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Apologists, the First Defenders of Christianity

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Abstract

The spread of Christianity in the 2nd century brought new challenges, following the attacks to which it was subjected. These attacks came from the Roman authorities, who continued to persecute Christians, beginning in the 1st century under Emperor Nero (54-68). In addition to the persecutions that Christians had to face, they were confronted with attacks coming not only from pagan intellectuals, but also from the Jews. In this political, cultural, and religious context, the apologists appeared, who, through their lives and writings, defended and promoted Christianity within the Roman Empire. Through their writings, the first contact of church literature with the external world of culture and science begins.

The *apologies* were true legal, moral, philosophical, historical, and political pleas. Also, they were displays of Christian doctrine. Coming from an intellectual background, well educated, the apologists knew how to use Jewish and Hellenistic culture since they brought numerous themes, formulations, documents, and arguments to defend and preach the truth of faith.

Keywords

Apologists, apologies, Church, Christianity, God, paganism, persecutions, religion.

I. Introduction

In the 2nd century, Christianity faced new challenges after coming in contact with philosophy¹. To these challenges, it responded through Christian apologists, who were the first defenders of Christianity. Thus, the second stage of patristic theology and literature is marked by Christian apologists and can also be called the “period of apologists”².

The Savior Jesus Christ chose the Holy Apostles to deepen and carry the message of the Gospel to all peoples: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Mt 28, 19-20). To fulfill this commandment of the Savior Jesus Christ, the Holy Apostles left the Apostolic Fathers as their successors, and they, through their work, created a connecting element between the writings of the New Testament and those of the Apologists³.

II. The Age of Apologists

It was not easy for the Church founded by the Savior Jesus Christ to transmit the message of the Gospel within the Jewish environment in which it emerged, and then to wage, during the first three centuries, a fearless struggle against philosophical currents, but also against the pagans, who did not accept the new religion, but rather unleashed cruel persecutions against it⁴.

¹ Étienne GILSON, *Filosofia în Evul Mediu: de la începuturile patristice până la sfârșitul secolului al XIV-lea*, translation from French by Ileana Stănescu, Editura Trei, București, 2022, p. 15.

² *Apologetica Ortodoxă*, Vol. I, Coordonatori: Adrian LEMENI, Pr. Răzvan IONESCU, Diac. Sorin MIHALACHE, Cristinel IOJA, Editura Basilica, București, 2013, p. 139.

³ Arhid. Prof. Univ. Dr. Constantin VOICU, *Patrologie I*, Editura Basilica, București, 2009, p. 123.

⁴ Preot Dr. Mircea Florin CRICOVEAN, *Crâmpete din teologia și spiritualitatea Părinților Bisericii*, Editura Marineasa, Timișoara, 2009, p. 29.

Rejected most often violently by the society and culture of the Roman Empire, Christians had to adopt different attitudes towards Greco-Roman culture and tradition. The delimitation of Christianity by polytheistic traditions was a much more complex process, which extended over a longer period. The relationship between Christianity and paganism manifested itself at the religious, moral, social, political, and cultural levels⁵.

In certain situations, they attacked it head-on, and in other situations, Christians claimed the traditions of Greco-Roman culture for their benefit. To formulate and spread their own opinions, the apologists resorted to Hellenistic literary forms⁶.

Theologians of the 2nd and 3rd centuries had to polemicize and fight on two fronts: with Judaism and Greco-Roman classicism. In the dispute with Judaism, the apologists had multiple antecedents in the New Testament, where most of their arguments appeared. For the polemic with pagan thought, the apologists had no biblical support, and thus, they were forced to discover analogies within classicism, through which to identify the similarities and differences between Christianity and classical thought. Against paganism, the apologists took over the arguments from the polemics with Judaism, but also other arguments from the writings of Greek philosophers⁷.

However, the spread of Christianity due to the zeal of missionaries, but also the new way of life practiced by Christians, put them in direct contact with pagan and Jewish society. In this context, new horizons were opened and broadened on fundamental issues of faith, morality, and profane culture. Since the number of Christians was constantly increasing, information about their lives multiplied. Thus, Christianity managed to

⁵ *Istoria bisericească universală*, Vol. I: *De la întemeierea Bisericii până în anul 1054. Manual pentru Facultățile de Teologie din Patriarhia Română*, Ediția a II-a, revizuită. Coordonatori: Pr. Prof. Dr. Viorel IONIȚĂ, Pr. Prof. Dr. Daniel BENGA, Pr. Prof. Dr. Nicolae CHIFĂR, Pr. Prof. Dr. Adrian GABOR, Pr. Prof. Dr. Ioan-Vasile LEB, Pr. Prof. Dr. Constantin PĂTULEANU, Editura Basilica, București, 2021, p. 147.

⁶ Claudio MORESCHINI, Enrico NORELLI, *Istoria literaturii vechi grecești și latine*, Vol. I: *De la Apostolul Pavel până la epoca lui Constantin cel Mare*, transl. Hanibal Stănciulescu and Gabriela Sauciuc, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2001, p. 10.

⁷ Jaroslav PELIKAN, *Tradiția creștină: O istorie a dezvoltării doctrinei*, Vol. I: *Nașterea tradiției universale*, transl. e Silvia Palade, Editura Polirom, 2004, pp. 50-51.

attract followers from all social categories, from slaves to those who were part of the imperial court, but also personalities of high scientific culture⁸ who had a higher intellectual level than those of previous generations. Starting from the second half of the second century, Christianity began to distinguish itself also due to the success it had among the educated class. Within this, it found people capable of justifying it, defending it, but at the same time promoting it through literary activity. Witnesses of this activity of defense and promotion of Christianity during this period are the Greek and Latin-speaking Christian apologists⁹.

They came from educated people of paganism, managing to put the Church and pagan culture in contact that would bring a lot of enlightenment and clarification¹⁰. The first contact of church literature with the external world of culture and science begins with their writings. The Apologists lived in the most difficult era since the beginning of Christianity, when the Roman emperors banned the practice of Christianity, under penalty of death, throughout the Roman Empire. The State considered adherence to Christianity a capital offense against the official cult of the emperor¹¹, but also the fact that it would bring serious harm to the religion of the ancestors and the pagan gods, who were the protectors of the Romans¹². Under these circumstances, the apologists were real candidates for death, but despite this, they did not hide to save their lives, but on the contrary, at the cost of their lives, they put all their knowledge and talent at the service of the public defense of Christians, and some even received martyrdom¹³.

⁸ Berthold ALTANER, *Patrologia*, Traduzione a cura del Rev Dott. E. Della Zuanna del Seminario Maggiore di Padova, VI Edizione, Editura Marietti, 1960, p. 70.

⁹ Luigi PADOVESE, *Introdúcere în teologia patristică*, translated from Italian by Anton Rus and Cristian Rarău, Editura Buna Vestire, Blaj, 2003, p. 207.

¹⁰ Preot Prof. Dr. Ioan G. COMAN, *Patrologie I*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1984, p. 212.

¹¹ Johannes QUASTEN, *Patrologia*, Vol. I: *fino al Concilio di Nicea*, Traduzione italiana del Dr. Nello Beghin, Editura Marietti, 1980, p. 166.

¹² Nicolae CHIȚĂR, *Istoria creștinismului I*, Editura Universității „Lucian Blaga” Sibiu, 2007, p. 44.

¹³ *Apologeți de limbă latină*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 3, transl. Prof. Nicolae Chițescu, Eliodor Constantinescu, Paul Papadopol and Prof. David Popescu, Introduction, notes and index by Prof. Nicolae Chițescu, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1981, p. 5.

In their writings, the apologists confronted representatives of pagan philosophy, but also with objections from the Jews¹⁴. Since its emergence, the Jews were the first opponents of Christianity, and over time, they invented a lot of slander against Christians, urging the Roman authorities to take a stand against members of the Church¹⁵.

Beginning the second half of the 2nd century, when Gnosticism created its systems, the apologists approached philosophy differently, claiming that the Christian message is the one that represents true philosophy. In this sense, they consciously approached philosophical issues, demonstrating that their teaching of faith, although it appeared new to the pagans, is older than Greek and barbaric wisdom¹⁶.

In addition to defending Christianity, the apologists tried to present it as worthy of being considered a “licit religion”. Also, in their writings, we have important details about pre-Nicene Christianity, and many of them developed the first reflections of Christianity on metaphysics, morality, cultural theology, cosmology, and dogmatics¹⁷. Through the writings of the apologists, Christian literature managed to introduce into Greek and Latin literature a new literary tradition, the biblical one¹⁸. They managed to systematize the teaching of Christian faith and presented the life of the Church of their time¹⁹.

III. The most representative apologists among the clergy and laity

Throughout their existence, some apologists came from the ranks of the clergy: Quadrat/Quadratus (?), Meliton of Sardis, Theophilus of Antioch,

¹⁴ Remus RUS, *Dicționar enciclopedic de literatură creștină din primul mileniu*, Editura Lidia, București, 2003, p. 66.

¹⁵ Preot Dr. Mircea Florin CRICOVEAN, *Crâmpeie din teologia și spiritualitatea Părinților Bisericii...*, p. 31.

¹⁶ Claudio MORESCHINI, *Istoria filosofiei patristice*, transl. Alexandra Cheșcu, Mihai-Silviu Chirilă and Doina Cernica, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2009, p. 61.

¹⁷ *Apologetica Ortodoxă*, Vol. I..., p. 139.

¹⁸ Claudio MORESCHINI, Enrico NORELLI, *Istoria literaturii vechi grecești și latine*, Vol. I..., p. 10.

¹⁹ Harold O. J. BROWN, *Imaginea lui Isus Cristos în oglinda ereziilor și în cea a ortodoxiei creștine*, with Foreword by George H. Williams, translated from English by Dan Siserman, Editura Humanitas, București, 2023, p. 106.

Apollinaris of Hierapolis, Tertullian, the author of the Epistle to Diognetus, but also those who came from the ranks of the laity: Aristides the Athenian, Saint Justin Martyr and Philosopher, Tatian the Assyrian, Miltiades, Hermias and Minucius Felix²⁰.

The Greek-speaking apologists, entering cultural dialogue with tradition, sought the historical, religious, and philosophical justification of the new religion²¹, demonstrating the superiority of Christianity over paganism.

Aristides the Athenian (2nd century) is considered the first Christian apologist and one of the most famous²². He wrote the first *Apology* (125) in defense of Christians²³ and was addressed to the emperor Hadrian²⁴ (117-138). The Syriac version was discovered in 1889 by R. Harris, who claims that it was written in the year 139 and addressed to the emperor Antoninus Pius²⁵ (138-161). *The Apology* contains two main ideas: the first is represented by the polemic against the religion of the pagans, and the second presents the doctrine and the Christian life²⁶. In this writing, he presents the Christians as superior to the barbarians, the Greeks, and the Jews.

Quadratus/Quadratus (2nd century) and Aristides wrote one of the oldest *Apologies*, which most likely appeared in the first decades of the 2nd century²⁷. *The Apology* of Quadratus/Quadratus was addressed to the emperor Hadrian (117-138) and was written in the year 125 in Athens²⁸.

²⁰ Preot Prof. Dr. Ioan G. COMAN, *Patrologie I...*, p. 222.

²¹ Gheorghe VLĂDUȘESCU, *Filosofia primelor secole creștine*, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 1995, p. 18.

²² Părintele Mitropolit Nicolae CORNEANU, *Farmecul scrierilor patristice*, Editura Anastasia, București, 2002, p. 119.

²³ Pr. John Anthony MCGUCKIN, *Dicționar de teologie patristică*, translated from English by Dragoș Dâscă and Alin-Bogdan Mihăilescu, Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2014, p. 39.

²⁴ SFÂNTUL IERONIM, *Despre bărbații iluștri: Despre viețile Apostolilor; Despre cei doisprezece învățători*, 2nd edition, introductions, translations and notes by Dan Negrescu, Editura Paideia, București, 2021, p. 42.

²⁵ Damian Gheorghe PĂTRAȘCU, *Patrologie și Patristică* sec. I-IV, 2nd edition, vol. I, Editura Serafica, Roman, 2007, p. 137.

²⁶ Părintele Mitropolit Nicolae CORNEANU, *Farmecul scrierilor patristice...*, p. 121.

²⁷ Claudio MORESCHINI, *Istoria filosofiei patristice...*, p. 61.

²⁸ Arhid. Prof. Univ. Dr. Constantin VOICU, Pr. Lect. Univ. Lucian-Dumitru COLDA, *Patrologie I*, Editura Basilica, București, 2015, p. 187.

Tatian the Assyrian (120-185) understands Christianity as a wisdom from which Greek philosophy would be derived²⁹. Christianity is also superior to paganism in its morality, and through Moses, it is before all philosophies³⁰.

Saint Justin the Martyr and Philosopher (100/110-165) was the first, but also the greatest, apologist of the second century³¹. He is one of the most cultivated and profound personalities of his era, being the founder of the first Christian theological school in Rome. After the Holy Apostle Paul, Saint Justin the Martyr and Philosopher is the second founder of Christian theology and philosophy³².

Through his writings, he responded to the challenges from Judaism, Hellenism, and Gnosticism³³. Saint Justin Martyr and Philosopher defended Christianity in its disputes with Judaism and paganism³⁴, but he also presents us with important information about the oldest form of the Liturgy. Saint Justin Martyr and Philosopher is a pioneer, he was the first to try to explain the truth of Christianity to Hellenistic intellectuals³⁵, followed by almost all the Greek Fathers of the Church³⁶.

Miltiades (2nd century) was a contemporary of Tatian the Assyrian, and he was a disciple of Saint Justin Martyr and Philosopher. He wrote an *Apology of Christian Philosophy* addressed to the emperors Marcus Aurelius (161-180) and co-regent Lucius Verus (161-169), and another *Apology* against the Greeks and one against the Jews. Through his writings, Miltiades defended Christianity against pagan attacks, Jews, and heresies³⁷.

²⁹ Claudio MORESCHINI, *Istoria filosofiei patristice...*, p. 73.

³⁰ Damian Gheorghe PĂTRAȘCU, *Patrologie și Patristică* sec. I-IV..., p. 140.

³¹ Jean LAPORTE, *Părinții Latini ai Bisericii*, translated from French by de Diana Rusu, Editura Galaxia Gutenberg, Târgu-Lăpuș, 2009, p. 9.

³² Gheorghe VLĂDUȚESCU, *Filosofia primelor secole creștine...*, p. 27.

³³ Prof. Dr. Stylianos G. PAPADOPOULOS, *Patrologie* Vol. I, transl. Adrian Marinescu, Editura Bizantină, București, 2006, p. 225.

³⁴ Preot Prof. Dr. Ioan BRIA, *Dicționar de teologie ortodoxă A-Z*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1994, pp. 31-34.

³⁵ Alexander SCHMEMANN, *O istorie a Bisericii de Răsărit*, transl. Vasile Gavrilă, Editura Sophia, București, p. 70.

³⁶ Hans Freiherr VON CAMPENHAUSEN, *Părinții greci ai Bisericii*, transl. Maria-Magdalena Anghelescu, Editura Humanitas, București, 2005, p. 31.

³⁷ Remus RUS, *Dicționar enciclopedic de literatură creștină din primul mileniu...*, pp. 572-573.

Theophilus of Antioch (120-181/190) is the first theologian to develop a terminology for the doctrine of the Holy Trinity³⁸, using the term Trinity Trias (Τριάς) for the first time, to emphasize the unity of God in the three Persons. In his writings, Theophilus of Antioch seeks to highlight the unity of God, combating polytheism³⁹.

Athenagoras the Athenian (133-190) can rightly be considered a true representative of Christian philosophy in his native city of Athens, which was par excellence a center of philosophical knowledge⁴⁰. In his treatise *On the Resurrection of the Dead*, he presents us with the most original work in the patristic literature on this subject. Athenagoras the Athenian is the first Christian writer to treat the dogma of the resurrection of the dead within a philosophical framework with exclusively philosophical material. At the same time, he managed to highlight all the contemporary results of biology, physiology, and medicine⁴¹.

Meliton of Sardis († 190/195) was a prolific writer who wrote numerous works (seventeen on various topics of apologetics, biblical exegesis, and liturgy)⁴², which together would make a true encyclopedia of Christian theology. Unfortunately, many of these writings have been lost, and only the titles or fragments remain. In his writings, Meliton of Sardis demonstrated a sense of scientific method and defended Christianity. He is the first to speak of the two natures (divine and human) of the Savior Jesus Christ⁴³.

Saint Irenaeus of Lyons (135/140-202) is a disciple of the first Fathers of the Church (disciple of Saint Polycarp of Smyrna (70-156), being a faithful depositary of the authentic Apostolic Tradition⁴⁴. He attempts to develop in his writings a grandiose ecclesiological system, which was the most important of the first centuries of Christianity. Through this, he

³⁸ Pr. John Anthony MCGUCKIN, *Dicționar de teologie patristică...*, p. 33.

³⁹ Claudiu POP, *Paradigma misionară preniceeană*, Editura Mega/Editura Eikon, Cluj-Napoca, 2021, p. 191.

⁴⁰ Claudio MORESCHINI, *Istoria filosofiei patristice...*, p. 74.

⁴¹ Preot Profesor Ioan G. COMAN, *Probleme de filosofie și literatură patristică*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1995, p. 99.

⁴² Pr. John Anthony MCGUCKIN, *Dicționar de teologie patristică...*, p. 322.

⁴³ Arhid. Prof. Univ. Dr. Constantin VOICU, Pr. Lect. Univ. Lucian-Dumitru COLDA, *Patrologie I...*, pp. 228-230.

⁴⁴ Hans Freiherr VON CAMPENHAUSEN, *Părinții greci ai Bisericii...*, p. 32.

managed to impose himself on the Christian writers who followed him in various aspects⁴⁵. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) resorted to the authority of Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, regarding the transmission of divine Revelation, Tradition, apostolic succession, and the positive idea of man. He was cited sixteen times in its documents: *Lumen Gentium* (7): 4, 13, 17, 20, 23; *Dei Verbum* (4): 7, 16, 18, 25; *Ad Gentes* (3): 3, 7, 8; *Gaudium et Spes* (2): 39, 57⁴⁶.

Saint Hippolytus (170/175-235) was an important theologian of the *Logos*⁴⁷, making important contributions to all areas of Christian science. He was an apologist and exegete. He expounded dogma, morals, and discipline. He wrote history and geography, and transposed his thoughts into religious poetry⁴⁸.

Tertullian (160-240) was the greatest theologian of the Western Church before Saint Hilary of Poitiers (315-368) and would be surpassed only by Saint Augustine (354-430). Receiving the legacy of Greek apologetics, Tertullian embedded it in Latin-language Christian culture and elaborated, in a more elevated way, through polemics⁴⁹. In his writings, he allocated significant space to clarifying the relationship between Christianity and pagan philosophies⁵⁰. Tertullian begins to lay the foundations of systematic and Christian political theology.

As Romans, Tertullian and Minucius Felix († 250), based on legal studies, were the most able to demand legal recognition of Christians from the Romans⁵¹. Saint Irenaeus of Lyons and Tertullian were the first pioneers of theological literature in Greek and Latin⁵².

Apologists are Christian writers from the second century who, due to attacks from intransigent Judaism, from less knowledgeable fanatical

⁴⁵ Claudio MORESCHINI, *Istoria filosofiei patristice...*, p. 79.

⁴⁶ Damian Gheorghe PĂTRAȘCU, *Patrologie și Patristică* sec. I-IV..., p. 186.

⁴⁷ Pr. John Anthony MCGUCKIN, *Dicționar de teologie patristică...*, p. 262.

⁴⁸ Arhid. Prof. Univ. Dr. Constantin VOICU, Pr. Lect. Univ. Lucian-Dumitru COLDA, *Patrologie I...*, p. 361.

⁴⁹ Claudio MORESCHINI, *Istoria filosofiei patristice...*, p. 181.

⁵⁰ Claudiu POP, *Paradigma misionară preniceeană...*, p. 188.

⁵¹ Gheorghe VLĂDUȘESCU, *Filosofia primelor secole creștine...*, p. 18.

⁵² Harold O. J. BROWN, *Imaginea lui Isus Cristos în oglinda ereziilor și în cea a ortodoxiei creștine...*, p. 108.

people, from Roman legislation, but also from pagan writers, sought to show in their writings the innocence of Christians. Through their writings, they sought to obtain tolerance for Christians from public authorities, to save their lives, which were threatened due to misinformation, perverted misinterpretation, or criminal misunderstanding⁵³. On the other hand, apologists wanted to show the value and superiority of the Christian religion, as the true one, compared to other pagan religions, but also to be able to win new followers. In the dispute with Judaism, apologists sought first to prove that in the person of the Savior Jesus Christ, all the prophecies of the Old Testament were fulfilled, rather than to show that He is the end of the Law⁵⁴.

IV. Apologies are the first writings defending and promoting Christianity

The name of the Apologists comes from their main writings, which are apologies for the Christian religion. The word apology is of Greek origin (*απολογία*), in Latin (*apologeticum*), and means defense, legal plea, justification, or speech delivered by someone before a court to defend themselves. These apologies are true pleas, aiming to obtain from the Roman emperors the recognition of the legal right of Christians to exist in an Empire that was officially pagan⁵⁵. In this context, a more specialized literary genre appears, and it is dedicated to different problems. This literary genre is that of the apologists or apologies⁵⁶, which are true masterpieces of Christian literature, and were written with tears and sighs⁵⁷. Apologies were legal, moral, philosophical, historical, and political pleas. They are also expositions of Christian doctrine⁵⁸. Apologists knew how to use Jewish and Hellenistic culture because they offered them numerous themes, formulations, documents, and arguments to defend and preach the truth of faith⁵⁹.

⁵³ *Apologetica Ortodoxă*, Vol. I..., p. 139.

⁵⁴ Jaroslav PELIKAN, *Tradiția creștină: O istorie a dezvoltării doctrinei*, Vol. I..., p. 41.

⁵⁵ Étienne GILSON, *Filosofia în Evul Mediu...*, p. 22.

⁵⁶ Preot Prof. Dr. Ioan G. COMAN, *Patrologie I...*, p. 211.

⁵⁷ *Apologeti de limbă latină...*, p. 5.

⁵⁸ Gheorghe VLĂDUȚESCU, *Filosofia primelor secole creștine...*, p. 17.

⁵⁹ *Apologetica Ortodoxă*, Vol. I..., p. 145.

Apologies involve accusations and attacks, so it is necessary to see the causes that led to the emergence of apologetic writings⁶⁰.

The intransigence of Judaism. The first opponents of Christians were the Jews, from whom this religion emerged. The first persecutions launched against Christians were by the Jews. They persecuted Christians, out of hatred, since the time of the Savior Jesus Christ and the Holy Apostles, who were threatened, imprisoned, beaten, and even martyred⁶¹, as was the case with the Holy Apostle James († 44)⁶². When they realized that they could not harm Christians, the Jews began to invent a multitude of slanders against them. When they saw that they could not succeed by their efforts, they agitated the Roman authorities against the Christians. The persecutions of the Jews against the Christians prepared, to some extent, and motivated their persecution by the Roman authorities⁶³. During the persecutions suffered by the Christians for three centuries (64-313), the Jews had their share of contribution⁶⁴.

Unfortunately, during the period of the apologists, this hatred of the Jews against the Christians intensified due to the spread and especially the success of Christianity⁶⁵.

The second cause that led to the appearance of apologetic writings was the *slanders brought against the Christians by the uneducated but fanatical people*. In the first decades after its appearance, Christianity was not considered a distinct religion, but rather a Jewish sect. Consequently, it was an officially accepted religion⁶⁶. Over time, after the spread of

⁶⁰ Arhid. Prof. Univ. Dr. Constantin VOICU, Pr. Lect. Univ. Lucian-Dumitru COLDA, *Patrologie I...*, p. 180.

⁶¹ Nicolae CHIFĂR, *Istoria creștinismului I...*, p. 43.

⁶² Călin Ioan DUȘE, *Persecuțiile și martirii creștini din secolul I*, Editura Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2024, pp. 244-247.

⁶³ *Istoria bisericească universală*, Vol. I: *De la întemeierea Bisericii până în anul 1054. Manual pentru Facultățile de Teologie din Patriarhia Română*, 2nd revised edition, Coordonator: Pr. Prof. Dr. Viorel IONIȚĂ..., p. 107.

⁶⁴ Arhid. Prof. Univ. Dr. Constantin VOICU, Pr. Lect. Univ. Lucian-Dumitru COLDA, *Patrologie I...*, p. 180.

⁶⁵ Preot Prof. Dr. Ioan G. COMAN, *Patrologie I...*, p. 220.

⁶⁶ Claudio MORESCHINI, Enrico NORELLI, *Istoria literaturii vechi grecești și latine*, Vol. I..., p. 217.

Christianity throughout the Roman Empire, the people noticed the new life of the Christians and thus began to take a stand against them⁶⁷. In the correspondence between Pliny the Younger (61/62-113), governor of Bithynia (111-113), and Emperor Trajan (98-117), from the year 112⁶⁸, we note that two accusations were brought against the Christians: encouraging civil disobedience and practicing immorality⁶⁹.

Christians were quite different from other people. They did not worship the emperor as a God, rejecting the emperor cult, which, starting with the emperor Octavian Augustus (27 BC -14 AD), developed continuously and became a state cult. Rejection of the emperor cult represented the commission of the crime of *les-majesté*⁷⁰.

Also, Christians were accused of not participating in pagan temples, abstaining from sacrifices, fleeing from public games and theater, being completely alien to any public joys and celebrations. In addition, Christians led a pure and secluded life; they met at agape and praised God, putting His teaching into practice⁷¹.

Following this new way of life, some formulas from the social and liturgical life of Christians, the uneducated people started to accuse Christians of: *atheism, theistic feasts/banquets, and oedipal love/couples*. These slanders were based on certain rumors, which arose from the pagans' partial interpretation of a Christian teaching and its wrong, but especially tendentious interpretation.

The most serious accusation brought against Christians was that of *atheism*, because they did not admit the existence of any of the gods of the Greco-Roman religion, and no one saw them offering sacrifices to them. Rejection of the cult of the gods represented a crime of *les-majesté*, also

⁶⁷ Arhid. Prof. Univ. Dr. Constantin VOICU, Pr. Lect. Univ. Lucian-Dumitru COLDA, *Patrologie I...*, p. 181.

⁶⁸ For more details about Pliny the Younger's correspondence with Emperor Trajan, see: Călin Ioan DUȘE, *Imperiul Roman și creștinismul în secolul I*, Editura Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2023, pp. 274-278; Călin Ioan DUȘE, *Persecuțiile și martirii creștini din secolul I...*, pp. 134-137.

⁶⁹ Jaroslav PELIKAN, *Tradiția creștină: O istorie a dezvoltării doctrinei*, Vol. I..., p. 51.

⁷⁰ Preot Prof. Dr. Ioan G. COMAN, *Patrologie I...*, p. 220.

⁷¹ Arhid. Prof. Univ. Dr. Constantin VOICU, Pr. Lect. Univ. Lucian-Dumitru COLDA, *Patrologie I...*, p. 181.

called *irreligiositas* or *sacrilegium*. The atheism of Christians was also supported by the fact that they denied the existence of the gods⁷².

They were accused of *theistic feasts/banquets* due to the misinterpretation of the Christian teaching about the Holy Eucharist (Christians eat the body of the Son of Man in their cult gatherings and drink His Blood, just as Atreus served his brother Thyestes' children as food). One of the most widespread slanders against Christians was the accusation that they eat human flesh or bread soaked in blood⁷³. They were accused of *oedipal love/intercourse* (incestuous relationships between parents and children or between brothers and sisters) based on the information that, at a certain moment during the common divine service, Christians gave each other the kiss of peace, and at the end celebrated the feast of love (agapa). The name of this accusation comes from the sin of Oedipus, who unknowingly became the husband of his mother Jocasta and the brother of his children: Eteocles, Polynices, Antigone, and Ismene. Christians were accused of cannibalism and incest by the rhetorician Fronto of Cirta⁷⁴.

To these three slanders, built on false rumors and fantasy, they added, as we see even in Tacitus (57-120), the general accusation that Christians hate other people: "To extinguish the rumor, Nero contrived to accuse some people, hated by everyone for their infamies, and subjected them to the most cruel tortures; the world called them «Christians»"⁷⁵. This accusation was based on the isolation of Christians from pagans, on the secret and clandestine nature of their cult meetings, on their non-participation in pagan cult manifestations, even when these had a national (patriotic) character, being put at the service of the prestige and protection of the homeland⁷⁶.

Persecutions form the third and most important cause that determines the appearance of apologies. Persecutions are in turn generated by Jewish fanaticism, but also by slanders started by the common people. They started against Christians, beginning in the 1st century. At first, the persecutions

⁷² Preot Prof. Dr. Ioan G. COMAN, *Patrologie I...*, p. 220.

⁷³ Jaroslav PELIKAN, *Tradiția creștină: O istorie a dezvoltării doctrinei*, Vol. I..., p. 51.

⁷⁴ Preot Prof. Dr. Ioan G. COMAN, *Patrologie I...*, p. 219.

⁷⁵ Cornelius TACITUS, *Annale*, XV, 44, translation, introduction and notes by Gheorghe Guțiu, Editura Humanitas, 1995, p. 430.

⁷⁶ Arhid. Prof. Univ. Dr. Constantin VOICU, Pr. Lect. Univ. Lucian-Dumitru COLDA, *Patrologie I...*, p. 181.

did not have a general character and were not triggered based on laws. On July 19, 64, when the fire that devastated Rome began, Emperor Nero (54-68), taking advantage of the hatred of the pagan population against Christians⁷⁷, began the persecution against them⁷⁸. Thus, in August 64, Nero declared Christians public enemies and dangerous for their superstition. He unleashed a persecution, which manifested itself with a terrifying cruelty commensurate with his madness⁷⁹. Christians were outlawed and treated as dangerous to public order and the existence of the state.

From the second half of the 2nd century, Christians were persecuted based on laws-edicts. Only the name of a Christian is persecuted. Apologists write against this situation, and their literature appears and develops in this historical framework⁸⁰.

In addition to these, pagan writings are also added. At first, in the first century, the educated class was not interested in Christians and treated them with contempt. Starting with the second half of the 2nd century, Christians began to show interest in the so-called “intellectual elite”. From among them appear writers such as Lucius Flavius Arrianus (c. 87-145/146)⁸¹, Marcus Cornelius Froto of Cirta (100-167), the teacher/magister of Emperor Marcus Aurelius (161-180), who was a rhetorician and physician of Berber origin. Fronto accused Christians of theistic feasts, during which incest was practiced. The Cynic philosopher Crescens (2nd century), who lived in Rome, accused Christians of being atheists⁸².

They hated and criticized Christians, believing all the slanders attributed to them, and the Epicurean satirist Lucian of Samosata (c. 120-180), a famous pamphleteer, parodied the teaching of faith⁸³. Thus, in his

⁷⁷ Emil DUMEA, *Teme de istorie a Bisericii*, Editura Sapiientia, Iași, 2002, p. 40.

⁷⁸ Claudio MORESCHINI, ENRICO NORELLI, *Istoria literaturii vechi grecești și latine*, Vol. I..., p. 217.

⁷⁹ For more details about Nero's persecution, see: Călin Ioan DUȘE, *Persecuțiile și martirii creștini din secolul I...*, pp. 76-79.

⁸⁰ Claudio MORESCHINI, ENRICO NORELLI, *Istoria literaturii vechi grecești și latine*, Vol. I..., p. 218.

⁸¹ <https://www.livius.org/sources/content/arrian/>, accessed on 4.04. 2025.

⁸² *Istoria bisericească universală*, Vol. I..., Coordonator: Pr. Prof. Dr. Viorel IONIȚĂ..., pp. 153-154.

⁸³ Preot Dr. Mircea Florin CRICOVEAN, *Crâmpoie din teologia și spiritualitatea Părinților Bisericii...*, p. 37.

writing *On the Death of Peregrinus*, published in 167⁸⁴, he ridiculed and mocked the belief in the immortality of the soul, in future reward, the contempt of Christians for death, their desire to accept martyrdom, and their brotherly love.

The greatest and fiercest opponent of Christianity in the 2nd century was Celsus/Kels. He was a Stoic or eclectic Platonist philosopher, an Epicurean, called by Origen (185-254/255), so as not to call him an anti-Christian⁸⁵. Between 175 and 180, he wrote the *True Word* (Λόγος ἀληθῆς), in which he criticized the entire Christian religion, which he wanted to discredit and compromise. Despite all the slanders brought against Christians, Celsus recommended collaboration with them, especially in restoring moral and social life within the Roman Empire⁸⁶. Published in 178, when the great apologists were no longer alive, it remained unanswered throughout the 2nd century⁸⁷. This writing was combated in 248 by the great Christian theologian and writer Origen in his writing *Against Celsus* (Κατὰ Κέλσου)⁸⁸.

These pagan writings, in addition to the accusations brought by the people, which reproached the Christians for inertia, that is, flight from the world and disinterest in the prosperity of the state, neglect of life and contempt for earthly goods, mock the Christian religion, ridicule the crucified God and the faith of the Christians in His Resurrection. Christians are blamed for all the disasters that befell the state⁸⁹.

We have previously shown the causes that led to the appearance of apologetic writings in their chronological order. If we were to examine these causes from the point of view of their importance, we would have to put in the first place the persecutions, the slander spread by the people

⁸⁴ Preot Prof. Dr. Ioan G. COMAN, *Patrologie I...*, p. 217.

⁸⁵ Mitropolit Nicolae CORNEANU, *Patristica mirabilia. Pagini din literatura primelor veacuri creștine*, Editura Mitropoliei Banatului, Timișoara, 1987, p. 91.

⁸⁶ *Istoria bisericească universală*, Vol. I..., Coordonator: Pr. Prof. Dr. Viorel IONIȚĂ..., p. 154.

⁸⁷ Preot Prof. Dr. Ioan G. COMAN, *Patrologie I...*, p. 218.

⁸⁸ Preot prof. dr. Ioan RĂMUREANU, Preot prof. dr. Milan ȘESAN, Preot prof. dr. Teodor BODOGAE, *Istoria bisericească universală*, Vol. I (1-1054), 3rd revised edition, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1987, pp. 140-141.

⁸⁹ Arhid. Prof. Univ. Dr. Constantin VOICU, Pr. Lect. Univ. Lucian-Dumitru COLDA, *Patrologie I...*, p. 182.

and the pagan writers, who at a dogmatic level accused the Christians of spreading absurd myths⁹⁰. In this historical framework, the literature of Christian apologists developed starting from the 2nd century.

Studying the contents of the Apologies, we notice that they aim to combat the groundlessness of the accusations and slanders brought against Christians by the masses who hated them, but also by cultured people⁹¹. Thus, the incrimination of atheism is rejected as false, because they do not worship idols and do not offer sacrifices to them, but adore the true God. Christianity is not against the idea and order of the state. The accusation comes from the fact that they are forced to gather in secret, and Christianity does not contain absurd ideas. Regarding the disasters that come upon the Roman Empire, they do not come because of the Christians, but are a punishment sent by God to the pagans, because they worship idols. All of these are fabrications, and they came either from bad faith or ignorance and misunderstanding of a teaching⁹².

Through their writings, the apologists proved the illegality of the persecutions. The edicts promulgated against Christians are unjust because legal forms are violated, and pagan legislation and philosophy are full of contradictions. Therefore, Christians are persecuted unjustly and illegally. Moreover, the apologists sought to show and demonstrate that the persecutions are illegitimate, that the accusations are unfounded, and that Christians are good citizens of the Roman state⁹³.

The apologists dealt with combating paganism and Judaism. They demonstrated in their writings the futility and folly of idol worship, its immorality in general, the cruelty and barbarity of human sacrifices, and the satanic principles that inspire the doctrine and life of the pagans.

The Jews were fought with quotations from the Old Testament. In combating them, the apologists used the Old Testament and the prophets to convince them of the messianic nature of the Savior Jesus Christ and

⁹⁰ Jaroslav PELIKAN, *Tradiția creștină: O istorie a dezvoltării doctrinei*, Vol. I..., p. 51.

⁹¹ Claudio MORESCHINI, Enrico NORELLI, *Istoria literaturii vechi grecești și latine*, Vol. I..., p. 218.

⁹² Arhid. Prof. Univ. Dr. Constantin VOICU, Pr. Lect. Univ. Lucian-Dumitru COLDA, *Patrologie I...*, p. 182.

⁹³ *Istoria bisericească universală*, Vol. I..., Coordonator: Pr. Prof. Dr. Viorel IONIȚĂ..., p. 110.

to attract them to Christianity. Ariston of Pella and Saint Justin the Martyr and Philosopher wrote against them.

Through their multiple activities, the apologists did not limit themselves to this; they sought to prove the superiority of the Christian religion, showing that it is pure, divine, revealed, and with a superior morality. In connection with the novelty of Christianity, the apologists showed that it is older than it seems and claimed the Old Testament for Christians. Others, like Saint Justin the Martyr, sought to show that the most prominent pagan thinkers also glimpsed the true Christian faith. Thus, the apologists have a negative attitude towards the accusations brought against them, towards Judaism and paganism, and a positive attitude towards the Christian religion, the merits of which they highlight. In their writings, they not only made an apology but also a polemic, defending Christianity and at the same time combating Judaism and paganism. In combating paganism, some had a hostile attitude towards it, and others a moderate one, because they sought to bring philosophy and Christianity closer together.

From what has been presented, we can see that the apologists pursued a threefold goal in their writings: the cessation of persecutions, the enlightenment of public opinion regarding the attitude towards Christianity, and the conversion of unbelievers.

Regarding the period in which the apologists were active, we must note that they began to appear from the time of Emperor Hadrian/Adrian (117-138). They were active throughout the 2nd century, but we also find apologists in the 4th and 5th centuries ⁹⁴.

Their apologies were addressed:

To the emperors or the Senate, because these were the only authorities who could and had the duty to stop unjust persecutions. They had to realize that only Christians could contribute to the good of society⁹⁵.

Some apologies were addressed to provincial governors, important officials, the Roman people, and the Jews. Apologies addressed to

⁹⁴ Arhid. Prof. Univ. Dr. Constantin VOICU, Pr. Lect. Univ. Lucian-Dumitru COLDA, *Patrologie I...*, p. 183.

⁹⁵ Claudio MORESCHINI, Enrico NORELLI, *Istoria literaturii vechi grecești și latine*, Vol. I..., p. 218.

emperors, the Senate, and the people, as a style and formula of address, are very reverent, always having a high level of general principles with attitudes of exhortation and respectful request. Such were the apologies of Aristides the Athenian, Quadratus/Quadratus, Athenagoras the Athenian, and Saint Justin the Martyr and Philosopher. On the other hand, we have apologies of great severity, against the pagans of Tatian the Assyrian and that of Tertullian, addressed to provincial governors and pagans, who are criticized mainly from a legal point of view, but also morally⁹⁶.

Other apologies were addressed to pagan intellectuals, who were representatives of a cultural tradition imbued with polytheism. These were in the form of exhortation, often passing from defensive to offensive. There were also some apologies, which were addressed to individuals, in the form of dialogue, in a gentle and conciliatory tone, such as the *Epistle/Letter to Diognetus*, the *Epistle/Letter to Autolytus*, Minucius Felix, and Meliton of Sardis. In the case of the apologies of Tatian the Assyrian and Hermias, the tone was completely hostile⁹⁷ and satirical. Hermias has a sarcastic tone towards the contradictions between the pagan philosophers⁹⁸.

From the content standpoint, the apologies are the first testimonies of faith, but especially of the Christian life, from this period in which all Christians were called to heroism⁹⁹. The main novelty brought by the content of the apologies was the new life of Christians, compared to the ordinary life of the pagans. The confrontation between the new and the old, in the period in which the apologists lived, was carried out under the sign of persecution, to impose the novelty on the old. This novelty was in danger of extinction, especially since it claimed to be of divine origin and wanted to replace the old for good¹⁰⁰.

⁹⁶ Preot Prof. Dr. Ioan G. COMAN, *Patrologie I...*, pp. 219-220.

⁹⁷ Claudio MORESCHINI, Enrico NORELLI, *Istoria literaturii vechi grecești și latine*, Vol. I..., p. 218.

⁹⁸ Preot Prof. Dr. Ioan G. COMAN, *Patrologie I...*, p. 363.

⁹⁹ Arhid. Prof. Univ. Dr. Constantin VOICU, Pr. Lect. Univ. Lucian-Dumitru COLDA, *Patrologie I...*, p. 184.

¹⁰⁰ Preot Prof. Dr. Ioan G. COMAN, *Patrologie I...*, p. 225.

V. Conclusions

Christianity spread in the 2nd century and faced strong religious, political, and cultural resistance. In this context, the apologists accepted this challenge, and their lives and work were of major importance for the Church¹⁰¹, in how they responded to the challenges of the time.

Although their writings did not have an immediate political effect, they gave a strong impetus to Christianity in three major directions, managing to put it in dialogue with philosophy, to reject heresies, and to elaborate dogmas.

The apologists were cultured people, trained in philosophical schools and with the possibility to face and reject any pagan or Jewish attack. They are the ones who created the first bridges between Christianity and philosophy¹⁰². Through their ability, the apologists managed to defend the truths of faith with the intellectual means of the educated pagan world. They can rightly be considered the founders of Christian theology and literature¹⁰³, since they had the first attempts at scientific theology. They discuss major doctrinal and moral issues, being the first missionaries who led to the inculturation of the Gospel in the civilization of their time, and to the evangelization of the culture of their time¹⁰⁴. They also established the first norms of faith, the first forms of sacramental life, the liturgical and cult elements were structured, the forms of social organization were clarified, and the clergy and the hierarchy became institutions centered around the ordination of bishops by the Apostles¹⁰⁵.

The apologists are the ones who make the first attempts at Christianizing philosophy. Philosophy supported only by reason could only give part of

¹⁰¹ Ana BACIU, "Confruntarea dintre creștinism și păgânism în Apologia I a Sfântului Iustin Martirul și Filosoful", in: *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai Theologia Orthodoxa*, 58 LVIII (2013) 2, p. 108.

¹⁰² *Apologetica Ortodoxă*, Vol. I..., p. 145.

¹⁰³ Claudio MORESCHINI, Enrico NORELLI, *Istoria literaturii vechi grecești și latine*, Vol. I..., p. 11.

¹⁰⁴ Damian Gheorghe PĂTRAȘCU, *Patrologie și Patristică* sec. I-IV..., p. 121.

¹⁰⁵ Alexandru BUZALIC, *Ekklesia: Din problematica eclesiologiei contemporane, ediția a doua revăzută și adăugită*, Editura Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2022, p. 40.

the truth, while Christianity contains the whole truth, because the Savior Jesus Christ revealed himself as the Absolute Truth on earth. In their writings, the apologists sought to show the connection between the two Testaments.

Through their tireless work, they laid the foundations of the intellectual discipline of theology, which over time made Christianity the most studied and academic of the great religions of the world. The Apologists were able to create early Catholic Christianity, which would begin to take on a clear form during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161-180)¹⁰⁶.

Also, through their writings, the Apologists are precursors of the Holy Fathers of the era of the Synods/Ecumenical Councils because they fought to reject the heresies of their time, especially the Gnostic one.

They were able to elaborate and clarify the meanings of Christian doctrine¹⁰⁷, as did the Holy Fathers of the following centuries. The Apologists of the early Church were able to teach Christian theologians how to interpret classical thought, at least until the Renaissance¹⁰⁸.

¹⁰⁶ Harold O. J. BROWN, *Imaginea lui Isus Cristos în oglinda ereziilor și în cea a ortodoxiei creștine...*, p. 107.

¹⁰⁷ *Apologetica Ortodoxă*, Vol. I..., p. 145.

¹⁰⁸ Jaroslav PELIKAN, *Tradiția creștină: O istorie a dezvoltării doctrinei*, Vol. I..., p. 63.