



THE BEREIA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

When Christians Lived as Atheists

David Anguish

“This is why you hate the Christians: because they do not consider these objects to be gods.” ~ *Epistle to Diognetus* 2.6

In his book, *God in New Testament Theology*, Larry Hurtado has a chapter entitled, “Who is ‘God’ in the New Testament?” (Hurtado 2010, 27–47). His question will seem axiomatic to most of us because, as heirs to twenty centuries of Christian influence, we automatically define *God* monotheistically to refer to “the supernatural creator and overseer of the universe” (Hurtado 2010, 27). But that singular definition was not the norm in the NT world where, in Hurtado’s words, there were “gods galore.”

But in the ancient world of the first Christians (*and in large parts of the current world as well* [my emphasis]), the words for *god* (e.g., the Greek word *theos*) designated one of many kinds of divine beings. There was neither one being nor even one genus or definition of deity. Instead there was a veritable cafeteria of divine beings of various orders, attributes, and functions. Not only the Roman Empire as a whole but also individual nations and peoples were rather richly supplied with deities (Hurtado 2010, 27).

Corollary to their pluralistic view of *theoi* was intolerance of other outlooks, not least the Christians “who distinguished themselves in taking a rather critical stance against devotion to the many deities of the time, insisting that there was only one true and living ‘God’ to whom alone worship was rightfully due” (Hurtado 2010, 28). The intolerance did not end with dismissal of the Judeo-Christian understanding. Roman culture excluded Christians from cultural social activities. From the Christian side, their view of God led them to withdraw from interactions and customs that were integral to the rhythms of the wider culture. Their neighbors’ inability to comprehend their view of *theos* and rejection of them

for believing it positioned them as outcasts who were publicly labeled *atheists* (ἄθεος, *atheos*), i.e., deniers of the gods.

Two passages in *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* illustrate. In 3.2, “the whole multitude . . . began shouting [to the proconsul], ‘Away with the atheists [ἄθέους, *atheous*]! Find Polycarp!’” In 9.2, having arrested him, the proconsul offered him the chance to “swear by the genius of Caesar; repent; say, ‘Away with the atheists [*atheous*]!’” Polycarp repeated the phrase, but not as the proconsul intended: he “solemnly looked at the whole crowd of lawless heathen who were in the stadium, motioned toward them with his hand, and then (groaning as he looked up to heaven) said, ‘Away with the atheists! [*atheous*]’” (Holmes 2007, 310–311, 316–317).

Consequences and Costs

Hurtado elsewhere noted what their different view cost the Christians, citing the NT (e.g., 1 Thess 2.14–16; Heb 10.32–36; and 1 Pet 4.12–16), the *First Apology* of Justin (Martyr) (110–165 AD), and the anonymous *Epistle to Diognetus* (Hurtado 2016, 61–69). The latter “describes Christians in relation to their various social settings (*Diogn.* 5.1–6.9),” and while “there is an obvious level of rhetoric in this material, . . . it is clear that the text reflects genuine concern to allay rumors about Christians and to try to deflect or dampen negative attitudes and harsh treatment of them” (Hurtado 2016, 68; see Holmes 2007, 700–704 for *Diognetus* 5–6).

The surrounding culture did not exhibit a live-and-let-live attitude toward the Christians, but rather hostility they could not avoid. In his *Père Lecture*, Hurtado devoted several pages to the reasons for this, showing that it was practically impossible for Christians to escape the pressure to acknowledge and pay homage to the gods. Guests in a typical Roman home, for example, would have encountered shrines honoring household gods believed to protect that house. When family members expressed their devotion to those deities, all who were present, including guests, were expected to join in. This expectation made life especially hard for wives and slaves who had converted to Christianity but continued to live with pagan husbands and masters.

Outside the home, Christians were confronted with other cultural expectations. Civic ceremonies typically included religious rites in honor of gods who were believed to guard the respective cities. Some were associated with the Roman imperial order and acknowledging them was expected as a demonstration of loyalty to the state. Trades, guilds, and military units all had patron deities, and meetings of those groups included ritual ceremonies to pay homage to them. Similar observances were typical at formal dinners, many of which were held in rooms in the temple of the god the temple represented. Indication of the pressure to participate is evident in examples of written invitations from the era in which the god was depicted as the one who extended the

invitation, effectively making the deity the host. Refusal to participate in homage to him or her was thus considered an affront (Hurtado 2016, 75–78). Hurtado summarizes what this meant for Christians as follows:

In short, birth, marriage, the domestic space, civil and wider political life, trades and work, the military, socializing, entertainment, arts, and music were all imbued with religious significance and association with various kinds of divine beings. . . . It would have been difficult, thus, for Christians to have participated in a wide variety of society occasions without having to consider whether they could do so in good conscience (Hurtado 2016, 75, 78).

In short, the challenge facing Christians in the first three centuries involved more than making a decision of conscience about visiting shrines, participating in rituals, overtly worshipping a false god, or declaring allegiance to the emperor. To be a Christian was effectively to be cut off from society, or at least viewed with more than a little suspicion. And to be welcomed back into the culture, a believer was required to abandon his Christian allegiance, publicly acknowledge the gods, and just as publicly renounce “the atheists.” It is therefore reasonable to ask, with Hurtado, “In light of the consequences involved in becoming a Christian then, why did many individuals do so?” (Hurtado 2016, 108).

It is also prudent to ask how their experience might inform us as we consider life in a world that is becoming more like what theirs was.

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Works Cited

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- Michael W. Holmes. ed. & trans. 2007. *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

For Additional Reading

For a more extensive treatment of the ideas addressed in the *Père Lecture*, see Hurtado’s *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016).

*All Scripture quotations not otherwise designated are from the ESV.
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Reflections for the Times

“The problem of evil which [postmodernity] highlights so remorselessly goes deeper than simply suggesting that all human claims are flawed; it deconstructs humans themselves. There is no longer an ‘I’: just a swirling mass of emotions, of signifiers, of impulses, meaning that ‘I’ am in a constant state of flux. The moral imperative left over from low-grade existentialism (that one should be true to one’s deepest self) collides with the postmodern claim that one’s deepest self is a fluid, unstable thing.” ~ N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (IVP Books, 2006), 31

“For myself, I decided to see if there were answers to Ehrman’s questions. Diving deeply into the class material and historical sources, I began to probe into the New Testament’s origins and reliability, and whether earlier Christians had ever addressed the issues Ehrman raised. Surely, these challenges were not new (though they were new to me). I quickly discovered that Christians had addressed these issues—even from the earliest days of the Christian movement—and had done so with depth, precision, and intellectual rigor. In short, there was a whole other side to the argument, even though that other side was never discussed or explored in class.” ~ Michael J. Kruger, *Surviving Religion 101: Letters to a Christian Student on Keeping the Faith in College* (Crossway, 2021), 20

“The man who has the best tools, other things being equal, will do the best work. Efficiency is largely skill in the use of the right tools. The modern preacher in his study is a man with his tools. If he does not have the right tools upon his desk, he cannot produce rapid results and as high grade work as he otherwise may.” ~ A. T. Robertson, *The Minister and His Greek New Testament*, pb. ed. (Baker Book House, 1977), 23–24

“We Christians like to think we have a solid grip on our religious beliefs. It stings when we get cornered by difficult questions because it makes us, and our faith, look bad. Too often, our reaction parallels Euthyphro’s [in his dialogue with Socrates]. We become hostile toward the questioner or run for the exits. After a few such situations, we become proficient at avoiding potential interrogators altogether.” ~ Steve Wilkens, *Good Ideas from Questionable Christians and Outright Pagans: An Introduction to Key Thinkers and Philosophies* (IVP Academic, 2004), 32.

“The problem with our Sunday schools is our teaching, not the Scriptures. The correction to our ‘just the facts’ approach is not the current insipid, topical discussion classes where unprepared students share their ignorance. The solution is to go back to the Bible and rediscover its great themes of sin, salvation, calling, covenant, responsibility, and God’s love, themes relevant to any age.” ~ Gary Holloway, “From Scripture to Sharing: Sunday Schools in Churches of Christ,” *Christian Studies* 12 (1992): 46–47

“We should remember that history’s first social critics were the Hebrew prophets, who had a key role in Israel’s, and therefore history’s, earliest ‘separation of powers.’ Standing over against the power of the kings and the power of the priests, the prophets had a dual task. First, and more positively, their responsibility was to keep calling the nation back to the ideals and terms of Israel’s founding constitution, the covenant. Second, and more negatively, their equal responsibility was to challenge any and all forms of the corruptions of power, whether by the kings, the priests, the people, or the false prophets.” ~ Os Guinness, *Carpe Diem Redeemed: Seizing the Day, Discerning the Times* (IVP, 2019), 67–68