

How does Christianity see itself within its larger cultural environment?

Christians have long held themselves to be distinct from the world around them; a belief that's manifested itself in a number of ways. Firstly, the Christian movement was noted for its separation from the world in such a way that many of its adherents were willing to die rather than recant. Secondly, the Christian movement found itself oppressed, infrequently by the state, but more often than not by localised discrimination. This discrimination occurred because of the wider misunderstanding of what Christians did, celebrated and who they claimed to worship. In their beliefs they were exclusive, like the Jews, but different. Finally, the Christian movement believed itself to be an 'outreach' movement, whose mission it was to proselytize in order to expand.

All of these beliefs can be seen in the words of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels, and even more so in the letters of Paul and Peter. Yet the question must be asked, to what extent was this perception unique to the growing movement of Jesus-followers? To address this question it will be necessary to look at Judaism and assess whether Christians inherited this perception of distinctiveness. Secondly it will be helpful to consider the canonical books and letters of the New Testament before finally analysing a number of early sources from outside the canon to determine any developing, or new, ideas about how Christianity views itself in relation to the world.

To begin with, however, it must be proven that Christianity does indeed see itself as distinct from the world. Christianity claims to have exclusive access to God, through Jesus as mediator on behalf of sinful man.¹ This means, therefore, that anyone who believes in a different faith, be it monotheistic or pantheistic, was excluded from receiving salvation. Christians believed that they alone had access to God because of their faith in Jesus as God's Son. Coupled with the fact that one had to undergo a public baptism to demonstrate sincerity of conversion, the Christian sect appeared to be disinterested in nominal followers: either a convert was 'in' for life, or not at all.

¹ *1 Timothy 2:5*, The Holy Bible, NRSV, (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1989). All subsequent Bible quotations from the NRSV unless otherwise indicated, p. 1369
5,496 Words, excl. Bibliography

Yet, despite the exclusivity of Christianity, there has always been a definite desire to expand and evangelise.² The clearest example of this is the Apostle Paul, who ‘travelled nearly ten thousand miles during his reported career,’³ establishing churches in towns across the major trade routes of the Roman Empire. Paul, noticeably, took the message of Jesus and brought it to an urban audience throughout the Roman world (whereas the details of Jesus’ own ministry as recorded in the Gospels suggest he never left Palestine). This evangelistic ideology was extremely successful, by all accounts. Hengel writes that, ‘The guiding thread for every history of Christianity is the irresistible expansion of the Christian faith...during the first 120 years.’⁴ It is evident, therefore, that although Christianity sees itself as distinct from the world, it believes it has something to share with the world. The ideological belief of exclusivity, ironically, is the driving force to evangelise so aggressively. Because Christians believe that their message alone offers access to God and salvation from His wrath, then those around, but not part of, the community of believers are still under that condemnation. It is the desire of Christians, therefore, to share their faith in an attempt to bring people, of all races, class and creeds, into their community to avoid God’s wrath and receive His blessing.

This explains, in part at least, why the Christian community began to find itself oppressed.⁵ The successful evangelism began to upset Jews who saw this new sect as a dualistic cult, setting its crucified Jesus alongside Yahweh, thereby ignoring and repealing the long-held *shema*.⁶ In the book of *Acts*, Luke records that riots broke out against the Christians because Paul and his disciples were converting enough people from worshipping Artemis to hurt their trade of idols.⁷

Perhaps the most poignant way in which the Christian community found itself distinct from the world was in its fervent belief of life beyond death. Unlike Judaism in this first century period, for example, Christians firmly believed in a new world where they would dwell with Christ. This is the reason that so many

² However, it is true that when Jesus first commissioned the disciples they were explicitly commanded not to go beyond the Jews. *Matthew* 10:5-6, p. 1074

³ Meeks, Wayne E., *The First Urban Christians*, 2nd Edition, (London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 16

⁴ Hengel, Martin, *Die Ursprünge der christlichen Mission*, NTS, 1971, 18, as taken from Meeks, *Urban Christians*, p. 16

⁵ ‘Actual persecution...was local, sporadic, almost random.’ Barnes, Timothy David, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 143-163

⁶ ‘Hear O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD alone.’ *Deuteronomy* 6:4, p. 191

⁷ *Acts* 19:23-41, p. 1253

were attracted to the new religious movement: hope for a better future. The basis of this hope can be found on the lips of Jesus, who promised,

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.⁸

Paul also presents this view in his letter to the Corinthians where he speaks of those who believe in Christ being resurrected: 'For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality...'⁹ Such views on the future clearly offered something new and purposeful to a society where mobility was limited and justice often difficult to obtain.¹⁰

However, the question then becomes whether or not this distinctiveness was inherited from Judaism. In answer, some central tenets of Jewish theological belief must be noted. Firstly, and most importantly, Judaism was monotheistic in a world where pantheism was the dominant religious worldview. To be a Jew meant believing that God had made a unique covenant with Abraham, promising that he would beget a nation through whom the world would be blessed.¹¹ This contract was sealed by Moses with the Law, summarised in the *Decalogue*, and became the rule of Jews across the globe. However, for the purposes of this essay, the Judaism being considered is not that which remained in Palestine, but rather the Judaism of the Diaspora. As Meeks points out, 'The Diaspora had begun at least as early as the deportations of the Babylonian exile...and had been fed by subsequent dislocations through successive conquests...'¹² meaning that, '...there was a substantial Jewish population in virtually every town of any size in the lands bordering the Mediterranean.'¹³

⁸ *John* 14:2-3, p. 1211

⁹ *I Corinthians* 15:53-54, p. 1310

¹⁰ Consider the words of A.H.M. Jones: 'But on the whole the classes were hereditary. The rich landowning families served generation after generation on the city councils. Sons of soldiers followed their fathers in the legions and the *auxilia*. Peasant proprietors cultivated their ancestral holdings, and tenants likewise.' Jones, A.H.M, *The Caste System in the Later Roman Empire*, Eirene, 8:79-96, as taken from Meeks, *Urban Christians*, p. 20

¹¹ *Genesis* 15 and 17.

¹² Meeks, *Urban Christians*, p. 34

¹³ *Ibid.*

As is the case even today cultural groups tend to reside together, hence cities having a ‘Chinatown’ or an ‘Irish’ quarter, so it’s no surprise that these Jews in the Diaspora tended to do the same. By doing so, they were establishing their own communities within a broader community, or a ‘city within a city’¹⁴ as Meeks phrases it. This enabled them to press for particular rights based on their own religious rites and unique understanding of their heritage. As Meeks argues, ‘Some aspects of their religious beliefs and practices, however, set them apart from the other immigrant cults that were becoming so common...’¹⁵ This accepted difference was noted by Josephus,¹⁶ and became official when Caesar granted Jews tax exemptions during the sabbatical year, protection from military extortion and allowed Hyrcanus to rebuild the city walls.¹⁷ It was reinforced again, first at Alexandria, and then empire-wide by decrees from the emperor.¹⁸

However, maintaining cultural and religious boundaries with their neighbours proved a two-edged sword for Jews in the empire. Whilst they were able to attract converts and proselytes by the fervency of their devotion, these Jews also, ‘Found themselves under strong pressures to conform to the dominant culture of the cities for reasons of expediency.’¹⁹ The desire to be fully part of the wider community was compounded by the distance from the Temple in Jerusalem, both geographically, and increasingly, culturally. Philo is a good example of this dichotomy: ‘He read Plato in terms of Moses and Moses in terms of Plato, to the point that he was convinced that each had said essentially the same things.’²⁰ Indeed, Meeks notes that during the rebellions in Palestine, Diaspora Jews don’t appear to have sent any support, nor suffered any reprisals, demonstrating that although the Diaspora Jews shared a common ancestry, there was a palpable disengagement with the locus of that heritage.²¹

¹⁴ Meeks, *Urban Christians*, p. 34

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XIX, 123-48. Accessed < http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0011_0_10485.html > on 26/05/2014

¹⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XIX, 5:2-3. Accessed < <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/josephus/complete.ii.xx.v.html> > on 26/05/2014

¹⁹ Meeks, *Urban Christians*, p. 36-7

²⁰ Goodenough, E.R., *An Introduction to Philo Judaeus*, 2nd Edition, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), taken from Meeks, *Urban Christians*, p. 37

²¹ See Meeks, *Urban Christians*, p.37

In due course it became clear that Christianity, although birthed through Judaism, was something new and quite different. A key example of this is the Apostle Paul, who started his career persecuting the Christian sect, even garnering support to take his mission of destroying the heretical sect to Damascus.²² Yet en route he was converted and began to proclaim the Christian message instead. Paul, having been a Jew, respected and intelligent, could have been the lynchpin in reuniting the two groups, bringing the wayward Jesus-worshippers back into the Jewish fold; yet instead he embarked upon a lifelong mission of debating Jews, planting churches and writing prolifically about salvation for the gentiles, proclaiming explicitly that the Gospel is for the whole world.²³ Christianity, therefore, was something different than Judaism, and this difference became more and more poignant as time moved on.

These Christians were seemingly more aggressive in evangelism, spearheaded by Paul, who established the model used by his disciples and other leaders. Churches sprang up in Galatia, Illyricum and as far west as Rome, with other leaders going East as far as India. Whilst one can argue that the Jews were present in many of these cities, what is significant is the timescale. These Christians were deliberately engaged in missionary activities, deliberately seeking to establish communities of believers, whereas the Diaspora seems to have existed due to conquest and invasion, at least initially. Even then it must be admitted that Judaism did not expand as irresistibly as the early Christians, because of the centrality of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Secondly, the Christians differed from the Jews in their understanding of the world and their place in it. Where Jews lived with a tension between their heritage and the present, the Christian tension was between believer and unbeliever; the world was against the Christian because it hates the light.²⁴ The distinction wasn't based upon laws or religious tradition, but upon whether one was a Christian or not. True, Jews were different from Gentiles, and this distinction has been maintained to the present, but the Christian community comprised men and women from any and all races. They required conversion to faith in Jesus as lord, not simply

²² *Galatians* 1:13-14, p. 1325

²³ *Romans* 10:12-13, p. 1284

²⁴ *John* 1:5, p. 1187

adherence to the Law.²⁵ This became a point of contention between Peter and Paul, where Paul (a Jew) publically reprimanded Peter (also a Jew) for discernibly treating Christian gentiles different from Christian Jews.²⁶ Indeed, the new community actually expected Jews to fully integrate with the gentiles; even though they could choose to retain their food preferences etc., they were barred from enforcing any food, circumcision or Sabbath laws upon these Christians. Christians differed from Jews because to become a convert to Judaism one had to participate strictly in the laws of Judaism, but to be a Christian one was free to maintain a certain cultural identity, so long as it did not conflict with Christian practice or belief. The food laws were to be a reminder of the world to come, not simply a rule to be obeyed to appear different from the world. Ignatius, in fact, called those who upheld these traditions ‘tombstones and graves of the dead’²⁷ because they did not ‘speak about Jesus Christ.’²⁸

Indeed, the Christians also claimed the Jewish scriptures for themselves. A classic example is found in the first epistle of Clement, where the author walks through Old Testament stories, pointing out God’s grace through them as an encouragement for the now-discontented church in Corinth. The author of Hebrews argued that Jesus was not simply another leader, but that he was the ‘pioneer and perfecter of our faith.’²⁹ In fact, the entire treatise contained within the book of Hebrews aims to warn Jewish converts to Christianity from returning to Judaism, because, the argument goes, Jesus is a better covenant-mediator than Moses, a better High Priest than the Levites and higher than the angels.³⁰ This argument, although undermining post-Christ Judaism, establishes the importance of the Old Covenant of Judaism to Christians.

Jesus Himself spoke of mediating a new covenant at the last supper, claiming the key promises of Yahweh to the Jewish nation and, in effect, reinterpreted them so that they were completed by His own death

²⁵ Consider Peter’s experience in *Acts* 10.

²⁶ *Galatians* 2:11-16, p. 1326

²⁷ *Epistle of Ignatius to the Philadelphians*, 6.1, taken from Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, (Michigan: BakerAcademic, 2009), Third Edition, p. 241

²⁸ *Ignatius, Philadelphians*, 6.1, p. 241

²⁹ *Hebrews* 12:2, p. 1390

³⁰ For an insightful collection of this dichotomy, and one often overlooked in this field of Jewish/Christian scholarship, see *The Perfect Saviour* edited by Jonathan Griffiths and published by IVP in 2012.

on the cross. The Christian communities even became known for celebrating the re-enactment of this feast, giving rise to claims of cannibalism.³¹

Turning to canonical documents to determine how Christianity viewed itself within its larger cultural environment, it has been noted that the Christian sect believed that it was distinct from the pervading culture around it. A key place in Jesus' teaching where he elucidates why Christians ought to be different is in *Matthew 5*, where he delivers the *Beatitudes*. In these verses Jesus explains that the Kingdom of God is for the poor in spirit, and that the earth belongs to those who are meek. He ends by calling blessed those who will be reviled and persecuted for following him.³² The criteria for success in the kingdom Jesus inaugurated was extremely counter-cultural, so much so in fact, that he tells those who follow him to expect persecution. Why? Because they are to be salt and light in a world of bitterness and darkness,³³ implying that the world Christians inhabit will be hostile to them, because they worship Jesus.

Elsewhere Jesus taught that family was not to take precedence over him: 'Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me...'³⁴ Jesus was reorienting the life of those who follow him from being based on this world to being focused on him and his promises. This contrasts greatly with Judaism, whose teachings and theological expression were explicitly familial: 'Recite these words...to your children...'³⁵ and, 'Remember the days of old...ask your father, and he will inform you...'³⁶ There was clearly a break from Judaism in that Jews and Gentiles were expected to mingle and come together as brothers through faith in Christ.

Jesus was inaugurating, at the very least, a cultural movement that would break the barriers of social status, religious heritage and economic position and create a community of equals, whereby all were equal under God, even if they retained their worldly signs of superiority. When they were together, as an *ekklesia*, there was to be no favouritism or bias.³⁷ Throughout his ministry, Paul calls himself the 'apostle to the

³¹ Justin Martyr, *I Apology* 26, accessed <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/200781565/Justin-Martyr-First-Apology>> on 27/05/2014

³² *Matthew* 5:1-12, p. 1063

³³ *Ibid.* 5:13-15, pp. 1063-1064

³⁴ *Ibid.* 10:37, p. 1075

³⁵ *Deuteronomy* 6:6-7, p. 191

³⁶ *Ibid.* 32:7, p. 221

³⁷ *James* 2:9, p. 1396

gentiles' because of his particular role in preaching to the gentiles, yet it is also clear that he loved his heritage and the Jews he encountered: 'For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh.'³⁸ Nevertheless, even though Paul made this his main ambition there are numerous stories recollectd in *Acts* of Jews interacting with, and converting, gentiles. Philip, for example, was told to leave Jerusalem to assist an Ethiopian eunuch struggling to understand Isaiah.³⁹ Consider, also, Paul's letter to Philemon asking that Philemon forgive Onesimus, a slave, for running away. Paul could command Philemon's obedience, but rather trusted him to do the right thing because of his faith in Christ.⁴⁰ This cultural movement was not only a mixture of Jew and Gentile, but it was home for slave and freedman alike, men and women, young and old; all were united together by the bond of faith, and governed by rules that protected the lowest to the highest.

Paul brought the message of Jesus into the cities of Greek culture. The communities he established followed a pattern of baptism and worshipping Jesus together frequently through singing hymns, sharing the holy meal, caring for each other in practical ways and enforcing discipline where required (take *1 Corinthians* 5 as an example). They listened as Paul reasoned, and began a process of discipleship, again modelled by Paul.⁴¹ Eventually it became clear that these communities would need leadership after the Apostles died. Thus Paul created a church government whereby he selected men known for their strength of faith and character to be bishops, elders and deacons.⁴² These men were tasked with overseeing the church,⁴³ caring for its members,⁴⁴ protecting the doctrine of faith that had been passed on to them⁴⁵ and selecting similar men to oversee other local communities.⁴⁶

It is true that in the cultural environment of the Roman world there were *collegia* that contained similar structures as the church. In fact the synagogues of Judaism were classed this way, although there were

³⁸ *Romans* 9:3, p. 1281

³⁹ *Acts* 8:26-31, p. 1237

⁴⁰ *Philemon* 1:8-21, p. 1376

⁴¹ Consider Paul's discipling of Aquila and Priscilla in *Acts* 18.

⁴² *1 Timothy* 3 and *Titus* 1

⁴³ *1 Timothy* 3:4-5, p. 1364

⁴⁴ *Acts* 7, pp. 1234-1236

⁴⁵ *1 Timothy* 4:16, p. 1365

⁴⁶ *Titus* 1:5, p. 1373

key differences between them, such as that ‘membership was automatic for a Jew by right of birth...[and] exclusive to Jews and proselytes, while other *collegia* were corporations with voluntary, open membership.’⁴⁷ The *collegia* of the empire were voluntary, yet hierarchical in a way that mirrored Roman society. The Christian communities differed from the larger cultural environment in that it established a meritocratic system whereby men were selected for their gifts in godliness and their maturity in faith as opposed to inheritance, wealth or status. Indeed, these overseers held authority over the community in such a way that a poor man economically would be able to discipline a wealthy man, for example.⁴⁸ Paul clearly had in mind a community of believers that were distinct from the world by their behaviour and their faith in Christ. His theological arguments throughout his letters present this repeatedly. In *1 Corinthians* 5 he orders the expulsion of an incestuous member immediately because, ‘That is not found even among pagans...’⁴⁹; in his epistle to the Galatians he argued that Christians are ‘...justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus...’⁵⁰; in his epistle to the Ephesians he argued that Christians are, ‘...no longer strangers and aliens, but...citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God...’⁵¹ and that they are to be armed for conflict with the world as it will attack their truth, righteousness, salvation and faith through false doctrines and temptations.⁵²

The book of *Revelation* contains a number of letters in chapters two and three that highlight the perception of the Christian churches as being beset by exterior challenges. To the church in Pergamum, the city is said to house Satan’s throne, and that the believers have held fast, ‘even in the days of Antipas my witness...who was killed among you...’⁵³ Concerning the church in Thyatira, they are warned against a prophetess who is ‘teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols.’⁵⁴ These letters point to the ideology of the Christian community that they are the minority holders of

⁴⁷ Smallwood, E. Mary, *The Jews Under Roman Rule: From Pompeii to Diocletian*, Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity, 20. Leiden: Brill, 1976, taken from Meeks, *Urban Christians*, p. 35

⁴⁸ Consider Ananias and Sapphira in *Acts* 5.

⁴⁹ *1 Corinthians* 5:1, p. 1297

⁵⁰ *Galatians* 2:16, p. 1326

⁵¹ *Ephesians* 2:19, p. 1334

⁵² *Ibid.* 6:14-17, p. 1339

⁵³ *Revelation* 2:13, p. 1426

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 2:20, pp. 1266-1427

truth, and that the world is poised to destroy them, yet they are called to remain faithful because of their hope in the future, established by Jesus himself.

More poignant, however, are the visions in *Revelation*. Although there remains varied speculation about the interpretation of the numerous horrifying images, it's obvious they point to fierce and violent opposition to the Christian community.⁵⁵ Yet, also in *Revelation* is the daily decision in the lives of the ordinary Christian: to follow Christ in the present because of the hope of the future. Whilst the cultural environment is hostile to the early Christians, they persevere because they see themselves as citizens of a larger and supernatural kingdom, which will reward their perseverance throughout the trials they undergo here on earth.

According to the New Testament documents, therefore, it is clear that the Christian community believed itself to be distinct in doctrine and purpose from the world. The Christians were energetically evangelistic because of their claim to have the monopoly on divine revelation, and their desire to have others saved from punishment by not believing. Yet there is also evidence of political structures within the various communities that shared similarities with the *collegia* of the Roman Empire, even though there were differences regarding status and inheritance.

In perhaps the most sustained, post-Apostolic argument regarding the way in which the Christian community relates to its larger cultural environment, *The Epistle to Diognetus* speaks of the community as those who, 'Disregard the world and despise death, neither recognizing those who are considered to be gods by the Greeks nor observing the superstition of the Jews.'⁵⁶ This perception caused Diognetus to seek further elucidation as to whom the sect worshipped and how. The author responds by insisting that the Christians refuse to worship manmade idols, arguing, rather, that 'Christians are not enslaved to such gods',⁵⁷ yet neither do they 'worship in the same way as the Jews.'⁵⁸ He presents the Jewish covenant sign as worthless, asking,

⁵⁵ *Revelation* 13:7, p. 1437

⁵⁶ *Epistle to Diognetus*, 1.1, taken from Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, (Michigan: BakerAcademic, 2009), Third Edition, p. 695

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.10, p. 699

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.1, p. 699

‘Is it not also ridiculous to take pride in the mutilation of the flesh as a sign of election, as though they were especially beloved of God for this?’⁵⁹

Having thus explained that the Christian faith is indeed different, the author then explains that Christians are not distinct by the barriers culture and society have erected: ‘For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, language or custom.’⁶⁰ Indeed, ‘Nowhere do they live in cities of their own, nor do they speak some unusual dialect, nor do they practice an eccentric way of life.’⁶¹ In fact, they are to be found, ‘in both Greek and barbarian cities’⁶² and are noticeably part of that community by following ‘the local customs in dress and food and other aspects of life.’⁶³

However, despite these similar cultural appearances and habits, the Christian community is distinguished from the environment around it because, although ‘they participate in everything as citizens,’⁶⁴ they, ‘endure everything as foreigners.’⁶⁵ True, they ‘marry like everyone else, and have children, but they do not expose their offspring. They share their food, but not their wives.’⁶⁶ As a note of pride, the author writes that the Christians, ‘obey the established laws; indeed in their private lives they transcend the laws.’⁶⁷ Yet, for all their involvement in, and similarities with, their cultural environment, it is clear that they do not see themselves as primarily part of it: ‘They live on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven.’⁶⁸

This is demonstrated by the way in which they are apparently treated:

They love everyone, and by everyone they are persecuted...they are poor, yet they make many rich; they are in need of everything, yet they abound in everything...By the Jews they are assaulted as foreigners, and by the Greeks they are persecuted, yet those who hate them are unable to give a reason for their hostility.⁶⁹

⁵⁹ *Diognetus*, 4.4, p. 701

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.1, p. 701

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 5.2, p. 701

⁶² *Ibid.*, 5.4, p. 703

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.5, p. 703

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.6-7, p. 703

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.10, p. 703

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.9, p. 703

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.11-17, p. 703

What is it that causes this perception of oppression and disenfranchisement? The author explains, ‘The world hates the Christians, even though it has suffered no wrong, because they set themselves against its pleasures.’⁷⁰ Why, then, do Christians endure and persevere in their faith, when hostility is all they receive? Again, the author explains, ‘For this is...no earthly discovery that was committed to them...on the contrary, the omnipotent Creator of all...established among humans the truth...from heaven and fixed it on their hearts...’⁷¹ It is the exclusivity of their doctrine and beliefs that give them the desire to maintain the ranks and persevere despite the trials, in conjunction with their firm eschatological belief that Christ would return in triumph and vindicate them. All this persecution achieves, however, is to swell their number: ‘Do you not see that as more of them are punished, the more others increase?’⁷² And this, the author argues, is proof that, ‘These things do not look like human works; they are the power of God.’⁷³

Ignatius would agree with this, for he wrote to the Romans that, ‘Christianity is greatest when it is hated by the world.’⁷⁴ Elsewhere in his letters, he speaks of the world being divided into, ‘Two coinages, the one of God and the other of the world, and each of them has its own stamp impressed upon it...’⁷⁵ clearly emphasizing that the Christian community is not simply set apart from its wider cultural environment, but is distinctly different because it is borne by suffering.⁷⁶ The author of *2 Clement* agrees, for he writes, ‘This age and the one that is coming are two enemies. This one talks about adultery and corruption and greed and deceit, but that one renounces those things.’⁷⁷

In *The Epistle of Barnabas*, too, there is evidence that the Christian community is to act differently in the world. Quoting the Jewish prophet, Isaiah, Barnabas writes that God expects Christians to,

⁷⁰ *Diognetus*, 6.5, p. 705

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 7.1-2, p. 705

⁷² *Ibid.*, 7.8, p. 707

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 7.9, p. 707

⁷⁴ *Epistle of Ignatius to the Romans*, 3.3, taken from Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, (Michigan: BakerAcademic, 2009), Third Edition, p. 229

⁷⁵ *Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians*, 5.2, taken from Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, (Michigan: BakerAcademic, 2009), Third Edition, p. 205

⁷⁶ ‘...Jesus Christ, whose life is not in us unless we voluntarily choose to die into his suffering.’ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *2 Clement*, 6.2-3, taken from Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, (Michigan: BakerAcademic, 2009), Third Edition, p. 145

Break every unjust bond, untie the knots of forced agreements, set free those who are oppressed, and tear up every unjust contract. Share your bread with the hungry, and if you see someone naked, clothe that person; bring the homeless into your house, and if you see someone of lowly status, do not despise that person, nor shall the members of your house or family do so.⁷⁸

By quoting this passage of Isaiah, Barnabas was making a statement about how Christians are to interact within their wider communities. They are to be noticeably driven by different purposes so that they can be witnesses to the grace and mercy of God that they had received.

Curiously, in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, during his trial before the proconsul, Polycarp speaks of the Christian's understanding of state law, when he responds to the proconsul, '...we have been taught to pay proper respect to rulers and authorities appointed by God, as long as it does us no harm...'⁷⁹ In this statement, one can see remnants of Ignatius' pleas to honour the Bishops as anointed by God, and also the words of Jesus, who commanded his followers to, 'Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's...'⁸⁰ The political structures, therefore, were to be honoured by Christians insofar as they were not in conflict with their primary allegiance – to Christ. Hence, when Pliny came into contact with Christians, he demanded that they forsake worshipping Christ, and demanded that they worshipped Caesar as evidence, because it was known that Christians were recalcitrant to worship any other god.⁸¹

How is it, then, that these Christians remain true to their beliefs when so heavily oppressed, even by the structures set in place to protect law-abiding citizens? In the *Second Epistle of Clement*, the author speaks of the temporary nature of this world, and therefore once again points to the eschatological hope their suffering in the present will be vindicated:

⁷⁸ *Epistle of Barnabas*, 3.3, taken from Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, (Michigan: BakerAcademic, 2009), Third Edition, p. 385

⁷⁹ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 10.2, taken from Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, (Michigan: BakerAcademic, 2009), Third Edition, p. 317

⁸⁰ *Matthew 22:20-22*, p. 1092

⁸¹ Pliny, *Letters to Trajan*, 10.96-97, accessed <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/pliny1.asp>>, on 27/05/2014
5,496 Words, excl. Bibliography

Moreover you know, brothers and sisters, that our stay in this world of the flesh is insignificant and transitory, but the promise of Christ is great and marvellous: rest in the coming kingdom and eternal life.⁸²

Evidently, therefore, the Apostolic Fathers experienced very poignantly the challenge of being a Christian in this world, engaging with the larger cultural environment, yet refusing to betray their faith and doctrines for political, financial or personal expediency.

In conclusion, this essay has demonstrated that Christianity views itself as distinct within its larger cultural environment. Having come out of Judaism through belief that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, the Christian faith began to distance itself from Judaism, completely repudiating Jewish traditions and laws. In the canonical documents it was found that Jesus and the Apostles expected the world to be opposed to their message, yet this did not stop the aggressive and expansionist evangelistic movement from spreading outward in all directions, crossing cultural, economic, class and political barriers. Their belief in exclusive revelation of divine truth was the inspiration for this evangelism, and led to widespread networks throughout the Mediterranean Basin that eventually required formal structures to be implemented. These structures were similar in form and function to those in their cultural environment, but commanded obedience beyond that of any outward authority, due to the belief that the believers were citizens of a supernatural kingdom.

Finally it was shown that during the period of the Apostolic Fathers, these Christian communities experienced and even revelled in the persecution, noting that the more persecution they received the stronger their communities became. This highlighted for the Christians the distinction between the world and their communities: they were at war, with Christians living lives in a manner that was different in many ways to society. These differences weren't inherited or cultural, but were moral and ethical and involved an understanding of God's expectations as revealed first to Israel and then to the Christians. Christians, therefore, viewed themselves as living in the world, but not of it, in such a way that their allegiance was to Christ, not the emperor, their people groups or even their families, which was, and remains, extremely counter-cultural.

⁸² 2 *Clement*, 5.5, p. 145

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