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Christians against Christians: The Anti-heretical Activities of the Roman Church in the Second Century

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*Christians against
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The church of Rome was actively involved in the disputes and conflicts that challenged the Christian movement throughout the Roman Empire from a very early period. Its interference in the affairs of other communities is most evident in the anti-heretical campaigns launched by its leaders as well as in the efforts those leaders made to found a universal church. This article shall restrict itself to the second century and as much as possible to the middle of that century. This period has not been investigated much due to the lack of reliable evidence. But as it seems to have been crucial for later developments, it is worth some close scrutiny. Most of what I will present in this article is not highly original – and what is original is not always very solid. My debt to previous studies will be clear enough and my own conjectures underlined. But I hope that a fresh examination of the scant evidence may stimulate discussion that could lead to a slightly new evaluation of the situation.

I shall argue that the leaders of the Christian community of Rome started developing, from a very early stage, an ambitious plan that they consciously pursued in a most persistent manner. To facilitate discussion, my arguments are grouped under four headings. I deal firstly with examples of what may be called clear cases of direct intervention; secondly, with the means employed and the weapons used in such interventions; thirdly, with the reasons behind Rome's intervention; and fourthly, with the strategy and the aims of the intervention as well as with an estimate of the results, successes and failures of the endeavour.

Involvement

The earliest known and most illustrious direct interference of Christian Rome in the internal affairs of a foreign community is related to a late first-century leadership crisis in Corinth. The evidence comes from a letter sent from Rome to Corinth that tradition later ascribed to Clement. 1 Clement, as the letter is known, has little to say about dogma. It is mostly concerned with problems of leadership, supporting (successfully as we may surmise) one group of Corinthian Christians against another. In the following decades, the leading personalities of Christian Corinth were very close to the leading personalities of Christian Rome. The letter was still being read with reverence two generations later. Around the year AD 160, the bishop of Rome, Soter, felt free to send a letter of his own admonishing the Corinthian Christians yet again. This new letter was read in public along with 1 Clement.¹

From the same period we also have the so-called First Epistle of Peter to the brethren living in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. This letter, written in the name of the apostle, is almost certainly pseudonymous, but the suggestion that it was sent from Babylon (i.e. Rome) to five districts of Asia Minor may be accurate. Its aim was to combat deviant views within the Christian movement. We have no idea whether it ever reached its destinations, nor can we imagine how it was meant to circulate among people living so far from Rome and so far apart from each other, but we do know that early in the second century it was already known and used by eminent leaders in Christian Asia Minor, such as Papias of Hierapolis² and Polycarp of Smyrna.³ Both 1 Peter and 1 Clement were held in great esteem by many orthodox Christians from an early period. 1 Peter was eventually received into the New Testament canon while 1 Clement came very close to being so received.⁴

Before the middle of the second century, a vigorous anti-Gnostic campaign was launched from Rome. Although others may have become involved in sporadic polemics at an earlier stage, it was Justin, writing from the imperial capital, who first made a systematic attempt to denounce the Gnostics by tracing their alleged genealogy. His treatise *Against all Heresies* is now lost, but the influence it exercised outside the capital can hardly be overestimated. About a generation later, Irenaeus of Lyon, who was a close associate of Christian leaders in Rome, used it as a basis for his own treatise, which incorporated its main arguments and superseded it.⁵ Irenaeus' work made its way quickly to almost all parts of the empire. A few years after its composition, for example, it was even being read in the remote Egyptian village of Oxyrhynchus, as papyrus fragments suggest.⁶

We are not explicitly told whether Justin or Irenaeus wrote their treatises with the intention of influencing foreign communities. Such documents were freely available and could circulate whenever and wherever there was sufficient demand for them.⁷ However, there are reasons to believe that it was not by mere chance that these anti-heretical compositions reached other parts of empire so quickly. We happen to know that an elder contemporary of Justin, the prophet Hermas, who was a leading figure of Christians in Rome, did not offer his prophesies simply to those who had ears to hear. Recording them with care in a rather complex pamphlet of a

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prophetic character, he was planning to make them “known to all the elect”. A certain Clement, possibly the church leader who had composed the letter to Corinth, would be entrusted to send these prophecies from Rome “to the cities abroad”.⁸ It had already become obvious that important religious ideas should not be confined to the believers of specific communities alone but communicated in a more or less organised way to as many churches as possible.

The next example is related to the so-called Easter controversy. Rome seems to have become involved in the dispute over the celebration of Easter for the first time around the middle of the second century. At that time, the Christian community of Rome, headed by Anicetus, did not celebrate Easter at all. As we are told, one of the leading personalities of the mainstream Christian communities in Asia Minor, Polycarp of Smyrna, visited Rome and held talks with Anicetus on disputed matters.⁹ We do not know whether the bishop of Smyrna made the trip on his own initiative or whether he was “summoned” by his Roman colleague. What we do know is that in regard to the dispute over the celebration of Easter the meeting ended in amicable disagreement.¹⁰

Although the information regarding this incident is vague and elusive, two things are clear. First, besides a certain degree of uniformity in matters of discipline and dogma, the desire for uniformity in matters of religious rites was also becoming evident. Second, the meeting to resolve disputed matters took place in Rome, not in Asia. A later and not very reliable source, the *Liber Pontificalis*, reports that about thirty years earlier under ‘pope’ Sixtus I an ordinance was passed declaring that bishops who had been summoned to the Holy See should not, upon their return, be received by their diocese except on presenting “apostolic” letters.¹¹ It is reasonable to think of Polycarp returning to his own church as a friend of the Roman Christian authorities, in spite of the remaining disagreements.

About forty years after Polycarp’s visit, the Roman bishop Victor (189–199) was not as lenient as his predecessor. In the meantime the celebration of Easter had become a major issue in the East. Victor, we are told, intervened in favour of one eastern group against the other and “tried to cut off from the common unity the dioceses of all Asia, together with the adjacent churches, on the ground of heterodoxy, and he indicted letters announcing that all the Christians there were absolutely excommunicated”.¹²

The final example is related to the so-called Montanist crisis. The New Prophecy, as this Christian trend was actually called,¹³ originated in Phrygia around the middle of the second century or shortly after. It divided Christians in Asia and soon spread to other Christian communities in various parts of the empire. While the conflict was at its peak, the leaders in Rome intervened yet again. After an originally rather ambivalent attitude, an unnamed bishop, most probably Victor, decided to issue letters of peace to the churches of Asia that were in tune with the New Prophecy. Having received further information, however, he changed his mind, recalled the letters and persisted in the excommunication of the Montanists.¹⁴

Although further evidence of Roman interference could certainly be added, these examples give a pretty clear idea of what is being argued here. From the late first to the end of the second cen-

ture, some leaders of the Roman church, under very diverse circumstances, made bold decisions that had radical repercussions on Christian communities located very far apart. During the third century, such interventions continued unceasingly.

Interfering in the affairs of others, it may be observed, was not the privilege of Roman Christians alone. Leaders that had little or nothing to do with Rome were also known to have exercised their influence beyond their jurisdiction, or to have at least attempted to do so. Paul belonged of course to a different era. Although Clement was trying to imitate him in writing to Corinth, the apostle was an itinerant teacher, admonishing those Christians he had for the most part converted himself. The same may be said (with reservations) about John who wrote letters to seven churches in Asia, which were incorporated in his Revelation. But Ignatius of Antioch, Dionysius of Corinth, Irenaeus of Lyon and a few others were leaders of specific communities who wrote letters of admonition and advice to Christians in other communities, some of which were located in areas far removed from their own.¹⁵

Such initiatives, however, as far as we can tell, were taken by individuals and were not part of a larger plan. There is no indication that Antioch, Corinth or Lyon was following a consistent policy. That the leaders of the Christian community of Rome were, on the other hand, persistent and consistent in their practice is not simply our own observation. Addressing himself in the early second century to his brethren in the imperial capital, Ignatius was perfectly clear of their strength as well as of their readiness to intervene. "You never have envied anyone", he wrote in admiration, "you taught others".¹⁶ Around the year 180, Dionysius of Corinth was well aware that Rome had addressed itself to other communities "from the beginning". He even called this attitude an "ancestral custom of the Romans".¹⁷ There are reasons to believe that Dionysius was not being rhetorical. The church of Rome was already renowned by the late fifties of the first century. Paul acknowledged that the faith of the Roman Christians was "talked of all over the world" (Rom. 1:8; cf. 16:19).¹⁸ He was planning to visit them, in the hope of conveying "some spiritual gift" that would be of lasting strength. Interestingly, however, he was also hoping in turn to be strengthened through their "mutual faith" (1:11–12). That this remark was not made out of mere courtesy may be seen from the good knowledge he had of the Roman community and its members. Irenaeus, who was a close contemporary of Dionysius, wrote in a most emphatic manner: "For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church [i.e. of Rome], on account of its pre-eminent authority ..."¹⁹ Early in the third century at the time of bishop Zephyrinus (199–217), Origen, who was living in Alexandria, visited Rome "desiring", as he wrote himself, "to see the most ancient church of the Romans".²⁰

Other second-century leaders also attempted to build disciplined and uniform churches of their own throughout the empire. It is possible that Valentinus was among them. Marcion most certainly organised a church whose communities were expected to follow a common direction. The Montanists also seem to have built uniform communities wherever they existed. This topic is discussed in greater detail below.

Means and Weapons

“The weapons with which we do battle are not those of human nature, but they have the power, in God’s cause, to demolish fortresses”, wrote Paul in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians (10: 4). Christians, however, soon found out that human weapons were also all too necessary for their cause. Thus, to pursue their aims, some leaders of the Roman Christian community employed all the means available to them.²¹ As we have seen in the examples above, they regularly expressed their views and tried to exercise their influence by issuing letters. Although a certain amount of information about the content and the purpose of several such documents exists, 1 Clement and 1 Peter are the only specimens which have survived (unless the so-called 2 Clement is taken to have served a similar purpose).

1 Clement is a carefully constructed document, well thought out and well written. It certainly comes from the pen of an educated person, versed in both pagan literature and Scripture. Other letters may have been relatively shorter. We have no reason to think that the bishop who informed the Christians in Asia that he would have nothing to do with them if they persisted in celebrating Easter in their traditional manner cared to express himself elegantly and at length. Such differences in the quality and purpose of such letters explain perhaps, at least to a certain degree, why so few have survived.

Letters were normally taken very seriously. It was said of Paul that while his epistles were weighty and full of strength, in person he made no impression and his powers of speaking were negligible (2 Cor. 10:10). But even sophisticated reports were not expected to bring about the desired effect just by being sent and read. As we are told in 1 Clement, the letter was delivered by members of the Roman community in person. The messengers were told to remain in Corinth until the matter was settled so that they could report back on the outcome of the intervention.²² It is reasonable to expect that while in Corinth they would have tried to add further arguments. This was common practice. As Acts makes clear, the delegates who were entrusted by the so-called apostolic synod to deliver a written message added arguments of their own orally (15:30–33).

In more serious cases the authorities of the Roman church would receive leading personalities from other communities to discuss matters with them in greater detail. While in Rome, we are told, visiting Christians were received by its bishops who never missed the opportunity to exhort them.²³ Polycarp visited Rome to explain himself regarding the Easter controversy. During the Montanist crisis, Irenaeus (already a presbyter and about to become a bishop) was sent by his Lyon diocese to deliver an important letter to bishop Eleutherus (175–189) of Rome. His brethren held him in great esteem and recommended him for his devotion to the faith. The message aimed at some kind of reconciliation. Like Polycarp, Irenaeus was probably unsuccessful, but he did not lose his favour with the Roman Christians either.²⁴

Before the end of the second century, the leaders of the Roman church were able to exercise their influence in more impressive ways. Besides writing letters and receiving leaders of foreign communities they could also summon peripheral synods. Making good use of their connections all over the

empire they were able to pursue their aims, intervening in organised and well-planned ways. While the Easter controversy was at its height, they convinced Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, to summon a great number of Asian Christian bishops in order to discuss the issue. Polycrates did so without complaining and played a leading role in the whole affair. It was only when the local synod failed to conform to the desires of Rome that their relationship came under severe strain.²⁵ For the same purpose synods were convened in Palestine, Pontus, Osrhoene, Corinth and, of course, Rome.²⁶

The church of Rome seems to have made good use of its contacts with the secular authorities. Some of its members may have been influential since the time of Paul. In the early second century, the Christians of Rome were already renowned for their power. Sent to the capital for execution, Ignatius of Antioch was confident that the local Christians could do whatever they desired and that they could almost certainly have him released as soon as he arrived.²⁷ Later in the same century Christian convicts in the mines were indeed released through the good services of the Roman bishop and his friends.²⁸

From the very beginning the Christian community of Rome included members of the imperial household, the so-called *familia Caesaris*. Such people often held positions of power or could appeal to other members of the imperial household who held such positions. Paul was told about this section of the Roman community and conveyed to it his special greetings. While some Christians of the imperial household suffered under Nero, this sector of the Roman church survived and multiplied under Marcus Aurelius (161–180) and Commodus (180–192). Irenaeus referred to its members as being well known and so did Hippolytus, who gave details. In the early third century, Callistus, a member of the *familia Caesaris*, became bishop of Rome (217–222). Since our information about him has been almost accidentally recorded, there are reasons to believe that he may not have been the first imperial freedman to hold an important position in the Christian community of the imperial capital. There is a good case for Clement being an imperial freedman also.²⁹

Besides being powerful and influential the church of Rome was also wealthy. Snippets of information make it clear that before the middle of the second century it was in control of substantial assets. Joining its community in around 144, a Christian from Pontus named Marcion made the quite considerable donation of 200,000 sesterces. This sum was eventually returned to the donor as Marcion withdrew from the church and organised his own community.³⁰ Soon after, other heretics in Rome, including a cobbler and a banker, were able to pay a salary to their own schismatic bishop.³¹ That such information was revealed in polemics against heretics should not diminish its value. The catholic church also accepted donations, which for the most part went unmentioned. There is evidence, however, that the authorities of the Roman church often sent donations with their letters to foreign communities.

By the middle of the second century the church of Rome was famous for assisting Christians in other cities. It sent contributions either in order to relieve the poverty of the needy or to comfort fellow-believers who had been condemned to the mines. The church of Corinth felt that it was in Rome's debt for such generosity.³² This practice continued, and a century later we are told about similar aid accompanying letters sent to Syria and Arabia.³³

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The Roman church received its income from many sources, one of which is of particular interest. As early as the late fifties or early sixties of the first century, the Christians of Rome were able to make use of the imperial treasury. Although the information comes from the unreliable apocryphal Acts of Peter, it may be taken seriously because it is not the kind of report that a pious Christian was likely to invent. The emperor whose treasures the Christians were able to exploit was the infamous Nero. Once again, the information was recorded because the imperial administrator who had access to Nero's treasures was under the influence of a heretic. By making donations and contributions, this administrator had become the patron of poor Christians in the capital.

Besides its bishop, by the middle of the third century, we are told, the Roman church supported forty-six presbyters, seven deacons, seven sub-deacons, forty-two acolytes, fifty-two exorcists, readers and door-keepers, and over fifteen hundred widows and persons in distress out of a common fund. This was used as an argument against the heretic Novatus who was establishing his own schismatic community. How dare he dispute where the real strength lay?³⁴

When letters were ignored, admonitions failed, contributions proved insufficient or local synods summoned by them reached undesirable conclusions, the leaders in Rome resorted to heavier weaponry. Inside their own community they quite often excommunicated individuals with deviant views or unrestrained ambitions – at least from the late second century onwards. With rather astonishing ease they were also prepared to terminate their communion with whole churches and communities that did not conform to their own views – no matter how innovative such views were, as is evident in the case of the Easter or “Quartodeciman” controversy.

In the course of their struggle against their enemies within the Christian movement, the leaders of the Roman church often employed two other weapons that were deliberately devised for this purpose. Besides being powerful, both weapons were destined to become essential characteristics of the Christian church that gradually emerged as apostolic and catholic. The first was the claim to an uninterrupted line of apostolic succession. By the end of the second century, complete lists were available demonstrating that in most major cities the local bishops were the direct descendants of the disciples of Jesus. One of the first such lists recorded the succession of ‘bishops’ in Rome. Being the heirs of Peter and Paul, the leaders of the capital could argue that their own views preserved the oldest and most authentic traditions. Although arguments of this calibre were certainly available and employed throughout the second century, a full list was only drawn up in Rome in around 180 through the good services of Hegesippus, a friend of the Roman authorities.³⁵

The second weapon devised and utilised in the struggles of the period was the New Testament canon, a closed corpus of books recognised as apostolic that was supposed to include all the basic doctrines of the Christian faith. The formation of the New Testament canon was a long process, the most important steps of which were taken in the second half of the second century.³⁶ Important details of this process have not been recorded, but there are strong reasons to believe that the major battles in its materialisation were fought and won in Rome.³⁷

Reasons

Despite their constant involvement in important disputes all over the Mediterranean world, the Christian leaders in Rome were not pursuing a policy that could properly be described as interventionist or expansionist. Cutting off from communion whole churches that were until then friendly and orthodox in their dogmas is not what one might expect from a group that desired to expand its influence. Nor does it seem likely that the Roman church was mainly interested in dissociating itself from communities that were at the greatest variance from its own orthodoxy. In the middle of the second century, Alexandria was far less orthodox than Asia Minor, and yet we have no knowledge of any letters or messengers being sent to that part of the Roman world.³⁸

Trying to understand the reasons that led the leaders of the Roman church to intervene involves, regrettably, entering the realm of speculation. But this much seems clear enough: the affairs and conflicts of foreign communities came to the attention of Rome only when and while it was facing similar problems of its own.³⁹

Disagreements and difficulties were evident in Rome from as early as the first generation (Rom. 16:17). While Clement was writing to Corinth about the correct choice of leaders, the Christian community of Rome was going through a serious leadership crisis and was about to take important decisions regarding the type of authority best suited to its needs. Clement does not mention in his letter that his younger contemporary Hermas had an altogether different understanding of how the church should be organised and administered. Hermas, judging from his work, was the heir of the prophets and other inspired teachers who had exercised great influence in the first and second generation after Jesus. Clement, on the other hand, was a representative of the emerging priesthood with its deacons and presbyters. It is therefore possible and even likely that while addressing themselves to Corinth, Clement and his friends were simultaneously engaged in a struggle against their own brethren who did not believe in the necessity of institutionalised and hierarchical types of leadership.⁴⁰

During the first half of the second century, the situation in Christian Rome became much more serious. Besides the disputes over the correct choice of leaders, the Christians in the capital found themselves involved in doctrinal controversies as well. Imperial Rome had always been the crossroads of almost everything important that was taking place in the empire. Since the time of the apostle Paul, Christians had been arriving to and moving out of the capital, making it one of the liveliest communities. Over the next two generations many Christian teachers and missionaries, representing almost all existing varieties of Christian tendencies and doctrines, arrived in Rome for longer or shorter periods.

Information has been preserved about Valentinus (originally from Alexandria), Cerdo (from Antioch), Marcion (originally from Pontus), Apelles (who spent some time in Alexandria), Justin (from Flavia Neapolis in Palestine), Tatian (originally from Assyria), Rhodo (from Asia Minor), bishop Polycarp (from Smyrna), presbyter and bishop Irenaeus (originally from Asia Minor and subsequently Lyon), Hegesippus (possibly from Palestine), Marcellina (possibly from Alexandria),

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Avercius Marcellus (from Hierapolis in Phrygia), presbyter Florinus (from Smyrna), Praxeas (from Asia) and a few others. Some of these teachers sided with the catholic leaders, the most illustrious of whom were Justin, Polycarp and Irenaeus. Hegesippus also seems to have belonged to the same group although his position is not so clear. Avercius Marcellus was orthodox. Tatian, Praxeas and Florinus became heterodox. The rest were influenced to various degrees by Gnostic ideas.

That Rome attracted intellectuals and religious teachers from all parts of the empire was a well-known fact. According to Tacitus, “all degrading and shameful practices collect and flourish in the capital.”⁴¹ Interestingly, most of those classified as heretics came from Asia Minor and Syria-Palestine.

Just how confusing the situation had become it is not difficult to imagine. People belonging to different groups, Justin conceded, called themselves Christians in spite of their great differences in doctrine and practice. To make matters worse he divided Christians into three categories: those who were in all respects orthodox-minded, like himself; those who were sincere and pious and yet did not share the opinions of the former in all important points; and, finally, those who were downright heretical.⁴² All heretics, he argued, had a common ancestor, but differed radically among themselves.

Justin thought that the internal problems of Christianity should be made public and even brought to the attention of the ruling emperor – although it is hardly imaginable that Antoninus Pius (138–161) had any serious interest in such matters. Apart from his lost treatise against the heretics, Justin dealt with matters of doctrine in other works, which have survived. The most serious threat to the catholic Christians of his time was posed by Valentinus and Marcion.

Valentinus, who arrived in Rome before the middle of the second century, was one of the candidates, so we are told, considered for the position of the new leader. He seems to have had great hopes because he was “an able man both in genius and eloquence”, but was surpassed by another candidate, probably Pius (c. 140–154), who apparently had been a confessor.⁴³ Disillusioned by the decision, Valentinus broke away from the church and started to propagate his own ideas, finding many followers throughout the empire. His contemporary Marcion posed an even greater threat to the catholic church. He also seems to have aspired to the presidency of the Roman community. Not being able to convince the elders about his views he broke away in 144 and started organising his own church with great success all over the empire.⁴⁴

While Justin was writing his treatise against these heretics, Polycarp of Smyrna visited Rome and conversed with local leaders. It is possible that he was trying to defend the practice of his own church, but it is even more likely that he was trying to defend the practice of some Christians living in Rome, many of whom were of Asian origin, who persisted in their old customs. At this first stage of the Easter controversy the problem could have mainly been an internal Roman affair. Regarding the celebration of Easter no agreement was reached, but by proclaiming that he had received the one and sole truth from the apostles, Polycarp persuaded many to turn away from Valentinus and Marcion to the church of God.⁴⁵ We can only imagine how baffling the

situation had become to the common Christians of Rome. Valentinus, Marcion, Justin, Polycarp and others, along with the elders of the local church (or, rather, churches), were simultaneously trying to lead them in different directions. It must have been anything but simple to be a Christian in mid-second century Rome.

The Roman authorities were so happy with Polycarp's success that they overlooked their disagreement over the celebration of Easter. A few decades later, however, the problem within the capital was really grave. The Asiatic Christians who had settled in Rome and kept their traditions had multiplied and were supported by members of the presbytery. The Roman community had now officially introduced the celebration of Easter but was basing it on a different calculation, following the custom of other eastern communities (including the Alexandrian). The idea was to keep the Christian feast apart from the Jewish Passover. Hence Easter was celebrated on a Sunday and not the 14th Nissan. Before Victor decided to excommunicate whole communities in Asia Minor, a number of important personalities had already been excommunicated in Rome. Among them were presbyter Florinus and Blastus. The former held heretical ideas, the latter was simply a defender of the quartodecimans. These leaders, we are told, "drew away more of the church and brought them to their own opinion".⁴⁶ In Victor's time the so-called Monarchian controversy broke out and the bishop had to excommunicate more leaders of the Roman church, including a confessor who became a schismatic bishop supported by some wealthy and energetic enthusiasts.⁴⁷ The most prominent supporters of this schismatic bishop came from Asia.

The Monarchian controversy was soon mixed up with Montanism, which also started to trouble Rome. In its earliest stages the New Prophecy seems to have been tolerated in the capital, but soon tensions escalated. The arrival of Praxeas (if this was his real name) from Asia caused great confusion. He apparently brought new information about the situation abroad and convinced the bishop of Rome, probably Victor, to excommunicate the Montanists in Asia Minor.⁴⁸

Around the year 200 under Victor's successor, the Christians of Rome were disturbed by more trouble. Zephirinus had to deal with Noetus from Smyrna and to excommunicate him (unless the hearings, which are related by Hippolytus, occurred in Smyrna). Noetus soon established a school of his own.⁴⁹

It is, therefore, obvious that when the leaders of Rome intervened in the affairs of foreign communities they were motivated by serious domestic problems. Since conflicts inside the capital were either influenced or imported from elsewhere, it was inevitable that the sources of evil should be dealt with directly. As early as the late first century a similar pattern was followed. The authorities in Rome did not pay special attention to the problems of the Christian movement unless they had serious repercussions for their own community. When this was the case, they confronted deviant voices by excommunicating their leaders in Rome and by addressing themselves to the communities whence the problems had originated. They sent letters, treatises and agents, often accompanied by donations, they received embassies and when everything else failed they cut themselves off completely from foreign communities that they believed were poisoning their own church.

Strategy and Aims

Bishops in the proper sense were first established in Rome at the time of Soter (?–175) during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, but since Clement's time a number of leading personalities seem to have exercised special powers. These leading personalities were later included in the list of bishops in which the church of Rome took pride. It is noteworthy that throughout the second century, we never hear of a single trip made by such leaders or, later, by proper bishops, in person. Christian Rome gives the impression of being self-conscious of its importance and gravity from a very early stage. It knew about the affairs of distant communities and gave advice freely. It received friends and tried to expel its foes. It was even able to summon peripheral synods. Foreign communities knew as much: they appealed regularly to its wisdom and sovereignty. Christians all over the empire seem to have realised that decisions taken in Rome were vital to the Christian movement at large. And yet, the Roman bishops themselves never left their see.

In pursuing their aims, the authorities of the Roman church were able to make use of a wide network. Emissaries and ambassadors were almost constantly flowing into and out of Rome. On the journey they knew in advance where to stop and whom to ask for assistance. All over the empire they could expect to be received by friendly communities that were only too happy to converse with them. Hegesippus, for example, while journeying to Rome from the East associated himself on the way with many bishops who held similar views to his own. One of his most important and memorable stops was in Corinth, where he stayed for many days.⁵⁰

It appears that the church of Rome was acting, or at least trying to act, within the Christian world in more or less the same way that the imperial Roman administration was acting within the empire. The resemblance between the religious and the secular system could not have been accidental. Among the Christians of Rome an important section belonged to the imperial household from which members of the administration were regularly drawn. It would be surprising if the Roman church did not take advantage of the experience and the acquaintances of its members who were close to positions of secular power.

In one important respect, the position of the Roman church differed from the position of the Roman administration. The bishop of Rome was not acknowledged as the leader of the Christian world in the sense that the emperor was acknowledged as the leader of the Roman world. The very idea of a superior leader over the Christian movement at large would have seemed preposterous to almost all local communities. From a very early stage, Christians were organised in independent communities with a local administrator who was not accountable to anyone else (at least in principle).

The Christian authorities in Rome, however, seem to have flirted with the idea of a superior leader at an early stage. The way they acted and their claim that they possessed the relics of both Peter and Paul suggest that they were aspiring to a very high position. By the middle of the second century, Marcionism could show the way. It was a religious movement spread throughout the empire with a single leadership giving directions and keeping all local communities uniform

and united – although it is far from certain how long Marcion's successors were able to keep control over all the Marcionite churches.⁵¹

Strangely enough, the clearest evidence for this ambition of the Roman authorities comes from where it would be least expected. This is probably the reason why so little attention has been paid to it. An examination, however, in the context of the Roman policy considered above leaves little room for doubt.

Around the year 268 a serious conflict between Christians in Antioch had reached its peak. A very large synod had deposed the local bishop, Paul of Samosata. However, he was not willing to give up possession of the church building, and enjoyed, apparently, the support of many local Christians. As Antioch was in control of the independent kingdom of Palmyra at the time, the orthodox side had to wait until the political situation settled down before petitioning emperor Aurelian (270–275) in around 272. This is the first known case of Christians appealing to the Roman authorities on an official matter. Interestingly, the emperor was not renowned for his sympathy to the Christian cause, having in fact sanctioned a persecution.

Under the circumstances it is almost certain that the bishops who made the petition had good reason to expect a favourable reply. Indeed, the emperor, according to the account given by Eusebius, “gave an extremely just decision regarding the matter, ordering the assignment of the building to those [Christians] with whom the bishops of the doctrine in Italy and Rome should communicate in writing”. Paul was finally driven with “the utmost indignity from the church by the ruler of this world”.⁵²

We can only guess who gave the eastern bishops such high hopes for a successful conclusion. But there should be no doubt as to who had led the emperor, or rather his advisors, to take such an astonishing decision. The very idea that matters in Christian Antioch should be settled according to the liking of the Roman bishop could only have been suggested by the Roman bishops themselves. In my view, this was the successful outcome of a consistent and well-pursued plan.

Justin, after all, may not have been acting in vain when he tried in the middle of the second century to explain the situation within the Christian movement to the Roman emperor Antoninus Pius. Since the imperial administration included prominent members of the church, he knew that there were ears interested in hearing his account. Before the end of the second century, the Roman bishop Victor could reach the emperor Commodus through the good services of his Christian concubine.⁵³ The few details that have been preserved adequately explain where Aurelian received his information about Christianity and its internal problems.

When Constantine established himself in the West, he also knew where to turn in order to solve the serious problems in the African church. The bishop of Rome was called to mediate, judge and advise the emperor.⁵⁴ For a brief period it looked as if the bishops of Rome had almost achieved their goal. But by becoming sole emperor and by openly declaring his adherence to Christianity, Constantine had other plans. Having settled in the eastern part of the Empire he made it clear

that if there was going to be a general leader of a recognised Christian church, then that leader would be himself alone.

The Roman church, however, was already very strong in the West. When the circumstances became favourable it was ready to exercise its power in matters religious as well as secular. If my suggestions are on the right track, then we can form an idea of just how and why, in dealing with religious diversity throughout the Empire, the leaders of the Roman church were able to establish their authority in spite of their minimal contribution to Christian dogma.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* (who testifies that *1 Clement* was being publicly read up to his own time) 2.25.8; 3.16; 4.23.9–12. My quotations from this work, referred to henceforth as *HE*, are based on the Loeb 1926 (vol. 1) and 1932 (vol. 2) translations. Cf. Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the first two centuries*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003, pp. 206–17.
- 2 *HE* 3.39.17.
- 3 Epistle to the Philippians (passim); cf. *HE* 4.14.9.
- 4 Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament: History and Literature of Early Christianity*, New York and Berlin: De Gruyter, 1987, pp. 11, 234, 287–95.
- 5 Justin's lost treatise is mentioned by him in his *1 Apology* 26. See also *HE* 4.18.9.
- 6 Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 7; Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the one Gospel of Jesus Christ*, Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000, pp. 218–9.
- 7 Justin informs his alleged recipients (i.e. the emperor and the Senate) that his treatise against heretics was available on demand. See *1 Apology* 26.
- 8 Hermas, *The Shepherd*, viz. 2.4.3. Cf. Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, pp. 218–36.
- 9 Since Polycarp is thought to have suffered martyrdom in 155, his trip to Rome must have taken place somewhat earlier.
- 10 *HE* 5.23–5.
- 11 See *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, "Pope St. Sixtus I".
- 12 *HE* 5.24.9.
- 13 It is even more probable that the adherents of the movement simply called it the "Prophecy".
- 14 For a recent and comprehensive treatment, see Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996; on the date, pp. 26–45; on Rome's reaction, pp. 55–66.
- 15 Cf. the attitude of some Palestinian leaders who wrote about the Easter controversy: "Try to send copies of our letter to every diocese that they may not be guilty towards those who easily deceive their own souls". Cited in *HE* 5.25.

- 16 Ignatius, *To the Romans* 3.1.
- 17 HE 4.23.10.
- 18 All Biblical translations are from the *New Jerusalem Bible* version.
- 19 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3.2, translation from the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* series, vol. 1.
- 20 HE 6.14.10.
- 21 See Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971, pp. 111–29.
- 22 1 Clement 65.1. Cf. Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, pp. 184–6.
- 23 HE 4.23.10.
- 24 HE 5.4.2.
- 25 HE 5.24.8.
- 26 HE 5.23.
- 27 Ignatius, *To the Romans* 1.2.
- 28 Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies* 9.12.1–13.
- 29 For details and references, see Dimitris J. Kyrtatas, *The Social Structure of the early Christian Communities*, London: Verso, 1987, pp. 79–86.
- 30 Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* 30.
- 31 HE 5.28.6–10.
- 32 HE 4.23.10.
- 33 HE 7.5.2.
- 34 HE 6.43.11–2.
- 35 HE 4.22.1–3.
- 36 See Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1987; Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*, Eugene: Harvest House, 2002; Lee Martin McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, rev. and expanded ed., Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995.
- 37 See Adolf Harnack, *The Origin of the New Testament and the Most Important Consequences of the New Creation*, Eugene: Wipf and Srock, 2004, especially pp. 94–114; Hengel, *The Four Gospels*, pp. 34–8, 136 note 548.
- 38 See Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, pp. 44–94, 108–10; C. Wilfred Griggs, *Early Egyptian Christianity: From its Origins to 451 C.E.*, Leiden: Brill, 1990.
- 39 This point has been forcibly argued by George La Piana in his article “The Roman Church at the End of the Second Century”, *Harvard Theological Review* 28 (1925), pp. 201–77. La Piana, however, insists that this policy was an innovation of Victor; I try to show that Victor was in line with a much older tradition.
- 40 See James S. Jeffers, *Conflict at Rome: Social Order and Hierarchy in early Christianity*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991. Cf. Dimitris J. Kyrtatas, “The significance of leadership and organisation in the

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spread of Christianity", in William V. Harris, *The Spread of Christianity in the First Four Centuries: Essays in Explanation*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005, pp. 53–68.

- 41 Tacitus, *Annales* 15.44, translation from the Penguin 1977 edition.
- 42 Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 80.2–5.
- 43 Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians* 4. Cf Thomassen *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the 'Valentinians'*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006, pp. 417–22 who regards this information as anachronistic.
- 44 See Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*, Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1990, pp. 17–8. Rome does not seem to have had a proper bishop at this time.
- 45 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3.4.
- 46 *HE* 5.15; Ps-Tertullian, *Against All Heresies* 22.
- 47 *HE* 5.28.6 and 5.28.9–12.
- 48 Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 1.
- 49 Hippolytus, *Against Noetus* 1.
- 50 *HE* 4.22.1–3.
- 51 Harnack, *Marcion*, pp. 99–103.
- 52 *HE* 7.30.19.
- 53 Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies* 9.12.10–1.
- 54 See W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985.