

Laos Heteros:

The Changing Shapes of Christian Communal Identity in the Writings of Justin Martyr

David E. Nyström

Lecturer in Exegetical Theology, Johannelund School of Theology
david.nystrom@johannelund.nu

Abstract: In his *Apology*, Justin Martyr avoids referring to Christians with ethnical terms and define believers primarily as individuals rather than as a fixed community. In the *Dialogue*, this tendency is reversed; in this text Justin clearly advances the thought of Christians as a people. This article explores this difference and argues that it rises from the writer's shifting apologetic needs.

Key words: Justin Martyr, Apologetics, Christian Origins, Christian Identity, Second Century Christianity

In Acts 11:26 we learn that it was in the city of Antioch that the small but growing group of people who claimed to be followers of a recently crucified Jewish Rabbi first came to be called *Christians*. The term probably originated among opponents to the new movement, but it was soon adopted as a self-designation by the community itself – a pattern not uncommon through history. The name Christian appears early to have been associated with persecution and martyrdom, and it soon developed into a ‘badge of honour’ proudly carried by believers.¹

Yet, adopting the term Christian and developing a community identity, was a complicated process for the first believers in Jesus. One problem was that the designation ‘Christian’ came to carry different associations to different people. As a movement growing out of the Jewish matrix, Christianity was long regarded by outsiders as but one of the many sects and branches of Judaism. From the standpoint of Roman authorities, it sometimes

became associated with disloyalty and moral depravity. Another problem was that the early believers of Jesus eventually formed themselves into a plethora of different groups who denied the designation to one another. Confessing to be a Christian therefore involved coming to terms with these various associations maintained by the surrounding society and its authorities.

In the writings of the Christian apologist Justin Martyr, these tensions and concerns of early Christian identity-making come into focus, and they shape the way Christian communal identity is framed. This article explores and compares the way Justin defines the term Christian and construes Christian communal identity in his two extant writings, the *Apology* (150-155 C.E.) and the *Dialogue with Trypho* (ca 160 C.E.). How does Justin conceive of a Christian believer and what is the nature of the Christian community? These questions are relevant for both the study of early conceptions of Christian

identity, and research into the interplay between apologetics and theology in the early church. The article argues that while Justin's fundamental understanding of a Christian is consistent in his writings, the way he frames the Christian community changes in accordance with his apologetic needs.²

The *Apology*

In the first chapter of the *Apology* Justin introduces himself as writing 'on behalf of a group /.../ drawn from every race of human beings, who are being unjustly hated and abused' (1:1).³ The word 'Christian' is not found in the text until the fourth chapter where it is referred to as an accusation; 'we are accused of being Christians' (4:5). It is first in chs. 7-8 that he explicitly uses the term in reference to the people he represents, and he is then careful to fill it with his own understanding. This is surprising and atypical for official *libelli* (petitions), which at least on a rhetorical level were designed to grasp the attention of the authority to which it was submitted. In these texts, due to the sheer number of them submitted, the petitioning party needed early on to clearly and succinctly identify themselves and their concerns.⁴ One might compare with Athenagoras' *Embassy* and Tertullian's *Apology*, both of which identify the represented group as Christians already in the first chapter. Justin's hesitance towards the term 'Christian', the text itself suggests, relates to the collective stereotyping which it evoked in imperial courts as well as to the vices often associated with it. The name alone, he argues, should not constitute grounds for accusation and judgement: '[S]omething is not judged to be either good or bad by the name it is called without consideration of the actions which are associated with that name' (4:1).

Rational beliefs, a moral life and undeserved suffering is what characterizes a true Christian, according to Justin.⁵ In ch. 14, he argues that moral transformation, more than anything else, signifies a genuine follower of Christ:

'Of old we rejoiced in promiscuity, but now we embrace only temperance,' (14:2) he claims, and:

'then we hated one another and murdered one another, and, because of custom, would not even live under the same roof as those who were not of the same race, now, after the appearing of Christ, we eat at the same table, and we pray for our enemies, and try to persuade those who unjustly hate, so that those who have lived according to the good counsels of Christ might have a good hope with us of obtaining the same things from the God who is Ruler of all'. (14:3)

When Justin gives an account of what Christians believe there is surprisingly little distinctively Christian theology to be found. The teaching of Jesus, largely limited to the sermon of the Mount, is quoted and framed as a universal ethical message, which in principle could have been delivered by any ancient sage; there is nothing which typically would have been offensive to a Greek or Roman audience.⁶ Distinctly Christian theology is most commonly found in short creedal formulations⁷ or when Justin seeks to justify specific and controversial beliefs, for example the bodily resurrection (19:1-8). In the latter cases, Justin is apparently responding to real accusations against Christianity, which suggests that he raises the issues out of apologetic necessity. His method of defending potentially offensive Christian doctrines is (A) proving that they are rational and (B) showing that they are similar to what others already have believed.⁸ He seeks a common deno-

minator with the surrounding culture by emphasizing that Christian beliefs are no stranger than other ideas represented in the pluralistic Roman society. Even if they will appear strange to some, they are not harmful to society and Christians should not be punished for them. ‘Now, if anyone says that this is incredible or impossible, the delusion hurts us, and no one else, so long as it is not found that any of our actions are wrong’ (8:5).

Christians, therefore, hold to sound and moral beliefs, but they also lead moral lives. More than anything else, the *Apology* portrays the Christian as an ideal citizen.⁹ Just like Socrates and other enlightened people of old, Christians suffer and are being persecuted by people who live *aneu logou* (without reason), are subject to evil desires and under the influence of demons (5:3-4, 57:1).

Since a true Christian is defined through these criteria heretics can be identified as false Christians on the basis of unsound doctrines, immorality and the fact that they are not persecuted by the authorities.¹⁰ In this way, the term ‘Christian’ is relativized and loses any independent meaning as the fact that one calls oneself a Christian does not mean anything in and of itself. ‘[T]hey are all called Christians,’ Justin explains to the emperor, ‘[so] we ask that you always make their actions the subject of your judgement, so that a person who is found guilty might be punished as a wrongdoer, rather than as a Christian; while if anyone is seen to be guiltless he might be acquitted as a Christian who does no wrong’ (7:3-4).

Since judgments on whether or not someone, according to these criteria, should be seen as a true Christian are only made on an individual basis, the *Apology* lacks any real sense of communal Christian identity. This is suggested

already in Justin’s opening phrase when he claims to represent a group of people that has this in common that they suffer undeservedly. Apart from this one common designator, the contours of this group are curiously blurred. In consequence, the Christian community is never referred to with ethnical¹¹ language or terms such as *genos*, *ethnos*, or *laos* in the *Apology*. In early Christian apologetics, Christianity was often ‘mapped into the imaginary and constructed national and ethnic landscape’ and the ‘others’, against whom Christianity was defended, were often particular ethnic identities.¹² In Justin’s *Apology*, however, the ‘other,’ against which Christian identity is constructed, is not an ethnic community, but those who in general live *aneu logou*, without the Logos (46:4, 57:1). Christians are not conceived of as a race, but rather as an enlightened group of people vaguely defined as gathered from all nationalities and races. Inclusion or exclusion from this group is decided on individual, if not arbitrary merits.

Being a Christian is therefore not the same sort of thing as being Jewish or Greek. It is an enlightened way of life which compares better with philosophy than ethnicity. Followers of Christ are in a sense analogous to followers of Plato, though their progenitor is much greater than Plato. He is the incarnated Logos and thus the Ultimate Source of the wisdom of which Plato and the other philosophers had only received parts.¹³ Christians are individuals and should be judged as individuals according to their works, Justin argues, and therefore the idea of Christians as a separate community is deemphasized in the *Apology*. Certainly, they enjoy fellowship and partake together in enlightened rituals or mysteries¹⁴ just as, one would expect,

many other good Roman citizens do, but they pose no threat to society as a group. On the contrary, every time they meet they pray that they ‘having learnt the truth /.../ might be judged worthy also to be found through [their] deeds people who live good lives and guardians of what has been commanded’ (65:1).

In summary, Christians are ordinary citizens and their boundaries towards the rest of society consists primarily in the excellence of their lives and the fact that they are persecuted for this excellence. This they have in common with many noble people from history, who were persecuted in the same way and slandered with the same lies at the instigation of the same demons.

The *Dialogue*

Turning to the *Dialogue*, we find a very different construction of Christian communal identity. At an individual level, Christians are defined the same way as in the *Apology*; namely on the basis of beliefs, life style and suffering. Just as in the *Apology*, true Christians are contrasted with the heretics, who claim the Christian name but do not hold to the right beliefs and/or do not live according to Christian ethical standards (35:1-6). And just like in the *Apology*, Christians are presented as suffering undeservedly (17:1).¹⁵

Yet, when it comes to describing the nature of the Christian community there are significant differences from the *Apology*. In the *Dialogue* the corporate identity of the Christian community is reinforced, rather than marginalized. Why this difference? In order to answer this, one must begin with acknowledging the different subject-matters, audiences and purposes of the two treatises. First, the *Dialogue* is not a socio-philosophical defence

of Christianity the way the *Apology* is, but a competitive theological discourse. Thus the subject-matter is different. The declared or rhetorical audience is also different, namely Jewish, as opposed to pagan for the *Apology*.

But the differences go deeper and can be traced all the way to how Justin interacts with (Greek translations of) the Hebrew Scriptures. In the *Apology* Justin is generally dependent on *testimonia* sources, i.e. Christian collections of proof texts. In the *Dialogue*, however, Justin “has gained more independence in his handling of the traditional material” and has more often a “direct recourse to the LXX text.”¹⁶ Yet, the difference does not only pertain to which texts Justin uses, but perhaps more importantly to how he uses them. In the *Apology*, Justin never quotes Scripture normatively and he presents prophets rather than Scriptures as authorities.¹⁷ The prophets, a total of eight, are named and quoted as witnesses who predicted the coming of Christ, inspired by the Logos. There is no real theology of Scripture at work in the *Apology*, nor an idea of a normative collection of texts. The authority of the prophets resides in the fact that what they prophesied came true rather than in them belonging to a divinely inspired literary corpus. Justin makes no reference to the Torah and it is a revealing fact that the word *grafe*, Scripture, is not found even once in the *Apology*. The difference from the *Dialogue* is striking, in which a solid theology of Scripture is at work, the Mosaic Law is discussed thoroughly and in which the word *grafe*, in different forms, is found over a hundred times. In 51:1 Trypho responds to Justin’s exegesis of an Isaianic prophecy with the objection that ‘[a]ll the words of the prophecy which you just quoted are ambiguous /.../ and they cer-

tainly do not prove what you want them to prove,' and in 60:1 he counters another of Justin's interpretations with the words '[w]e do not draw the same conclusion from the words you quoted'. In the *Dialogue*, the controversy centres on the right interpretation of Scripture and the true nature of the people of God.

This, in turn, reflects the most important difference between the two texts, relating to our question, which is that of rhetorical purpose. In the *Apology*, Justin argues for the right for Christians to be part of and to enjoy security and justice in the Roman society. His strategy is to claim this right on an individual basis; i.e. that all citizens, regardless of what they might call themselves, have the right to be judged according to their individual actions and choices. In the *Dialogue*, the rights Justin affirms in the *Apology* are not contested and therefore they need no defence. When Justin and Trypho establish their points of contention at the beginning of their conversation, the latter concedes that the evil accusations directed towards Christians (e.g. cannibalism and sexual promiscuity) are frivolous: 'Those other charges which the rabble lodge against you are not worthy of belief, for they are too repulsive to human nature' (10:2). Trypho does not question the inclusion of Christians in the larger society, he does not criticize their morality and he does not seem to disagree with Justin's framing of Christianity as some sort of philosophy. In short, Trypho to some extent agrees with Justin's description of a Christian as found in the *Apology*, and in a sense the discussion in the *Dialogue* starts where Justin's argument in the *Apology* ends.

What Justin then responds to in the *Dialogue* is the challenge Trypho *does* issue against Christians, which is formulated as follows:

But this is what we are most puzzled about, that you who claim to be pious and believe yourselves to be different from the others do not segregate yourselves from them, nor do you observe a manner of life different from that of the Gentiles, for you do not keep the feasts or Sabbaths, nor do you practise the rite of circumcision. You place your hope in a crucified man, and still expect to receive favors from God when you disregard his commandments. Have you not read that 'the male who is not circumcised on the eighth day shall be eliminated from his people. (10:2)

In this passage Trypho primarily questions two things: first, the Christians' claim to true piety and second, though implicitly, their right to call themselves a God-fearing community. By accusing Christians collectively of not segregating themselves from the Gentiles through observing the very customs which established the communal identity of the Jewish people, and by reminding Justin that everyone who does not keep the commandments will be 'eliminated from his people,' Trypho challenges Christian sincerity and the legitimacy of their claim to be a Holy community. Christians are hypocrites, they have no right to call themselves pious, and they do not share membership of God's elected community.

We find therefore in the *Dialogue* a challenge from the opposite direction of what Justin responds to in the *Apology*. In the *Apology*, Justin defends Christians' right to be treated as individuals and not to be judged 'as Christians' in a corporate sense. What Trypho challenges, however, is the existence of any real communal identity of Christians at all. Christians do not constitute a pious community, since they do not observe a manner of life

which sets them apart from the Gentiles around them.

Thus, the discussion becomes a theological one which centres on the criteria for inclusion in God's saving economy. In order for Justin to formulate a response to Trypho, he is compelled to create arguments which grant interpretative rights of the Hebrew Scriptures to the Christians and which reinforce the Christians' communal identity. Therefore, the contrast Justin paints is not a philosophical one, such as one between wise and foolish people in general. Rather, we find a contrasting of communities, namely that of the Christians against that of the Jews. In the *Dialogue*, the ambivalence towards the Christian name found in the *Apology* is also gone; the term is immediately and unproblematically accepted as a self-designation.

In the *Dialogue*, a Christian is no longer primarily the ideal citizen, but a member of God's elected community and a true heir to the promises of sacred Scripture. Justin says to Trypho:

For the words which I use are not my own, nor are they embellished by human rhetoric, but they are the words as David sang them, as Isaiah announced them as good news, as Zechariah proclaimed them, and as Moses wrote them. Aren't you acquainted with them, Trypho? You should be, for they are contained in your Scriptures, or **rather not yours, but ours**. For we believe and obey them, whereas you, though you read them, do not grasp their spirit. (29:2, my emphasis)

And though Christianity is still framed as a philosophy in the first nine chapters of the *Dialogue*, the adherents of this philosophy are defined collectively rather than individually. The Christian community is set up as an alternative to the Jewish one,

and therefore, unlike in the *Apology*, it is presented in ethnical terms. Christianity is not just the same sort of thing as philosophy but also, and perhaps more decidedly, the same sort of thing as Judaism. In 11:5, Justin says that Christians are the true *genos* of Judah, and in 138:2 he claims that Christ founded a new *genos*. Throughout the text, the idea that Christians have replaced the Jews as God's elected people is implied, and in ch 119 it is stated explicitly:

And after that Just One was put to death, we blossomed forth as another people [*laos heteros*], and sprang up like new and thriving wheat, as the prophets exclaimed /.../ But we Christians are not only a people, but a holy people [*laos hagios*], as we have already shown /.../ Wherefore not only are we not a contemptible people, nor a tribe of barbarians, nor just any nation as the Carians or the Phrygians, but God even chose us, and appeared to those who did not seek him. /.../ For this is really the nation promised of old to Abraham by God, when he told him that he would make him a father of many nations. /.../ Thus, God promised Abraham a religious and righteous nation [*ethnos*] of like faith, and a delight to the Father, but it is not you, in whom there is no faith." (119:3-6)

In the *Apology*, *laos* occurs mostly in quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures and almost exclusively in reference to the Jewish nation. Therefore, the mere fact that Justin later, in the *Dialogue*, chooses to call Christians a *laos* suggests that he views the Christian community as an entity comparable to the Jewish nation. And that he adds the adjectives *heteros* and *hagios* reveal his ambition to define Christians over and against the Jews as God's elected community. The term 'Holy People' derive from the Hebrew Deutero-

nomistic tradition, in which Holy, in Beentjes' words, 'does not refer to ethical standard, nor morality or piety, but to [the people's] special and privileged status, which is completely owing to God's initiative.'¹⁸ By calling Christians a Holy People, Justin lays claim to the Jews' status as God's elected community. This conclusion is confirmed when he a few sentences later explicitly states that Christians, rather than the Jews, constitute the *ethnos* promised to Abraham.

Conclusion

In the *Apology* the issue which Justin addresses is exclusion of Christians from the good society. His strategy is to claim continuity with formerly persecuted but now highly respected philosophers and by framing Christianity as a philosophy equally or even more enlightened than those represented by these ancient sages. In the *Dialogue* the point of contention is the nature of God's elected community and who may be considered a part of it. In response to this question, Justin uses a different set of strategies than in the *Apology*.

In Justin's view, the claims of both Jews and Christians to constitute the people of God are mutually exclusive. They cannot both be true and therefore, it is not enough to just seek acceptance from the Jews. Justin has to find a way to turn the tables and make a double point. Claiming the identity as God's unique people for the Christians implies denying it to the Jews, and therefore the Jews must have been rejected by God, replaced, as it were, by the Christians. And in order to replace the Jews, the Christian community must be framed as the same sort of thing as the Jewish community, namely as a group with clear boundaries or as a people. As a consequence, the individual aspect of Christian identity, which

is the dominating theme in the *Apology*, is not lost but markedly deemphasized in the *Dialogue*. This change does not necessarily imply a development in thought. It does, however, reveal a proclivity and ingenuity for apologetic adaptation in this ancient writer.

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Notes

1. See Judith M. Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 250-259).
2. I am here following a majority view among scholars, which holds that Justin's *First and Second Apology*, in some way, should best be seen as a unity, though for the purposes of this article, I have largely confined myself to the *First Apology*. For discussions on the topic, see Paul Parvis, "Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: The Posthumous Creation of the Second Apology," in *Justin Martyr and His Worlds*, ed. Sara Parvis and Paul Foster (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).
3. Quotes from the *Apology* are taken from Denis Minns and Paul Parvis, *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies*. Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: OUP, 2009), and for the *Dialogue*, Michael Slusser (ed.), *Dialogue with Trypho*. Selections from the Fathers of the Church (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), is used.
4. Fergus Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World (31 BC - AD 337)*. 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1992), 161.
5. For a more in-depth treatment of Christian identity in the *Apology*, see David E. Nyström, *The Apology of Justin Martyr: Literary Strategies and the Defence of Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 65-69. See also David E. Nyström, "Antiquity and Novelty in Justin Martyr's *First Apology*" in "*Må de nu förklara...*" *Om bibeltexter, religion, litteratur. Festskrift till Staffan Olofsson* eds. Rosmari Lillas-Schuil, Gunnar Samuelsson, Georg Walser, Tobias Ålöw (Göteborg: LIR, Institutionen för litteratur, idéhistoria och religion, Göteborgs universitet, 2016), 249-259.
6. See chs 15-17.
7. 6:2, 13:3-4, 31:7, 46:5.
8. See e.g. 13:3, 18:5-6, 20:4-5.
9. E.g. 5:1, 17:1, and 65:1.
10. 'And we request that those who do not live according to his teachings, and are only called Christians, be punished by you as well' (16:14). 'And whoever are not found living as he taught are not to be recognized as Christians, even if they speak the teachings of Christ with their tongues' (16:8). 'But that they [heretics] are not persecuted nor killed by you - at least because of their doctrines - we are sure' (26:7).
11. As Buell has pointed out, ethnicity should primarily be understood in social rather than biological terms: 'Ethnicity is a flexible type of discourse about collective identities and the boundaries between groups, but it is one in which naturalizing appeals to common origins regularly feature' (D. K. Buell, *Making Christians: Clement of Alexandria and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 105.
12. Aaron P. Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' Praeparatio Evangelica*, ed. Gillian Clark and Andrew Louth, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: OUP, 2006), 1-10, quote from 9.
13. 46:2-4, cf. 2 *Apol* 8:1.
14. The Christian practises of baptism, Eucharist and Sunday worship are accounted for in chs 65-67.
15. 17:1. Christians are on this point contrasted also to the Jews, whose suffering Justin acknowledges. The difference is that the Jews, as opposed to the Christians, have deserved their suffering (cf. 16:2 and 19:2).
16. Oskar Skarsaune *The Proof from Prophecy: A Study in Justin Martyr's Proof-Text Tradition: Text-Type, Provenance, Theological Profile*. (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 426. See also Martin C. Albl. "And Scripture Cannot be Broken": *The Form and Function of the Early Christian Testimonia Collections*. (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 101-106.
17. For a more developed argument on this, see Nyström, *Apology*, 130-136.
18. Pancratius C. Beentjes, "'Holy People': The Biblical Evidence," in *A Holy People: Jewish and Christian Perspectives on Religious Communal Identity*, eds. Marcel Poorthuis and Joshua Schwartz, *Jewish and Christian Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 13-14.