

# DOING CIVIC GOOD WITHOUT BOWING TO THE CIVIC GODS:

## *Second-Century Apologetics as Cultural Catechesis*

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“The second-century world,” Carl Trueman notes in *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, “is, in some sense, our world.” His primary point seems to be that, in the second century, it was not primarily the miraculous claims of Christianity that offended non-Christians—and so it has become again.

What was repulsive and even subversive to those outside the second-century church was not the miracle-working deity that Christians proclaimed but the way of life that the church practiced. Trueman puts it like this:

In the second century, the church was ... under suspicion not because her central dogmas were supernatural but rather because she appeared subversive in claiming Jesus as King and was viewed as immoral in her talk of eating and drinking human flesh and blood and expressing incestuous-sounding love between brothers and sisters.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, Christianity flourished

by existing as a close-knit, doctrinally bounded community that required her members to act consistently with their faith and to be good citizens of the earthly city as far as good citizenship was compatible with faithfulness to Christ.<sup>2</sup>

What makes Christianity most offensive in secularizing Western cultures today is not the church’s claim that Jesus stilled the seas, healed the diseased, or rose from the dead. It is the moral claim that our allegiance to Christ excludes participation in the practices by which the world around us is being catechized—which was precisely the challenge that Christians faced in the second century. It is in this sense that “the second-century world” is also “our world.”

Broadly speaking, one might say that the dominant challenge to Christian faith in the modern era first moved from *miracles to metaphysics* and now has moved to the very *morality* of

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 406.

<sup>2</sup> Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 407.

maintaining Christian faith in the public sphere. In 2019, for example, British medical doctor David Mackereth lost his job for declining to use pronouns that conflicted with an individual's birth gender. When he appealed to a tribunal, Mackereth lost his case because—in the words of the tribunal—the general practitioner's “belief in Genesis 1:27, lack of belief in transgenderism[,] and conscientious objection to transgenderism ... are incompatible with human dignity.” Such convictions—the tribunal continued—“conflict with the fundamental rights of others.”<sup>3</sup>

What is clear in this instance and many others is that the public practice of Christianity is no longer presumed to be good for the social order. To refuse to affirm the cultural liturgies of expressive individualism is not merely to set oneself outside the cultural mainstream; it is to behave in a manner that is harmful and immoral—and this change is not limited to courtrooms, classrooms, and boardrooms. I recently glimpsed it firsthand when I stepped into student ministry for a few months and encountered a different set of doubts than I had ever faced before.

### **The Doubts I Never Dreamed I Would Face**

I first worked with middle school and high school students nearly three decades ago. During those years, students typically didn't struggle with their faith until the first year or two of college. When they did question their faith, their doubts had to do with the truthfulness of Scripture and the plausibility of miracles described in Scripture. These students did not always pursue a Christian way of life, but they and their parents generally assumed that the practice of Christian faith makes the world a better place.

In 2019, I returned to student and family ministry in a temporary role, and I discovered a very different set of challenges and doubts. Doubts about Christian morals now preceded any questions about Christian miracles. One young woman in particular confessed that she found the historical evidence for the resurrection to be compelling. Yet she was willing to reject Christianity and the Bible if the Christian faith could not accommodate her conception of herself as bisexual and perhaps transgender. In her mind, for Christians to withhold affirmation of her self-conception was to disregard her dignity and to devalue her psychological well-being. According to her analytic attitude, evidence for the Christian faith was irrelevant unless the Christian faith could be conformed to her perception of what is good.<sup>4</sup>

This is a dilemma I never envisioned during my early years of student ministry nearly three decades ago—an acceptance of the evidence for the central miracle of the Christian faith coupled with a rejection of this same faith on the basis of its perceived immorality.<sup>5</sup> For this young woman and many others like her, doubts about the morality of Christianity now precede

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<sup>3</sup> Iliana Magda, “He Opposed Using Transgender Clients' Pronouns. It Became a Legal Battle,” *New York Times* (October 3, 2019); [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com). See also Glen Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe: How We All Came to Believe in Freedom, Kindness, Progress, and Equality* (Sydney, NSW: The Good Book, 2022), 191–196.

<sup>4</sup> “The analytic attitude expresses a trained capacity for entertaining tentative opinions about the inner dictates of conscience, reserving the right even to disobey the law insofar as it originates outside the individual, in the name of a gospel of a freer impulse,” Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 31.

<sup>5</sup> The young woman's simultaneous reception of a rational argument for Christian faith coupled with a rejection of the moral requirements of Christian practice suggested that her objections to the Christian faith may have been emotivist and pre-rational in nature. Emotivism “rests upon a claim that every attempt ... to provide a rational justification for an objective morality has in fact failed,” leaving the individual to choose his or her own ethical first principles, Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 22–23.

any questions related to miracles or metaphysics. For her, no less than for the tribunal that upheld a British general practitioner's termination, any allegiance to the Christian faith that prevents support for the prevailing cultural affirmations is immoral.

I am not suggesting here that the current dilemmas of late modernity are identical with the challenges of the second century. There is, however, a meaningful analogy that may be drawn on the basis of a perceived immorality of Christian practices due to the refusal of Christians to conform to prevailing cultural liturgies. The challenges that Christians faced in the second century had less to do with doubts about Christian miracles and more to do with disgust at Christian morals—and so it is in our current moment as well.

Carl Trueman makes this connection briefly in the closing pages of *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. What I wish to do in our time together is to explore this connection more deeply. Specifically, my plan is to consider how second-century apologists defended Christians against charges that their faith was immoral through apologies which—although addressed to emperors—were never meant to be read by emperors at all. They may never, in fact, have circulated beyond Christian communities. I will argue that these apologies were primarily catechetical in nature, with the goal of cultivating a culture (1) which pursued habits of civic good while refusing to revere the civic gods and (2) which displayed a distinctive consistency between profession and practice. To demonstrate this pattern of alternative cultural catechesis, I will interact with a variety of second-century texts, focusing on one particular defense of the Christian faith, the *Apologia* of Aristides of Athens.

## Arguments from the Second-Century World

The original *Apology* of Aristides seems to have been written in the early or mid-second century. The textual history of the *Apology* is complex, and the precise form of the earliest Greek text cannot be established with certainty prior to the fourth century.<sup>6</sup> The Syriac version seems to have been translated from an earlier version of the Greek text than any surviving Greek manuscript. Nevertheless, the contours of the argument remain substantially the same both in the Syriac and Greek versions.

Little is known about Aristides himself beyond what Eusebius of Caesarea preserves, that the author was “a believer earnestly devoted to our religion” who addressed an apology to Emperor Hadrian.<sup>7</sup> This placement of the apology in Hadrian's reign may represent a misunderstanding of the text that was known to Eusebius, but Eusebius is undoubtedly correct to place the initial text in the second century. Jerome adds the further detail that Aristides was “a most eloquent Athenian philosopher” who retained his philosopher's garb after becoming a follower of Jesus.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For the textual history of the *Apologia* of Aristides, including the preservation of a modified Greek text in the Christian novel *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, see Markus Vinzent, *Writing the History of Early Christianity: From Reception to Retrospection* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 206, and, William Simpson, “Aristides' *Apology* and the Novel *Barlaam and Ioasaph*” (Ph.D. diss., King's College London, 2015), 238–239. For modified stemma indicating textual sources, see William Rutherford, “Reinscribing the Jews: The Story of Aristides' *Apology* 2.2–4 and 14.1b–15.2,” *Harvard Theological Review* 106 (2013): 66.

<sup>7</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Volume I, Books 1–5*, ed. Kirsopp Lake, Loeb Classical Library 153 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 4:3:3.

<sup>8</sup> “Aristides Atheniensis philosophus eloquentissimus, et sub pristino habitu discipulus Christi,” Hieronymus, *De viris Illustribus (Berühmte Männer)*, ed. Claudia Barthold (Fohren-Linden, Germany: Carthusianus Verlag, 2010), 186.

This earnestly-devoted Athenian philosopher begins his *Apology* by appealing to the beauty of the created order.<sup>9</sup> According to Aristides, the beauty and orderly motion of the cosmos require a deity who is “immortal, perfect, incomprehensible,” and self-existent. “He stands in need of nothing,” Aristides declares, “but all things stand in need of him.”<sup>10</sup> After his declaration of the necessary nature of the divine, Aristides turns to the concerns that drive his defense of Christianity: *Which of the several types of people in the world—barbarians, Greeks, Jews, or Christians—is devoted to a deity that meets these necessary qualifications? And what way of life does each type of devotion produce?*<sup>11</sup> From the perspective of Aristides, because human beings imitate what they venerate, defective devotion inevitably produces defective ethics.<sup>12</sup> What will become clear is that Aristides is not making this argument to convince pagans but to catechize Christians into a new way of being in the world.

## ***1. Christians Practiced Habits of Radical Civic Good While Refusing to Bow to the Civic Gods***

One of the central arguments Aristides makes is that it is possible to practice radical civic good without participating in the veneration of the civic gods. For Romans in this era, religion was not primarily a matter of beliefs or morals.<sup>13</sup> Religion referred to “the binding ties of duty to the gods, the state, and the family, expressed in the virtue of *pietas*. It was therefore the cement of society and the foundation of justice.”<sup>14</sup> Civic devotion was primarily a matter of divination, supplication, and sacrifice with the pragmatic goal of securing divine favor and avoiding divine wrath. According to Polybius, writing three centuries earlier, these patterns of recognizing and reverencing the venerable gods were what held the Roman state together.<sup>15</sup> To reject such

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<sup>9</sup> This aesthetic appeal is followed immediately by an argument from motion that seems to echo Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Aristotle, “Ἀριστοτέλους τῶν Μετά τα Φυσικά Α,” *Metaphysics, Volume II: Books 10–14. Oeconomica. Magna Moralia*, Loeb Classical Library 287 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935) 12:6–9 (1071b). See also Thomas Gaston, “The Influence of Platonism on the Early Apologists,” *The Heythrop Journal* (2009): 577.

<sup>10</sup> Aristides of Athens, *Aristide: Apologie*, ed. Marie-Joseph Pierre, et al., *Sources Chretiennes* 470 (Paris: Cerf, 2003), chap. 1.

<sup>11</sup> It is acknowledged that this listing of human genuses differs in the Greek and Syriac versions of the *Apologia* of Aristides. The human races or genuses (γέννη) in this taxonomy reveals a porousness between categories that, today, would be separately classified in terms of “religion” and “ethnicity.” In *A Former Jew: Paul and the Dialectics of Race* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), Love Sechrest documents the dominant functions of ἔθνος and γένος, two key terms that indicated group identity. Her research reveals the overlapping functions of these terms in the early centuries of Christianity, as well as the differences between ancient and modern perceptions of the terms. ἔθνος frequently set one group in contrast to another in the context of war, religion, or land, with an emphasis on social or territorial boundaries; as an indicator of social boundaries, ἔθνος could include religion. Γένος, the Greek term sometimes translated “race,” seems to have emphasized characteristics of kind or kinship; γένος could also include religion.

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Aristides, *Apologie*, 9. See also “Προς Διογνητον,” *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* 3rd ed., ed. Michael Holmes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 10:4: “Ἀγαπήσας δε μιμητῆς ἑσθι αὐτοῦ τῆς χρηστοτητος.”

<sup>13</sup> According to Cicero, if one wanted to know what was right and wrong, one went to philosophers not to the diviners in the temples, Cicero, “De Divinatione,” *On Old Age. On Friendship. On Divination*, ed. W.A. Falconer, Loeb Classical Library 154 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), 2:10–11. For further discussion, see Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 188.

<sup>14</sup> Frances Young, “Greek Apologists of the Second Century,” *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, ed. Mark Edwards (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 100. For further discussion, see Michael Kruger, *Christianity at the Crossroads: How the Second Century Shaped the Future of the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 42–43.

<sup>15</sup> Polybius, *Polybius, The Histories, Volume III: Books 5–8*, ed. W.R. Paton, rev. F.W. Walbank and Christian Habicht, Loeb Classical Library 138 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 6:56.

reverence was to risk provoking the disfavor of the gods in such a way that the social order itself might be torn apart.

Because Christians refused to participate in these religious rites, the church was seen as a threat to the cohesion and stability of the social order. It is for this reason that Aristides and other second-century apologists go to such lengths to make their case that Christians pose no threat to the social order. One of the most consistent arguments made by second- and third-century Christian apologists is that Christians are able to contribute civic good without venerating the civic gods. In fact, according to Aristides, Christians do *more* to strengthen the social order than barbarians, Greeks, or Jews. According to Aristides, the cosmos itself remains due to the prayers of the church. “To me there is no doubt,” he writes, “that the itself earth abides through the supplication of Christians.”<sup>16</sup> The church’s contribution to civic good did not, however, end with supplications directed toward the Christian God on behalf of the world. It includes the lives Christians live together and the care they direct toward their neighbors.

Aristides begins his summary of this way of life with clauses that echo the Jewish Torah: Christians “do not adulterate or fornicate,” “they do not covet what is not theirs,” “they honor father and mother,” “they love their neighbors,” “they judge with justice,” and so on. Despite the Jewish origins of these declarations, many of these values would have been, at the very least, recognizable to second-century Romans.<sup>17</sup> Some of these ethics would even have caused philosophically-minded Romans to nod their heads in agreement.<sup>18</sup> Yet Aristides does not stop with this summation of familiar ethics. He moves quickly to actions so radically generous that they would have been ridiculed as absurd among most of his neighbors.

Christians, according to Aristides, “rescue orphans from those who abuse them, and they give without grudging to the one who has nothing.” Although some philosophers did criticize the practice of abandoning unwanted infants, rescuing the fatherless would have seemed ludicrous in a context where children unacknowledged by a father were widely perceived as disposable.<sup>19</sup> Aristides continues, “Whenever one of their poor passes from the world, each one according to his ability pays attention and carefully sees to his burial. If anyone of their number is imprisoned or oppressed for the name ‘Christ,’ all of them provide his needs, and if it is possible

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<sup>16</sup> Aristides, *Apologie*, 16.

<sup>17</sup> Justin Martyr similarly begins with patterns of life that would have been acceptable among certain philosophically-minded Romans before moving to patterns that might have been rejected or ridiculed. See *Apologia A*, 14–15 in *Iustini Martyris Apologiae pro Christianis. Iustini Martyris Dialogus cum Tryphone*, ed. Miroslav Marcovich (Berlin, Germany: Walter de Gruyter, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Adulterous relationships were widely condemned in certain circles, and the first-century Stoic Musonius even took a negative view of sexual relations outside marriage, Caius Musonius Rufus, *C. Musonii Rufi*, ed. Otto Hense (Leipzig, Germany: Teubner, 1905), 64, 67, 71. See also Epictetus, *Discourses: Books 1–2*, trans. W.A. Oldfather (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), 2:4–13. Some cults would also have resonated with certain Christian ethics, Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods*, 172–174.

<sup>19</sup> O.M. Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, trans. Brian McNeil (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 2005), 28–33.

for him to be delivered, they deliver him.”<sup>20</sup> These patterns of giving to the impoverished and caring for the imprisoned are precisely the habits that Lucian of Samosata mocks as preposterous in his second-century summary of the events leading up to the death of the Cynic philosopher Peregrinus.<sup>21</sup> The Cynic philosopher falsely played the part of a Christian for a time and ended up in prison. Lucian’s account of the event ridicules the compassion that Christians showed to Peregrinus. His satirical rhetoric reveals the degree to which the generosity of the Christian way of life simply could not be fitted into Roman expectations. A few years later, the philosopher Celsus similarly criticized the ways that the church brought together persons from every background and social class.<sup>22</sup>

Persons outside the Christian faith in the second century questioned how Christians could do anything other than civic harm since they abstained from the civic liturgies. The response of Aristides and other second-century apologists was that, despite their refusal to participate in the *cultus deorum*, Christians constituted a distinctive voluntary association, a *habitus* whose virtues contributed to the civic good completely apart from any participation in the civic religion.<sup>23</sup> Christians contributed good to the social order not only through prayers to their God—which, according to some apologists, stood in the place of sacrifices—but also through their care for the disadvantaged. This benevolence, according to Aristides and other second-century apologists, contributed more good to the social order than any good enacted by those who practiced the rites of the venerable gods. Justin made a similar point in his first apology, but Justin added yet another characteristic of the church’s life: multiethnicity and cultural diversity. According to Justin, local churches in the second century gathered people around the same tables who had “once despised and destroyed each other and who refused to hold anything in common with people who were not of the same tribe, due to their differing customs.”<sup>24</sup> Verifying

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<sup>20</sup> Aristides, *Apologie*, 15. The practice of burying the poor is noteworthy. In much of the Roman Empire, if a deceased individual could not afford burial, his or her body was tossed into a mass burial pit. To avoid this fate, those with the capacity to do so joined funerary societies. The bylaws of one such society were inscribed on a marble slab in Lanuvium in the year 136. Joining this funerary society required applicants to donate 100 sestertii and one amphora of *vini boni*, followed by an ongoing monthly payment. The inscription on which these bylaws survive today was crafted, in part, for the purpose of publicizing the good deeds of the society’s patron. The church provided a funerary society of sorts for those who could not join such societies, whether because they could not afford to do so or because these societies required acknowledgment of pagan deities. See Andreas Bendlin, “Associations, Funerals, Sociality, and Roman Law: The Collegium of Diana and Antinous in Lanuvium (CIL 14.2112) Reconsidered,” in Markus Öhler, ed., *Aposteldekret und antikes Vereinswesen: Gemeinschaft und ihre Ordnung* (WUNT 1280, 2011), 251–252; Maureen Carroll, *Spirits of the Dead: Roman Funerary Commemoration in Western Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 45–46; Ian Morris, *Death-Ritual and Social Structure in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 42.

<sup>21</sup> Lucian of Samosata, “Περὶ τῆς Περεργρινου Τελευτης,” *Lucian, The Passing of Peregrinus. The Runaways. Toxaris or Friendship. The Dance. Lexiphanes. The Eunuch. Astrology. The Mistaken Critic. The Parliament of the Gods. The Tyrannicide. Disowned*, ed. A.M. Harmon, Loeb Classical Library 302 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 11–13, 16. Notice in particular Lucian’s sarcasm in chapters 11 and 12.

<sup>22</sup> For the presence of barbarians, enslaved persons, women, and uneducated individuals in the churches, see the reply to Celsus in Origen of Alexandria, *Contra Celsum: Gegen Celsus*, vol. 5, *Fontes Christiani*, ed. Michael Fiedrowicz (Freiburg, Germany: Herder, 2012), 7:36, 41. According to Aristides, Christians embraced one another as “brothers, without distinction” regardless of social class, *Apologie*, 15.

<sup>23</sup> For a summary of early Christian *habitus*, see Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 122–128.

<sup>24</sup> Justin Martyr, *Apologia A*, 14, in *Iustini Martyris Apologiae pro Christianis. Iustini Martyris Dialogus cum Tryphone*, ed. Miroslav Marcovich (Berlin, Germany: Walter de Gruyter, 2005). Although ancient conceptions of race and ethnicity differed from modern conceptions, the second-century apologist Justin recognized the uniquely multiethnic nature of second-century Christian communities. Phrases such as “τοὺς οὐχ ὁμοφύλους” and “τὰ ἕθη” suggest that Justin was describing people previously separated by ethnic and cultural differences who now lived in fellowship with one another. For multiethnic, multisocioeconomic, and multigenerational churches as an apologetic argument for the truthfulness of the gospel, see Jamaal Williams and Timothy Paul Jones, *In Church as It Is in Heaven: Cultivating a Multiethnic Kingdom Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023).

that this was indeed a characteristic of these local communities, the philosopher Celsus explicitly criticized the economic and sociocultural diversity of early Christians.<sup>25</sup>

The questions posed by those outside the faith in the second century were not, of course, identical to the challenges of the twenty-first century, and I do not pretend that they were. Today, the challenges are more likely to have to do with how a Christian can possibly contribute anything other than civic harm if she or he does not wear a Pride patch on a uniform or use someone's preferred pronoun or affirm a young woman's conception of herself as bisexual. And yet, perhaps there is more similarity than one might think at first. In some sense, these contemporary cultural demands constitute a civic liturgy that includes vestments and rituals, blessings and confessions and absolution, coupled with widespread incredulity that anyone who refuses these rituals could possibly contribute to the common good.<sup>26</sup> Any refusal to concede to such social rituals is, in the words of the British tribunal in 2019, "incompatible with human dignity."

How, then, can Christians today demonstrate their contribution to the common good while refusing to conform to these civic liturgies? One possible response, grounded in the *Apology* of Aristides, is for Christians to be characterized by such generosity toward the disadvantaged and the marginalized that these habits of life simply cannot be fitted into the categories of the dominant culture. What if the church's participation in care for the impoverished, our love for prisoners, and our welcome of children in the foster system was so widespread that an awareness of these habits was as widely known as our stand against progressive sexual agendas? What if these habits caused contemporary equivalents of Lucian of Samosata to develop comedy routines that mocked not merely our supposedly out-of-date morals but also our inexplicable generosity? What if the church's pursuit of communities that are richly multiethnic, multisocioeconomic, and multigenerational caused the twenty-first century counterparts of Celsus to turn up their noses at the strangeness of Christian diversity?

Aristides was not describing civic good that the world would recognize as good. He was describing something better—a goodness so rich and radical that it simply could not be fitted into the categories of the dominant culture. What goodness might local churches do today that defies the categories of the dominant culture?

## ***2. Christianity Was a Coherent Commitment that Required Consistency Between Profession and Practice***

A further point made by Aristides of Athens and other second-century apologists is that Christianity represented a coherent commitment that required consistency between profession and practice. This stood in stark contract to the competing commitments that characterized their cultural context, and this point is deeply relevant for our apologetics today.

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<sup>25</sup> Origen of Alexandria, *Contra Celsum: Gegen Celsus*, vol. 5, *Fontes Christiani*, trans. Michael Fiedrowicz (Freiburg, Germany: Herder, 2012), 7:36, 41. See also Tertullian of Carthage, *Quintile Septimi Florentis Tertulliani Ad Nationes Libri Duo*, ed. Philip Borleffs (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1929), 1:2.

<sup>26</sup> For the religious rhetoric and impulses grounded in unacknowledged Christian assumptions in contemporary progressivist movements, see, e.g., Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 532–533.

It was generally agreed in the second century that “even if rationality led to skepticism about the nature of traditional gods, the ancient customs [regarding the worship of these gods] should be maintained.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, profession and practice were separable. Participation in the rituals of the gods did not require belief in the stories repeated about the gods. Many philosophers simultaneously denied the existence of the civic gods and yet participated publicly in the worship of these same gods. Christianity, unlike Roman religion, required consistency between the beliefs professed and the habits practiced.<sup>28</sup>

According to Aristides, belief in a singular deity who has “no other god as his companion” compelled Christians neither to reverence “idols made in a human image” nor to consume “food consecrated to idols.”<sup>29</sup> The coherence of Christian profession and practice provided evidence for its superiority. This argument for the truthfulness of Christianity may be found in other early apologists as well, and it persisted for some time. More than two centuries after Aristides, one of the evidences for the truth of Christianity that Augustine of Hippo presented to Romanianus was the consistency between Christians’ beliefs and their practices. The Greek philosophers had, according to Augustine, participated in pagan worship, yet these same philosophers taught in their schools that the gods were not real. The consistency of the Christian life was what the philosophers sought but never achieved, according to Augustine.<sup>30</sup>

Aristides articulated not only this external coherence between profession and practice but also the internal coherence of Christianity. According to Aristides, barbarians, Greeks, and Jews all lived within contradictory narratives that only the Christian narrative is able to reconcile. The barbarians claimed, for example, that the elements of the cosmos were divine, but they protected, manipulated, and even destroyed these same elements, revealing that the elements could not be divine after all.<sup>31</sup> The Greeks made righteous laws yet venerated and imitated unrighteous gods whose actions contradicted these righteous laws.<sup>32</sup>

As he engages each alternative commitment, Aristides follows the same pattern: he re-narrates the story of each genus of people—barbarians, Greeks, Jews, and others—and shows the contradictions within their constitutive narratives. After showing the contradictions in each alternative commitment, Aristides retells the constitutive narrative and present practices of Christianity. When he does, he reveals that, in Christian faith, there is no contradiction. There is, instead, coherence and consistency between the truths professed, the liturgies practiced, and the lifestyle required. Because a sovereign and singular God is both Creator and Redeemer, any

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<sup>27</sup> Frances Young, “Greek Apologists of the Second Century,” *Apologetics in the Roman Empire*, 100.

<sup>28</sup> For Christianity as not merely a practice or a community but a faith with particular and distinct beliefs, see Larry Hurtado, *Why on Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?* The Père Marquette Lecture in Theology (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2016) 122–123.

<sup>29</sup> Aristides, *Apologie*, 15

<sup>30</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *De Vera Religione*, in *De magistro, De Vera Religione*, ed. Domenico Bassi (Milan, Italy: Edizioni Testi Christiani, 1930), chapters 3–7. According to Augustine, if Plato had returned to life and glimpsed this consistency, he would have immediately become a Christian.

<sup>31</sup> Aristides, *Apologie*, 4–5

<sup>32</sup> Aristides, *Apologie*, 13



apparent inconsistency in the faith originates either due to a misunderstanding of what God has communicated or because of rebellion against what God has commanded.

The second-century apologists were concerned both with the *external consistency* and the *internal coherence* of the church's faith. Unlike the philosophers who sacrificed to the venerable gods and goddesses while simultaneously denying or redefining their existence, the external practices of Christians did not contradict their profession. This need for consistency extended beyond external practices and required a metanarrative that was internally coherent as well.

So what are the implications of this pattern for Christian cultural engagement today? For one thing, this call for consistency between profession and practice provides an explanation—grounded in the venerable witness of the church throughout the generations—for why a Christian should not verbally affirm that which he or she knows to be false regarding an individual's gender. It also stands as a reminder of the importance of the local church in the life of the apologist, since church discipline is a divinely ordained means for maintaining consistency between Christian profession and practice.

Perhaps most importantly for the sake of apologetics today, the second-century apologists' presentations of the internal coherence of Christian faith remind believers that any commitment which contradicts Christian faith will also, in the end, contradict itself. Every human commitment includes some fragment of truth, goodness, or beauty. These crumbs of truth, goodness, or beauty—no matter how fragmentary they may be—will cohere with Christianity in some small way, but they will do more than cohere with some aspect of Christian faith. They will also introduce internal contradictions in any commitment that stands against Christian faith. In the *Apology* of Aristides, even the barbarians recognize the beauty of the cosmos; it is not their recognition of this beauty that introduces the contradictions in their commitment, it is their divinization of it.

The contradictions of the twenty-first century are not the same as the ones that Aristides faced, but the responsibility of apologetics to point out these contradictions is perhaps more crucial than ever.<sup>33</sup> What this should shape within the Christian is humble confidence—confidence because Christian faith does indeed provide a coherent and comprehensive account of the way the world is, yet humble because God alone comprehends this account wholly and completely. A Christian whose life is marked by this humble confidence can simultaneously recognize the world's narratives as false and yet celebrate every strand of truth, beauty, and goodness that appears in these false narratives.<sup>34</sup> The Christian can do this because each of these strands

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<sup>33</sup> Today, the inconsistencies may be found in other places—for example, in the contradiction between the affirmation of human equality and dignity on the one hand and a rejection of humanity's formation in God's image on the other hand. "As the flood tide of Western power and influence ebbs, the illusions of European and American liberals risk being left stranded. Much that they have sought to cast as universal stands exposed as never having been anything of the kind. ... Humanism derives ultimately from claims made in the Bible: that humans are made in God's image; that his Son died equally for everyone; that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. ... That human beings have rights; that they are born equal; that they are owed sustenance, and shelter, and refuge from persecution: these were never self-evident truths," Holland, *Dominion*, 539–540. See also Anthony O'Hear, *Beyond Evolution: Human Nature and the Limits of Evolutionary Explanation* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1997), 130–132.

<sup>34</sup> This stands in continuity with Augustine's later declaration that "all the branches of heathen learning include not only superstitious fancies but also liberal instruction which is better adapted to the use of truth," Augustine of Hippo, *De doctrina Christiana libri quatuor* (Ingolstadt, Germany: Attenkover, 1826), 2:40.

stretches back to transcendental reality and thus reveals a contradiction in the world's narratives that Christian faith alone can resolve.

The strategy that Aristides follows is to re-narrate the constitutive story of each alternative commitment in his context, showing the contradictions in each one; then, he recounts the beautiful coherence and explanatory strength of the Christian metanarrative. What if this strategy became more predominant in our classrooms as a way to engage the commitments that stand against Christian faith? Every developmental theory, every secular practice of leadership, every approach to marketing, every philosophical system—each one has a story which draws from a well of common grace but which is at the same time rightly critiqued as defective by the Christian metanarrative.

What this requires practically is to practice retelling the constitutive narratives of these defective commitments in a manner that recognizes both their transcendental affirmations and their contradictions. When critiquing these claims, we re-narrate their own narratives in a manner that reveals their brokenness and their beauty, showing how they have failed even to measure up to their own best ideals—which is, at least in part, what Augustine did with the history of Rome in the first ten books of *City of God*.<sup>35</sup> Then, much like Augustine in the second half of *City of God*, we highlight how the glimmers of truth, beauty, and goodness that mark these claims are known in their fullness only in the coherence of the Christian community and the Christian metanarrative. As the dominant cultural narratives in our own day turn from a neutral perspective on Christianity to a negative view, the glimmers of common grace within the culture's stories may grow dimmer and more distorted, but they are never completely absent—and every glimmer of light within them, no matter how faint, is an evidence of their own contradictions.<sup>36</sup>

## **Second-Century Apologies as Cultural Catechesis**

According to the apologists of the second century, it is possible to practice radical civic good without bowing to the civic gods, and the coherence of Christianity testifies to its truth by revealing the contradictions in every competing narrative. Having heard my considerations regarding how these truths might be contextualized in the twenty-first century, some of you may now find yourselves wondering, “Will these tactics from the second century work? Will they persuade the world that Christians are, in fact, good for the social order? Might they at least provoke the broader culture to embrace our presence in the public square?”

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<sup>35</sup> Curtis Chang, *Engaging Unbelief: A Captivating Strategy from Augustine and Aquinas* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 66–93, and, Joshua Chatraw and Mark Allen, *The Augustine Way: Retrieving a Vision for the Church's Apologetic Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023).

<sup>36</sup> For neutral world and negative world, see Aaron Renn, “The Three Worlds of Evangelicalism,” *First Things* (February 2022): [www.firstthings.com](http://www.firstthings.com). Renn connects the strategy of “cultural engagement” with a neutral world that is no longer dominant. While agreeing with his assessment of the emerging trend as one that is negative toward historic orthodox Christianity, I see the role of cultural engagement differently. Each of the “three worlds” represents a particular configuration of points of cultural affirmation and cultural challenge. In some cases, the church affirmed and challenged the correct points; in other instances, some Christians recognized points of challenge or affirmation that others did not. Put another way, each “world” represents a different potential configuration of cultural engagement, and the transition from one to another is a reconfiguration of the points of engagement in their particularities. If what I have described is the case, the shift may not be from a position of potential cultural engagement to a position in which cultural engagement is impossible. What is needed instead in the current context is careful consideration of which reconfiguration of cultural engagement preserves the most faithful witness in contexts that no longer assume the social good of Christian profession and practice.

My answer is, “No, they won’t, and I never intended them to do so.”

I have no confidence that these arguments will persuade any contemporary secular progressivist that Christian professions and practices are good for the world. As far as anyone today can tell, the apologies of Aristides and Justin and Athenagoras did not change imperial perceptions of Christianity. In the second century, the worst persecutions were, after all, yet to come. Why, then, have I attempted to connect these ancient examples to our present circumstances? It is not because I expect these practices to convince any secularist of the social good of Christianity. It is because God works through practices such as these to form us into the type of community that will persist past the rise and fall of every power that resists God’s truth. What is likely to take shape through these particular practices is not the persuasion of the world but the formation of a people—a people who persist in publicly practicing and proclaiming their faith.

My contention is that these second-century apologies were never intended to reach any emperor or to convince any of the church’s persecutors of the truthfulness of Christianity. Four surviving apologies were addressed to emperors: the first and second apologies of Justin, the *Presbeia peri Christianōn* of Athenagoras, and the apology of Aristides.<sup>37</sup> Yet the literary form of these apologies reveals that their authors never intended them to be presented before any emperor.<sup>38</sup> To bring a petition before the emperor was to follow a series of procedures and protocols. Any shortcomings in this process could result not merely in a refusal of the petitioner’s request but in punishments up to and including execution. Even if one follows the form of the text that adheres most closely to imperial expectations, the *Apology* of Aristides is missing two crucial imperial *praenomina* and refers to the emperor as “king” instead of any then-current title such as *autokratōr*.<sup>39</sup> Most of the apologies define their subjects in the opening paragraphs but fail to include a specific request or dispute, which would have been essential had these documents actually been presented before emperors.

Furthermore, given the patterns of literary distribution in the second century A.D., these texts would have been privately copied and distributed within Christian communities. Without a sufficient market to justify investing in copying these documents for sale, the reach of privately-copied apologies might have extended as far as individuals who were interested in becoming Christians but certainly no further.<sup>40</sup>

What then was the purpose of these apologies?

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<sup>37</sup> Quadratus, Apollinaris, and Melito also seem to have penned apologies addressed to emperors, but these texts do not survive except in quotations preserved in later authors such as Eusebius of Caesarea, *Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Volume I, Books 1–5*, ed. Kirsopp Lake, Loeb Classical Library 153 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 4:3:1–3; 4:26:7–1; 5:5:4.

<sup>38</sup> Tessa Rajak, “Talking at Trypho: Christian Apologetics as Anti-Judaism in Justin’s Dialogue with Trypho the Jew,” *Apologetics in the Roman Empire*, 25; see also Loveday Alexander, “The Acts of the Apostles as an Apologetic Text,” *Apologetics in the Roman Empire*, 19. Another point that may be significant in this regard is the philosophical bent of each emperor addressed by these early apologists. Each of the imperial addressees of these various treatises was known to some degree as a philosopher. It seems these names might also have been intended less as intended destinations for the apologies and more as appeals intended to attract the attention of philosophically-inclined readers. For further examination of Christians as and among philosophers, see Heidi Wendt, “Christians as and among Writer-Intellectuals in Second-Century Rome,” *Christian Teachers in Second-Century Rome*, ed. Gregory Snyder (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2020), 84–108.

<sup>39</sup> Lorraine Buck, “Second-Century Greek Apologies Addressed to Emperors” (Ph.D. diss., University of Ottawa, 1997), 156–160.

<sup>40</sup> Buck, “Second-Century Greek Apologies,” 252–264.

The intention was to catechize the church into a particular culture which pursued radical civic good and maintained coherence between profession and practices while refusing to bow to the civic gods. By providing summaries of the Christian narrative and by re-narrating the competing constitutive stories of other people groups, these texts assured Christians on the fringes of the superiority of Christian profession and practice. By defining the terms of the church's way of life, the apologists clarified the moral culture of Christian community. These ethical markers which brought profession and practice into alignment with one another were not merely private perspectives; they were public practices that would eventually, inevitably, reveal Christians to their neighbors as Christians—and perhaps that provides us with some understanding of why these catechetical documents were addressed to emperors. Christianity was not merely a private belief but a public way of life. Addressing apologies to the emperor imbued the church's catechesis with public accountability, even if the documents never reached an emperor. By presenting these declarations of Christian faith in a way that linked them to public powers, Christians were catechized in a way that rejected the possibility of keeping the implications of their newfound faith to themselves. During a time when it was tempting to downplay the public implications of the Christian way of life, the apologists imbued the church's catechesis with public accountability.

If indeed the second-century world is in some sense our world, how should the works of the second-century apologists shape contemporary apologetics and catechesis? In the first place, our training of new Christians should include not only instruction in the doctrines that Christians profess but also equipping in how to engage alternative moral narratives and in how to practice the moral implications of these doctrines in public. Furthermore, the moral life of the church will become increasingly crucial in our apologetics. The ecclesial apologetic of a church that does radical civic good without compromising its public proclamation and practice of Christian morals will become more important than ever before.

And this brings me back to the young woman who preferred her own bisexual self-conception over evidence for the resurrection that she herself admitted was compelling. During the pandemic, I lost track of this teenager but, throughout 2019, her engagement with church followed a predictable pattern. She would attend student ministry for a short time before declaring she would never return, due to her disagreement with the moral implications of the gospel. And yet, a few weeks later, she would be back again. I never asked why, but I think I know. It was because the people of God loved her and cared for her in a way that no one in her home or at school did, despite her unwillingness to embrace the gospel. As far as I know, she never was persuaded that Christianity is good for the world, but she had discovered that Christians could be good to her. Someday, somewhere, I pray that God will work through that knowledge to clear her moral confusion as he draws her to himself. In the meantime, we persist in defending the goodness and truth of the Christian faith by catechizing God's people to become a community of civic good that refuses to bow to the civic gods.