

What made early Christians a peculiar people?

**“One second-century pagan critic of Christianity was willing to tolerate everything else about Christians if they would only worship the gods.”**

[David Heim](#) interviews [Larry W. Hurtado](#)

This article appears in the [April 12, 2017](#) issue.



Larry W. Hurtado. Photo courtesy of the Centre for the Study of Christian Origins.

*Larry Hurtado has focused much of his research on the early development of devotion to Jesus. His books include One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism (1988) and How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God? (2005). His latest book, Destroyer of the Gods, highlights the distinctiveness of Christian beliefs within the religious world of the Roman Empire. Hurtado is professor emeritus at the University of Edinburgh, where he established the Centre for the Study of Christian Origins.*

**Because Christians' belief in one God precluded them from worshipping other gods, early Christians refused to worship local gods or join in other religious ceremonies. How peculiar was this behavior in the ancient Roman world?**

So far as we know, the only religious groups that took this stance were those of Judaism and early Christianity. Of course, what became Christianity originated among early first-century Jewish followers of Jesus, and the stance against worshipping the traditional gods of the larger Roman world was inherited from the ancient Jewish matrix of the Jesus movement.

In the case of the Jews, however, Romans saw their exclusivist stance as basically an ethnic peculiarity. Jews didn't try to convert other peoples from worshipping their gods, so the Romans could accommodate their refusal to worship the Roman gods.

But from a very early point the Jesus movement became a trans- and multiethnic movement, and it made converts of pagans, so it came across as much more of a threat to social, religious, and political stability. To refuse to worship the gods was to refuse to recognize the basis on which the political and social structures rested. In the eyes of the people of that time, Christians simply had no right to refuse to worship the gods of their families, cities, and the empire. It was probably the most offensive feature of early Christianity.

Celsus, for example, a pagan critic of Christianity in the late second century, expressed a willingness to tolerate all the other objectionable things about Christians if they would only assent to worshipping the gods. That's indicative of how it mattered and how it was regarded.

**Belief in one God has a theological as well as a social or political dimension. How much do you think pagan converts were aware of this?**

Actually, the notion that behind all the various particular deities is one supreme deity who exercises an overall sovereignty over the world was circulating at the time, especially in philosophical circles. Stoics, for example, taught that everything happened according to the divine purpose. For that reason, humans should humbly submit to everything that happens to them, whether good or bad. Some early Christian writers, such as Justin Martyr, sought to articulate Christian faith in dialogue with philosophical trends of his time and often posited similarities.

Again, the crucial differentiating thing was this: the pagan philosophical notion of one supreme deity carried no implications for one's worship of the various particular deities. Early Christian teaching, however, involved the renunciation of the traditional gods and a refusal to join in sacrifice to them.

Early Christian teaching also emphasized that the supreme deity acted in love toward the world. This too was a somewhat novel idea. The character of the deity that early Christianity proffered was somewhat different from pagan notions.

**Another peculiarity of Christians was their focus on texts and the interpretation of them. This would seem to be a socially limiting factor insofar as it required literacy to be a leader. Was it?**

I suspect that early Christian leaders were probably individuals who had some prior experience and aptitude for leading. Studies of Paul's letters suggest that the leaders of the small Christian groups that he founded tended to be men and women who ran small business operations and had households with a few servants. This sort of individual also likely developed some literacy.

The ability to read and write was likely important in early Christian circles, but literacy wasn't limited to the social elite of the time. Often, for example, household slaves were taught to read and write so that they could serve their masters in a variety of tasks.

**Given the peculiarities of Christianity, the question arises: What was so appealing about Christianity? What made Christians willing to face ridicule and suspicion for adopting this faith?**

I don't have answers to this question myself, but it is an important one that thus far hasn't had adequate attention. I'm not sure that we can posit a single answer to the question—likely there were varying factors for different individuals.

Justin Martyr says, for example, that he was drawn by the persuasive reasoning and doctrines of Christianity. Others, I suspect, were drawn by the experience of an almighty deity who was motivated by love (an idea that I can't find in Roman-era pagan discourse). Others may have been attracted by demonstrations of divine power in exorcisms and other such phenomena, or by the moral commitment of Christians, their ethical living standards.

Many believers lapsed from the faith, indicating that for them the social costs were too great.

**Christianity began as a branch of Judaism—and probably would have been seen that way by pagans—so it is all the more surprising that it was ultimately among pagans and not Jews that Christianity took root. How do you explain that?**

“Christians’ refusal to worship the gods was a threat to social and political stability.”

Well, Paul felt himself divinely called specifically to proclaim the gospel among pagans (gentiles), and he devoted himself to an impressive translocal mission to fulfill that calling. But to judge from Paul's discussion in Romans 9 to 11, it appears that only a minority of Jews (a “remnant”) became adherents of the Jesus movement. I don't have a ready explanation for this.

**The claim that Jesus is Lord was a startling innovation within Judaism, with its focus on the one God. Christians started to assert that God is two yet one. Was there any precedent for this dyadic way of thinking about God?**

The initial claims seem to have been that God had raised Jesus from death and installed or exalted him as the universal Lord to whom all now were to submit and through whom they were now to be reconciled with the one God. This very quickly entailed the belief in Jesus' preexistence, especially the belief that somehow he was also the one through whom God had created the world and through whom God was now redeeming the world (e.g., 2 Cor. 5:19). Still more novel was the conviction that God now required Jesus to be given the sort of reverence otherwise reserved for God alone (e.g., Phil. 2:9–11; John 5:22–23).

Yes, this dyadic pattern of beliefs and devotional practices was a novel and remarkable development. In *One God, One Lord*, I surveyed evidence of what I described as a “chief agent” tradition in ancient Judaism—the notion that God had a being who served as God’s principal agent, a kind of vizier to God. In some ancient Jewish texts, this is a heavenly or angelic figure; in others, a biblical hero such as Moses or Enoch; and in some texts a personified attribute of God (such as Wisdom) serves in this way.

I proposed that the earliest believers adapted this “chief agent” category and posited Jesus in such a capacity. But they also expanded this category in novel ways, most notably in the conviction that Jesus was to be programmatically included as recipient of worship along with God. In the eyes of at least some Jews of that time, this was abhorrent, even blasphemous. I think that the initially vigorous opposition to the Jesus movement by the young Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, was likely prompted at least in part by this view of the matter.

As for the pagan world, it had lots of divinized human figures. But it’s one thing to imagine the divinization of a figure in a polytheistic outlook in which you can have as many gods as you want and quite another thing to accommodate a second figure in a monotheistic outlook in which there is only one deity to whom worship is to be given. The logic is considerably different. I don’t see any real explanation for the distinctively dyadic pattern of early Christian belief and practice in the pagan religious environment of the time.

### **Is belief in Jesus as Lord still being worked out in New Testament texts?**

Actually, the fundamental convictions that Jesus has been exalted as the true Messiah, Lord, and God’s unique Son; that Jesus now bears and shares God’s glory; that Jesus is the agent of creation and redemption; and that Jesus is to be revered along with God are all presupposed as familiar and common among believers in Paul’s letters, which date from the years 50 to 60. As the great German scholar Martin Hengel noted, there was more crucial christological development in those first two decades than in the succeeding seven centuries.

This feature is confirmed by the fact that there aren’t many extended discussions or explanations of beliefs about Jesus in Paul’s letters—he presupposes that his readers are already acquainted with these beliefs. One comparatively longer passage is Philippians 2:6–11, which speaks of Jesus “in the form of God (or a god)” becoming a

man, obedient to the point of crucifixion, and then uniquely exalted by God and given “the name above every name,” and so to be revered by every level of creation. Already in earliest New Testament texts, Jesus is constitutive for adequate discourse about God and adequate worship of God. To cite another early though shorter text, note 1 Corinthians 8:4–6, which speaks of “one Lord, Jesus Christ” set alongside the “one God, the Father,” and Jesus is posited as “the one through whom are all things [in creation] and through whom we exist.”

The dyadic pattern of belief is patently clear, and yet the condensed expression of it suggests that Paul in some sense presupposes that his readers know it. And consider 2 Corinthians 3:12–4:6, where Paul compares the transient glory of Moses and Torah with the greater glory of “the Lord” Jesus, who is “the image of God” (4:4) and who reflects God’s own glory (4:6).

To be sure, in subsequent decades the expressions of early Christian belief continue to develop, but the impetus for all this, the fundamental convictions that drove it, and the key questions that Christians strove to address were all there in the earliest texts.

**That Christians were so peculiar in the pagan world suggests a countercultural identity. Yet some Christian texts were also keen to say that Christians were not a threat to the pagan empire. In the end, how much of a challenge to empire were the Christians of the first few centuries?**

Christians in the first three centuries generally tended to avoid conflict with their pagan environment where they could do so without seriously compromising their Christian convictions. Christian texts of the time profess a readiness to pray for the emperor and the welfare of the Roman Empire, and they portray Christians as positive members of their society. The Roman physician Galen expressed a certain grudging admiration of Christians as demonstrating the sort of ethical standards also advocated in philosophical schools.

But in the main the evidence indicates that pagan observers of early Christians found their religious convictions and practice (especially their refusal to honor the traditional gods) threatening to the established religious and social order. Despite Christian professions of being good citizens, pagan critics saw their refusal to worship the gods as undercutting the bases on which the social and political order

rested.

For Christians today living in a setting in which Christianity is either a suspect minority (as in China) or only one option in a multifaith culture (as increasingly is the case in Western societies), the texts of the first three centuries of the church offer the best resources for thinking about how to combine a positive contributory role in society with a firm commitment to maintaining Christian convictions.

*A version of this article appears in the April 12 print edition under the title "What made early Christians peculiar?"*