

- **Christian Identity in the Graeco–Roman World**
- **Christliche Identität in der Griechisch–Römischen Welt**
- **L'Identité chrétienne dans le monde gréco-romain**

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RÉSUMÉ

Dans le débat théologique récent, l'a souvent été soutenu que les affirmations traditionnelles du caractère absolu du christianisme étaient devenues nulles ou dénuées de sens, tout simplement par le fait du pluralisme religieux. Ceci semble supposer que l'affirmation d'un caractère absolu avait son sens dans un contexte où le christianisme exerçait un monopole religieux et culturel, mais qu'elle perd son sens en dehors de ce contexte. On peut répondre à cela en avançant la thèse opposée: dès son origine, le christianisme a affirmé son caractère absolu, alors qu'il est né au sein de la situation pluraliste de l'empire romain. Autrement dit, c'est précisément une situation de pluralisme religieux et culturel qui a constitué le milieu d'origine de cette affirmation d'un caractère absolu. Ainsi, une étude plus approfondie du processus par lequel le christianisme s'est défini dans le monde gréco-romain prend tout son sens au vu de la situation actuelle.

Les non-Juifs qui ont cru en Christ attiraient l'attention de leurs voisins par leur attitude intolérante vis-à-vis de tout culte rendu au génie de l'empereur ou aux dieux romains. Seuls les Juifs avaient le privilège légal de refuser de participer à ce culte. Quand les chrétiens d'origine païenne ont commencé à se comporter comme des Juifs sur ce point, sans être Juifs eux-mêmes, ils ne disposaient d'aucun fondement juridique pour justifier leur refus de prendre part à la religion officielle.

*Deux noms que l'on a dès l'origine attribués aux chrétiens, *christiano* et 'le troisième peuple' (ni juifs, ni grecs), nous montrent que les chrétiens devaient définir leur identité par rapport à deux entités: le judaïsme et le paganisme. En ce qui concerne le paganisme, les chrétiens d'origine païenne partageaient la conviction fondamentale des Juifs selon laquelle tout culte païen constituait de l'idolâtrie et devait par conséquent être*

désapprouvé. A ce propos, que ces religions païennes aient été l'une des anciennes religions nationales (animistes pour la plupart) ou le culte officiel rendu aux dieux gréco-romains, ou encore l'une des nouvelles religions à mystère ne faisait aucune différence significative. Toutes ces religions étaient elles-mêmes plutôt tolérantes et pouvaient s'accommoder d'autres croyances qui n'étaient pas exclusives, tout comme elles n'étaient pas elles-mêmes exclusives. C'est le refus 'juif' des chrétiens d'avoir quoi que ce soit à faire avec les autres religions qui les a mis en marge et a fait d'eux un problème pour leurs voisins et pour les autorités romaines.

Pour les autorités romaines, le refus des chrétiens de participer à la religion officielle était le seul et unique problème. Ceci explique la politique adoptée par Rome à l'égard des chrétiens. En même temps, ce refus explique le secret de la victoire de l'Eglise sur l'un des plus puissants empires que le monde ait jamais connus.

En ce qui concerne les religions à mystère la non participation des chrétiens ne posait pas le même problème. C'était même l'inverse: le christianisme pouvait être considéré comme très semblable aux religions à mystère et pouvait être inclus parmi elles comme la 'version à mystère' du judaïsme. Les apologistes chrétiens reconnaissent quelques similitudes entre les sacrements chrétiens et les rites des religions à mystère, mais il l'expliquent par la théorie de l'imitation démoniaque. Le défi le plus subtil que dut relever le christianisme vint du gnosticisme qui, souvent, ne se présentait pas comme une autre voie que le christianisme, mais comme le christianisme même. Le gnosticisme était compatible avec la religion officielle et avec d'autres religions. Ainsi, il n'a pas produit de martyrs. En refusant la voie gnostique, l'Eglise disait non à une approche facile, et très

séduisante, du pluralisme. Elle disait également non à une approche qui pouvait entraîner l'extinction du christianisme en tant que tel, avec son identité propre, et la disparition des chrétiens comme un peuple différent.

L'idée, émise par Justin, Clément d'Alexandrie et d'autres parmi les premiers pères de l'Eglise, d'une révélation extérieure à l'Écriture n'atténue en aucune manière cette approche sans compromis des religions païennes. St. Justin, l'auteur de l'idée du Logos spermatikos, ne pensait pas du tout que Christ était la réalité cachée derrière les religions païennes. Ce n'était pas non plus la pensée de Clément d'Alexandrie, ni d'aucun autre père de l'Église primitive. Justin partageait la conviction courante parmi les chrétiens que cette réalité cachée n'était pas Christ mais les démons. Il savait aussi que ce rejet de la religion officielle était considéré comme un outrage et qu'il conduisait au martyre. Mais il

voulait rendre ses lecteurs païens conscients du fait que les chrétiens n'étaient pas les seuls à refuser le culte officiel. Parmi leurs grands hommes les plus éminents, plusieurs avaient fait de même. L'un d'eux, Socrate, était même devenu un martyr pour cette raison. Ainsi, en l'un des grands héros de la culture grecque, le plus grand des philosophes, Justin trouve un allié, un porte parole, précisément pour cet élément qui semblait le plus anti-culturel dans la foi chrétienne: le rejet de la religion officielle.

Par conséquent, ce n'est absolument pas dans la religion non-chrétienne que Justin voit le Logos spermatikos à l'oeuvre, mais dans le rejet par des non chrétiens de la religion non chrétienne. La même idée se retrouve chez Clément d'Alexandrie et même chez Tertullien. Les tentatives modernes de faire des premiers pères de l'Église les porte parole de l'idée d'un 'Christ caché' dans les religions païennes sont donc sans fondement.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In der modernen theologischen Debatte ist oft behauptet worden, daß traditionelle Bestätigungen über die absolute Natur des Christentums mit der einfachen Tatsache des religiösen Pluralismus' zunichte gemacht wurden. Das deutet an, daß solch ein Gedanke nur in einem Kontext sinnvoll ist, in dem das Christentum ein kulturelles und religiöses Monopol ausübt. Das Gegenteil kann jedoch behauptet werden: von Anfang an hat das Christentum seinen absoluten Charakter bestätigt, obwohl es im Herzen des pluralistischen Römischen Reiches entstanden ist. Daher ist ein Studium darüber, wie das Christentum sich selbst in der Griechisch-Römischen Welt zu verstehen bekam, relevant zu der modernen Situation.

Nicht-jüdische Christen zogen die Aufmerksamkeit ihrer Nachbarn auf sich, in dem sie sich weigerten, an der Anbetung des Kaisers oder römischer Götter teilzunehmen. Nur Juden hatten vom Gesetz her das Privileg solche Anbetung zu verweigern. Christen, die ursprünglich Heiden waren, begannen sich in dieser Hinsicht wie Juden zu benehmen, hatten aber keine gesetzliche Grundlage dafür.

Christen wurden als 'das dritte Volk' zu

einem Begriff, weder Juden noch Griechen. Mit den Juden teilten sie sich den Glauben, daß die Anbetung der Heiden Götzendienst war—egal ob es die Form der alttümlichen nationalen Religionen annahm; oder die offizielle Anbetung, die den Griechisch-Römischen Göttern angeboten wurden; oder eine der neuen Mysteriumreligionen. Diese waren alle 'tolerant', es war die 'jüdische' Intoleranz der Christen, die sie für ihre Nachbarn unerträglich machten.

Für die römischen Behörden war die Verweigerung der Christen, an dem offiziellen Kult teilzunehmen, das einzige Problem, und das erklärt ihre Feindseligkeit. Dies war jedoch auch der Schlüssel zu dem Sieg der Kirche über eines der mächtigsten Reiche in der Geschichte.

Das Problem im Fall der Mysteriumreligionen, und besonders in der Gnostik, war die Versuchung sich wegen einigen oberflächlichen Ähnlichkeiten anzugleichen. Die Gnostik war 'umfassend'. Mit der Ablehnung dieses Weges lehnte das Christentum eine Möglichkeit ab, die seine Identität zerstört hätte.

Und zuletzt, es gibt in den Schriften

bestimmter Kirchenväter (insbesondere Justin's Logos Spermatikos keine Rechtfertigung für die Annahme, daß Christus die versteckte Realität in heidnischen Religionen war. Justin, im Bezug auf Sokrates und andere, wollte nur aufweisen, daß Christen nicht die Einzigen waren, die eine offizielle Religion verweigerten. Justin sieht

daher das Logos Spermatikos nicht als mittätig an in anderen Religionen, sondern nur in der Verweigerung von einigen Nicht-Christen bei nicht-christlichen Religionen. Daher sind moderne Versuche, eine Basis für die Annahme des versteckten Christus' in nicht-christlichen Religionen in den Schriften der Kirchenväter zu finden, ohne Grundlage.

I

The present-day relevance of my theme could be indicated by a slight reformulation of the title: Christian identity in a religiously pluralistic world. As is well known, Christians in general and theologians in particular are not in agreement concerning the question how Christians should respond to the reality of religious pluralism.

Paul Rajashekar, the leader of the LWF office for the *Church and People of Other Faiths*, once said the following:¹ 'While we hold our allegiance to the universal Lordship of Jesus Christ, Christianity itself is a particular religion in a religiously pluralistic world and there is every indication that it will remain so. Today we cannot take the same attitude which many Christians in the past took in dismissing other faiths as some form of satanic substitutes or demonic deceptions.' Rajashekar continued by saying that Christians in our times in increasing measure have seen the many positive values in other religions, and that other religions have established themselves in Christian countries and have won considerable hearing. 'In this situation the traditional absolute claims of Christianity have become rather tenuous. Some Christians have even raised the question of whether Christian faithfulness demands the repetition of the absolute claims of the New Testament and the early church.'

If I am not mistaken, this quote is rather representative of a certain way of thinking which has been very much in vogue lately. It may be summarized like this: The absolute claims of Christianity were credible in a certain period and in a certain setting. They were credible when Christianity was the

only religion of Christian Europe, they may have been credible in other periods and areas when Christianity was the dominant element in a certain culture, they may even have been credible when there were realistic prospects of Christianity becoming the only or dominant religion of a certain area. But now, with the prospect of increasing religious pluralism, and Christianity losing its cultural monopoly in the 'old world', the Christian claims of absoluteness become less and less credible. The context in which they gave meaning is vanishing.

I must confess that as an historian of the early Church I find it rather surprising that anyone should hold this view. It seems to presuppose that the claims of absoluteness originated in the Constantinian period, or maybe even in Medieval Europe. As everyone should know, this is not the case. The Bible did not originate in a homogeneous, unified culture, Jewish or Christian. It took shape in a situation of cultural and religious pluralism and confrontation, of ethnic and racial conflict. The same description holds true with regard to the formative years of the early Church. The world of religious pluralism, the world of the pluralistic metropolis, was not a foreign world to early Christianity. It was precisely in this world it had to define itself from the beginning, and all the sayings of absoluteness or uniqueness have exactly this world as their background. One could, I think, argue that it is only in a pluralistic situation that sayings about uniqueness are really meaningful. Pointing out that there is only one saviour and only one way leading to salvation, is more appropriate in a setting where several saviours and ways are competing, than in a monopoly situation in which no alternatives are allowed to appear.

Accordingly, the need to define Christian identity in a situation of religious pluralism is by no means a new challenge to Christians. From the beginning, Christians had to find out what belief in Jesus meant in exactly this kind of environment. We shall take a closer look at some important aspects of this process of defining Christian identity and Christian belief in the pluralistic Graeco-Roman world.

II

'The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch' (Acts 11,26). People are identified by their names. Individuals are given individual names. A group of people with a strong group identity will usually be given a name, for easy identification. Very often, the name which the group itself prefers, is not the same as the name used by outsiders. In Antioch, Luke tells us, the disciples *were called* Christians²—presumably by outsiders.³ It was not a name they chose for themselves. And for good reason, for it was hardly meant as an honorary or positive name. Calling someone a *christianos* was equal to saying that he belonged to the sect founded by Christos (the Anointed One) or Chrestos (the useful one)—both words were pronounced the same way. Names with the ending—*ianos* were typical sect names. In this case, the name to which the ending was appended, may have been strange in itself. If Gentiles in Antioch took it to mean The Anointed One, they would not be familiar with its meaning. Well informed Gentiles would have some vague knowledge that it had something to do with the national aspirations and hopes of the Jewish people, maybe they would even know that 'The Anointed One' was the expected national redeemer. As long as Jews in Antioch talked about this Anointed One, their Gentile surroundings would hardly take notice, and hardly bother. What was special in Antioch, was that an increasing number of Gentiles began behaving strangely Jewish. And all the time these Gentiles were talking about The Anointed One, even more so than the Jews themselves. These Gentiles were strange people. They behaved very Jewish, they were thinking very Jewish. First of all,

they refused to have anything to do with normal, ordinary religion at Antioch, exactly like the Jews. They would not pay any respect to the official gods of Rome, let alone sacrifice to them. They would not burn incense in front of the emperor's statue. Nor would they pay any respect to the traditional gods of Antioch—that is: the old gods of Syria, the gods of their own ancestors, the gods they themselves had worshipped until recently. They would not even have anything to do with any of the new religions, the mysteries—again: exactly like the Jews. Like the Jews, they behaved and thought as a people apart, a people different from other men. But they were not Jews. They did not undergo circumcision at their conversion, they did not observe the Jewish purity regulations concerning food, they did not appear to observe the Sabbath, they did not attend the Synagogue service. And all the time they had this strange name on their lips, 'The Anointed One', *Ho Christos*. So, what else could you call them, these strange non-Jewish Jews, than 'those people of the Anointed One', 'the Messianics', *Hoi Christianoi*.

III

My theme is Christian identity in the Graeco-Roman world, and I could think of no better point of departure than the situation in Antioch, when the disciples were given the name Christians. And I think it will prove fruitful to stay a little more in Antioch, and make some points concerning Christian identity with constant reference to that city.⁴

Antioch was the third biggest city of the Roman empire, and it was the old capital of a large empire older than the Roman. It was founded in the forth century BC, shortly after the death of Alexander, by one of his three leading generals, Seleucus Nicator. He named the city after his father Antiochus, and made it the capital of his empire, which extended from the shores of the Mediterranean and all the way the borders of India. It was a typically Hellenistic city, with a nucleus of six thousand Athenian immigrants in its population, the rest of which was mostly natives from the region (Aramaic-speaking Syrians), and a

substantial Jewish colony.⁵ Antioch soon flourished, and especially under Antiochus IV Epiphanes it became a true metropolis, consciously hellenized, magnificently adorned, known as the centre of culture, art, and pleasure in the East, arena of the Olympic games. It was also under Epiphanes that the Jewish question for the first time was put on the agenda in Antioch. Jewish resistance to Epiphanes' programme of Hellenization did not make them popular, and when the story of Jewish resistance in Jerusalem became known in Antioch, anti-Jewish riots broke out, the first such riots on record ever. When the Romans took control of the province of Syria and Palestine in 64–63 BC, Antioch took on new significance as the Roman stronghold against the Parthian empire in the east. It became a typically Graeco-Roman city, the third biggest in the empire after Rome and Alexandria, and it provides us with an excellent and typical example of the religious, cultural, and political setting in which early Christianity had to define itself.

First of all, we see quite clearly that the identity of Christians had to do with their relationship to Judaism and the Jewish people. As long as we are talking of the community of Jewish believers in Jesus in Jerusalem, that might be considered self-explanatory. Of course the first believers in Jesus had to define themselves vis à vis the rest of the Jewish people, the great majority who did not believe in Him. But I want to emphasize that this relationship to Judaism and the Jews was not less important in a typically Graeco-Roman city like Antioch. Maybe one could reasonably argue that it became *more* important there, than in Jerusalem.

In Jerusalem, the Jewish identity of all Jews was, in a certain sense, unproblematic. A Jew in Palestine could belong to the party of the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Essenes, or the disciples of Jesus; he could be a Zealot, or he could belong to no particular party at all. In any case, his Jewish identity as such was not in question. He belonged to an old nation, recognized as such by the Roman authorities. He belonged to a nation with rather peculiar religious traditions, but even that was recognized by the Romans, to the point that they allowed the Jews *not* to take part in official worship of the Roman gods and the genius of the Emperor. This special privilege, granted to the Jews and to nobody else, was not granted

willingly by the Romans, and they always carried a grudge against the Jews and were deeply suspicious of them. But they had to admit that it was an old and established tradition among the Jews that they could only worship the God of Israel and nobody else, and the Romans had a deep respect for traditions; their own and those of other peoples. Nobody could deny that the Jews were following the traditions of their forefathers when they behaved in this peculiar way in all matters of religion and ritual.

In the diaspora outside the Land of Israel, Judaism was recognized as a *religio licita*, a legal religion. There were Jewish colonies in all the major cities all around the Mediterranean, and in their conduct of their religion and rituals, these Jewish colonies were protected by the legal status of Judaism. But they were not loved by their Gentile neighbours. They were under great pressure towards assimilation and loss of Jewish identity. They were under great pressure to minimize Jewish ritual observances, because these kept them most apart and made social life with Gentiles difficult. In other words: In the diaspora, Jewish identity was much more problematic, it was something you had to be conscious about, and perhaps fight for.⁶

This was the case in Antioch, too. So, in Antioch we find the two religious and cultural elements that were always important in Christian self-definition: the Jews and the Gentiles, the Jews and the Hellenistic population. The Jewish believers in Jesus hardly represented a problem to their Gentile neighbours. They were Jews, they were allowed to behave Jewish—and probably were expected to behave Jewish—with regard to official religion. It was otherwise with the Gentile believers in Jesus. They, too, behaved Jewish with regard to official religion. In refusing to have anything to do with official religion or emperor worship they behaved Jewish, they claimed a Jewish privilege. But they were not Jews. They were the neither-nor-people. Early in the second century they were called 'the third people'. Not Jews, not Gentiles, but the third people.⁷ This name, as well as the name *Christianoi*, tells us that Christian identity in the Graeco-Roman world was defined within the social, cultural, and religious tension between Gentiles and Jews. The relationship Jews/Gentiles so to

speak provides us with a diagram within which we can describe Christian identity. To understand this better, we shall have to look a little closer at the Gentile element in this diagram.

IV

Let us look at Paganism in Antioch. Antioch was a metropolis, a true mega-city by the standards of those days, with maybe as much as half a million inhabitants.⁸ That means, in Antioch we find the typical pluralism of all big cities, ancient or modern. In Antioch, as in Rome, Alexandria, Ephesus, Carthage—the five biggest cities in the Roman empire, and also the five most important centres of Christianity, after Jerusalem—we find three elements in Pagan religion.⁹

The first is what we could call the old native religion. This would be different from city to city, from area to area, because the gods of native religion were local. In Antioch the native religion would be very close to the religion of the Canaanites of the OT; it means, e.g., that Baal was a major deity.¹⁰ It was a religion concerned with fertility and vitality, life energy, among men and beasts and on the fields; Baal was a dying and rising god, he died and rose with the barley in the fields. It was a religion concerned with personified forces in nature, it was basically an animistic religion, concerned to appease the divine forces, good or evil. In other words, the core of traditional religion in Antioch was classic animism, as we still find it at the core of popular religion all over the world.

The second element was that which we could call official religion, lying as a second layer above the old native worship. The Romans were convinced that the welfare of their empire was directly dependent on the goodwill and favour of the Roman gods, and their favourite technique for accommodating other peoples' pantheons was to identify the Roman gods with those of other peoples.¹¹ Only the names differed, the gods were the same. This process had been carried out first with regard to the gods of Greece; in this case there existed officially recognised identifications. But the same process went

on with other pantheons of the eastern peoples. In Antioch this process was begun before the Roman conquest, the Greek Seleucids had identified the old Semitic gods of Syria with the Greek pantheon already, and this process of Hellenization was so complete by New Testament times, that only the Greek names of the deities of Antioch survive in our sources, not the Semitic ones. On top of this, the Roman identifications were added, and the old cults of Syria could parade as the official worship of the Roman gods, who were no longer local, but in a sense universal, at least as universal as the empire itself. This was not a religion for the individual, private man; it was the official worship carried out by the authorities. Its purpose was the wellbeing and peace and prosperity of the empire. Its latest addition brings this out most clearly: the worship of the emperor's personal genius.

The third and newest element of Paganism in a city like Antioch was what we nowadays would call the new religions. This new type of religion can be seen as a product of the cultural and religious common-market established with the empire itself. When people travelled from city to city, when people met with other people of quite different backgrounds in the big cities, something happened to traditional, national religion. People were forced to compare and to think about their religion. They were forced to raise the problem of universality: Is my religion just the religion of this locality, or is it in any way the truth for all men?

This resulted in two things. It resulted in a high degree of religious relativism and syncretism. But it also had another and apparently different result. Some became convinced that their old local religion really was the truth for all men, and so they loosened their old faith from its national limitations and made it an offer to all men. In this way some national cults became international and missionary; most of them had an eastern origin. We call them the mystery religions, because they had rites of initiation that were kept secret to outsiders.¹²

It is interesting to observe that these religions of eastern origin were consciously Hellenized, that is: westernized, before they were presented to the Greek-Roman world.

In A.D. Nock's words: 'For the . . . expansion of cults from the Near East in Greece and in the West . . . (they) were substantially translated into Greek and remade with Greek elements into cults which retained an Oriental flavour but were divorced from their original cultural and religious setting.'¹³ The mystery cults of Dionysios and Attis came from Asia Minor, the mysteries of Isis came from Egypt, and the mysteries of Mithras came from Persia. These mystery religions did not aspire to the position of new state religion, they did hardly at all *want* to become official religion—and the only one to achieve a kind of semi-official standing was Mithraism, which for one period in the third century was popular in the army and with some emperors. No, the mystery religions were satisfied to form a new kind of religious society: the *private religious society or club*. The peak of this movement was the 'New Age' phenomenon of antiquity: Gnosticism. It tried to make an amalgam of all the best oriental wisdom, and presented it as new wisdom in the West, old and new at the same time.

It goes without saying that this new religiosity was a typical city phenomenon. Very likely, the mystery cults satisfied the need of big-city people for new social networks. In the mystery cults, the individual was taken seriously. Mystery religion very much centred on the salvation of the individual. And the mystery societies acted as fellowships of mutual help and assistance.

At the same time, the mystery cults did not bother about or interfere with the other religious loyalties of the citizen. He could apply for membership in a mystery cult, and at the same time perform the obligatory rites of official religion. He could be initiated in more than one mystery religion; after some time it became an ideal to be initiated in 'all mysteries'. Therefore the Romans could tolerate these new missionary religions, despite the fact that they regarded some of them with considerable suspicion.

V

We must now look at the other side of our religious diagram, the Jewish side. And it may be fruitful to include at once some

observations on the situation of Christians also.

As I have said, a high degree of mutual tolerance prevailed within the Roman empire, especially with regard to religion. Old national religions were accepted, and even the missionary mystery religions were tolerated. But speaking of tolerance, we should stress the word *mutual*. There was, so to speak, an unwritten rule of the game: If you tolerate my gods, I will tolerate yours. And everyone respected this rule—except the Jews and the Christians. The reason was simple. As one Jewish historian has put it: 'The Gods of Greece could easily compromise with the God of Israel, but he could not compromise with them.'¹⁴

The problem with the Jews, seen from the Roman perspective, was that it proved quite impossible to get the Jews to pay any homage whatsoever to the Roman gods. To the Jews, of course, that would have been idolatry plain and simple. And to worship the Emperor would be as bad if not worse, for that was worship of a human being as if he were God. So the Jews proved absolutely stubborn on these points: No homage to the Roman gods, no worship of the emperor.

This was very hard to accept for the Romans. No other people made such difficulties. No other people had a God like the people of Israel, a God who tolerated no other god beside himself. Because of this, the Romans did not love the Jews, to put it mildly. In fact, there were many who did not like the Jews very much. The Jews were popularly called *atheists*, meaning that they refused any participation in official religion. They were called *haters of men*, meaning anti-social people, because their rules of ritual purity did not allow much contact with Gentiles. They could not eat together with non-Jews, for example.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the Romans were realists enough to understand that there was no way they could change or force the Jews to behave differently in these matters. And the Romans had respect for old traditions. They had to recognize, although they may not have liked it, that the Jews were following the tradition of their ancestors when they refused to have anything to do with any god beside the God of Israel. Accordingly, the Roman authorities

made an exception from the general rule: *The Jews were allowed to abstain from worship of the Roman gods and the emperor.* Part of the reason for this tolerance by the Romans was probably their conviction that Judaism was and would remain the national religion of the Jewish people. And in this they were not mistaken. The problem came with Christianity, when it became clear that Christianity was not destined to remain a Jewish religious group, but recruited more followers outside than inside Judaism.

I have said that the mystery religions were old national eastern religions turned universal and missionary. In this perspective, one can easily imagine the role into which Christianity would be cast. Christianity could be interpreted as Judaism turned into a universal mystery religion, the 'mystery version' of Judaism. Probably this was how some saw it in antiquity. Certainly it has been seen this way by some modern scholars.¹⁶ And although I believe this perspective is, on the whole, misleading, it certainly makes us see the identity problem of early Christians clearly.

Mystery religions were very tolerant, never exclusive. If Christianity, as another 'new' religion, was put in this category, Christian refusal to take part in any other religious worship must have been very offensive. In this respect Christians did not behave like the mystery people. They behaved like Jews. When, at the same time, they did not present the national aspect of Judaism, but were consciously universalistic and missionary, they represented a unique challenge to their surroundings. The mystery religions did present their adherents with an addition, a new dimension to their religious life. Confronted with Christianity, you had to choose, you had to say no to everything else to be able to say yes to a new master and a new life. Let us look a little closer at this Christian 'no' to other faiths.

VI

With regard to the old national religions, Christianity quite simply continued the rejection pronounced by the OT and Judaism. To worship Pagan gods by honouring their statues in the temples was regarded as

idolatry plain and simple, the very thing most of the OT was directed against. The Jews and the Christians took notice of the basically animistic character of the old religions by claiming that the official gods were not really gods at all, but deceptive demons, evil spirits. Official religion was nothing else than worship of (evil) spirits!¹⁷

This was no learned theory of advanced theologians only. It was impressed on all Christians minds, e.g. at their baptism. When a Gentile was baptised, he said two things. He confessed his faith in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the form of affirmative answers to the three questions of faith—which developed into the three articles of the creed.¹⁸ But before the baptismal candidate confessed his faith in this positive way, he said the following formula: I renounce thee, Satan, and all service of you and all your works.¹⁹ We still have basically the same sentence in our Norwegian baptismal liturgy, and no-one any longer knows exactly what it means. To the early Christians it had a very clear and drastic meaning: I hereby declare that I shall no longer visit the temples, no longer bring the sacrifices or burn incense to any image, no longer consult the astrologers or fortune-tellers, no longer have anything to do with the religious traditions of my ancestors. It is all service to Satan, slavery under Satan. Now I am free from it, I quit all that, I break with it.

One can easily imagine how offensive this was with regard to family and old friends who still were not Christians. And it brought the non-Jewish Christian into a legal no-man's land where he was unprotected by any law. He behaved Jewish, but he was not a Jew. He was not protected by the legal status of Judaism. He was the follower of a new religion, not a century-old tradition. He had no legal protection.

I believe this explains quite exactly the legal standing of the great majority of early Christians—those of non-Jewish origin. It explains why the early Church was a persecuted Church and a martyr Church. If Christianity had only had consequences within the realm of private religion, there would have been few problems with the authorities. There would have been severe

conflicts within the family and among friends, but not with the authorities. But Christianity had consequences outside the realm of private religion. Christians—just like the Jews—refused to take part in official religion. Therefore the Church had a constant conflict going with the authorities.

It is interesting to see how this conflict between Church and state developed. For the first 200 years the state authorities tried, with mixed success, to ignore the Christians as far as possible. Roman policy was delineated by the emperor Trajan in a response to an official in Bithynia, Asia Minor, in 112 AD.

You have taken the right line, my dear Pliny, in examining the cases of those denounced to you as Christians, for no hard and fast rule can be laid down, of universal application. They are not to be sought out; if they are informed against, and the charge is proved, they are to be punished, with this reservation—that if any one denies that he is a Christian, and actually proves it, that is by worshipping our gods, he shall be pardoned as a result of his recantation, however suspect he may have been with respect to the past. Pamphlets published anonymously should carry no weight in any charge whatsoever. They constitute a very bad precedent, and are also out of keeping with this age.²⁰

The meaning of the emperor is quite clear: Make as few martyrs as possible. Do not make active investigation as to who are Christians. Only when persons are denounced as Christians by their neighbours should action be taken—but then due punishment must be given. Refusal to worship our gods is the very mark of the Christian, and is a capital offence.

This official policy was normally the one actually carried out. The early reports on martyrdoms confirm that the initiative to legal persecution did not come from the authorities, but from ordinary people: neighbours, relatives, slaves betraying their masters and vice versa.

Part of the reason why the Romans would avoid great numbers of martyrs, was that they regarded Christian martyrs as good publicity for the Church and bad publicity for the authorities. They knew the truth of Tertullian's famous words: The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church. But the problem was: With or without this publicity, the Church continued to grow. In the third century, Christians had become so numerous that one of the emperors, Decius, decided it was intolerable that so many people openly opposed the obligatory duties of all loyal citizens. In 251 AD Decius introduced

the second phase in the State's dealings with the Church: That year he launched the first systematic and full-scale attempt to destroy the Church through violent persecution. He succeeded in producing a great number of martyrs, but he did not succeed in destroying the Church. It lasted about 50 years until the emperor Diocletian tried once more to wipe out the Church once and for all. It was the most terrible persecution ever, and in the Eastern part of the empire it lasted 10 terrible years. But it did not succeed. Historically speaking, it was probably too late. The Christians were too many and were so integrated into the society on all levels that it was practically impossible to destroy them without destroying the fabric of society.²¹

And then, within less than ten years, came the great shift which introduced the third phase, which in parts of Europe has lasted into our century: The Constantinian era. Emperor Constantine obviously understood that the Church could not be beaten, it had successfully opposed the physical means of power which Diocletian had amassed against it. There is a popular American saying, 'if you can't beat 'em, join 'em.' Whether that was Constantine's reason or not; it clearly was his policy. The only way to make the power of Rome and the spiritual power of the Church coexist peacefully and without unbearable conflict, was to make Christianity the religion of the state.²²

I think that is a very interesting story. What was the force that drove this story forward; what was the secret behind the Church's victory over one of the most powerful empires the world has ever seen? I think one may put it quite simply: It was the simple fact that the Christians refused to take part in official religion. In the long run, that left the state with only two alternatives: beat 'em or join 'em. Through this stubborn refusal to participate in official religion, the Christians conquered the empire. In the words of Peter Brown: 'They remained a small group: but they succeeded in becoming a big problem.'²³ It did cost them a terrible price: The blood of the martyrs. But through it, they won.

VII

With regard to the mystery religions, the situation was similar, and yet different. There was no obligation to take part in

these, the Christians were not the only ones who refused to have anything to do with them. The greatest problem was the similarity between the mystery religions and Christianity itself. Therefore, Christian polemic at this point is not simply a take-over from Judaism, because the Jews did not have this problem. The early Apologists, like Justin, see the problem and usually follow the strategy of admitting a superficial similarity, especially with regard to the rites of the Christian sacraments, but attributing these to demonic imitation. The demons knew in advance about Christ and the Christian sacraments, because they knew the Old Testament prophecies. Therefore they produced poor parodies of these things among the Gentiles, so that when the real thing came, people would say: just another myth, just another mystery.²⁴

This sharp polemical attitude was itself part of the big difference between Christianity and the mysteries. The world of mystery religions would easily have accommodated Christianity and made it a member of the group, had not Christians insisted that their faith excluded all other forms of worship.

The biggest problem in this field was Gnosticism, because important groups within this movement insisted on being the true Christians. While the mystery religions may have accused Christians of being narrow-minded because they would allow no alternatives, Gnosticism presented itself not as an alternative but as Christianity itself. There are many aspects of this conflict with Gnosticism which there is no space to go into here; I will only draw attention to one feature. For the most part, Gnosticism presented itself as the open-minded version of Christianity. Which means: Gnostic Christianity *was* compatible with the necessary participation in official religion, and also with membership in one or more of the Pagan mysteries. By and large, Gnostics avoided being persecuted, and they seem to have mocked Christian martyrdom as completely unnecessary.²⁵

So—to sum up: In a world of religious pluralism, a world in which people intensely disliked to choose *one* alternative and exclude all others, Christianity presented people

with exactly this option. It made Christianity unpopular, like Judaism, and for much the same reason. But more than that: It made Christians visible, it made them 'public', because the Christian rejection of Pagan worship was not a private affair. It could make them martyrs.

VIII

In the light of this—what about the early Christian sayings that seem to speak for tolerance and for the idea that Christ was active also outside Biblical revelation, as the *Logos Spermatikos*? What do these sayings tell about Christian identity? In our days, some theologians advocating a more inclusive approach have pointed to the *Logos Spermatikos* idea as an early Christian version of the idea that Christ is the hidden reality also in non-Christian religion.²⁶

Let me state my thesis quite bluntly: The author of the *Logos Spermatikos* idea, Saint Justin, did *not* think that Christ was the hidden reality behind Pagan religions.²⁷ Nor did Clement of Alexandria, nor any other father of the early Church. Justin shared the common conviction among Christians that this hidden reality was not Christ, but the demons. He also knew that this rejection of official religion was regarded as an outrage, and that it produced martyrdoms. Like some Jewish apologists before him, he liked to make his Gentile audience aware of the fact that Christians were not the only ones who rejected official worship. There were some among their own greatest men who had done the same. One of them even became a martyr for it, like the Christians: Socrates. In one of the big heroes of Greek culture, the greatest of philosophers, Socrates himself, Justin finds an ally, a spokesman, and a spokesman for precisely that element in Christian faith which seemed most anti-cultural: the rejection of official religion.

Those who were born before Christ . . . were dragged into law courts as irreligious and meddling persons, when they tried in human narrowness to think out and prove things by reason. Socrates, the most ardent of all in this regard, was accused of the very crimes that are imputed to us. They claimed that he introduced new deities and rejected the state-sponsored

gods. But what he did was to ostracize Homer and the other poets, and to instruct men to expel the evil demons and those who perpetrated the deeds narrated by the poets;²⁸ and to exhort men by meditation to learn more about God who was unknown to them, saying: 'It is not an easy matter to find the Father and Creator of all things, nor, when He is found, is it safe to announce him to all men.'²⁹ Yet, our Christ did all this through His own power. There was no one who believed so much in Socrates as to die for his teaching, but not only philosophers and scholars believed in Christ, of whom even Socrates had a vague knowledge, ... but also workmen and men wholly uneducated, who all scorned glory, and fear, and death (Justin, 2. *Apology*, 10 (transl. Falls)).

Accordingly, it is *not* in non-Christian religion that Justin sees the *Logos Spermatikos* at work, but in non-Christian rejection of non-Christian religion.³⁰ In Justin's case, it is precisely the most offensive, the most provocative aspect of Christian behaviour within a pluralistic society, namely the stubborn adherence to Christ alone, which is brought home and explained in a culturally meaningful way through his idea of the *Logos Spermatikos*.

To sum up: In Justin religion and philosophy are antagonistic entities. Philosophy is valued in so far as it destroys official religion, and it is this destruction of non-Biblical religion (idolatry) by *Pagans* which is regarded as manifestations of Christ the Sower, the *Logos Spermatikos*, by Justin.³¹

Whence did Justin get his idea that Pagans who repudiated idolatry should be reckoned as Christians? There is a Rabbinic saying, transmitted in different contexts, which says: Anyone who repudiates idolatry, is to be called 'a Jew'.³² Pagans who reject idolatry, are, so to speak, Jews *honoris causa*. The Rabbis could sometimes group Abraham, Ananias, Azarias, and Mishael (the three young men of Dan 3) together as model martyrs or model proselytes, precisely because they all repudiated idolatry. In exactly the same way Justin can group such people together as 'Christians':

Lest some should unreasonably assert ... that we affirm that Christ was born one hundred and fifty years ago ... and should accuse us as if all men born before Christ were not accountable for their actions, we shall

anticipate and answer such a difficulty. We have been taught that Christ was First-begotten of God, and we have indicated above that He is the Logos of whom all mankind partakes. Those who lived by reason (or: according to Logos) are 'Christians', even though they have been considered atheists: such as, among the Greeks, Socrates, Heraclitus, and others like them; and among the foreigners, Abraham, Ananias, Azarias, Mishael, Elijah, and many others ... (1. *Apol.* 46:1-3, transl. Falls).

I would suggest that Justin has christianized a Jewish idea: The Gentile person who all on his own repudiates Pagan religion is heading in the right direction, he is an honorary 'Jew'—or, *mutatis mutandis*, a 'Christian'. The model case is Socrates: He repudiated Athenian religion (idolatry, demon worship) and exhorted the Athenians to seek the Unknown God.

IX

It is time to conclude. We have seen that the identity, or the self-definition, of early Christians was a complex phenomenon with many aspects. Instead of trying to sum up everything of relevance, I would like to end by highlighting one conclusion.

Christianity was born in a religiously pluralistic world, among pluralistically minded people. In such a world, many things are tolerated. But one thing is difficult to tolerate: The message which claims to be absolute truth for all men. The early Church was under a constant pressure to dilute or soften its claim to possess an absolute truth for all men. The best proof of this pressure are the many martyrdoms. Christians were martyred for not being willing to respect the Roman gods and the divine status of the emperor. It was incompatible with their Christian faith. Their uncompromising attitude with regard to Pagan religion in general probably made people in general dislike them to the extent of instigating mob persecutions. On the other hand, it was this Christian unwillingness to compromise which made them such an insoluble problem to the authorities.

Early Christian ideas of Christ as the Logos Spermatikos in no way softens this

uncompromising stand. On the contrary, they bolster it by pointing out that a few among the Pagans anticipated this uncompromising rejection of Pagan religion.

I have consciously emphasized the rough edge of this early Christian identity. It should not surprise us. Let me repeat: We are dealing with a Church suffering martyrdoms. And yet—allow me to bring some warmth to the picture by ending with a quote which not only keeps the rough edge, but also speaks of the love behind it. It is the nicest expression of Christian identity I can think of:

The distinction between Christians and other men is neither in country nor language nor customs. For they do not dwell in cities in some place of their own, nor do they use any strange variety of dialect, nor practise an extraordinary kind of life. . . . Yet while living in Greek and barbarian cities, according as each obtained his lot, and following the local customs, both in clothing and food and in the rest of life, they show forth the wonderful and confessedly strange character of the constitution of their own citizenship:

They dwell in their own fatherlands—but as sojourners;

they share all things as citizens—and suffer all things as strangers;

every foreign country is their fatherland—and every fatherland is a foreign country;

they offer free hospitality—but guard their purity;

they pass their time upon the earth—but their citizenship is in heaven;

they obey the appointed laws—and they surpass them in their own lives;

they love all men—and are persecuted by all men; . . .

they are put to death—and they gain life;

they are poor—and make many rich;

they lack all things—and have all things in abundance;

they are dishonoured—and are glorified in their dishonour;

they are spoken evil of—and are justified;

they are abused—and give blessing;

they are insulted—and render honour.

When they do good—they are buffeted as evildoers;

when they are buffeted—they rejoice as men who receive life.

They are warred upon by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks—but those who hate them cannot state the cause of their enmity (*Epistle to Diognetus*, IV).

1 In an opening address at a seminar in Chicago, 2 and 3 May 1986, arranged by the Commission on Studies in the LWF. Quoted here according to a xeroxed press release by the LWF.

2 The Greek construction (*chrematissai . . . tous mathetas christianous*) is formally an accusative with an (active) aorist infinitive, but the meaning is clearly passive, as observed in all translations.

3 Gentiles, not Jews. The Jews believed in the Anointed One themselves, and called the Christians by the name of Nazarenes, to identify them with Jesus. The form of the adjective *christianos* is a Latinism (*christianus*). Some scholars take this as an indication that the name was coined by the Roman authorities in Antioch, but this is by no means a compelling inference. Similar names were usual, as e.g. *Herodianoi* et al.

4 For general information on the Antioch of antiquity, cp. G. Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria*, Princeton 1961; J. H. W. G. Liebeschütz, *Antioch. City and Imperial Administration in the later Roman Empire*, Oxford 1972. Concerning Christianity in Antioch, consult A. J. Festugière, *Antioche païenne et chrétienne* (Bibliothèque des écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, 194), Paris 1959; D. S. Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch*, Cambridge (Cambr. Univ. Press) 1982; and W. A. Meeks, R. L. Wilken, *Jews and Christians at Antioch in the first four centuries of the Common Era* (Society of Biblical Literature Sources for Biblical Study Nr. 13), Missoula 1978, 13–52.

5 On Jews in Antioch, cp. W. A. Meeks, R. L. Wilken, *op.cit.*, 2–13; and the older work by C. H. Kraeling, 'The Jewish Community at Antioch', *JBL* 51 (1932), 130–60.

6 Concerning Judaism in the Diaspora of the Graeco-Roman world, cp. V. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, paperback ed. New York 1977 (orig. publ. 1959), part II, 269–277; and the older work of Jean Juster, *Les Juifs dans l'empire romain*, Paris 1914.

7 On the concept of the third people—the oldest occurrence is in *Kerygma Petrou*, fragm. 2a (*apud Clem. Alex. Strom.* VI:5:41) —cp. esp. A. von Harnack, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten I* (4.Aufl.), Leipzig 1924, 264–67; 281–89, with copious references to the primary sources.

8 That is, in 'greater Antioch', the entire territory of the city. According to Meeks/Wilken, *op. cit.*, 8 (referring to Liebeschütz), Antioch proper may have had 150,000 inhabitants in the fourth century, whereas the whole territory of Antioch probably had 400,000. Maybe the population was already declining in the fourth century AD.

9 On religion in the ancient cities, cp. in particular A. D. Nock, *Conversion. The Old and New in*

- Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*, Oxford (paperb. ed.) 1961; R. L. Fox, *Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean world from the second century AD to the conversion of Constantine* (Penguin Books), Harmondsworth 1988, 27)261.
- 10 On traditional Paganism in Antioch, cp. Wallace-Hadrill, *op. cit.*, 14ff.
 - 11 Cp. R. M. Ogilvie, *The Romans and their Gods*, (paperb. ed.) London 1986 (orig. publ. 1969).
 - 12 To my mind, the best description of these 'new religions', the mystery cults, is still A. D. Nock's in *Conversion*, chs. III–IX (1961 paperb. ed., pp. 33–155). For a convenient collection of primary sources in translation, see M. W. Meyer (ed.), *The Ancient Mysteries: A Source Book*, San Francisco 1987.
 - 13 A. D. Nock, *op. cit.*, 37. The analogies in modern times are striking: First, the westernization of Hinduism into Neo-Hinduism around the turn of the last century; then, in our days the Americanization of eastern ideas in the cultural melting-pot of California.
 - 14 Victor Tcherikover in the book quoted in note 6.
 - 15 On Gentile and Roman attitudes towards and perceptions of Jews, cp. *i.a.* I. Heinemann, 'The attitude of the Ancient World toward Judaism', *Review of Religion* 4 (1940), 385–400; J. G. Gager, *The origins of Anti-Semitism. Attitudes toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity*, New York/Oxford 1985, esp. pp. 35–112. Gager makes a good case for the view that anti-Jewish feelings were not universal, and were balanced by much fascination and sympathy for Jews, often by Pagans in high places. This was no doubt the case, but should not be generalized unduly. There is a full presentation of the sources in M. Stern, *Greek and Latin authors on Jews and Judaism I–II*, Jerusalem 1974/80 (a third volume projected).
 - 16 E.g. A. Loisy and H. Lietzmann, and *instar omnium* Odo Casel. For a critical and informed discussion of this thesis, cp. the chapter 'Pagan and Christian Mysteries' in J. A. Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy*, London 1960 (and later reprints), 152–163.
 - 17 The early Christian sayings to this effect are legion, beginning with Justin. The same idea is certainly presupposed already by Paul in 1 Cor 10:20f, and indicated in the LXX and the Jewish Pseudepigrapha. Cp. a short review and discussion of the material in my *The Proof from Prophecy: A Study in Justin Martyr's Proof-Text Tradition* (Suppl. to Novum Testamentum 56), Leiden 1987, 368f.
 - 18 Cp. esp. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (3 ed.), London 1972, 40–49.
 - 19 This formula, with some variation in wording, is first attested in Tertullian ca 200 AD, and then in several liturgical texts from Hippolytus (c. 220 AD) onwards. Texts in English translation in E. C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy* (2. ed.), London 1970, 7ff.
 - 20 I have adopted here the translation in Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (2. ed.), London 1963, 6.
 - 21 On the theme of Church and state, persecution and martyrdom in the early Church, see first and foremost William H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, Oxford 1965 (reprint Grand Rapids 1981).
 - 22 There are a great many books and articles on Constantine and his religious policy—see for orientation A. H. M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, Pelican Books, Harmondsworth 1972; and Heinrich Kraft (ed.), *Konstantin der Grosse* (Wege der Forschung 131), Darmstadt 1976.
 - 23 P. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity from Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad*, London 1971, 65.
 - 24 E.g. 1. *Apol.* 33:3; 53f; 62:1; 64; 66:4; *Dial.* 70:1; 78:6 *et al.*
 - 25 This is well brought out and well documented by E. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, New York (Vintage Books) 1981, ch. IV (pp. 84–122).
 - 26 E.g. George Khodr in a paper read at the WCC central committee meeting at Addis Ababa in 1970: 'Christianity in a Pluralist World—the Economy of the Holy Spirit'; later published in S. Samartha (ed.), *Living Faiths and the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva 1971, 131–142. In this paper, Khodr claims Justin as one of the originators of the idea that 'Christ . . . is asleep in the night of the religions' (p. 142).
 - 27 On *Logos Spermatikos*, cp. *i.a.* R. Holte, 'Logos Spermatikos. Christianity and Ancient Philosophy according to St. Justin's Apologies', *Studia Theologica* 12 (1958), 109–168; N. Pycke, 'Connaissance rationelle et connaissance de grâce chez saint Justin', *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 37, Louvain/Gembloux 1961, 52–85; J. H. Waszink, 'Bemerkungen zu Justins Lehre vom Logos Spermatikos', *MULLUS, Festschrift für Theodor Klauser* (= Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum, Ergänzungsband 1), Münster 1964, 380–390; D. Bourgeois, *La sagesse des anciens dans le mystère du verbe: évangile et philosophie chez saint Justin philosophe et martyr*, Paris 1981.
 - 28 This refers to Socrates' criticism of Homer and the other poets in Plato's dialogue *Republic*, X.
 - 29 Socrates in Plato's dialogue *Timaeus* 28C.
 - 30 It may come as a surprise to some that Justin employs the concept of *Logos Spermatikos* only twice, and both times in the Second Apology. The first occurrence, in 2. *Apol.* 8:2f, is in a passage completely parallel to the one from 2. *Apol.* 10

quoted above. The second, in 2. *Apol.* 13:3, has a very similar context: martyrdom and witness for the truth, fight against demons, being partially accomplished by some of the philosophers.

- 31 The Christology behind this idea would seem to be the concept of Christ (=Logos) as the *mediator of creation*, especially the creation of man. As the creator, God has endowed man with a rational (Logos-like) capacity. The demons and the demonic are anti-rational, anti-Logos. Justin's idea is not very far from Paul's in Rom. 1 and 2, and Paul's Areopagus speech in Acts 17. Cp. in particular B. Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation* (Acta Seminarii Neo-

testamentici Upsaliensis 21), Uppsala 1955, and my own remarks on the *Logos Spermatikos* Christology in Skarsaune, *Incarnation: Myth or Fact?* St. Louis 1991, 67–70.

- 32 Cp. *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael*, tractate Pisha V:40–43 (ed. Lauterbach pp. 26f); *Bab. Talmud*, tractate Megillah 13a; *Sifre Deut.*, paragraph 28. Cp. also the following: 'Idolatry is so heinous that he who rejects it is as though he admits the whole Torah' (*Bab. Talmud*, Kiddushin 40a. For some further comments on this theme, see my *The Proof from Prophecy*, 364–66; and *Incarnation: Myth or Fact?*, 68f.