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Christian Onomastics: A Response to Frankfurter

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In his critical response to our article 'Onomastic perspectives on conversion', David Frankfurter doubts the validity of name-giving as an indicator for the religious background of the families involved.¹ In his view biblical names could be used by 'pagans' for all kinds of non-strictly religious reasons, such as the popularity of a local (Christian?) shrine. Moreover religious and in particular Christian identity was not so clear-cut as is usually thought.

That Christians continued a lot of traditional religious practices is not in doubt.² We ourselves pointed out that many Christians continued to give their children pagan names ('false negatives'), resulting in a low sensitivity of the onomastic test for Christianity. This explains the necessity of a multiplying factor to obtain an estimate of the number of Christians based on the number of Christian names.³

We disagree with Frankfurter, however, on the specificity issue: rather than listing possible reasons why non-Christians would give their children typically Christian names ('false positives'), we focus on the fact that proven cases of non-Christians with Biblical or other typically Christian names are extremely rare.⁴ It is of course possible to speculate that many people with 'Christian' names were in fact pagans, but we think that there were good reasons why in the fourth century very few non-Christians would give their children Christian names.

1 M. Depauw / W. Clarysse, "How Christian was Fourth Century Egypt? Onomastic Perspectives on Conversion," *Vigiliae Christianae* 67 (2013), 407-435 and D. Frankfurter, "Onomastic Statistics and the Christianization of Egypt: A Response to Depauw and Clarysse," *Vigiliae Christianae* 68 (2014) 284-289.

2 Frankfurter, *Response*, 286-287.

3 Depauw / Clarysse, *Onomastic Perspectives*, 427-428.

4 Frankfurter, *Response*, 288 against Depauw / Clarysse, *Onomastic Perspectives*, 425-427.

In our view, Christians stand out as a group, at least up to the early fourth century, because they refused to take part in offerings and in the common meals following these;⁵ because they did not pay the usual honours to the emperor, causing problems in the army, in the administration and in the courts; and because they had their own organisation, with churches (or prayer houses), priests and bishops, Sunday cult and poor relief. As a result, persecutors apparently did not have problems in finding out who was a Christian and, in the wake of a persecution, *lapsi* trying to return in the fold were treated as traitors, which shows that the community was already well organised by the late third century.

Even if Christians participated in many traditional religious practices, there is thus in our view little evidence for the concept of a fluid Christian identity, as embraced by Frankfurter. Christianity was digital rather than analogue: people were either Christian or pagan. To determine to which group people belonged, the state could focus on things Christians refused to do, such as offering to the traditional gods and the emperor, and use these as diagnostic tests. Only Christians would not perform traditional offerings (no false negatives—high sensitivity) and those who did not perform the traditional offerings were always Christians (no false positives—high specificity).

Unfortunately, this diagnostic test is not available to us today at the desirable scale.⁶ For that reason we have resorted to the adoption of Christian names. We admit that the sensitivity of this test is low, since many Christians did not give typically Christian names to their children. But we consider it unlikely that pagans would give their children names typical of what they probably saw as a separatist, intolerant and fundamentalist religion.⁷ Precisely because Christians were seen as a group separating themselves from society, the specificity of Christian names is high (Table 1).

5 M. Humphries, *Early Christianity* (Oxford 2006), 199.

6 For a similar plea for the use of onomastic evidence as a means to gauge changes in society, see M. Wolffsohn / T. Brechenmacher, "Nomen Est Omen: The Selection of First Names as an Indicator for Public Opinion in the Past," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 13 (2001), 116-139.

7 For those born after ca. 325, appearing in the records from the mid-fourth century onwards, it is theoretical possible that non-Christians started copying Christian names, at least some of the non-Biblical ones. But the very gradual increase of the graph shows that this must have been rare: cf. the rare examples listed in Depauw / Clarysse, *Onomastic Perspectives*, 426.

TABLE 1 *Sensitivity and specificity of diagnostic tests for Christianity*

Refusal Offerings		Christian Onomastics	
Sensitivity	Specificity	Sensitivity	Specificity
High	High	Low	High
almost no false -	almost no false +	many false -	very few false +

Similarly, very few non-Muslims nowadays give their children typically Islamic names. The dynamics of religiously inspired onomastic change are therefore different from those of other types of sociolinguistic evolution, e.g. that caused by 'those names today that parents everywhere pluck from western television to give their infants'.⁸

To summarize: our approach is of necessity statistic and cannot explain every—or even any—individual case.⁹ But clearly a major onomastic shift happened in the course of the fourth century AD. Many people stopped giving their children names from the traditional onomastic pool, usually integrated in a family tradition. Instead they preferred Hebrew names, taken from the sacred books of the Christians. It is unlikely that non-Christians would suddenly have developed a preference for Jewish names, since Jews were not particularly popular in Roman Egypt. Nor is it plausible that at the early stage, when these names were still a minority even within the Christian community, pagans would have followed a new fashion.¹⁰ On the level of the society at large, the use of typically Christian names is therefore in our opinion a valid indicator for the conversion of the population to Christianity.

8 Frankfurter, *Response*, 288.

9 Compare M. Choat, *Belief and Cult in Fourth-Century Papyri* (Turnhout: 2006), 51-56, esp. p. 53: "There is a clear but frequently overlooked disjunction between onomastic analysis on a large scale (capable of charting general trends, for instance) and specific application to any given individual"

10 The martyrs' names, cited by Frankfurter, *Response*, 286-287 were excluded by Depauw / Clarysse, *Onomastic Perspectives*, 421 because they come to the fore only in the (later) fifth century, which falls outside the chronological scope.