Article

Crafting True Religio in Early Christianity

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Abstract: Most studies of the religio-racial constellation begin with the medieval taxonomy of Christians, 'Jews', 'pagans' and 'heretics'. Some scholars examine how this medieval taxonomy functioned as a system of dehumanization in the Middle Ages; others are more interested in how it has been adopted and adapted in modern racist taxonomies; and still others examine how religious images continue to influence the way non-white, non-European, non-Christian, and non-secular bodies are seen and treated today. What is lacking in the literature to date is an in-depth examination of how this fourfold taxonomy came to be. To understand how modern racialized taxonomies incorporated the earlier "religious" categories—a question that is beyond the scope of this article—we also need to better understand the genealogy of these religious categories, their scope, and their implication in processes of unequal power distribution. To that end, we must address the following questions: Where did the distinction between true and false religion come from; how did the figure of the pagan emerge; what about the Jew as anti-Christian? Rather than focusing on contemporary expressions of religio-racialization, or directing our attention to modern or even late medieval expressions of the religio-racial constellation, this article turns to the period of early Christianity when Christian apologists created the key religionized taxonomies that would shape the way Christians imagined, related to, and, in a later stage of history, governed Christianity's others: the Jews, the heretics, and the pagans.

Keywords: religionization; Christian imagination; Jews; Muslims; religion; Roman Empire Codex Theodosianus

1. Introduction

Scholars of critical race studies and critical religion are increasingly challenging the traditional separation between religion and race (Nye 2019; Clark 2017; Jansen and Meer 2020), which according to Anya Topolski, "masks the race-religion constellation" (Topolski 2018, p. 71). If critical whiteness scholars make the invisible norm of whiteness visible (Dyer 1997; Ahmed 2007) and critical secularism scholars show how the modern secular state is "deeply implicated in a particular (Christian) political theology" (Laborde 2014, p. 693), the time has come to make visible the Christian theological legacies implicated in the making of Europe's racialized world (Carter 2008; Jennings 2010).

Much research on the religio-racial constellation focuses on the Middle Ages (Heng 2011; Anidjar 2014) and modern colonialism (Maldonado-Torres 2014; Vial 2016; Hutton 2019; Said 2003). These studies usually take as a point of departure the medieval taxonomy of Jews, pagans, and heretics, understood as a set of power categories used to identify and categorize non-Christian bodies. Some scholars examine how this taxonomy functioned as a system of dehumanization in the Middle Ages; others are more interested in how it has been adopted and adapted in modern racist taxonomies; and still others examine how religionized images continue to influence the way non-white, non-European, non-Christian, and non-secular bodies are racialized today. What is lacking in the literature to date is an exploration of how this taxonomy of Jews, pagans, and heretics, which would profoundly shape the way Christians imagined, related to, and governed non-Christians, came into being. This article contributes to bridging this knowledge gap. To that end, and building on recent scholarship (Buell 2002; Barton and Boyarin 2016; Lieu 2004; Fredriksen 2006a),

this article revisits the period of the Christian apologists. I will show how their effort to rhetorically construct a self-conscious and distinct Christian identity went hand in hand with the creation of hermeneutical figures of otherness: Jews, pagans, and heretics.

As we engage in the task of unmasking the religio-racial constellation and bring to light the Christian theological legacies that underlie Europe's history of religio-racialization, it becomes imperative to delve into the origins of the distinct religionized categories prevalent in Christian society—namely, Christians, Jews, pagans, and heretics. Admittedly, the depth and complexity of this subject necessitates a meticulous historical and textual examination, a task that exceeds the confines of this article.[1] Consequently, the exploration presented here may lack the granularity each religionized category truly warrants; indeed, each warrants its own dedicated study. Nonetheless, for scholars seeking to elucidate the intersection of religionization and racialization, I think that the conceptual and systematic approach developed in this article holds significant value, offering a foundational framework for further inquiry and analysis.[2]

2. Reflections on the Religio-Racial Constellation

Scholars theorizing the religio-racial constellation point out, that "the category of race was co-constituted with religion", that "the formation of race" was implicated "in the racialization of religious subjects" (Meer 2013, p. 389), and that the classification of people into races happened "according to categories we now associate with the term 'religion'" (Topolski 2018, p. 59). They study how (religio)racialization happened in the past to fathom that race and religion continue to be "two key features of [European] life that shape the distribution of resources, life chances, and domination and oppression" (Husain 2017, p. 2). Thus, they delve into history to grasp the nuances of the present (Nirenberg 2014). They ask, what is the logic that underpins Europe's racial formation and how can we "tease out the specifics of [the role of religion], not only in terms of race relations but also for other dynamic social processes such as racial formation" (Emerson et al. 2015, p. 355).

The general thrust among these scholars is that both race and religion are socially constructed categories: they do not have an objective, inherent, or fixed meaning (Nongbri 2013; Omi and Winant 2015). These categories have a history and both are made; they do not refer to a fixed or pre-given natural reality. Furthermore, both are categories of power: they are implicated in the politics of boundary making: classifying, essentializing, hierarchizing, and oppressing people. Scholars of critical religion and critical race studies are not primarily concerned with individual feelings or personal prejudices; rather, they understand race and religion as structures that inform and regulate society and distribute power unequally (Bonilla-Silva 2015). Therefore, scholars studying the religio-racial nexus do not only examine images (in literature, artwork, rituals, and symbols) and how they construct otherness or difference, but they also zoom in on the role of race and religion in creating stratified societies, which privilege some (those who embody the racialized norm) and oppress others (who deviate from that norm).

In the field of critical race theory, Geraldine Heng stands out as a pioneering scholar. Assuming that racialization is necessarily a socio-historical process, she challenges the separation of religion and race by questioning the conventional understanding, even among critical race scholars, that race is a modern construct (Alcoff 2006; Holt 2000; Omi and Winant 2015) and shows convincingly that the European Middle Ages were also "... part of the long history of race" (Heng 2018, p. 3). In her book *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, she offers the following "working minimum hypothesis of race" (Ibidem):

> "'Race' is one of the primary names we have—a name for the strategic, epistemological, and political commitments it recognizes—that is attached to a repeating tendency, of the gravest import to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, in order to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups. Race-making thus operates as specific historical occasions in which strategic essentialisms are posited and assigned through a variety of practices and pres-

sures so as to construct a hierarchy of peoples for differential treatment. My understanding, thus, is that race is a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather than a substantive content."

According to Heng's definition, race operates as a mechanism for categorizing humans into discrete groups by selectively emphasizing certain differences, thereby facilitating the unequal distribution of power. She moves away from a substantial definition of race—saying what race is—and rather emphasizes that the characteristics "selected for essentialism would vary in the *longue durée*—perhaps battening on bodies, physiognomy, and somatic attributes such as skin color in one location; perhaps on social practices, religion, and culture in another; and with perhaps a multiplicity of interlocking discourses elsewhere" (Heng 2018, p. 3). She continues by saying that "religion—the paramount source of authority in the medieval period—could function both socioculturally and biopolitically: subjecting peoples of detested faith, for instance to a political theology that could biologize, define and essentialize an entire community as fundamentally and absolutely different in an interknotted cluster of ways" (Heng 2018, p. 3). When Heng speaks about *religion* in the context of Europe, she is, of course, speaking about Christianity, which laid the groundwork for the fundamental "religio-racialized" classifications that have shaped medieval and modern endeavors to "allocate positions and authority differentially among human groups" (Heng 2018, p. 3).[3]

An important way in which high medieval Christian society distributed power differentially among social groups was by policing the borders between Christians and non-Christians. Racialized society assumed a religionized framework (Moyaert 2024). Christians were those who worshiped God truthfully (true religion), while the beliefs and practices of non-Christians deviated from true religion, i.e., from the true worship of the one true God (Masuzawa 2005; Lipton 2014; Nongbri 2013; Topolski 2018; Stroumsa 2010). Non-Christians were further classified as Jews, pagans, and heretics. If the traditions of Jews symbolized false religion, pagans were sometimes considered as having no religion (Maldonado-Torres 2014). Heretics were renegades, pretending to be true Christians while perverting orthodoxy. While polemicists often depicted 'Saracens' (Muslims) as pagans and idol worshipers, they were more often compared to Jews (Freidenreich 2023). Indeed, "Jewish identity served, in religious terms, as a template for understanding the pernicious 'Law of Mohammed'" (Akbari 2009, pp. 3–4), which was understood as a regression to the Old Law of Moses, a return to a legalistic past that had been superseded by Christ and the Church.

This boundary between true and false religion intersected with the distinction between those who could be saved in principle (Christians) and those whose salvific potential was questionable: thus the 'problem' or 'question' of the Jew, heretic, and pagan presented itself as the 'problem' or 'question' of salvation. While baptized Christians were capable of receiving God's gift of salvation, the mainstream Christian theological position was that there was no salvation outside the Church, a position ratified by the council of Florence in 1442, According to this Council, the Church

> "firmly believes, professes and preaches that all those who are outside the catholic church, not only pagans but also Jews or heretics and schismatics, cannot share in eternal life and will go into the everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels, unless they are joined to the catholic church before the end of their lives..."

Especially in the later Middle Ages, asking the soteriological question often went hand in hand with the dehumanization of Christianity's others. Those who fell outside the realm of the (imagined) *Corpus Christianum* (salvation) were projected as a threat to the integrity of the Christian body and as having a body qualitatively different from that of a Christian (Parker 2014; Heng 2018; Matteoni 2008; Akbari 2009). Enemies of true religion were often imagined as having a "tangible, physical pathology" and their spiritual depravity would eventually lead to the disintegration and even deformation of the body (Parker 2008, p. 7). Their disfigured bodies, the illness of their blood, and the blackness of

their skin supposedly revealed that they were agents of Satan and that their beliefs and practices were not only misdirected but even demonic and monstrous. In brief, "they were ugly as sin" (Strickland 2003, p. 29).[4] This soteriological framework had real consequences for non-Christians: questioning people's humanity justified treating them as less than human. It would not be uncommon for non-Christian bodies to be portrayed as tumors that needed to be segregated, contained, or removed (Terpstra 2015). Significantly, while heretics, Jews, and pagans represented different religionized groups, and faced different disciplinary measures, there existed a significant overlap in the legal measures applied to these groups. For instance, practices such as segregation, censorship of publications, anti-miscegenation laws, inquisitions, crusades, and expulsions were employed across different religionized groups concurrently.

For too long, theories of race have been developed "without examining the central role Christianity [religion] and theology played in the articulation" of racial stratification (Medina 2020). Heng's work, and more precisely her focus on the late Middle Ages has made a tremendous contribution to surfacing the Christian theological vocabularies that underwrite 'race'. More work is, however, needed. Given that the taxonomy of religionized otherness—Jews, pagans, and heretics—had such an impact on how non-Christians were perceived and treated and indeed formed the backbone of medieval and, at least to a some extent, modern religio-racialized society, we must ask where did this classification system come from? Where did the distinction between true and false religion come from; how did the figure of the pagan emerge; what about the Jew as anti-Christian (Freidenreich 2011); and the heretic? In order to answer these questions, we must pay attention to the early Christian imagination and zoom in on the second and third centuries, when Christian apologists constructed a sense of Christianness by simultaneously creating rhetorical figures of otherness. As will become clear, the figures of Jews, heretics, and pagans emerged from a complex interplay of symbol, discourse, and the material circumstances of Christians living in the sometimes hostile context of the Roman Empire before Constantine (r. 306–337). These figures of otherness are the outcome of Christian apologists trying to authorize Christianness in a context of contestation and polemics; i.e., in a context when Christians were a marginalized minority.

3. Constructing True and False Religio in Early Christianity

In Roman imperial culture before Constantine, Christianity was a diverse phenomenon (Fredriksen 2014). Identities were largely "evolving and fluid" and the distinctions and boundaries between different social groups "whether those traditionally termed heretical and orthodox, or Jew and Christian" were not yet that clear (Paget and Lieu 2017, p. 2). Christianity was a work-in-progress with no official form, and the process of configuring Christianness in a largely non-Christian world was ongoing (Buell 2005, 26 ebook). As Boyarin would have it, the borders between Christians and non-Christians still had to be constructed and imposed (Boyarin 2004). From this perspective, it makes more sense to speak about Christianities, even though precisely that plurality would be denied by those seeking to establish a single Christian orthodox norm. As scholars have convincingly shown, "in many cases 'heretical' ideas and practices were coeval—at least with those that came to be defined as orthodox" (Boyarin 2004, p. 3). Heresy and orthodoxy, in this sense, are not only constructed but also co-constructed categories (Le Boulluec 1985).[5]

Christians, prior to the so-called Constantinian turn, found themselves in a minority position, their way of life was contested, and they sometimes faced persecution. In this at times hostile environment, Christian apologists began to construct a normative sense of Christianity in relation to imagined figures of religious 'otherness'. They sought to define what is true and false worship, what is the Christian norm and what deviates from it, who belongs and who does not, and how a Christian ought to live faithfully in a largely non-Christian society (Soormally 2019; Moyaert 2024). A crucial aspect of this ongoing effort involved addressing and refuting the objections raised against their way of life.

Operating "within their particular cultural and rhetorical contexts," Christian apologists made use of existing rhetorical strategies and patterns of thought, as well as available understandings of human differences. Sometimes they contested, redefined, or even adapted the meaning of existing concepts to fit their apologetic goal (Knust 2006, p. 13; Buell 2005). To better understand the making of the 'heretic', the 'Jew, and the 'pagan', we first have to attend to the terms of *religio* and *superstitio*. As we shall see, these terms would play a key part in the Christian process of religionized boundary making.[6]

3.1. Religio and Superstitio

In antiquity, the Latin notion *religio* and its plural *religiones* did not necessarily revolve around beliefs, worship practices, or the gods, i.e., those things which we would nowadays associate with religion (Nongbri 2013, pp. 25–30). *Religio* was not limited to a separate realm of human life or a bounded institution or set of institutions; the notion *religio* had a much broader scope. Before it was a system of beliefs, ritual practices, and temples revolving around the gods, *religio* belonged to the realm of experience and emotion (Schilbrack 2017, p. 833) and it pointed to a sense of restraint, a feeling of having to tread carefully.

As Barton and Boyarin have shown, *religio* could also be attributed to any object, person, or place that invoked a sense of awe, restraint, or even anxiety. Anything that caused Romans to tread carefully—"any bond or boundary, any oath, prodigy or omen, any law or tradition or prohibition"—could be *religiosus* (Barton and Boyarin 2016, pp. 81–82). In particular, the uncanny, the unknown, and the perilous could evoke the emotions of *religio*—and could make Romans "behave with particular circumspection" (Barton and Boyarin 2016, p. 64), e.g., entering a forest or dealing with death. Cultic obligations were also *religiosi* (Smith 1963, p. 24) and Romans were obliged to observe them since they were expected to honor the gods and give them their dues. In all of this, neither external authorities—kings or magistrates—nor gods or spirits or other transcendent forces were necessarily seen as the source of the restraint. Further, the transgression of some religious boundaries could evoke a terrible sense of shame or of being tainted. This explains why the Romans "approached such boundaries as we might approach an electrified fence" (Barton and Boyarin 2016, p. 65).

Over time, however, *religio* came to refer mainly to various worship practices or the performance of ancient rituals to please the gods and to keep the peace (King 1999, pp. 35–36). *Religio* became more or less synonymous with *traditio*, doing what one's ancestors have always done, with an emphasis on continuity. In *De natura deorum*, Cicero (106–43 BCE) derives *religio* from *relegere*, "to retrace or re-read" (Cicero 1933, II. 72). *Religio* is thus understood as an obligation to do as one's ancestors had done, hence the opposition of *relegere* to *neglegere*, to neglect. A religious person is one who keeps the traditions of his ancestors while an irreligious person is one who neglects these traditions (Hoyt 1912, p. 127). Significantly, the older a *religio*/*traditio* (the longer its ancestral history), the more authority it had and the more respect it deserved (Fredriksen 2006b, p. 235).

Another possible etymological root of *religio* is the verb *religare*, meaning 'to bind together' or 'to tie together', indicating a shared reverence for the same gods. From this perspective, *religio* is a power that holds people together. In ancient Mediterranean culture, *religio* intersected with peoplehood or ethnicity (kinship, blood relations, genealogy, shared language, and/or territory and customs). "Ancient gods," Fredriksen explains, "run in the blood" and *religio* was an ethnic identity marker (Fredriksen 2006b, p. 238). To practice a *religio* therefore implied ethnic belonging, and to be "a Jew, Egyptian, or Greek, or an Antiochene, Athenian, or Roman was to practice the traditional rites of one's ancestors" (Schott 2008, p. 8). Therefore, next to antiquity, ethnicity—understood as peoplehood, "indexed proper religion" (Fredriksen 2006b, p. 235). Given that there are many people, there are also many gods and many ways to worship the gods, and in this sense, there was a variety of *religiones*. This was perfectly 'normal'; at the same time, there was a sense in which Romans claimed superiority in terms of *religio* and delegitimized the worship traditions of foreigners.

Romans contrasted proper *religio* to *superstitio*. However, "superstitio is not the antithesis but the excess of religio" (Boyarin 2019, p. 106). Superstitious people participate in exaggerated cults, attach too much importance to prophecies, or allow themselves to be swindled by charlatans. The elite often applied this reproach to common people [*vulgus*], to those living in the countryside [*pagani*], and to slaves and women. Thus, the distinction between *religio* and *superstitio* was both gendered and classed. Even though the elite ridiculed *superstitiones* and regarded them as contrary to *religio*, in reality, these practices were tolerated as long as they were "harmless to the Roman order" (Kahlos 2007, p. 97).

If the notion of *superstitio* in the first century BCE was mainly reserved for individuals, by the early second century CE, it had come to denote the *religio(nes)* of foreigners, and then in a pejorative way (Buell 2005, p. 193). Roman authors used this label to disparage and inferiorize foreigners as barbarians, that is, as the negative counter-image to the civilized Greeks and Romans (Fredriksen 2014, p. 24). For example, Cicero emphasized that when it comes to matters of *religio*, Romans were far superior to other people:

> "Moreover, if we care to compare our national characteristics with those of foreign peoples, we shall find that, while in all other respects we are only the equals or even the inferiors of others, yet in the sense of religion, that is, in reverence for the gods [*religione id est cultu deorum*], we are far superior [*multo superiores*]." (*De natura deorum* II.3, Cicero 1933)

3.2. Christian Apologists Defend Themselves by Claiming Ethnicity and Antiquity

The vast majority of the people among whom Christians lived did not share their religious beliefs and practices. Christian traditions were considered new and did not clearly mark ethnicity; some Christians kept the Jewish law, while others were Romans (or gentiles). However, they were all suspect because they did not respect the Roman cult. Christian *religio* was frowned upon, mislabelled, and discredited. Some Romans were concerned that Roman Christians (gentile Christians), who did not respect their standing cultic obligations, would threaten the *pax deorum.* This concern may explain the occasional violent outbursts, and even the persecution of Christians for not conforming (Fredriksen and Irshai 2015, p. 120). Alongside persecution, Christians were also the target of ethnoreligious polemics.

Against this background, early second and third century apologists tried to authorize themselves. In so doing, they worked "within their particular cultural and rhetorical contexts, employing tools of rhetoric they shared with their neighbors in ways that served their own persuasive projects" (Knust 2006, p. 13). They thus started from the existing terms of the debate—*religio/superstitio*—while modifying their scope and meaning so as "to include their truth, neatly reversing the terms on their opponents" (Beard et al. 1998, p. 227). That "ethnicity and antiquity indexed proper religion" was a given (Fredriksen 2006b, p. 235); how apologists would map their sense of Christianness onto this understanding of *religio* was something they had to creatively figure out. Refuting the charge of newness by claiming antiquity for Christian *religio* was one way to proceed; the other was to claim some sense of Christian ethnicity.

3.2.1. Crafting Christian Peoplehood

In her groundbreaking work, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity*, Denise Kimber Buell shows how Christian apologists engaged in ethnic reasoning to demonstrate that their way of life met the criterium of ethnicity; *that* their *religio* was also linked to a *people* [*laos/genos*] (Buell 2005). Thus, we may understand that Christians are sometimes called 'a new race', 'the real people of God' or 'the true people of God', or the 'New Israel'. Consider in this regard Justin Martyr, who writes:

> "Now, since Christ was the First-born of every creature, He founded a new race which is regenerated by Him through water and faith and wood, which held the mystery of the cross." (Dial. 138 in Justin Martyr 1948)

Some apologists emphasized that Christians too "are united by common ties of kinship" and blood relations (Buell 2005, p. 9). Just as the Hellenes projected a genealogy according

to which they all descended from a common ancestor—Hellas, Christians claimed a long genealogy: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Judah were projected as ancestors of Christ who came to restore the Hebrews and their traditions. Others, while imagining Christians in terms of ethnicity, emphasized instead the uniqueness of Christian peoplehood as a universal and inclusive people: Christians welcome others from a whole range of nations (gentiles), regardless of their particular ethnic origins. In Christ, there will be neither Greeks nor Jews (Gal 3: 28). Rather than adhering to a specifically Hebrew genealogy beginning with Abraham or Jacob, those apologists who made this universalizing claim traced Christian peoplehood back to Adam, the first human from whom all humans descended (marking universality). Such a universalized ethnic line of reasoning asserts that at the root or in principle (i.e., at the beginning of creation, cf. Genesis 1), there is already a common bond among all human beings—whether Greek or Jewish—that precedes particular ethnic differences among people. Moreover, within the Christian theological framework, this unity holds a universalizing promise that will be fulfilled in the eschaton; all will be united in Christ, the new Adam, the progenitor of a new people. Christ offers the promise of salvation to all people, thus restoring them to their original calling.[7]

Here, I want to highlight that this universalizing move actually conceals its own particularity or perhaps ethnicity. The idea that all can be included in Christian humanity draws attention away from the fact that this potential Christian inclusivity goes hand in hand with an effort to fix the boundaries of Christianness. While Christianness might in principle be open to all, one only becomes part of the Christian peoplehood through the gates of baptism and faith; and that is a hard border (Buell 2005, p. 46). Universality, inclusion, and the idea of becoming (one can become Christian by becoming in Christ) do not contradict the idea that this is a bounded people of the saved, a people of the righteous, or a God-loving people (*genos*). Only true *religio* (see below) leads to salvation; other forms of *religio* lead to perdition.

This exclusivist understanding of *religio* sets boundaries between Christians and non-Christians, baptized and unbaptized, and faithful and unfaithful. Significantly, this attempt to boost Christian standing in the Roman cultural framework is often translated into a supersessionist logic, with Jews being projected as a tribal and particularistic people and Christians as a universal and inclusive people. Jewish law is for Jews only, while salvation in Christ is for all people (Horrell 2020). Thus, the Christian effort to claim proper *religio* in the Roman world also affected how they imagined (their relation to) the Jews.

3.2.2. Christian Religio as the Most Antique

From a Roman perspective, the more ancient the *religio/traditio*, the more prestige it had. The Christian movement was, however, new, and that newness was held against them (De Roover 2014). To formulate a counterargument, apologists "especially use[d] strategies of other Jews and Roman-period Greeks as they stand relative to Rome: asserting greater antiquity and claiming to be the source of authentic wisdom for other peoples" (Buell 2005, p. 64). More precisely, they projected a sacred religious history according to which Christian *religio* predates the birth of Christ and even predates Abraham. Consider again in this regard Justin Martyr (100–165), who said to the men of Greece that Christian *religio* was a restoration of ancient knowledge that had been distorted:

> "[…] the advent of our Saviour Jesus Christ; who, being the Word of God, inseparable from Him in power, having assumed man, who had been made in the image and likeness of God, restored to us the knowledge of the religion of our ancient forefathers, which the men who lived after them abandoned through the bewitching counsel of the envious devil, and turned to the worship of those who were no gods." (Justin Martyr 1948, Hortatory Address to the Greeks Ch. 38, my translation)

Arguing for the antiquity rather than the newness of Christian *religio*, Justin Martyr also emphasized the universal power of the divine *Logos*, operative throughout human history and sowing seeds among peoples and their traditions [*Logos spermatikos*].

"[Christ] is the *Logos* of which every *genos* of humans partakes. Those who lived in accordance with the *Logos* are Christians, even though they were called godless, such as, among Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus and others like them; among the barbarians, Abraham, Ananiah, Azariah, and Mishael, and Elijah and many others [...]." (Justin Martyr 1948, 1 Apol. 46.2)

On the one hand, this line of reasoning, which is also known as *consensus gentium*, affirms that even among those who worshipped many gods, rudiments of Christian *religio* could be found. The fact that gentiles worshipped many gods proved that they actually felt the "need of some god, the altar with its victims implied convictions of sin, and the lustrations betokened the conscious want of purity" (Eadie 1869, p. 3212). On the other hand, "because the Christian *logos* was the original source of all truth, anything true was necessarily Christian" (Chidester 2000, p. 56). Following this line of reasoning, novelty was tempered by the antiquity and universality of the *Logos* (Buell 2005, p. 80).

To sum up, to bolster the authority of their way of worship, Christian apologists argued that their religion was connected to peoplehood and was, in fact, the oldest religion possible. However, there were other battles to be fought. Christians would not only argue that their *religio* was legitimate; they would also argue that it was the only true *religio*.

4. The Figure of the Pagan as Un-Christian

Christian practices were sometimes ridiculed by Romans, who called the Christians *superstitious* and accused them of promiscuous excessive behaviour typical of *superstitiosi*. Apologists, trying to dismiss the charges leveled against them, turned the tables on the Romans and argued that Christian tradition was, in fact, *religio vera* while Roman traditions were exemplars of *superstitio*, which increasingly intersected with the notion of idolatry.

In his *Apology*, Tertullian (160–240) states that Christians, just because they confess to being Christians, are treated unjustly by the Roman juridical system (*Apol.* I.4). They are treated as outlaws and denied the right to prove their innocence (*Apol.* I–II), a right that is normally extended to anyone who stands accused of crimes. Tertullian goes on to make a special plea for freedom of religion and freedom from persecution, arguing in the following way:

"Let one man worship God, another Jove; let this man raise suppliant hands to heaven, that man to the altar of Fides; let one (if you so suppose) count the clouds as he prays, another the panels of the ceiling; let one dedicate his own soul to his god, another a goat's. Look to it, whether this also may form part of the accusation of irreligion—to do away with freedom of religion, to forbid a man choice of deity, [*libertatem religionis et interdicere optionem divinitatis*], so that I may not worship whom I would, but am forced to worship whom I would not." (Apol. XXIV.5, Tertullian 1931)

Interestingly, while making his plea for religious freedom [*libertas religionis*], he also makes a case for the superiority of the true *religio*, which is based on God's revelation in Christ, calling Roman *religio* irreligion (*Apol.* XXIV.3). According to Tertullian, there are no other gods besides the one true God and for that reason, the accusation that Christians offended Roman *religiones* was simply nonsensical. Of course, he rhetorically charges, Christians did not pay respect to the Roman gods, why would they honor gods that simply do not exist? (*Apol.* X.2). It follows that "we [Christians] cannot be thought to injure what we have proved non-existent, the charge of injury is mere madness" (*Apol.* XVII.1). It is Roman worship that revolves around "profane idols" and "the deification of human names" (*Apol.* XVII.2). In his words, speaking about Roman *religio*:

"If they definitely are not gods, then definitely it is not a religion; if it is not a religion because they definitely are not gods, then we are definitely not guilty of injuring religion [*Si enim non sunt dei pro certo, nec religio pro certo est: si religio non est, quia nec dei pro certo, nec nos pro certo rei sumus laesae religionis*]." (Apol. XIV.1, Tertullian 1931)

If we follow this line of reasoning, it was not Christians but rather Romans who were guilty of an offense against the true religion of the true God [*veram religionem veri Dei*] (*Apol*. XIV.1).

In the course of Tertullian's argument, we notice a significant shift from emphasizing *how* one worships to *who* one worships (the object of worship is the true God). The gentiles [*ethnici*], so he claimed, worshipped nothing but non-existing gods. This is the greatest offence against God: "*Atquin summa offensa penes ilium idololatria*" (*De spectaculis* II.90). In essence, gentile *religio* is misdirected and therefore idolatrous, and idolatry is ridiculous.

This also had implications for the understanding of *superstitio*, which according to Christian apologists is less a problem of excessive awe than one of misdirected worship. Here, Christian charges against *superstitio* intersect with Jewish charges against *idolatry*. What is more, Tertullian, building on Jewish traditions, linked idolatry to sexual immorality, fornication, and adultery (see *On Idol*. 1). Those who are slaves to idolatry are also slaves to the flesh and to lust. In contrast, Christian *religio* indexed self-control and purity, all signs of civilization. While Christians claimed *vera religio* for themselves, non-Christian gentiles were now imagined to be practicing false *religio*. Religionized boundaries are being drawn.

Over a century later, in the fourth century, when Nicene Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire, the relation between Christians and non-Christian gentile Romans changed dramatically: "the Christians [now] stepped from the edge of the Roman society right into its center" (Jürgasch 2015, p. 124). If being Roman previously did not match being Christian, now the "terms became more and more synonymous" (Jürgasch 2015, p. 125). To be Roman now entails being Christian and vice versa. Against this background a new term emerges, that of the pagan. Christians started using the term 'pagan' in the sense of the non-Christian Roman gentile (Jürgasch 2015). Scholars debate why the term 'pagan', which has no biblical roots and previously had no religious meaning, was adopted to describe non-Christian Romans. One possible reason why the Latin term *paganus*, which meant country dweller, was employed to mark a boundary between Christian and non-Christian Romans is that Christianity spread more rapidly in larger cities (e.g., Antioch, Alexandria, Rome, and Corinth) than in rural areas, where ancient 'traditions' persisted much longer. Significantly, in Roman culture, the term *paganus* was associated with the *superstitio* of the uneducated, foolish peasant who did not live in the civilized urban Roman empire. Indeed, the term *paganus* always had a sense of marginality, of not being part of the center and of belonging to the periphery (Jürgasch 2015). When emperor Theodosianus issued the Edict of Thessalonica and Nicene Christianity became the official *religio* of the Roman Empire, this was the go-to term used to mark the shift of Nicene Christianity to the center and the *marginalization* of non-Christian Romans. In this regard, the Christianization of the Roman Empire implied the paganization/marginalization of the Roman cult, practiced by non-Christian Roman gentiles, who were now the 'other' of Christianity. In any case, the term 'pagan' is linked to the process of selfing and othering. To worship the wrong gods, to participate in the Roman cult, equals paganism. The rhetorical figure of the pagan furthermore married the folly and promiscuity of the idol worshiper with the uncivilized excess of the *superstitio romana* or *superstitio gentili* (Leone 2013, p. 6). Because false worship, i.e., worship of the wrong god(s), according to Christian apologists, translated into immoral behavior, pagans would be depicted as barbaric, wild, savage, drunk, violent, and engaged in perverse sexual practices. These representations would prove to be quite resilient and adaptable, so that they could be easily reshaped and used in different contexts (Lipton 2014).

Soon, the pagan became a key rhetorical or hermeneutical figure of non-Christianness. The knowledge produced by this rhetoric does not derive first and foremost from social interaction and makes sense only within (Christian) theological narrative, in which there is but one true religion. We are dealing with an imaginary construct that could be used in many contexts across time and space. Later, "[m]edieval Christians applied the word to a wide and heterogeneous range of peoples: Old Testament gentiles; ancient Greeks and Romans; unconverted Celts, Germans, Magyars, Scandinavians, and Slavs; Muslims

(in spite of their rigorous monotheism); 'Tartars' (Mongols); sub-Saharan Africans; Asian Buddhists and Hindus" (Lipton 2014, p. 8). Thus, the 'pagan' came to function without having a clear referent; as a trope frozen in time. The pagan of today is in principle the same as the pagan of the past. This would explain why contemporary pagan practices were often approached through the lens of ancient Greek, Roman, or sometimes Egyptian polytheistic traditions, or why they were traced back to "the prototypical episode of idolatry: the forging of the golden calf at the foot of the Sinai while Moses received the laws up above" (Akbari 2005, p. 34).

As a rhetorical figure, the pagan could serve several, often overlapping, functions depending on the intentions of the Christian scholars (Kahlos 2020, p. 95). Christian writers, mention the pagan frequently in polemical anti-heretical literature as a way to slander erring Christians or to discredit a doctrinal opponent or a heretic, somewhat like calling him a Jew or a Judaizer. Consider in this regard Athanasius of Alexandria (pp. 295–373), who defamed the Arians (heretics *par excellence*) by calling them pagans:

> "Who would call them even by the name of pagans, much less that of Christians? Would anyone regard their habits and feelings as human and not rather those of wild beasts, seeing their cruel and savage conduct? [...] They are much inferior to the pagans and stand far apart and separate from them." (Ath. Hist. Arian. 64. Tran, NPNF, modified by Kahlos 2020, p. 96)

However, Christian authors could also invoke the counterimage of a good and noble pagan to contrast with Christians who showcase immoral behavior and waste their time on drinking and feasting. No wonder pagans would not convert! In fact, to the eyes of the noble pagan, Christian corruption and perversity were an affront. Here, the hermeneutical figure of the pagan functions as a way to encourage Christians to repent and convert. In other contexts, church leaders would sometimes complain about churchgoers who continued to participate in pagan festivities or performed pagan rituals: "Here the pagan label functioned as a method of chastisement" (Kahlos 2020, p. 98). In any case, labeling religiously ambivalent people as pagans was a means by which Christian authorities tried to police the boundaries of the Church and distinguish between insiders (proper Christians) and outsiders (non-Christians), in this case those worshipping false gods. The pagan, however, is only one of the rhetorical figures of otherness that emerge from the Christian imagination.

5. The Figure of the Jew

While the Jesus movement started as a strictly Jewish movement, which upheld Jewish beliefs and practices, many Jews, living under the yoke of the Roman Empire, rejected the claim that Jesus fulfilled the biblical messianic prophecy. That Christians, who claimed to "revere as Scripture the same texts as did the Jews" and "claimed to be the heirs of God's promises through the prophets of the biblical tradition", were contradicted by the Jewish people posed a profound challenge (Lieu 2002, p. 95). Not only did apologists now have to craft a sense of Christianness in a sometimes hostile Roman setting, they also had to struggle for legitimacy against this Jewish rejection. This rejection was all the more challenging because Jews, ticking the boxes of both ethnicity and antiquity, constituted an ethnoreligious community that was at least recognized as such in the Roman world. While Christian apologists worked hard to claim a similar status and deployed various rhetorical strategies to that end, their own traditions were not recognized as legitimate. Against this background, apologists felt compelled to construct a sense of Christianness while both dealing with this Jewish rejection and making their case vis-à-vis the Roman world. Consequently, the Christian apology against the Jews is never only about the Jews.

There is, however, more. Quite early on in the Jesus movement, there were Christ-following Jews who began to reconsider the relationship between Jews and gentiles. Some believed that gentile Christians, like the so-called God-fearers in Jewish communities, while not having to uphold all the Jewish laws, would also not be able to fully participate in the Christian life. Others were convinced that one did not have to be Jewish to obtain

full membership or full participation in the community of Christians (cf. the conflict between James, Peter, and Paul). Some sought to maintain a distinction, others sought to ignore it, stating that in the Christian community, there would be "neither Greek nor Jew" (Rom 10: 12), that all would be saved in Christ's name, and that the Jewish Law and its prevailing food restrictions, ritual obligations, and festivals had to be reconsidered. As the Jesus movement developed, it also diversified and evolved into "Jewish Christianities and Judaizing Gentile Christianities but also purely Gentile forms of Christianity" (Fredriksen and Irshai 2006, p. 978). This diversification raised multiple questions, theological but also more practical, about what it entailed to be a Christian, and more particularly, what this would mean as regards the prevalence of the Law. Against this background, a specific genre emerged, known as the *adversus Iudaeos* tradition. This genre produced what Cohen has called the "hermeneutical Jew," an imagined Jew based on Christian biblical and theological categories rather than on knowledge drawn from personal interaction (Cohen 1999, p. 3). This "figure [is] imagined for the purpose of serving as a foil for the construction of Christian identity" (Freidenreich 2011, p. 114). In crafting this hermeneutical Jew, apologists made use of the tradition of Roman ethnoreligious othering. They also drew on the many prophetic admonishments against Israel, casting the Jewish people as idolatrous and hence unfaithful as well as sinful. Finally, apologists could appeal to some of Jesus' sayings about the Pharisees, scribes, priests, and Sadducees *and* they could turn to the Pauline corpus, especially those passages in which Paul criticizes his "apostolic competitors" (see e.g., Romans 11). As Fredriksen has it, "these Hellenistic Jewish texts, with all their intra-Jewish arguments, were a gold mine for later Christian rhetoric *contra Iudaeos*" (Fredriksen 2014).

The *adversus Iudaeos* tradition is permeated by the idea that Christ functions as the hermeneutical key for understanding the Hebrew scriptures. Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah foretold by the Hebrew scriptures. From this perspective, Christ fulfills the promises of Jewish tradition. To understand this, however, the Bible should not be read literally but figuratively or *kata pneuma.* One example of such a reading is the hermeneutics of typology, whereby events, figures, or even statements from the Hebrew scriptures prefigure or foreshadow events, figures, and statements from the New Testament (Kaplan 2019, p. 73). Typological reading was not in fact a Christian invention, but was built on the tradition of Midrash; the Rabbis also interpreted "the Bible figuratively in order to read into it various theological and homiletical ideas made necessary by the contemporary experiences of the Jewish society caught in the whirlpool of great historic changes" (Bokser 1973, p. 99). Adopting Midrashic hermeneutics, apologists adapted it to their own purpose as a weapon against the Jews (Bokser 1973, p. 99). The Hebrew scriptures, and their events and figures, would only be meaningful in light of the Christ event. If the first foreshadows, the latter fulfils and illuminates the deeper meaning and significance of the first. Irenaeus of Lyons (140–220) states: "If anyone, therefore, reads the Scriptures with attention, he will find in them an account of Christ, and a foreshadowing of the new calling" (*Adv. Haer.* IV.26, Irenaeus 1978).

To drive this point home, Christian apologists depicted the Jews as overly attached to the letter of the text, and this literalist reading supposedly blinded them to the deeper, more spiritual meaning of their texts. Furthermore, Jewish literalist hermeneutics were seen as a direct outcome of their being driven by fleshly desires. Jews did not read according to the spirit, but rather "understand everything in a carnal way" [*kata sarka*] (Justin Martyr, *Dial*. 14.2). Their carnal hermeneutics translated into a life of sin and illicit sexual relations and vice versa (*Dial*. 14.2). Again, we see how the making of religious boundaries intersects with sexualization. The Jewish literal reading of scriptures supposedly also matches their literal understanding of the Law and they fail to understand the deeply figurative meaning of their ritual traditions, namely that circumcision prefigures baptism, just as Passover and the sacrifice of the Lamb prefigure Easter and Christ's crucifixion (Justin Martyr, *Dial*. 40), and the meal offerings anticipate the eucharist (*Dial*. 41). Consequently, this once beloved people of God were now unable to fully experience God's faithfulness and presence. Blind to the true meaning of their own scriptures, they are blind to God's plan of salvation.

Christians, by contrast, master allegorical readings of the Scripture and metaphorical interpretations of ritual.

The reason why the Jews continue to resist the deeper spiritual meaning of the Hebrew scriptures against all evidence is because, according to Justin Martyr, they are a "stupidly stubborn people" (*Dial*. 123), their hearts are hardened (*Dial*. 18), they are "idolatrous" and "sinful" (*Dial*. 18), and ungrateful towards God (*Dial*. 27). For that reason, God gave the Jews the Law in the first place: to keep them from idol worship and from turning away from God. They are, however, a weak people, and even under the Law, they did not obey God and did not "hesitate to sacrifice their children to demons" (*Dial*. 19). Justin Martyr continues:

> "We, too, would observe your circumcision of the flesh, your sabbath days, and, in a word, all your festivals, if we were not aware of the reason why they were imposed upon you, namely, because of your sins and your hardness of heart." (*Dial*. 18, Justin Martyr 1948)

The stubbornness lamented by the prophets continues today as the Jews hold on to a Law that, without faith in Christ, has lost all meaning. Christians, thanks to their spiritual hermeneutics, avoid all problems of carnality and live a virtuous spiritual life.

As a hermeneutical abstraction, the imagined Jew "contained great power, serving by means of absolute contrast to focus and define the desiderata of orthodox identity" (Fredriksen and Irshai 2006, p. 984). Those Christians who did not accept the projected boundaries were accused of Judaizing. To call someone a Judaizer was to accuse that person of engaging in inappropriate practices, thereby at once infecting the entire community. Judaizing was cast as a fall—a lapsing into old habits, a shift from purity into impurity, from spirituality into carnality, from chastity to promiscuity, and from true *religio* to false *religio* (Drake 2013, p. 2).

6. The Figure of the Heretic

Like the Jew and the idolater/pagan is projected as falling outside the realm of *vera religio*, the Christian realm. Typically, heretics are accused of falsely claiming the name 'Christian' for their beliefs and practices. Pretending to be Christian, they poison the one singular Christian truth (orthodoxy) with their false and innovative teachings and sicken the Christian body.

The idea that heresy is a deviation from the orthodox truth is, however, imaginary. The history of Christianity was never one of singularity and uniformity; rather it is a history of diversity, discord, and disunity (Berzon 2016, p. 14). From the very beginning, there were many communities who claimed to be Christian and there were often disputes about the proper way of leading a Christian life in an otherwise non-Christian world. These communities did not yet have a clearly delineated sense of Christianness, for they were all in the process of identity formation. During the second century, this process of selfing would translate into claims of orthodoxy, while those upholding different ideas would be cast as heretical. This claimed Christian orthodoxy sets the norm against which deviation is produced, and deviation helps formulate a sense of identity. Thus, heresy is not a deviation from a previously established, stable, and orthodox norm (Berzon 2016, p. 13); orthodoxy assumes, needs, and feeds on a real (or imagined) heterodox other and vice versa. Apologists who invested their energy in the establishment of a boundary between heresy and orthodoxy are called heresiologists. Boyarin calls heresiologists the inspectors of religious customs. They "tried to police the boundaries so as to identify and interdict those who respected no boundaries" (Boyarin 2004, p. 2). More profoundly, however, they also created and crafted boundaries in a time when these were not so clear. One such heresiologist was Irenaeus of Lyons (130–202). He enlisted all the known heresies to defend and sharpen the idea of Christian orthodoxy. He catalogs them by founder, false teachings, and corrupt practices, and then defines and sharpens Christian orthodoxy against these multiple heresies. His work is one of creative and normative theological craftsmanship rather than of mere description.

Heresy (Αἱρέσεις) did not always have such a negative connotation. In origin, the Greek word means 'choice', and is used to refer to different schools of thought. These could be either medical or philosophical schools of thought (e.g., the term is applied to Stoics and Pythagoreans), and Flavius Josephus applies it to various Jewish groups, such as the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the Zealots (*Ant.* 13.5.9; 18.1.2; *War* 2.8.14). Josephus, while preferring Essenes and Pharisees, does not speak in a derogatory way about these different groups. In Acts, the term is used to refer to the Sadducees, Pharisees, and Christians (see Acts 5:17, 24:5, 24:14, 26:5, 28:22). This word was, however, picked up by second century Christian apologists to mean deviating opinions which threatened the unity of the Christian community and the continuation of tradition. In Jewish circles too, heresy would receive a more negative connotation, and Jewish sages called Christians heretics.

Early on in its existence, the community of the Christian faithful was imagined as a body, and more particularly as the earthly body of Christ joined together by the love of God. The faithful were like the limbs of Christ's body and the integrity of this body was enacted and enhanced in and through various worship practices and rituals. For the body to remain healthy, all its members would have to dedicate themselves to its moral and spiritual 'hygiene' and to the unity of the community. The apostle Paul expressed his concern about the growing disunity among the Christian communities when he wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians:

> "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that [...] there be no divisions [*schismata*] among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me [...] that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.' 'Has Christ been divided?'" (1 Cor 1:10-12 NRSV)

It was a challenge to keep Christian communities together and strengthen their sense of belonging, especially in a context of contestation and persecution. Quite a few Christians, when put to the test, faltered and rejected their Christian allegiance. Such disunity was seen as threatening and harmful to the community.

During the second century, the problem of disunity was projected onto the notion of heresy, which now became a negative category. A heretic becomes a renegade, someone who harms the community from the inside, by inventing deviating truths. The threat coming from outside (persecution) was matched by a threat coming from inside (heresy). In both cases, the menace of the disintegration of the community also played a role in the process of identity formation. It is a typical pattern of selfing and othering: in times of crisis, the challenge is to strengthen the 'right' Christian identity and keep deviation outside.

Building on the metaphor of the body, the threat associated with heresy was first imagined in terms of disease and contamination. This is in line with the passages in the gospels where Jesus claims that the sick need a physician (e.g., Mark 2:17). When some Christians upheld powerful positions, dangerous metaphors such as cancer, pollution, and contamination were used to sever "gangrenous" members from the Christian body so that order could be restored. Heretics were also cast as transgressive, promiscuous, and lustful (Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 26). It was believed that they are enslaved by fleshly desires (or, in contrast, they are extremely rigid and ascetic in an effort to control their lust) and they intentionally seek to corrupt feeble women with their treacherous teachings (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I.6.3).

What makes heresy all the more problematic is that it presents itself under the pretense of truth. Thus, Irenaeus of Lyon writes, "error [...] is never set forth in its naked deformity, lest, being thus exposed, it should at once be detected." The error of heresy presents itself as the imitation of a precious jewel, and he continues by stating that heretics are like wolves in sheep's clothing (*Adv. Haer.* I, preface 1.2, Irenaeus 1978). Elsewhere, he argues that heresy takes on the form of milk, while it is, in fact, a mixture of lime and water (*Adv. Haer.* III.17.4). He speaks about the arrogance of the heretics, who claim to have access to knowledge that is beyond their reach, and goes on to object to their "wicked, although

plausible, persuasions" (*Adv. Haer.* I.32.3). Their lies destroy the truth (*Adv. Haer.* I.8.1). Heretics twist the truth and divide it (*Adv. Haer.* I.9.4). They are innovators.

Furthermore, heretics supposedly project 'vain' genealogies, which falsify the only legitimate genealogical line of Christians. They are innovators rather than heirs of tradition, born after Jesus' ascension rather than stemming from the disciples of Christ, and their origin is demonic rather than divine; Satan is their father. Irenaeus, in an effort to distinguish Christians from heretic genealogy, projects Simon Magus (Acts 8:9) as the father of all heresies; all later false teachings (e.g., Marcion) go back to him: "from [him] [. . .] all sorts of heresies derive their origin" (*Adv. Haer.* I.13.2, Irenaeus 1978). Thus, he wants to emphasize that heresy is a novel invention, an innovation, a deviation, which only "broke [. . .] much later" (*Adv. Haer.* III.4.3, Irenaeus 1978). Heresy lacks tradition, it does not have a long history, and it springs from the 'creative' imagination of arrogant minds. Denying them Christian lineage and excluding them from the one eternal salvific path, Irenaeus gives heretics a non-Christian name: they are Simonians, but also Marcionites and Valentinians, rather than Christians.

Against the genealogical line of heretical corruption and division, Irenaeus places the genealogical line of faithful and apostolic Christians, which is present only in those churches which can guarantee apostolic origin and continuity (Knust 2006, p. 155). He

> "[i]ndicat[es] that tradition derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul; [and that] the faith preached to men, [. . .] comes down to our time by means of the successions of the bishops. For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of its pre-eminent authority, that is, the faithful everywhere, inasmuch as the apostolical tradition has been preserved continuously by those [faithful men] who exist everywhere." (*Adv. Haer.* III.2, Irenaeus 1978)

The orthodox norm of the apostolic tradition is, so Irenaeus claims, preserved in Rome, thanks to the twofold succession via Peter and Paul (a male line rather than the female line of the heretic). The apostolic tradition guarantees the preservation of Christian orthodoxy, which has been present in the universally founded Church from the very beginning. A heretic cannot be a Christian, even though they all claim to be precisely that. The heretic also falls on the wrong side of true religion, even though he pretends to be 'Christian'. That makes the heretic particularly dangerous.

7. Conclusions

Much work in the field of religio-racialization takes Modernity or the Middle Ages as its point of departure. The focus is on how the religionized taxonomy of Christians on the one hand and Jews, pagans, and heretics on the other was racialized in the later Middle Ages or in Modernity. Not only were their bodies imagined as marked by difference, but they were also treated differently in Christian society; they were marginalized, persecuted, expelled, and sometimes killed. The question of how this taxonomy, which forms the basis of medieval racialized society, came about remains under-researched. In this article, I addressed this knowledge gap by explaining how Christian apologists created the category of *vera religio* in a context of contestation (early Christianity) and in response to non-gentile Christians (later known as pagans), Jews, and other Christians with whom they disagreed and whom they labeled heretical. Operating in a context of contestation and sometimes persecution, Christian apologists forged a sense of true Christianity by simultaneously creating various rhetorical figures of otherness with which to compare themselves. Such comparison served an apologetic purpose; it aimed to enhance Christian self-understanding while delegitimizing those who were cast as Christianity's others.

This early Christian process of selfing and othering took place in the socio-political context of the Late Roman Empire, where Christians occupied a minority position. Faced with opposition from Jews and gentiles, and dealing with different expressions of Christianness, apologists created borderlines between true religion (orthodoxy) and various expressions of

false religion (Boyarin 2004); thus, they were making categories of religionized normativity and deviation. The resulting religionized taxonomy of otherness built around Jews, pagans, and heretics would later exert a significant influence on the structuring of European Christian societies and the treatment of non-Christians. Indeed, when Nicene Christianity became the official *religio* of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, this taxonomy was inscribed into the law (see Codex Theodosianus) (Berzon 2017). Once again, borders were "imposed by strong people on weaker people" (Boyarin 2004, p. 2). Religionized categories that previously figured solely in Christian discourse came to be expressed in disciplinary measures, with material effects on the relations between Christians on the one hand and Jews, pagans, and heretics on the other hand. As this apologetic discourse translated into laws that helped to shape society, the discursive distinction between *vera religio* and various expressions of religious deviation was consolidated as a socio-political and cultural reality. Here, we can see clearly how words help create worlds (Hill Fletcher 2017, p. 83). This is where we find the early beginnings of the taxonomy that would later become the framework of the religio-racial constellation of Europe.

Notes

[1] For a more elaborate and detailed study of the history of religionization, see (Moyaert 2024).

[2] This article is based on two chapters in my book *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other: A History of Religionization* (Moyaert 2024).

[3] Which is why, I think it would make sense to argue for a field called critical Christian studies rather than critical religion.

[4] In the medieval mindset, the colour white evoked purity, innocence, and civilization, whereas black symbolized sinfulness and demonic characteristics, and placed the dark-skinned person in the realm of the uncivilized and barbaric—even though it cannot be said that "everything black was viewed negatively by medieval interpreters." Here we can consider the "black color of the Benedictine habits," which symbolized "humility and penitence" (Strickland 2003, p. 84). Nevertheless, generally speaking, whiteness, as an identity marker, also suggested a Christian identity, whereas blackness indicated a non-Christian identity. Together with the disfiguration of bodies, the darkness of skin was the most consistent feature of those who were perceived as enemies of Christianity and the medieval Christian would easily understand this visual symbolization.

[5] Bauer's book emerged as perhaps the most influential work within the realm of orthodoxy and heresy. It laid the groundwork for subsequent discussions that would ensue in the field (Bauer 1934).

[6] To avoid projecting our modern understanding of religion onto the past, I adhere to the Latin terminology (Barton and Boyarin 2016; Nongbri 2013).

[7] The idea that early Christians engaged in ethnic reasoning goes against many assumptions about Christianity transcending ethnic divides and particularistic boundaries. Christians tend to associate their 'religion' with universality and inclusion, rather than with ethnic claims. Perhaps, here we already find one of the roots of the masking of the religio-racial constellation, at the heart of the Christian claim to universality; to being open to all people regarding of their ethnicity. The originality and importance of Buell's work is that she shows that Christian claims to universality were also 'ethnicized claims to peoplehood'.

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