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Fixed Essay: Apologetics

“Not Only Will I Refute”: Rhetorical Strategies in Tertullian’s *Apologeticum*

This paper has two main components. The first part describes and analyzes the specific charges Tertullian imputes to the “pagan” [[1]](#footnote-1) oppressors of Christianity. The second half compares the charges and countercharges Tertullian mentions to various other apologetic writers in order to determine to what extent both the charges and responses follow a perceivable pattern of rhetorical strategy.

Tertullian’s strategy is to claim that not only do Christians not commit the crimes for which they are accused, but in fact, the very accusers of the Christians, the pagans, are guilty of what they accuse the Christians.[[2]](#footnote-2) This strategy seems to be used in Justin Martyr, though in a less pronounced way.[[3]](#footnote-3) In contrast to Justin’s relatively meek presentation of Christian doctrine, Barnes notes that Tertullian is “characteristically aggressive.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Tertullian claims that pagan animosity against Christians derives from a short list of crimes: murder, temple robbery, adultery, and treason.[[5]](#footnote-5) These crimes repeat throughout the *Apologeticum* in different forms. Murder is predominantly dealt with under the charge of infanticide. Adultery seems to encompass a number of different sexual crimes, including incest. The final charge, treason (to both the emperor and the gods of the Roman state) is repeated in several places and particularly noteworthy.[[6]](#footnote-6) In the following pages, I will address each of the aforementioned major crimes and describe how Tertullian responds to each of the crimes in turn, always with the intention to both defuse the argument and reverse the charge onto the accusers.

The first charge on Tertullian’s list of alleged crimes perpetuated by the Christians is murder. Tertullian primarily focuses on this claim in the instance of infanticide.[[7]](#footnote-7) This claim probably originates in a misinterpretation of the eucharist’s words of institution, “This is my body, and this is my blood.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Tertullian argues against the claim that Christians eat children by arguing that no one has actually claimed to witness child sacrifice at first hand.[[9]](#footnote-9) He additionally argues that the secrecy of the Christians exceeds that of the mystery religions of various pagan worshippers who have managed to keep their secret safe. If they have managed to keep silent, the Christians only exceed in their clandestineness (such would especially be desirable if they were in fact eating children), so it must be the case that the accusations are from people outside the cult, and thus such accusations are ultimately the result of an untrustworthy rumor.[[10]](#footnote-10) Later in Chapter 8, Tertullian provides an interesting example of *reductio ad absurdam* when he assumes (for the sake of argument) that the claims of Christian cannibalism and incest are in fact true, and then goes on to rhetorically ask his audience whether eternal life is worth the personal guilt or shame caused by such crimes. He states that obviously eternal life is not worth such crimes and then concludes that the argument therefore doesn’t hold and pagans should not believe the lie.[[11]](#footnote-11)

As I said before, Tertullian’s methodology throughout the *Apologeticum* is to first defuse the indictment against the Christians and then to demonstrate how the pagan accusers themselves are guilty of the crime in question. In the case of murder, Tertullian expands the definition to encompass essentially any kind of violence. The Romans commit infanticide through the socially acceptable practice of exposing infants.[[12]](#footnote-12) Moreover, Tertullian finds instances in pagan history where child sacrifice, particularly to Saturn[[13]](#footnote-13) is described.[[14]](#footnote-14)

“Adultery”[[15]](#footnote-15) includes all sexual immorality, including incest. Much as in the case of pedophagy, sexual immorality is a general trope of slander used by classical rhetoricians.[[16]](#footnote-16) However, like the claim to pedophagy, the claim to adultery may have some basis in misinterpretation of actual Christian customs. It has been suggested[[17]](#footnote-17) that the Christian practice of referring to one’s fellow believers by familial terms like “brother” and “sister” may have led to pagans believing that Christians married their actual blood-relatives. Moreover, the exclusive nature of the Christian liturgy may have allowed for the pagans to allege any number of invented crimes about what was really happening behind closed doors. The most infamous example of this is the slur about the dogs and the candle sticks, wherein at the Christian *agape* feasts dogs were supposedly tied to candlesticks solely for the purpose of providing a scapegoat for the knocking over of said candlesticks in order to permit orgies in the dark. Apparently, if one is able to show that the candlesticks were knocked over by dogs this subsequently allows for complete freedom to indulge in licentious lusts.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Tertullian refutes this by focusing attention on the virtues of chastity in the Christian community. Because Tertullian is a Montanist, chastity has an even more important place for him in the overall Christian theology. It is a true symbol of Christian purity and is something to truly strive for. At times he argues this so strongly that he disparages marriage altogether, as can be seen in his *Exhortation to Chastity*.[[19]](#footnote-19) Tertullian, like Paul, allows for monogamy only as a concession to sexual lust (which is inherently bad because of classical understandings of passion and because of New Testament injunctions).

Tertullian’s strategy for reversing the charge is just as graphic as his method for the violence category was. He argues that the lack of chastity in traditional non-Christian culture allows for the possibility of and even causes in some cases sexual immorality. Tertullian tells the story of a young boy who had been separated from his family, sold into slavery, and then later purchased as a catamite by his own father. The story combines two disgusting, in Roman eyes, instances of *porneia*, homosexuality and incest, in order to provide a worst case scenario of the consequences of libertinism. Tertullian further argues that pagan religion encourages sexual immorality because mythology about the gods, the supposed paragons of pagan virtue, contains many stories of unnatural congresses many of the gods are brother and sister, have homosexual relationships, and have adulterous relationships. Tertullian thus argues that if the gods, the models of pagan virtue behave this way, then their followers consequently also behave this way.

Moving right along, we come to the claim of temple robbery**.** Now, Tertullian never seems to satisfactorily address this issue.It could be that he’s talking about the despoiling of pagan temples on the part of zealous Christian ruffians, but such a destruction of public property is hardly defensible, and he makes no attempt to defend this practice. Instead, what he might have in mind is the argument that the Christians are an economic drain on society,[[20]](#footnote-20) since Christians do not provide money for temples/festivals/etc.[[21]](#footnote-21) Tertullian argues against this by claiming that not only do Christians continue to economically contribute to certain business (eg. the baths, sundry goods, incense, etc.),[[22]](#footnote-22) but they also are especially virtuous in morality. So, they do not cheat on their taxes.[[23]](#footnote-23) Moreover, according to Tertullian, the only people that do suffer from the Christians’ boycott are those who are employed in questionable business practices like prostitution, murder, and sorcery.[[24]](#footnote-24) This claim both refutes the argument and argues that the Christians are exceptional and outshine the pagans in their civic integrity.

The crime of treason is a particularly pressing issue for Tertullian. This claim is probably borne out of the fact that if an individual was called to the courts for being a Christian, he or she would be required to sacrifice on behalf of the emperor’s genius.[[25]](#footnote-25) Non-lapsing Christians would of course refuse because sacrificing to the emperor’s genius would exemplify idolatry, and so they would be seen to be treasonous for their unwillingness to provide spiritual support for the emperor. Additionally, the pagans claim that the gods cause natural disasters on account of the obstinacy of the Christians.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Tertullian notes that first of all, the Christians do pray for the sake of the emperor. He claims that this prayer provides a necessary spiritual protection for the whole of the empire, which could be withdrawn if the Christians really wanted to harm the empire. So, in fact, Christians are assisting the empire; if they were to cease performing Christian rituals and prayers on behalf of the emperor then the empire would fall into dissolution. This response follows the pattern established heretofore of inverting the pagan claim entirely so that the Christians are now seen not only to be loyal servants of the emperor, but moreover they serve as the most important spiritual pillars of the empire, providing an essential cosmos-maintenance.[[27]](#footnote-27) Meanwhile, traditional worship is directly opposed to this, because, Tertullian says, it is equivalent to demon-worship. This claim is further supported by the example of magic, which Tertullian notes is a means whereby one can order the gods, demigods, ghosts, or other supernatural spirits to cause harm. Tertullian extrapolates from the possibility of magic causing harm to conclude that the real motivations of all of these supernatural entities is in fact to cause harm to the entire human race.[[28]](#footnote-28)

I have consistently stressed that Tertullian’s main strategy in arguing against the pagans is to invert many of their preconceptions, so that their religion is nothing more than harmful superstition, and Christianity is true religion. To this end, Tertullian argues that the supposed innovativeness of the Christian tradition is in fact a revival of a perennial philosophy/religion that predates all of the religions of the world. From this perspective then, major pagan religious figures like Orpheus, Musaeus, Melampus, Trophonius, and Numa[[29]](#footnote-29) have instituted false or faulty religions and corrupted the core, primeval tradition, all under the influence of demonic agency.[[30]](#footnote-30) In this sense then, the pagans are in fact the real desecraters of tradition and the real condemners of the human race.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Now, the success of these arguments depends heavily upon the degree to which the pagans are actually willing to follow Tertullian’s injunction to research into these claims. But, such research, beyond the simple character witnessing that Tertullian requests in the case of individual Christians,[[32]](#footnote-32) requires that the pagans read the sacred scripture from the viewpoint of a Christian.[[33]](#footnote-33) Here then might be seen the general weakness of such an apologetic plan: the persuasive value of the argument depends largely on the position of one already converted.[[34]](#footnote-34)

One of the general apologetic strategies then, is to convince the opponents that their own viewpoint is wrong. Both Tertullian and Justin argue that Christians are treated differently from all other criminals and indicted solely on the charge of their name.[[35]](#footnote-35) Granted, Tertullian later addresses specific crimes that are conflated with the Christian name, but the argument here is that the *modus ponens* which dissolves the syllogism “x is a Christian” to “x is a criminal” is inherently flawed. It indicates that a wholly different concern other than the actual punishment of crime must be at work in the minds of the pagans. Both Justin and Tertullian thus attribute the break in pagan reasoning that would lead them to charge the Christians solely for their name and not their deeds to demonic influence.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Further similarities in strategy can be found between Justin and Tertullian. In Chapter 17, Justin states that Christians are unusually beneficial to the state, because they are more likely to pay their taxes.[[37]](#footnote-37) This, they were specifically told to do by Jesus (Mark 12:16-17, Mat. 22:20-21). Justin additionally makes mention of the “upsetting of the lamp, and promiscuous intercourse,”[[38]](#footnote-38) but does so as a jab at the Gnostics, whom he treats as very different---he even claims the Romans do not persecute them. Justin also uses associating[[39]](#footnote-39) language similar to Tertullian’s “From among you are we. Made, not born are Christians,”[[40]](#footnote-40) when he writes “…we, who out of every race of men”[[41]](#footnote-41) and otherwise describes the previous state of Christians.

Some of these apologetic strategies seem remarkably similar, particularly the name vs. charge distinction, and the financial benefits of Christians to the states. Others repeat the general claims but do so in a very different way (e.g the recurrence of the “upsetting of the lamp” narrative). Still others are general enough that though the apologetic motif is present, it seems to be a general characteristic of the genre, rather than of a particular authorial source (e.g. the re-imagination of all non-Christian deities as demons, other such vilifications of non-Christian culture, and the underscoring of similarity between the conflicted cultures).[[42]](#footnote-42)

Tertullian utilizes a number of “commonplaces”[[43]](#footnote-43) in the construction of an apologetic work. Barnes claims that Tertullian derives many of his tropes and arguments from the lost apologetic works of Melito and Miltiades, but also notes, as is suggested by the above evidence, that Justin seems to be a primary source for the *Apologeticum*.[[44]](#footnote-44) However, despite the seeming lack of originality, Tertullian does possess some originality. Justin is never quite as inflammatory as Tertulian, so it seems correct to say that Tertullian, who manages to combine two preexistent genres (that is, defense and attack) into a fairly coherent whole, does something new. Tertullian “not only” defends the Christians against the various charges, but he also does a bit of analysis against his enemies an concludes that they are in fact the real perpetrators. He “set out to make the accusers blush”[[45]](#footnote-45) by demonstrating that in their heart of hearts (conscientia) the pagans acknowledge the innocence of the Christians (after all, they torture them to confess that they are not criminals/Christians!) and only commit the horrible crimes they do out of blind ignorance and acceptance of the infernally motivated lack of distinction between name and charge.

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1. I’ve chosen to use the anachronistic, derogatory, and somewhat naïve term “pagan” instead of “follower of traditional religion” for the sake of economy. It should be understood that by this term I mean non Judeo-Christian religious peoples of the second and third centuries. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tertullian, *Apol*. 4.1 (T.R. Glover, trans., *Tertullian: Apology, De Spectaculis,* Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977], 2-230): …iam de causa innocentiae consistam, *nec tantum refutabo quae nobis obiciuntur, sed etiam in ipsos retorquebo qui obiciunt, ut ex hoc quoque sciant hominess in Christianis non esse quae in se nesciunt esse…* (Emphasis mine.) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Justin, *Apol.* *1*, cap. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. T.D. Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 107. Barclay also notes that offensive rhetoric is a particularly effective method of self-defense (John M.G. Barclay, “Josephus’ Contra Apionem as Jewish Apologetics,” in *Critique and Apologetics*, eds. Anders Christian Jacobsen, Jörg Ulrich, and David Brakke (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009), 272. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Apol*. 2.4 (L): …quando, si de aliquo nocente cognoscatis, non statim confesso eo nomen homicidae vel sacrilegi vel incest vel publici hostis, ut de nostris elogiis loquar… [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Apol*. 10.1 (L): Itaque sacrilegii et maiestatis rei convenimur. *Summa haec causa immo tota est*, et utique digna cognosci… (Emphasis mine.) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Apol.* 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church Rev. Ed.* (Penguin, 1993), 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Apol.* 7.4-5 (L): Quis umquam taliter vagienti infanti supervenit? [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Apol.* 7.8 ff.; 7.13. Tertullian here alludes to the evil curse (malum) Fama, the personification of Rumor, who, in the Aeneid causes mischief for Aeneas and Dido. (Vergil, *Aen.* 4.174.) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Apol.* 8. Tertullian’s lurid depiction of the necessary steps to kill an innocent infant and mix its blood with bread is a prime example of rhetorical *descriptio* from which the desired result is a sentiment of nausea. This sentiment is moreover an indirect argument via *pathos* meant to force the pagans to confront and acknowledge the humanity of their targets. cf. *Apol*. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Apol.* 9.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The sacrifice of children to Saturn is mythologically justified because, according to Hesiod, Saturn hear a prophecy that his children would overthrow him one day, and so sought to avoid this fate by devouring his children. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Apol*. 9, 23.19 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I have diverged here from the original order in *Apol*. 2.5 because Tertullian deals with murder and sexual immorality at the same time. Both are claims made against Christian ceremony. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Jennifer Wright Knust, *Abandoned to Lust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), Chapter 1: 15-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See fn. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 9.6-7 (Gerald H. Rendall, trans., *Minucius Felix,* Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977], 314-437). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Tertullian draws his argument from Paul and builds upon the apostle’s own distinction between divine injunction and opinion as well as between encouraged act and concession. Paul claims that marriage is allowed only to channel insatiable lust in a productive way, and it proves ultimately to be “better to marry than burn” (1 Cor. 7:9). (*Exhortation to Chastity*, William P. Le Saint, trans., *Tertullian: Treatises on Marriage and Remarriage*, Ancient Christian Fathers [New York: Newman Press, 1951], 47-48.) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Apol.* 42.1 ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Apol*. 13.6 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Apol*. 42.4-7 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Apol.* 42.9 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Apol.* 43.2 (L): Plane confitebor, quinam, si forte, vere de sterilitate Christianorum conquieri possint. Primi erunt lenones, peructores, aquarioli, tum sicarii, venenarii, magi, item aruspices, arioli, mathematici. His infructuosos esse magnus est fructus. (The balance of this last antithetical statement clearly demonstrates Tertullian’s method of inversion throughout the *Apology*.) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Tertullian rhetorically defines *genius* as *demon*: Nescitis genios daemonas dici et inde diminutive voce daemonia? (*Apol.* 32.2 [L]) [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Tertullian famously references these claims when he notes, “Si Tiberis ascendit in moenia, si Nlus non ascendit in arva, si caelum stetit, si terra movit, si fames, si lues, statim Christianos ad leonem!” (*Apol.* 40.2) [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. He even cites an example of rain production, which has at times been attributed alternatively to both pagan and Christian holy men, the famous rain miracle which was supposedly recorded in the letters of Marcus Aurelius. (*Apol.* 5.6) [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Apol.* 23.1 [L]: Porro, si et magi phatasmata edunt et iam defunctorum infamant animas, si pueros in eloquium oraculi elidunt, si multa miracula circulatoriis prastigiis ludunt…habentes semel invitatorum angelorum et daemonum adsistentem sibi potestatem… quanot magis ea potestas de suo arbitrio et pro suo negotio studeat totis viribus operari quod alienate praestat negotiation! [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Apol*. 21 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *Apol*. 28.1 cf. 2.18 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *Apol* 41.1 ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. e.g. *Apol.* 3.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. For example, Chapter 20 details various cataclysmic events that fulfill Judeo-Christian prophecy, but such events could just as easily conform with pagan prophecies, or the enigmatic sayings of Nostradamus for that matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. This in turn seems similar to Engberg’s analysis of the phenomenological horizons of converts, “When describing their own conversion, the apologists though they were describing a ‘reality’…what we are offered […] are their views in retrospect.” Jakob Engberg, “From among You are We. Made, not Born are Christians: Apologists’ Accounts of Conversion before 310 AD” in *Continuity and Discontinuity in Early Christian Apologetics* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2006), 76. There is always an inherent difficulty in transferring the feeling of participation in a specific worldview. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Tertullian: *Apol.* 2.18 ff. ; Justin (K): *Apol.* 1, ch. 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Tertullian: “ratio aemulae” *Apol.* 2.18 ; Justin [K]: *Apol 1*, ch. 5, 10, 14 etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *Apol. 1*, Ch. 28. See fn. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Apol. 1*,Ch. 26 [K] [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. What I mean here is that such language is the opposite of rhetorical “distancing” language. The intent is to demonstrate the proximity of the groups so that the Christians seem more human. See also fn. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *Apol*. 18.4 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. *Apol. 1*, Ch. 25 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Barclay conceives of this last strategy as the first step in a general paradigm that all apologetic works follow. (Barclay 276) [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Barnes 104 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Barnes 107 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)