

**SIMILAR YET UNIQUE:
CHRISTIANS AS DESCRIBED IN THE *LETTER TO DIOGNETUS* 5**

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The Greek Christian apology commonly called the *Epistle to Diognetus* is generally regarded as a masterpiece of early Christian literature. Though it is anonymous¹ and the identity of Diognetus, the recipient, is unknown,² it is commonly dated in the 2nd century A.D.³ This apology was apparently (chapter 1) written in response to several issues Diognetus asked about, including how Christianity may be distinguished from paganism and Judaism, why it came so late into the world, and where its disciples drew their courage and contempt for the world. Perhaps the most interesting pericope is chapter 5, a discussion of the ways in which 2nd century Christians were and were not like their contemporaries. This article will attempt to explain and elaborate upon the similarities and differences the author mentioned by reflecting upon additional primary source material, with the goal of providing a clearer understanding of the fifth chapter of this apology.

The author begins the fifth chapter by mentioning several ways Christians were like contemporaries. It is asserted that they are “not distinguished from the rest of mankind either in locality, or in speech, or in cus-

¹Though ascribed to Justin Martyr in the marginal notes of some mss and found with a collection of his writings, due to stylistic differences, the presence of spurious material in collections of Justin’s writings, and the fact that no ancient writers refer to this work as being written by Justin. Justinian authorship is doubtful.

² Suggestions regarding Diognetus’ identity include his being the tutor of Marcus Aurelius, or a magistrate in Alexandria known from the papyri.

³ This is due both to its ascription to Justin Martyr and its presence in collections of 2nd century writings, as well as the comments about persecution and the manner in which it contrasts Christian belief and practice with pagan and Jewish attitudes. Brief introductions to this work can be found in: E. Ferguson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (New York: Garland, 1990); S. Jackson, ed., *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1909); R. Gwinn, ed., *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* (15th. ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), and in introductions to critical editions including J. B. Lightfoot, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) and A. Coxe, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979). Quotes from the *Epistle to Diognetus* in this essay are from the Lightfoot edition.

toms.” The fact that early Christians were not different from their neighbors in terms of locality is obvious from an examination of the literature of the period. The early Christians were not like the members of the Qumran community (cf. *The Rule of the Community*), for “they (Christians) dwell not somewhere in cities of their own.” Christians inhabited some of the major cities of the empire including Philippi (Acts 16:12; Phil 1:1), Thessalonica (Acts 17:2), Corinth (Acts 18:1; 1 Cor 1:2), Antioch (Acts 13:1), and Rome (Rom 1:7; 16:3ff), as well as some of the smaller centers like Lystra and Derbe (Acts 14:6). Besides living in Greek cities like those mentioned above, Christians of the 2nd century also lived in “barbarian” cities. This is clear because by the first quarter of the 3rd century 20 bishoprics existed in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley.⁴ Besides living in these different areas believers were also known to have come from different national and ethnic backgrounds. Paul (Phil 3:5ff), Apollos (Acts 18:24), and Peter (Acts 12:13), for instance, were all Jewish. Simeon was probably black (Acts 13:1), and Lucius (Acts 13:1) was African. Christians, such as Paul, were known to have been Roman citizens (Acts 22:25), whereas other leaders, like Peter, did not have this honour. Christians then were not different from their contemporaries based on where they lived or even national or ethnic origin or citizenship.

The writer of the *Epistle to Diognetus* also notes that Christians were not distinguishable by virtue of language for the text states, “neither do they (Christians) use some different language.” Christians, rather, spoke the same languages as those around them. The fact that Christians spoke Greek, the *lingua franca*, is obvious from the fact that the New Testament and many other documents of the early Christian era were written in Greek. The fact that some Christians spoke Latin, is clear since Christians were of the *familia Caesaris* (Phil 4:22) and Erastus, a Christian mentioned in Romans 16, was a Roman civil servant. Some of the early Christians, such as the 12 disciples and others from Galilee, no doubt, could speak Aramaic (note especially Aramaisms in Matthew’s Gospel), and Acts 2 reports that many other languages were spoken by Christians. Like locality then, language did not distinguish Christians from their neighbors.

At first glance one might be shocked by the assertion in the first line of chapter 5 that the customs of Christians did not differ from those around them. One familiar with common practices of the era might be led to ask: Did then Christians commonly engage in acts like pederasty (as Plato apparently did; see *Symposium* 211 C-E) and the sacred prostitution of Aphrodite (Herodotus, *History* 1.199)? If one reads further on in chapter 5, however, one discovers that what the author meant by customs was “dress and food and the other arrangements of life.” In this respect the assertion meshes with

⁴ K.S. Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 78

the data of other primary sources. Although Christians struggled over customs like eating meat offered to idols (1 Cor 11:5), and eating food that some considered unclean (Acts 10:10ff), as a rule Christians were much like their contemporaries. For instance, many married (Acts 18:2) and had children (Eph 6:1ff). Christians slept (Acts 12:6), ate (Phil 4:12), and had friends (Philemon 1:1). They also travelled (1 Cor 16:7), had slaves (Philemon 16), worked as tradesmen (Acts 18:3) and civil servants (Rom 16:23), and when they spread their message, they evangelized as pagan itinerant preachers did (Acts 17:22ff; cf. Dio Chrysostom, *The Eighth Discourse, On Virtue*).

The discussion of differences between Christians and their neighbors follows the author's discussion of the above mentioned similarities. The way chapter 5 of this apology presents Christians as being different from their contemporaries can be grouped under the following topical headings: persecution, inverted responses to persecution, sexual practices, other-worldiness. The first two differences will be considered together. An obvious way Christians were different from their neighbors is that they were persecuted. Although other groups like the mystery cult of Dionysus (186 B.C.)⁵ and the *astrologi* and *philosophi* (71 A.D.)⁶ were persecuted with official sanction from time to time, the Christians were the most consistently persecuted group in the 2nd century. This was probably, at least in part, due to the following reasons: Romans of higher social station believed that Christian beliefs attacked the very fabric of Roman society like a debilitating disease (Tacitus, *Sat.* 3.2), as a new religion Christianity could not claim the sanction of antiquity (Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 6:1; 8:1-4; 9:1), as an offshoot of Judaism it shared the opprobrium of its parent religion (Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 66), some of its practices and false rumors of practices reminded some of the Dionysus scare (186 B.C.), and its exclusive character did not mesh well with Roman "tolerance" (Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 6:1; 8:1-4; 9:1)⁷. The author's numerous statements about Christians being persecuted such as "they endure hardship", "they are persecuted by all", "they are condemned", and the assertion that "war is waged against them (Christians) by the Jews...(and) the Greeks", point to the vivid reality of persecution in the early years of the Christian movement. The nature of this persecution varied but often included torture (*Mart. Poly.* 6), the seizure of property (Cassius Dio, *Hist. Rom.* 67:14), and a demand to renounce one's faith (*Acta S. Justinii et sociorum* 1, 2, 45). Persecution frequently led to death by a variety of means including stoning (Acts 7:54ff), burning (*Martyr. Poly.* 15), and attacks by

⁵ H. Koester, *History, Culture and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 1987), 182.

⁶ E.J. Bickerman, *Chronology of the Ancient World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 237.

⁷ S. Benko, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 21-24.

wild beasts (Tacitus, *Annals* 15:44). Some were unable to hold up under the stress like the Phrygian Quintus mentioned in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (chapter 4), however many endured suffering and death for their faith (*Mart. Poly.* 15; Acts 8:2). Although one might think that the Christians who were persecuted hated their attackers, the author of this "epistle" maintains that "though reviled they bless" and "being punished they rejoice". This response, which differed radically from what was taught in ancient Greek religions and literature (cf. Turnus' act of vengeance against Aeneas in the *Illiad* and Orestes' murder of his mother in Sophocles' *Electra*) is testified to again and again in documents of the early Christian era (Ignatius, *Rom* 5; Acts 7:60; *Mart. Poly.* 7) and demonstrates a radical difference between the Christians' attitudes and the attitudes of their neighbors.

Following the author's assertion that Christians are unlike their neighbors both because they are persecuted and because of their reaction to being persecuted, it is also pointed out that Christian sexual practices differ as well, for it is said "they do not cast away their offspring", "they have meals in common but not their wives", and "they find themselves in the flesh but not after the flesh". Among pagans in the 2nd century sexual expression was basically unbridled. Homosexuality (Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon* 2.35), pederasty (Plato, *Symposium* 211 C-E), premarital sex,⁸ and cross dressing,⁹ sex acts with statuary, and prostitution (much of it religious) with its accompanying abortion and exposure of unwanted children¹⁰ were just some of the common practices of the day which received general public sanction. Although there are accounts of recent converts to Christianity continuing their pre-conversion sexual practices (1 Cor 5), by and large the early Christian attitude toward sexuality differed greatly from the surrounding society. Christians taught that sex was only to be enjoyed by a man and a woman (Rom 1:26-27; 1 Cor 6:9) who had made an exclusive (1 Cor 6:9) life-long commitment (1 Cor 7:11) to each other in a loving (Eph 5:22, 25; 1 Cor 7:3), mutually submissive relationship (Eph 5:21; 1 Cor 7:4). The offspring of their sexual union was to be loved (Eph 6:4), treasured as a gift from God (Tit 2:4; Mk 10:14), and brought up to follow the faith of the parents (Eph 6:4).

One final way that Christians were different from those around them is that they were other-worldly. The New Testament does illustrate that Christians took an active role in the life of the society. They, for instance, paid taxes (Rom 13:7), prayed for, and were submissive to, governing officials (Rom 13:1), served in the civil service (Rom 16:23), and took care of widows and orphans (1 Tim 5:9; Jas 1:27). For the Christians, though, their

⁸ R. L. Foxe, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 342.

⁹ R. and C. Kroeger, "Sexual Identity in Corinth", *The Reformed Journal*, (December 1978), 11-15.

¹⁰ Foxe, *Pagans and Christians*, 343.

real citizenship was “in heaven”, as the author of this apology states, “(they) dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners”, and “every fatherland is foreign (to them)”. This concentration on the future manifested itself in several concrete ways. In contrast to the exploitative treatment of slaves by pagan masters (Apuleius, *Met.* 9, 12; Demosthenes, *Lycurg.* 29), belief in future judgement (2 Cor 5:10; Heb 9:27) likely influenced Christian teaching that masters were to treat their slaves fairly and kindly (Philemon 16, 17). Likewise, stress on the future hope of heaven no doubt increased the desire of Christians to evangelize (Rom 15:19; Acts 8:25) and thus help others gain entrance to the Kingdom.¹¹ Similarly, the focus on the future probably also contributed to the Christians’ downplaying the importance of material goods (Acts 2:45; 4:32).

In the world, then, but not of the world is the *Epistle to Diognetus*’ exposition of the Christian community’s relationship to Graeco-Roman culture. It is a faithful rendition of an important New Testament motif.

¹¹ Although other movements such as the cult of Asclepius engaged in evangelism, by far the most missionary minded movement of the 2nd century was Christianity. See Koester, *History, Culture and Religion*, 176.