

1-1-1963

Early Christian Attitudes Toward the Roman State

Walter W. Oetting

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Oetting, Walter W. (1963) "Early Christian Attitudes Toward the Roman State," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 34, Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol34/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Early Christian Attitudes Toward the Roman State

By WALTER W. OETTING

(This article represents substantially a chapter in a forthcoming publication on the history of the early church by Concordia Publishing House.)

I. THE SITUATION IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

THE church always confronts the state. Sometimes the relationship is casual, as in the United States, where, generally speaking, the church is allowed to carry on its work with little interference.¹ Often, however, the relationship is one of antagonism, as in the Soviet Union, where the state insists that it has no concern at all about religion but where the Communist party, closely tied to the state, is in continuous struggle to convince the people to forsake their piety.² Sometimes the relationship is one of domination. Either the church dominates the state, as was theoretically true during the Middle Ages in the West, or the church is controlled by the state, as in the Byzantine Empire during the same period. The early church confronted a state that was at times neutral but more often hostile.

Christianity entered into a world where it was taken for granted that the state

dominated all religious activities. Prior to the advent of Christianity the Romans made no distinction between the life of the state and the religious life of the people.³ The Romans felt that the gods had given them empire, peace, and prosperity as a result of the fact that the gods were pleased with the worship they received from the Romans. Cicero admitted that it was because the Romans surpassed all others in piety that the gods had protected and prospered the empire.⁴ Horace insisted that the Romans owed their empire to their submission to the gods and attributed the ills of Rome to the neglect of the temples.⁵ The maintenance of this covenant was the responsibility of the state. The priests who carried out the ritual worship were appointed by the Senate. The administrator of the activities of these priests was the *pontifex maximus*. The people had little to do with this state cultus except on festivals.

The citizen, however, was expected to do nothing that would displease the gods of Rome. In his home and on his farm every Roman had altars dedicated to the traditional gods of Rome. Originally these

¹ A fine recent study of this relationship in America is by Anson P. Stokes, *Church and State in the United States* (New York: Harper, 1950), 3 volumes. There is also a fine bibliography.

² The most recent study of the church in the Soviet Union is Walter Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961). We also recommend John S. Curtiss, *The Russian Church and the Soviet State* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1953).

³ Excellent studies on Roman religious life are Franz Altheim, *Epochen der römischen Geschichte* (Frankfurt, 1934), trans. Harold Mattingly; *The History of Roman Religion* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1937) and W. R. Halliday, *Lectures on the History of Roman Religion from Numa to Augustus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1923).

⁴ *Tusculan Disputations*, V, 5.

⁵ *Odes* III, vi, 1—8.

deities were thought of as spirits (*numina* or *animae*), without personality or mythology, who made the crops grow and protected families from extinction.⁶ This family worship took the form of various rites that had to be carefully carried out. The essence of this religious life was in the worship itself rather than in the knowledge of god or in the character of the spirit. The individual who properly carried out this worship was considered religious. Since it has often been pointed out that Roman religion was not concerned with morals, it should be noted that because religion was a function of the state, civil law was at the same time the Moral Law. The *ius divinum* was at the same time the *ius civile*. Piety and good citizenship were closely tied together.⁷

The oversight of all these family gods was originally in the hands of the Senate. Only gods whose worship was allowed by

⁶ See Herbert J. Rose, *Religion of Greece and Rome* (New York: Harper, 1959), for an excellent discussion of this religion. *Numina* has a meaning similar to the Polynesian word *mana*, which means "force." These were not spirits but rather the power that resided in the object itself to work either good or evil for man. These "powers" were later personified and given names, many of which were imported from Greek mythology. It is this multiplicity of gods (whose origin is quite understandable, but which becomes rather difficult when names and myths are added) that led to the comment of St. Augustine (*City of God*, IV, 8), "When can I ever mention in one passage all the names of gods and goddesses that they themselves have never been able to number. They give every individual object some deity."

⁷ This was true of course in most ancient cultures. N. D. Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1956), showed that all law among Greeks, Romans, and Hebrews was thought to proceed from the divine. Also see Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago: University Press, 1948).

the Senate could be legally worshiped. As the empire expanded, people from all over the Mediterranean moved to Rome to be part of the life of the capital. They brought the worship of their own gods with them. Since these were not considered Roman gods and had not received the official sanction of the Senate, their cult was designated "private." Practiced by the people rather than by officially appointed priests, they were not related to the most ancient religious traditions of the Roman people.⁸ These cults were often of the "mystery" type.

The mystery religion emphasized the assurance of personal immortality through mystical relationship with the deity. This experience took place when the initiate into the cult was allowed to view the mystery of death and life presented in dramatic form. The secret was revealed by telling the story of the death and resurrection of the god. The most popular deities were Isis and Osiris from Egypt, Attis and Cybele from Asia Minor, and Demeter from Greece. The dramas differed in particulars, but essentially each told the story of how the deity suffered death, was forced to reside in Hades for a time, but ultimately triumphed over death through resurrection. These myths originally symbolized that the gods were directly responsible for the birth of spring each year. Only later were they told as the key to eternal life. After an individual had participated in this drama he was

⁸ The specific problems that confronted the state in this situation are briefly but well told by Robert M. Grant, *The Sword and the Cross* (New York: Macmillan, 1955). We recommend this book as an analysis of the relationship that existed between religion and government in the empire at the time of Christ's coming.

a "knowing one." The ritual connected with this initiation included washings, eating the flesh of slain animals, and participating in various orgiastic activities, such as wild dancing, being drenched in blood, mutilating oneself, and sexual license.⁹

The Roman rulers carefully watched these cults to prevent any citizen from participating in immorality. It is interesting that the immoral rites of Cybele were permitted in Rome, but no Roman was allowed to participate. We know from the histories of Livy that the police were often called to break up gatherings for the worship of Dionysus because of immoral practices.¹⁰ The Roman government was also concerned about the possibility that these foreign cults might be a breeding ground for sedition since they were very popular with the disinherited in Rome.¹¹

⁹ The mystery of Eleusis is described in the *Second Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. There is also an illuminating discussion of this cult by G. E. Mylonas, "Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries," *The Classical Journal*, XLIII (1947). He has recently included this research in *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton: University Press, 1961). On the cult of Dionysus, associated with Eleusis, see the play *Bacchanals* by Euripides and the novel *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius. Catullus' poem *Attis* gives a description of the rites of Cybele. Plutarch's essay *Osiris and Isis* is perhaps the finest ancient description of that cult. Excellent modern discussions are by Samuel Angus, *The Mystery Religions and Christianity* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1925), and by Franz Cumont, *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1911).

¹⁰ *History of Rome*, IV, 30; XXV, 1; XXXIX, 16.

¹¹ The legal situation of these cults is described by Theodore Mommsen, "Der Religions-frevel nach römischem Recht," *Historische Zeitschrift*, LXIV (1890). We cannot agree with Mommsen's analysis of the legal situation governing early Christianity.

It was not toleration that caused Rome to allow these forms of worship but rather the popular demand for them. Indeed just before Christianity began to be rather popular in Rome the government attempted to reestablish its control of popular religious life by introducing a new cult to preserve the religious traditions of Rome through the worship of "the spirit of Rome" in the person of the emperor. Worship was given to *Roma* in the East. Hence it was called the emperor cult. The theory was that the empire had brought peace and justice to the whole civilized world. It was therefore worshiped as beneficial to man. Deity among ancient peoples is usually not defined philosophically, but as that which gives good things. Since Rome brought peace and justice it was honored and praised—or worshiped. But what was the symbol of Rome? The person of the emperor was the obvious choice. Romans gave to the emperor honor and praise as the incarnation of all that made Rome great and all that Rome did for the world. The names of most of the traditional gods of Rome were attached in one way or the other to this cult.¹² Generally speaking, however, the emperors did not think of themselves as gods walking on the earth. Rather they participated in deity to the degree that their wills determined the course of people's lives through their office. This cult became rather popular. But here as in the previous examples the people were not expected to participate in these rites. They were always carried on by official functionaries of the state. It is

¹² See Lily Rose Taylor, *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor* (Middletown: American Philological Association, 1931). Also E. R. Goodenough, "The Political Philosophy of Hellenistic Kingship," *Yale Classical Studies*, I (1928).

only in the third century that all the people were required to worship in this cult.

Since Christianity faced this type of state, it grew as a separate institution. It was not the official religion of any state with which the Romans came into contact and was therefore a private and unofficial cult. To the best of our knowledge the believers did not ask for any official recognition. They were called by the Spirit to await the coming of Christ and to worship God in His name.

II. THE ROMAN STATE AND THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN CONFLICT

Christians separated themselves from society and were deeply suspicious of the state. This attitude of separateness can be traced to the Jewish roots of Christianity. When the Jews in the Babylonian Captivity were antagonistic to their foreign rulers, Jeremiah wrote:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses, and live in them; plant gardens, and eat their produce. Take wives, and have sons and daughters . . . multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.¹³

These words suggest that the people to whom the prophet was speaking were hostile to the state in which they were held captive. In the years before Christ this attitude among the Jews continued toward the tyranny of the Seleucids in the time of the Maccabees and was then transferred to the Roman government. Daniel's compari-

son of government with "the beast" in opposition to the people of God but claiming a place in the temple is carried over into the Christian tradition.¹⁴

Conversely, the attitude of Roman society toward the church was also suspicious. Since Christianity began in Palestine, and many of the early Christians were Jews, the Romans simply transferred to the church their detestation of the Jew. The Christians could show no image of their God. The Romans deduced from this that the Christians were "atheists." The Christians spoke Greek in communities that understood only forms of Latin. They spoke in Greek of eating the body and drinking the blood of the Son. The Romans gossiped that they were butchering babies and eating their flesh and blood. Fronto, the teacher of Marcus Aurelius, wrote:

Now the story of their initiating novices is as detestable as it is notorious. An infant, concealed in a meal so as to deceive the unwary, is placed before the one who is in charge of the rites. This infant, hidden under the meal, is struck by the novice, who thinks he is striking harmless blows but kills him with blind and hidden wounds. Horrible to relate, they drink his blood, eagerly distributing the members of his body, and are united by this sacrifice and pledged to common silence by this awareness of guilt. . . . Everyone knows about their banquet and everyone speaks of it. People of both sexes and every age come to the banquet on the accustomed day with the children, sisters, mothers. There after much feasting, when the banquet has grown warm and the heat of drunkenness burns into incestuous desire, a dog tied to the lampstand is aroused to run and jump by throwing a bit of food

¹³ Jer. 29:4-7 RSV

¹⁴ See especially Hippolytus' *Commentary on Daniel*, IV, v ff.

beyond the length of the rope by which he is tied. Thus with the light . . . overturned and put out, the haphazard embracing of shameful desire takes place in the shameless darkness.¹⁵

This was the rumor among the Romans. If anyone should think that such misunderstanding of the nature of Christian worship is impossible, let him only consider some of the gossip in the 20th century! The good qualities of the Christians were lost in this mire of suspicion and gossip. Suetonius suggested that the Christians were "superstitious,"¹⁶ a word associated with witchcraft. Tacitus called them "haters of the human race" because they did not worship any known or knowable god and practiced immoral rites.

It was only natural that Nero should play on the hatred of the people and blame the fire in Rome on Christians. We do not know who started that blaze. Nero, however, made the mistake of rebuilding the burned part of the city and constructing many beautiful temples. The people suspected that he was building temples to placate the wrath of the gods for destroying part of their city. To turn suspicion from himself he picked a small foreign group in Rome that everyone suspected of the most horrible crimes, blamed them for the fire, and encouraged the wrath of the populace. Even the Roman Tacitus thought the punishment severe: "Besides being put to death they were made to serve as objects of amusement; they were clad in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified; others set on fire to serve to illuminate the night when daylight

failed."¹⁷ The Romans were used to making the execution of criminals a matter of public amusement in the Colosseum and regarded it as a routine affair.

But Nero's example became the pattern for other areas in the empire.¹⁸ Persecution began in Rome but spread to all parts of the empire in the second century. Peter and Paul probably lost their lives in Rome.¹⁹ John was exiled to the island of Patmos.²⁰ The grandchildren of Judas were called to Rome by Domitian to determine whether his suspicions were true.²¹ Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, and Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, were martyred in the midst of celebrating and cheering mobs. In Lyons about 50 Christians were mobbed. Eusebius recorded the description of the persecution written by the Christians who had suffered:

But these rumours spread, and all were infuriated at us. . . . But the entire fury of the crowd, governor, and soldiers fell upon Sanctus, the deacon from Vienne, and upon Maturus, a noble combatant though but lately baptized, and upon Attalus, a native of Pergamum . . . and upon Blandina. . . . Blandina was filled with such power that those who by turns kept torturing her in every way from dawn till evening were worn out and exhausted, and themselves confessed defeat from lack

¹⁷ *Annals*, XV, 44.

¹⁸ See W. M. Ramsay, *The Church in the Roman Empire* (New York: Putnam, 1912), pp. 244—5. The best summary of the most recent research into the nature and extent of persecution with the conclusions derived from these studies is by A. N. Sherwin-White, "Early Persecutions and Roman Law Again," *Journal of Theological Studies*, III (1952).

¹⁹ 1 Clement 5.

²⁰ Rev. 1:9.

²¹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III, xx, 1—6.

¹⁵ Quoted from Grant, pp. 75, 76.

¹⁶ *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, "Nero" XVI

of ought else to do to her; they marveled that the breath still remained in her body all mangled and covered with gaping wounds . . . But the blessed woman . . . in confession regained her youth; and for her to say, "I am a Christian, and with us no evil finds a place," was refreshment.²²

There were no empirewide centrally directed persecutions until the third century. Before this time persecution was sporadic and local. The government usually acted when encouraged by the mob.²³ The officials did not seek out Christians. Only if an individual was accused of being "Christian" was he liable to police action. It was assumed that if he confessed to "the name" he was guilty of all the actions that gossip credited to Christianity. For this reason Peter wrote the Christians to be ready to suffer for the name: "If anyone suffers as a Christian let him not be ashamed, but under that name let him glorify God," and he added, "Let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or a wrongdoer, or a mischiefmaker."²⁴ He also told them, "Always be ready to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence."²⁵ And this is precisely what the Christian apologists set out to do.

III. CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES TOWARD THE STATE

In order to explain their position some Christian teachers in the second century

²² *Ibid.*, V, i—iii.

²³ For a study of this see W. H. C. Frend, "The Persecutions: Some Links Between Judaism and the Early Church," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, IX (1958), 141—58.

²⁴ 1 Peter 4:15, 16. Also see Ignatius, Eph. 1:2; 3:1; Rom. 4:1; Eusebius, *op. cit.*, V, i, 19; Clement, *Stromateis*, VII, 1; Justin Martyr, 1 *Apology*, 4.

²⁵ 1 Peter 3:15.

wrote apologies to the emperor. The word *apology* originally meant "defense."

These apologists insisted that they were not atheists, immoral, or unpatriotic. Justin admitted that Christians did not worship the gods, but he insisted that this did not mean that they were atheists. He explains that there is only one God, and this is the God Christians worship. Justin also attempted to show that when Christians talked about a kingdom of Christ, they were not necessarily disloyal to the empire.²⁶ It is important to note, however, that the millennialistic teaching of early Christianity certainly gave cause, unjust though it was, to these suspicions. Tertullian pointed out that Christians refused to worship the emperor because he was not God. But he insisted that Christians were loyal.²⁷ Aristides also defended Christians against the charge of immorality.

Wherefore they do not commit adultery or fornication, or bear false witness, or embezzle what is held in pledge, or covet what is not theirs. . . . And their women, O Emperor, are pure as virgins, and their daughters are modest, and their men keep themselves from every unlawful union and from all uncleanness.²⁸

Indeed, Theophilus maintained that on the basis of such evidence the Christians were actually the empire's best citizens.²⁹ Both Justin and Tertullian included a description of Christian worship to prove that it was not immoral.³⁰

All these apologists pleaded for toleration of Christians. They justified this in

²⁶ 1 *Apology*, 2.

²⁷ *Apology*, 28—30.

²⁸ *Apology*, 15.

²⁹ *To Autolycus*, 9—15.

³⁰ Justin Martyr, 1 *Apology*, 61—67; Tertullian, *Apology*, 39.

a number of ways. Athenagoras pleaded that Christians were like any other philosophical group and should be accepted as such.³¹ Justin Martyr appealed to the generally accepted idea that Rome stood for justice. Certainly the emperor could not allow Christians to be prosecuted without a fair trial in which all the evidence was laid out. He insisted that to allow mobs to control legal procedures was not just. Justin seems rather sure that a fair trial would exonerate the Christians.³² But these earlier apologists requested toleration only for themselves. They did not argue from a basic principle of "rights." Tertullian was the first to demand freedom to worship for all individuals on the basis of a fundamental human right. He contended that it was a privilege of nature to worship God as one pleased. He did not urge that the state withdraw from the religious life of the community. He merely suggested that it ought not attempt to control how an individual worshiped God.³³ This was not an uncommon idea among pagans in the fourth century; it is rather interesting coming from a Christian.

All the early fathers accepted the divine function of government. The function of the state, according to Irenaeus, is to reward good and punish evil. This is necessary because of sin. "Since man, departing from God, reached such a pitch of fury that he looked upon his own brother as an enemy, and engaged in all kinds of restless conduct without fear, God imposed upon man the fear of man."³⁴ God then uses

the state to curb the passions of men and to bring some degree of justice to human life. Generally the fathers quoted St. Paul's emphasis on government as "God's servant."³⁵

Government is of divine origin, but it is necessary only because of man's sin. While the fathers thought of government as having a divine function, they also thought of it basically as a "human institution." By the fourth century it is obvious that many Christians considered man's original condition as one without government. There are some indications of this view in the second century. Tatian, for example, suggested that this world is constructed "good," but the organized human conduct that makes up society is bad. He classed civilization and government together as perversions of the original cosmos.³⁶ Tertullian especially challenged the idea that Rome's greatness was the result of God's favor. He asserted that the Roman Empire was rather the product of war and bloodshed.³⁷ Hippolytus in his *Commentary on Daniel* carried this even further. He has little or nothing good to say about the Roman Empire. He compared it to wild beasts that rage among peaceful people. That Rome should rule the world is no more than a satanic aping of the catholic kingdom of Christ. Government is at most a necessary evil. But it is necessary. He noted that even a pagan ruler like Nebuchadnezzar was a medium by which God carried out His own designs in human history.³⁸

³¹ *Plea*, 2.

³² 1 *Apology*, 4, 7, among other sections. Most of the apologists discuss this aspect of the problem.

³³ *To Scapula*, 2.

³⁴ *Against Heresies*, V, 24.

³⁵ See especially Origen, *Commentary on Romans*, IX, 26—28.

³⁶ *Oration*, 19.

³⁷ *Apology*, 25.

³⁸ *Commentary on Daniel*, I, 10.

This attitude toward government is also illustrated in the fact that the fathers connected government with the coming of Antichrist. There seems to be no hint among these teachers that the government could ever become Christian. Its destiny was rather to be engulfed in the forces of Antichrist. In his work on *Christ and Antichrist*, Hippolytus pointed out that the Antichrist would arise out of the tribe of Dan, overwhelm the 10 kingdoms into which the Roman Empire would be subdivided, and finally, in alliance with these various parts of the empire, war against Christ. He suggested at the end of this discussion that the Jews always war against Christ. Both Hippolytus and Tertullian assumed that the empire would survive until the return of Christ to reign among men.³⁹ The important point, however, is that this state would end in opposition to God. They could hardly conceive of the state as being Christian. Indeed, the historian Eusebius went to great lengths to show a skeptical church that an emperor could be Christian.⁴⁰ St. Paul feels the need to discuss the value of government. His remarks in Rom. 13 are set in the midst of a section on Christian love. He illustrated the relationship between those who live according to love and the institution that exists by force. Paul's answer is based on the fact that the government carries out a divine function, even if it does not do

³⁹ Hippolytus, *On Christ and Antichrist*, 25; Tertullian, *Apology*, 32. See Cecil J. Cadoux, *The Early Church and the World* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1925), pp. 345—348. Also J. J. Pelikan, "The Eschatology of Tertullian," *Church History*, XXI (1952), 108—122.

⁴⁰ See his *Life of Constantine* and especially his *Oration of the Emperor Constantine*.

it in love. The early fathers continued this emphasis.⁴¹

There is seemingly no concern among the early fathers for any particular form of government. They stress that government serves the function of forestalling anarchy. It is usually anarchy that is contrasted with this divine institution. There is little discussion of tyranny. It is rather assumed that government, by definition, is just. Origen is perhaps the classic example of this outlook. Government is to keep order and do justice. If it does not do so it is not really government at all. He established the Hellenic distinction between the just ruler and the tyrant as part of the Christian attitude. When he characterized government as "divinely ordained" he assumed that it was just.⁴²

The fathers made it very clear that even if government was not entirely just, Christians did not have the right to rebel. Rather they insisted that these rulers were responsible to God and He would take care of them in the Judgment. There are only two hints that come even close to suggesting rebellion. Tertullian told the persecuting governor that if the Christians desired they could cause a good deal of trouble to the government because they outnumbered the Romans. But this threat

⁴¹ Justin Martyr, 1 *Apology*, 3; 2 *Apology*, 9, 10. Athenagoras, *Plea*, 18. Theophilus, *To Autolytus*, I, 11. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V, 24. Origen, *Commentary on Romans*, IX, 26—28; *Against Celsus*, IV, 70—85. See especially Oscar Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament* (New York: Scribner's and Sons, 1956).

⁴² *Against Celsus*, VIII, 68. Also see William A. Banner, "Origen and the Tradition of Natural Law Concepts," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, VIII (1954), 49—82.

is stated merely hypothetically.⁴³ Origen expressly mentioned the possibility of disobedience in reaction to tyranny.

Suppose that a man were living among the Scythians whose laws are contrary to the divine law, and he had no opportunity to go elsewhere and was compelled to live among them; such a man for the sake of true law, though illegal among the Scythians, would rightly form associations with like-minded people contrary to the laws of the Scythians. . . . For just as it would be right for people to form associations secretly to kill a tyrant who had seized control of their city, so too, since the devil, as Christians call him, and falsehood reign as tyrants, Christians form associations against the devil . . . in order to save others.⁴⁴

It is important to note that Origen did not give the Christians the right to rebel; indeed he expressly denounced such a reaction.⁴⁵ Rather he allowed them to resist the government only when required to do evil. Origen felt that only those who had not accepted the yoke of Christ, which demanded "love toward all," could engage in secret activity against tyranny. Indeed, he seemed to feel that the non-Christian must keep the state in order, even to the point of rebelling against tyrants, but that the Christian could not participate.⁴⁶ The *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus classified sedition with fornication and astrology as activities that excluded an individual from Baptism.⁴⁷ The duty of the Christian is obedience. The apologists constantly

protested their loyalty to the government. Even Tatian mentioned that Christians regularly prayed for the emperor.⁴⁸ Justin Martyr wrote to the emperor:

More even than others, we pay the taxes and assessments to those whom you appoint, as we have been taught by Him. For once in His time some came to Him and asked whether it were right to pay taxes to Caesar. And He answered . . . "Then give what is Caesar's to Caesar and what is God's to God." So we worship God only, but in other matters we gladly serve you, recognizing you as emperors and rulers of men and praying that along with your imperial power you may also be found to have a sound mind.⁴⁹

Tatian felt that paying taxes was like "slavery," but he claimed to have paid them anyway.⁵⁰ Even though Christians served the state in civil offices and military posts, this participation in government was not favored by the church.⁵¹ It was therefore rather difficult for the fathers to refer to this service in protesting their loyalty. Tertullian contrasted the Christians with those who were actually disloyal to the emperor. He went so far as to assert, "Caesar is more ours than yours, for our God appointed him."⁵²

Along with these statements that Chris-

⁴⁸ *Oration, 4*; also see Athenagoras, *Plea, 37*.

⁴⁹ *1 Apology, 17*. See *Early Christian Fathers*, trans. and ed. Cyril C. Richardson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953).

⁵⁰ *Oration, 4*.

⁵¹ There is very little early evidence about Christians in military service. There is considerable evidence after 170 that there were Christians in service. The canons of some synods, however, expressly forbid joining the army. Tertullian (*Apology, 37*) and Origen (*Against Celsus, VIII, 69—75*) did not feel that a Christian could be a soldier.

⁵² *Apology, 33*.

⁴³ *Apology, 37*.

⁴⁴ *Against Celsus, I, 1*. Translation adapted from Henry Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: University Press, 1953) T, 1.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 15; VIII, 65.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, IV, 70.

⁴⁷ *Apostolic Tradition, 16*.

tians were loyal and indeed the empire's best citizens, we notice a certain consciousness that the Christians were separate. Christians thought of themselves as living apart from the state as well as from pagan society. It is important to note here, however, that this withdrawal is not what we call "separation of church and state." Neither the early church nor the Roman state had any conception of this modern political development. As we have already indicated, the Romans assumed that religious life was the immediate concern of the state. Christians did not disagree with this position. There is no suggestion that the state ought to be "a-religious" or that it ought to separate itself from the religious concerns of the people. Perhaps certain aspects of early Christian thought could have led to such a conception, but there is no suggestion of it. There are, however, many intimations of a feeling of separateness.

Melito, Bishop of Sardis, in the last part of the second century, wrote the emperor that Christianity and the Roman Empire developed together. He saw them as two separate institutions that began at the same time. Assuming that both were to serve a divine function, he suggested that they ought to work together.⁵³ This has been called dualism. Melito recognized in Christianity a magnitude parallel to the state and entrusted with the function of supporting the state spiritually.⁵⁴

Origen is perhaps the best example of this type of thought. He contrasted the

laws of God with those of the state.⁵⁵ Many early fathers made this distinction, suggesting that Christians obeyed the laws of the state when the latter were in conformity to those of God. Arguing from the fact that there were so many conflicting civil laws, they pointed out that civil legislation did not always represent the law of nature. God's law, the law of nature, was the same everywhere. Human law could be evaded and was therefore imperfect.⁵⁶ Tertullian pointed out that the pagan admitted this deficiency implicitly when certain of his laws were either repealed or no longer enforced.⁵⁷ Divine law, Origen asserted, is never repealed and is always enforced. It is the contrast here that is important. Christians saw themselves as subjected to a law that was apart from and higher than the laws of the state. It was on this basis that they also justified "obeying God rather than men."

The state, then, for Origen is neither Christian nor evil. He disagreed with the Gnostics, who said that the state had no divine function, but was the product of evil demons to accomplish evil. Origen thought of government as ordained by God, but for the non-Christian world. It served a good purpose, indeed God's purpose, but it operated through force rather than through love. The state for Origen was sub-Christian. Christians, as well as the church, therefore had little to do with the state. He indicated that Christians could not participate in the civil functions of government, much less in military functions.⁵⁸

⁵³ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV, xxvi, 7—9.

⁵⁴ Adolf Harnack, *Mission and Expansion of Christianity* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1962 reprint), pp. 161 and 162.

⁵⁵ *Against Celsus*, VIII, 26.

⁵⁶ Justin Martyr, 1 *Apology*, 10—12; Tatian, *Oration*, 28—29.

⁵⁷ *Apology*, 4—6.

⁵⁸ *Against Celsus*, VIII, 73—75.

It seems strange to us that he should desire the privilege of living in a peaceful community, without doing anything to keep it that way. For Origen, however, the fact that Christians prayed, took care of the sick and wounded, and held office in God's community, the church, far outweighed any other service they could render to the state.⁵⁹

The early church had not worked out any theory of church-state relationship. Two facts are important. Before the time of Constantine the church was independent. It was independent by necessity. On

⁵⁹ Ibid.

the other hand, the classical mind always considered the religious life of the community to be the business of the state, in fact, most important for the welfare of the state. No Christian from this period suggested that the religious life of imperial subjects was of no concern to the empire. In the period after Constantine (c. A. D. 325), when the church and the Roman Empire were allied with each other, these two ideas continued to struggle with each other. It is only in the 18th century that "separation" became a historical reality in some areas of the world.

St. Louis, Mo.