Ea Superstitione: Christian Martyrdom and the Religion of Freelance Experts*

HEIDI WENDT

ABSTRACT

This paper situates Roman actions undertaken against Christians amidst an unofficial pattern of measures employed throughout the imperial period to manage the expanding influence of freelance religious experts. Questions about the historical circumstances of martyrdom or persecution tend to proceed from the assumption that Christians were perceived and dealt with as a distinct religious community. However, the penalties alleged by writers such as Paul and Justin were more commonly issued against self-authorized individuals (magi, astrologers, prophets, diviners, philosophers, and so forth) than against undifferentiated religious groups. Thus, I propose that Roman motivations for investigating and punishing Christians, at least in the first and second centuries, are best understood in relation to the wider phenomenon of freelance expertise and the range of concerns that it engendered.

Keywords: Roman religion; Roman religious policy; Christianity; martyrdom; Paul; Justin Martyr

I INTRODUCTION

This article attempts to locate Roman punishments of Christians within a larger pattern of legal measures undertaken at Rome and elsewhere in the Empire to manage the influence of self-authorized or 'freelance' experts in specialized skills and areas of knowledge.[1] Such measures escalated in frequency and severity over the course of the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E., with nascent Christianity emerging within their purview.[2] Although many studies of persecution or martyrdom once began from the premise that Roman

* I owe many thanks to a number of people who read and provided invaluable feedback on this article at various stages of its development. Foremost among these are John Bodel, Aaron Glaim, Lisa Mignone, Stanley Stowers, and Greg Woolf, as well as the participants in Brown University's Culture and Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean Colloquium. I am also grateful to Catherine Steel and the anonymous readers of *JRS*, whose insightful suggestions greatly improved the structure and expression of the piece. For the main idea I am indebted to an unlikely interlocutor, the poet Karl Kirchwey, whose tenure as the American Academy in Rome's Andrew Heiskell Arts Director coincided with the year I spent there as a pre-doctoral fellow, and whose interest in my research inspired me to expand it in new directions. Although I had not yet considered the possible implications of legislation issued against freelance religious experts for historicizing Roman actions against Christians, Karl's provocative questions about the matter continued to percolate until I arrived at an answer that I hope he will find satisfactory, if long overdue.

[1] I have in mind such emerging disciplines as philosophy, medicine, rhetoric, astrology, and religion, each of which entailed the provision of particular services (education, moral instruction, healing, initiation, divination, and so forth). For an overview of the evidence, see Rawson 1985: 66–99, 298–316; Wallace-Hadrill 2005 and 2008: 213–58.

[2] I use Christianity in a highly limited sense to capture any religious phenomena that involved the figure of Christ.

JRS 105 (2015), pp. 183–202. © *The Author(s) 2015.*
Published by The Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies.
doi:10.1017/S007543581500091X

https://doi.org/10.1017/S007543581500091X Published online by Cambridge University Press

administrative stances toward Christians originated with and targeted them disproportionately, even singularly, I intend to establish an arc of historical circumstances that predated Christians but which prepared how Roman officials would situate and respond to their religious activities.[3]

In particular, Roman tactics for isolating, examining and punishing Christians were already well rehearsed in earlier and ongoing proscriptions or expulsions of *magi*, astrologers, seers, prophets, other varieties of diviners, and philosophers, *inter alios*. Together these diverse figures seem to have constituted a salient class of actors for ancient commentators, and one whose practices regularly warranted the attention of local magistrates.[4] Although incidents involving religious legislation are typically framed as a matter of Roman policy toward such corporate entities as cults, communities, or groups, I argue that many of these episodes ultimately stem from concerns about self-authorized expertise. The lens that I propose is compatible with previous approaches to the same evidence but offers greater nuance and another unit of analysis for examining Roman responses to different modes of foreign religion. For its quality of evidence and the frequency with which the measures in question were enacted there, this article focuses predominantly on Rome. Notwithstanding, the influence of specialists was hardly limited to the capital; provincial governors pursued similar courses of action against them when the occasion arose and often with precedents from Rome explicitly in view.[5]

There is a compelling basis for locating Roman actions against Christians within pre-existing patterns of action. On the one hand, what we know about procedures for dealing with Christians suggests continuity with more general efforts to circumscribe self-authorized actors and phenomena with which they were associated. On the other, the same legislation that impinged upon Christians might also, and in some cases did, extend to a wider set of recipients than Christian sources care to mention.[6] The latter omission is unsurprising since the principal body of evidence for these events consists of writings whose authors were more interested in both theologizing Christian punishment and making it appear exceptional than they were in objectively reporting on its circumstances and effects.[7]

Since the past decade has witnessed a surge of academic interest in martyrdom, this is a timely moment to revisit the historical basis of Roman actions against Christians. A number of scholars have called attention to the complex ways in which ideologies of persecution were at once integral to Christian identity construction, and also inseparable from broader motifs of noble suffering and death.[8] Others have challenged the dating of supposedly early martyr acts and argued that the perception of martyrdom as a

The danger of introducing the category for this period is that it presumes anachronistic features of later Christian institutions. On problems of categorization in the study of early Christianity, see King 2011.

[3] For the scholarly history, see Moss 2012: 23. Although this premise of uniqueness has been challenged over the past century, many of its assumptions remain unexamined.

[4] A number of ancient authors invoke different kinds of religious specialists together, as if they constitute an implicit category irrespective of differences in their offerings, e.g. Cicero (especially *De Div.*), Juvenal (especially the sixth and tenth satires), the various writings of Lucian, Artemidorus (prologue to the *Oneirocriticon*). For the salience and character of the religion of freelance experts, see Rives 2007: 158–81; Wendt 2013; forthcoming 2016.

[5] For the legal discretion of provincial governors as it pertained to the matter of Christians, see Rives 1996: 18–25.

[6] Even such famed legislation in the historiography of martyrdom as Diocletian's edicts was not limited to Christians but also outlawed the writings of astrologers, Egyptian alchemists, and Manicheans (*Coll. leg.* 15.3; Lactant., *DMP* 13; Eus., *HE* 8.2.3–4). For the later evidence, see Rives 1999; Leppin 2007.

[7] Moss 2012: 113–21, 132–9; King 2013.

[8] The scope of evidence relevant to the study of martyrdom has thus expanded to include non-Christian sources that seem to have influenced the development of Christian discursive practices, such as traditions about the trial and execution of Socrates. See Edwards 2007: 207–20; Moss 2012: 26–37. On ideologies of martyrdom and their

https://doi.org/10.1017/S007543581500091X Published online by Cambridge University Press

formative Christian experience owes much to authors writing after the reign of Constantine had begun.[9] Building upon these insights, I propose that although martyr acts and other early Christian writings furnish compelling and ostensibly first-hand perspectives on religious legislation, the focused antagonism apparent in these sources is but a partial witness to a more comprehensive set of measures and the overarching class of activity that warranted them. While the exact processes under which Christians and other kinds of experts were investigated, tried and executed might differ in particulars, the larger set of legal responses to this class is, as I will demonstrate, more coherent than has previously been appreciated.

II THE RISE OF FREELANCE RELIGIOUS EXPERTS IN THE EARLY EMPIRE

Before turning our attention to the evidence for Roman actions against Christians some definitions are in order. First and foremost, by 'freelance expert' I intend to capture any self-authorized purveyor of specialized religious skills, teachings, and related services who drew upon such abilities in pursuit of status, prestige, and even more transparent forms of profit. Unlike a civic priest, whose religious authority was granted on account of factors like social status and institutional affiliation, freelance experts operated outside existing institutions and had to earn their recognition and legitimacy, often through demonstrations of skill or learning.[10] While these criteria also encompass many specialists in philosophy, medicine, law, and rhetoric, the focus of the following discussion is experts in religion, that is, ones who directly enlisted gods and similar beings (*daimones*, divine *pneuma*, spirits of the dead, etc.) in their practices.[11] I also include within this category astrologers, who typically held divine understandings of celestial bodies and their relevance to human affairs.

Of course, the boundaries between these putative areas or disciplines were often porous, and all the more so since many experts employed a range of skills that span multiple categories of practice; indeed, there seem to have been clear competitive advantages to wielding more than one form of expertise.[12] While distinctions in the content of specialized offerings are not unimportant, they are secondary to some of the deeper field dynamics that all freelance experts negotiated: the challenges of constructing one's own authority and legitimacy, competition, the problematic connotations of interest, and opportunities for niche forms of prestige (e.g. writing and intellectual demonstrations, the production and interpretation of esoteric writings). I thus find it productive to theorize all specialized offerings as products of a common class of religious activity, one that necessarily cuts across categories like magic, astrology, mystery cults, philosophy, Judaism, and Christianity.

Recent scholarly interest in particular kinds of religious experts has yielded rich studies of their impact on the changing religious landscape of the Roman Empire.[13] Altogether the

rôle in Christian culture-making and identity-formation, see Perkins 1995; Castelli 2004; Rebillard 2012; King 2013.

[9] On the dating of early martyr acts, see Moss 2010a and 2010b. For her argument that the concept of martyrdom was a product of fourth-century historiography, see Moss 2013: 215–46.

[10] See also Rives 2007: 168; Stowers 2011a: 41–9.

[11] For religion in this sense, see Stowers 2008a. For the 'religious' leanings of astrologers, see Barton 1994: 86–113; Beck 2007: 1–8; Ripat 2011.

[12] For instance, a mystery initiator who explained transformative rites using philosophical doctrines, or a healer whose prognoses involved astrology.

[13] Select publications include: Dickie 2001; Frankfurter 2002; Klingshirn 2006; Johnston 2008: 109–82; Rives 2010; Ripat 2011; Graf and Johnston 2013; Ullucci 2013. For earlier studies of the evidence, see MacMullen 1966; Smith 1978; Potter 1994; Francis 1995.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S007543581500091X Published online by Cambridge University Press

evidence for their activities suggests that from the early decades of the imperial period they grew increasingly influential, more diverse with respect to the skills or methods in which they claimed expertise, and more assorted in the ethnic coding of their wisdom and practices.[14] In keeping with other effects of imperial expansion — new networks of trade and travel, improved mobility, and increasingly heterogeneous urban populations, among other factors — it is unsurprising that many participants in this class of activity were foreigners who capitalized on interest in offerings perceived to be novel or exotic among Roman audiences.[15]

The same period witnessed an escalation in both the frequency and severity of efforts intended to counteract specialist influence, particularly throughout the first century C.E.[16] Although experts in religious knowledge and services appear often, maybe even most often, in our sources for these punishments, equivalent actions were taken against comparable and similarly self-authorized actors, especially philosophers. The measures themselves might take the form of an expulsion, a proscription of certain practices, or the confiscation of certain objects or materials. They might issue from an individual magistrate, the senate, or the emperor. Some targeted specific kinds of experts, but the same or similar measures might also encompass their followers or clientele, as well as certain practices or artifacts with which they were commonly associated.[17]

In an article on expulsions of astrologers, Pauline Ripat argues persuasively against reading these legislative incidents as plain indicators of Roman attitudes toward entire disciplines or undifferentiated groups. Among other reasons, Ripat notes that individual measures often applied to more than one type of specialist (e.g. *magi* and astrologers) and likely targeted select populations of actors within larger categories of expertise (i.e. certain kinds of astrologers, but not, say, Thrasyllus or Balbillus, who would have been spared on account of their pedigrees or the status of their patrons).[18] Moreover, while some experts might be exempt from suspicions that attended the wider class, others were not only vulnerable but even solicited stricture to their own benefit.[19] Even in cases where the language of a piece of legislation is more exact, given the robustness of many specialized offerings there is reason to suspect that its scope was broader in intent than the wording would suggest; since many experts had the capacity to innovate exponentially through new combinations of skills, intellectual influences, and ethnic frames of reference, they and their offerings evaded neat classification.[20] As Ripat aptly remarks of their protean nature, for Roman magistrates and others tasked with enforcing legislation, getting a handle on the specialist phenomenon must have been 'equivalent to an attempt to scoop water from a bucket with a slotted spoon'.[21] This raises the possibility that concerns about freelance expertise might be inferred in certain

[14] In referring to certain practices or wisdom traditions as ethnically coded, I mean that they were strongly associated with a particular people or region, even if the relationship was a verisimilitude. See Scheid 1995; Parker 2002.

[15] See Wallace-Hadrill 2005. As Haack (2006: 103–4) and Ripat (2011: 129–30) have argued, specialists might even exaggerate their own exoticism through dress, language, and nomenclature.

[16] For the first-century trend, see Cramer 1951.

[17] Although my approach to this evidence has much in common with the now classic treatment of Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price (1998: 211–44), it nevertheless differs with respect to the perceived motivations for religious legislation (managing the expanding influence of specialists versus maintaining the symbolic purity of the Empire's centre) and the types of social formations posited (freelance experts and their followers versus cults or rival systems of belief). For the ability of individuals to influence civic religion through 'private' religiosity, see Ando 2009: 179–80.

[18] See Ripat 2011: 120–3.

[19] Ripat 2011: 138–41.

[20] See MacMullen 1966: 129; Ripat 2011: 132. The untroubled imprecision of ancient writers strengthens the argument that the larger problem that these measures were intended to address was the phenomenon of freelance experts, even if a given type of expert had created a pretext for stricture.

[21] Ripat 2011: 140.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S007543581500091X Published online by Cambridge University Press

cases where they are not stated explicitly, namely, in episodes that involve practices, social formations, and *instrumentum* deeply resonant of specialist activities.

By way of illustration, Tacitus recounts an incident during the reign of Tiberius in which four thousand freed practitioners of *ea superstitio*, here certain Egyptian and Judean forms of religion, were expelled from Rome.[22] Suetonius reports that the emperor abolished *externas caeremonias*, among which were Egyptian and Judaic *ritus*, and adds that *mathematici* were expelled at the same time, although he pardoned any who promised to desist from the art.[23] In the same version of the story, Tiberius then compelled people gripped by *ea superstitione* to publicly destroy religious garments and *instrumentum*, the latter of which might include anything from vessels or images to writings. Josephus, too, recounts what seems to be the same incident, but in his version Tiberius was prompted to act after learning of deceptions perpetrated by the priests of a temple to Isis, who facilitated the seduction of one aristocratic woman, and by a disreputable Judean and his accomplices, who posed as experts in Mosaic wisdom in order to steal from another.[24]

The differing accounts of this episode reveal important points of overlap between freelance and/or exotic experts (Egyptian priests, Judean teachers, astrologers), groups or institutions that they might establish (private temples, schools of instruction, regular clienteles), and religious services in which they typically claimed expertise (divination, wisdom instruction or textual interpretation, initiation into divine mysteries). Although the relationship between some of these details and concerns about freelance expertise is circumstantial, comparable circumstances arise in other accounts of Roman religious legislation. When Livy chronicles the Bacchanalia controversy, which he initially traces to an itinerant Greek sacrificer and seer (*sacrificulus et vates*), he concludes with a consular speech in which the audience is reminded of how often the magistrates have acted to forbid the introduction of foreign *sacra*, to exclude sacrificers and seers from the Forum, the Circus, and the city, to seek out and burn prophetic books, and to abolish every manner of sacrificing except for the one performed according to Roman custom.[25] While many scholars have noted parallels between the harsh suppression of Bacchic cult and Roman prosecutions of Christians, here too, each item of the suite of religious legislation can be linked, either directly or indirectly, with specialist activity.[26] Although Livy does not reiterate the culpability of figures akin to the *graecus* for each of the efforts he lists, it may be more revealing that he does not need to; the account in its entirety impresses upon readers that itinerant experts were obvious epicentres for such concerns.

Livy is hardly exaggerating the frequency with which Roman authorities attempted to get a handle on the expanding influence of freelance experts by proscribing certain forms of foreign religion, by expelling certain kinds of specialists, and by confiscating prophetic texts. Such measures grew increasingly common and severe over the course of his lifetime, with expulsions alone occurring with greatest concentration from 33 B.C.E. to 93 C.E.[27] On separate occasions, Augustus excluded private forms of Egyptian religion from the city's *pomerium*, limited the subjects about which *manteis* could prophesy, confiscated writings attributed to the Sibyl and other writers of little repute,

[22] Tac., *Ann.* 2.85.11–17. Elsewhere (Wendt forthcoming 2015) I argue that these first-century expulsions of Judeans and proscriptions of Judaic practices were not, as has commonly been thought, directed at Rome's 'Jewish community' or some arbitrary segment thereof, but rather at self-authorized experts in Judean religion, as well as their clientele.
[23] Suet., *Tib.* 36.1.
[24] Joseph., *AJ* 18.65–84.
[25] Livy 39.16.8–9.
[26] On the significance of the Bacchanalia affair for Christian persecution, see North 1992: 181–2.
[27] See Cramer 1951; Desanti 1990.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S007543581500091X Published online by Cambridge University Press

and made illegal the private possession of such prophecies.[28] Under Tiberius, between 16 and 19 C.E. alone, there are at least seven separate references to measures aimed at suppressing the activities of *magi, goētes, venenarii, malefici, haruspices, mathematici, Chaldaei, harioli*, diviners of all varieties, and certain practitioners of Egyptian and Judean religion, as well as the circulation of pseudepigraphic *oracula sibyllina* and other kinds of *fatidici libri*.[29] The fervour of his efforts was not lost on later historians, who note that Tiberius executed an unprecedented number of *venenarii* and *malefici*. Ulpian claims further that nearly every emperor after him renewed legislation against *mathematici, Chaldaei, harioli*, and all others engaged in similar pursuits.[30]

Not unlike the later Christian evidence, a number of sources for these measures provide insight into the range of concerns that motivated Roman officials to examine and punish certain figures and kinds of social activity. At the extreme end of the spectrum, freelance experts could pose a tremendous and very measurable threat to Roman governance. Astrologers and other diviners attracted negative attention on occasion by casting imperial horoscopes for contenders to the throne, or by prognosticating about the affairs of powerful people.[31] At the other end, however, specialists might be perceived as urban clutter, especially since many are said to have competed for clients in public areas. As a case in point, Marcus Agrippa expelled *goētes* and astrologers from Rome in 33 B.C.E. under the aegis of a city improvement initiative that also encompassed public works, sewer cleaning, and the provision of hygiene services.[32] The latter example serves as an important reminder that actions taken against freelance experts were not always a matter of seditious activity.[33] Instead, the more general concern about them seems foremost a regulatory matter: they were at once commonplace and popular but difficult to isolate and contain.

Whatever problems religious experts might be seen to pose, the frequency of measures issued against them throughout the first century of the Empire points to a growing frustration about how to effectively manage their activities. Judging from the periodic reissue of earlier legislation, the challenge was only exacerbated by the apparent ineffectiveness of these efforts, even as the punishments they carried were steadily augmented.[34] Adding to the challenge, punishments might also have the unintended consequence of enhancing the reputations of their recipients.[35] Much as exile had become the mark of the true philosopher, attempts to suppress the influence of freelance experts could heighten their perceived authority,

[28] On the banning of Egyptian cult from inside the *pomerium*: Dio Cass. 40.47.3–4, 53.2.4, 54.6.6; Orlin 2002. For the regulation of *manteis*: Dio Cass. 56.25.5; Suet., *Tib*. 63. On the Sibylline books: Suet., *Aug*. 31.1; Tac., *Ann*. 2.32.

[29] Such actions are recounted in the following references, which are not exhaustive: Tac., *Ann*. 2.85, 6.12; Suet., *Tib*. 36.1, 63; Dio Cass. 56.25.5, 57.15.8, 57.18.3–5, 57.18.5a. Ripat (2011: 115–14) offers an excellent overview of the evidence, though weighted in favour of incidents involving astrologers. On the religious connotations of *venenarii* and *malefici*, see Rives 2006: 56–7.

[30] Ulpian, *De officio proconsulis* 7; *Coll. leg*. 15.2.1–3; Rives 2006: 67; Ripat 2011: 143.

[31] There is no shortage of incidents in Roman history whereupon an inspired figure marshalled popular followings that exacted heavy tolls. See Florus, 2.7.4–7, 9–12; Diod. Sic. 34.2.5–9, 36.1–11 (Syrian prophets who led slave revolts in Sicily); Dio Cass. 54.34.5–7 (Vologaeus, a Dionysiac priest who led a revolt in Thrace); Tac., *Hist*. 4.61–5 (Veleda, a seer who led a revolt in Gaul); Joseph., *BJ* 2.253–71, 6.285–7 (Judean prophets who led revolts in Judea).

[32] Dio Cass. 49.43.1–5; Ripat 2011: 118. The notion that specialists constituted a public nuisance reflects the perspective of magistrates rather than that of the people who actually relied on their services, some of whom were even social élites. Juvenal distinguishes between the sorts of experts whom wealthier and poorer women might be inclined to consult (6.576–94).

[33] Ripat 2011: 118.

[34] For instance, whereas ancient historians recount mere confiscations of prophetic writings under the Julio-Claudian emperors, when Justin Martyr mentions an equivalent ban he adds that in his day death had been decreed for any who read the books of Hystaspes, the Sibyl, or the Judean prophets (*1 Apol*. 44.12).

[35] Bowersock 1995: 16–17; Ripat 2011: 141.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S007543581500091X Published online by Cambridge University Press

authenticity and efficacy.[36] As Ripat notes, if fame was one's aspiration, then outright defiance of laws that proscribed certain activities made that fame easier to achieve.[37]

The threads binding these assorted legislative incidents are at least twofold. First, they targeted similarly self-authorized purveyors of specialized offerings, or else any artifacts and social formations that specialists might produce. Second, the same strategies were used consistently to suppress various permutations of this class of activity, whether Egyptian and Judaic rites, astrologers and other diviners, or privately held prophetic writings that were likely composed or interpreted by specialists.

Whereas these incidents have been viewed as symptomatic of Roman attitudes toward entire groups, communities, cults, or categories of practice, many seem to have originated from concerns about specialists and the innovative forms of religion that they were known to purvey.[38] I suspect that the former conclusions have much to do with the recipients posited for these measures: categories, ethnic or religious communities, or systems, even when the sources cite individual practitioners as the perceived culprits. Some scholars do foreground experts as the intended targets, and also acknowledge parallels between the shared lots of specialists who were proscribed or expelled concomitantly. However, many of these comparisons tend to stop short of parsing the larger categories (magic, astrology, Judaism, Christianity) into which varieties of experts are sorted.[39] The result is that the common denominator of freelance expertise underlying many of the incidents in question is difficult to discern and we are left with a mistaken impression of essential difference between participants in a common field of religious activity.

The relationship that I am proposing between the recipients of these punishments does not depend on the content of their religious programmes, on the exact services they offered, or on the ethnic idioms couching their practices. Rather, I am suggesting that from an administrative perspective freelance experts shared a number of characteristics stemming from the common field dynamics that they negotiated. These differences may seem slight but, as I hope to demonstrate, they have important implications for how we reconstruct the status of foreign religious phenomena in Rome in order to situate Christians within this landscape.

III PAUL'S PUNISHMENTS IN THE CONTEXT OF FREELANCE EXPERTISE

In the preceding section I proposed that legislative actions undertaken to get a handle on the burgeoning influence of freelance experts formed an unofficial pattern that escalated in frequency and severity through the first century of the Empire. It is roughly within

[36] Reckless public critiques of the emperor only increased the renown of Lucian's Peregrinus, who became known as the philosopher banished for his frankness and excessive freedom, akin to Musonius Rufus, Dio, Epictetus, and anyone else who had been in a similar predicament (*De mort. Pereg.* 18). Tongue in cheek though it may be, the detail is perfectly in keeping with strategies of disinterest and novelty employed by any number of entrepreneurial figures in their pursuit of legitimacy. On the banning of philosophers, see Sen., *Helv.* 10.8; Dio Cass. 65.13; Tac., *Agr.* 3; Plin., *Ep.* 3.11. Muson. Ruf., *Disc.* 10.7–10.

[37] Ripat 2011: 136.

[38] For example, Beard *et al.* write (1998: 212): 'The Roman élite undoubtedly conceived of its own religious system as superior to the cults of its conquered subjects. No Roman propounded the view that Rome should respect the religious liberty of other peoples. This does not mean that the Romans were therefore *in*tolerant. The issue is rather the degree of *exclusivity* of the Roman system, how it operated and how it changed — particularly as the empire prompted new ways of defining what was "Roman", new ways of thinking about what was to count as "Roman" and what was not. The shift in Roman concern for the purity of the capital alone to the maintenance of correct practices throughout the empire is directly connected to changing views of "Roman-ness".' See also Gruen 1990: 174–5; Orlin 2010: 162–214. I will say more in the conclusion about the problems of analysing these incidents only in terms of systems or aggregate groups, without sufficient attention to individual actors and interests.

[39] See, for example, Rutgers 1994, who acknowledges the parallel circumstances of Jews and practitioners of Egyptian religion.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S007543581500091X Published online by Cambridge University Press

this window, the so-called first phase of Christian persecution spanning the reigns of Nero to Decius, that we first encounter references to Christians, some of which appear in texts that chronicle similar penalties imposed upon non-Christian specialists and groups. Paired with the vivid trial proceedings that frame many martyr accounts, these sources have been of interest primarily to scholars wishing to reconstruct Roman motives for singling Christians out and punishing them.[40] While the numerous studies of the topic have shed much light on matters like the legal foundation of charges against Christians, they have been admittedly less successful in formulating a plausible historical explanation for why Christians attracted such attention in the first place.[41]

A recent publication by James Rives provides a succinct and highly accessible overview of the relevant scholarship, on account of which I will simply recapitulate his assessment that many of the solutions proposed have proven untenable either because they stake too much on particular charges, or because they posit pre-existent criminal laws for which we have no evidence.[42] None, moreover, has been able to account for the claim made by multiple early Christian writers that the primary charge brought against Christians was that of simply being Christian. The impasse is understandable: our sources are vague about the legal basis of prosecutions, the events seem to have been sporadic and *ad hoc*, and the explanations that Christians themselves provide are consciously rhetorical and rich in drama. G. E. M. de Ste Croix's theory of how trials of Christians unfolded — namely, as *cognitiones extra ordinem* that permitted the presiding official significant latitude to evaluate pending charges and to assign punishments — productively obviated the quest for their legal foundation. But, his dissenters object, if Roman actions against Christians were largely the product of individual initiative and discretion, how do we account for the overarching consistency in how they were treated? Rives' answer is apt: 'On the one hand, the pattern may well have been less consistent than it appears; most of the extant evidence comes from the Christian side, where the concern was to commemorate martyrs rather than document the variety of official responses to charges of Christianity … On the other hand, the tendency of Roman officials to follow precedent or seek advice from the emperor whenever possible would easily account for such consistency as did exist.'[43]

And yet, from Rives' conservative answer another question arises: whence did such a precedent form? He rightly praises a growing tendency among scholars to emphasize the reactive nature of Roman responses to Christians, but even his measured remarks seem to presume or require a prior frame of reference into which those in power might first slot Christians before determining the appropriate course of action for dealing with them. On this matter, the preceding discussion furnishes a fresh set of possibilities. That is, the seemingly intractable problem of why Romans took action against Christians might be enriched by situating these incidents amidst earlier efforts to regulate or suppress specialists in novel, often foreign or ethnically coded, forms of religion. Rather than examining the prosecution of Christians as yet another instance of Roman anxieties about new or foreign religious groups, we might instead consider the possibility that concerns about Christian experts and followers stemmed from their perceived relationship to a class of religious activity with a problematic regulatory history.

Although they rarely enter into discussions of martyrdom, the undisputed Pauline epistles furnish the richest, if least utilized, evidence for the circumstances underlying

[40] For the character of these proceedings, see Potter 1993.
[41] See de Ste Croix 1963; 2006; Sherwin-White 1952; 1964.
[42] Rives' objective is not to weigh in on the question of why the Romans persecuted Christians, but merely to sketch out the main issues and to suggest a framework within which to understand them (2011: 200). For a comprehensive presentation of the evidence, see Barnes 1968.
[43] Rives 2011: 208–9.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S007543581500091X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Christian punishment. Rather, Paul's repeated references to having endured imprisonment, expulsions, and beatings have been subordinated to the more historically dubious narrative of *Acts of the Apostles*.[44] The oversight has obscured an important link between measures enacted against freelance experts and the incidents at the root of martyrdom, since the sort of punishments that Paul describes exhibit remarkable continuity with the incidents examined above.

Elsewhere I have argued that indications of Paul's participation in the field of freelance expertise are woven throughout his epistles.[45] Like other religious specialists of his time, he offers a comprehensive religious programme that is authorized by revelation and the receipt of divine mysteries, and whose contents are elaborated by prophecies, innovative retellings of Judean myth, and philosophy. Indeed, paralleling a strategy that Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston have posited of Orphic *bricoleurs*, who drew on and creatively combined elements from Greek myth, Paul's myth-making is tailored to initiation into the mysteries of Christ through baptism, during which initiates received God's own *pneuma* in order to be spared from a human condition and eschatology of his own design.[46] Spatial limitations, however, narrow our focus to his description of occasions whereupon he received now familiar forms of public stricture: imprisonment, expulsion, and corporal punishment. His statements not only correlate with the legislative tactics examined above, but also corroborate the postulated dynamics that accompanied them.

The first point of overlap involves the rhetorical effect of having endured punishments. An examination of his assorted appeals suggests that Paul proffers suffering both as proof of his pure motives for spreading his gospel and to distinguish himself from religious experts who falsely claim authority about Christ. These aims are evident in 2 Corinthians 11, where he asks of would-be rivals: 'Are they ministers of Christ? [I am] a better one: with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Judeans the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning.' Likewise, Paul alleges to live in a constant state of danger from his own people (Judeans), from Gentiles, in cities, and from 'false brothers' (ψευδαδέλφοι).[47] Here and elsewhere, Paul invokes hardships that he has endured as an apostle in defence of own legitimacy, over and against that of others engaging in similar activities whose teachings and practices nevertheless differ from his own. John Fitzgerald has highlighted notable continuities between Paul's hardship catalogues (*peristaseis*) and those of first-century philosophers like Epictetus and Seneca, who invoke equally adverse circumstances. According to Epictetus, the sage 'suffers no harm even though he is soundly flogged, or imprisoned, or beheaded, but bears all of this with personal profit'.[48] As to the intended effect of enumerating hardships, Fitzgerald argues that adversity occasions the exhibition of virtue because it tests and reveals the recipient's true character. Endurance of hardship is thus a mark of virtue, and also of one's authenticity, sincerity, and disinterest.[49]

Beyond basic similarities in how Paul and certain philosophers used *peristasis* catalogues, there is also overlap in the nature of the hardships themselves: corporal punishments, imprisonment, exile, and even the threat of death. More than once Paul mentions running afoul of local magistrates, for instance, when he recalls how the

[44] e.g. Rives 2011: 200. Likewise, Barnes' essay (1969) on Paul's imprisonments only deals with the evidence from Acts. In my view, the Pauline epistles provide far more reliable evidence than does Acts for the present topic. On the challenges of the Pauline material in Acts, I follow scholars who argue that its contradictions of Paul's own self-representation and teachings are not resolvable. See Tyson 2006: 50–78; Pervo 2010: 1–22, 149–86.

[45] Wendt 2013: 250–327.

[46] Hodge 2007: 67–108; Stowers 2008b; Engberg-Pederson 2011: 39–105; Graf and Johnston 2013.

[47] e.g. 2 Cor. 11:23–5; Gal. 2:4–5.

[48] Epict., *Diss.* 4.1.127; Fitzgerald 1988: 64.

[49] Fitzgerald 1988: 115.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S007543581500091X Published online by Cambridge University Press

governor of Damascus attempted to seize him, and elsewhere, when he claims to have been driven out of Judea.[50] In these examples, and, for that matter, in comparable ones from Musonius Rufus and Epictetus, the precise forms and circumstances of alleged hardships match Roman tactics for dealing with freelance experts on other occasions.[51] This is fitting, since earlier I proposed that many philosophers occupied one subset of the wider class of activity that also contained religious experts. The same explanation also accounts for why Paul shares many characteristics with philosophers, even if he enlisted philosophical doctrines, discourses, and techniques of self-mastery in the context of religious activities, in my sense.[52]

So too, does Paul seem aware of the generative potential of punishment, especially in his letter to the Philippians, which he writes during a period of incarceration (possibly even at Rome). Here he reports that imprisonment has actually furthered his agenda since the entire imperial guard knows that he suffers for Christ. His notoriety has also spawned imitators who proclaim Christ from envy, rivalry, and selfish ambition.[53] About the latter, Paul is unconcerned since it matters not whether one's motives are false or true so long as Christ is proclaimed in every way. As I noted earlier, restrictive legislation and expulsions often carried the dual advantages of confirming the sincerity and truth of one's teachings, and of burnishing the reputations of the persons penalized. As in the case of an astrologer mentioned by Juvenal, whose services are all the more desired for his visible proof of incarceration, a handcuff on his wrist, Paul's general embrace of suffering — his own, that of Jesus, that of the assembly in Jerusalem, and even that of his audiences — seems to have heightened the intrigue surrounding his religious offerings.[54]

The observation that Paul's particular hardships match punishments enforced for other varieties of freelance experts gains strength from additional considerations. For instance, the collection that Paul solicits for certain poor people (πτωχοί) among the holy ones living in Jerusalem has parallels with economic practices that were strongly, and problematically, associated with freelance expertise. Several *comparanda* arise within the window of this study. Cicero insists that no one may have a collection (*stipem*) except the followers of the Idaean Mother, and they only on the permitted days. Elsewhere he writes that the Romans have 'abolished collections, except the one for the Idaean Mother, because collections fill the city with *superstitiones* and deplete households'.[55] Valerius Maximus relates an anecdote in which a proscribed aedile escaped Rome undetected after donning the Isiac habit and travelling through the city streets under the pretence of taking a collection, while Juvenal laments the wastefulness of wives who, left to their own devices, are all too eager to squander their husbands' earnings on alms for the roving priests of foreign gods.[56]

These examples suggest both that collections undertaken on behalf of gods, or in exchange for religious expertise, were included in the broader set of practices circumscribed by Roman magistrates, and also that Paul's basic economic practices are consistent with those of other experts, even if the justifications for collections were idiosyncratic. For an even closer analogy we might recall Josephus' story of the reprobate Judean and his three accomplices who professed expertise in the wisdom of the laws of Moses in order to steal from an aristocratic woman interested in Judaica by

[50] 2 Cor. 11:32; 1 Thess. 2:15.
[51] e.g. 1 Cor. 15:31–2; 2 Cor. 1:8–10; 1 Thess. 2:2–3.
[52] For Paul's relationship to philosophy, see Malherbe 1989; Stowers 1998: 1–89; Wasserman 2008; Stowers 2009.
[53] Phil. 1:15–17.
[54] Juv. 6.560–4.
[55] Cic., *De leg.* 2.22.9, 2.40.11. I am grateful to Fritz Graf for drawing my attention to this reference.
[56] Val. Max. 7.8.1–5; Juv. 6.475–575.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S007543581500091X Published online by Cambridge University Press

getting her to send donations to the Jerusalem Temple.[57] One wonders whether our differing impressions of the two Jerusalem collections, that one is charity, the other extortion, are merely a matter of perspective: Paul's self-representation versus Josephus' normative judgement of itinerant experts in Judean religion. Notably, when Paul denounces a fictive Judean teacher of Gentiles, he uses the same stock charges that Josephus levies against the Judean deceivers at Rome: theft, improper relations with married women, despoiling temples, and sullying God's reputation among non-Judeans through his actions.[58]

Another consideration involves Paul's instructions to his groups to abstain from suspicious activity of the sort for which Roman authorities penalized freelance experts and their participants on other occasions. First Thessalonians and Romans both contain lengthy asides in which the apostle urges people not to reject human authority, to remain subject to governing authorities, to live quietly and mind their own affairs, to continue working, and even to pay their taxes. Being privy to the wider context of Roman efforts to legislate against these actors reframes how we understand some of Paul's instructions for those in Christ.[59] Insofar as expulsions and proscriptions were issued in response to perceived complicity in socially disruptive behaviour, Paul's affirmations of civic responsibilities seem to guard against obvious consequences of participating in a class of religious activity that drew such attention.

Again, Paul's admissions of imprisonment, punishment and expulsion are only one of several qualities that justify treating him as a participant in that class. Nevertheless, the epistles are largely absent from discussions of early evidence for the persecution of Christians, which begin from independent witnesses like Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny and Trajan, and to a certain extent material from Acts. Yet the Pauline epistles furnish a link between later Roman punishments of Christians and the earlier pattern of legal measures exacted against a more variegated cast of specialists. Reframed in this way, Paul's letters become a rare form of evidence not only for the general phenomenon of freelance expertise, but also for how one such expert might strategically reconcile punishments with his particular set of religious claims.

IV EVIDENCE OF OTHER EARLY ACTIONS AGAINST CHRISTIANS

With the Pauline evidence to demonstrate continuity between Roman responses to freelance experts generally speaking and to Christian experts specifically, it remains to be shown how other early sources for the punishment of Christians square with the pattern of legislation that I have outlined. Outside the New Testament, Christians first appear in Tacitus' account of the Great Fire of 64 C.E., written sometime in the first quarter of the second century. According to Tacitus, a display of civic religious responses to the disaster could not dispel suspicion that Nero was behind it.[60] To counter the rumour he blamed Christians, a category of people who were already associated with immoral activities. Tacitus explains that this pernicious *superstitio* had been checked momentarily when its instigator and namesake was sentenced by Pontius Pilate. It soon broke out again, not only in Judea but also in Rome, where all shameful things in the world converge and are celebrated.[61] Several Christians were arrested, investigated, and convicted on account of their disclosures, less for the crime of arson

[57] Joseph., *AJ* 18.65–84.
[58] Rom. 2:17–24.
[59] 1 Thess. 4; Rom. 13:1–7.
[60] Tac., *Ann.* 15.44.
[61] Tac., *Ann.* 15.44.12–17.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S007543581500091X Published online by Cambridge University Press

than for hatred of humankind. Some were covered with animal skins and torn to death by dogs, others set ablaze as torches.[62]

As many scholars have pointed out, Tacitus' use of the term Christian is somewhat anachronistic for the Neronian period, a consideration that does not preclude the possibility that they were implicated in Nero's response to the fire since Paul attests to some degree of familiarity at Rome with teachings and practices involving Christ around that time.[63] If we are to believe his statements about imprisonment and other punishments suffered on account of his gospel, then we also know of at least one mid-first-century authority on Christ who was penalized for his activities.[64] In other words, regardless of whether Tacitus dramatizes the plight of the Christians at Nero's expense, or whether the story is a later Christian interpolation, it would not be implausible for apostles and followers of Christ to crop up in that scenario for their affinity with a wider class of religious actors regularly called into question for such reasons.

Suetonius is terser in his account, saying only that Nero severely punished many abuses during his reign, including the activities of Christians, a class of people prone to a new and nefarious *superstitio*.[65] As part of the same sweep Nero curtailed conspicuous consumption, revoked the customary immunity of charioteers, who had earned a reputation for cheating and robbing, and banished actors and their partisans. Suetonius offers no commentary on how Christians were punished, nor does he explicitly connect any of these measures to the Great Fire. Although they are the only recipients who are linked with religious activity, the fact that Christians were co-implicated with belligerent charioteers and actors belies a more general concern about the propensity of these groups for public disturbance.

Aside from certain hyperbolic details, which if original are *à propos* of the despot who issued them, these punishments, too, accord with measures undertaken by Roman authorities on other occasions to manage the activities of freelance experts. As he glosses the identity of Christians for his readers, Tacitus captures a dynamic we have now observed severally: a Roman magistrate attempts to quell a form of religious activity by punishing its instigator, with the unintended result that it redounds and spreads, requiring renewed and even harsher suppressive measures. Pliny experiences this frustrating predicament firsthand. After interrogating people accused of being Christians once, twice, and then a third time with the threat of capital punishment, it is with options exhausted that he orders the execution of those unwilling to recant.[66] Extreme though his actions may seem, they are consistent with the opportunities extended to practitioners of problematic religious practices on other occasions, for instance, in Suetonius' recollection of astrologers who escaped expulsion by promising to give up their craft.[67]

Although Pliny's letter to Trajan does not dwell on the culpability of specialists, it is important to keep in mind that at the time he wrote, some fifty years after Paul, Christian forms of religion might have evolved from entrepreneurial offerings to a kind of religious activity that more closely resembled voluntary associations.[68] Nevertheless, Pliny's handling of Christians aligns in key areas with earlier legislation against

[62] Although the authenticity of these graphic details has been called into question, if original Tacitus seems to include them foremost as evidence of Nero's draconian cruelty. However, the characterization is in keeping with portraits of Nero that we receive from other sources. See Coleman 1990; Potter 1993: 67.

[63] This is most obvious in Romans, which Paul writes to people whom he has never met but who seem to have some prior knowledge of Christ. I am not suggesting, however, that these sources attest to the presence of a population of Roman 'Christians' in the 60s.

[64] This is not to say that Paul's imprisonment *was* the result of the fire, although nothing excludes this possibility.

[65] Suet., *Ner.* 16.2.

[66] Plin., *Ep.* 10.96.2.5–6.

[67] Suet., *Tib.* 36.1.

[68] e.g. Joseph., *AJ* 14.213–16; Suet., *Jul.* 42; *Aug.* 32.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S007543581500091X Published online by Cambridge University Press

specialists, particularly with respect to the kinds of social dynamics undergirding those episodes. Casting Christian practices as a contagion to be checked and cured, he cites the desertion of temples, an intermission in regular religious observances, and a flagging market for sacrificial animals as the impetus for his investigation.[69] Although he makes special note of the defiant attitude (*contumacia*) of the accused, it would appear that his interest in Christians stems from their alleged impact on local social practices and institutions.

If we return to some of the non-Christian examples discussed above, further connections between Pliny's letter and the specialist phenomenon might be inferred. Consider, for instance, the rôle of informants, solicited and compensated by the Roman officials, who identified Bacchic worshippers that they might then be arrested, questioned, and punished.[70] Pliny reports that accusations against Christians had multiplied, as is usually the case, merely because the matter was being scrutinized.[71] He questions the value of a publicly published *libellus* of undisclosed authorship, which Trajan deems inadmissible, echoing Nerva, who outlawed such informing on Judaic practices.[72] Paul also mentions the slanderous charges of informants when he mentions certain 'false brothers' brought in to spy on a private meeting of the apostles in Jerusalem.[73]

Like Paul himself, specialists might bridge multiple categories of expertise, with the result that the precise actors affected by an edict might only be clarified in practice by the testimony of aggrieved observers with a vested interest in informing on suspicious activity. Furthermore, enforcement was not always a feasible task and seems to have depended, at least in part, on the voluntary participation of the public. Speaking to the latter challenge, Suetonius notes that Vitellius grew hostile to astrologers after issuing an edict that banned them from the city, to which they responded by posting a placard assuring that he would no longer be alive on the specified date.[74] What these examples suggest is that the actual specialists incriminated in a piece of legislation were not always self-evident, and might only come to light through accusation or self-incrimination.

While scholars often concede that Roman officials rarely took action against Christians on their own initiative, too little attention has been paid to clues of competition among rival experts and existing institutions that pervade Christian writings and could shed light on why, and by whom, Christians were brought to the attention of governing authorities.[75] Such indications recur throughout the narrative of Acts, for instance, when Paul is dragged before local magistrates after he exorcises the prophetic *daimōn* from a female belly-talker (ἐγγαστρίμυθος) who had earned a great deal of money for her masters by foretelling the future. His accusers charge that he has thrown Philippi into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for Romans to accept or practise.[76] Likewise, in Ephesus Paul has an altercation with a silversmith who fears that his business of casting sacred images of Artemis will decline because he teaches that gods made by human hands are not really gods.[77]

On the subject of Acts, it is worth noting that its author locates the apostles in the phenomenon of freelance expertise and even illustrates the consequences of engaging in this class of activity as they are regularly expelled from the cities they visit, examined by

[69] Plin., *Ep.* 10.96.9.5–6.
[70] Livy 39.14.6.3–4.
[71] Plin., *Ep.* 10.96.5.
[72] Plin., *Ep.* 10.97.2; Dio Cass. 68.1.2.
[73] Gal. 2:4–5.
[74] Suet., *Vit.* 14.4–5.
[75] See also Rives 1996: 200–2, who notes that many of the incidents in the Acts (e.g. 18:12–17, 21:27–26:32), as well as the initial disturbance leading to the execution of Christians in Lugdunum and Vienna in 177 C.E. (Euseb., *HE* 5.1.7–8), seem to have involved other people charging individual Christians before various Roman officials.
[76] Acts 16:16–40.
[77] Acts 19:23–41.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S007543581500091X Published online by Cambridge University Press

city officials, and imprisoned or otherwise punished. In Acts 18:2, Priscilla and Aquila are even introduced as exiles from Italy, who came to Corinth after Claudius had ordered all Judeans to leave Rome. At the same time, however, the author is careful to show that unlike other specialists with cameos in his story — Theudas, Bar-Jesus or Elymas, Simon Magus, Judean exorcists, Athenian philosophers, and practitioners of magical arts, who spontaneously burn their books upon learning about Christ — the apostles are *legitimate* purveyors of true teachings and real divine power; their ability to prevail in the face of opposition is precisely what distinguishes them from those other figures.

That competion was rife among freelance rivals is well attested by non-Christian and Christian sources alike, but it is often overlooked how many first- and second-century Christian writings cast non-Christian experts as opponents second only to 'heretics' and Judaizers. In addition to the cast of specialists in Acts, the *Didache* urges readers neither to practise divination, magic or sorcery, nor to use incantations or astrology or rites of purification, nor even to wish to see or hear these things.[78] Justin denounces Simon Magus and Menander as false authorities on Christ, who used beguiling 'magical' arts to attract a great following at Rome in the time of Claudius.[79] He also argues that an emperor who is persuaded by those who conjure the dead (νεκρομαντεῖαι), *magoi* and their assistants (πάρεδροι), dream-senders (ὀνειροπομποί), and philosophers should also be willing to entertain Christian beliefs.[80] Justin admits that certain philosophers have, at times, deservedly received punishment without compromising more esteemed philosophers or the schools with which the culprits claimed affiliation.[81] Hence he proposes criteria for discerning 'true' Christians from those who might pose as such but who actually deserve the punishments being inflicted indiscriminately on anyone by that name.[82]

Adjusted for perspective, Christian sources can also be triangulated with the polemical accounts of writers who decry the toxic effects of freelance expertise. For instance, the episode motivating Justin's *Second Apology*, the arrest of a Christian named Ptolemy at the instigation of a man whose wife divorced him after receiving instruction in Christian teachings, bears an unmistakable similarity to Josephus' account of Egyptian and Judean religious experts who were similarly punished.[83] After a period of imprisonment Ptolemy appeared before Rome's urban prefect and was executed, along with two additional men who questioned the sentence because Ptolemy had not been convicted of any crime, but was killed only for being a Christian.

Justin's narrative may differ in perspective from that of a writer like Josephus but it shares a number of structural affinities with accounts that we have seen: a specialist in novel religious practices or teachings influences a woman, whose husband reports him to a Roman authority on charges of adultery or theft. Although one might assume that the prefect of Justin's story, if reliable, punished Christians on account of their religious beliefs, I find it more plausible that he took 'Christians' to be akin to *magi, Chaldaei, mathematici, Iudaei,* diviners, initiators, and so on. I would even venture to suggest that the famous complaint of Christians garnering suspicion and being punished 'for the name alone' is less poignant when one considers that the fate of any other type of expert seems to have hung in the balance of being identified as a participant in a form of activity that was presently under investigation. In other words, a practitioner of

[78] Acts 16:6, 19:18–19; *Didache* 3.4. See also Smith 1978. While I do not find charlatan to be a useful category, I share Smith's instinct to situate early Christian figures amidst other freelance experts in religion.
[79] Justin, *1 Apol.* 56.2; 2 *Apol.* 15.1.
[80] Justin, *1 Apol.* 18.3–6.
[81] Justin, *1 Apol.* 4.7–8.
[82] Justin, *1 Apol.* 26.1–5.
[83] Justin, 2 *Apol.* 2.1–20. The literary unity of the *Second Apology* is debated and some have proposed that the story of Ptolemy was initially an independent document. See Parvis 2007.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S007543581500091X Published online by Cambridge University Press

astrology might fall under suspicion and incur penalty merely by virtue of having been labelled an 'astrologer'.

From the other side of the looking-glass, then, early Christian writings offer further insight into the tactics and dynamics we have seen already with respect to Roman efforts to regulate the activities of freelance experts. In a rather striking admission, Tertullian admits that even though Christians pose no problem to Roman authorities, there are certain people who may truly complain of suffering losses on account of the religion of Christians: *venenarii, magi, haruspices, harioli, mathematici*. 'To be unprofitable to such as these', he qualifies, 'is in itself profitable'.[84] Inasmuch as all varieties of freelance experts rivalled one another for clients interested in novel or exotic wisdom traditions, rarified teachings, divinatory methods, and other religious practices, Tertullian's statement provides a tantalizing glimpse of Christian participation within a specific and more variegated class of specialists. And, in keeping with the evidence that we have considered above, it would be wholly unsurprising if such rivalries account for some of the negative attention that Christians seem to have drawn, at least in the first and second centuries. This is not to suggest that they were deserving of punishment, but to reiterate that from a Roman perspective they fell into a class of activity that had repeatedly provoked such responses. Likewise, most specialists were vulnerable to the sort of concerns that Christians, rightly or wrongly, might be seen to pose.[85] In raising such alarms, Christians mirrored a then familiar precedent set by numerous freelance experts over the course of the preceding century.

V BEYOND CULTS AND COMMUNITIES

It has become something of a commonplace that with few exceptions the Romans usually allowed foreign peoples to cultivate their gods in a customary manner. Although they might occasionally take issue with certain cults or rites, it was only in the case of Christians that they saw fit to suppress *an entire religion*. To quote Rives again, 'Roman authorities might forbid certain rituals such as human sacrifice or prohibit the activities of particular religious functionaries such as the Druids, but they otherwise allowed people to worship their traditional deities more or less as they pleased … The Roman repression of Christianity thus appears to constitute an anomaly in what we might call Roman religious policy, and scholars have long attempted to account for it.'[86] On the contrary, I would suggest that many of the exceptions scholars have in mind when they note the Romans' general tolerance for foreign religion involved freelance experts and their followers, and that actions against Christians are best understood in this light.

Rather than view such occasions as revocations of permission to maintain native forms of religion for one reason or another, or as evidence of inconsistent attitudes toward particular disciplines, we might instead consider that such legislation had a more limited target, one that transects different ethnic populations and categories but was specific to none. In other words, what are perceived as minor inconsistencies in Roman attitudes toward the religion of Egyptians, Judeans, and Persians, or categories of practice such as philosophy and astrology, may have been a matter of freelance experts acting in those

[84] Tert., *Apol.* 43.

[85] Such concerns range from atheism to exclusivity to fanaticism to moral pretensions to rumours of secret rites to effects on local economies. A comprehensive list of grievances about Christians appears in Walsh and Gottlieb 1992; Rives 2011: 210. I largely agree with Rives' suggestion that reducing the reasons for popular hostility to Christians to mere religious matters obscures broader aspects of these concerns, although I am inclined to locate these broader aspects in freelance expertise, rather than (only) in the Christians' perceived refusal to identify with local communities.

[86] Rives 2011: 199–200.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S007543581500091X Published online by Cambridge University Press

different capacities. Against this backdrop, Christians would not have been analogous to foreign populations with their traditional gods and observances, but to a more specific set of entrepreneurial religious actors. That is, theirs was a form of religion — really, many forms of religion — among other offerings propagated by freelance experts. Thus situated, Roman efforts to repress Christians are not anomalous but par for the course.

The prominent rôle of specialists in our Christian sources (not to mention in the composition of many of those sources) has been largely neglected owing, I suspect, to notions of *sui generis* 'communities of believers' that dominate explanations of the origins and spread of Christianity. As Stanley Stowers has noted, such narratives lack accounts of how Christian groups developed in terms of ordinary social processes because they proceed from the assumption, reinforced by later Christian myths of origin, that these communities both formed organically and were highly coherent in thought and practice.[87] While a writer like Paul certainly laboured to produce circles of followers dedicated to his teachings and enlisted copious identity rhetoric in the service of this ambition, his ideal (and apparently unrealized) 'community' vision is simply that, an ideal, which he pursued through a number of tactics internal to his audiences. It is productive to study these tactics as evidence of how a freelance expert interested in forming groups might actually evoke and sustain them, but our task as scholars should be to translate such efforts and their resulting social formations into broader analytic terms.

Nevertheless, the scholarly habit of referring to Pauline and other early Christian forms of religion as 'communities' ultimately makes them incomparable with other first-century groups. Continuities between the wider specialist phenomenon and Christian forms of religion are more apparent, however, when the types of social formations imagined for early Christians are redescribed in terms that are consistent with the regular followings that formed around individuals who fit the mould of traditional experts with similar group-making interests.[88] As we learn from sources like the Pauline epistles and the *Didache*, such groups might then continue to be served by other freelance experts, whether the latter were affiliated with an original founder or departed from his or her teachings and practices.

As I suggested earlier, the problems that attend treating Christians as an undifferentiated religious community, or a network of communities, are not entirely absent from other studies of Roman religious regulation. Many explanations for the legislative actions considered in the first part of this article also posit a single type of social formation (i.e. cults or communities) as their intended recipients, even when the sources point to individual experts who were not necessarily linked with a larger entity.[89] As in the case of Christian punishments, the circumstances underlying these episodes are dismissed in favour of more symbolic explanations (e.g. concerns about Rome's religious purity or Roman identity). To be sure, there is ample fodder for these interpretations in the discourses that surround regulatory incidents. Many ancient authors who record them lament the contamination of foreign *superstitio* or otherwise pathologize the parties involved.[90] However, the discursive justifications for these events are not plain indicators of what warranted them.[91] Although the commentaries of Roman authors undoubtedly

[87] Stowers 2011b: 243–4.

[88] For example, Harland 2003; 2009; Stowers 2011c; Kloppenborg 2013.

[89] See also Ripat 2011. Similar assumptions crop up elsewhere in studies of the Empire's religious history. The topic of religious mobility, to name but one example, is typically analysed in terms of the movement of existing cults, without much consideration of the rôle and interests of the individual actors who were likely inseparable from many of these processes. See the important treatment of this topic by Simon Price (2012), whose insights are otherwise entirely compatible with the lens of freelance expertise.

[90] Tacitus speaks of freedpersons *infected* by *ea superstitione* in reference to practitioners of *iudaica* and *aegyptiaca*, and also in his characterization of Christians. Pliny, too, uses such language when he writes to Trajan about his problem with Christians.

[91] See Rives 2006; Otto 2013.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S007543581500091X Published online by Cambridge University Press

capture certain sentiments about self-authorized expertise, it is less clear to what extent, if any, the magistrates who issued legislation were influenced by such opinions.

In this article I have argued that the selective fashion in which regulatory measures have been studied makes it difficult to see that many of the occasions on which Roman magistrates issued religious legislation involved freelance experts rather than aggregate entities. The approach that I have proposed seeks more specific impetus for these events while also adding a layer of complexity to studies that posit structural or symbolic factors as the Romans' primary motivation for taking action against particular religious experts and forms of religion. I have also theorized a relationship between the recipients of these measures that does not depend on their exact claims, methods, or affiliations — in other words, whether they were experts in Judean wisdom, authorities on Christ, or diviners of planetary movements — but on their participation in a common field of religious activity within the Empire's motley religious landscape.[92] Acknowledging the different kinds of religiosity comprising our existing scholarly categories allows for greater explanatory power than attributing legislative incidents to general, fluctuating anxieties about foreign peoples and their *superstitiones*, and may help to resolve apparent contradictions in the status of phenomena that were variously protected and restricted at Rome.[93]

The possibility that the plight of Christians is continuous with measures directed against assorted freelance experts invites, in turn, another conclusion, that it was from this particular class of religious activity that the earliest authorities on Christ arose, and within it that Christian forms of religion, in their full range of diversity, took shape. With Christians located within a wider class of activity, we are better positioned to investigate whether, and if so why, they became notable recipients of measures commonly employed to manage it. Lucian, for example, attributes their disregard for authority to the fact that 'the poor wretches have convinced themselves … that they are going to be immortal and live for all time, in consequence of which they despise death and even willingly give themselves into custody, most of them'.[94] Although we must exercise caution both in weighing Lucian's comment, and in assuming that such expectations were uniquely Christian, we might ask how afterlife-oriented forms of religion might embolden participants to court punishment, even death.[95] Or, in view of the favourable stakes that punishments might entail, we might consider how these stakes would have risen as rival specialists actively solicited them.[96]

To bring the discussion full circle, as an example of how some freelance experts reconciled punishments with their proprietary religious claims and expectations, early Christian writings constitute a rare and invaluable body of evidence.[97] For all of their drama and subjectivity, these texts are no less valuable as witnesses to the impact of Roman regulatory measures upon the broader class of activity from which they are excerpted. In the absence of comparable accounts from other recipients of this legislation, however, it is important to recognize the extent to which the perspectives of one set of affected actors skew our impression of its aim and scope.

Wright State University
heidi.wendt@wright.edu

[92] Content is still crucial for capturing a specialist's self-positioning, frame of reference, recognition, and aptitude.
[93] Ripat 2011: 116; Wendt forthcoming 2015.
[94] Lucian, *De mort. Peregr.* 13.
[95] On the heavenly rewards that awaited Christian martyrs, see Moss 2013: 207–12.
[96] The question of how to respond to this threat of punishment would become one of the most contested issues among second- and third-century Christian writers. See King 2009; Hyldahl 2011; Moss 2012: 145, 149–55.
[97] See also Potter (1993: 53, 71), who notes that Christian martyr acts illustrate the administration of Roman justice from a rare perspective: that of the victim.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S007543581500091X Published online by Cambridge University Press

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ando, C. 2009: 'Evidence and orthopraxy': a review article of J. Scheid, *Quand faire, c'est croire. Les rites sacrificiels des Romains*, *Journal of Roman Studies* 99, 171–81
Barnes, T. 1968: 'Legislation against the Christians', *Journal of Roman Studies* 58, 32–50
Barnes, T. 1969: 'An apostle on trial', *Journal of Theological Studies* 20, 407–19
Barnes, T. 1984: *Early Christianity and the Roman Empire*, London
Barton, T. S. 1994: *Power and Knowledge: Astrology, Physiognomics and Medicine under the Roman Empire*, Ann Arbor
Beard, M., North, J., and Price, S. 1998: *Religions of Rome. Volume I: A History*, Cambridge
Beck, R. 2007: *A Brief History of Ancient Astrology*, Malden
Bowersock, G. 1995: *Martyrdom and Rome*, Cambridge
Castelli, E. 2004: *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making*, New York
Coleman, K. 1990: 'Fatal charades: Roman executions staged as mythological re-enactments', *Journal of Roman Studies* 80, 44–73
Cramer, F. 1951: 'Expulsion of astrologers from ancient Rome', *Classica et Medievalia* 12, 9–50
De Ste Croix, G. 1963: 'Why were the early Christians persecuted?' *Past and Present* 26, 6–38
De Ste Croix, G. 2006: *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom and Orthodoxy*, ed. M. Whitby and J. Streeter, Oxford
Desanti, L. 1990: *Sileat omnibus divinandi curiositas: Indovini e sanzioni nel diritto romano*, Milan
Dickie, M. 2001: *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*, Oxford/New York
Edwards, C. 2007: *Death in Ancient Rome*, New Haven
Engberg-Pederson, T. 2011: *Cosmology and the Self in the Apostle Paul*, New York
Fitzgerald, J. 1988: *Cracks in an Earthen Vessel: An Examination of the Catalogues of Hardships in the Corinthian Correspondence*, Atlanta
Francis, J. 1995: *Subversive Virtue: Asceticism and Authority in the Second-Century Pagan World*, University Park
Frankfurter, D. 2002: 'Dynamics of ritual expertise in antiquity and beyond: toward a new taxonomy of "magicians"', in P. Mirecki and M. Meyers (eds), *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 114, Leiden, 159–78
Graf, F., and Johnston, S. 2013: *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife: Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets* (2nd edn), Oxford/New York
Gruen, E. 1990: *Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy*, Berkeley/Los Angeles
Haack, M.-L. 2006: *Prosopographie des haruspices romains*, Pisa/Rome
Harland, P. 2003: *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society*, Minneapolis
Harland, P. 2009: *Dynamics of Identity in the World of Early Christians: Associations, Synagogues and Congregations*, New York
Hodge, C. 2007: *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul*, New York
Hyldahl, J. 2011: 'Gnostic critique of martyrdom', in J. Engberg, U. Erikson and A. Peterson (eds), *Contextualizing Early Christian Martyrdom*, Contextualizing Early Christianity in Late Antiquity 8, Frankfurt, 119–38
Johnston, S. 2008: *Ancient Greek Divination*, Malden
King, K. 2009: 'Martyrdom and its discontents in the Tchacos Codex', in A. DeConick (ed.), *The Codex Judas Papers: Proceedings of the International Congress on the Tchacos Codex held at Rice University, Houston, Texas, March 13–16, 2008*, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 71, Leiden/Boston, 23–42
King, K. 2011: 'Factions, variety, diversity, multiplicity: representing early Christian differences for the 21st century', *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23, 216–37
King, K. 2013: 'Willingness to die for God: individualization and instrumental agency in ancient Christian martyr literature', in J. Rüpke (ed.), *The Individual in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean*, Oxford, 342–84
Klingshirn, W. 2006: 'Inventing the sortilegus: lot divination and cultural identity in Italy, Rome, and the provinces', in C. Schultz and P. Harvey Jr. (eds), *Religion in Republican Italy*, Yale Classical Studies 33, New Haven, 137–61
Kloppenborg, J. 2013: 'Membership practices in Pauline Christ groups', *Early Christianity* 4, 183–215

https://doi.org/10.1017/S007543581500091X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Leppin, H. 2007: 'Old religions transformed: religions and religious policy from Decius to Constantine', in J. Rüpke (ed.), *A Companion to Roman Religion*, Malden, 96–108
MacMullen, R. 1966: *Enemies of the Roman Order: Treason, Unrest and Alienation in the Roman Empire*, Cambridge, MA
Malherbe, A. 1989: *Paul and the Popular Philosophers*, Minneapolis
Moss, C. 2010a: *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*, New York
Moss, C. 2010b: 'On the dating of Polycarp: rethinking the place of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* in the history of Christianity', *Early Christianity* 1, 539–74
Moss, C. 2012: *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies and Traditions*, Anchor Bible Reference Library, New Haven
Moss, C. 2013: *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom*, New York
North, J. 1992: 'The development of religious pluralism', in J. Lieu, J. North and T. Rajak (eds), *The Jews among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, Oxford/New York, 174–93
Orlin, E. 2002: 'Foreign cults in Rome: rethinking the pomerial rule', *Memoirs of the American Academy of Rome* 47, 1–18
Orlin, E. 2010: *Foreign Cults at Rome: Creating a Roman Empire*, New York
Otto, B.-C. 2013: 'Towards historicizing "magic" in antiquity', *Numen* 60, 308–47
Parker, G. 2002: '*Ex oriente luxuria*: Indian commodities and Roman experience', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 45, 40–95
Parvis, P. 2007: 'Justin, philosopher and martyr: the posthumous creation of the Second Apology', in S. Parvis and P. Foster (eds), *Justin Martyr and His Worlds, Minneapolis*, 22–37
Perkins, J. 1995: *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era*, London
Pervo, R. 2010: *The Making of Paul: Constructions of the Apostle in Early Christianity*, Minneapolis
Potter, D. 1993: 'Martyrdom as spectacle', in R. Scodel (ed.), *Theater and Society in the Classical World*, Ann Arbor, 53–88
Potter, D. 1994: *Prophets and Emperors: Human and Divine Authority from Augustus to Theodosius*, Cambridge, MA
Price, S. 2012: 'Religious mobility in the Roman Empire', *Journal of Roman Studies* 102, 1–19
Rawson, E. 1985: *Intellectual Life in the Late Roman Republic*, Baltimore
Rebillard, É. 2012: *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity*, North Africa, 200–450 CE, Ithaca
Ripat, P. 2011: 'Expelling misconceptions: astrologers at Rome', *Classical Philology* 106, 115–54
Rives, J. 1996: 'The piety of a persecutor', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4, 1–25
Rives, J. 1999: 'The decree of Decius and the religion of Empire', *Journal of Roman Studies* 89, 135–54
Rives, J. 2006: 'Magic, religion and law: the case of the *Lex Cornelia de sicariis et veneficiis*', in C. Ando and J. Rüpke (eds), *Religion and Law in Classical and Christian Rome*, Stuttgart, 47–67
Rives, J. 2007: *Religion in the Roman Empire*, Malden
Rives, J. 2010: '*Magus* and its cognates in Classical Latin', in R. Gordon and F. Marco Simón (eds), *Magical Practice in the Latin West: Papers from the International Conference Held at the University of Zaragoza 30 Sept.–1 Oct. 2005*, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 168, Leiden/Boston, 53–77
Rives, J. 2011: 'The persecution of Christians and ideas of community in the Roman Empire', in G. Cecconi (ed.), *Politiche religiose nel mondo antico e tardoantico: poteri e indirizzi, forme del controllo, idée e prassi di tolleranza. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Firenze, 24–26 settembre 2009*, Bari, 199–216
Rutgers, L. 1994: 'Roman policy toward the Jews: expulsions from the city of Rome during the first century C.E.', *Classical Antiquity* 13, 56–64
Scheid, J. 1995: '*Graeco ritu*: a typically Roman way of honoring the gods', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 97, 15–31
Sherwin-White, A. N. 1952: 'The early persecutions and Roman law again', *Journal of Theological Studies* 3, 199–213
Sherwin-White, A. N. 1964: 'Why were the early Christians persecuted? – an amendment', *Past and Present* 27, 23–7
Smith, M. 1978: *Jesus the Magician: Charlatan or Son of God*, New York

https://doi.org/10.1017/S007543581500091X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Stowers, S. 1998: *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews and Gentiles*, New Haven
Stowers, S. 2008a: 'The ontology of religion', in W. Braun and R. McCutcheon (eds), *Introducing Religion: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Z. Smith*, London, 434–49
Stowers, S. 2008b: 'What is Pauline participation in Christ?' in F. Udoh *et al.* (eds), *Redefining First-Century Jewish and Christian Identities: Essays in Honor of Ed Parish Sanders*, South Bend, 352–71
Stowers, S. 2009: 'The Apostle Paul', in G. Oppy and N. Trakakis (eds), *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion I: Ancient Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford/New York, 145–58
Stowers, S. 2011a: 'The religion of plant and animal offerings versus the religion of meanings, essences and textual mysteries', in J. Knust and Z. Vårhelyi (eds), *Ancient Mediterranean Sacrifice*, New York, 35–56
Stowers, S. 2011b: 'The concept of "community" and the history of early Christianity', *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23, 238–56
Stowers, S. 2011c: 'Does Pauline Christianity resemble a Hellenistic philosophy?' in R. Cameron and M. Miller (eds), *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians*, Atlanta, 219–43
Tyson, J. 2006: *Marcion and Luke-Acts: A Defining Struggle*, Columbia, 50–78
Ullucci, D. 2013: 'Toward a typology of religious experts in the ancient Mediterranean', in C. Hodge, S. Olyan, D. Ullucci and E. Wasserman (eds), *"The One Who Sows Bountifully": Essays in Honor of Stanley K. Stowers*, Atlanta, 89–10
Wallace-Hadrill, A. 2005: '*Mutatas formas*: the Augustan transformation of Roman knowledge', in K. Galinsky (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Augustus*, Cambridge, 55–84
Wallace-Hadrill, A. 2008: *Rome's Cultural Revolution*, Cambridge/New York
Walsh, J., and Gottlieb, G. 1992: 'Zur Christenfrage im zweiten Jahrhundert', in G. Gottlieb and P. Barceló (eds), *Christen und Heiden in Staat und Gesellschaft des zweiten bis vierten Jahrhunderts: Gedanken und Thesen zu einem schwierigen Verhältnis*, Munich, 3–86
Wasserman, E. 2008: *The Death of the Soul in Romans 7: Sin, Death and the Law in Light of Hellenistic Moral Psychology*, WUNT II 256, Tübingen
Wendt, H. 2013: *At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in Early Imperial Rome*, unpub. dissertation, Brown University
Wendt, H. forthcoming 2015: '*Iudaica Romana*: a rereading of Judean expulsions from Rome', *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 6
Wendt, H. forthcoming 2016: *The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Early Roman Empire*, New York

https://doi.org/10.1017/S007543581500091X Published online by Cambridge University Press