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The Transformation of Christianity from a Cult of *superstitio* to the only *religio uera* During the Fourth Century

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The purpose of this article is to examine the process which saw the transformation of Christianity from being a cult of *superstitio*, only one of many cults in the religious mix of the later Roman Empire, to becoming the only *religio uera* by the end of the fourth century CE in a diametric reversal of fortune. The period also saw the development of the concept of a correct and exclusive licit religious identity for the first time in Roman history. I will first of all look at the meaning of the terms *superstitio* and *religio*, their development during the period covered and also see how they were used by various Roman authors. I will then take the process further by investigating briefly how two of the most important Christian authors of the period defined them when they strove to convince their audience of the rightness of their cause and of their beliefs.

Though Constantine initially promulgated full religious tolerance for all in the Edict of Milan, CE 313 and ‘there is certainly no clear evidence for a simple campaign by Constantine and his successors against paganism’,¹ the persecuted Christians of the early centuries of the new religion gradually became the persecutors as the fourth century advanced. During the whole of this period, pre- and post-Constantinian, Christian writers produced *Apologiae* in which they tried to sell their sect to the pagan majority, very often by denigrating pagan rituals. Tertullian’s *Apologeticus* is perhaps the best known example of this, with which I deal later in the article; others include those of the first Christian Apologist, Justin Martyr (c. CE 100-165) who wrote the *Apologia* – a set of discourses propounding the supremacy of the Christian faith. The first surviving Apology is addressed to the Emperor Antoninus Pius (ruled CE 138-161) and to his adopted son, Marcus Aurelius (ruled CE 161-180), who himself was something of a philosopher. Justin appeals to these emperors and their sense of decency, arguing against the persecution directed at Christians. Another very well-known apologist is Origen (c. CE184/5-253/4) who wrote *Against Celsus* in

Greek as his last work in c. CE 248. Celsus was a Graeco-Roman philosopher who in CE 170 wrote the first extensive attack on Christian life and teaching, possibly to countermand the Apologia of Justin Martyr. The work only survives in the refutation of Origen but Celsus knew the New Testament and defended a conservative monotheism. Origen opposed Celsus’ work in eight volumes the main contrast he drew was between the human wisdom of the philosophers and the revealed truth of scripture.²

Pagans, such as Celsus and Porphyry, fought back, a process that was still going on in the latter part of the fourth century. However, during this period emperors began to legislate against aspects of paganism and this is demonstrated in the Theodosian Code which is particularly virulent against sacrifice which is described as ‘the madness of sacrifice’ in a rescript of Constantius II in CE 341.³ Further bans followed and this intensified after the accession of Theodosius I in CE 379. Legislation in CE 381 ascribed to Gratian, Valentinian II and Theodosius states,

If any madman or sacrilegious person should immerse himself in forbidden sacrifices, by day or by night as a consulter of uncertain events, and if he should suppose that he should employ or should think that he should approach a shrine or temple for the commission of such a crime, he shall know that he will be subjected to proscription.⁴

In CE 382 Gratian went further and removed the Altar of Victory from the curia and the subsidies from the state cults, the sacra publica, particularly from the Vestal Virgins. Theodosius reinforced the ban on any kind of sacrifice in further legislation of CE 391/2 and coupled this with threats against the worship of images.⁵ In CE 394, in the wake of his victory over Eugenius in the battle of Frigidus, Theodosius finally closed the temples and made all polytheistic rites illegal.⁶

However, Christian anti-pagan polemic was still necessary for many years after this legislation since in spite of it paganism lingered on. The Spaniard Prudentius wrote his Contra Symmachum in two volumes which was a response to Symmachus

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² Foster, 2010: 119.
³ C. Th. 16.10.2.
⁴ C. Th. 16.10.7.
⁵ C. Th. 16.10.12.
⁶ C. Th. 16.10.13.
(written twenty years before), which also carries on the old Christian Apologetical tradition against pagan gods and their rites. Then Augustine, writing in the post-CE 410 world after the shock of the sack of Rome, produced *Ciuitas Dei*, the first ten books of which refute the pagans’ charges that Christians brought about the fall of Rome. The first five books deal with the pagan belief that people must worship the old gods to achieve material advantages in this world, including the continuation of the Roman Empire and the supremacy of the city of Rome; books six to ten refute those who state that one must worship the old gods to gain eternal life. Finally, Paulus Orosius (c. CE 375-after 418), a disciple of Augustine, produced his *Historiarum Adversum Paganos*.

Originally *superstitio* meant a ‘standing still over something’, hence ‘amazement’, ‘wonder’ or ‘dread’. While the formation of the Latin word is clear, from the verb *superstare*, ‘to stand over, stand upon; survive’, its original intended sense lacks clarity. The Latin verb *superstare* itself is comparatively young, being ‘perhaps not ante Augustan’ and first found in Livy:

*signa alia in circo maximo cum columnis, quibus superstabant evertit* ⁸
It overturned other statues in the great circus together with the pillars on which they stood

The use of the noun by Cicero and Horace thus predates the first attestation of the verb. Greek and Latin polytheists who:

modelled their relations with the gods on political and social terms, scorned the man who constantly trembled with fear at the thought of the gods, as a slave feared a cruel and capricious master. Such fear of the gods was what the Romans called superstition. ⁹

*Superstitio* is defined in Lewis and Short as ‘excessive fear of the gods, unreasonable religious belief, superstition’. ¹⁰ As a term it was especially applied to divination and related topics from the third century BCE, originally in cults which

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came from outside Italy.\textsuperscript{11} It is seen to be used in this way in the works of Plautus and Ennius.\textsuperscript{12}

Grodzynski states that the development of the meaning of the word \textit{superstitio} has three distinct stages over the centuries from the third century BCE to the fifth century CE. Firstly in the Republican period, from the third century BCE to c.100 BCE, it possessed a meaning of divination. Secondly, from c.100 BCE to c. CE100 the definition of the word broadened to mean a deviation from the national religion of the Romans. Thirdly from the beginning of the second century until the fifth century CE the term indicated ‘la mauvais religion des autres’, latterly everything other than Christianity.\textsuperscript{13} During this third stage the connotation of \textit{superstitio} gradually became infused with a sense of wrongness. But echoes of fear of sorcerers and magic still lingered even at this late period and would still have been covered by the definition.

Many of the authors of the Late Republic and the early Empire use \textit{superstitio} in a way which indicates that they understood it to mean practices or beliefs deviating from the traditional Roman cults. Varro for example states: ‘A \textit{superstitioso dicat timeri deos, a religioso autem tantum uerieri ut parentes, non / ut hostes timeri’ (A superstitious man is one who fears the gods while the religious man is one who reveres them like his father and does not fear them as enemies).\textsuperscript{14} While Seneca says in his \textit{De Clementia}, 2.5.1 that ‘\textit{religio deos colit, superstitio uiolat}’ (religion honours the gods while superstition profanes it) and ‘\textit{superstitio error inanus est}’ (superstition is an insane error).\textsuperscript{15} Finally Cicero in \textit{De Natura Deorum} opines:

\begin{quote}
\textit{horum enim sententiae omnium non modo superstitionem tollunt in qua inest timor inanis deorum, sed etiam religionem quae deorum cultu pio continetur.}
\end{quote}

For the doctrines of all these thinkers [philosophers] abolish not only superstition, which implies a groundless fear of the gods, but also religion which consists in piously worshipping them.\textsuperscript{16}

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\textsuperscript{11} Salzman 1987: 173.
\textsuperscript{12} Salzman 1987: 173.
\textsuperscript{13} Grodzynski 1974: 59.
\textsuperscript{14} Varro in Aug. \textit{De Civ. Dei.6.9}.
\textsuperscript{15} Sen. \textit{Ep.123.16}.
\textsuperscript{16} Cic. \textit{De. Nat. Deor.1.42.117}.
\end{flushright}
This interpretation of *superstitio* can be seen applied to Christians once we get into the period of the Empire when Christians began to come to the attention of the Roman authorities and the definition of what was true *religio* to the Romans of this period - that is the rites of the *sacra publica*, the state cults, became more clearly defined. For example Suetonius in *Nero* uses *superstitio* in connection with the new cult of Christianity in a context where the author lists various laws by Nero to maintain public order. Amongst these is punishment for Christians, ‘*Afflicti suppliciis, Christiani, genus hominum superstitionis nouae ac maleficae*’ (Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition).\(^{17}\) Though *Nero* concerns events in the first century CE, Suetonius is actually writing at least fifty years later and it is possible that the term had slightly changed in usage by then. Pliny the Younger also uses *superstitio* in the sense of a foreign and depraved religion in talking of the Christians whom he had encountered as governor of Bithynia, 111-3 CE. He described Christianity as a: ‘*superstitionem prauam immodicam*’ (a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths).\(^ {18} \) Tacitus also held the same viewpoint about the new cult: ‘*repressaque in praesens exitiabilis superstitioner sumerum erumpebat*’ (suppressed for the moment, this detestable superstition erupted again).\(^ {19} \) Suetonius, Pliny and Tacitus were all near contemporaries so to some extent reflect the same attitudes.

During the early Empire, however, there is an interesting throwback of meaning to be found in Columella (c. CE 4-70) in his *De Rustica*. Here the author uses *superstitio* in its traditional sense and advises the ‘avoidance of soothsayers and diviners outside the framework of the state religion’.\(^ {20} \) It was the distrust of soothsayers and diviners outside the framework of the state religion which gave rise to the pejorative associations of the term *superstitio* from the time of Cicero, when it first appears in Roman literature in connection with divination.\(^ {21} \) However the enshrinement in law of the word as having malign religious properties dates to long after this period as I discuss later in this paper.

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\(^{17}\) Suet. *De Vit. Caes.* 6.16.
\(^{19}\) Tac. *Annals.* 15.44.5.
\(^{20}\) Col. *De Rus.* 1.8.6.
Religio in the Latin language meant ‘reverence for God or the gods, fear of the gods’.\textsuperscript{22} It is not, however, an exact opposite of superstitio because to be superstitious one first must be religious.\textsuperscript{23} Superstitio can rather be seen more as a type of religion, albeit one that often has maleficent properties. Religio in a transference of meaning could also mean ‘devotion or scrupulousness, a system of religious belief’,\textsuperscript{24} and is certainly used in this way in Late Antiquity in the letters of Quintus Aurelius Symmachus (c. CE 340-402). In the sense of ‘reverence of the gods’ the term was applied to the sacra publica. It could also be attributed to other polytheistic cults as in Ep.1.20.1 where Symmachus writes to his friend Ausonius ‘Camena\-rum religio sacro fontis aduer\-titur’ (so the cult of the Muses is turned towards their sacred fountain).

Religio could also mean the holiness or sacredness inherent in any religious object; for example a deity, temple, or sacred vessels. It is used in this way by Cicero in Verr. 2.4.44: ‘propter singularem eius fani religionem’ (on account of the singular sanctity of his temple). In Late Latin the term came to be applied to Christianity as the pagan Ammianus demonstrates: ‘Christianam religionem absolutam et simplicem anili superstitione confundens’ (The plain and simple religion of the Christians he [Constantius] obscured by a dotard’s superstition).\textsuperscript{25} This is a very interesting passage showing quite clearly how, by the late fourth century when Ammianus wrote his history, Christianity could be described by a pagan as a religio, not a superstitio. This usage can be contrasted with that of another pagan Symmachus in Relatio 3.16 (written in CE 384) where he tells the Emperors that ‘sacrilegio annus exaruit. necesse enim fuit perire omnibus, religionibus negabatur’ (It was blasphemy that dried up the year’s yield; and it was bound to follow that all would perish, for religion [that is religio in the old sense of the traditional cults] was being denied its proper support).\textsuperscript{26}

Symmachus is here clinging to the old usage, while Ammianus uses the word religio in the new way meaning Christianity, in spite of his own religious affiliation. It is

\textsuperscript{22} Lewis and Short 1955: 1556.
\textsuperscript{23} Grodzynski 1974: 40.
\textsuperscript{24} Grodzynski 1974: 40.
\textsuperscript{25} Amm. 21.16.18.
\textsuperscript{26} Symm. Rel. 3.16.
possible that Ammianus is making a legal distinction between the two terms of religio and superstitio as the latter came to be codified in law as a term of religious denigration during the fourth century. It is first seen legally in use in a rescript of Antoninus Pius, mid-second century, which has been handed down to us by the jurist Ulpian. Superstitio here means a particular religion but is not used in a pejorative way. This usage, however, was to change dramatically.

In her exhaustive examination of the changing use of the term superstitio in the Theodosian Code, Salzman has demonstrated very clearly how the utilisation of the word shifted during the course of the fourth century and beyond. Thus this term, once the prerogative of un-Roman religious practices, which would have included Christianity, became attached in an extremely abusive way to polytheistic practices in general. Religio was now Catholic Christianity, superstitio the un-Roman rituals of paganism including the sacra publica and any other religious deviations from the norm. It is with the legal texts from the end of the third through to the fifth centuries that superstitio as a legal term becomes tainted with malign properties. However it was not just pagans who were singled out to be guilty of superstitio as the term also applied to Jews and Christian heretics. The Theodosian Code describes any religion other than Christianity as aliena superstitio. The laws as applied to pagans, discussed earlier in the article, are laid out in the Theodosian Code, 16.10. Adjectives applied to superstitio in the laws against paganism in the Code include damnabilis and uana.

This dramatic change of emphasis can also be seen in the Christian literature of the period. Christians started to use the terms ‘pagans’ and ‘paganism’ to define, describe and indeed defile their opponents, trying in this way to unify all beliefs but their own under an umbrella of otherness. The term pagani denotes rusticity and rustic beliefs, a far cry from the rarefied opinions of the Neoplatonic philosophers or those of the aristocracy who still clung to the ancient cults. It labelled those holding such beliefs as provincials, and even outsiders, from Roman society. By giving one’s

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27 Ulp. Dig. 12.2.5.1; Grodzynski 1974: 55.
29 Grodzynski 1974: 56.
30 C.Th. 16.2.5, CE 323
31 C.Th. 16.10.17-18, CE 399.
32 Kahlos 2011: 166.
opponents a derogatory name, we, who are the norm, who ‘belong’, define their
otherness and difference.\textsuperscript{33} Other ways to define difference are to label the
opposition stupid or mad; those who profess paganism are categorised as \textit{stolidus},
foolish, in an Imperial edict of CE 425.\textsuperscript{34} The Christian author of the late fourth
century \textit{Carmen Contra Paganos} portrays a pagan senator as having madness of
mind, \textit{insania mentis}.\textsuperscript{35} Polytheists could also be likened to children or women, which
was meant to demean their intellectual ability. For example Augustine depicts
pagans as children who play in the mud.\textsuperscript{36} This is not to say that Christian writers of
the pre-Constantinian period did not consider those who followed pagan cults as
deviant and themselves as superior. Tertullian, whom I discuss in the next section,
certainly regarded everything other than Christianity and its adherents as wrong and
inferior. This approach however becomes much more focused and prevalent during
the fourth century as Christianity became the dominant religion.

I now want to examine the use of \textit{superstitio/religio} in two of the most eminent of the
Christian apologists. These are Tertullian and Firmicus Maternus. Tertullian was one
of the greatest of the apologists of the pre-Constantinian period. He was North
African and a convert to Christianity, who must be seen as one of the giants of the
early Church. Author of a plethora of works devoted to the Christian faith, we are
here concerned with his \textit{Apologeticus}; composed c. CE 197 it is his literary
masterpiece. Tertullian is extremely single-minded in his approach, devoted to
Christianity which is the only true faith. Though Tertullian calls for freedom of religion
and freedom from persecution for Christians, whose martyrdom he feels has in fact
spread the faith; he also proceeds to refute the notion that Rome ruled the world
because of the worship of its gods. Christianity, not paganism, is the only possible
religion to follow so his freedom of religion is not really freedom at all. In the
\textit{Apologeticus}, 24.7, Tertullian blasts the Egyptians:

\begin{quote}
Atque ideo et Aegyptiis permissa est tam uanae superstitionis potestas
auibus et bestii consconcrandis et capite damnandis qui aliquem
huiusmodi deum occiderit
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{33} Kahlos 2011: 168. \\
\textsuperscript{34} C.Th. 15.5.5. \\
\textsuperscript{35} Carm. Contr. Pag, 30; Kahlos 2011: 172. \\
\textsuperscript{36} Aug. Sermo, 62.16.
\end{flushright}
Why, the Egyptians are allowed full freedom in their empty superstition to make gods of birds and beasts and to condemn to death any who may kill a god of that sort.

Later in the same passage, 24.9 he states ‘Sed nos soli arcemur a religionis proprietate’ (But we alone are forbidden a religion of our own). Here we have a clear example of the distinction that Christians of this period already made: religio is Christianity, and superstition is pagan nonsense. Tertullian is equally damning just after this passage at the beginning of Section 25.1 when he says, ‘Satis quidem mihi uideor probasse de falsi et uera diuinitate’ (I think I have proved enough as to false and true deity). It is obvious which Tertullian regards as the true and which the false divinity.

In spite of the legalisation of Christianity under Constantine, the fourth century saw the continuation of apologetic writing on both sides of the divide. In his many works Eusebius of Caesarea helped to promote the establishment of the Christian cause during the reign of Constantine. There were still many pagans as the century reached its mid-point, but it was nevertheless during this period that the serious conversion of the aristocracy, many of whom especially in Rome itself were still convinced polytheists, began. One of these aristocrats is my second main example of a Christian apologist, Firmicus Maternus. Originally an ardent pagan, between CE 337 and 340 Firmicus wrote the Mathesis which is a long work devoted to astrology. In this Firmicus uses the word superstition to refer to excessive fear produced by certain pagan rites; this is similar to the original use of the word in the Roman Republic. Converted to a devout Christianity he later wrote an anti-pagan tract called De Errore Profanarum Religionum between CE 346 and 350 in which he urges the sons of Constantine to stamp out superstition which he defines here as paganism. He uses the term no fewer than eight times in this way in this work.37 One example is at 12.1:

\[\text{Quapropter quicumque haec sacra deuota mente veneratur, cumcumque placet superstitionis istius metuenda contagio, aut malis suis solacium quaerit, aut (d)eorum tacita cogitatione collaudat}\]

Whoever devoutly observes these pagan cults, whoever takes pleasure in the dreadful contagion of his superstition is either seeking solace for his own troubles or else is praising the misdeeds of the gods.

As asserted by Salzman, there are none fiercer in devotion to a cause than the recently converted.\(^{38}\)

There was a brief respite for paganism, in the reign of the Emperor Julian (CE 360-63) who as part of his campaign against Christianity produced his own anti-Christian polemic, the *Contra Galileos*. The following quotation emphasises Julian’s devotion to the old gods of Rome:

For these (Christians), by following you (Jesus) have descended to such a pit of ruin that they have let go of the ever-living gods [of our city] in order to embrace the lifeless corpse of the Jew.\(^{39}\)

But Julian’s death brought his experiments in reversing the gains of Christianity to an abrupt end. His immediate successors in the Dominate, Jovian, Valentinian I and Valens were Christians but allowed pagans to worship relatively freely. However with the accession of Theodosius in the East after the disastrous defeat at Adrianople in CE 378, where Valens was killed, the anti-pagan tide grew ever stronger and the subsequent Christian Emperors continued the earlier trend of action against *superstitio*.\(^{40}\) In CE 382 Gratian was the first Emperor to refuse the title of *pontifex maximus*, and in the same year he withdrew the state subsidies from the cults of the *sacra publica* including the Vestal Virgins. This process was carried further by the legislation of Theodosius in CE 391/2 when all sacrifices were prohibited, all temples closed and Roman magistrates were threatened with special penalties if they broke the ban. Sacrifice for the purpose of illicit divination was to be severely punished, here referring back to an original meaning of *superstitio*.\(^{41}\) All this legislation is laid out starkly in the various edicts of the *Theodosian Code*. The overall message was clear enough; Christianity was now the only *religio uera* and those who still practised pagan *superstitio* would face severe penalties.\(^{42}\)

\(^{38}\) Salzman 1987: 177.
\(^{39}\) In Hoffman 1987: 114.
\(^{40}\) Beard, North and Price 1998: v.1, 398.
\(^{41}\) C.Th. 16.10.10, 16.10.12; Beard, North and Price 1998: v.1, 374-75.
\(^{42}\) Beard, North and Price 1998: v.1, 375.
Not even the eloquence of Symmachus in his *Relatio* 3 appealing against anti-pagan measures by the state could stem the anti-pagan tide. Symmachus was defeated not just by the fierce single-minded Christianity of Bishop Ambrose of Milan (redolent of Tertullian), but probably because by this time, the aristocracy, of which Symmachus was an illustrious member, were becoming increasingly comfortable with Christianity as the state religion and the benefits that it could bring. Yet to think that paganism died merely by the legal enactments against polytheism of the emperors of this period would be simplistic. It continued on in the shadows for many years after Symmachus’ death which occurred in CE 402.

I have tried in this brief account to show how during the fourth century, the last century when paganism was still legal, the polytheistic tradition of the Roman Empire was superseded by a monotheistic state religion of Christianity; once it gained the ascendant it claimed exclusivity. The concept of *superstitio* came to be applied not to divination or foreign religious rites but to all paganism. A religious intolerance which was new to Rome became the norm. If the religious tolerance and pluralism that Symmachus, Themistius and others preached had survived things might have been different; but a new breed of Christian bishops like Ambrose, who came to dominate the reigning Emperors, imposed a strict adherence to the cult from their followers, like in the Judaism from which Christianity sprang. This single-minded Christianity was the doctrine that triumphed, not the polytheistic tradition that had been the norm in Rome for a thousand years. As Lactantius stated in his Divine Institutions,

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superstitiosi ergo qui multos ac falsos deos colunt. Nos autem religiosi
qui uni et uero Deo supplicamus
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Therefore they are superstitious who worship many and false gods. We on the other hand are religious, who make our supplications to the true God. 43

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