. Davidson, "Ambrose's *de officiis* and the Intellectual Climate of the Late Fourth Century," *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Nov., 1995), 315, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1583823>>.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 318.

³¹ *Ibid*, 319.

³² David C. Lindberg, "Science and the Early Christian Church," *Isis*, Vol. 74, No. 4 (Dec., 1983), 513, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/232210>>.

³³ *Ibid*, 515.

What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from “the porch of Solomon,” who had himself taught that “the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart.” Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For once we believe this, there is nothing else that we ought to believe.³⁴

Clearly from this passage, Tertullian had such a negative view towards pagan philosophy because of the belief that it led towards heresy. If followers of Christianity began to question its strict doctrine using Platonic reasoning then blasphemy would surely follow. “What he therefore opposed was not philosophy generally, but heresy or the philosophy that gave rise to it.”³⁵ Saint Augustine would also make some blatantly anti-intellectual comments in his works. “When it is asked what we ought to believe in matters of religion, the answer is not to be sought in the exploration of the nature of things ... Nor should we be dismayed if Christians are ignorant about the properties and the number of the basic elements of nature.”³⁶

Although it is true that Christian intellectuals did not completely dismiss pagan learning out of hand and that even Tertullian appropriated Aristotelian rational techniques and put them to apologetic use,³⁷ what matters is that pagan intellectuals of the day saw Christians as inherently unintellectual. The pagan Emperor Julian would describe the differences between paganism and Christianity as such: “Ours are the reasoned arguments and the pagan tradition which comprehend at the same time due worship of the gods; yours are want of reason and rusticity, and all your wisdom can be summed up in the imperative ‘Believe.’”³⁸ This pagan outlook on Christian intellectualism would help to shape the appearance of pagan religious identity that was to be shaped in large part by the Emperor Julian.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid, 516.

³⁶ Ibid, 521.

³⁷ Ibid, 517.

³⁸ Ibid, 515.

The Emperor Julian and the Creation of Pagan Religious Identity

When the Emperor Julian took on the emperorship in 361 CE, he fully understood the powerful nature of Christianity. In his childhood, Julian had received a Christian education along with his brother Gallus after the rest of their family had been murdered following the death of the Emperor Constantine in 337 CE. Constantine's successor, Constantius II, seemed pretty intent on making sure that Julian and his brother were brought up as proper Christians. However, when Julian ventured to Nicomedia he came under the influence of neoplatonic pagans such as Libanius and Eunapius.³⁹ It was Julian's exposure to both Neo-Platonism and Christianity that would influence his actions as emperor from 361 until 363 CE. Upon taking the over as emperor for Constantius II, Julian would try to systematically adopt an institutionalized paganism to compete with the rapidly growing Christian hierarchy. In doing so, Julian would try to create a homogenous pagan identity based largely on the Christian identity he had been exposed to as a youth. The paganism which Julian had tried to "restore" was actually something quite new. "Although he believed that he was resuscitating the old religion, in practice, Julian created a new one, a blend of philosophy, pagan ritual, and myth."⁴⁰

According to Julian's own philosophical treatise on Christianity, *Against the Galileans*, he felt that the entire religious tradition of Christianity was detestable. He believed that "[the Christians] have not accepted a single admirable or important doctrine of those that are held either by us Hellenes or by the Hebrews who derived them from Moses; but from both religions they have gathered what has been engrafted like powers of evil, as it were, on these nations----atheism from the Jewish levity, and a sordid and slovenly way of living from our indolence and

³⁹ Cameron, 88-89.

⁴⁰ Vasiliki Limberis, "'Religion' as the Cipher for Identity: The Cases of Emperor Julian, Libanius, and Gregory Nazianzus," *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 93, No. 4 (Oct., 2000), 378, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1510164>>.

vulgarity; and they desire that this should be called the noblest worship of the gods.”⁴¹ In essence, he believed that the Christians adopted their practices from both the Hellenes and the Hebrews, but only the most derogatory of those practices. Although he claims in his philosophical musings to believe that Christianity is the antithesis of good social order, Julian realizes quickly the ability for the Christian doctrine to attract followers. In a letter to Arsacius, the high priest of Galatia, he asserts that his new pagan doctrine is not prospering as he had hoped and asks, “Why do we not observe that it is [the Christian’s] benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase atheism? I believe that we ought really and truly to practice every one of these virtues. And it is not enough for you alone to practice them, but so must all the priests in Galatia, without exception.”⁴² Though he may not agree with the doctrine of the Christians, he can fully recognize the power of Christian identity in attracting followers and unabashedly attempts to adopt these practices into his own religious practices. Although it was his insistence on the infusion of a moral code into pagan religion which diminished this new doctrines appeal from the outset.⁴³

Also similar between Christianity and Julian’s paganism is the idea of a singular God. Although Julian often calls upon the gods in a plural form, his idea of neoplatonic paganism believed that all of the gods were simply different names for the same incorporeal, invisible God who is knowable through the intellect alone.⁴⁴ Julian’s view of that one omnipotent God seems very similar to the Christian conception of their God as well. In his letter to a pagan priest, Julian

⁴¹ Julian, *Against the Galileans*, Trans. by Wilmer Cave Wright, PH.D., Book 1, <http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/julian_apostate_galileans_1_text.htm>.

⁴² Julian, Letter to Arsacius, High-priest of Galatia, Trans. by W. C. Wright, <http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/julian_apostate_letters_1_trans.htm>.

⁴³ Limberis, 378.

⁴⁴ Ibid 378.

mentions that “we must suppose that God, who naturally loves human beings, has more kindness for those men who love their fellows.”⁴⁵ This conception of a loving God who looks down kindly upon human philanthropy seems to be much different from the unconcerned pantheon of gods who were unconcerned with the goings on of humankind. In fact, Julian dismisses the myths of earlier pagan tradition as fallacious by saying “it is true that the Hellenes invented their myths about the gods, incredible and monstrous stories.”⁴⁶ Therefore it is hard to say that Julian was trying to resuscitate an ancient pagan religious tradition. It seems as though what he was really trying to do is elevate a contender to the Christian monopoly under the guise of ancient tradition. It was perhaps this alien nature of his new doctrine which made it so unappealing to traditional pagans.

Julian was attempting, primarily, to elevate his new pagan doctrine to the level of Christianity politically. The pagan religions were slowly being pushed to the point of irrelevance under the emperorship of Constantius II and Christianity was being elevated to prominence within the state. In order to accomplish this goal he restores all property to the pagan temples and, in his role as *pontifex maximus*, personally takes part in many public pagan rituals. However, Julian’s overzealous approach may have actually been detrimental to his cause as “when he sacrificed a large number of animals at Antioch, the general public was scandalized to witness soldiers gorging themselves on sacred meat, since there was a food shortage at the time.”⁴⁷ The pagan historian Ammianus Marcellinus, while listing Julian’s qualities and his faults after his death, said that “if he had returned from Parthia there would be a shortage of

⁴⁵ Julian, *Fragment of a Letter to a Priest*, Trans. by Wilmer Cave Wright, <http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/julian_apostate_letter_to_a_priest.htm>.

⁴⁶ Julian, *Against the Galileans*.

⁴⁷ Limberis, 383.

cattle.”⁴⁸ All the while, though, he was trying to get the pagan priests to conform to a single religious doctrine in order to stand unified against the dominant Christian church. “Julian’s religion required—if not an experiential transformation—at least a commitment, and thus from the outset dissuaded the common people.”⁴⁹ His attempt to unify the disparate pagan groups into a unified religious hierarchy, although pivotal to a successful creation of a pagan religious revival in the face of Christianity, ultimately led to the demise of his pagan church through the ostracization of traditional pagans.

Julian did little during his short reign as emperor to directly attack Christianity. His aims were focused towards elevating paganism rather than eradicating Christianity. In another of Julian’s letters he affirms that, “by the gods that I do not wish the Galilaeans to be either put to death or unjustly beaten, or to suffer any other injury; but nevertheless I do assert absolutely that the god-fearing must be preferred to them.”⁵⁰ In an attempt to do exactly this, Julian legislated one of his few edicts which were in direct opposition to the Christians. This edict barred Christians from the teaching profession. Surely Julian understood the powerful influence that educators had on the youth from his own experiences in his own youth, but more importantly, Julian felt that “Greek learning was a divine creation, and men who scorned the gods, the myths and their versions of morality and honor, had no business teaching others.”⁵¹ This edict, however, would be singled out by the historian Ammianus Marcellinus as particularly harsh and oppressive.⁵² He stated that “the laws he enacted were not oppressive ... but there were a few exceptions, among them the harsh decree forbidding Christians to teach rhetoric or grammar

⁴⁸ Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire*, trans. by Walter Hamilton, (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 298.

⁴⁹ Limberis, 382.

⁵⁰ Julian, *Letter to Atarbius*, <http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/julian_apostate_letters_1_trans.htm>.

⁵¹ Limberis, 384.

⁵² Cameron, 94.

unless they went over to the worship of the pagan gods.”⁵³ Marcellinus, being a pagan and an historian who focused more on military and political history than religious, and also having served under Julian in the army and praised him for many of his successes, must have felt this particular edict to be especially egregious to list it among Julian’s faults. Other pagans, and especially Christians, would have also seen this edict as especially oppressive.

Julian can be seen here to have tried to systematically invent a pagan religious identity to compete with the prevailing Christian identity. In doing so, Julian was forced to adopt certain aspects of Christian identity and to invent some aspects of pagan identity. Julian’s attempts, however, were ultimately unsuccessful. The reasons for why this is seem to be the fact that Julian was trying to force a new form of paganism onto a populace that was practicing a more traditional form of paganism. Julian’s new paganism, borrowing heavily from Christianity, was almost entirely alien to traditional pagans. Also, Julian’s over-zealousness seems to have alienated a large portion of all classes of pagans. Lastly, Julian died on campaign against the Persians a mere two years after becoming emperor. The army then hastily declared Jovian as the new emperor. Jovian then reinstated Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, destroying any real chance of a pagan revival as envisioned by Julian. Although Julian’s attempts to revive pagan religious practices were ultimately unsuccessful, the neoplatonic religious identity that he created against to Christianity would continue to be a force of opposition until the closing of the Athens Academy in 529 CE.⁵⁴

Conclusion

The tensions between paganism and Christianity during Late Antiquity and the eventual dominance of Christianity as a political force caused pagans to rethink their traditional religious

⁵³ Marcellinus, 298.

⁵⁴ Cameron, 165.

practices. Prior to the ascension of Christianity, paganism was not a homogenous religious force. There were innumerable differing traditional polytheistic religions within the Roman Empire which existed with apparent impunity. The only requirement of these different religious practices was that they show their dedication to the Roman State by sacrificing to the imperial cult. Other than this requirement, there was not any sort of prevailing religious identity which encumbered pagan ideology and led to intolerance. The persecution of Christianity was because of suspicion of Christian intents and the fact that they would not pay homage to the imperial cult which, to the Romans, did not make sense unless they were against the Roman State. The prevailing Christian identity which did not allow them to sacrifice to the imperial cult and therefore led to their persecutions translated, once Christianity became a dominant political force, into intolerance of pagan religious practices. It was soon clear that religious pluralism was coming to an end within the Roman Empire and in order to prevent this Neo-Platonists, most notably the Emperor Julian, attempted to create a unified pagan religious identity in opposition to Christianity.