

Debate and Dialogue

Christian and Pagan Cultures *c.* 360–430

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ASHGATE

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This is a story of Babylon and Jerusalem – binary oppositions in Christian polemics against ‘paganism’ in 360–430. In Christian texts, Jerusalem cannot exist without Babylon and vice versa. In order to exist, Christians need their counterpart, ‘pagans’. The theme of this book is the construction of Christian identity through inventing, fabricating and sharpening binary oppositions. Binary oppositions, such as Christians – pagans, *religio* – *superstitio*, truth – falsehood, the one true God – the multitude of demons, served to create and reinforce the Christian self-identity. I will examine how the Christian argumentation against pagans was intertwined with self-perception and self-affirmation.

The hypothesis to be tested is that literary evidence tells us more about Christian authors, their audiences and communities rather than about any polytheists or polytheistic religions themselves. Thus, in my research on the presentation of otherness, I will observe Christian authors themselves as the creators of the images of pagans rather than pagans as such. One of the basic assumptions is that the image of the ‘other’ reveals more of the creators of the image than of the object portrayed. In the search for Christian identity the pagans were a good enemy – particularly in the altered religious circumstances after the ‘Constantinian revolution’. Furthermore, the construction of Christian identity, or rather, identities, was (and is) an ongoing process. In the course of the fourth and fifth centuries and later on, Christian identity was continuously re-constructed by polarization and building up discursive dichotomies between Christians and others. Thus, I propose that the Christian polemical writings functioned as a tool for establishing and defining boundaries between Christianity and other religions.

The aim of this book is to unfold the structures of the polemics of the Latin fathers: rhetorical strategies, argumentation, the means of debate and moments of dialogue. I am working, not on the level of the historical facts, but on the level of ideas. Therefore, I am not interested in trying to judge whether the version argued in the polemic is truthful or not, but rather in observing the strategies that the authors make use of in creating their concepts of reality. I will not attempt to reconstruct the historical conditions of polytheistic religions on the basis of Christian information. Consequently, I will not discuss, for example, how and to what extent polytheistic cults were practiced at the turn of the fifth century but rather what kind of ideas Christian writers constructed of polytheistic cults and practices and how they used these ideas in their argumentation.

Demarcation of Boundaries and the Problem of *Incerti*

One of the frontiers demarcated and constantly rectified in the Christian polemical and apologetic literature was the one between Christians and pagans. Christian opinion leaders implanted and then polarized the Christian–pagan dichotomy in order to strengthen the Christian *Selbstverständnis*. They bundled up a large variety of diverse religions, cults and practices into the overall term paganism.¹ This simple-minded division of the world into two opposing segments turns out to be problematic because there were individuals (as well as places, practices and festivals) that did not fit into this simplified categorisation. I have developed a concept of *incerti* to describe these individuals in between – in the grey area between the Christians and pagans (see Chapter 2).

The simplified distinction introduced by late antique Christians has lived on in the Western culture dominated by Christianity and consequently also in modern research. The nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars tended to interpret historical events and cultural phenomena of the Late Roman Empire in terms of this sharp dichotomy. From the 1970s onwards, however, the dichotomous structures have been questioned and sometimes even successfully deconstructed in late antique studies² and alternative ways of perceiving late antique society have been elaborated in recent scholarship.³

What the Christian polemical texts are anxious about are the grey areas and forbidden frontier crossings and trespassings. It seems that the authors often write to affirm themselves in their own confusion with the pagan past, either with the high literary tradition and history or the festivals and practices of urban and rural communities. The cultural heritage of the past had become problematic to Christian opinion leaders and they had to define their relationship with polytheistic religions as well as with the old cultural structures in which they had grown up. They had to define what was to be regarded as Christian and what as non-Christian and what was suitable for a Christian and what was not. Could Christians take part in the traditional festivals and ceremonies of the local communities without endangering their souls?

Furthermore, I discuss the aspiration of Christian authors to emphasize the unique character and exceptionality of Christianity when compared with other ancient religions and traditions. This is due to the polemical and apologetic ends of the writers – their desire to distinguish their own religion from others. It is understandable that, in constructing and reinforcing one's identity, one's own religion and tradition is seen as unique, distinct and different from others and even as superior and as the acme of world history. Needless to say, this apologetic emphasis influences us even today: Christianity is perceived – in research often implicitly – as unique when

1 Christian polemicists of the mainstream church wanted to present Christians as one uniform group and their opponents as one monolithic group of pagans. In reality, both groups were far from homogenous but consisted of a colourful diversity of numerous different sects.

2 E.g., J.J. O'DONNELL, 'The Demise of Paganism', *Traditio* 35 (1979a), 45–88.

3 E.g., M. FORLIN PATRUCCO, 'Pagani e cristiani', *Storia di Roma*, 3,2, Torino 1993, 753–80: 762 perceives the rivalries in the eastern Roman Empire in the fourth century as a contrast in ideological and cultural order within Hellenism rather than as a religious polemic.

compared with other religions.⁴ I wish, however, to bring forward the historical roots of this thinking, not to take a stand on whether Christianity was remarkably different from other ancient religions or not. I rather discuss in what kind of light Christian writers wanted to represent their religion.⁵

This book records and explores moments of debate and dialogue in Christian texts. The writings of Christian authors were not always merely polemics against polytheistic religions and debate with polytheists but they were also a dialogue with the pagan past. Augustine's *City of God*, for example, is this kind of debate and dialogue, on one hand an attack against old Gods, on the other hand a dialogue with Greco-Roman cultural tradition. The Christian polemics in 360–430 continued the long tradition of debate and dialogue between pagans and Christians. The Christian writers in Late Antiquity exploited classical literature and Greek philosophy. Therefore, discursive dichotomies are also set in the context of Greek and Roman literature as well as of the Christian apologetic tradition. In Chapter 4, for example, the phases of the binary opposition of *religio* and *superstitio* are followed and the subversion made in Christian apologetics is recorded. In these turnovers, however, the Greek and Roman concepts are utilized and the debate is conducted with the techniques and arguments that were already familiar and conventional in the Greco-Roman tradition but that were utilized for the Christian writers' own purposes.

Polemic and Polarization

C. Guignebert stated that the polemical and apologetic writings of the church fathers give us the impression that there prevailed an irreconcilable conflict between Christianity and paganism. "Or, ce n'est certainement pas la vérité", he asserted.⁶ One could add that at least it was not the whole truth but only a polemicist's truth.

Before the 380s Roman society enjoyed a phase of relative tranquillity. The period of about thirty years from Constantius II to Valentinian I has even been called a 'peaceful coexistence' for pagan and Christian cults.⁷ In the 360s and 370s, particularly in the city of Rome, there prevailed an atmosphere of 'tolerance' and

4 The tendency to treat Christianity as separate from other ancient religions has prevailed in modern research for decades. Nevertheless, there are some outstanding exceptions, for example, in the recent *Religions of Rome* by M. BEARD – J. NORTH – S. PRICE, Cambridge 1998, Christianity is discussed as one religion among others.

5 Or conversely, pagan writers attempted to accentuate or downplay the similarities with Christian thought. As M. VINZENT, 'Das "heidnische" Ägypten im 5. Jahrhundert', *Heiden und Christen im 5. Jahrhundert*, Leuven 1998, 32–65: 65 has pointed out, the efforts of fourth- and fifth-century pagans to minimize the differences between their paganism and Christianity must be read as critically as the corresponding attempts of Christian apologists to create unbridgeable gulf between the two.

6 C. GUIGNEBERT, 'Les demi-chrétiens et leur place dans l'Eglise antique', *RHR* 88 (1923), 65–102: 65.

7 L. CRACCO RUGGINI, 'Simboli di battaglia ideologica nel tardo ellenismo', *Studi storici in onore di Ottorino Bertolini* 1, Pisa 1972, 177–300: 192: "la convivenza pacifica". E.R. DODDS, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, Cambridge 1965, 107 introduced the term "peaceful coexistence".

compromise on the level of everyday life.⁸ R. A. Markus has proposed that it was both the last repressive of years of Constantius II's reign and Julian's attack on Christianity in the name of Hellenism in the 360s that brought on the polarization of the Christian and pagan attitudes in the last decades of the fourth century (c. 380–400). He speaks of increasingly embattled positions from about 380 onwards and of a wave towards a more resilient attitude to pagan, that is, classical, culture – but not towards polytheists and polytheistic cults – about 400.⁹ Markus' notion of wave-like movement in the assimilation and attitudes towards the pagan is worth taking account. However, it is also important to emphasize the varying historical circumstances of each writing and writer. For instance, anonymous polemical pamphlets (such as *Carmen contra paganos* and *Carmen ad senatorem*) and Augustine's *De doctrina christiana* represent two different modes of argumentation. Furthermore, Markus' zigzag theory can be surveyed in the light of the proposed notion of the construction of Christian identity through creating and sharpening binary oppositions. I am inclined to argue that both Constantius II and Julian are symptoms or catalysts of the beginning polarization rather than causes. In the eyes of Christian opinion leaders, Christians had assimilated themselves too much in the late antique – pagan – universal culture in the preceding decades. Christian leaders, the loud-voiced writers, considered Christian identity threatened and attempted to crystallize the differences. Julian's attack against Christians, particularly his argumentation against Christian use of classical learning, seems to have given form to Christians' own phobias and thus functioned as a catalyst. There had been comparable situations with similar fears of weakening Christian identity from time to time in preceding centuries. Tertullian's admonitions to luke-warm Christians in *De spectaculis* is an example of the concerns of Christian opinion leaders.

It is the Christian polemicists' interpretation of history that still influences our modern views of the triumph of Christianity and the defeat of paganism in the Late Antiquity as well as our conceptions of polytheistic religions of the Roman world.¹⁰ It is worth noting that much of what we believe to know, for example, about polytheistic religions in the fourth and fifth centuries has been conveyed by Christian authors in their polemical texts.¹¹ Christian apologetic and polemic gives us a remarkably biased and unidimensional picture of polytheistic cults and practices. The idea of polytheist religious views as morally, spiritually and intellectually bankrupt asserted

8 S. MAZZARINO, 'La propaganda senatoriale nel tardo impero', *Doxa* 4 (1951), 121–48: 142: "ambiente di compromesso"; M.R. SALZMAN, *On Roman Time: The Codex Calendar of 354 and the Rhythms of Urban life in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley 1990, 195: "ambience of compromise".

9 R.A. MARKUS, 'Paganism, Christianity and the Latin Classics in the Fourth Century', *Latin Literature of the Fourth Century*, London 1974, 1–21: 5, 7, 12–13; cf. R.A. MARKUS, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, Cambridge 1990a, 30.

10 A classic example of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the binary oppositions elaborated by Christian apologists is A.D. NOCK's (*Conversion*, Oxford 1933 (repr. 1961), 2–5) sharp distinction between primitive or traditional religion (paganism) and the religion of prophetic movements (Christianity).

11 Fortunately, our knowledge is not entirely dependent on Christian sources; there is also (increasing) epigraphical and archaeological evidence extant.

by Christian authors, for example, by Augustine of Hippo, was taken at face value and largely continued until very recent religious studies.¹² Constructing the other to suit their purposes, Christian writers operated by moulding the alleged views of the opposition into forms that the writers could then use to their own advantage – not only simplifying but also distorting polytheists' views on idols, blood sacrifices, demonology and so on.¹³ Opponents' religions were represented as ridiculous, childish, superficial and detached and then contrasted with the more developed, adultlike, profound and salutary Christianity.

In order to illustrate the history of the effect of Christian apologetic and polemical literature, I take the interpretations of the *taurobolium* rite as an example. Much of the evidence of the *taurobolium* belonging to the cult of Magna Mater comes from Prudentius' description in the *Peristephanon*. Prudentius' detailed portrayal of the rite has generally been accepted as a valuable source for the rite in classical and in religious studies. However, ultimate vigilance is needed in interpreting this narrative. N.B. McLynn has appositely questioned the reliability of Prudentius' description. He states, "the shower of blood [of the *taurobolium*] belongs to the world of fantasy". Prudentius probably could not have had first-hand information on the rite itself.¹⁴ Moreover, we must remember that the purpose of the poet is to defame pagan practices. Could the narrative of a denigrator be taken at face value? Would scholars write the history of early Christianity employing the statements of Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, Fronto or Celsus as they stand?

The purpose of this work, however, is not to correct the reconstructions of the historical circumstances of polytheistic religions or to provide some sort of rehabilitation of these religions but rather to discuss the argumentation, structures and rhetorical tools of the Christian polemics from which our *Vorverständnisse* about the inferior, immoral and decadent pagan cults derive. Understanding the historicity of our interpretations, we will hopefully attain a deeper *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*, a historical-effective consciousness of Christianity. I focus on the text world created by the Christian polemicists although other worlds, the world of historical reality and other text worlds, are glimpsed from time to time.

The Christian preunderstanding influences our ideas of ancient religions. Modern scholars have often been stuck in a Christianly-defined concept of religion and value Greco-Roman religions anachronistically – more or less subconsciously – in

12 N. SHUMATE, *Crisis and Conversion in Apuleius' Metamorphoses*, Ann Arbor 1996, 24–30 criticizes the modern research of Greco-Roman religions for still valuing paganism as psychologically and emotionally sterile (whether implicitly or explicitly). She criticizes both Nock and R. MACMULLEN, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, New Haven 1981, 95–6 for underestimating the dynamics of non-Christian personal religious experiences and psychological capacities of polytheism.

13 For the rhetorical techniques used in distortion of the opponents' views, see the discussion in Chapter 3. Correspondingly, pagan polemicists applied the same techniques against Christianity.

14 PRVD. perist. 10.1006–1050. N.B. MCLYNN, 'The Fourth-century *Taurobolium*', *Phoenix* 50 (1996), 312–30: 319. See also Chapter 5.

relation to Christianity.¹⁵ M. Sachot criticizes researchers of ancient religions for having searched for features that could fit into the analysis modelled according to Christianity.¹⁶ Some scholars would not even call pagan cults and practices religions at all; for example, John North in his otherwise outstanding article in 1992, makes an overall generalization of pagans, stating: “the pagans, before their competition with Christianity, had no religion at all in the sense in which the word is normally used today”. North’s concept of religion seems extremely narrow – one could say, Christianly defined – for he lists characteristics of a religion that pagans lacked: a tradition of discourse about ritual or religious matters, an organized system of beliefs and authority-structure.¹⁷ This is remarkably strange since in religious studies the concept of religion has generally expanded after a long series of debates on the essence of religion.

Another distortion achieved by Christian polemics is the representation of receding paganism. I am inclined to think that extreme caution is needed when Christian apologists are used as sources for polytheistic cults and their vitality. In their narrative of the triumph of Christianity, Christian writers, understandably enough, wished to present a picture of receding paganism. This was part of their persuasive rhetoric. Thus, modern research has fallen into the rhetorical trap of Christian polemicists. Scholars have adopted the ideas of the dying pagan tradition, particularly the completely lifeless Roman religion.¹⁸ The late paganism of the late fourth century was usually described as a form without content and without genuine religious emotions.¹⁹ Nevertheless, vigorous attempts to re-evaluate the vitality of

15 A. HAMMAN, ‘Chrétiens et christianisme vus et jugés par Suetone, Tacite et Pline le Jeune’, *Forma Futuri. Studi in onore del cardinale Michele Pellegrino*, Torino 1975, 91–109 may serve as an example of the Christianly-determined attitude of a modern scholar. While he reproaches Roman authors for not having bothered to acquaint themselves with Christianity, he has not bothered to familiarize himself with the Roman religion on its own terms (p. 109): “Leur [Suetone, Tacite, Pline] faiblesse à tous est de n’avoir pas étudié le christianisme du dedans et sur dossier, de n’avoir pas cherché à comprendre la nouveauté et l’esprit de la religion nouvelle et reconnu la sclérose de la religion romaine, incapable de répondre aux véritables interrogations.”

16 M. SACHOT, ‘Religio – superstitio’, *RHR* 208 (1991), 355–94: 358–60.

17 J. NORTH, ‘The development of religious pluralism’, *The Jews Among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, London 1992, 174–93: 187–8.

18 E.g., G. BONNER, ‘The Extinction of Paganism and the Church Historian’, *JEH* 35 (1984), 339–57: 340: “these last defenders of a dying cause”; 356: “the decline of paganism had set in even before the conversion of Constantine, and the virtual absence of any pagan martyrs confirms the impression that paganism was already dying even before”. M. TESTARD, *Chrétiens latins des premiers siècles*, Paris 1981, 116–17: “En réalité, le paganisme ne représente plus une pensée qui puisse exercer un attrait sur les esprits, mais seulement un ensemble complexe de mentalités et de comportements ataviques qui persistent dans divers milieux.”

19 E.g., L. VIDMAN, *Isis und Sarapis bei den Griechen und Römern*, Berlin 1969, 157–8, 164–5, claimed that the many initiations and priesthoods of the Roman senators served only as symbolic scenery. For a discussion about Roman cults and counter-arguments, see M. KAHILOS, *Vettius Agorius Praetextatus*, Roma 2002, 87–8, e.g., that the ‘forms and contents’ of Greco-Roman religions ought not to be hastily assessed according to the modern, Christianly-coloured concept of religion.

late antique paganism have been done recently, e.g., by G.W. Bowersock, Garth Fowden and F.R. Trombley.²⁰

It has been observed that the Christian polemic against pagans and polytheistic cults at the turn of the fifth century was mainly conducted with traditional arguments and clichés. R.A. Markus has even called this polemic ‘shadow-boxing’.²¹ M.R. Salzman, R. Lizzi and L. Cracco Ruggini have recently argued that the significance and vitality of the polytheistic cults during this period have been underestimated.²² Christian opinion leaders might have regarded the Roman religion as well as the so-called Oriental cults as a threat to Christianity because polytheistic cults and urban feasts were still popular.²³ According to these scholars, many cults seem to have persisted longer and more extensively than had earlier been thought. As Salzman has shown, the major pagan cults that were closely connected to the imperial cult ensured their survival in the fourth century: because of the imperial cult even Christian emperors were sustaining pagan ceremonies.²⁴

20 G.W. BOWERSOCK, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, Ann Arbor 1990; F.R. TROMBLEY, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization c. 370–529 I–II*, Leiden 1993–94; G. FOWDEN, *The Egyptian Hermes*, Cambridge 1986, e.g., 173: “... paganism is widely perceived as not just a lost cause, but a deservedly lost cause. That is changing; but late paganism is still in urgent need of students, just to bring our understanding of its literary remains to the level already enjoyed by the patristic tradition.” MCLYNN 1996, 326 sees the development of the *taurobolium* as evidence that paganism may have retained something of its flexibility and vitality; see also P. BARCELÒ, ‘Zur Begegnung, Konfrontation und Symbiose von religio Romana und Christentum’, *Christen und Heiden in Staat und Gesellschaft des zweiten bis vierten Jahrhunderts*, München 1992, 155–6 and A. WARDMAN, *Religion and Statecraft among the Romans*, London 1982, 135.

21 MARKUS 1974, 7–8: “To read the various formal set pieces, the *contra paganos* type of literature from the pens of Christian apologists, is to enter a world of almost total unreality. We are the spectators of shadowboxing. The real issues scarcely ever appear, except between the lines”. Recently R.A. MARKUS, in response to G. O’Daly, ‘Augustine’s Critique of Varro on Roman Religion’, *Religion and Superstition in Latin Literature*, Bari 1994, 78–9 has pointed out that “there certainly were genuine and living issues of moment at stake” but the polemic is strikingly antiquarian and highly artificial. Also BONNER 1984, 342: “the apparent irrelevance of so much Christian polemic to the actual conditions of paganism”.

22 R. LIZZI – F.E. CONSOLINO, ‘Le religioni nell’Impero tardo-antico: persistenze e mutamenti’, *Storia di Roma*, Torino 1993, 895–974; R. LIZZI, ‘Ambrose’s Contemporaries and the Christianization of Northern Italy’, *JRS* 80 (1990), 156–73; 156; L. CRACCO RUGGINI, ‘Un cinquantennio di polemica antipagana a Roma’, *Paradoxos politeia*, Milano 1979a, 119–44.

23 J. MATTHEWS, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus Marcellinus*, London 1989, 425 assumes that Christians regarded the Gods of the Oriental mystery cult, rather than the old Gods, as the main challenge to their Christian religion. However, the Christian polemicists’ main attack was centered upon the traditional civic religion, not the mystery cults, e.g., in Augustine’s *City of God*. People continued to dedicate inscriptions to the Gods of the Roman civic religion: G. ALFÖLDY, ‘Die Krise des Imperium Romanum und die Religion Roms’, *Religion und Gesellschaft in der römischen Kaiserzeit*, Köln 1989, 53–102: 55–7.

24 SALZMAN 1990, 141–6; J. CURRAN, [Review of Salzman, *On Roman Time*, 1990], *JRS* 82 (1992), 305–8: 306.

Thus, we see the antiquarian polemic against paganism on one side and the vitality of polytheistic practices in everyday life on the other side. As was stated above, this inquiry is not concerned with whether Christian polemic was targeted against real pagan adversaries and whether the anti-pagan literature reflected the real religious circumstances of the turn of the century. I see the issue of the Christian polemic in 360–430 as even deeper and more complicated than a mere juxtaposition of literary topoi and ‘real’ religious circumstances. I am shifting the emphasis from the *objects* of the polemic onto the *writers* of the polemic. Thus, the ‘shadow-boxing’ and the antiquarian character of the fourth- and fifth-century polemic are unpacked by discussing the techniques, topoi and motives in Christian writing.

It is worth asking why Christian writers attack to such a great extent as, for example, Augustine does in his *City of God* – in twenty-two books.²⁵ Why this remarkable fervour and these energetic assaults?

Why are the Christian writers utilizing old arguments in their invectives? Both Christian and pagan assaults are highly literary in character. As Markus has aptly written, the archaism of the Christian – pagan debate is more than a literary device. In the fourth century the identities and relations between polytheists and Christians were far from clear and in these perplexing circumstances the traditional arguments elaborated in the debate of preceding centuries became so important that, in Markus’ words, they were “a way of coming to grips with something which neither side has been able to get into focus”. In order to clarify their self-identity Christians knew *whom* to rebut but they did not know exactly *what* to refute. One might add that in the religious circumstances of the fourth century Christians did not always recognise even *whom* to refute. In the Christian (and Jewish) apologetic tradition as well as in the philosophical and antiquarian tradition they found suitable tools for their construction of identity through attacks. This is why the figure of Porphyry becomes so significant in the fourth- and fifth-century debate. He was an easily identifiable target for Christian polemicists. Through the old arguments and clichés, things that were far from clear could be squeezed into clear discursive categories. The Christian polemicists of the fourth century were shaping *their* world through the old arguments of the earlier apologetic tradition and philosophical and antiquarian discussion of classical authors utilized by apologists.²⁶

The main target of Augustine’s *City of God* is the late Republican Roman civic religion described by Varro.²⁷ It was more convenient to mould a straw man from the traditional civic religion as “empty, contradictory, proliferating endless gods and

25 A. MANDOUZE, ‘Saint Augustin et la religion romaine’, *RA* 1 (1958), 187–223: 200 stressed the topicality of Augustine’s attacks: the church father “n’a jamais eu de goût pour combattre les fantômes”. Similarly C. LEPALLEY, ‘L’aristocratie lettrée païenne: une menace aux yeux d’Augustin’, *Augustin le prédicateur*, Paris 1998, 327–42: 335; G. O’DALY, ‘Augustine’s Critique of Varro on Roman Religion’, *Religion and Superstition in Latin Literature*, Bari 1994, 65–75: 67 and E.G. WELTIN, *Athens and Jerusalem*, Atlanta 1987, 75, 99.

26 MARKUS 1974, 8: “a means which enabled the Christians to get an indeterminate and polymorphic reality into sharp focus”. MARKUS 1994, 79 even speaks of the “fiction of a conflict between pagans and Christians” imposed on us by the Christians of the fifth century.

27 AVG. civ., particularly books 2–6. Augustine pays little attention to the Gods of the so-called Oriental mystery cults such as Isis and Mithras. Nevertheless, other Christian writers

endless rituals without meaning, almost totally isolated from its social context and then to destroy it".²⁸ It is also worth remembering that Varro appears as a religious authority to educated pagans of the fourth and fifth centuries.²⁹ Augustine remains silent on the still living cults and the religious tensions in North Africa. One wonders if he backs off from the contemporary paganism deliberately because he is afraid of making a frontal assault on the contemporary polytheism.³⁰ Most of the arguments of the fourth and fifth century Christian polemic come from classical literature and earlier apologetic.³¹ Thus, Christian polemicists turned to the old clichés of Greco-Roman Gods handed over by Varro, Cicero and Seneca, as well as Greek philosophical critiques of religion. These classical topoi were a tried and proved arsenal of arguments in Christian apologetics.³² Even earlier apologists such as Lactantius and Arnobius had turned their attack, not against the altars next-door, but against myths.³³ Thus, references to contemporary everyday religious life did not belong to the Christian polemical strategies. The debate was conducted in literary terms.

The polemic focuses on *tradition*. It seems that the polemicists avoid the real issues of the present. There are, for instance, no references to contemporary events, literature or persons in Augustine's *City of God*, except the discussions in the first book on the Sack of Rome and at the end of the fifth book on the battle of Frigidus. This is why many scholars have sensed an atmosphere of unreality in *City of God*. Nevertheless, tradition and history were a means of dealing with the present, questions of immediate interest. Tradition had always been a way of discussing highly topical issues in Greco-Roman literature and I am inclined to see Christian polemic following this convention of a learned discussion. Christian writers are showing themselves as capable of intellectual debates. The events and *exempla* of the past were used in handling contemporary problems.³⁴ Thus, the issues of the present were projected into the past and the contemporary controversies were paralleled with the dichotomies of the history.

also attack the Gods of mystery cults, e.g., in the anonymous poems *Carmen contra paganos* and *Carmen ad senatorem*.

28 NORTH 1992, 187. Lactantius and Arnobius as well as Augustine made use of the Republican writers, particularly Varro. For the rhetorical strategy of straw men and stereotypes, see Chapter 3.

29 AVG. CIV. 7.22. O'DALY 1994, 69.

30 Suggested by H. CHADWICK, 'Augustine on Pagans and Christians: Reflections on Religious and Social Change', *History, Society and the Churches*, Cambridge 1985, 9–27: 22.

31 AVG. CIV. 4.1 mentions as his sources personal experience, *ipse vidimus*, and pagan literature, *ex litteris eorum*.

32 The arguments against pagan Gods are discussed in Chapter 6.

33 M. EDWARDS, 'The Flowering of Latin Apologetic: Lactantius and Arnobius', *Apologetics in the Roman Empire*, Oxford 1999, 197–221: 219 points out that Arnobius and Lactantius addressed 'the commonwealth of learning'.

34 Similarly Arnobius in his *Adversus nationes* utilizes the history of Republican Rome in his argumentation. As O. NICHOLSON, 'Civitas Quae Adhuc Sustentat Omnia: *The Limits of Ancient Christianity*', Ann Arbor 1999, 7–25: 15 states, "This is not antiquarianism; it is effective strategy."

This is why the tradition became such an important issue: the antiquarian character of the pagan–Christian debate was no longer antiquarian but rather of current interest. This is why the Republican and early imperial authors Varro and Vergil were so important. The Augustinian dialogue with Vergil was by no means antiquarian. On the contrary, because everyone – Christian and pagan – knew Vergil, his description of the destruction of Troy was an apposite way of discussing contemporary issues such as the Sack of Rome in 410.³⁵

35 For the use of Vergil in all kinds of issues of human interest, see S. MACCORMACK, *Shadows of Poetry*, Berkeley 1998, 160.