

INTRODUCTION

According to Eusebius of Caesarea, the reign of the emperor Commodus (180–92 CE) marked a change in fortunes for Christians, whose ranks grew in this period to include some of the wealthiest and most powerful people in the Roman Empire: “The word of salvation was leading every soul from every race of humanity to the pious worship of the God of the universe, so that now many of the people in Rome conspicuous for wealth and breeding turned to their salvation with all their households and families.”¹ In Eusebius’s narrative, one sign of the newfound interest in Christianity among the empire’s elite classes came from the trial of a Christian named Apollonius during Commodus’s reign. This Apollonius, Eusebius says, was “celebrated for his culture and philosophy” (παιδεία καὶ φιλοσοφία βεβηγημένον) and offered a “most learned” (λογιωτάτην) defense of Christianity in front of the praetorian prefect and senate in Rome.² Despite his learning, Apollonius was put to death.³ But Apollonius’s example, and the defense he provided of Christianity, helped demonstrate the growing prominence and learning of Christians toward the end of the second century. Wealth, breeding, and education went together, and people who possessed all three things were accustomed to speak in front of imperial authorities.

This book tells the story of how Christian intellectuals became more prominent and learned, and how they eventually came to be associated with imperial authorities in settings that did not end with their deaths by execution, as was the case for Apollonius. The story extends from the 150s to the 230s, by which point a small group of Christian intellectuals had succeeded in gaining close connections to the imperial household and in being taken seriously as intellectuals. This did not mean the end of persecution for Christians, which would come only with greater changes in the fourth century. But the breakthrough for Christianity in the third century was still an important transition. It meant that, for the first time, Christian intellectuals had joined the mainstream of the Roman Empire’s elite intellectual culture.

Following the norms of scholarship in study of the early church, this breakthrough seems like it should have much to do with changing attitudes

toward Christianity. The guiding assumption at work here is that Christianity was the key factor for how Christian intellectuals presented themselves and how they were perceived. Justification for this belief comes, in large part, from the narratives found in accounts of Christian martyrdom and persecution, including the likely spurious *Acta* of Apollonius's trial before the praetorian prefect, the senate, and an audience of intellectuals.⁴ In this text, Apollonius is asked if he is a Christian, and he responds without hesitation, "Yes, I am a Christian" (Ναί, Χριστιανός εἰμι).⁵ The trial and the text continue, but this is the decisive point and the moment at which Apollonius's fate was determined, in spite of the learned defense he offered of Christianity. The phrase "I am a Christian" appears in many other early texts relating to persecution, including some that are more likely to be authentic than the *Acta* of Apollonius.⁶ Documents like these condition readers to believe that Christianity was the most important consideration when a Christian intellectual met with an imperial authority and interacted with non-Christians. Readers come away with the assumption that the only way for the outcome of such meetings to change was increased sympathy to Christianity on the part of imperial authorities.

My aim is to challenge this assumption. I do this by suggesting that Christianity was not always the defining factor in how Christian intellectuals were regarded by imperial authorities and other elite figures in the Roman Empire.⁷ Christian intellectuals were also regarded as intellectuals and judged for the "culture and philosophy" that they displayed. In some contexts, they placed more emphasis on culture and philosophy than on Christianity in terms of how they presented themselves. In short, Christian intellectuals often behaved in ways that avoided, deemphasized, or complicated the simple claim of "I am a Christian." Rather than marking themselves off from others, they depicted themselves as full participants in the intellectual culture of the Roman Empire and were judged on this basis.

My argument to demonstrate this claim is based on an expansive view of Roman intellectual culture that resists the traditional tendency to keep different types of intellectuals segregated from each other. This tendency has increasingly been challenged in scholarship, which now is more eager to group together philosophers, physicians, and sophists, among others.⁸ A key emphasis in this more expansive view is on "ways of knowing," an approach that identifies patterns throughout the Roman Empire in how self-proclaimed experts tried to demonstrate their expertise, regardless of their specialty.⁹ This, in turn, provides the basis for my definition of intellectuals, by which I simply mean people who presented themselves as authority figures because of what they knew or claimed to know, especially if this knowledge was based on the possession of high-level literacy.¹⁰ The

definition I offer sets aside the requirement of past studies that intellectuals were defined by being “learned . . . according to ancient standards.”¹¹ This definition speaks to the idea that intellectuals had to convince people that they had expertise, which was a fundamental concern for intellectuals. But the definition takes for granted the concept of ancient standards, as if there were unanimous agreement on this point within the Roman Empire.¹² I dwell on this point because some of the figures I term intellectuals may not have measured up to more restrictive ancient standards of learning and education, especially as they were applied by the wealthiest and best-educated figures in the Roman Empire. Some of the intellectuals who may have failed to measure up include Christians, but also figures with expertise in fields like astrology and dream interpretation who had ambivalent reputations, despite the obvious learning and technical skills of some practitioners.¹³ This situation, in short, points to the variability in standards of learning and education in the Roman Empire. Not all intellectuals may have been successful in demonstrating to everyone that they possessed expert knowledge, but this does not disqualify them as intellectuals by my definition.

Christians fit into this competitive world, in spite of the long-standing tradition of their being exceptionalized or ignored in studies of Roman intellectual culture. Exceptionalism of this sort owes something to the force of the statement “I am a Christian,” which implies that Christians were different from everyone else. But it also has been reinforced by tendencies within early Christian studies and classical scholarship, two overlapping fields that have nonetheless often operated in isolation from each other.¹⁴ This is reflected in the myopic tendencies of much scholarship on the early church, which makes Christianity the exclusive focus, zooming in on it so closely that all other considerations fade into a distant background.¹⁵ Isolation is also apparent in the general absence of Christian authors and literature from the works of classical scholars treating Greek imperial literature.¹⁶ Attitudes are evolving within both fields, but it is still notable that early Christian authors have been basically excluded from the new series of volumes focusing on ways of knowing in the Roman Empire.¹⁷ Scholars of early Christianity, at least, are now doing more to highlight commonalities between Christian and non-Christian intellectuals, particularly in recent studies that group Christians with other religious or ritual experts of the Roman Empire.¹⁸ This approach comes close to my own, but I expand the category of experts further to link Christians with a wider intellectual culture.

Christian intellectuals offer many signs of their place within this culture. Some of these are so basic that they can easily be missed or ignored.

The city of Rome is one. It was all but an obligatory destination or a longer-term home for Christian intellectuals, including many of the most significant authors and intellectuals of the second and third centuries.¹⁹ The same was true for non-Christian intellectuals, who had been regular visitors and inhabitants of Rome since the Hellenistic period.²⁰ Another basic factor linking Christian and non-Christian intellectuals was their preference to work and communicate in Greek, even when they were in Rome.²¹ It was not coincidental that the primary language for Christian literature written in Rome continued to be Greek well into the third century, just as it was for some of the city's non-Christian intellectuals, including Aelian, a native of Italy who nonetheless wrote exclusively in Attic Greek.²² One final significant feature of Roman intellectual culture was the prominent role the emperor and other imperial authorities played in it. When Christians addressed apologetic works to the emperor, they were following the same pattern as their non-Christian counterparts, who were equally interested in attracting imperial attention and favors.²³ In short, there was much linking the Christian and non-Christian intellectuals of Rome, even if disciplinary boundaries and traditions have predisposed scholars to keep them apart.

Among the Christians who came to Rome or addressed themselves to imperial authorities, I am interested in a select group of intellectuals whose careers mark out key developments in Christian engagement with Roman intellectual culture. These are Justin Martyr, Tatian, Julius Africanus, and Origen. In the 150s and 160s, Justin's works provide the earliest extant and detailed evidence of a Christian intellectual making himself known to his non-Christian counterparts and the imperial household.²⁴ His pupil Tatian, meanwhile, reveals the increasing complexity of Christian intellectual culture in the 170s and after, and the diverse ways in which Christian intellectuals responded to the norms of their non-Christian counterparts. Then, in the 220s and 230s, Julius Africanus and Origen were among the first Christian intellectuals to gain close connections to the imperial household and to enjoy a wider reputation in non-Christian intellectual culture. Other Christians will be part of the story, and this book could well have been expanded to include coverage of additional Christian intellectuals with connections to the city of Rome or who addressed themselves to the imperial household.²⁵ But the four figures of Justin, Tatian, Africanus, and Origen are key for offering a contextualized historical narrative. They can all be situated in particular places at particular dates, and substantial portions of their works survive. They may have been anticipated in some of what they did by earlier Christians, but the evidence for this suggestion can be derived only by inference from fragments and scattered hints in the works of other authors.²⁶ This sort of exercise would introduce much

uncertainty to the discussions and arguments of this book, which is not designed to be an exhaustive treatment or catalogue of Christian intellectuals in Rome.²⁷ Instead, I work with what survives, and what can show with more certainty important steps in the development of Christian intellectual culture within the context of the Roman Empire.

The point of this approach is to emphasize similarities between Christian and non-Christian intellectuals and their common engagement with the same intellectual culture. This, it must be emphasized, is different from pointing out that both Christians and non-Christians had similar interests in philosophical thought.²⁸ It is likewise different from noting parallels between Christian and non-Christians genres of literature, such as the clear similarities between works of heresiology and doxography, both of which reported the doctrines of a succession of philosophers or teachers.²⁹ My aim, instead, is to show the interest of Christian intellectuals in the same issues and topics that were engaging their non-Christian counterparts. Both groups were participating in the same debates that characterized intellectual culture in the period, including those concerning the proper relationship of an intellectual with imperial authorities and the significance of Greek culture in the broader history of the world. The engagement of Christian intellectuals with these issues was part of their larger attempt to be taken seriously and to seek out favors and privileges from imperial authorities. Christian intellectuals were even engaging in a characteristic tendency of the period—namely, claiming that the learning they possessed was superior to that of their rivals who had different specialties.³⁰ All of this highlights the wide-ranging engagement of Christian intellectuals with the culture of their time, and the lack of clear boundaries between intellectuals of different specialties.

Christian engagement with intellectual culture extends beyond the Second Sophistic, a concept that has sometimes been emphasized in studies of Christian intellectuals of the second and third centuries.³¹ The elusiveness of the Second Sophistic, however, limits its helpfulness as a means to approach and contextualize Christian intellectuals. In a strict sense, the Second Sophistic refers only to a small group of famous sophists identified by Philostratus in his *Lives of the Sophists* who were active from roughly the time of Nero (r. 54–68 CE) to the early third century.³² But the concept of the Second Sophistic is often applied much more loosely to nearly any type of Greek literary production in the Roman Empire, and even to some Latin authors of the second and third centuries who seem especially sophistic.³³ The term does retain some value as a useful shorthand to describe characteristic aspects of elite Greek intellectual culture of the Roman Empire, including an emphasis on classicism and extemporaneous

speech.³⁴ But the Second Sophistic offers little utility as an analytical or conceptual category when approaching Christian intellectuals. A broader focus on Christians alongside intellectuals of many different specialties is more productive than grappling with the murky concept of the Second Sophistic.³⁵

What results from this approach is a new set of conversation partners for Christian intellectuals and a new appreciation of the challenges they faced fitting in with the competitive intellectual culture of the Roman Empire. In traditional scholarship on early Christian intellectuals, they tend to be associated almost exclusively with their coreligionists, particularly in studies that trace the development of a specific theme or topic of significance in a range of Christian authors over time.³⁶ This type of scholarship is insular, fostering the attitude that Christians were exceptional and kept to themselves. Even when Christian intellectuals are studied with reference to their non-Christian counterparts, much of the focus tends to be on the small collection of passages where a Greek or Roman author makes an explicit reference to Christianity.³⁷ These passages are of interest to me, but my method allows for an expanded pool of relevant evidence, dealing with authors and texts that rarely appear in scholarship on early Christianity. My method focuses on how emperors and other members of the empire's elite intellectual culture regarded other intellectuals who shared key features in common with Christians. I thereby show that Christians were regarded not simply as Christians but also as intellectuals. In the process, I reveal why they may have had their credentials and expertise challenged for reasons that had little or nothing to do with Christianity.

The book's argument proceeds in four chapters, first setting out the challenges facing Christian intellectuals in the second century and then showing how their successors in the third century were able to gain some degree of acceptance and legitimacy. Chapter 1 describes the general intellectual climate of the Roman Empire, and the emergence of an exclusive partnership between Greeks and Romans based on a shared fascination with the classical Greek past. Fascination with Greek culture and history led to the exclusion of other civilizations, and the marginalization of intellectuals linked with regions of the world that were associated with barbarians. The result was a competitive and homogeneous intellectual culture supported by the close relationships of elite Greeks and Romans. This context posed challenges for Jews, Christians, and any other intellectuals who might challenge the prevailing fixation on classical Greece.

Chapter 2 focuses on Justin Martyr, presenting him as a pioneering figure in the development of Christian intellectual culture and examining the attempts of subsequent Christian intellectuals to gain public

reputations and imperial connections. His efforts to become known to the imperial household fit in with a normal trend for intellectuals who came to Rome. The emphasis he placed on persecution by imperial authorities was likewise not unique to Christianity, as conventional wisdom suggests. Rather, his claims that philosophers gained legitimacy by being persecuted by secular authorities formed part of a larger conversation in his time about the proper way for an intellectual to behave when faced with the emperor. Some of his contemporaries shared Justin's views on this point, but others were more impressed by intellectuals who managed to survive their encounters with imperial authorities. Justin mostly failed in his attempt to gain the sort of attention he seems to have wanted, but he also offered a model for later Christian intellectuals about how to present themselves.

Chapter 3 shifts attention to Justin's pupil Tatian, demonstrating the growing complexity of Christian intellectual culture in the later second century. It shows that Tatian built on the example of Justin in presenting himself as an intellectual. Tatian suggested that he was not simply a philosopher but also a man of culture, with encyclopedic knowledge of all the subjects that might interest intellectuals of his time. In the process, he claimed to reject the norms of Greek culture, while nonetheless demonstrating his mastery of it. This pose was key to Tatian's attempt to show that he possessed greater expertise and superior knowledge than his Greek contemporaries. It likewise provided part of the basis for why he was dismissed as a heretic by many later Christians, who were less aggressive in their rejection of Greek culture and little inclined to call themselves barbarians, as Tatian did. Tatian's career consequently shows the increasing extent of Christian engagement with Roman intellectual culture in the second century, and the internal controversies that resulted from it.

Chapter 4 then addresses Julius Africanus and Origen, and the breakthrough of Christian intellectuals in the third century. It challenges the idea that the successes gained by these intellectuals in gaining connections and respect were related to growing sympathy toward Christianity. Instead, the chapter shows that Africanus and Origen were better able than previous generations of Christian intellectuals to fit in with the competitive norms of Roman intellectual culture and to make themselves useful to members of the imperial household. The connections they gained to the emperor and his family were likewise a consequence of major changes for the empire that resulted from the transition of the Antonine to the Severan dynasty around the turn of the century. Civil wars and instability led the Severan emperors to open themselves up to a larger and different group of people than their Antonine predecessors had. The Severans' intellectual

interests also reflected a larger shift toward more focus on the ancient history and culture of non-Greek civilizations, subjects where both Africanus and Origen could demonstrate real expertise. Africanus and Origen shared many of the same interests and tendencies as Justin and Tatian, but they were in a better position to take advantage of these, thanks to the changes that the empire experienced under the Severans.

This book challenges traditional narratives about the development of Christianity that pay little attention to the context of the Roman Empire, especially as it relates to intellectual culture.³⁸ Justin, Tatian, Julius Africanus, and Origen emerge as intellectuals who seem less exceptional than scholars have been accustomed to see them. Like other intellectuals in the empire, they were interested in building reputations for themselves and in capturing the attention of the imperial household. In the process, they became caught up in debates and controversies that were engaging the great majority of intellectuals in the Roman Empire and that were shaping how Christians thought of themselves and their relationship to the empire. If we seek to explain how Christian intellectuals behaved and how they ultimately gained more prominent positions in the Roman Empire, we need to start from the premise that they were little different from their non-Christian counterparts. The successes that they eventually experienced were predicated on these similarities and on larger transitions that the empire underwent in the early third century, rather than growing sympathy for Christianity.

In simple terms, we will gain a greater understanding of the careers and works of Christian intellectuals if we understand what it was like to be an intellectual in the Roman Empire. This is a fundamental point in the following chapters, and the reason why so much space is devoted to non-Christian intellectuals, particularly in chapter 1. The careers and experiences of non-Christian intellectuals in Rome provide a context that has largely been ignored for Justin Martyr and his successors in the Roman Empire, and a less insular way to approach the development of Christian intellectual culture.