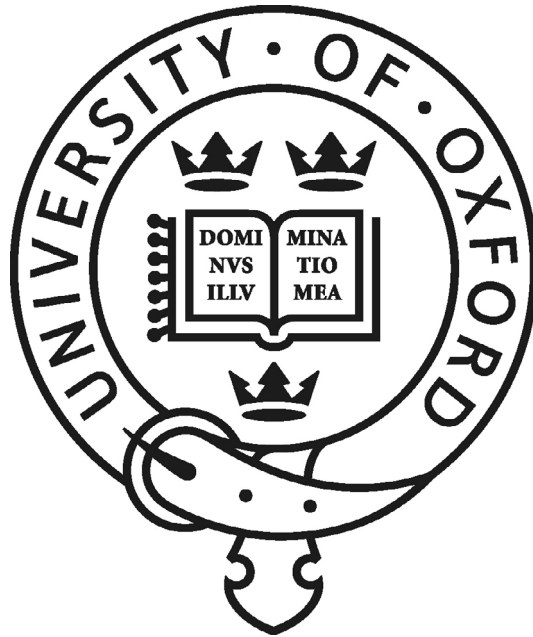


An Affinity for Justice

Ethics and Apologetics in Lactantius'
Response to Persecution



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Abstracts

Short Abstract

This thesis discusses Lactantius' moral philosophy and understanding of justice, and explores the apologetic use he made of these ideas. The present study is the fullest treatment of Lactantius' view of justice in any language, and the only one in English. Its methodology is philological; it combines a close reading of Lactantius' corpus with a literary-historical investigation of the many sources he cites and of the ideological justification of the Diocletian persecution. I investigate how these sources govern the form and content of Lactantius' arguments; his apologetic method means he often argues for Christian ideas from pagan sources and premises. Lactantius understands justice as meeting obligations and divides obligations into two domains: duties to God and duties to other humans. He does so by likening God to a Roman *paterfamilias*, which creates the obligations of worshipping God and of treating other humans as his children and one's siblings. Lactantius arrives at this definition by reconfiguring Cicero's understanding of natural law, which undergirds justice in *de Legibus* Book 1. Lactantius' conception of justice thus adopts a Ciceronian framework, but fills it with Christian ideas which drive his ethics. Lactantius' ethics were influenced by Cyprian's selection of biblical quotations in *ad Quirinum*; *contra* Wlosok and Loi, I found no profound dependence upon the *Hermetica*. The study then situates Lactantius' ethics in the intellectual context of his day. Lactantius' understanding of justice is carefully constructed to respond holistically to the persecutors' ideology and asserts that Christians embody the ideals of Roman virtue. Contrary to the suggestions of Digeser and Colot, he does not seek to Christianise the Roman empire, but rather to dissuade it from persecuting Christians.

Long Abstract

This thesis explicates Lactantius' doctrine of justice and situates it within his moral philosophy and response to the Diocletian persecution. Lactantius understands justice as meeting obligations, and these obligations exist in two spheres: towards God and towards humans (*DI.* 5.14.9-11; 6.10.1-2). Lactantius' ethics in general have received little scholarly attention (Spanneut's study is a notable exception), despite its being one of the most important parts of his thought. As Lactantius divides both justice and ethics more broadly into meeting obligations to God and to other humans, his entire ethical philosophy can be outlined in a consideration of justice. He repurposes classical ethics, claiming that they support Christianity and discourage persecution. Thus, understanding his conception of justice enables us to identify the historical relevance of his rhetoric with greater precision. The way Lactantius delineates the difference between pagan and Christian ethics displays the fault lines of the early fourth century's religious conflict more clearly.

There are two opposite errors into which Lactantian scholars are liable to fall. The first error treats him as a theologian writing in a historical vacuum, though exploring how he uses sources such as Cicero; the second treats him merely as a source for answering broader historical questions and as unworthy of consideration in his own right. This study attempts to situate Lactantius firmly in his historical period, paying attention to the intellectual culture of his time, while still maintaining Lactantius' thought as the primary object of study.

My method is philological: I analyse Lactantius' moral philosophy through a close textual analysis of his corpus, which situates his writing in its literary and historical contexts. The first two chapters construct these two frameworks for interpreting Lactantius. The first is historical, a survey of the persecution's history and ideology

from the extant primary sources. It discusses the writings of Porphyry, Hierocles, and Iamblichus; imperial rescripts and panegyrics on the emperors; and Christian accounts of their persecutors' motivations, which are treated with appropriate historical caution. The persecutors' ire centred around Christians' alleged impiety. This was seen in Christians' failure to worship the traditional gods, but also in their abandonment of their ancestors' traditions, refusal to obey the law, and in their endangering their fellow citizens by threatening the *pax deorum*. The second chapter is literary, unpacking the various conceptions of justice which Lactantius' many literary influences transmitted to him. Lactantius' sources include Roman authors such as Cicero, Seneca, Lucretius, and Virgil; philosophers from the Platonic, Stoic and Epicurean traditions; religious texts such as the *Sibylline Oracles* and the *Hermetica*; Lactantius' Christian predecessors Tertullian, Minucius Felix, and Cyprian; and the Bible. The treatments of justice in these authors provide categories through which to interpret Lactantius' own conception of justice more precisely. These two chapters provide the necessary background for discerning the sources and contemporary relevance of his own conception of justice. Lactantius' rhetorical strategy is displayed in his appeals to the themes and values found in his contemporaries' writings, and especially in how he reframes terminology and images from the debate over persecution rather than choosing explicitly Christian motifs. Investigating how Lactantius uses his sources is also important for his rhetoric, as this shows what Lactantius thought would persuade his audience and illuminates his interpretive strategies in modifying this material. His plethora of sources is designed to create a consensus around his ideas from as many different perspectives as possible.

Having explored Lactantius' sources and contemporaries in detail, I then return to Lactantius, conducting word studies of *iustitia* and other key words and mapping out the

range of meanings he gives to this conceptual field. I explore how he affirms and critiques the ideas described in Chapters 1 and 2 as he defines justice for himself.

The next four chapters survey Lactantius' understanding of justice. Chapter 3 explores basic concepts in Lactantius' moral philosophy, such as the epistemology, pedagogy, and telos of virtue. It shows how Lactantius anticipates his definition of justice ahead of its definitive explication in *Institutes* 5, most prominently seen in his identifying Christ as the *doctor iustitiae*. However, despite this title, Lactantius gives almost no content to Christ's teaching in *Institutes* 4. Rather, the *doctor iustitiae* motif identifies Christ with the Stoic *sapiens*, which justifies Christ's lowly life and death along with Christian religious non-conformity.

Chapter 4 synthesises the various definitions of justice Lactantius gives and introduces the various sources other scholars have posited for that definition. It also considers how Lactantius' protology contributes to his account of justice, and discusses how Lactantius uses the justice motifs identified in Chapter 2 which are not covered in later chapters. Chapter 4 concludes that the metaphor of God as divine *paterfamilias* undergirds Lactantius' ethics; this image generates the requirement that God be loved as *Pater* and revered as *Dominus*. God's fatherhood renders all people siblings, and consequently *fraternitas* is the basic concept within Lactantius' social ethics. Lactantius uses the *paterfamilias* motif to modify the way Cicero grounds justice in Nature in *de Legibus*: Lactantius asserts that justice is the obligation to treat humans and the divine not as fellow-members of a cosmic polity but of a family.

Therefore, Lactantius divides justice's obligations into duties to God and duties to other humans. These two domains of obligation structure Chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 5 discusses Lactantius' religious ethics, which he organises around the questions of 'what' and 'how' to worship. Using his *paterfamilias* metaphor, Lactantius asserts that the

providential deity must be singular; he uses Christians' status as children of God to claim that they have a greater right to revise Roman traditions than the tetrarchs, who appealed to divine filiation to legitimise their constitutional innovations. Lactantius argues that true worship is internal and ethical, describing Christians as the true temples of God. His interiorisation of worship renders persecution impotent to create meaningful worship, and by describing Christian bodies as temples, he depicts religious violence sacrilegious. Lactantius' social ethics, discussed in Chapter 6, cohere around three virtues, *aequitas*, *humanitas* and *misericordia*; and three duties, *humilitas*, *caritas*, and *innocentia/patientia*. Lactantius structures his social ethics by following Cicero's definition of justice in *Off.* 1.20, which divides justice into right use of wealth and force, but Lactantius adds *aequitas*, a basic requirement of the fraternal piety which governs his social ethics. Lactantius claims that the classical philosophers failed to understand each of these obligations, critiquing them by appealing particularly to Cyprian's florilegium *ad Quirinum*. This chapter also explores the picture of justice given in *de Mortibus Persecutorum*, which uses the words *iustus* and *pius* rarely and instead criticises the tetrarchs by depicting them as dominated by their vices.

The final chapter applies these findings to two pertinent questions in Lactantian scholarship. The first is which of Lactantius' sources governed his own ideology. Lactantius' concept of justice is not driven by Hermetic ideas, as Wlosok and Loi claimed. The *Hermetica* hardly discuss social ethics at all; Lactantius takes Hermetic quotations out of context and interprets them in ways the original authors would have rejected. Other scholars have made cases that Lactantius' understanding of justice is driven by Cicero (so Colot) or by the Bible (Buchheit, Grossmann, Walter). This study concludes that both sources are fundamental to Lactantius' conception of justice: he

appeals to a Ciceronian framework to explain what justice is, but redefines the obligations Cicero derived from justice according to Biblical criteria.

Secondly, Lactantius' conception of justice is pertinent to his political-philosophical ambitions. Contrary to Digeser's and Colot's accounts of Lactantius' thought, this study finds no political programme or desire to Christianise Rome within his writings. The passages in *Institutes* Book 5 which are sometimes taken to be political are in fact designed to show that Christians are the most just members of Roman society and thus should not be persecuted. The *Epitome* has no increased political focus, and Lactantius' addresses to Constantine express no wish that Constantine promote Christianity, even though panegyric was used to urge honorands towards particular courses of action. Rather, the institution which Lactantius understood as spreading justice throughout the empire was the church, following an ecclesiology developed by Cyprian. The horizon of his hopes for the church is not its supremacy in Roman society or the Roman state's adoption of its values, but merely that it be permitted to worship freely. Lactantius framed his ethics around justice because doing so allowed him to give a coherent response to the various charges the persecutors made against Christians. Lactantius sought not the Christianisation of Rome but a return to the little peace of the church. More fundamentally, the aim of his writings was not to synthesise Christianity and Roman culture but to present Christianity in terms literate pagans might accept. Though he uses classical sources to justify his ideas, he evaluates those sources by what the Christian tradition taught.

This project contributes to Lactantian and Late Antique studies in several ways. It gives the fullest account of Lactantius' view of justice in any language, and is the only one on the topic written in English. The length of this project has permitted a fuller synthesis of Lactantius' ethical thought than that given by previous writers, who have

tended to focus on a few key passages or possible sources. This enables the study to improve upon previous accounts of Lactantius' sources, revising the picture that his understanding of justice was more Hermetic or Ciceronian than Christian. It proposes a new way of explaining what Lactantius drew from each source and explains the logic underlying his combination of their ideas.

This project also revises the picture of Lactantius' aims which has prevailed in anglophone scholarship, namely that his writing is primarily political-philosophical and that he sought to synthesise Christianity with classical thought. This study recovers the influence of African Christianity and particularly Cyprian on Lactantius. It has also identified several Lactantian arguments which have previously gone unnoticed. He appeals to Roman religious values to argue against persecution: he likens violence against Christians to sacrilege, polytheism to filial impiety, and the Roman social hierarchy to fraternal impiety. Most fundamentally, this study has connected Lactantius' ethics to his historical context, showing how his arguments invert the persecutors' rhetoric and how Lactantius claims Roman virtue is fulfilled in Christianity. It provides insight into Christian hopes and fears about the future before and after Constantine aligned himself with Christianity. Contrary to some speculation, Lactantius at least did not dream of a Christian Roman empire, nor write his works to bring one about. Rather, it was the desire to prevent the return of persecution which loomed largest in his imagination about the future.

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¹ There were some books and articles which could not be included in this study due to the Bodleian's closure.

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*omnia enim opera nostra operatus es nobis
nomen tuum et memoriale tuum, Domine, in desiderio animae*

Introduction

Christianity had always had an uneasy place within the Roman empire, but, at the turn of the fourth century, imperial suspicion towards their Christian subjects erupted into violence. Christians, it was alleged, violated Rome's prized virtues:¹ piety,² sanctity, justice.³ In doing so they threatened the empire those virtues had won: After decades of turmoil the empire was at peace, and a panegyrist claimed the emperors earned their felicity by their piety (*Pan. Lat.* XI.18.1-5).

As persecution flared, a Christian rhetor employed in the imperial court felt compelled to respond. A purge of the court left him unemployed, so he turned to writing. His thesis was that Christians embody the virtues which they were accused of denying, but moreover that Christians alone could realise the ethics Rome espoused and sought but never attained. Cicero wrote of having only a shadow of justice (*Off.* 3.69), and Lactantius' *Divine Institutes* offers to display the reality. In its most basic sense, Lactantius understands justice to mean giving God⁴ and humans their due. 'Justice's first duty is to be connected with God; its second is connection with humans. The first is called religion, the second is named mercy or humanity' (Lact. *DI.* 6.10.1-2).⁵ However Lactantius expands the virtue to encompass all of moral philosophy, the first Latin Christian author to write on such a topic. He does so, I will argue, to respond to the persecutors' charges against Christianity. The goal of this thesis is to situate Lactantius'

1 I translate *virtus* as 'virtue' when the Latin has a sense of moral excellence or uprightness that comes sufficiently close to our English word.

2 I use 'piety' as equivalent to the Latin *pietas*, with its three domains of duty to gods, parents, and empire.

3 'Justice' is equivalent to the Latin *iustitia* or the Greek δικαιοσύνη as appropriate. Occasionally I translate δικαιοσύνη as 'righteousness' if its sense is obviously closer to that English word.

4 I use 'God' to describe the Christian deity and 'god/gods' to describe pagan deities, for clarity and to reflect Lactantius' use of the terms. The exception to this rule is if reference is made to a henotheist's highest God, for which I use a capital.

5 All translations are my own unless otherwise specified.

account of justice more firmly within the ideological context of this tumultuous era than previous studies have done. This introduction will treat Lactantius' *vita et opera* and set out some important methodological considerations as we evaluate Lactantius' use of sources, aim, and audience. I then situate the contribution of this thesis within broader scholarship on Lactantius' view of justice.

Lactantius' Life

Most of our author's biography is unknown.⁶ L. Caecilius Firmianus 'Lactantius' (c.250-c.324) never tells us where he grew up, but Jerome identifies him as Arnobius of Sicca's student, indicating he was African (Hier. *Vir. Ill.* 79-80).⁷ Lactantius travelled to Bithynia during Diocletian's reign to teach Latin rhetoric at the emperor's request, sometime between the mid-290s and the outbreak of persecution in 303.⁸ As the language of imperial bureaucracy, Latin was important in the eastern provinces as well as in the west.⁹ Cities usually appointed public teachers and imperial appointments were rarer, so Lactantius' post would have carried high esteem.¹⁰ Jerome says he took to writing for poverty and lack of pupils; Lactantius attributes his literary turn to the outbreak of persecution, when he presumably resigned his post rather than sacrifice.¹¹

6 For recent accounts of Lactantius' life, see Anthony Bowen and Peter Garnsey, eds., *Lactantius : Divine Institutes* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), 1–6; Anthony P. Coleman, *Lactantius the Theologian: Lactantius and the Doctrine of Providence* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2017), 7–28. See also Samuel Brandt, 'Über Das Leben Des Lactantius', *Sitzungsberichte Der Kaiserlichen Akademie Der Wissenschaften in Wien* 120, no. 5 (1890): 1–42; Antonie Wlosok, 'L. Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius', in *Restauration und Erneuerung*, ed. Johannes Divjak and Reinhart Herzog, *Handbuch der lateinischen Literatur der Antike* 5 (München: Beck, 1989), 375–404.

7 His name is contested. See Timothy D. Barnes, 'Lactantius and Constantine', *JRS* 63 (1973): 39; J. L. Creed, ed., *De Mortibus Persecutorum* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), xxx; Coleman, *Lactantius*, 8–9. For his dates see also Bowen and Garnsey, *Lactantius : Divine Institutes*, 1; Eberhard Heck, *Die dualistischen Zusätze und die Kaiseranreden bei Lactantius* (Heidelberg: CWinter, 1972), 167–70. Lactantius does not list Arnobius among his apologetic predecessors, indicating the two authors wrote contemporaneously, and perhaps that Lactantius was unaware of Arnobius' conversion.

8 Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine : Dynasty, Religion and Power in the Later Roman Empire* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 176.

9 J. Stevenson, 'The Life and Literary Activity of Lactantius', *Studia Patristica* 1, no. 1 (1957): 662.

10 Robert A. Kaster, *Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 220, 226.

11 Lactantius' account is probably truer. Stevenson, 'The Life and Literary Activity of Lactantius', 662.

Lactantius remained in Nicomedia until at least 305, since he mentions an event two years after the persecution began (*DI.* 5.11.15).

In extrema senectute Lactantius tutored Constantine's son Crispus in Gaul, probably in Constantine's capital Trier (*Hier. Vir. Ill.* 80). His other movements during and after the persecution are unknown; two possible reconstructions have been suggested. Barnes argues that Lactantius left Nicomedia in 305 and began tutoring Crispus in 309/310, possibly returning to Africa in the meantime, then likely resumed his post in Nicomedia after the persecution ended in 313 due to his poverty.¹² However, Wlosok and Heck think that Lactantius remained in Nicomedia until 313, where he read of the persecution's conclusion, and then spent the rest of his life in Trier.¹³ There is minimal evidence for Lactantius' location between 305 and his arrival in Trier; he was presumably lying low. Barnes convincingly dates Crispus' birth to 295-300, which makes an earlier date for Lactantius' appointment to Trier more probable.¹⁴ Crispus' education was certainly finished before he became Caesar in 317.¹⁵ But after this role Lactantius' movements are not determinable. Contra Barnes, tutoring Crispus presumably improved his financial situation, reducing the incentive to return to Nicomedia. Lactantius cites eastern forms of persecution documents (*DMP.* 34.1–35.1; 48.1-13), but these might have been supplied by others, and there was a 'dramatic appropriateness' to citing documents which ended the persecution from the place where it began.¹⁶ These documents are not conclusive, either for Barnes' or Wlosok's and Heck's theories. Thus the suggestion Lactantius remained in Trier until his death is plausible.

12 Barnes, *Constantine*, 177–78.

13 Wlosok, 'L. Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius', 376–79; Eberhard Heck, 'Defendere-instituere: zum Selbstverständnis des Apologeten Lactanz', *Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique* 51 (2005): 209–13; Eberhard Heck, 'Constantin Und Lactanz in Trier - Chronologisches', *Historia - Zeitschrift Fur Alte Geschichte* 58, no. 1 (2009): 121–30.

14 Barnes, *Constantine*, 177–78.

15 Contra Stevenson, 'The Life and Literary Activity of Lactantius', 665–66.

16 Creed, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, xxvii n. 72.

Lactantius' residence in Constantine's court would have permitted these men to affect each other's thinking and actions.¹⁷ Lactantian influence can plausibly be detected on Constantine's *Oration to the Saints* and letter to the Council of Arles, and on his general attitude towards religious toleration.¹⁸ The relationship between the two continues to fascinate scholars, though nothing I argue below depends on its strength. Lactantius' movements between Nicomedia and Gaul are unknown. Lactantius may have returned to Nicomedia to resume his chair after 313, though he could equally have remained in Trier; we have no information about when he ceased tutoring Crispus or where he died.

Lactantius tells us nothing about how he adopted the Christian faith, though Augustine labels him a convert (*Aug. Doct. Christ.* 2.60-61). Scholars typically follow Augustine's line, and we can trace the deep impact of Lactantius' classical education, perhaps indicating it occurred before he adopted Christianity. Barnes believes Lactantius converted in Nicomedia 'while it was not only fashionable but also safe'.¹⁹ Wlosok dates his conversion to the eve of the persecution, perhaps after encountering Christianity in Africa: he disparages rhetoric's ability to teach virtue (*DI.* 1.1.8), implying his conversion occurred when he left his imperial post.²⁰ However, the statement does not necessitate that he was converted when the persecution began, only that he sought then to distance himself from his former profession, perhaps after witnessing his peers use their skill to support the persecution. Diocletian's court contained other Christians (*DMP.* 10.4; 15.1-2), and his proscription of religions did not

17 They may have met in Nicomedia, where Coleman suggests Lactantius could have taught Constantine himself. Coleman, *Lactantius*, 12.

18 See Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius and Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 133–38; Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, 'Lactantius and Constantine's Letter to Arles: Dating the Divine Institutes', *JECS* 2, no. 1 (1994): 33–52.

19 Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 13; cf. Michel Spanneut, *Tertullien et les premiers moralistes africains* (Paris: PLethielleux, 1969), 125.

20 Antonie Wlosok, *Laktanz und die philosophische Gnosis* (Heidelberg: CWinter, 1960), 191 n. 8. See also Heck, 'Defendere-instituere', 209; Blandine Colot, *Lactance: penser la conversion de Rome au temps de Constantin* (Firenze: L.S. Olschki, 2016), 376–78.

begin before 296,²¹ so we do not need to suppose that Lactantius would have declined the appointment had he already been a Christian. It is difficult to make a definitive case about where Lactantius converted; what is clearer is that he was influenced by the Christianity of his homeland.²² The Christian writings Lactantius cites show that North African Christianity influenced him more deeply than the church in Bithynia, as does his treatment of the Novatian controversy (4.30.10-13). Accordingly, I suggest that we should render Lactantius' Christian thought against a North African background.

Lactantius' Geography

In stabler times the emperors resided around the Mediterranean, but by the tetrarchic age the centre of gravity had shifted. Increased pressure on the northern frontiers and a resurgent Persia meant that third century emperors needed to spend more time defending their borders.²³ Consequently, they built permanent imperial residences, with all their administrative and bureaucratic accompaniments, closer to the frontiers, and visits to Rome became short and ceremonial.²⁴ This affected the places where one could find imperial employment; the cities in which we can locate Lactantius are not Rome but closer to the frontiers.

North Africa

Lactantius never tells us he grew up in North Africa, but Jerome's testimony indicates he spent time in Sicca Veneria, a town on the road between Carthage and Cirta.²⁵ Lactantius' imperial summons to Nicomedia shows he was a well-known rhetorician and presumably had reached the pinnacle of North Africa's intellectual

21 Min Seok Shin, *The Great Persecution: A Historical Re-Examination* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 100–102.

22 Stefan Freund, *Divinae institutiones. Buch 7, De vita beata* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 4.

23 John Wilkes, 'Provinces and Frontiers', in *The Cambridge Ancient History, Volume 12*, ed. Alan Bowman, Averil Cameron, and Peter Garnsey, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 233.

24 Wilkes, 243.

25 Werner Huß, 'Sicca Veneria', in *Brill's New Pauly: Antiquity*, ed. Hubert Cancik, Helmuth Schneider, and Christine F. Salazar (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 415.

culture, which would place him in Carthage. North Africa was an important source of the empire's corn supply and was historically stable, but the late third century saw increased conflict with native tribes, so Diocletian divided and reformed its provincial administration.²⁶ North African religion mixed Roman rites and deities with older Punic customs. In Romanised cities the Capitoline deities were worshipped, but in other areas worship of Ba'al Hammon persisted.²⁷ Christianity was established there by the end of the second century and sporadically persecuted, which is reflected in the writings of Tertullian and Cyprian. The church particularly fought over how Christians who lapsed during persecution should be readmitted to the church. The region produced strong traditions of apologetic and martyrological literature, elements of the African tradition which Lactantius perpetuates.²⁸

Nicomedia

Lactantius' first imperial appointment was in Bithynia's capital, Nicomedia. Due to Persia's resurgence, by the early third century Nicomedia was the preferred imperial residence in the region.²⁹ Its harbour and location on several highways made it important both for troop movements and trade. Diocletian made it his capital in the eastern empire, and Constantine died there, despite establishing Constantinople as city of residence.³⁰ Lactantius' appointment was presumably part of Diocletian's efforts to make his eastern capital comparable to Rome (cf. Lact. *DMP.* 7.10; *Lib. Or.* 61.5).³¹ Contrary to the

26 C. R. Whittaker, 'Africa', in *The Cambridge Ancient History: Volume II*, ed. Alan K. Bowman, Dominic Rathbone, and Peter Garnsey, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 517, 532–36; Maureen Tilley, 'North Africa', in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Volume I*, ed. Frances M. Young and Margaret M. Mitchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 383.

27 For North African religion, see J. B. Rives, *Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage: From Augustus to Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

28 Tilley, 'North Africa', 385–90; G. E. M. De Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 116–17.

29 Wilkes, 'Provinces and Frontiers', 221, 250.

30 Jesper Majbom Madsen, *Eager to Be Roman: Greek Response to Roman Rule in Pontus and Bithynia* (London: Duckworth, 2009), 22; Karl Strobel and Eckhard Wirbelauer, 'Nicomedia', in *Brill's New Pauly: Antiquity*, ed. Hubert Cancik, Helmuth Schneider, and Christine F. Salazar (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 738.

31 Stevenson, 'The Life and Literary Activity of Lactantius', 662.

assumption that Greek cities remained culturally unaffected by Roman rule,³² Bithynia's residents sought to participate in the empire's ruling community and advertise their Romanness through inscriptions and imperial cult.³³ Imperial residence would have strengthened this Roman identity, as is evidenced by the appointment of a professor of Latin Rhetoric. Christianity was established in Asia Minor much earlier than in Lactantius' other cities. Pliny the Younger gives invaluable evidence about treatment of Bithynian Christians in the early second century (Plin. *Ep.* 10.96). Epitaphs show Christians were well integrated into their societies by the early third century. By the Great Persecution, a significant number of Christians lived in and around Nicomedia, whose church building was prominently located (*DMP.* 12.3, Eus. *HE* 9.5.1–8.14; 9.9a.3–6).³⁴

Trier

Finally, Lactantius taught in Constantine's court in Trier. Trier was the capital of Belgica, the northernmost of the three Gallic provinces. Gaul was agricultural, and its religion combined traditional Gallic cults alongside Roman worship.³⁵ In Lactantius' day Trier was newly prosperous after many years of turmoil and decline. Constantius restored the area after the usurpations and invasions of 260-75, and made Trier his capital due to its proximity to the German frontier.³⁶ Constantine also resided there while ruling from the west, and his sons were stationed there after he moved to

32 Barbara Levick, 'Greece and Asia Minor', in *The Cambridge Ancient History: Volume 11*, ed. Alan K. Bowman, Dominic Rathbone, and Peter Garnsey, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 617.

33 Madsen, *Eager to Be Roman*, 53, 129–33; cf. S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

34 Christine Trevett, 'Asia Minor and Achaëa', in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Volume 1*, ed. Frances M. Young and Margaret M. Mitchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 314–21.

35 Edith Mary Wightman, *Roman Trier and the Treveri* (London: Hart-Davis, 1970), 25; C. Goudineau, 'Gaul', in *The Cambridge Ancient History: Volume 11: The High Empire, AD 70–192*, ed. Alan K. Bowman, Dominic Rathbone, and Peter Garnsey, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 471–89.

36 Wightman, *Roman Trier*, 56–59; Timothy D. Barnes, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 68.

Constantinople.³⁷ The city remained an important imperial city until the time of Theodosius.³⁸ We know very little of Gallic Christianity's history in its first three centuries: Irenaeus' evidence suggests there was probably a church there by the end of the second century, and the episcopal see of Trier was established around the mid third century.³⁹

Lactantius' Education

Lactantius' rhetorical education would have formed him deeply. Rhetoricians were of varied backgrounds; Lactantius' success may indicate he was from the elite end of this spectrum. His appointment by Constantine particularly speaks to his reputation, as Gaul was known for its orators.⁴⁰ Lactantius' education would have taught him language, literature, and persuasion, but it was also designed to inculcate upper-class values, morality, and preservation of the social order.⁴¹ Rhetoricians preserved culture and tradition through transmitting formative stories, *exempla*, and conceptions of virtue and vice (cf. *Aus. Prot.* 73).⁴² A liberal education was thought to inculcate virtue, discipline, and the right understanding of *mores*. It was taken to demonstrate the requisite virtue for important government offices, granting men moral as well as social status.⁴³ Participation in the civil service also inculcated Roman values and virtues, creating a network which gave local elites access to advancement and wealth, and

37 Edith Mary Wightman, *Gallia Belgica* (London: Batsford, 1985), 211–12.

38 Wightman, 215–17.

39 Wightman, *Roman Trier*, 227; John Behr, 'Gaul', in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Volume I*, ed. Frances M. Young and Margaret M. Mitchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 366–69.

40 Roger Rees, 'Panegyric', in *A Companion to Roman Rhetoric*, ed. William J. Dominik and Jon Hall (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 145.

41 Charles McNelis, 'Grammarians and Rhetoricians', in *A Companion to Roman Rhetoric*, ed. William J. Dominik and Jon Hall (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 285–90; Anthony Corbeill, 'Rhetorical Education and Social Reproduction in the Republic and Early Empire', in *A Companion to Roman Rhetoric*, ed. William J. Dominik and Jon Hall (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 70.

42 Kaster, *Guardians of Language*, 18; Edward Jay Watts, *The Final Pagan Generation* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 63.

43 Kaster, *Guardians of Language*, 27–28.

created stability for the emperors through their loyalty.⁴⁴ Lactantius' education trained him to write about morality and how one should act as an upright Roman. He positions himself as fulfilling this role of moral commentator more successfully than his non-Christian peers could (*DI*. 1.1.8).

Lactantius' Works

De Opificio Dei

Lactantius' first extant work (*Opif.*) argues for divine providence, which is particularly seen in the composition of the human body. It was written before the *Institutes*, but after persecution began (*Opif.* 1.1-2; 20.1-2; *DI*. 2.10.15), making 304 a plausible date of composition. Lactantius remained in Nicomedia until at least 305 (*DI*. 5.11.15), making this city the work's provenance. *De Opificio Dei* is addressed to Lactantius' former student Demetrianus, who held an official post when the persecution began (*Opif.* 1.4-5).

Divine Institutes and Epitome

Next, Lactantius wrote his *magnum opus*, *Divinae Institutiones* (*DI*). This work in seven books was prompted by two anti-Christian polemicists whom Lactantius encountered in Nicomedia (5.2.2),⁴⁵ but it aims to give a universal response to people who attack justice (5.4.1). We consider the work's method, audience, and aim below. The manuscript tradition contains a longer and shorter version of the text, the longer version addressed to Constantine and containing two dualistic passages. Pichon argued convincingly that the additions are Lactantian,⁴⁶ and Heck established a consensus that

44 Watts, *The Final Pagan Generation*, 22.

45 See chapter 1.

46 René Pichon, *Lactance: Étude Sur Le Mouvement Philosophique et Religieux Sous Le Règne de Constantin*. (Paris, 1901), 23–29.

the shorter version predates the longer.⁴⁷ Lactantius began the first edition around 305, since he refers to events two years after the persecution began (5.11.15), and completed it before Maximian's death in 310, since he assumes all the persecutors are alive (5.23.1-5).⁴⁸ Heck dates the additions to 324, and suggests Lactantius was revising the work when he died.⁴⁹ However, Digeser suggests Lactantius edited and updated the work while resident at Constantine's court in 310-13.⁵⁰ We do not know the work's provenance; Lactantius was likely lying low until the persecution ceased.

The *Institutes*' fifth book contains a second prologue, leading some to suggest it was written before the others. Stevenson thinks it strange that the work does not address the persecution until its fifth book; he adds that the later books are more philosophical than the earlier ones, which contain mainly apologetic commonplaces. He suggests that Lactantius wrote several shorter works, and later combined them into one complete refutation of paganism.⁵¹ However, Heck dismissed this argument, attributing it to a false distinction between philosophical and apologetic books.⁵² Certainly, Lactantius' longest discussion of philosophy occurs in Book 3, and Book 5 responds most closely to the charges the persecutors made against Christians. Ogilvie writes that the work is carefully structured into negative and positive halves, and thinks that Lactantius had this structure in mind from its inception.⁵³ Lactantius' defence of Christianity is carefully cumulative. He needed to deconstruct false religion (Books 1–2) and wisdom (Book 3) and set forth true religion and wisdom (Book 4) before he could argue that persecution

47 Heck, *Die dualistischen Zusätze*. For earlier theories that the longer edition was original, see e.g. Pichon, *Lactance*, 28ff.; Stevenson, 'The Life and Literary Activity of Lactantius', 671.

48 Samuel Brandt, ed., *L. Caeli Firmiani Lactanti Opera omnia*, CSEL 19 (Vindobonae: FTempky, 1890), xii–xiv; Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 291 n. 96. Heck, assuming he wrote in the east, writes he might not have heard of Maximian's death, and so Galerius' death in 311 becomes the *terminus ante quem*. Heck, *Die dualistischen Zusätze*, 144–47; Colot, *Lactance*, 180–88.

49 Heck, *Die dualistischen Zusätze*, 149–50.

50 Digeser, 'Lactantius and Constantine's Letter to Arles', 49–50.

51 Stevenson, 'The Life and Literary Activity of Lactantius', 669–70.

52 Heck, *Die dualistischen Zusätze*, 146–47.

53 Robert Maxwell Ogilvie, *The Library of Lactantius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 3.

of Christians is unjust. Books 1–4 are preparatory, and in Book 5 he turns to address the persecutors directly. We see this pivot in Lactantius' reference to his work's asserting the creator's oneness (5.1.1), which refers to the earlier books, since monotheism is not discussed in Book 5. I see no reason why the new prologue was not occasioned by this change in rhetorical purpose. In my view, Lactantius conceived of the *Institutes* as a complete whole.

'Long after' (*iam pridem*) completing the *Institutes*, Lactantius' friend Pentadius requested an epitome of his longest work (*Epit.* pr.1). Perrin dates it to around 320.⁵⁴ The *Epitome* re-elaborates the *Institutes*' argument in light of Constantine's new favour towards the church. As such, it is less propaedeutic and more explicitly Christian than the original. Loi concludes that its arguments are Lactantius' final and definitive opinions.⁵⁵

De Mortibus Persecutorum

De Mortibus Persecutorum (DMP.) recounts the history of persecution to assert that God punishes all who persecute Christians. A confessor named Donatus is its addressee. The work describes the tetrarchic persecution, detailing the deaths of each persecuting emperor, and concludes with Constantine's and Licinius' victory over their rivals. The work's *terminus post quem* is Daia's defeat in mid-313; Licinius' depiction indicates it was written before 316, when Licinius' relations with Constantine soured.⁵⁶ The work was only discovered in 1677, and its authenticity doubted until Pichon's 1901 monograph.⁵⁷ Scholars have speculated about the work's provenance based upon

54 Michel Perrin, ed., *Épitomé des Institutions divines*, SC 335 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1987), 16; Bowen and Garnsey, *Lactantius : Divine Institutes*, 3.

55 Vincenzo Loi, 'La giustizia sociale nell'etica Lattanziana', *Augustinianum* 17, no. 1 (1977): 160.

56 Barnes, 'Lactantius and Constantine', 36–39. Constantine's and Licinius' first war used to be dated to 314 (see e.g. Eberhard Heck, *Mē Theomachein* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1987), 212.), but this has now been discredited. Creed, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, xxxiv.

57 Pichon, *Lactance*, 337ff; Creed, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, xxix–xxxiii.

Lactantius' knowledge of events in different provinces.⁵⁸ However, Lactantius was a sufficiently skilled writer that he could describe others' accounts like an eyewitness.⁵⁹ Creed identifies a latent hostility towards Licinius which may suggest that Lactantius wrote in Constantine's territories,⁶⁰ but any statements about the work's provenance remain speculative. The work's tone is vindictive and partisan, leading to some to doubt its historical reliability.⁶¹ However, perceptions of Lactantius' historical accuracy have increased over time, and he avoids merely transmitting Constantinian propaganda.⁶²

De Ira Dei

Lactantius' next work was a treatise on divine impassibility, *de Ira Dei (ID.)*.⁶³ The work is also addressed to a Donatus, but probably not the addressee of *de Mortibus Persecutorum*, since Lactantius writes *de Ira* to a student who needs correction.⁶⁴ The work alludes to conflict between Constantine and Licinius, indicating a date of 316/7.⁶⁵

Phoenix Poem and Lost Works

Finally, Lactantius authored a poem on the phoenix, an allegory for resurrection, which Bryce ascribes to his youth.⁶⁶

Jerome also lists several works of Lactantius' which are no longer extant. While in Africa, he wrote a *Symposium*, and after travelling to Nicomedia, a poem describing the journey in hexameters. He also wrote *The Grammarian*, two books to Asclepiades, four books of letters to Probus, two to Severus, and two to his student Demetrianus (Hier. *Vir. Ill.* 80).

58 Stevenson, 'The Life and Literary Activity of Lactantius', 664–65.

59 Barnes, 'Lactantius and Constantine', 40.

60 Creed, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, xxvii.

61 H. A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 141.

62 Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 13–14.

63 For notes on the text, see Eberhard Heck, 'Nachträgliches Zu Den Kleinen Schriften Des Lactanz', *Antike Und Abendland* 59, no. 1 (2013): 126–44.

64 Christiane Ingreteau, ed., *La colère de Dieu*, SC 289 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1982), 26.

65 Coleman, *Lactantius*, 26.

66 Jackson Bryce, *The Library of Lactantius* (New York: Garland, 1990), 6.

Sources

One of the first things the casual reader of Lactantius notices is his profuse quotation of sources, including Roman school texts, classical philosophy, religious writings from various nations, and pagan⁶⁷ oracles alongside the expected Christian texts. He quotes these both from memory and from his library.⁶⁸ Lactantius is much more likely to justify an idea using the *Sibylline Oracles*, Hermes Trismegistus, Virgil, or above all, Cicero, than with the Bible. His Ciceronian style is famous: Pico della Mirandola called him *Cicero Christianus*,⁶⁹ and Jerome said he wrote *quasi quidam fluvius eloquentiae Tullianae* (*Ep.* 58.10). This use of sources distinguishes his writing from Tertullian's, Cyprian's, and even his teacher Arnobius'.

Lactantian scholars continue to debate which of Lactantius' sources was most important, and a case can be made for the priority of several sources. Bryce identifies three kinds of quotations: ornamental citations, those used with their original sense, and those which Lactantius decontextualises and uses for different purposes to their original authors'.⁷⁰ We also need to distinguish the sources which Lactantius uses to justify an argument from those which formed his opinions and were foundational or authoritative for his thought.

Wlosok, Heck, and Freund believe that Lactantius tried to synthesise pagan and Christian culture to make Christianity accessible to Roman elites. Others allege that Lactantius drew no distinction between the Bible and pagan sources,⁷¹ or that his

67 Despite its anachronism, I use 'pagan' to designate Lactantius' non-Christian interlocutors and sources for want of a better alternative. Lactantius' primary interlocutors were Roman, making 'Hellenes' inappropriate; the contents of 'Roman' religion is the point of contention; 'polytheists' is excluded because some assert that Lactantius' opponents included philosophical monotheists; and 'pagan' connotes traditional Graeco-Roman cult more directly than 'non-Christian' does.

68 Ogilvie, *The Library of Lactantius*, 4.

69 Pico della Mirandola, *De Studio Divinae Atque Humanae Philosophiae* (Basel, 1573), 1.7.

70 Bryce, *Library*, 17–18.

71 Hans Bietenhard, 'The Millennial Hope in the Early Church', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 6 (1953): 26.

blending of sources leads him towards syncretism.⁷² Freund writes that pagan ideas are woven into Lactantius' doctrines.⁷³ Wlosok and Loi conclude that Lactantius accepted Hermetic material as authoritative; Ogilvie adds that he used them uncritically.⁷⁴ Heck writes that Lactantius ascribes divine inspiration to Cicero.⁷⁵

However, closer reading reveals that Lactantius believes one must accept God's revelation to be inspired. He qualifies the inspiration of classical authors with *paene* or *quasi* (*DI.* 5.9.6; 5.12.7; 5.22.11).⁷⁶ Kendeffy identifies four categories of *testimonia*: human testimonies; testimonies which his audience will think divine, such as oracles; *testimonia divino similia*, such as the Sibyllines and Hermetica; and testimonies which Lactantius himself regards as divine.⁷⁷ As Walter has shown, Lactantius establishes a categorical distinction between Christian revelation and the imperfect knowledge contained in non-Christian texts.⁷⁸ It is important not to confuse protreptic tactics for what Lactantius believed to be truth's objective basis.⁷⁹ Though he primarily cites classical authors, his essential intuitions come from the Bible, and the other texts are adapted and misrepresented to support a biblical model.⁸⁰ This shows we need to read Lactantius on two levels: firstly, to understand how he uses his cited sources, but also to understand by what principles he assesses those sources, and from whence come his

72 Brian Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 68.

73 Stefan Freund, 'When Romans Become Christians: The "Romanisation" of Christian Doctrine in Lactantius' Divine Institutes', *Studia Patristica* 80, no. 6 (2017): 77.

74 Wlosok, *Laktanz*, 210–12; Vincenzo Loi, 'Il concetto di "iustitia" e i fattori culturali dell'etica di Lattanzio', *Salesianum* 28 (1966): 620–21; Ogilvie, *The Library of Lactantius*, 36.

75 Eberhard Heck, 'Iustitia Civilis - Iustitia Naturalis: à propos du jugement de Lactance concernant les discours sur la justice dans le "De re publica" de Cicéron', in *Lactance et Son Temps*, ed. Jacques Fontaine and Michel Perrin (Paris: Editions Beauchesne, 1978), 177.

76 Vinzenz Buchheit, 'Cicero Inspiratus: Vergilius Propheta? Zur Wertung paganer Autoren bei Laktanz', *Hermes* 118, no. 3 (1990): 364.

77 Gábor Kendeffy, 'Lactantius as Spokesman of a Mystery', *Rivista Di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa* 53, no. 3 (2017): 447.

78 Colot, *Lactance*, xxi.

79 Buchheit, 'Cicero Inspiratus', 357.

80 Hervé Inglebert, *Les Romains chrétiens face à l'histoire de Rome* (Paris: Institut d'études augustiniennes, 1996), 119–20.

own fundamental assumptions. We need to differentiate between his structure's foundations and its cladding.

Lactantius' use of his sources is also tied to estimations of his competence. One commentator writes, 'he superimposed the entire corpus of Christian teaching on a mind formed by the traditions of pagan humanism, and he never seemed to realise the contradictions involved in the process.'⁸¹ Previous generations of scholars focused on his transmission of other sources, causing them to conclude he was mediocre and derivative.⁸² He is also accused of justifying Christianity using pagan sources out of ignorance of the Bible.⁸³ However, Monat's monograph established that Lactantius' knowledge and use of the Bible is more skilful than is often acknowledged.⁸⁴ The *Institutes* are protreptic, making it unwise to assume Lactantius' omissions indicate ignorance.⁸⁵ Despite the abundance of pagan sources, his ideas are founded on Biblical passages which he usually does not cite. Many of these are designed to be heard by Christian readers while flying beneath a pagan's radar.⁸⁶

Method and Style

This assessment indicates Lactantius' prolific citation of classical sources, which he regarded as less authoritative than Christian texts, was deliberate. Lactantius introduces his method by cataloguing the inadequacies of three previous apologetic works: Tertullian's *Apologeticum*, Minucius Felix' *Octavius*, and Cyprian's *ad*

81 Elizabeth Allo Isichei, *Political Thinking and Social Experience; Some Christian Interpretations of the Roman Empire from Tertullian to Salvian* (Christchurch: University of Canterbury Press, 1964), 60.

82 See e.g. Pichon, *Lactance*, viii; cf. Bryce, *Library*, 4.

83 Pichon, *Lactance*, 199–201.

84 Pierre Monat, *Lactance et la Bible* (Paris: Etudes augustiniennes, 1982); cf. Antonie Wlosok, 'Zur Bedeutung Der Nichtcyprianischen Bibelzitate Bei Laktanz', *Studia Patristica* 4 (1961): 234–50; Paul McGuckin, 'The Non-Cyprianic Scripture Texts in Lactantius' *Divine Institutes*', *Vigiliae Christianae* 36, no. 2 (1982): 145–63.

85 Jakob Speigl, 'Zum Kirchenbegriff des Laktanz', *Römische Quartalschrift für Christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte* 65, no. 1 (1970): 20.

86 McGuckin, 'The Non-Cyprianic Scripture Texts in Lactantius' *Divine Institutes*', 146–47.

Demetrianum. This demonstrates Lactantius understood his writing as akin to apologetic, even if he wanted to improve upon previous attempts. Minucius Felix's work was appropriately eloquent, but its contents insufficient to fully vindicate truth. Tertullian's eloquence was patchy, and he responded only to attacks on Christianity rather than instituting the truth in its place. Cyprian's style was sufficient, but his content insufficiently preparatory; he wrote for catechised Christians, so his works were mocked by outsiders. Instead of arguing logically he quoted scripture, which pagans regarded as false; Lactantius attributes this to his large knowledge of scripture and desire to focus on Christianity's substance.

Instead of merely responding to Christianity's detractors like Tertullian, Lactantius hoped to construct (*instituire*) something in its place *in quo necesse est doctrinae totius substantiam contineri*. And where Cyprian had cited the Bible, Lactantius appeals to logic and human evidence his readers would accept, lest they be blinded by the full luminosity of divine evidence.⁸⁷ Lactantius' rhetorical method prioritises gradually accustoming his readers to the truth (5.1.22-28; 5.4.3-8). And this leads to an important principle for interpreting him. Since his work is propaedeutic, gradually guiding the reader towards the truth, Lactantius' later statements are a surer guide to his own opinions than the earlier ones.

Lactantius describes his method by quoting Lucretius: he intends to use his honeyed rhetoric to sweeten the bitter medicine of the truth (5.1.14; cf. *Lucr.* 1.936ff; 4.11). This explains the proliferation of classical quotations: they are intended to appeal to people accustomed to polished rhetoric, who found the Bible lowly. Lactantius explains his reluctance to use the Bible in his introduction: those who do not know the truth think that the Scriptures speak human words and are *aut insani aut fallaces* (*DI.*

⁸⁷ Lactantius may have found his method affirmed by Cyprian's comment on the importance of not profaning the sacrament of faith (*Cyp. Quir.* 3.50, citing *Matt.* 7:6).

1.4.2). Lactantius resolves to omit sources that *omnino non creditur*, and to prefer the poets and philosophers, often quoted against the Christians (1.5.1). He regards biblical truth as an *arcanum* or *sacramentum* which requires initiation. In Colot's eyes, Lactantius likens Christian teaching to a religious mystery, making a parallel with the Hermetica which pagan intellectuals respected.⁸⁸ Nicholson identifies that Lactantius' goal goes beyond argument to sounding 'as many overtones as he could' and making 'Christian notions resonate in his reader's memory'. He sought to make his readers understand Rome's literary heritage in a Christian way.⁸⁹ Lactantius uses what Colot calls controlled ambivalence, introducing a term or quotation so it can be heard on both a pagan and a Christian register. The possible pagan resonance means the pagan reader is not repelled, but the argument gradually clarifies that Lactantius intends the Christian meaning.⁹⁰

Lactantius' quotations of these sources are not just a garnish for erudition's sake; they are integral to his persuasion.⁹¹ His Latinity, the interweaving of classical literature into his argument, is one of the major features of his style. Lactantius often heightens his narrative's emotional tension by quoting passages of Virgil with the same resonance, for example to underscore the persecutors' ferocity (5.11.4-5, citing Virg. *Aen.* 2.368-4.366-68; 11.646).⁹² Cicero's oratorical works encouraged familiarity with many literary genres to increase one's persuasive abilities: 'we must read poetry, acquire a knowledge of history, and select teachers and writers of all the noble arts, read them attentively, and, for the sake of practice, praise, expound, correct, criticise, and refute

88 Colot, *Lactance*, 25–29.

89 O. P. Nicholson, 'The Christian Sallust: Lactantius on God, Man and History', *Studia Patristica* 80, no. 6 (2017): 136.

90 Blandine Colot, 'La problématique de la justice dans les Institutiones divines de Lactance', in *L'amour de la justice*, ed. Anne-Isabelle Bouton-Touboul (Pessac: Ausonius Publications, 2017), 116–18.

91 Nicholson, 'The Christian Sallust: Lactantius on God, Man and History', 122.

92 Bryce, *Library*, 284–89.

them' (Cic. *Orat.* 1.34.158).⁹³ I suggest Lactantius saw himself as following this Ciceronian injunction, meaning that he modified previous apologists' methods according to the practice he taught as a rhetorical educator. This distinguishes Lactantius from his Patristic forebears, who regarded Christianity as indifferent or opposed to classical culture.⁹⁴ Lactantius also embraced classical culture more enthusiastically than subsequent church fathers such as Jerome and Augustine, who feared that rhetorical culture would foster pride, competitiveness, and a lust for status.⁹⁵

Cicero is Lactantius' most visible interlocutor. 'One could not say that Lactantius consults or draws from Cicero; rather he has wholly incorporated Cicero within himself, to the fashioning of his thought, and the moulding of his style.'⁹⁶ There are several reasons for this. His centrality to the Latin curriculum gave Lactantius a deep familiarity with his thought and style. Both authors believed moral philosophy was the highest kind of thought, and Lactantius was attracted to Cicero's combination of ethics with practice.⁹⁷ Colot has paid particular attention to this relationship and argues that Lactantius follows Cicero's attempt to justify Roman world-rule theologically. Lactantius seeks, as Cicero did before him, to unite rhetoric and philosophy.⁹⁸ Lactantius particularly engages with Cicero as a theorist of justice; Cicero's arguments against Carneades and his natural law theory are integral to Lactantius' case. And Lactantius' description of justice is central to his refutation of the persecutors' ideology; he cites a quintessentially Roman orator to challenge the policy of the Roman emperors of his day.

93 Trans. May and Wisse.

94 Excepting Minucius Felix. Inglebert, *Les Romains chrétiens*, 121.

95 Kaster, *Guardians of Language*, 81.

96 Bryce, *Library*, 19.

97 Bryce, 22.

98 Colot, *Lactance*, 45.

Audience

Lactantius' stated audience is four-fold. He wants to encourage persecutors to turn from irrational violence and engage with Christianity rationally. However, even if they reject his words, he can strengthen Christians who are tempted by the prevailing ideology or the threat of violence. Lactantius writes partly to edify himself. And finally, truth is sufficiently powerful that *sanae mentes* will accept it once it has been revealed using honeyed words, implying a second group of pagans (*DI*. 5.1.1-14). Thus, as he identifies it, Lactantius' intended audience is both internal and external.

However, some scholars doubt this audience. It is a commonplace that Patristic apologetic texts were written primarily for Christian audiences, since most pre-Constantinian Christians would have had little access to their apologies' addressees, and publicising a Christian faith was dangerous.⁹⁹ Wayman sees the work as primarily catechetical, based on Lactantius' identifying a (partly) Christian audience; to do so he must ignore Lactantius' other stated audiences.¹⁰⁰ Conversely, Hanson identifies features of apologetic texts which would be redundant if their audience were internal, such as descriptions of liturgical practice.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, the typical arguments for why patristic apologies cannot be exoteric apply less securely to Lactantius, as his imperial employment gave him access to the sorts of people to whom apologies were addressed. It is highly plausible that he presented the *Institutes* before its addressee Constantine.

The most prominent Lactantian scholars take seriously his claim to be writing to pagans.¹⁰² Lactantius identifies an audience who might be sympathetic to Christianity

99 Mark J. Edwards et al., 'Introduction: Apologetics in the Roman World', in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 8–9.

100 Ben David Wayman, 'Lactantius's Power Struggle: A Theological Analysis of the Divine Institutes, Book V', *Political Theology* 14, no. 3 (2013): 308.

101 R. P. C. Hanson, 'Eberhard Heck: MH ΘΕΟΜΑΧΕΙΝ', *The Classical Review* 38, no. 1 (1988): 164.

102 Monat, *Lactance et la Bible*, 25; Ogilvie, *The Library of Lactantius*, 96; Inglebert, *Les Romains chrétiens*, 120.

but are repelled by the Bible's language.¹⁰³ Drake sees the work as an appeal to get moderate non-Christians on his side, a suggestion I find probable; they are likely the *sanae mentes*.¹⁰⁴ Lactantius emphasises the persecution's violence to create revulsion towards the policy among such people. Colot's suggestion that pagans are Lactantius' more significant audience is warranted, since the Christians he addresses agree with pagans about persecution.¹⁰⁵ There is, then, no good reason to doubt Lactantius' stated audience: he wrote both to Christians and non-Christians, and the latter category contained people both hostile and sympathetic to Christians. These people were Lactantius' peers and fellow-elites, Latin-speakers, *docti* and *literati*, highly educated and cultured. They were people like his students, the educated civil servants who ran the empire, the sort of men who delivered the *Latin Panegyrics*.¹⁰⁶ His style and method are intelligible in this context: he relies on Cicero and other school texts because these were the authors that Roman bureaucrats knew and respected.¹⁰⁷ We can speculate that Lactantius spent the years 305-310 in a province where the persecution was milder and wrote to encourage governors and imperial bureaucrats to favour his coreligionists.¹⁰⁸ Lactantius' other works are addressed to Christians but retain his method of justifying Christianity using pagan authorities.¹⁰⁹

Aim

We have already considered some of Lactantius' literary goals: he hoped to turn persecutors away from violence; to discourage educated Christians from apostatising; and to encourage moderate pagans to sympathise with Christians and oppose the

103 Eberhard Heck, 'Lactanz und die Klassiker. Zu Theorie und Praxis der Verwendung heidnischer Literatur in christlicher Apologetik bei Lactanz', *Philologus* 132, no. 1 (1988): 169.

104 Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 210; cf. Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 32, 39.

105 Colot, *Lactance*, 7.

106 Nicholson, 'The Christian Sallust: Lactantius on God, Man and History', 122–25.

107 He knew Greek, and had some access to Greek philosophy, but these texts would have been less persuasive than the ones he uses.

108 The persecution's severity depended on each governors' decision.

109 Coleman, *Lactantius*, 35–37.

persecution. Lactantius wanted to expose the falsity of the Nicomedian polemicists' attack on justice because their *superba impietas* provoked him; because Lactantius himself knew the truth; and, he suspects, because of divine prompting. He hoped to refute all who would ever oppose justice (5.2.1–4.8). Responding to the persecution is one of the *Institutes*' central goals; to interpret Lactantius correctly we must consider its history and ideology. Yet most Lactantian scholarship tends to abstract him from his historical context,¹¹⁰ an omission the present work addresses.

People reject Christianity because truth is obscure, wrapped in simple language, and naturally bitter and austere. However, Lactantius hopes that his rhetorical skill will suffice to explain it clearly and teach people how to live (1.1.7-10; 5.1.15-21). He seeks to send his audience *ad ipsum doctrinae uberrimum ac plenissimum fontem*, his typical designation for the Bible and the catholic church (1.1.21-22; 4.30.1-12; 7.25.1-2).¹¹¹ This indicates that he regards his work as preparatory, a preliminary introduction to Christianity which will overcome elite prejudices towards it and leave its readers receptive to traditional catechesis. His ultimate goal is their conversion to Christianity. He sets his writing alongside the jurists, *arbitri aequitatis*, who wrote *institutiones civilis iuris*. Instead, Lactantius will write *divinae institutiones*, covering religious philosophy rather than basic laws, alluding to Cicero's goal in *de Legibus* (1.1.12; Cic. *Leg.* 1.14).¹¹² He also contrasts his writing with that of the rhetoricians and philosophers. Orators sought to teach living well, but in Lactantius' experience taught men to be cleverly bad (*DI.* 1.1.8). Philosophers also claimed to be guides to life, but Lactantius thinks their disagreements obscured which path to follow.¹¹³ By contrast, Lactantius

¹¹⁰ Digeser is a notable exception to this trend.

¹¹¹ Colot sees overcoming literate pagans' objections to the Bible as a large part of Lactantius' literary purpose. Colot, *Lactance*, 31–32.

¹¹² The liturgical preface to the Lord's Prayer used in Cyprian's day included the phrase *divina institutio*, which Bryce suggests was another source for Lactantius' title. Bryce, *Library*, 10.

¹¹³ In presenting his work as an *Institutes* he claimed that Christianity could give a philosophical manual for living, responding to the pagan charge that one could not claim to die as a philosopher (as the persecuted Christians did) unless one had lived like one. Mark J. Edwards, *Religions of the*

claims to have the truth of how to live from divine revelation (1.1.17-19). He concludes by exhorting his readers to adopt wisdom and religion, practise virtue, and to follow Jesus along the path to life (7.27.1-16).

Lactantius' stated aim was presenting Christianity in terms that literate pagans could accept. Modern interpreters are divided about how to understand this. Many think that he sought to synthesise Christianity and pagan philosophy so elites would be more favourable towards it. However, others see his use of pagan sources as more combative. We will continue to assess Lactantius' attitudes towards paganism as our argument unfolds.

Lactantius and Justice

Justice is a valuable topic because it opens up Lactantius' thought and also illuminates a period of rapid, history-altering ideological change. By styling his *magnum opus* '*Divinae Institutiones*' he positions it as a response to institutes of civil law, placing justice at its core. Ethics is one of Lactantius' most interesting and original areas of thought. As Spanneut observed, while earlier Latin fathers gave situational moral instructions, Lactantius was the first to give a complete moral philosophy.¹¹⁴ However, despite Spanneut's contribution, Patristic ethics remains almost unaddressed, particularly in the pre-Constantinian era. Lactantius situates justice at his ethics' heart; studying justice reveals the centre of his most original contribution to the tradition. It is not a modern category imposed upon him; we seek to understand him on his own terms. Occupying this central place in Lactantius' thought, justice provides a test case for several unresolved questions in Lactantian scholarship. He constructed his account of justice using a variety of sources, allowing us to consider how he understood

Constantinian Empire (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 27.
114 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 125.

Christianity to relate to pagan thought; and it is central to the political aims others have identified in his writings.

Lactantius' account of justice also gives us deeper insight into the ideological conflict and change of the early fourth century. The fourth century continues to fascinate because of the way its politics and religion intertwine, and because so much of its history depends on its actors' interior motivations, information that is only indirectly accessible to us. As an employee of two emperors, Lactantius was well-placed to witness the era's developments; he is one of our best sources for its religious change. Lactantius has been criticised for theological deficiency, but his moral philosophy is much richer, unsurprisingly given Roman philosophy's preference for ethics. This increases his value as a witness to his era's ideological conflict. The tetrarchs did not persecute Christians for their beliefs, but for what they did and failed to do. Many of their accusations against Christians were ethical: Christians were impious, they betrayed their forefathers by forsaking their customs, and they threatened society through their anti-social behaviour. The Roman preference for ethics over metaphysics was mirrored in the minds of the persecutors, and Lactantius' ethical focus allows us to peer further into their minds than a solely doctrinal treatise would have done. Therefore, the lack of scholarly attention towards Patristic ethics neglects an important avenue for understanding pagan-Christian relations in this period. Studying fourth-century ethical competition reveals the lines of disagreement between pagans and Christians in that tumultuous time. It reveals how pagans and Christians constructed their identities and defined the boundaries between them. The fact that Lactantius locates his discussion of persecution in a book titled *de Iustitia* indicates he believed justice to lie at the heart of the conflict between pagans and Christians. Studying justice opens up the lines of

disagreement in a period of profound religious and social change, revealing why that conflict was so heated.

Furthermore, justice's political overtones make Lactantius a useful witness to how Christians regarded the state right before it began to be Christianised. Lactantius introduces the *Institutes* by alluding to Cicero's *de Legibus* and legal institutes, placing his work in conversation with Roman political philosophy. This is where we would expect to find Christian reflection on Christianity's place within the Roman empire. Lactantius wrote other works after Constantine's profession of Christian faith, allowing us to track how his political and ethical thinking changed as Christianity's fortunes improved. Exploring Lactantius' understanding of justice gives a fresh perspective on several questions which are central to how we understand this oft-disputed time.

There exist about half a dozen articles on Lactantius' conception of justice, none of them in English. The topic also plays an important role in Walter's and Colot's recent monographs. The first author to treat the topic at length was Vincenzo Loi, whose 1966 article 'Il concetto di "iustitia" e i fattori culturali dell'etica di Lattanzio' sought to identify and locate the sources for Lactantius' various uses of *iustitia*. Loi found Christian, classical, and Hermetic elements to Lactantius' polyvalent understanding of justice. He concluded that ultimately Lactantius transposed the Stoic union of virtue, wisdom, and religion into a Hermetic-Gnostic register. Spanneut's 1969 monograph *Tertullien et les Premiers Moralistes Africains* surveys the moral theology of Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius, and Lactantius. Spanneut explains carefully how Lactantius' epistemology, anthropology, soteriology, and human teleology contribute to his ethics. However, although the work covers the broader pre-Constantinian Latin ethical tradition, Spanneut gives minimal consideration to either the sources or context of Lactantius' ethics.

Heck's 1978 chapter '*iustitia civilis – iustitia naturalis*' is more focused. It investigates Lactantius' use of Cicero's *de Republica* in his definition of justice in *Institutes* 5.12–18, and concludes that Lactantius evaluated Cicero's speeches according to their internal assumptions. The introduction to Monat's edition of *Institutes* Book 5 includes a section on Lactantian justice, and follows Loi's assessment of Lactantius' sources. Monat shows how Cicero paved the way for Lactantius by identifying justice as a universal obligation to preserve the human community. Monat also considers the Latin apologists as Lactantius' sources, and concludes that his understanding of justice draws the most from Minucius Felix.

Buchheit's 1979 article 'Die Definition Der Gerechtigkeit Bei Laktanz und Seinen Vorgängern' covers similar ground to Loi's article, but reaches different conclusions. Buchheit argues that as Lactantius' definition of justice necessitates Christian worship, the background for his thought is more likely to be biblical-patristic than classical or hermetic. He argues that the classical and Hermetic precedents for Lactantian justice are vaguer than Loi recognised; Lactantius derives his two-fold justice from the biblical great commandment. However, Buchheit finds little other Christian background, a lacuna subsequent scholars have attempted to fill.

Elizabeth DePalma Digeser's 2000 monograph *The Making of a Christian Empire* is methodologically unique in this bibliography.¹¹⁵ She treats Lactantius as an historical source rather than a theologian, and considers his ideological context at much greater length. Digeser locates Lactantius' account of justice within an attempt to create a new, Christianised Roman constitution. She identifies precedents in Ciceronian natural law and the biblical great commandment, but ultimately constructs Lactantian justice in

¹¹⁵ It is not coincidental that she is the only anglophone writer in this survey; she represents a more historical and social-scientific approach to Patristics which is common in North America.

conversation with Roman jurisprudence. Digeser emphasises the historical and political significance of Lactantius' understanding of *iustitia*.

Christiane Grossmann has written two articles on components of Lactantian justice, published in 2002 and 2004.¹¹⁶ Like Buchheit, Grossmann prioritises Lactantius' Christian background and finds allusions to specific New Testament passages in Lactantius' definitions of justice and piety. Ingremeau explores how justice is presented in *Institutes* Books 5 and 6, particularly in relation to Roman imperialism.¹¹⁷

Finally, two recent monographs include extensive considerations of Lactantian justice. Jochen Walter's *Pagane Texte und Wertvorstellungen bei Lactanz* uses justice as a test case for how Lactantius uses and adapts pagan values and sources. Walter concludes that no Ciceronian or Hermetic passage corresponds sufficiently to Lactantius' definition of justice to have determined it. He regards the Christian background as more significant, but ultimately thinks the formulation of justice was Lactantius' own construction. And Blandine Colot's *Lactance: Penser la Conversion de Rome au Temps de Constantin* shows how Lactantius christianises Cicero's understanding of natural law, which renders justice equivalent to *pietas*. Colot draws attention to Lactantius' rhetorical polyvalence, which speaks to his pagan and Christian audiences on different levels, ultimately guiding pagans towards his own understanding of justice.¹¹⁸

116 Christiane Grossmann, 'Die Neutestamentlichen Grundlagen Der Gerechtigkeits- Definition Im 5. Buch Der Institutionen Des Lactanz', *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 37, no. 2 (2002): 395–403; Christiane Grossmann, 'Pietas Est Dei Notio: Eine Untersuchung Zu Lact. V 14, 11f.', *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 39, no. 2 (2004): 171–81.

117 Christiane Ingremeau, 'Lactance et la Justice: du livre V au livre VI des Institutions Divines', in *Autour de Lactance*, ed. Jean-Yves Guillaumin and Stéphane Ratti (Besançon: Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2003), 43–52.

118 Colot covers similar ground in various articles, such as Blandine Colot, 'Pietas, argument et expression d'un nouveau lien socio-religieux dans le christianisme romain de Lactance', *Studia Patristica* 34 (2001): 23–32; Colot, 'La problématique de la justice dans les Institutions divines de Lactance'; Blandine Colot, 'Lactantius and the Philosophy of Cicero: "Romideologie" and Legitimation of Christianity', *Studia Patristica* 80, no. 6 (2017): 79–95.

Contribution and Outline

There are several reasons why a fresh consideration of Lactantius' understanding of justice is warranted. Firstly, this survey indicates that no consensus about its sources has yet emerged. Cicero, the *Hermetica*, and the Bible are often mentioned as plausible sources, but the Latin fathers and Sibylline Oracles are usually omitted. Determining whether Lactantius' thought is fundamentally pagan or Christian is crucial to understanding his rhetorical purpose; this lack of consensus warrants another consideration of the question. It is also possible to focus on source-critical questions so much that Lactantius' own coherence is obscured.

Secondly, many of these studies are too short to unpack the complexity of Lactantius' description of justice. He constructs the virtue in conversation with so many sources that an article cannot consider them all. Many scholars acknowledge that Lactantius makes justice the sum of virtues, but restrict themselves to his definitions of justice itself when assessing his ethics.¹¹⁹ This is particularly the case with his social ethics; scholars commonly reduce this to *aequitas* and minimise the other components Lactantius attributes to justice. We need to synthesise the whole of his thought rather than focusing on a few quotations. Given ethics is one of his most original contributions, the subject warrants fuller attention. Justice is central to Lactantius' ethic and apologetic, and there is need for a monograph on the subject.

Finally, Digeser is right to emphasise the importance of situating Lactantius in his historical context. As Bryce observed, the backdrop of persecution gives Lactantius' discussion of justice 'an urgent contemporary relevance' and 'a certain intensity and excitement'.¹²⁰ Despite Lactantius' appeals to classical texts and his desire to write for all time, he wrote in a particularly fraught period which must have shaped his agenda.

¹¹⁹ Loi is a notable exception.

¹²⁰ Bryce, *Library*, 7.

Too many Lactantian scholars treat him as a philosopher abstracted from time and space. However, Digeser's approach is not unproblematic either. In her desire to read Lactantius as a witness to early fourth century imperial politics, she overplays the importance of contemporary sources such as Porphyry and the jurists, and neglects the fact that Cicero is Lactantius' primary conversation partner.¹²¹ In her desire to anchor Lactantius to his historical context, she overemphasises the political elements of the text. This illustrates two equal and opposite errors into which Lactantian scholars are liable to fall: one approach is solely theological, without considering his historical context, and the other is so focused on historical-political questions which originate elsewhere that it fails to read Lactantius on his own terms. Neither approach is helpful for ascertaining Lactantius' intentions, and both are liable to elide or misconstrue important components of his thought. In 1966, Loi wrote that justice is one of Lactantius' richest, most important, and most original ideas.¹²² It is surprising previous scholars have not explored how he used this crucial concept to respond to the persecution in greater detail.

My approach takes seriously both Lactantius as commentator on the classical tradition and Lactantius as respondent to Diocletian's persecution. As such, my first two chapters provide the background to situate him within these contexts. Chapter 1 reconstructs the anti-Christian rhetoric of Lactantius' day, tuning our ears to hear Lactantius' allusions to this ideology throughout his writings. Chapter 2 considers how Lactantius' key sources understand justice, aiming to give a taxonomy of the different ways justice could be expressed. While most of the literature focuses on individual passages which approximate Lactantius' definition of justice, my study is broader. Classical understandings of justice were polyvalent, and mapping out their diversity

121 Colot, *Lactance*, 186.

122 Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 585.

enables us to recognise how Lactantius uses and modifies these traditions with greater precision.

My first two chapters construct the context in which we should read Lactantius; the subsequent chapters consider his own view of justice. Chapter 3 introduces the presuppositions of Lactantius' moral philosophy and shows how he prepares readers for his definition of justice by deconstructing pagan religion and philosophy and by his Christology. Chapter 4 unpacks Lactantius' definition of justice, which divides into religious obligation and social obligations. The analysis centres around a word study of *iustitia*, *pietas*, and cognates. Here I begin considering the sources of the definition. The chapter concludes by asking which of the justice motifs from Chapter 2 can be found in Lactantius. Chapters 5 and 6 cover Lactantius' religious and social ethics respectively. Each chapter involves a fresh look at the question of Lactantius' sources, and locates his ethics within the context of tetrarchic religious controversy. Finally, Chapter 7 relates these findings to key questions in Lactantian scholarship, including his sources, aim, and political goals.

Chapter 1: The Context of the Great Persecution

Despite wanting to write an apology that would be perennially valid, Lactantius' account of Christianity is deeply influenced by the persecution that prompted it. This chapter investigates that persecution's history and ideology. The history is well-known and thus treated briefly, but recovering the discourse around the persecution, in which Lactantius positions himself, is essential for interpreting him correctly. Lactantian scholars have often analysed his thought without attending to this background,¹ but this misses the resonance Lactantius' words would have had in their own day. Lactantius' apology is constructed around the values and virtues prized by this persecuting society, and listening attentively to the latter's voice helps us to understand the former better.

History of the Persecution

Pliny to Valerian

Roman persecution of Christianity can be divided into two eras. In the first, persecution was sporadic, localised, and instigated from below. Trajan decreed that Christians should not be sought out, but should be punished if they came through the courts and refused to sacrifice *ture ac vino* (Plin. *Ep.* 10.96-7).² In this period, religious identity was policed by what was forbidden, such as foreign cults which lacked Senatorial approval, rather than by demanding positive religious acts.³ Persecution was instigated by the public or by individual governors. Christians seem to have been persecuted simply for bearing the *nomen Christianum* and their corresponding refusal to

1 With the notable exception of Elizabeth DePalma Digeser.

2 For sacrifice in antiquity, see John Scheid, 'Old Religions Transformed: Religions and Religious Policy from Decius to Constantine', in *A Companion to Roman Religion*, ed. Jörg Rüpke, trans. Jane E. A. Anderson (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), 289–97.

3 Rives, *Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage*, 235–40; cf. Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire: (A.D. 100-400)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 15.

sacrifice,⁴ rather than for a crime associated with it or their *contumacia* in resisting authority.⁵

The second era, beginning with the Decian persecution, saw state-sponsored, universal demands to sacrifice to the Roman gods. Christians, now a much larger group, became a specific target of Roman hostility.⁶ In 250 Decius required the empire to sacrifice, an act of *supplicatio* to aid the empire rather than an intentional attack on Christians.⁷ Valerian and Gallienus initiated persecution in 257, again desiring to uphold public religion and its salutary consequences (Eus. *HE.* 7.2.6ff).⁸ The persecution ended when Valerian was captured in Persia, and his son Gallienus rescinded the edicts (7.13.1-3).⁹

The third century's change in religious policy reflects an ideological shift whereby religion's relationship to politics was reconceived: the state's security became seen as more dependent upon universal worship of the gods, who would then favour the empire.¹⁰ In 212, the *Constitutio Antoniana* extended Roman citizenship to all the empire's free residents, making these new citizens responsible for upholding civic religion. Removing identity markers like citizen and peregrine made religion a more important marker of Roman identity.¹¹ In response to the third century's political turmoil, emperors attempted to centralise and unite the empire, and they became less

4 De Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution*, 110.

5 Gaddis' view. Michael Gaddis, *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 34–35.

6 Mary Beard, John North, and S. R. F. Price, *Religions of Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1:241-3.

7 Graeme Clarke, 'Third-Century Christianity', in *The Cambridge Ancient History: Volume 12*, ed. Alan Bowman, Averil Cameron, and Peter Garnsey, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 625. For the rite of *supplicatio*, see Allen Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 172–93.

8 Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 139.

9 See Shin, *The Great Persecution*, 26–31.

10 H. A. Drake, 'Lessons from Diocletian's Persecution', in *The Great Persecution*, ed. D. Vincent Twomey and Mark Humphries (Dublin: Four Courts, 2009), 52–53.

11 Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 205–7; Hervé Inglebert, 'Citoyenneté romaine, romanités et identités romaines sous l'Empire', in *Idéologies et valeurs civiques dans le monde romain*, ed. Claude Lepelley and Hervé Inglebert (Paris: Picard, 2002), 244.

tolerant of non-participation in Roman rites.¹² Decius' *supplicatio* radically reconfigured imperial religion away from the local and communal towards the universal and individual. Additionally, governors' duties were expanded and systematised, making them more responsible for seeking out criminals.¹³ These changes combined to increase the perceived threat Christians brought to Rome.

The 'Little Peace of the Church'

After Valerian's persecution, the church enjoyed unprecedented peace and growth, the so-called 'little peace of the church'.¹⁴ During the last third of the century, many educated elites and bureaucrats converted to Christianity (8.1.1-6; Arn. 2.5).¹⁵ This was what Lactantius regarded as normal. He was probably old enough to remember Decius' and Valerian's persecutions, but he would have been catechised during the little peace.

This period also saw Diocletian's accession (r. 284-305),¹⁶ the emperor who stabilised the empire after the third century crisis. Diocletian appointed a college of emperors, enabling multiple borders to be defended without risk of usurpation. He instituted an abdication process whereby the senior Augusti would be replaced by the junior Caesars at regular intervals. He created a new religious justification for imperial rule: the Augusti became sons of Jupiter and Hercules, and their Caesars joined that divine lineage through being adopted by the Augusti (cf. *Pan. Lat.* XI.2.3-4; 10.4-5). The emperors reigned through divine appointment; the previous half-century had proven how unstable reigns justified by military or senatorial power were.¹⁷ Diocletian also

12 Rives, *Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage*, 250–51; Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 1:212-3.

13 Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 1:238.

14 W. H. C. Frend, 'The Failure of the Persecutions in the Roman Empire', *Past & Present*, no. 16 (1959): 18 believes that Gallienus' decree gave Christians legal recognition within the empire. Conversely, De Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution*, 107 believes that toleration was not officially granted until 311.

15 Stevenson, 'The Life and Literary Activity of Lactantius', 667.

16 For his life and reign, see Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 4–14.

17 Hartmut Leppin, 'Old Religions Transformed: Religions and Religious Policy from Decius to Constantine', in *A Companion to Roman Religion*, ed. Jörg Rüpke (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 139.

overhauled the empire's bureaucracy, increasing the number of provinces, codifying and universalising Roman law, and enlarging the army and civil service. He promoted traditional Roman virtues across the empire, seen in his rescript on Manichaeism and edict on marriage.¹⁸ Most of Diocletian's innovations codified previous developments; he was no revolutionary, but sought to stabilise the empire and likely understood himself as restoring ancient traditions.¹⁹ During this period Diocletian appointed Christians to his court, including Lactantius. Lactantius was familiar with the tetrarchy's ideology; in subsequent chapters we will explore how his writing interacts with it.

The Great Persecution

However, towards the end of Diocletian's reign, hostility towards the Christians resurfaced. Our primary sources for the period are Lactantius and Eusebius; both are partisan, and any reconstruction of causes and motivations is therefore provisional.²⁰ Lactantius locates the end of the little peace in Diocletian's purging the army after Christian soldiers interrupting the auguries in Antioch (Lact. *DMP.* 10.1-4).²¹ As such religious ceremonies were used to guide and protect the state, their interruption was deemed a national security threat.²² Eusebius describes several factors that precipitated the persecution, though he judges the ultimate cause to be divine chastisement of Christian complacency (*HE.* 8.1.7-9). Constantine describes an Apollonian oracle

18 Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 9–10, 19.

19 Peter Garnsey and Caroline Humfress, *The Evolution of the Late Antique World* (Cambridge: Orchard Academic, 2001), 25–29; Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 115–16.

20 For the difficulty of evaluating the historicity of the sources, see Mark Humphries, 'The Mind of the Persecutors: "By the Gracious Favour of the Gods"', in *The Great Persecution*, ed. D. Vincent Twomey and Mark Humphries (Dublin: Four Courts, 2009), 14–19. For Eusebius' literary purpose, which is similar to the present interpretation of Lactantius, see James Corke-Webster, *Eusebius and Empire: Constructing Church and Rome in the Ecclesiastical History* (Cambridge: University Press, 2019). We consider how Lactantius' history of the persecution depicts the tetrarchs as unjust in Chapter 6.

21 P. S. Davies, 'The Origin and Purpose of the Persecution of AD 303', *JTS* 40, no. 1 (1 April 1989): 79 nn. 72, 90–93; Barnes, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine*, 54–56; Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 18–19. The incident is typically dated to 299. However, Shin suggests a possible date of 296/7. Shin, *The Great Persecution*, 68–74.

22 Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, *A Threat to Public Piety: Christians, Platonists, and the Great Persecution* (Cornell University Press, 2012), 178–79.

claiming the presence of οἱ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς δίκαιοι hindered oracular pronouncements; Diocletian responded violently after discovering that it referred to Christians (*apud* Eus. *VC.* 2.50-51).²³ The incident demonstrates the resonance of justice-language during the persecution. Digeser points to the augurs, prophets, priests, and theurgists behind the scenes, whose antipathy towards the Christians caused them to interpret their divinatory signs as requiring the removal of Christianity.²⁴ Cities may also have petitioned the emperors to remove those who refused to sacrifice and thereby endangered civic flourishing, as they did after Galerius halted the persecution in 311 (*HE.* 9.7.3-14).

Lactantius adds that two authors fomented anti-Christian violence in Nicomedia; their attacks prompted our author to write the *Divine Institutes* (*DI.* 5.2.2; 5.4.1-2). One was Sossianus Hierocles, governor of Bithynia and prefect of Egypt, and identifiable by the title of his work (5.2.12-13).²⁵ The other critic was a philosopher, who is commonly identified with Porphyry of Tyre, the most prominent and prolific of the era's opponents to Christianity. I outline below why I do not think this identification is secure.

On 23rd February 303, the emperors' officials razed the Nicomedian church. The following day they published an edict confiscating scriptures, depriving Christians of their status and legal privileges, and subjecting them to torture (*Lact. DMP.* 13.1).²⁶ The edict was promulgated throughout the empire but implemented inconsistently (cf. *DI.* 5.11.10).²⁷ The persecution was relatively mild in the west; Lactantius says that

23 Digeser argues plausibly that this is the same event as the interruption of the auguries in *DMP.* 10. Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, 'An Oracle of Apollo at Daphne and the Great Persecution', *Classical Philology* 99, no. 1 (2004): 57-77; cf. Davies, 'The Origin and Purpose of the Persecution of AD 303', 89-92.

24 Digeser, *Public Piety*, 182.

25 For his career see Timothy D. Barnes, 'Sossianus Hierocles and the Antecedents of the "Great Persecution"', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 80 (1976): 243.

26 Humphries, 'The Mind of the Persecutors', 12-13; Simon Corcoran, *The Empire of the Tetrarchs: Imperial Pronouncements and Government, AD 284-324*, Rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 179-81.

27 Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 23.

Constantius destroyed only buildings, and Eusebius that he did not even do this (*HE*. 8.13.13).²⁸

The second persecution edict arrested clergy, and the third required sacrifice for their release (8.2.5; 8.6.8-10; *Mart. Pal.* pr. 2). The fourth edict, issued in 304, demanded universal sacrifice (3.1; Lact. *DMP.* 15.4).²⁹ Contra de Ste. Croix,³⁰ Shin adduces evidence that all four edicts were enacted in the west, though they were enforced with variable severity.³¹ The eastern Caesar Maximinus Daia promulgated new edicts requiring universal sacrifice upon his accession in 305, using census records to enforce his demand more systematically. He appointed priests to establish paganism throughout his territories, the most positive attempt to create a universal Roman religious identity in this period.³²

Historians must explain why Diocletian suppressed Christianity only at the end of his reign. Eusebius and Lactantius name Galerius as the persecution's instigator (11.3-6; *Eus. Mart. Pal.* 4.1), which several historians accept. They suggest that Galerius gained power to direct the empire's religious policy after defeating Persia in 298-9,³³ or that Diocletian's conservative rhetoric left him open to manipulation towards persecution, particularly if oracles and auguries appeared to support the policy.³⁴ Conversely, Shin attributes the persecution to Diocletian's initiative, and points to Christianity's rapid growth, the instigation of oracles, and the desire to secure the empire through universal sacrifice before abdicating to explain his initiating persecution at the end of his reign.³⁵

Manders' numismatic study locates the persecution within the Tetrarchs' attempt to

28 This is supported by the Donatists' belief that Constantius' territories were free from *traditio*; they were willing to have Gallic bishops adjudicate their case. De Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution*, 96.

29 Corcoran, *Tetrarchs*, 181–82.

30 De Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution*, 74–79.

31 Shin, *The Great Persecution*, 179–80.

32 Clarke, 'Third-Century Christianity', 655; Paul Keresztes, 'From the Great Persecution to the Peace of Galerius', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 1983, 384.

33 Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 18–19.

34 Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 142–47; cf. also Clarke, 'Third-Century Christianity', 650.

35 Shin, *The Great Persecution*, 59, 120–23, 189, 221.

unify the empire through religious means.³⁶ The reasons adduced by Shin and Manders seem sufficient to prompt Diocletian to persecute Christians at the end of his reign, though perhaps the ascendant Galerius encouraged the policy as well.

Despite the tetrarchy's new religious ideology, it does not appear that the imperial cult or worship of the emperors played a part in this persecution. Though the tetrarchs were praised using divine epithets, they did not claim divine status, but rather to be the gods' agents on earth (e.g. XI.2.3-4; 3.1-3; 7.3; VII.12.6-8).³⁷ Neither Lactantius nor Arnobius thought it necessary to respond to claims of imperial divinity, and the emperor's status was not renegotiated as the empire Christianised.³⁸ Sacrifices for the emperors' benefit were more important than those offered to the emperors, though the former were still political since they supplicated the gods who upheld the emperor.³⁹ Digeser reads Lactantius' Euhemeristic criticism of the Roman gods as a veiled attack on the tetrarchic ideology.⁴⁰ However, if the tetrarchs had claimed divinity, Lactantius surely would have mentioned it in *de Mortibus*, a polemical work written when Christianity was legal.

Generally, scholars follow Chadwick in assessing that the persecution produced a relatively small number of martyrs; torture and imprisonment were more common.⁴¹ However, Shin's survey concludes it likely that 'a very great number of Christians'

36 Erika Manders, 'The Great Persecution and Imperial Ideology: Patterns of Communication on Tetrarchic Coinage', in *Religious Violence in the Ancient World*, ed. Christian R. Raschle and Jitse H. F. Dijkstra (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 220–21.

37 J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, 'Religion in the *Panegyrici Latini*', in *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*, ed. Franz Paschke (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1981), 391; Angelika Starbatty, 'Kaiser Und Gott in Den *Panegyrici Latini*', *Antike Und Abendland* 53 (2007): 163; Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 11.

38 J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 239; Liebeschuetz, 'Religion in the *Panegyrici Latini*', 393; Barbara Saylor Rodgers, 'Divine Insinuation in the "Panegyrici Latini"', *Historia* 35, no. 1 (1986): 70.

39 Price, *Rituals and Power*, 221.

40 Digeser, *Christian Empire*, chap. 2.

41 Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 180. Humphries, 'The Mind of the Persecutors', 18 n. 41 calls this the scholarly *communis opinio*.

perished during the persecution, more than our extant martyr acts and histories indicate.⁴² Unlike in earlier centuries, there is no evidence for jeering crowds or popular support for Christians' punishment; rather, the crowds seem to have found the policies harsh and unnecessary (cf. Eus. *Mart. Pal.* 9.3; Athan. *Hist. Ar.* 64).⁴³ Drake suggests the persecution failed because Christians won the sympathy of a large mass of moderate pagans, to whom the persecution seemed egregiously unjust.⁴⁴

The End of Persecution

On his deathbed, Galerius granted Christians the right to worship as they wished (Lact. *DMP.* 34.4-5). Galerius attributed the change to his clemency and did not retract the persecution's theology. Drake reads the edict as an admission that coercion could not achieve religious consensus.⁴⁵ However, Maximinus Daia revived anti-Christian policies in his provinces, partly in response to civic petitions. The stories of Constantine's profession of a dramatic conversion to Christianity, capture of Rome, and grant of religious freedom are well-known.⁴⁶ Unlike Galerius, Constantine and Licinius restored churches' property at public expense and gave free exercise of religion to all, so *quicquid divinitatis* dwells in heaven might favour the empire (48.2). Daia professed compliance with the edict and was later defeated by Licinius. Constantine and Licinius eventually fell out because, Constantine claimed, Licinius resumed persecuting Christians (Eus. *HE.* 10.8.10; *VC.* 1.52-4).⁴⁷ With Constantine's conquest of the eastern empire in 324 and sponsorship of the Council of Nicaea in 325, the era of persecution was seen to be ended.

42 Shin, *The Great Persecution*, 190.

43 Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 21; De Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution*, 67–68.

44 Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 150–52.

45 Drake, 'Lessons from Diocletian's Persecution', 55.

46 See Averil Cameron, 'Constantine and the "Peace of the Church"', in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Volume 1*, ed. Frances M. Young and Margaret Mary Mitchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 541–43; Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 178–91, 198–204.

47 For details see Clarke, 'Third-Century Christianity', 664–65.

Ideology of the Persecution

Sources

The ideology of the persecution can be reconstructed from various contemporary sources. This section surveys those sources, roughly in order of their reliability. We also consider the question of whether Porphyry is Lactantius' unnamed philosopher. We are fortunate to possess documents which record the persecution's official justification, the emperors' motivations in their own words. These documents are preserved by Christian critics, but where we can verify them they have been accurately transmitted, and scholars conclude the Christian historians recorded documents reliably.⁴⁸ The tetrarchs' ideology can be discerned more broadly through other edicts, the imperial panegyrics, and coins and other iconographic representations.

There are two anti-Christian polemicists from this period whose writings are partially extant. Porphyry was the more significant; his *Against the Christians* was banned twice and prompted several Christian responses, indicating the threat it posed.⁴⁹ Most scholars agree he was at least indirectly involved in fomenting the Great Persecution, as Christians felt most compelled to respond to his polemic.⁵⁰ However, scholars who identify Porphyry with the unnamed philosopher do so based on two questionable assumptions: Porphyry wanted to incorporate civic rituals such as blood sacrifices into his philosophical understanding of worship, and he was politically active. The first point is argued by Michael Bland Simmons, who reads Porphyry's fully-extant works in the light of de-contextualised fragments, and assumes Porphyry agrees with the

48 Corcoran, *Tetrarchs*, 149–51, 186–87; Timothy D. Barnes, 'Eusebius of Caesarea', *The Expository Times* 121, no. 1 (2009): 7; Aaron P. Johnson, *Eusebius* (London: IBTauris, 2013), 93–95.

49 John Granger Cook, 'Porphyry's Attempted Demolition of Christian Allegory', *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 2, no. 1 (2008): 5–6.

50 Jeremy M. Schott, 'Porphyry on Christians and Others: "Barbarian Wisdom," Identity Politics, and Anti-Christian Polemics on the Eve of the Great Persecution', *J ECS* 13, no. 3 (2005): 278; Andrew Smith, 'Philosophical Objections to Christianity on the Eve of the Great Persecution', in *The Great Persecution*, ed. Vincent Twomey and Mark Humphries (Dublin: Four Courts, 2009), 48.

surface meaning of oracles he cites.⁵¹ However, Porphyry thinks oracles must be interpreted philosophically; otherwise, they are unreliable sources of truth.⁵² Porphyry's extant works are consistent hostile towards animal sacrifices: they are unjust, leading towards the body and away from virtue and the divine (*Abst.* 2.37.5-40.5, 2.42.3). It is pious to honour the gods κατὰ τὰ πάτρια, but for Porphyry this means not sacrifices or offerings, but that one's mind imitates and is united to the divine (*Marc.* 18-19). He is pessimistic that ordinary people could please the divine, since this requires virtue, wisdom, and accurate theological knowledge (*Abst.* 2.35.1; 2.60.3-4; 2.61.5; *Marc.* 11, 16, 23).

Porphyry's political views reflect this elitism. O'Meara claims Neoplatonists were more politically active than is usually acknowledged.⁵³ However, his chapter on politics does not mention Porphyry, and we lack evidence he shared his successors' political activity. Plotinus' legislative activity is only theoretical (*Porph. Vit. Plot.* 12), and the brevity of Porphyry's comments about society, citizenship, and the political virtues indicate their unimportance for him. He sees cities as the realm of evil daimonic activity, which lead one away from the divine (*Abst.* 1.36.2-37.4; 2.40.3; 2.43.2-3; *Marc.* 15). He disparages civic religion (*Marc.* 23; cf. Smith 245F), and is defensive of his own religious non-conformity (*Abst.* 2.33.1).⁵⁴ If we are correct in doubting the attribution of the prologue to Eusebius' *Praeparatio Evangelica* to Porphyry, then there is no evidence Porphyry called for persecution of Christians. Rather, the evidence depicts a Porphyry who discouraged philosophers from participating in politics.

51 Michael Bland Simmons, *Universal Salvation in Late Antiquity: Porphyry of Tyre and the Pagan-Christian Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

52 Edwards, *Religions*, 207; Aaron P. Johnson, *Religion and Identity in Porphyry of Tyre: The Limits of Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 116-17.

53 Dominic J. O'Meara, *Platonopolis: Platonic Political Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2003).

54 Johnson, *Religion and Identity*, 124.

Given this picture, could Porphyry have been Lactantius' unnamed philosopher? Lactantius says this philosopher hid greed and lust under ascetic apparel, and used his wealth to influence judicial verdicts. He wrote three books against Christianity, to convince people to worship the gods who secure the empire, to protect the innocent from deception, and to persuade Christians to stop suffering pointless tortures (*DI.* 5.2.3-7, 5.4.1). Barnes thinks that Lactantius' description of the philosopher's immorality is incompatible with Porphyry's asceticism.⁵⁵ However, the description is clearly polemical. Furthermore, scholars see hints that Porphyry participated in Diocletian's conferences (a): he travelled soon after his marriage because of the 'needs of the Greeks' and divine encouragement (*Marc.* 4).

Digeser adds several arguments. (b) Both Porphyry and Lactantius use the metaphor of paths to God and (c) cite oracles as authoritative, even including two identical oracles. Furthermore, (d) both authors discuss whether Christians should be tolerated, while Celsus and Hierocles do not.⁵⁶ Schott sees further similarities: (e) like the imperial rhetoric, Porphyry emphasises ancestral traditions' value; (f) Lactantius' philosopher called himself *antistes philosophiae*, and Porphyry says the only true priest is the σοφός (*Marc.* 16). (g) Both Lactantius and Porphyry describe Jesus as a sage but not a god. (h) Lactantius' unnamed philosopher justifies persecution in similar terms to the prologue of Eusebius' *Praeparatio Evangelica*, which Schott takes to be Porphyrian.⁵⁷

These arguments vary in strength. One's entire interpretation of Porphyry can turn on accepting (h), since no other Porphyrian fragment calls for persecution. I think the

55 Timothy D. Barnes, 'Porphyry "Against the Christians": Date and the Attribution of Fragments', *JTS* 24 (1973): 438–39.

56 Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, 'Lactantius, Porphyry and the Debate over Religious Toleration', *JRS*, 1998, 139–43.

57 Jeremy M. Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 179–85.

fragment is more likely Eusebius' compilation, the maximal case against Christians, since he usually identifies his sources. Eusebius quotes Porphyry extensively, but tellingly does not attribute similar ideas to him later in *Praeparatio Evangelica*.⁵⁸ Schott defended (e) using Eusebius' introduction and Porphyry's exhortation to worship κατὰ τὰ πατρία in *Marc.* 18, a phrase Porphyry immediately redefines to refer to philosophical practices, as we saw. In fact, Porphyry claims his own worship is older than his society's customs, delegitimising those institutions (*Abst.* 2.5.1-2; 2.12.2; 4.2.1-9). A common context and intellectual culture explains several other similarities. Any religious work of the time would have needed to discuss toleration of Christianity (d), as anti-Christian sentiment was increasing after a period of peace. Hierocles may have mentioned it in non-extant parts of his work. The paths to heaven motif (b) is a philosophical commonplace.⁵⁹ An increased interest in oracles in the third century may explain (c). Lactantius' citation of two oracles from *Philosophy from Oracles* is a stronger argument, though our authors could have found them independently in compilations of oracles. If Lactantius sought to respond to *Philosophy from Oracles*, we would expect a much fuller response to hostile oracles.⁶⁰ That Lactantius asserts Jesus' deity (g) is a standard feature of Christian apologetic. Below I argue that Lactantius' Christology is higher than Schott realises, eliminating the overlap with Porphyry.

58 Ariane Magny, *Porphyry in Fragments: Reception of an Anti-Christian Text in Late Antiquity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 40; Matthias Becker, ed., *Contra Christianos: neue Sammlung der Fragmente, Testimonien und Dubia* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 458–59; Aaron P. Johnson, 'Rethinking the Authenticity of Porphyry, Contra Christianos, Fr. 1', *Studia Patristica* 46 (2010): 53–58. For the opposite case, see Adolf von Harnack, ed., *Porphyrius 'Gegen die Christen,' 15 Bücher: Zeugnisse, Fragmente und Referate* (Berlin: Verlag der Königl. Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1916), 45; Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, 'Ein Bruchstück Aus Der Schrift Des Porphyrius Gegen Die Christen.', *Zeitschrift Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft Und Die Kunde Der Älteren Kirche* 1, no. 1 (1900): 101–5; Timothy D. Barnes, 'Scholarship or Propaganda? Porphyry Against the Christians and Its Historical Setting', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 39, no. 1 (1994): 65; Robert L. Wilken, 'Pagan Criticism of Christianity: Greek Religion and Christian Faith', in *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition*, ed. Robert M. Grant, William R. Schoedel, and Robert L. Wilken (Paris: Beauchesne, 1979), 127–29; Digeser, 'Religious Toleration', 138.

59 See Mark J. Edwards, 'Porphyry and the Christians', in *Studies on Porphyry*, ed. George E. Karamanolis and Anne D. R. Sheppard (London: Institute of Classical Studies, University of London, 2007), 120.

60 Edwards, 120.

Lactantius' describing the philosopher *antistes philosophiae* (f), language Porphyry also used, is a significant commonality, but Marx-Wolf has shown this was a common rhetorical strategy at that time.⁶¹ The phrase 'the needs of the Greeks' (a) could refer to imperial business, and 'Greeks' did have a religious connotation.⁶² But without other information it seems unwise to hang an entire case upon the phrase.

Furthermore, Lactantius is unaware of some of Porphyry's famous criticisms, such as his redating *Daniel* to the Maccabean period to undermine proof from prophecy arguments (Porph. Beck. 23T-37F; cf. *DI*. 4.12.12-19; 4.21.1). Lactantius' response to paganism does not significantly depend on Neoplatonism. Instead of responding to Porphyrian motifs, Lactantius discusses Roman questions using Roman authorities.⁶³

Perhaps the strongest argument for Porphyry's being the unnamed philosopher is his prominence in Christian apologetic. If Porphyry is not the unnamed philosopher, we must explain how Lactantius' polemicist has otherwise disappeared from the historical record. However, outside of Christian writings Hierocles is similarly obscure.⁶⁴ Porphyry was his era's most prominent philosopher, making his fame, and infamy, unsurprising. Lactantius seems to describe his philosopher as less significant, jumping on the bandwagon to make his name (*DI*. 5.2.10-11). He produced his three books not during Diocletian's winter *consilium*, as is often supposed, but afterwards when the persecution began (*eodem tempore Dei templum everteretur, duo extiterunt ibidem...*, 5.2.2). Diocletian invited not philosophers, but *iudices pauci et pauci militares* to the *consilium* (*DMP*. 11.6). This may be mere polemic, of course. But it seems implausible that Lactantius could have presented the era's greatest philosopher, at the close of his career, as needing imperial recognition. If Lactantius' description is accurate, the

61 Heidi Marx-Wolf, 'High Priests of the Highest God: Third-Century Platonists as Ritual Experts', *J ECS* 18, no. 4 (2010): 481–513.

62 Smith, 'Philosophical Objections to Christianity on the Eve of the Great Persecution', 34.

63 Colot, *Lactance*, 89–95.

64 *PLRE* 1.432.

philosopher may well have proved historically inconsequential, repeating others' arguments, possibly influencing his contemporaries, but having no further impact. He is significant for Lactantius not because of his prominence, but because Lactantius heard him and felt compelled to respond. I think it likely that Porphyry's arguments were adopted by the persecutors. However, the evidence does not allow us to conclude confidently that Porphyry is Lactantius' unnamed philosopher.

Porphyry's anti-Christian writing is preserved only by his opponents, and discerning Porphyry's voice amidst the layers of criticism and recontextualisation is complex.⁶⁵ I have used a fairly minimalist approach which prioritises fragments which are attributed to Porphyry,⁶⁶ and the authors who wrote closer to his time.⁶⁷ I do not assume that Porphyry agrees with every oracle he cites in *Philosophy from Oracles*, since they are often preserved without Porphyry's interpretive comments.⁶⁸ I make no assumptions about the dating of Porphyry's works, except the philosopher died c. 305, so his works were completed when Lactantius began the *Institutes*.⁶⁹ Given my doubt that Porphyry is Lactantius' unnamed philosopher, my argument does not depend on Lactantius having read any of Porphyry's works, but I do assume that his criticisms would have permeated society, and that Lactantius could have heard the arguments that influenced the emperors.

65 For some significant works in the history of identifying fragments of *Contra Christianos*, see Harnack, *Porphyrius 'Gegen die Christen'*; Barnes, 'Porphyry "Against the Christians"'; Barnes, 'Scholarship or Propaganda?'; Magny, *Porphyry in Fragments*; Becker, *Contra Christianos*. For critical issues surrounding *Against the Christians*, see also Edwards, 'Porphyry and the Christians'.

66 Other fragments may record ideas which Porphyry espoused, since anti-Christian polemic recycled arguments from generation to generation. Andrew Smith, 'Porphyry and His School', in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 330.

67 See Magny, *Porphyry in Fragments*; Gillian Clark, 'Augustine's Porphyry and the Universal Way of Salvation', in *Studies on Porphyry*, ed. George E. Karamanolis and Anne D. R. Sheppard (London: Institute of Classical Studies, University of London, 2007), 127–40.

68 Following Johnson, *Religion and Identity*, 130–31.

69 Smith, 'Porphyry and His School', 326.

We have already encountered Sossianus Hierocles, who instigated the persecution through writing and judicial action (*DI*. 5.2.12-13). He wrote an anti-Christian treatise called *Philalēthēs* or *Philalēthēs Logos*.⁷⁰ Its contents are attested only by Lactantius and by a *Contra Hieroclem* attributed to Eusebius.⁷¹ *Philalēthēs* adduced contradictions in the Bible to demonstrate its falsity (5.2.12-15; Ps-Eus. *Hier.* 1.1-2). *Contra Hieroclem* responds to the comparison of Jesus with Apollonius of Tyana, which its author considered Hierocles' most original argument, and preserves little else of Hierocles' polemic. Pseudo-Eusebius accused Hierocles of plagiarising Celsus, and believed that Origen's *Contra Celsum* addressed the rest of Hierocles' claims sufficiently (*Hier.* 1.1-2). This indicates that Celsus' arguments were recycled during the Great Persecution, making him another witness to its ideology.⁷² Celsus wrote *Alēthēs Logos* around 175-80, an unprecedentedly extensive criticism of Christianity based on first-hand knowledge of Christian beliefs.⁷³ Origen quotes from Celsus at length, and scholars think Origen preserves the majority of Celsus' argument.⁷⁴

70 Barnes dates the work before 303, and Digeser to 299-303. Barnes, 'Sossianus Hierocles and the Antecedents of the "Great Persecution"', 242-45; Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, 'Porphyry, Julian, or Hierokles? The Anonymous Hellene in Makarios Magnes Apokritikos', *JTS* 53, no. 2 (2002): 488-89. Lactantius writes that Hierocles wrote the work after he had been a 'prime mover in the persecution' (*DI*. 5.2.12), which Johnson interprets as meaning after the persecution began, and dates the work after 304. Aaron P. Johnson, 'Against Hierocles', *JTS* 64, no. 2 (2013): 583 n. 44. However it is plausible that Hierocles agitated for a persecution for some time before it occurred, and that he wrote after becoming known as a proponent of persecution, but before the persecution itself began. Hence Digeser's range of 299-303 fits the evidence well. For further discussion of the work's name and composition, see Tomas Hägg, 'Hierocles the Lover of Truth and Eusebius the Sophist', *Symbolae Osloenses* 67, no. 1 (1992): 140-43.

71 Hägg shows inconsistencies between *Contra Hieroclem* and Eusebius' other works that seem to indicate they cannot be by the same author. Hägg, 'Hierocles the Lover of Truth and Eusebius the Sophist', 145-49. Barnes, 'Scholarship or Propaganda?', 60; and Johnson, 'Against Hierocles', 584-85 accept his conclusion. Consequently, this work will refer to the author as pseudo-Eusebius.

72 Richard Goulet, trans., *Le Monogénès* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2003), 1:112. Though cf. C. P. Jones, ed., *Apollonius of Tyana*, LCL 458 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 150, who says that Hierocles' biblical criticisms were taken from Porphyry.

73 Michael Frede, 'Origen's Treatise Against Celsus', in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire*, ed. Martin Goodman et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 132; Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), xxviii; Gerard Watson, 'Celsus and the Philosophical Opposition to Christianity', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (1992): 166. See Burke on Celsus' knowledge of the Hebrew Bible. Gary T. Burke, 'Celsus and the Old Testament', *Vetus Testamentum* 36, no. 2 (1986): 241-45.

74 John M. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists: A Study of Platonism, 80 B.C. to A.D. 220* (London: Duckworth, 1977), 400.

There are other authors who, though not Lactantius' immediate contemporaries, still illuminate the anti-Christian rhetoric of his era. Iamblichus of Chalcis was Lactantius' later contemporary, and I have included him because he indicates what a fourth-century philosopher could have said about public religion.

Finally, we can discern something of the charges that the Christians faced from the writings of the Christians themselves. The key authors are Lactantius, Eusebius, and Arnobius. Eusebius introduces his *Praeparatio Evangelica*, a work roughly contemporaneous with Lactantius,⁷⁵ with a series of criticisms of Christianity which are highly relevant to this study (Eus. *PE*. 1.2.1-5). It is sometimes regarded as a Porphyrian fragment, but the passage does not name him and purports to describe the common criticisms of many. This wide array of sources means we can be reasonably confident in our reconstruction of the era's ideology.

Tetrarchic Documents

Galerius

Several extant documents record the persecutors' motivations in their own words. Galerius' deathbed edict of 311, which repealed the persecution, also explained why he originally felt that the policy was warranted.⁷⁶ Galerius appealed to the need to uphold *leges veteres, publica disciplina Romanorum*, and to preserve *rei publicae ... commoda atque utilitas*. He accused Christians of *parentum suorum reliquerant sectam*, of abandoning the *veterum instituta* which perhaps their own parents had laid down, and of establishing *leges* for themselves. Christians exchanged *bonae mentes* for *voluntas* and *stultitia* and formed secret societies from disparate peoples. The persecutory edicts

75 Édouard Des Places and Jean Sirinelli, eds., *La préparation évangélique: introduction générale, livre I*, SC 206 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1974), 8–14.

76 Lactantius records the edict in its original language (*DMP*. 34.1-5), and Eusebius gives a version in Greek (*HE*. 8.17.5-10). Corcoran, *Tetrarchs*, 186–87.

aimed to return these people to *veterum instituta* and *diis ... cultum ac religio debita* (Lact. *DMP.* 34.1-4).

In rescinding the persecution, Galerius does not grant that Christianity has a right to exist but attributes the retraction to his *clementia*. While proscribed, Christians were offering no worship for the empire's *salus*, which Galerius perceives as worse than their original obstinacy. Christians' renewed permission to worship carries two conditions: that they do nothing *contra disciplinam*, and that they pray to their God for the *salus* of the state (34.3-5).

This document contains much of the emperors' ideology. The repetition of *vetus*, *instituta*, and *leges* indicate the need to preserve imperial customs, legitimated by their antiquity, and show that abandoning these customs entailed rejecting one's parents and ancestors, a lack of filial piety.⁷⁷ Christians forsake the rational traditions established by wiser forebears for foolishness and their own stubborn willfulness. Galerius criticises no doctrine, but rather practice.⁷⁸ By mixing *varii populi*, Christians produced a polluted, miscegenous religion, since religious practices were tied to ethnic customs. And Christianity's secrecy was associated with sedition, since cults needed imperial permission.⁷⁹ The goal of these *leges et instituta* was the *utilitas, commoda* and *salus rei publicae*. Such customs had a long-demonstrated ability to secure the divine favour which upheld the empire. The continuity of custom would ensure continuity in the state's constitution and character; worship was the gods' due (*religio debita*), and their

77 Hermogenian, a contemporary jurist, wrote that alongside the laws, people keep customs of long antiquity as equally important to the laws, a tacit part of their citizenship obligations (Just. *Dig.* 1.1.3.35).

78 MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 19.

79 Garth Fowden, 'The Individual and the Gods', in *The Cambridge Ancient History: Volume 12: The Crisis of Empire, AD 193-337*, ed. Alan Bowman, Averil Cameron, and Peter Garnsey, 2nd ed., vol. 12 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 540, 551; Steven J. Larson, 'The Trouble with Religious Tolerance in Roman Antiquity', in *Religious Competition in the Third Century CE*, ed. Jordan Rosenblum, Lily C. Vuong, and Nathaniel DesRosiers (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 58.

favour would ensure the empire's *salus*.⁸⁰ This would benefit Christians; persecutory violence is depicted as paternalistic, therapeutic, and compassionate.⁸¹

This edict does not use the words *pietas* or *iustitia*, but those ideas are invoked. It seeks to reestablish Roman traditions of piety, upon which imperial success and security depended.⁸² Humans owe the gods worship, and by worshipping properly, citizens fulfill their obligations to ancestors and the state. The edict thus accuses Christians of failing to be pious in each of that virtue's traditional domains.⁸³ Some classical conceptions of justice included rendering to the gods their due, and Galerius also invokes lawfulness, following reason, and preserving the common good, which were important philosophical conceptions of justice.

Maximinus Daia

Eusebius also records Maximinus Daia's rescript of 312, which encouraged cities to continue persecuting Christians after Galerius' edict terminated the practice (Eus. *HE*. 9.7.3-14).⁸⁴ The rescript accuses Christians of ἀσέβεια, μίασμα and cursed folly (ἐπάρατος ματαιότης) and credits traditional worshippers who wanted to expel Christians from their cities with piety. The text supports persecution in order to protect divine providence, and ensure that Zeus keeps the cities safe from destruction. The empire remains peaceful and fruitful only due to divine benevolence, which is maintained through traditional sacrifices; Christians' folly and error threaten it (9.7.7-12).⁸⁵ This rescript does not invoke the antiquity of traditional religious customs. Its

80 Humphries, 'The Mind of the Persecutors', 27.

81 Gaddis, *No Crime*, 7–8.

82 Humphries, 'The Mind of the Persecutors', 20.

83 Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 1:222.

84 This letter is partially preserved in two Latin inscriptions, indicating Daia sent near-identical letters to several cities who pleaded for the persecution's continuation. Corcoran, *Tetrarchs*, 149–51.

85 In the following chapter, Eusebius recounts how this policy caused the empire to be gripped with famine, disease, and war (Eus. *HE*. 9.8.1-13).

main concern is showing the gods the honour which will prompt their favour, ensuring the material and military flourishing of the empire.

Manichees

Two other imperial pronouncements illuminate the tetrarchs' attitude towards religion and society. The rescript on the Manichees (*Coll.* 15.3.1-8) links Roman religion to the gods' providence, which has ordered the world so that *boni et egregii viri et sapientissimi* have, over many ages, established and preserved practices which are *bona et vera*.⁸⁶ It is *non fas* and *maximum crimen* to revise the ancients' decrees, and a new *religio* may not criticise an old one. Traditional religion was granted by the gods, and the Manichees replace it *pro arbitrio suo pravo* (§§2-3). The emperors call Manichaeism *inanissima ac turpissima doctrinae superstitio*, characterised by *pertinacia* and *pravitas*. *Superstitio* implied not false doctrine but excessive or irregular practice, which destabilised the official and traditional honours which secured the *pax deorum*.⁸⁷ Pliny was typical of Romans in regarding Christianity a *superstitio* (*Ep.* 10.96). The letter on the Manichees emphasises the sect's foreign origins and expresses fear that Persian vice might corrupt Roman virtue.⁸⁸ The rescript commands the burning of Manichaean scriptures, confiscation of property, and the execution of recalcitrant followers. Any *honorati aut cuiuslibet dignitatis vel maiores personae* within the sect were sentenced to the mines and their estates confiscated. These punishments were given so that the sect might be entirely expunged from the empire (*ut igitur stirpitus amputari lues haec nequitiae de saeculo beatissimo nostro possit*, *Coll.* 15.3.7-8). Christians were susceptible to the same charges as the Manichees and experienced

86 Corcoran, *Tetrarchs*, 135–36.

87 Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 1:216.

88 Corcoran, *Tetrarchs*, 136.

similar penalties.⁸⁹ Both sects were regarded as presuming to overturn centuries of religious expertise and disrupt society by doing so.

Marriages Edict

A 295 edict on close-kin marriages extends this logic: the gods favour the empire not only for its religious virtue but for its social virtue. This edict extends the Roman definition of marriage throughout the empire, prohibiting other cultures' customs which Romans regarded as incestuous.⁹⁰ The edict closely associates religious and moral purity. The gods will be *faventes atque placati* towards Rome if they see that *cunctos sub imperio nostro agentes piam religiosamque et quietam et castam in omnibus mere colere vitam* (Coll. 6.4.1). All people must uphold Roman standards of virtue if the gods are to bless them, and the gods hold the emperors responsible for their subjects' moral actions. Marriages conducted *religiose atque legitime*, according to *disciplina iuris veteris* are pure and honourable; it pleases the emperors' *pietas* that their subjects show *pia ac religiosa consanguinitati debita caritas* (6.4.2). Rome became great because of its religious scrupulousness, since its laws enjoined *religio sapiens pudorisque observatio* (6.4.6). The antiquity, sanctity, and moral purity of Roman laws are inseparable; following the law inculcates virtue and pleases the gods.⁹¹ Familial duty is expressed in religious language and is understood as a religious obligation. The gods require not only religious piety but also familial and political piety; though piety has three domains, it is one virtue. The tetrarchs issued this edict before persecuting Christians, and yet its close association of divine protection with universal adherence to Roman law and morality paved the way for universal enforcement of Roman religion.⁹²

89 Clarke, 'Third-Century Christianity', 648.

90 Before the *Constitutio Antoniana* these regions used their local laws; Roman law was applied gradually. Judith Evans Grubbs, *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook on Marriage, Divorce and Widowhood* (London: Routledge, 2002), 140–41.

91 John Noël Dillon, *The Justice of Constantine: Law, Communication, and Control* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 106.

92 Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 20.

Prices Edict

The edict on prices describes the tetrarchs' duty as keeping the empire *quies* through just laws and military victory.⁹³ *Avaritia* is the enemy of that justice and peace. This edict also attributes the empire's flourishing to divine favour, which depends upon the maintenance of justice, in this case by checking greed and rampant inflation.⁹⁴ Piety towards the gods, moral behaviour, and the common good were firmly linked in tetrarchic political reasoning.

More generally, the rescript system allowed rectification to those for whom justice was inaccessible through the normal judicial system. It also allowed rulers to depict themselves as dispensers and defenders of justice, who were concerned for the needs of their vulnerable subjects.⁹⁵ Tetrarchic rescripts generally use *iustus* to mean fair or lawful. They show an increased use of *iustus* language in the decade prior to the persecution, and begin to use *iustitia* to describe an ideal of fairness to which legal process should conform (*CJ.* 3.28.23; 7.16.40; 7.62.6).⁹⁶

In the tetrarchs' minds, Christian refusal to sacrifice led to impiety, lawlessness, and rejecting ancestral customs. This was no legitimate difference of religious opinion. Christians were thought to undermine the state by disrupting the divination through which the government obtained divine guidance, threatening the divine providence which protected the state, rejecting the law and established religious practice of the *maiores*, and withdrawing from society and forming their own, possibly subversive or seditious, societies. The government responded to this threat by indicating that

93 For the text, see Marta Giaccherio, ed., *Edictum Diocletiani et collegarum de pretiis rerum venalium*, 8 (Genova: Istituto di storia antica e scienze ausiliarie, 1974), 1:134-7.

94 Humphries, 'The Mind of the Persecutors', 21.

95 Serena Connolly, *Lives behind the Laws: The World of the Codex Hermogenianus* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 138-51.

96 Extant rescripts from 294-304 use *iustus* 31 times and *iustitia* five times; rescripts from 283-293 use the terms five times and once respectively. The uses of *pietas* and *clementia* also increase in the same period, perhaps indicating an overall increase in ethical language in imperial self-presentation. See Tony Honoré, 'Palingenesis of Latin Private Rescripts. IV. AD 283 - 292', accessed 28 April 2021, <http://iuscivile.com/materials/honore/rescripta/rscript4.shtml> and related pages.

Christians had forfeited their privileges as citizens. At least under the tetrarchy, to be a pious citizen one must sacrifice.

Philosophers and Anti-Christian Writers

Impious

A similar picture emerges from the writings of contemporary philosophers. The most fundamental charge levelled against Christians during the persecution was that they were impious. Eusebius begins his apologetic work *Praeparatio Evangelica* by listing questions τις ἐλλήνων might ask Christians. The challenge combines racial, social and religious criticisms, but centres around the allegation that Christians are δυσσεβεῖς, ἀσεβεῖς and ἄθεοι (Eus. *PE.* 1.2.2-3).⁹⁷ Hierocles wrote to glorify *summus deus* (*DI.* 5.3.25), seeing himself as defending the divine from the insult of Christian non-worship.⁹⁸ Iamblichus does not mention Christians explicitly, but criticises atheists, often taken to be Christians, who cannot discern religious truth from error (Iamb. *Myst.* 3.31.179-80).⁹⁹ Improper worship causes divine hostility, and the sacrilegious fight against the gods (3.31.178). Celsus criticises Christians for failing to worship true divinities and for exalting humanity to the rank beneath God (Orig. *Cels.* 4.23, 28).¹⁰⁰ Despite different divine ontologies, these authors agree that Christians fail to give the gods their due.

Porphyry thought Christian doctrines were impious: Christians are unable to please the divine because their impiety corrupts their ability to reason (Porph. Smith 343F). Christians privilege blind faith over reason, and as νοῦς is a divine hypostasis,

97 Corke-Webster reads Eusebius' *Church History* as claiming Christians possess the virtues Greek philosophy and Roman society praised, including piety. Corke-Webster, *Eusebius and Empire*, 76–77.

98 Hierocles may have been a Neoplatonist like Porphyry, or henotheistic like Celsus.

99 Cf. Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, ed. Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershbell (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 201 n. 246.

100 Silke-Petra Bergjan, 'Celsus the Epicurean: The Interpretation of an Argument in Origen, Contra Celsum', *HTR* 94, no. 2 (2001): 188–89; Henry Chadwick, 'Origen, Celsus and the Stoa', *JTS* 48 (1947): 38.

their folly is hostility towards the divine.¹⁰¹ Christians are *indocti et impiae naturae*, who cannot receive *dona* from the gods. They reject the gods to worship forbidden *daimones*,¹⁰² rather than worshipping through practising justice, purity and other virtues, and making life a prayer to God through imitation and enquiry: *Inquisitio purgat; imitatio deificat* (Smith 346F).¹⁰³ Porphyry attributes Christian miracles to *magicae artes*, linked to evil *daimones* (Beck. 70F), and objected to Christians using miracles rather than rational arguments to persuade people.¹⁰⁴ In Porphyry's eyes, Christians fail to worship the divine appropriately through philosophical enquiry or virtue and instead honour *daimones*, cutting themselves off from divine benefits.¹⁰⁵ Both Porphyry and Lactantius claim that their tradition's worship is truly intellectual and virtuous, but disagree over worship's appropriate object.

Threaten Divine benefits

Christians' failure to worship the gods had material consequences. Rome attributed her greatness to her religious scrupulousness. Disruption to that religion could compromise her security, threatening military failures, natural disasters, and famines.¹⁰⁶ Porphyry blames plagues on Christian worship, which incited the gods to depart and withhold their assistance from the city, allowing epidemics to flourish (οὐδεμιᾶς δημοσίας τις θεῶν ὠφελείας, Beck. 65F). One group's impiety causes the gods to forsake the whole city, carrying public and civic consequences.¹⁰⁷ Unlike Celsus, who only predicted divine punishment towards the Christians,¹⁰⁸ Porphyry writes that

101 Helene Whittaker, 'The Purpose of Porphyry's Letter to Marcella', *Symbolae Osloenses* 76, no. 1 (2001): 157–58.

102 When referring to philosophers I transliterate the Greek '*daimon*' to differentiate their concept from the connotations of the English 'demon'. Lactantius uses *daemon* sufficiently similarly to our modern concept that I use 'demon' in his case.

103 Johnson thinks Augustine transmitted this passage faithfully. Johnson, *Religion and Identity*, 134.

104 Becker, *Contra Christianos*, 387.

105 Johnson, *Religion and Identity*, 134.

106 Heck, *Mē Theomachein*, 227.

107 Possibly following Plato's *Laws* Book 10. Becker, *Contra Christianos*, 462.

108 Cf. Orig. *Cels.* 8.35, 68, contra Watson, 'Celsus and the Philosophical Opposition to Christianity', 167.

Christian misconduct threatens the whole community. Iamblichus commended different worship practices, but agreed that right religion was needed to keep the empire safe (Iamb. *Myst.* 3.31.178; 5.6.206; 5.10.210-1). Eusebius records a similar charge. More than being ξένος and νεώτερος, Christians' abandonment of ancestral gods renders them δυσσεβεῖς, ἄθεοι, θεομαχοῦντες, and hostile to their benefactors; it threatens their cities and empire (Eus. *PE.* 1.2.2). According to this logic, Christians were deservedly sanctioned by the emperors. Public rites were essential to uphold imperial order, and Digeser suggests pagan philosophers and priests united in opposing Christian practices which they believed would threaten public worship (cf. Arn. 1.1-2).¹⁰⁹ The emperors asserted that Christian impiety would cause divine disfavour; the philosophers affirmed this belief, and justified it theologically. It is likely that the idea was accepted by all ranks of Roman society. Christians created no mere intellectual disagreement, but a national security risk.

Rejecting Ancestral Customs and Lawlessness

Christians failed to treat the divine piously, but their rejection of traditional religion also showed impiety towards the ancestors who established those customs. The connection between ancestral customs, lawfulness, piety, and rationality can best be seen in the polemic of Celsus. Celsus regarded the Jews as heirs of a legitimate ancestral tradition, whose customs (νόμοι) instantiated the universal and ancient λόγος taught by poets and philosophers (Orig. *Cels.* 1.14).¹¹⁰ Yet this λόγος was expressed differently in different countries because they were governed by different spiritual overseers with differing wishes (5.25, 34). Traditions are judged by their antiquity because ancient peoples were thought to be closer to the gods; antiquity and custom define legitimate

109 Digeser, *Public Piety*, 174–75.

110 Carl Andresen, *Logos und Nomos: die Polemik des Kelsos wider das Christentum* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1955), 108–45.

religious practice (cf. Cic. *Leg.* 2.27).¹¹¹ Consequently, Celsus criticises Christians for appealing to barbarian traditions to legitimise their beliefs but not following those traditions properly (Orig. *Cels.* 1.14-26; 2.1-4; 5.33). Christians take the worst parts of Judaism, their exclusivism and monotheism, separate these from any legitimising national tradition, and add the worship of a recently-crucified man.¹¹² He accuses Jesus of contradicting Moses' laws; Christians are lawless and apostates from Judaism (7.18). Celsus depicts rejecting the universal λόγος for one local instantiation as anti-social as well as foolish.

This charge was repeated during the Great Persecution. Rather than being Greek or barbarian, Christians cut an unprecedented and illegitimate path which mixes the two identities (Eus. *PE.* 1.2.1; cf. Mac. 3.30.1-31.5).¹¹³ They follow impious Jewish customs yet do not even preserve these properly (Eus. *PE.* 1.2.3-4). They pursue τις νεωτερισμός τοῦ βίου, which connotes sedition and subversion, and reject gods who have been long and widely accepted. Like Celsus, Porphyry praises the Jews for upholding their ancestral traditions; Christians reject all traditions to worship forbidden *daimones* (Smith 344F, 346F).¹¹⁴ Porphyry regards Christianity as lawless and barbaric, a characteristic illustrated by the conversion stories of Ammonius and Origen (Beck. 6F).¹¹⁵ These stories illustrate Porphyry's belief that a Hellenistic way of life is superior and opposed to barbarian customs; Christian converts abandon Greek customs or pollute

111 Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 122. Similarly, Arnobius' biggest innovation was to reject antiquity as a criterion for truth. Edwards, *Religions*, 36.

112 Celsus and R. Joseph Hoffmann, *On the True Doctrine: A Discourse against the Christians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 35–36.

113 Becker, *Contra Christianos*, 459.

114 Schott, 'Porphyry on Christians and Others', 311; Johnson, *Religion and Identity*, 273–74.

115 For whether Porphyry and Eusebius describe one or two Origenes and Ammonii, see Mark J. Edwards, 'Ammonius, Teacher of Origen', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 44, no. 02 (1993): 169–81; Ilaria Ramelli, 'Origen, Patristic Philosophy, and Christian Platonism: Re-Thinking the Christianisation of Hellenism', *Vigiliae Christianae* 63, no. 3 (2009): 217–63; Digeser, *Public Piety*, 23–48; Mark J. Edwards, 'One Origen or Two? The Status Quaestionis', *Symbolae Osloenses*, 2015, 1–23.

them with foreign traditions, betraying their upbringing.¹¹⁶ To be a Christian is to be παράνομος, dangerously to disregard the laws.¹¹⁷ And because laws and religious customs ultimately derive from the divine, this is yet more evidence of Christians' irreligiosity.

Anti-social

By critiquing Christianity's apostasy from Judaism, Celsus asserts that Christianity has rebellion in its DNA. Such a cult will produce followers who rebel against Graeco-Roman laws and institutions as they rebelled against Judaism.¹¹⁸ Christianity's critics allege that its founders were anti-social, and would corrupt those who followed them. They see Jesus as a sorcerer and brigand, both charges of seditious behaviour (Ps-Eus. *Hier.* 2.1-2; Lact. *DI.* 5.3.7-9, 16).¹¹⁹ Similarly, the disciples fabricated gospel accounts; they were lowly and uneducated, magicians and swindlers (Beck. 70F; Ps-Eus. *Hier.* 2.2; *DI.* 5.2.17; 5.3.3; cf. Orig. *Cels.* 3.18, 44, 49). While other religions invite the pure, Christians call sinners, the unwise, and children, and exclude the virtuous because they cannot convert anyone truly righteous (3.59, 62, 65; cf. Matt. 9:13). The ancients assumed that a literary education inculcated virtue and that the uneducated were necessarily morally depraved;¹²⁰ Celsus applies this criticism to the disciples and indirectly to all Christians.

116 The charges against Origen can be generalised to apply to all Christians. John Granger Cook, 'Porphyry's *Contra Christianos* and the *crimen nominis Christianorum*', in *Le traité de Porphyre contre les chrétiens*, ed. Sébastien Morlet (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 2011), 246.

117 Contra Aaron P. Johnson, 'Philosophy, Hellenicity, Law: Porphyry on Origen, Again', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 132 (2012): 57–67, the charge of lawlessness indicates disobedience to civil laws. Porphyry uses παράνομος in that sense elsewhere (*Marc.* 14). A social nuance is implied by the discussion of national identities, wrong living instead of wrong teaching, and the use of πολιτεία and βάρβαρον. See Michael Chase, 'Porphyry against the Christians: Critical Notes on a Recent Volume of Studies', *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 8, no. 1 (2014): 98; Schott, 'Porphyry on Christians and Others', 293–95, 309; Cook, 'Porphyry's Attempted Demolition of Christian Allegory', 13.

118 Andresen, *Logos und Nomos*, 223.

119 Magic was deemed to transgress custom, law, and the socio-political hierarchy, and offend the gods. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 99; David Neal Greenwood, 'Celsus, Origen, and Julian on Christian Miracle-Claims', *Heythrop Journal* 57, no. 1 (2016): 100–101.

120 Kaster, *Guardians of Language*, 62, 71.

As a private religion, Christians faced charges of secrecy, which implied rebellion, unapproved religious practices, and acting contrary to the laws (Orig. *Cels.* 1.1-3; 7.62; 8.17).¹²¹ The dual meaning of νόμος as religious custom and imperial legislation shows why Celsus connects religious innovation with sedition (8.49).¹²² One's Christian identity was seen to contradict one's civic identity; Christians declared *Christianus sum* in court where any other Roman would have said *Romanus sum*.¹²³ Christians refused to participate in the public life which ensured the empire's continuation, placing their voluntary religious organisation above the common good.¹²⁴ Hence Christianity privatised religion when Romans believed that the empire's wellbeing depended on religion remaining public, as it bound people to their ancestors, fellow citizens, and emperor.¹²⁵ Furthermore, Christians rejected the theology used to justify imperial power. The tetrarchs legitimised their rule by appealing to divine sponsorship (*Pan. Lat.* X.12.6; XI.3.1-8); in rejecting the deities, Christians denied the legitimacy of the emperors. Celsus grounded government in his henotheistic theology, deriving imperial power from the monarchy of Jupiter (Orig. *Cels.* 8.68; cf. Hom. *Il.* 2.205).¹²⁶ Rejection of Roman deities thus entailed a rejection of Roman imperial power and social structures.

Foolish

The criticisms of Jesus' and the disciples' unscrupulousness go hand in hand with their alleged ignorance. No texts produced by such people could contain universal truth (Porph. Beck. 56T; 86D).¹²⁷ Christianity pursues the material rather than the intellectual

121 In response, Eusebius used letters and succession lists to portray Christian teaching as publicly accessible and unified in time and space. Corke-Webster, *Eusebius and Empire*, 239–40.

122 Andresen, *Logos und Nomos*, 226.

123 Colot, *Lactance*, xxxiii–xxxiv.

124 Celsus and Hoffmann, *On the True Doctrine: A Discourse against the Christians*, 44.

125 Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 124–25.

126 Given Hierocles' alleged similarity to Celsus, he may also have seen political subversion in Christians' heterodox theology.

127 Schott, 'Porphyry on Christians and Others', 303.

realm, and their impiety corrupts their rationality (Porph. Smith 343F).¹²⁸ Porphyry regards Christians as deluded, irrational people who claimed that they had a truer perception of reality than the greatest philosophers (Porph. *Vit. Plot.* 16). The philosophers think Jesus unworthy of worship: Porphyry regards Jesus as a pious man improperly deified (Smith 345F-345aF). Christians are fools for taking the slender evidence of Jesus' miracles, which any magician could replicate, to prove his deity (Ps-Eus. *Hier.* 2.1-2; Lact. *DI.* 5.3.7-9, 16; Orig. *Cels.* 1.68, 71). Celsus asks why Christians are willing to worship one man and not others such as Heracles or Asclepius (Orig. *Cels.* 3.22-43); instead, he thinks Christians worship not God, nor even a *daimon*, but a corpse (7.68).

Among Christianity's critics, Porphyry had an unparalleled knowledge of the Bible; *Contra Christianos* challenged its credibility, rationality, and morality (Porph. Beck. 47F-80T; cf. Orig. *Cels.* 3:41; 5.2-14; 7.12-14). Porphyry introduced two strategies to the pagan polemic against Christianity: he rejected allegorical interpretation of the Bible, making it more vulnerable to charges of inconsistency (Porph. Beck. 6F),¹²⁹ and he used chronography to undermine proof-from-prophecy arguments, undermining Christians' claim that the Bible was miraculously inspired (Beck. 13T; 27T).¹³⁰ Christianity's critics claimed truth could only be discerned philosophically through

128 Michael Bland Simmons, 'Porphyry of Tyre's Biblical Criticism', in *Reading in Christian Communities*, ed. Charles A. Bobertz, David Brakke, and Rowan A. Greer (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 98.

129 Cook, 'Porphyry's Attempted Demolition of Christian Allegory' describes the interpretive techniques to which Porphyry objects in more detail.

130 Magny, *Porphyry in Fragments*, 78-96; W. Boer, 'A Pagan Historian and His Enemies: Porphyry Against the Christians', *Classical Philology* 69 (1974): 199-200. Interest in oracles increased in the third century, which prompted renewed pagan attention to Christian arguments from prophecy. Simmons, *Universal Salvation*, 22; Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, 'Lactantius, Eusebius, and Arnobius: Evidence for the Causes of the Great Persecution', *Studia Patristica* 39 (2006): 36-40. Porphyry was a skilled chronologist, and also argued that an apocalypse of Zoroaster was a forgery. B. Croke, 'Porphyry's Anti-Christian Chronology', *JTS* 34 (1983): 170-76. Late antique philosophers and Christians shared hermeneutical practices, theological ideas, and a non-conformity regarding traditional cult. Their conflict was a competition over who would define truth and virtue, and we should understand Porphyry's critique of Christianity in this light. Jeremy M. Schott, "'Living Like a Christian, but Playing the Greek": Accounts of Apostasy and Conversion in Porphyry and Eusebius', *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1, no. 2 (2008): 258.

investigating the ancient λόγος; such knowledge is inaccessible to the lower classes, who have no right to challenge the elites (cf. Orig. *Cels.* 1.4; 6.19).¹³¹ Ultimately, folly was a religious error: as Neoplatonists regarded νοῦς as a divine hypostasis, Christian folly meant hostility towards the divine.¹³² Christian irrationality testified to their impiety.

Unjust?

We have found several arguments that the Christians failed in their duties of piety towards gods, ancestors, and the state. But was justice, Lactantius' central virtue, also part of the persecutors' charges? The sources concerned with the persecution use justice vocabulary less frequently than the language of piety. However, injustice may be inherent in the charge of impiety. Porphyry regarded piety as the facet of justice directed towards the divine (*Abst.* 3.1.2). The unjust person (ἄδικος) fails in their duty towards gods and ancestors, which makes them ἀνόσιος; and towards other humans, which makes them lawless (παράνομος, *Marc.* 14). These are errors with which fourth-century Christians were charged. Christian failure towards gods, ancestors, and fellow humans would render them unjust in Porphyry's eyes.

Furthermore, Porphyry's conception of justice privileged the rule of reason over the other parts of the soul and required abstinence from bodily desires to assimilate the soul to god (*Sent.* 32; *Abst.* 3.26.10–27.2; *Marc.* 11). Porphyry would have regarded Christians as unjust, because their foolish doctrines showed they lacked wisdom, and perhaps also intemperate, since their religion embraced the material. According to Augustine, Porphyry said that Christians do not worship the divine appropriately, meaning that they do not imitate and learn about the divine nor practise justice and the

131 In response, Eusebius portrayed Christian leaders as intellectuals united within a continuous tradition of orthodox instruction. Corke-Webster, *Eusebius and Empire*, 100–119.

132 Whittaker, 'The Purpose of Porphyry's Letter to Marcella', 157–58; Julia Annas, *Virtue and Law in Plato and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 136–41.

other virtues (Porph. Smith 346F). His conception of justice had a strong component of refraining from harm, and Christians threatened their neighbours with divine displeasure. Though we have no record of Porphyry labelling Christians unjust, he charges Christians with failing at each of justice's requirements.

The rise in frequency of justice language in legal contexts suggests it resonated in Lactantius' day. We may reasonably assume that Christianity's opponents thought that they failed to give the gods their due, though they seem to have preferred *pietas* language for this failing. The prominence of impiety in the literature indicates that it was the more resonant charge.

Conclusion

The charges against Christians in the Great Persecution cohered around the assertion that Christians were impious. Christians had abandoned their ancestral gods to worship forbidden *daimones* according to rituals which did not come from any cultural tradition. Their failure of duty towards the gods, ancestors, and society was understood to be one error. Religiously, this impiety was thought to prompt the gods to remove their providential care from the places where Christians were tolerated. Socially, abandoning traditional religion was a crime against one's ancestors, whose wisdom determined how the gods should be approached. Gentile Christians rejected their own traditions for barbarian ones, and they did not even maintain these properly, but mangled and distorted them according to their new-fangled teaching. This rejection of custom indicated a more general lawlessness; Christians could not be trusted to obey the civic laws by which the *pax Romana* was maintained. This lawlessness also involved folly: all cultures had their own legitimate variations of archaic wisdom or *λόγος*, which Christian innovation discarded. Christians were thought to form secret, subversive

societies, to follow immoral and lawless men, to privatise necessarily-public religion, and to reject the theological justification for imperial rule.

The tetrarchic edicts emphasise *Romanitas* more than the philosophers, who perhaps use keeping ancestral traditions in its place. Undergirding this was a dispute about who could determine religious truth: the philosophers thought this was their prerogative, and wider society gave the role to the *maiores*. Both groups agreed that the recent, barbarian, unscrupulous tradespeople who founded the church had no genuine theological insight. Regarding the rejection of religious traditions as one crime against gods and ancestors indicates that the Greeks were working with a similar concept of piety to the Romans. Our analysis shows how the ancient world understood religion to be inherently social.

However, interestingly, the extant fourth century philosophical sources do not call for Christians to be punished. The most explicit text is Eusebius' prologue in *Praeparatio Evangelica*, a Christian summary of pagan charges, and likely the maximal case against the Christians. No extant fragment of Porphyry calls for religious coercion, though we know from Lactantius that this was Hierocles' literary purpose. The language of justice is much less prominent in these texts, though Porphyry discusses the virtue, and we may assume that it was inherent in piety rhetoric, at least for the philosophers. Nevertheless, it appears that *pietas* was more culturally resonant in the discourse surrounding religious persecution. As one of the cardinal virtues, justice was never unimportant, and was part of the emperors' broader self-presentation, but it was less common in religious contexts. Given this background, our task will be to show why Lactantius made justice so central to his response to this religious conflict.

Chapter 2: Justice in Lactantius’ Sources

Before we analyse Lactantius’ conception of justice, we will survey the conceptions of justice in the sources available to him. Doing so will enable us to analyse which sources he draws upon and how he modifies them. This chapter uncovers a set of categories by which we can analyse the different justice motifs Lactantius uses, which gives a framework for analysing Lactantius’ justice concept with greater precision than has previously been attempted. This chapter surveys a broad array of sources, of varying degrees of importance for Lactantius’ justice conception, though more space is given to his most significant sources: Cicero, biblical and Christian sources, and the Hermetica.

Classical Sources

Plato and Platonists

Plato’s description of justice is well-trodden territory.¹ Plato grounds law and justice in divine Reason, which makes them universal and natural.² In the *Republic*, Plato ultimately defines justice as correct ordering according to function, whereby each part of the soul or city fulfills its role for the common good (*Rep.* 429a-433e). Justice is when reason, the highest good, regulates souls and states and moderates their passions (441a-444c; 586e-587a; *Laws* 863e-864a). Since justice is the healthy functioning of the soul, injustice is undesirable despite the external gain it might bring (*Rep.* 445ab; 589d-

1 See e.g. M.F. Burnyeat, ‘Justice Writ Large and Small in Republic 4’, in *Politeia in Greek and Roman Philosophy*, ed. Melissa Lane and Verity Harte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 212–30; Aryeh Kosman, ‘Justice and Virtue: The Republic’s Inquiry into Proper Difference’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato’s Republic*, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 116–37; Richard Kraut, ‘The Defense of Justice in Plato’s Republic’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 311–37.

2 This anticipates the Stoics’ natural law, though Plato would not have used the name. The Stoics applied natural law to all people, whereas Plato claimed only that cosmic reason was the source of a Greek *polis*’ laws. Annas, *Virtue and Law in Plato and Beyond*, 5, 138.

590a). Justice also entails harmlessness³ and giving each their due according to merit (*Rep.* 331ce; 335bd; 433e; *Laws* 757a-758a). Piety is a subcategory of justice which is expressed towards the divine (*Euth.* 12de).⁴ In each case, wisdom governs how these other components of justice are employed, showing that rational ordering governs the other understandings of justice.

Cicero, Apuleius, and Porphyry are plausible transmitters of Platonic justice to Lactantius. Neoplatonists such as Porphyry expanded Plato's cardinal virtues into hierarchies, with a different form of each virtue present at each level of the hierarchy. Porphyry's hierarchy was fourfold, with Plato's understanding of the cardinal virtues at the bottom, 'political' level (*Porph. Sent.* 32). In Porphyry's philosophy, justice, piety, abstinence, lawfulness and reason are closely linked. As in Plato, justice's essence means the rational ruling over the irrational, which in Neoplatonism means seeking union with the divine and separation from the body through contemplation, abstinence, and harmlessness (*Abst.* 3.26.9–27.2; cf. *Marc.* 11). However, where Plato saw contemplation of the transcendent as necessary for teaching civic virtue, in Porphyry's extant writings it enables escape from the civic realm (cf. *Abst.* 1.36.2–37.4; 2.43.2-3).⁵ The strand of Plato's thought most relevant to Lactantius' project was the one Plato's followers de-emphasised.

Aristotle

Aristotle's contributions to classical conceptions of justice are also well-known. Aristotelian virtues seek εὐδαιμονία and the mean between the vices of excess and deficiency (*NE.* 2.6-7). He defines justice in two senses: broadly, it is the summation of

3 Harm is defined by the philosopher alone, indicating that Plato subordinated not harming to ordering according to reason (*Rep.* 342de; *Laws* 735c-736a).

4 I take it that although the *Euthyphro* failed to find a definition of piety, it nevertheless uncovered true statements about piety. Cf. Timothy Chappell, 'Euthyphro's "Dilemma"', Socrates' Daimonion and Plato's God', *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 2, no. 1 (21 March 2010): 40.

5 Contra O'Meara, *Platonopolis*, 44. See page Error: Reference source not found.

social virtue (5.1.15-19; *Pol.* 3.7.8), and specifically, the virtue of sharing well and acting lawfully (*NE.* 5.1.8-10; 5.2.4-10). Aristotle distinguishes distributive justice, which seeks a proportional equality according to merit (5.3.6-14), from corrective justice, which employs a universal arithmetic equality (5.2.13).⁶ Aristotle does not ground law metaphysically in nature as Plato does.⁷ He posits ἐπιείκεια to correct deficiencies in how justice is instantiated in law (5.10.4-6). Justice applies only between social equals; it does not involve human actions towards the gods and applies only analogically to children, slaves, and women (5.6.4; *Pol.* 1.5.3-6).⁸ Lactantius does not use Aristotelian categories; I include Aristotle here to show the limits of Lactantian justice.

Cicero

Though Lactantius was motivated to write the *Institutes* by two anti-Christian polemicists in Nicomedia, his primary interlocutor is neither of them, but rather Cicero.⁹ Cicero's conception of justice is central to Lactantius' own understanding of the virtue, and features prominently in the discussion below. Colot rightly emphasises Cicero's continuing importance to the philosophical tradition and Roman ideology; his ideas were prevalent and relevant in Lactantius' day.¹⁰ Ciceronian justice is inseparable from his view of natural law, which he develops in *Laws* Books 1–2.¹¹ Law is not created by

6 Jean Roberts, 'Justice and the Polis', in *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought*, ed. Christopher Rowe and Malcolm Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 353.

7 Annas, *Virtue and Law in Plato and Beyond*, 165.

8 Marco Zingano, 'Natural, Ethical, and Political Justice', in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle's Politics*, ed. Marguerite Deslauriers and Pierre Destrée (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 205–6; Sarah Broadie, 'Aristotelian Piety', *Phronesis* 48, no. 1 (2003): 60; Christopher Bobonich, 'Elitism in Plato and Aristotle', in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Ethics*, ed. Christopher Bobonich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 298–318.

9 For Lactantius' knowledge of Cicero, see Ogilvie, *The Library of Lactantius*, 58–72.

10 Colot, *Lactance*, 88–89.

11 Cicero's account of natural law was clearly influenced by Stoicism, but he retains his Academic predilection for questioning and synthesising the different philosophical schools. Inwood also sees a strong Platonic influence in the account. Brad Inwood, *Reading Seneca: Stoic Philosophy at Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005), 224; Malcolm Schofield, 'Two Stoic Approaches to Justice', in *Justice and Generosity*, ed. Andre Laks and Malcolm Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 192–93. However, Cicero thought scepticism would corrode society if applied to its

communities, but is *aeternum quiddam quod universum mundum regeret imperandi prohibendique sapientia* (Cic. *Leg.* 2.8). Natural law is the commands and prohibitions of divine Reason (2.8-10). This natural law then becomes the standard of justice and injustice (*iuris atque iniuriae regula*) which applies both to gods and humans (1.18-19). ‘Law is seen as universal, operating in the wider cosmos as well as in human society, organizing all spheres of nature, including humans, in a way which orders and directs them.’¹² Humans’ rational capacity is derived from the gods’ rationality, and this sharing of rationality means that humans and gods also share truth and law (*ND.* 2.77-79). This places humans and the divine within the same commonwealth: the universe is the *domicilium* and *patria* of both humans and gods (*Rep.* 1.19, 22-23). Being fellow-citizens, subject to the same law, creates the obligation to uphold the same standard of justice. Furthermore, Cicero describes this bond as akin to consanguinity, establishing a kind of familial piety between humans and the gods (*Leg.* 1.21-25).¹³ Thus, in this account, justice becomes following Reason’s laws about how to live well together and respecting other humans and the gods as fellow citizens of the cosmos.¹⁴

Cicero adduces three forms of what he considers empirical evidence for this universal commonwealth and natural justice. The gods have given humans reason;¹⁵ all cultures have similar principles of how to live well together, which shows the whole human race is knitted together; and there is a natural kindness and sympathy between people (1.32-5). A Ciceronian ethic identifies these dispositions in human nature and then reasons to a moral injunction to express those dispositions fully. Cicero thinks it

institutions. Niall Rudd and J. G. F. Powell, eds., *Cicero: The Republic and the Laws* (Oxford: University Press, 2016), xiv–xv.

12 Annas, *Virtue and Law in Plato and Beyond*, 168.

13 Though this passage does not use *pietas*.

14 Reason must be combined with the natural impulse towards community to arrive at a mature conception of what justice requires. Richard Bett, ‘Did the Stoics Invent Human Rights?’, in *Virtue and Happiness*, ed. Rachana Kamtekar, 2012 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 156–57; Schofield, ‘Two Stoic Approaches to Justice’, 209–11.

15 Along with speech and the ability to communicate (Cic. *Off.* 1.50).

essential that justice is grounded in nature. This undergirds the other virtues: if justice is merely conventional then there is no real goodness, only expediency and craftiness in avoiding punishment. Religion towards the gods, *caritas*, and *pietas* are undermined if justice is merely conventional, because they are no longer the obligations of shared cosmic citizenship (1.40-43). Hence Cicero grounds justice in providential divine governance, which he understands as a mind, reason, or power operative within the world. This universality of law creates the requirement to treat all humans and gods as fellow-citizens, his version of the Stoics' cosmopolitanism.¹⁶ Humans are just when they live according to this rational disposition and follow its dictates. Cicero uses this doctrine to justify Roman law and ethics using religion, though he also justifies Roman institutions by appealing to the wisdom of their founders, a more popular argument.¹⁷ He acknowledges that human states have implemented natural law imperfectly, but he regards the founders of Rome as the best instantiators of natural justice (1.42).

Having surveyed the foundation of Ciceronian justice, we can now unpack the concept itself. Ciceronian justice is ordering society according to Reason, because this is the ground for natural law. Cicero frames justice's duties towards other humans as entailing preserving the common good. Justice's role is to safeguard the *coniunctio* and *societas* generated by shared participation in reason and natural law (1.16-20).¹⁸ In one list of the cardinal virtues, Cicero glosses *iustitia* as *communitas*, sense of community (*Off.* 1.152). *Iustitia suum cuique distribuit* (*ND.* 3.38);¹⁹ the common good is

16 Cicero's cosmopolitanism generates fairly weak and negative obligations towards foreigners, and it does not negate the importance of the *civitas* (cf. *Leg.* 2.5) as it does for the Stoics. Malcolm Schofield, *Cicero: Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 105–12. I am grateful to Malcolm Schofield for sharing this forthcoming chapter with me.

17 Jean-Louis Ferrary, 'The Statesman and the Law in the Political Philosophy of Cicero', in *Justice and Generosity*, ed. Andre Laks and Malcolm Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 67–70; Colot, 'Lactantius and the Philosophy of Cicero', 86–87.

18 Pierre Monat, ed., *Lactance: Institutions divines V*, vol. 1, SC 204 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1973), 22.

19 Contrary to Cicero's *Laws*, Cotta here denies that justice as right distribution applies to humans' relations with the gods. For the problem of discerning Cicero's own opinions from his dialogues, see Jed W. Atkins, *Cicero on Politics and the Limits of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 14–26, 36–44.

maintained by avoiding harming others, and using public and private goods for appropriate ends (*Off.* 1.20). Cicero encompasses other expressions of justice, such as beneficence, right distribution, preserving equality, and treating others with *fides*, under these two duties (1.23). He does not (typically) develop the idea of religious duties as expressions of justice towards the gods (*ND.* 3.38). However, he does regard social virtue as religiously pious and thinks that aiding others leads towards the gods; Hercules was deified for such behaviour (*Tusc.* 1.14.32). Conversely, those who fail to show the social virtues (he specifies *beneficentia liberalitas bonitas* and *iustitia*) rebel against the gods, because such people break the human *societas* which the gods established (*Off.* 3.28). Treating other humans justly is a matter of concern throughout the cosmic polity.

Cicero makes justice central to his ethics. He names *sapientia* as the highest virtue, as was traditional, but includes knowledge of how humans should relate to each other and of the community between gods and humans within it. Thus *sapientia* demands the preservation of *communitas*, which is his definition of *iustitia* (1.153). When choosing between different obligations, justice or the preservation of society's fellowship must come first (1.160). Elsewhere Cicero names justice the *domina et regina virtutum* (3.28), and it governs the expression of the other virtues (1.62-3). The prominence of justice in Ciceronian ethics goes a long way towards explaining why the virtue is central for Lactantius.

Seneca

Lactantius also interacts with the Stoic tradition, of whom Seneca is an important Roman representative. Seneca was a situational rather than a systematic philosopher, and he does not discuss justice at length.²⁰ His ethics often discuss the character of the

²⁰ See e.g. Catharine Edwards, 'Absent Presence in Seneca's Epistles', in *The Cambridge Companion to Seneca*, ed. Alessandro Schiesaro and Shadi Bartsch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 41–53. For Seneca's political philosophy, see Miriam T. Griffin, *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976); Malcolm Schofield, 'Seneca on Monarchy and the Political Life:

sapiens, whose virtue is perfect (*Ep.* 115.3-4). Seneca was popular among Latin Christian authors because his Stoic ethics approximated their own (e.g. Tert. *An.* 20.1).²¹ Lactantius follows this trend, calling him *acerrimus Stoicus* (*DI.* 1.5.26). Seneca's philosophy discussed several issues which Lactantius makes central to justice: how to give generously; how to regard slaves; the bestiality of *crudelitas*; and the question of why divine providence allows good people to suffer.

Seneca regards philosophy as a divine gift and the means of obtaining the good life. Philosophy discovers the truth about human and divine affairs, instructs humans *colere divina, humana diligere*, and is aided by virtues like *religio, pietas*, and *iustitia* (*Sen. Ep.* 90.1-3; cf. 90.28). Like Cicero, Seneca derives ethical obligations from the *communitas* of shared rationality which exists between gods and humans. Nature unites humans and the divine into a shared body or family and gives them *amor mutuus*. Nature established what is *aequum iustumque*, and justifies the injunctions to help others and not cause harm, because all people are bound by their shared human nature (*Ep.* 95.51-53). This generates Natural Law, which obliges one to behave towards all humans so that human kinship is upheld.²² Seneca locates social virtue in a natural human interrelatedness. And humans grow in virtue by imitating the divine which is Nature; this reinforces humanity's distinctiveness from animals (*Prov.* 1.5-6; *Ep.* 87.19). Seneca advocates worshipping the divine by knowing and imitating it, rather than by typical pagan offerings (95.47-50).

De Clementia, De Tranquillitate Animi, De Otio', in *The Cambridge Companion to Seneca*, ed. Shadi Bartsch and Alessandro Schiesaro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 68–81.

21 Seneca, *Dialogues and Essays*, ed. John Davie and Tobias Reinhardt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), xxvi–xxvii; though cf. Chiara Torre, 'Seneca and the Christian Tradition', in *The Cambridge Companion to Seneca*, ed. Alessandro Schiesaro and Shadi Bartsch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 267–68, who attributes Seneca's prominence to contemporaneity with the apostles as much as to any ideological overlap.

22 For Seneca's view of natural law, see Inwood, *Reading Seneca*, 224–48.

Lucretius

Lucretius' *de Rerum Natura* is one of Lactantius' major sources, but it contributes more to his theology than his ethics. The *iustus* lexical group occurs only twice in his work, asserting that humans have no grounds to complain of nature's unfairness in both contexts (Lucr. 3.950, 4.1241). More broadly, Epicureans located justice in a mutual compact to avoid harm and pursue what is advantageous for the community, rather than in nature (*KD*. 31-33). Though Epicureans were often accused of providing an insufficient account of justice, Vander Waerdt argues that it is not in the Epicurean wise man's interest to act unjustly, since injustice's gains hinder the sage's quest for self-sufficiency and freedom from distress.²³ Lucretius' account of matter rejects several presuppositions of Lactantius' ethics, such as providence and final judgement (Lucr. 3.14-27, 830-42, 978-1020; 5.82-90, 156-221).²⁴ However, Lactantius borrows from his critique of paganism, particularly his affirmation of mental worship and denial that pagan gods protect their worshippers (5.1194-1235).

Rhetorical Sources

The rhetorical tradition, in which Lactantius was educated, expected that rhetorical training also taught virtue. An orator must understand and embody virtue to be a good speaker. The perfect orator is motivated by justice and other virtues, and will have much experience of *iustitia*, *fortitudo*, *abstinentia*, *temperantia*, and *pietas* (12.2.17, 31). Quintilian locates the capacity for human reason and virtue in divine gift, but persuasive teaching is needed to turn this inclination into a settled disposition (1.pr.16; 2.16.10; 12.2.1-3; cf. Cic. *Orat.* 1.13.56). Hence, the virtues are not the exclusive property of the philosophers. Oratory enables justice to be realised within society: orators can bring

23 P. A. Vander Waerdt, 'The Justice of the Epicurean Wise Man', *The Classical Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (1987): 411-18.

24 Phillip Mitsis, 'Epicurus: Freedom, Death, and Hedonism', in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 82-83, 88.

help to the needy, raise up the lowly, give security, free from peril, and ensure that people receive their civil rights (Cic. *Orat.* 1.8.31-32). Quintilian's treatise contends that the ideal orator requires excellent character as well as excellent speech, since oratory is destructive to society in the hands of a vicious man (Quint. 1.pr.9; 1.2.3; 2.15.33-4; 12.1.1-2). In Quintilian's discussion of legal justice, honesty, not harming, and even due legal process, are subordinated to justice as fair distribution and ultimately to upholding the common good (Quint. 12.1.40-43; 12.3.1-7; 12.7.1-2). Lactantius positions himself within this tradition, claiming to use his rhetorical skills to teach just living.²⁵

Juridical Sources

Though he never practiced law himself, Lactantius trained many legal professionals and would have been familiar with Roman law and jurisprudence. The emperors used legal communications to present themselves as guarantors of justice within the empire; their use of justice language in these documents increased in the decade before the persecution.²⁶ The third century jurist Ulpian gave an influential definition of justice which was still resonant several centuries later. Ulpian derives *ius* from *iustitia* and calls jurists priests of justice, discriminating between fair and unfair (Just. *Dig.* 1.1.1.1). He defines justice thus: *iustitia est constans et perpetua voluntas ius suum cuique tribuendi. Iuris praecepta sunt haec: honeste vivere, alterum non laedere, suum cuique tribuere. Iuris prudentia est divinarum atque humanarum rerum notitia, iusti atque iniusti scientia* (1.1.1.10). Ulpian divides law into public and private; public law maintains the *res publica* and covers religion, priesthoods, and magistracies. Private law is further divided into *ius naturale*, *ius gentium*, and *ius civile*. *Ius naturale* includes laws of marriage and rearing children; *ius gentium* is the law that all peoples observe; and *ius civile* is the law of states or cultures, which can be written or unwritten (1.1.1.1-

²⁵ Edwards, *Religions*, 21.

²⁶ See page 62.

6). By calling his work *Institutiones*, Lactantius presents himself as a fellow legal theorist, asserting jurists hold no monopoly on defining justice.²⁷

Christian Sources

Bible

Next, we must ask how to distinguish a Christian or biblical justice from this classical picture.²⁸ Later we will investigate in what form Lactantius encountered these biblical ideas. Terminologically, Lactantius' *iustitia* was the equivalent of δικαιοσύνη, which the New Testament and Septuagint use frequently.²⁹ In the Septuagint, δικαιοσύνη and its cognates most commonly translate *šdq*, though they also gloss *mišpāt*, *hesed* and *'emet*.³⁰ The Septuagint translators give δικαιοσύνη a similar semantic range to *šdq*, attributing to it the nuances of covenant faithfulness and salvation which the Hebrew contains.³¹ Hence we can be confident that the Hebrew *šdq*

27 Monat, *Lactance: Institutions divines V*, 1973, 1:30–31.

28 Key works on biblical justice, on which this account is based, include David Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); J. A. Ziesler, *The Meaning of Righteousness in Paul: A Linguistic and Theological Enquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); John Reumann, *Righteousness in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982); B. Johnson, 'Šādaq', in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1974), 239–64; B. Johnson, 'Mišpāt', in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1974), 86–98; Mark A. Seifrid, 'Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures and Early Judaism', in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter Thomas O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 415–42; Mark A. Seifrid, 'Paul's Use of Righteousness Language against Its Hellenistic Background', in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter Thomas O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, vol. 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 39–74; Gottlob Schrenk, 'Dikē, Dikaios, Dikaiosunē, Dikaioō, Dikaiōma, Dikaiōsis, Dikaiokrisia', in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. G. W. Bromiley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1965), 174–225; Calvin J. Roetzel, 'Justification, Justify', in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 477–80; T. Muraoka, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Louvain: Peeters, 2009).

29 In this section I gloss these words interchangeably as 'justice' or 'righteousness'. I have not used a Latin Bible for this study because the Vulgate postdates Lactantius, and our knowledge of the *Vetus Latina* is patchy. Psalm references are given from the Septuagint's numbering unless otherwise specified.

30 δικαιοσύνη has a corporate nuance which expressed the Hebrew's covenantal context better than ἐλεημοσύνη or ἀληθεία could. Ziesler, *The Meaning of Righteousness in Paul*, 61.

31 Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings*, 82; Ziesler, *The Meaning of Righteousness in Paul*, 61; Johnson, 'Šādaq', 262.

correlates to categories available to Lactantius. I have also included *mišpāt* in this study, as it occurs in hendiadys with *šdq* in significant places.³²

Though legal in background, justice affects all of life, and describes how life should be rightly ordered (Isa 1:11-17; Jer. 22:3, 15-16; Amos 5:21-24; Mic. 6:6-8).³³ Legally, justice is not only giving a fair verdict but enacting that verdict in society. Unlike in classical Greek, δικάζω can carry a positive sense, meaning to vindicate as well as to punish.³⁴ More broadly, justice means following a norm of relationships which leads to social flourishing, according to the covenantal pattern given by God.³⁵ It is primarily realised in communal contexts. It denotes a society where all relationships are as they should be, a distinctive of biblical justice.³⁶

Thus justice means covenantal faithfulness, regardless of whether it describes God's action or the obligations between members of society (Neh. 9:8). This covenantal framework is ultimately grounded in God's right ordering of creation and his faithfulness to that created order. God's justice as covenantal faithfulness causes him to deliver his people, even when their suffering is merited (Ps. 5:9; 30:2; 33:16-20; 70:2, 15; 97:2; Isa 32:17; 41:2; 45:13; 46:13; 51:5; Dan. 9:1-27). Salvation also produces God's righteous judgement of the world, in answer to prayers for deliverance from

32 Johnson, 'Šādaq', 246–47. *Mišpāt* is also rendered in the LXX by κρίσις, κριμα, and δικαίωμα. Johnson, 'Mišpāt', 97.

33 For justice in the Old Testament, see E. R. Hayes, 'Justice, Righteousness', in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*, ed. Mark J. Boda and J. G. McConville (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 466–72; Nancy Declaissé-Walford, 'Righteousness in the Old Testament', in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 818–23; Harold V. Bennett, 'Justice, OT', in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 476–77; Geoffrey Turner, 'The Righteousness of God in Psalms and Romans', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63, no. 3 (2010): 285–301.

34 Muraoka, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, 169.

35 Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings*, 96; though cf. Seifrid, 'Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures and Early Judaism', 423–26.

36 Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings*, 87.

oppression (Ps. 5:7, 9; 7:9-19; 9:9; 49:6; 71:2, 15, 16, 19, 24; 88:15; 118:7, 62, 106; Prov. 21:15).³⁷

Human righteousness is modelled on divine righteousness.³⁸ Humans are *ṣaddîq* not because they are sinless, but by being in a relationship with and generally obedient to God (Ps. 23:3-5). The Bible contrasts the righteous (*ṣaddîqîm*, δικαιοῖ) with the wicked (*r^ešā'îm*, ἀδικοῖ or ἄσεβεῖς) and uses these groups as categories for the recipients of different eschatological fates (Gen. 18:23-28; Ps. 1:6; 57:11; Prov. 3:33; 10:3-24). Human righteousness produces humility, faithfulness, moral uprightness, and trusting God for deliverance (Deut. 9:5; Ps. 7:8-11; 11:4-7; Prov. 9:9; 20:7; Isa. 33:15). More broadly, it means observing due process in legal matters, ensuring economic transactions are conducted fairly, speaking honestly, and avoiding evildoing (Lev. 19:15, 36; Deut. 1:16; 16:18-20; 24:7; 25:15). The Sermon on the Mount advocates breaking cyclical violence by not seeking one's rights under distributive justice but instead offering generosity and non-retaliation (Matt. 5:21-26, 42-48).³⁹

Justice creates a particular requirement to meet the needs of society's most vulnerable members (Ps. 10:17-18; 82:3-4; Isa. 1:11-17; Jer. 22:3, 15-16; Amos 5:21-24; Mic. 6:6-8; Matt. 25:31-46). This is not distributive; rather, the indigent receive disproportionate attention because they are at greatest risk of mistreatment (Isa. 1:12-17, 21; 5:8-12; 59:8-11; Jer. 7:1-15; Matt. 5:3-5).⁴⁰ Mistreating the vulnerable renders Israel's worship offensive to God (Amos 5:21-24). New Testament authors consciously reject human status or honour as categories for ranking people (Mark 10:35-45; Matt. 19:16-30; 20:20-28; Luke 18:18-30; James 2:9-13; cf. 1 Cor. 11:17-34). The king was

37 Seifrid, 'Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures and Early Judaism', 415–16, 430. Contra A. E. McGrath, 'Justice and Justification: Semantic and Juristic Aspects of the Christian Doctrine of Justification', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35, no. 5 (1982): 411.

38 Hayes, 'Justice, Righteousness', 467; Johnson, 'Ṣādaq', 260.

39 Johan Thom, 'Justice in the Sermon on the Mount: An Aristotelian Reading', *Novum Testamentum* 51, no. 4 (2009): 328–30.

40 Thom, 326.

particularly responsible for safeguarding his community's righteousness and ensuring the vulnerable were treated fairly; the messiah would be the ultimate just ruler (2 Chron. 9:8; Ps. 71:4, 12-14; Isa. 9:6; 11:5; 16:5; 32:1; 42:1-4; 53:11; Jer 23:5; 33:15). The final eschatological state is envisaged as a kingdom of perfect justice (Matt. 13:43; Luke 6:20-26; 16:19-31; 2 Pet. 3:13).

The Hebrew Bible and Septuagint govern the New Testament's use of justice language, which is always configured in relationship to God.⁴¹ The New Testament calls Christ 'righteous' to express his divinity as well as his moral purity (Luke 23:47; Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14; 1 Pet. 3:18; 1 John 2:1).⁴² 'The righteous' obey God's will or law, expressed through worship, mercy, and charity (Matt. 6:1-18; 7:16-23; 9:13; 12:7, 48-50; 23:23; Mark 3:31-35; 6:20; 14:32-42; Luke 1:6, 75; 23:50). Being justified means that God accepts one's request for forgiveness (Luke 18:14). Righteousness is both prompted by and the appropriate response to Jesus' passion (1 Pet. 2:24; 1 John 2:29; 3:7). When used ethically, righteousness conveys that a person is morally pure or obedient to God. Paul declares that God alone is righteous and gifts righteousness to humanity *διὰ πίστεως χριστοῦ*. Paul preserves the Old Testament's idea of divine righteousness causing God's salvific action, which is largely absent from the rest of the New Testament. Receiving this gift of righteousness grants one a right standing and a right relationship with God (Rom. 3:10, 21-26; 5:17; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 2:15-21; Phil. 3:8-11).⁴³ Though this primary meaning of righteousness is forensic, the Pauline

41 For justice in the New Testament, see J. K. Brown, 'Justice, Righteousness', in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin, 2nd ed. (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013), 463-67; Marion Soards, 'Righteousness in the New Testament', in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 813-18; Thom, 'Justice in the Sermon on the Mount'; C. C. Newman, 'Righteousness', in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 1053-59; PHEME PERKINS, 'Justice, NT', in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 475-76.

42 Newman, 'Righteousness', 1055; G. Kilpatrick, 'A Theme of the Lucan Passion Story and Luke Xxiii. 47', *JTS* 43 (1942): 34-35.

43 Ziesler, *The Meaning of Righteousness in Paul*, 165-67; Seifrid, 'Paul's Use of Righteousness Language', 53. Lactantius does not use justice in this Pauline sense.

literature can also use δικαιοσύνη ethically (Eph. 5:9; 1 Thess. 2:10; 1 Tim. 6:11).⁴⁴ As in the Old Testament, Paul's ethical sense is an outworking of a covenantal relationship with God rather than a virtue acquired by habituation as in the classical tradition.

The Hebrew understanding of justice governs the Septuagint's and New Testament's use of the idea. So how might we distinguish biblical justice from the classical concept? *Ṣḏq* and the classical Greek δικαιοσύνη both come from forensic backgrounds and indicate conformity to a norm. However, in Hebrew this norm is God's character and action, rather than νόμος, φύσις, or the idea of the good, and it is revealed rather than discerned philosophically.⁴⁵ Though both govern communal relations, the Hebrew concept makes a covenantal context central; biblical justice is more fundamentally relational than Greek justice.⁴⁶ The classical world does not emphasise divine righteousness, salvation, or vindication as the Hebrews did, instead focusing on ethics, distribution, and retribution. While the Greeks distributed social goods based upon merit, biblical justice is particularly oriented towards the vulnerable and derives an equality from being fellow covenant members.

Cyprian's *Ad Quirinum*

Cyprian's florilegium *Ad Quirinum* is a significant, though by no means only,⁴⁷ source of Lactantius' biblical material.⁴⁸ McGuckin thinks that Lactantius had another florilegium,⁴⁹ and Lactantius would have encountered biblical material liturgically. However, Cyprian's collection is an important intermediary between Lactantius and the biblical tradition, and it influenced Lactantius' understanding of biblical ethics. *Ad*

44 Roetzel, 'Justification, Justify', 479.

45 Seifrid, 'Paul's Use of Righteousness Language', 43–44; Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings*, 103.

46 Johnson, 'Ṣāḏaq', 263; Monat, *Lactance: Institutions divines V*, 1973, 1:25.

47 Wlosok, 'Zur Bedeutung Der Nichtcyprianischen Bibelzitate Bei Laktanz'; contra Brandt, *L. Caeli Firmiani Lactanti Opera omnia*.

48 For the attribution of the florilegium to Cyprian, see Edwina Murphy, "As Far as My Poor Memory Suggested": Cyprian's Compilation of *Ad Quirinum*', *Vigiliae Christianae* 68, no. 5 (2014): 533–50.

49 McGuckin, 'The Non-Cyprianic Scripture Texts in Lactantius' Divine Institutes', 152.

Quirinum contains three books, the first of which treats Judaism, the second Christology, and the third ethics.⁵⁰ It uses *iustitia* more than any of Cyprian's other works and contains many passages which appear determinative for Lactantius' understanding of the virtue. *Iustitia* is usually ethical but also describes Christ's messiahship and, less commonly, God's judgement. It rarely describes God's saving action; Cyprian increases the term's ethical emphasis relative to the Bible's usage.

God's ways are *iustae et verae*; he judges rightly and vindicates his people (*Quir.* 3.20=Rev. 15:3-4; cf. *Quir.* 3.35). Despite this, in the present age God gives common grace equally to the *iusti* and *iniusti* (*Quir.* 3.49=Matt 5:44-45). Cyprian links justice with Christ's roles in creation, kingship and judgement; God called Christ in righteousness to enlighten and save humanity (*Quir.* 2.3, 7, 14, 28, 30, 33). As saviour, the Son alone gives access to the Father, and died once, the *iustus* for the *iniusti*, to bring people to God (2.27).

Ethically, *iustitia* is associated with right worship (1.16; 3.18). It is often used in contexts of judgement and martyrdom, and it is used to contrast those who follow God with those who do not (e.g. 2.18, 28; 3.16, 31, 44, 62). Social evil and suffering, including injustice, arises from rejecting God (3.47). Righteousness is attained through enduring suffering, as the two ways motif illustrates (3.6=Matt. 7:13-14; *Quir.* 3.15=1 Macc. 2.52). Cyprian also includes the tradition that faith justifies one before God, which Lactantius does not pursue (*Quir.* 1.5; 3.42=Hab. 2:4; Gen. 15:6; Gal. 3:6). Cyprian connects justice to neighbour- and enemy-love; all people are siblings because God created them, and he gives common grace to *iusti* and *iniusti* alike (*Quir.* 3.3; 3.9; 3.49). Justice also entails humility, sinlessness, judging well, charity, giving due honour, refraining from violence, and seeking the heavenly in place of the material (1.24; 3.1-5,

50 Hans von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Latin Church* (London: Black, 1964), 39.

11, 20, 60-1). *Iustitia* is particularly connected with charitable giving; Cyprian quotes Matthew 25:31-46 repeatedly, which says that alms are offered ultimately to Christ (*Quir.* 2.30; 3.1; 3.113).

In *ad Quirinum*, *iustitia* has the bipartite meaning of obediently worshipping God and loving neighbour, which is characteristically expressed in almsgiving. Cyprian includes other ethical themes used by Lactantius, but does not incorporate them within *iustitia*. Cyprian's selection of biblical material moves justice towards the meaning Lactantius gives it. He retains the word's judicial and eschatological contexts and uses *iusti* to designate right worshippers. Cyprian deemphasises the covenantal context, particularly in Book 3, where *iustitia* occurs most frequently.⁵¹ Justice still requires right worship and enables societal flourishing, but it is more a virtue than a state of right relationship and is grounded in law or creation rather than the covenant. Divine righteousness characterises judgement and Christ's work but no longer motivates salvation more broadly. *Ad Quirinum* most commonly places *iustitia* in an ethical context, describing appropriate human actions or dispositions.

Tertullian

The main nuance of *iustitia* in Tertullian's *Apology* is fair legal judgement, which requires proper investigation and impartial decisions. Tertullian uses *iniustus* and *iniquus* to criticise Roman magistrates who condemned Christians merely for carrying that name (*Tert. Apol.* 1.1–5.8). *Iustitia* can also indicate a moral rectitude which pleases God (18.2; 21.4). Tertullian argues repeatedly that Christians are more virtuous than pagans, because their ethics come from God (39.12-15; 45.1-3; 46.12-16). He sees the Christians' mutual love as a testament to pagans (39.7-9).⁵² He commends Christians' social conscience, though usually without using *iustitia*. Tertullian connects virtue to

51 The *iustitia* word group occurs eight times in Book 1, 33 times in Book 2 and 71 in Book 3.

52 A comment which probably influenced Lactantius; so Monat, *Lactance et la Bible*, 252.

societal flourishing and argues repeatedly that Christians are good citizens, which also demonstrates that their theological deviation was not socially dangerous. Rather, their virtue is evidence that they possess religious truth.⁵³ Many elements of Lactantius' theology are present – the replacement of sacrifice with virtue as the ultimate form of worship, universal siblinghood, equity, non-violence, and love of all (36.3-4; 37.1; 39.6-9) – but Tertullian does not frame them using justice or present justice as summarising virtue. Tertullian criticises the pagans' expression of justice but not their understanding of the virtue as Lactantius does.⁵⁴

Iustitia appears even more frequently in Tertullian's *Contra Marcionem*. Justice is the *plenitudo divinitatis ipsius* and shows God in his dual role as Father and Lord: as Father he shows *clementia*, rewarding good, and as Lord he practices *disciplina* and punishes wrongdoing (*Marc.* 2.13.5). Tertullian invokes the dual titles of the Roman *paterfamilias* to argue that God's goodness and judgement are inseparable (1.25-27).⁵⁵ God's justice arranged and distinguished the different elements of creation, a non-moral kind of right ordering, and after the fall it gained the function of restraining evil (2.13.1-3). Tertullian glosses the end of the decalogue and neighbour-love command as teaching *innocentia*, *pudicitia*, *iustitia*, and *pietas* (17.4).⁵⁶ The universal law of love gave commandments to love God and neighbour, which would have been entirely sufficient had humanity followed them (*Iud.* 2.3).⁵⁷ Biblical law requires charity, freeing slaves,

53 A. Birley, 'Attitudes to the State in the Latin Apologists', in *L'apologétique Chrétienne Gréco-Latine à l'époque Prénicénienne*, ed. Antonie Wlosok and François Paschoud (Genève: Fondation Hardt, 2005), 251; Eric Francis Osborn, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 226.

54 As Colot observes, Lactantius' endeavouring to write about legal philosophy rather than specific laws (*DI.* 1.1.12) describes the difference between his work and Tertullian's. Colot, *Lactance*, 100.

55 Wlosok, *Laktanz*, 239–41. *Bonitas* is more important for Tertullian than for Lactantius, since he responded to Marcion's separation of divine goodness and judgement; Lactantius used the motif to argue for the oneness and providence of the true (Christian) God.

56 No religious duty is specified in the passage, so *pietas* probably means honouring one's parents.

57 Osborn, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West*, 226.

providing for the needy, avoiding evil speech, legal fairness, and caring for the earth and its animals (*Marc.* 2.17.3-4; 2.19; 4.36).

Minucius Felix

Sometime in the third century, Minucius Felix wrote an apology in dialogue format.⁵⁸ The work is structured like a lawsuit, with the prosecution and defence presenting their cases in turn. Though Minucius Felix is the apologist whose style is most similar to Lactantius',⁵⁹ he does not share our author's focus on justice. He uses the word group only eight times, indicating the concept was not particularly significant for him.⁶⁰ The pagan Caecilius thinks Christians unjust because they fail to maintain ancestral religious traditions, which secure Rome's greatness (MF. 6.1-3; 8.1; 13.5), and their meetings are secret, seditious, incestuous, and cannibalistic (9.1–10.5). Despite their hopes, they will receive the eschatological fate of the *iniusti* (11.5).

The Christian Octavius attributes Rome's expansion to cruelty and violence rather than the piety and justice that they claimed (25.1-4).⁶¹ Octavius asserts that true worship consists in cultivating innocence, justice, avoiding deceit, and saving other humans from danger. Thus, among the Christians, the way to be *religiosior* is to be *iustior*; justice as a social virtue is true worship (32.3).⁶² Octavius also uses *iustus* in the context of eschatological judgement (34.12). Those who do not know God will be judged *iniustus* and *impius*, since it is just as bad to ignore (*ignorare*) the *parens omnium et omnium*

58 The work is related to Tertullian's *Apology*, but scholars continue to debate which work was earlier and influenced the other. See e.g. W. H. C. Frend, 'Some North African Turning Points in Christian Apologetics', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 57, no. 1 (2006): 6.

59 Edwards, *Religions*, 32.

60 Similarly, *pietas* occurs only seven times. Monat overstates Minucius Felix' influence on Lactantius' concept of justice relative to the other apologists. Monat, *Lactance: Institutions divines V*, 1973, 1:29–30.

61 Minucius Felix did not believe the institution of the empire could be separated from its belief that piety caused its greatness. Birley, 'Attitudes to the State', 263.

62 Lactantius also closely associates justice and worship. Monat, *Lactance: Institutions divines V*, 1973, 1:29. The association is more common in Lactantius' predecessors than Monat allows, as it follows the biblical tradition that the *iusti* are defined by being rightly disposed towards God.

Dominus as it is to offend (*laedere*) him (35.4).⁶³ More generally, Minucius Felix uses *impietas* to refer to wrong, superstitious religion (38.7), and advocates humility and treating other humans as one's equals (37.8-10). He regards justice as a virtue which can be expressed towards God or towards other people, but he does not use it to frame his ethics. Neither speech develops a moral philosophy; the combatants agree about what the virtues look like but disagree about who possesses them. Minucius Felix does not reconstrue Roman ethics, as Lactantius attempts to do.

Cyprian

Like the other fathers, Cyprian discusses the injustice of persecution of Christians; several of Cyprian's esoteric works also outline a conception of justice and ethics. Cyprian often uses *iusti* to describe the victims of persecution (e.g. *Pat.* 10; 19; 21; *Ep.* 58.2, 5-6). Because of their faithful worship, God will vindicate them eschatologically, unlike the *impii*, *iniusti* and *peccatores* (*Dem.* 17, 21; *Pat.* 24; *Ep.* 58.10-11). Cyprian exhorts Demetrianus, the addressee of his apology, to repent before this final judgement comes (*Dem.* 25). However, God is patient in this age, and providentially blesses the *iusti* and *iniusti* alike (*Pat.* 4). Jesus is *iustus* and the justifier, particularly as advocate and forgiver of sins (*Ep.* 55.18).

Despite the persecutors' cruelty, Christians are good citizens; they pray for the empire's flourishing and their neighbours' peace and salvation (*Dem.* 12, 20). The Romans blame Christians for military defeats and political chaos, which actually stem from God's anger towards superstition and the persecution of true worshippers, who are *innocentii*, *iusti*, *Deo cari* (5, 7, 17, 23). The *iusti* are *Deum timentes* (*Pat.* 24), and *iustitia* commonly denotes a right disposition towards God or the church (*Ep.* 59.11; *Dem.* 23-24).

63 This phrase approximates Lactantius' characteristic description of God as *Pater et Dominus*.

In social contexts, Cyprian particularly uses *iustitia* in reference to almsgiving and to due legal process (*Dem.* 3). *Patientia* is a defining virtue of the *iustus*, as biblical archetypes show (*Pat.* 10; 17). Christ is patience's ultimate exemplar; despite being *innocentia ipse et ipse iustitia*, he allowed himself to be judged, mocked, and executed by sinners (7).⁶⁴ Cyprian's *de Opera et Eleemosynis* frequently uses *opera iusta* to refer to almsgiving, though the work uses religious rather than social arguments to encourage giving (*Op.* 1-2, 6, 16; cf. *Pat.* 18).⁶⁵ *Iustitia* indicates a right relationship with God which produces almsgiving, leading to forgiveness of sin.

Cyprian uses the *iustitia* word group fairly frequently, usually with the biblical meanings of charitable giving and right relationship to God, particularly in contexts involving persecution and eschatological judgement. Cyprian incorporates much less of the philosophical resonances into the word than Lactantius does.⁶⁶ However, justice is more central to Cyprian's ethics than to the earlier fathers', who described elements of Lactantius' justice ethic without using the word. Yet Cyprian is not a systematic moral philosopher; that was Lactantius' contribution to the tradition.

Other Religious Sources

Sibylline Oracles

The *Sibylline Oracles* we possess are a collection of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic texts, attributed to female pagan prophets known as Sibyls.⁶⁷ Lactantius appeals to Varro to support his mistaken belief that the Sibylline Oracles were the same as the Roman Sibylline Books, which were written by ten mythic prophetesses and used

64 Monat correctly identifies *de Bono Patientiae* as an important source for Lactantius, though its influence goes beyond its biblical quotations. Monat, *Lactance: Institutions divines V*, 1973, 1:28.

65 *Iustitia*, *miserecordia* and ἐλεημοσύνη are much more important words for this giving than *caritas* or *pietas* are.

66 Pichon, *Lactance*, 131.

67 For the character of the Sibyl in classical literature, see J. L. Lightfoot, *The Sibylline Oracles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3–23.

by the Roman Senate for divination in times of crisis (*DI*. 1.6.7-16).⁶⁸ This explains their appeal for Lactantius: these texts purported to be authoritative for Roman religion yet affirm many doctrines he wanted to promulgate.⁶⁹

Religious and social virtue are closely related in the *Sibylline Oracles*.⁷⁰ They depict ethics in vivid colours, with stark contrasts between virtue and vice, damnation and reward; apocalyptic depictions of the final state convey moral exhortation even when they are not explicitly moralising.⁷¹ Though the different oracles commend a wide variety of worship practices, they all enjoin monotheism and criticise polytheism and idolatry (*Orac. Syb.* 3.11-35, 545-50, 586-90, 715-23, 762-3; 4.13-17; 8.361-77, 429-36; 5.77-85, 353-6, 403-7).⁷² Religious and social ethics are united: God is propitiated through sacrifice, honouring justice, and oppressing none (3.624-32). There is a close relationship between δικαιοσύνη and εὐσέβεια; loss of these virtues causes social decay, and they are the grounds for final judgement (3.213-7, 695; 4.41-48, 151-92; 5.269-85; 8.279-81, 416). The Sibyllists speak against vices, particularly violence, greed and sexual immorality, which they see as characterising the surrounding nations (3.36-42, 188-9, 202-5, 310-11, 762-5; 4.30-34; 5.165-77, 386-96; 8.125-30). They promise an eschaton where the world is held in common, where God's law is followed and brings justice, and where there are no social divisions, discord or violence (3.373-80; 8.110-21).⁷³ Given this future, one should oppress no one, be humble, abandon violence, and practice justice and charity (3.624-32; 4.162-5; 7.85-91; 8.402-11, 480-4). As is

68 Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 1:205.

69 Contra Frend, 'Some North African Turning Points in Christian Apologetics', 12, Lactantius does not regard them on the same level as the Bible; they are *testimonia divino similia*. Kendeffy, 'Lactantius as Spokesman of a Mystery', 447.

70 Both categories are more common than political comment, which is surprising given the original Sibylline Books were political. John J. Collins, *The Sibylline Oracles of Egyptian Judaism*, 1 (Missoula: SBL, 1974), 2-3.

71 Lightfoot, *The Sibylline Oracles*, 144-46.

72 Bate calls this doctrine the main theological concern of the Jewish oracles. H. N. Bate, *The Sibylline Oracles, Books III-V* (London: SPCK, 1918), 27; cf. Lightfoot, *The Sibylline Oracles*, 37-44.

73 Rieuwerd Buitenwerf, *Book III of the Sibylline Oracles and Its Social Setting* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 342.

common in apocalyptic texts, the Sibyllists expect the δίκαιοι and εὐσεβεῖς will be persecuted for their faithfulness but ultimately rewarded (3.213-7, 272-94; 5.33-4; 7.160-2).⁷⁴

Hermetica

The Hermetica were written in Hellenophone Egypt in the second to third centuries AD, though they were reputedly ancient and attributed to the Egyptian god Thoth. Ogilvie identifies them as a mystical form of Platonism rather than being particularly Egyptian, Jewish, or Christian,⁷⁵ though more recent research has identified genuinely Egyptian elements within them.⁷⁶ Iamblichus thought that Hermes Trismegistus was the source of Plato's doctrines (Iamb. *Myst.* 1.1.1–2.6),⁷⁷ and this high regard for the Hermetica may have been widespread in Lactantius' circles. Lactantius calls Hermetic evidence *simile divino*, because it is exceedingly old and the human who gave it has been deified. He uses it to provide evidence for monotheism which pre-dates pagan mythology, particularly as he names Hermes a kinsman of Jupiter and Saturn (*DI.* 1.6.1-4; 1.11.61; 4.1.7). This pedigree would presumably have given the texts a higher degree of legitimacy among pagans than the Bible; we assess below how much they informed Lactantius' own theology.

The Hermetic treatises seek to guide aspirants towards divine vision and to liberate the soul from the body (*CH.* 1.28; 10.3-8, 16-19).⁷⁸ Evil is associated with matter, the body, and the passions (1.18-21).⁷⁹ Because of this anti-materialism, the works

74 Olivia Stewart Lester, 'Prophetic Rivalry, Gender, and Economics: A Study in Revelation and Sibylline Oracles 4-5' (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 190.

75 Ogilvie, *The Library of Lactantius*, 33–34.

76 Peter Kingsley, 'Poimandres: The Etymology of the Name and the Origins of the Hermetica', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 56 (1993): 1.

77 Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*, 84.

78 Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 99, 108–9.

79 There is a tension between monist and dualist elements in the treatises. See Fowden, 102; Gregory Shaw, 'Taking the Shape of the Gods', *Aries* 15, no. 1 (2015): 152–57.

commend cognitive and verbal worship (1.22, 26, 31-32; 5.11; *Ascl.* 22; 41). εὐσέβεια ἔστι θεοῦ γνῶσις (*CH.* 9.4), which requires a divinely-gifted rational faculty which few receive as well as freedom from bodily things.⁸⁰ Fowden locates this anti-material emphasis within the late-antique pagan trend to deemphasise the human realm and seek the divine, seen also in Neoplatonism.⁸¹

The Hermetic texts contain minimal social ethics and use justice language rarely, perhaps because the philosophical tradition understood it as a social, distributive virtue. They speak occasionally against ἀδικία, violence, and evil-doing (10.21; 12.23), but ultimately identify these errors with pursuing the body.⁸² Lactantius used the *Hermetica* to argue for the antiquity of monotheism and for immaterial worship.⁸³ Given this role, it is unsurprising that they are not significant for Lactantius' social ethics.

Hystaspes

Hystaspes was purportedly a Medean king who received an apocalyptic vision; the work attributed to him seems to have predated the common era and been Zoroastrian in background.⁸⁴ Lactantius is our major source of fragments from Hystaspes, making it difficult to discern how the seer influenced our author's view of justice. Lactantius uses Hystaspes to support his eschatology: injustice will flourish during the tribulation, but the end will bring a final judgement, vindicate the just, and inaugurate a millennium of justice and peace (Hystaspes fr. 12, 14a, 15a).⁸⁵ I suspect that, as for the *Hermetica*, Lactantius used Hystaspes more to support theological ideas he could not justify using classical sources than to justify his ethics.

80 Walter Scott and A. S. Ferguson, *Hermetica* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 2:214-5.

81 Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, 112.

82 Scott and Ferguson, *Hermetica*, 2:268, 371. Scott has missed the religious component of Lactantian *iustitia*, but his reading of the *Hermetica* is apposite.

83 Caroline Nicholson and Oliver Nicholson, 'Lactantius, Hermes Trismegistus and Constantinian Obelisks', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 1989, 200.

84 Coleman, *Lactantius*, 48-49.

85 Joseph Bidez and Franz Cumont, eds., *Les mages hellénisés: Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspe d'après la tradition grecque* (Paris: Société d'éditions "Les Belles lettres, 1938), 2:368-74.

Latin Panegyrics

We have already considered what the tetrarchs' edicts indicate about their ideology, but that ideology is also reflected indirectly through the panegyrics delivered by their orators. The *Latin Panegyrics* are valuable comparanda because they are contemporaneous to Lactantius, written by men of his class and education, and working in the same Gallic courts and schools.⁸⁶ These speeches were published as models, ethical as well as rhetorical, for Gallic students, so the speeches create as well as participate in a shared oratorical culture.⁸⁷

In the *Latin Panegyrics*, *iustus* can have a basic sense of what is right, deserved, or appropriate, without being developed further (VIII.21.3; IX.8.3; VI.15.5).⁸⁸ As we would expect in this genre, *iustitia* most commonly indicates ruling well through distributing rewards and punishments according to merit, often occurring in legal contexts (X.3.3; XI.19.2; IX.1.2; VI.22.5). As such, *iustitia* is one of several virtues, including *concordia* and *pietas*, which secure the empire's prosperity (X.11.3). It rectifies society after theft and senseless violence, frees people from tyrants, and supports those who have been mistreated (XI.3.6; VIII.19.3; VI.6.1, 10.3-7, 14.5; IV.9.1; cf. also XII.4.4). *Iustitia* is frequently associated with benefaction, but it is the virtue which ascertains astutely where to bestow generosity rather than an obligation to give itself (VII.5.1; V.2.2, 5.5-6). One orator personifies justice as a divine force which ensured that Constantine beat Maxentius as was deserved (XII.4.2). Justice does not

86 I number the panegyrics according to manuscript order, following Mynors. This study omits panegyrics III and II, written after Lactantius died. For these sources' historical value, see C. E. V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers, eds., *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini* (Berkeley ; Oxford: University of California Press, 1994), 34. For their occasionality and the dangers of generalising from them, see Roger Rees, 'The Private Lives of Public Figures in Latin Prose Panegyric', in *The Propaganda of Power*, ed. Mary Whitby (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 77; and Liebeschuetz, 'Religion in the *Panegyrici Latini*', 389.

87 C. E. V. Nixon, 'Latin Panegyric in the Tetrarchic and Constantinian Period', in *Latin Panegyric*, ed. Roger Rees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 239.

88 C. E. V. Nixon, 'Constantinus Oriens Imperator: Propaganda and Panegyric. On Reading Panegyric 7 (307)', *Historia* 42, no. 2 (1993): 238-42.

describe how humans should treat the divine, nor is it one of the virtues which prompts a divine reward of prosperity or felicity.⁸⁹ Right distribution in the legal or political sense is *iustitia*'s fundamental meaning in the *Panegyrics*, though sometimes it has resonances of generosity, relational faithfulness, or concern for the common good.

Pietas is more prominent than *iustitia* in the *Latin Panegyrics*. It was customary in the genre to praise the honorand's justice (cf. Arist. *Rhet.* 1.9.5–6) and possession of the cardinal virtues (cf. Quint. 3.7.15–16), though the virtues which were fashionable fluctuated over time.⁹⁰ The *Latin Panegyrics* include the cardinal virtues but rarely develop their meaning (cf. especially *Pan. Lat.* VI.4.4). Virtues such as *virtus* (martial valour), *pietas*, *victoria*, *clementia*, and *felicitas* receive more sustained attention, both in terms of frequency and in how the virtues' content is explained.⁹¹ Though the data set is small and unrepresentative, this may indicate that *iustitia* was less important in tetrarchic rhetorical culture, outside of judicial contexts, than other virtues. For our purposes, it is significant that *iustitia* is never used to describe religious virtue, and so was not directly applicable to failures to worship. Liebeschuetz writes that the panegyrists align with what we know of imperial propaganda or the intellectual climate of the day.⁹² Thus, the perfunctory way justice is treated in these texts may indicate a trend that went beyond these individual orators, particularly as they and their speeches were used to train younger orators and civil servants.

89 This is expressed using *pietas*, *religio*, and invocations of the emperors' divinity (*numen*, *divus*, *divinus*, *deus*).

90 Rees, 'Panegyric', 137; Donald Russell, 'The Panegyrists and Their Teachers', in *The Propaganda of Power*, ed. Mary Whitby (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 18.

91 See Robin Seager, 'Some Imperial Virtues in the Latin Prose Panegyrics', in *Papers of the Liverpool Latin Seminar. Fourth Volume*, ed. Francis Cairns, Frederick Williams, and Sandra Cairns (Liverpool, 1984), 129–65.

92 Liebeschuetz, 'Religion in the *Panegyrici Latini*', 389–90.

Conclusion

At the end of this chapter, we must assess the spectrum of conceptions of justice these sources made available to Lactantius. I take right distribution, giving to each their own, to be basic to the other classical understandings of justice, which specify how to distribute rightly. The rule of reason or rational ordering predominates in the Platonic tradition, though this tradition also incorporates preserving the common good and not harming. Though justice as fulfilling duties to gods and humans occurs only in one of Plato's early works, his successors repeated the motif. Virtue is often understood as imitating the divine. Avoiding harm through abstinence is particularly prominent in Porphyry, and it governs his understanding of right worship. Aristotle added the categories of distributive and corrective justice, and he restricted justice's application to political equals, thus excluding the self, non-citizens, and the gods.

In practice, Cicero makes *iustitia* the highest virtue. Natural law generates justice and produces a relationship between humans and the gods, which is understood as creating a cosmic *polis*. Fundamentally, justice means ordering according to Reason and requires preserving its community. Cicero also mentions not harming, using private and public goods for their appropriate ends, preserving property rights, right distribution, liberality, and maintaining *fides* as parts of justice, but does not use *iustitia* to describe religious virtue. Seneca also posits a community of gods and humans which generates ethical requirements and describes it in familial terms. Seneca does not define justice, but he discusses its components in ways that were formative for Lactantius. Quintilian regards justice as essential for speaking well. He constructs justice in a legal context, which involves a lack of partiality and a desire to avoid harming where possible, but prioritises preserving the common good. The juristic tradition defines justice as rendering right to everyone, which means refraining from harm, living honourably, and

giving to each their due; this tradition shows the resonance of Latin and Ciceronian philosophy in the third century.

Covenant and right relationship are central to the Bible's conception of justice and lead to its thick sense of universal societal flourishing which the Hebrew prophets proclaimed.⁹³ It carries the usual legal connotations of judging fairly, but extends these to incorporate the social outworkings of vindication. God's righteousness leads to his covenantal faithfulness in salvation, even when his people are undeserving. For humans, justice requires a particular regard for society's most vulnerable members, expressed through charity and deliverance. The just live obediently to God's law, which is expressed through worship, humility, purity and charity. In Paul, *δικαιοσύνη* denotes receiving an unearned right-standing before God. Righteousness is the basis of eschatological judgement. The biblical understanding of justice is more revelation-dependent and relationally-construed than the classical concept.

Cyprian's florilegium gave Lactantius the ideas that God judges justly and that Christ's justice is expressed in revelation. Justice divides into treatment of God and treatment of neighbour, a division Lactantius follows. Justice entails obedience to God's law, expressed in right worship and virtue. It is acquired through faith and enduring suffering steadfastly. Socially, justice requires loving humans as siblings, which is enacted through charity, humility, and asceticism. Cyprian moved the word away from describing God's covenant faithfulness and salvation and emphasised its ethical dimension.

The Latin Christian tradition describes justice as a right attitude towards God, charity or almsgiving, true or ethical worship which is superior to sacrifice, and a

93 This eschatological dimension parallels the classical idea that the golden age would be just and abundant. However, the Jewish eschaton is much more determinative for the Hebrew concept of justice than the golden age is for classical justice.

criterion for eschatological judgement. Apologetic literature emphasises justice as due legal process and calls persecuted Christians *iusti*, *innocentes*, and good citizens. This genre asserts that Christians can best discern and inculcate the moral behaviour which produces societal flourishing. In Tertullian and Cyprian, love is central to fulfilling the law, which divides into love of God and love of neighbour and is grounded in regarding all people as siblings. In Cyprian, the *iustus* is *paciens* and exemplified by Christ. However, these authors do not use justice to summarise virtue. The Christian tradition uses *iustitia* to refer to right religion or relationship with God more than the classical tradition. Rather than distributing social goods according to merit, these authors praise charity towards the vulnerable. However, they use *pietas* relatively infrequently, following the infrequent occurrence of εὐσέβεια in the New Testament.

The Sibylline oracles emphasise the importance of monotheism and refraining from idolatry. Religious and social ethics are closely intertwined, with justice denoting both right worship and right treatment of others. The Sibyllists speak against violence, greed, and sexual immorality. These texts expect that the just will be persecuted but also vindicated eschatologically. The eschaton will see justice reign, God's law obeyed, and social divisions eradicated. These texts largely follow the themes of biblical justice, though the eschatological expectation and polemic against other nations' sins are heightened. We have little of Hystaspes' text, but he seems to have contributed mainly to Lactantius' eschatology. The Hermetica construct virtue in a contemplative and other-worldly framework. Piety is the knowledge of God and is expressed through contemplation of the divine, philosophical enquiry, hymns, and fleeing the material. These texts describe social ethics only briefly.

Like the rescripts, the *Latin Panegyrics* use *iustus* to refer to ruling fairly and moderately, often in legal contexts. This fairness promotes the general flourishing of

society. Justice motivates the emperors to be faithful to each other and to deliver their people from oppression; towards usurpers and barbarians it means due punishment, violence which is deserved. It also denotes wisdom in bestowing benefaction where it is needed or deserved. *Iustitia* is not used of human treatment of the divine, nor is it a virtue which earns divine *felicitas*, as *pietas* does. Similarly, the persecution texts do not call Christians' failure to worship the gods unjust, but impious. I suggest that this indicates that *pietas* was more resonant in religious contexts than *iustitia* in tetrarchic circles.

Many of these motifs occur across the different traditions. Harmlessness, generosity, fair legal process, and asceticism are found in multiple sources. The classical tradition uses a fairly consistent set of justice motifs, but different authors privilege different motifs, a fact which will help us discern which authors influenced Lactantius. The Christian tradition emphasises justice as relating rightly to God more than does the classical tradition, which uses *religio* and *pietas* for this virtue and construes justice as primarily social. Classical texts discuss harmlessness more than the Christian authors; correspondingly, Christians prioritise charity and protecting the vulnerable more than their classical counterparts. In Seneca, the *iustus* is the sage who possesses perfect virtue; Christians use *iusti* for people who are ethically imperfect but who worship the correct God. The philosophers and Hermetica use justice to describe pursuing the rational, an emphasis absent from the Christian tradition. For the Sibyls, the key vices are idolatry, greed, violence, and sexual immorality. The Hermetic tradition constructs piety as ascetic and contemplative, the means of gaining knowledge and ascent to the divine. As we explore Lactantius' conception of justice in greater detail, we can compare his ideas with the nuances of these traditions to determine which sources drive his thinking.

Chapter 3: Introducing Justice

This chapter and the next form a pair, which introduce and define Lactantius' understanding of justice. This chapter has two sections. The first introduces key concepts in Lactantius' ethics, the background against which Lactantius depicts justice. These include his understandings of *virtus*, evil, and how virtue is known and acquired, each distinctive components of Lactantian theology. Finally, we explore virtue's goal, immortality, and how Lactantius uses this in his argument that *virtus* and *religio*, as means to the *summum bonum* of human existence, are practices which distinguish humans from animals. The second section explores Lactantius' basic definition of justice, an analysis which is continued in the following chapter. In the present chapter, we survey how Lactantius introduces justice in the *Institutes* before he defines it in Book 5. This includes his Christology, in which Christ's role of *doctor iustitiae* is prominent. Considering how Lactantius' argument unfolds across the *Institutes* illuminates his rhetorical strategies more clearly.

Lactantius' Moral Philosophy

Definition of Virtue

Ethics are a fundamental category for Lactantius' apologetic, and one of the places where he is most original.¹ We begin by considering his definition of *virtus*, a notoriously untranslatable word. It was originally a martial virtue, denoting manly courage or military valour. Along with *pietas* and *fides*, it was one of Roman society's traditional virtues.² Building on the Roman usage, Cicero and Seneca understood virtue as *recta ratio*, wisdom, or the knowledge of what is good or bad (Cic. *Leg.* 1.25, 45; cf.

1 Pichon, *Lactance*, 130–31.

2 John Davie and Tobias Reinhardt, eds., *Seneca: Dialogues and Essays* (Oxford: University Press, 2016), xvi.

Sen. *Ep.* 95.57). Cicero also calls it *adfectio animi constans conveniensque* (Cic. *Tusc.* 4.15.34-35). For Seneca as for other Stoics, one must possess virtue perfectly to have it at all, so only the sage can be virtuous.³ In Lactantius' day, the Neoplatonists developed complex hierarchies of virtues which led to divinisation (Porph. *Sent.* 32; Iamb. letter 3 fr. 2; 16 fr. 2). Though Porphyry and Iamblichus are less otherworldly than Plotinus,⁴ they minimise the 'political virtues' compared to Lactantius. Similarly, in the *Hermetica*, virtue entails contemplating God and fleeing evil desires (e.g. *Ascl.* 11), with minimal mention of social virtue. By contrast, the *Latin Panegyrics* celebrate the emperors' social virtues, including the martial *victoria* and *virtus*, far more than religious ones.⁵ Lactantius' sources and contemporaries gave several approaches to *virtus* from which he could draw.

Lactantius defines *virtus* as wisdom combined with knowledge (*DI.* 3.8.31), *fortitudo animi* (3.12.18),⁶ the power of following knowledge's dictates (3.12.29), knowing *bonum* from *malum* (6.5.5)⁷ and acting on that knowledge (6.5.11), *cupiditas recta et honesta faciendi* (6.5.9), and a pacifying of the spirit in response to the disturbance of vice (7.10.6).⁸ Virtue's presence and expression in a human is stable and constant (7.10.2-3), though it initially tastes bitter to the person who adopts it (1.1.7). Christ is the ultimate *magister virtutis*, being *ipse virtus et ipse iustitia* (4.16.4). Gehrke compares Lactantius' theology with other ante-Nicene 'power theologies' and concludes that he uses *virtus* to indicate 'a power of action directed towards non-material

3 Inwood, *Reading Seneca*, 80. For the sage in general, see Elisa Uusimäki, 'The Rise of the Sage in Greek and Jewish Antiquity', *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 49, no. 1 (2018): 1–29; Rene Brouwer, *The Stoic Sage: The Early Stoics on Wisdom, Sagehood and Socrates*, Cambridge Classical Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

4 Iamblichus' letters show an interest in applying philosophy to local governance. For Porphyry, see O'Meara, *Platonopolis*, 44.

5 Cf. Seager, 'Some Imperial Virtues in the Latin Prose Panegyrics'.

6 A traditional Roman definition. Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 595.

7 This abbreviates Lucilius' definition, which included knowing *turpe* from *honestum*, *utile* from *inutile* (Charpin fr. 23).

8 Aristotle divided virtues into moral and intellectual (*NE.* 2.1.1); Lactantius' discussion explores only the moral virtues.

conflicts'.⁹ This is seen in the definitions of *virtus* as the ability to act on moral knowledge and the idea, explored below, that virtue requires struggling against evil.

Hamartiology

Next we explore Lactantius' hamartiology, his reason for why virtue is needed. Lactantius typically locates human moral failings in the body or flesh.¹⁰ He locates the virtues in the heavenly soul and vices in the material body; these constantly conflict, grounding moral conflict in human nature (2.12.8; *ID.* 15.3-4; 19.1-3).¹¹ Because of this conflict, all are susceptible to sin (20.4-5; *DI.* 6.24.9). Yet Jesus' perfect life shows that sin is not necessary but a failure of the will (4.25.6-7). Lactantius regards the human will as essentially free, constantly at a crossroads between good and evil, but able to choose good once it has been identified.¹² His emphasis on the will's freedom occurs alongside a minimisation of the Holy Spirit and grace.

Since virtue requires knowing and practicing what is good, sin can be either a failure of knowledge or will, as well as a disposition opposed to virtue (4.26.22). Lactantius is often taken to locate error in ignorance rather than sin,¹³ which is often true. The *Institutes'* opening chapter asserts that *haec enim pravitatis est causa, ignoratio sui*, meaning ignorance of the human's religious purpose (1.1.25). However, Lactantius also attributes error to following *cupiditas mala*; the *commotiones, ira, cupiditas*, and *libido*; or demonic temptation (3.29.14-16; 6.5.6-14).¹⁴ Lactantius locates

9 Jason Gehrke, 'Lactantius's Power Theology', *Nova et Vetera* 17, no. 3 (2019): 696.

10 Though cf. *DI.* 6.23.35-36, which locates some sins and lusts in the mind.

11 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 141. Pichon attributes Lactantius' dualism and general lack of theological precision to his being an apologist and layman. Pichon, *Lactance*, 30.

12 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 146.

13 e.g. Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 9.

14 By Lactantius' day, philosophers agreed that evil *daimones* inclined people towards evil (Porph. *Abst.* 2.37.1-40.5; Iambl. *Myst.* 2.6.82; 3.31.176-7; 4.7.190-1).

evil's origin in the Adamic fall (2.12.15-20); society was further vitiated by the subsequent rise of ruler cult (5.5–6).¹⁵

Lactantius' dualistic hamartiology is often attributed to Hermetic or gnostic influence. The Hermetica associate vice with ignorance and pursuing the body and its passions (*CH.* 9.3-4; 10.8; *Ascl.* 22).¹⁶ Lactantius' association of evil with the body is more Platonic or Gnostic than Christian, though he also affirms that humans in the protological state and millennium are both embodied and virtuous, which contradicts his dualism.¹⁷ This dualism is foundational to Lactantius' theology but expressed inconsistently, meaning that he can still imagine earthly states of virtue. This shows his account of evil comes from the non-Christian sources quoted above, and he did not fully integrate it with his Christian fall and eschatological narratives.

Epistemology of Virtue

For Lactantius, virtue is strongly dependent upon understanding what is good. He claims that pagan understandings of virtue are inadequate because his epistemology prioritises revelation.¹⁸ Showing Roman pragmatism, Lactantius names moral knowledge the highest kind of knowledge (*DI.* 3.7.1-3; 3.13.7). *Sapientia*, closely related to *veritas*, emerges as an important moral category, which he claims cannot be separated from *religio* without misconstruing both (3.30.4). Religion needs intelligence to know its object, while true wisdom involves recognising and worshipping the world's

15 See O. P. Nicholson, 'The Source of the Dates in Lactantius' Divine Institutes', *JTS* 36, no. 2 (1985): 291–93.

16 Edwards, *Religions*, 32.

17 In Seneca, the golden age's residents possessed innocence but not virtue or justice, because the latter require education, constant testing, and deliberate choice (*Ep.* 90.46). Lactantius usually follows Seneca's pedagogy of virtue (see page 110), but for the presence of virtue in the *Ur-* and *Endzeit* he depends on the Christian tradition.

18 Many classical philosophers also linked virtue to knowledge, but privileged *recta ratio*, philosophy, and contemplating nature as the means for discerning the good (*Cic. Leg.* 1.25, 45; *Tusc.* 2.5.13; 5.25.70; *Sen. Ep.* 90.1-3, 25-29). Lactantius uses Senecan motifs to argue that the philosophers are insufficient guides to virtue, but ultimately denies philosophy the role Seneca gives it of being able to discern how to live morally. Inwood, *Reading Seneca*, 228; Benjamin Hansen, 'Preaching to Seneca: Christ as Stoic Sapiens in Divinae Institutiones IV', *HTR* 111, no. 4 (2018): 545–47; Torre, 'Seneca and the Christian Tradition', 273.

providential ruler (4.3.3-10). Misunderstanding these first principles leads to misconstruing derivative ideas, as the philosophers have done (6.6.1-7, 25-28).

For Lactantius, truth is hidden and cannot be discerned by human sense or intellect. The body darkens human perception, since ignorance is a property of what is human, and knowledge of the divine (7.2.7-9; *ID.* 1.4). Truth can only be known by divine revelation, God being *doctor sapientiae duxque virtutis* (1.1.19; cf. *ID.* 1.8-9).¹⁹ However, Lactantius believes that once the truth has been uncovered its veracity will be obvious and undeniable, like the sun shining in one's face (*DI.* 2.19.5-6).²⁰ He does not envisage sin corrupting noetic function, though it may deter people from seeking the truth.²¹ Hence, humanity's problem is primarily ignorance rather than a sinful disposition, which he illustrates with light and visual metaphors. God is the source of illumination, and admitting God into one's *pectus*, one of Lactantius' favourite images for conversion, allows God to reveal his mystery (*ID.* 1.6). This revelation occurs through the scriptures (*DI.* 7.25.1-2), the church (4.30.11),²² baptism (3.26.9-11; 7.5.22),²³ and ultimately through Christ's teaching and passion (4.12.15; 4.13.1; 4.14.17; 4.20.3-13).²⁴

As Buchheit observes, Lactantius often insists that truth must be revealed when he is confronting paganism.²⁵ The idea is polemical. Lactantius takes most philosophy to be

19 Buchheit, 'Cicero Inspiratus', 366–67. Contra Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 89, who writes 'Lactantius parted company with earlier Christian literature by arguing consistently the view that knowledge about God can come from everyone's own God-given reason and perception.' Cyprian directs a similar idea against the Jews rather than pagans: *Nihil posse Iudaeos intellegere de scripturis, nisi prius crediderint in Christo* (*Quir.* 1.5).

20 A common epistemological metaphor from Plato onwards. Cf. Kendeffy, 'Lactantius as Spokesman of a Mystery', 442–45.

21 However, following pleasures and sinful desires can blunt a person's receptiveness to truth, partly because they desire to preserve their way of life (7.1.12-18).

22 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 133.

23 Wlosok, *Laktanz*, 216–20.

24 Neoplatonists constructed virtue as imitation of the divine (e.g. Iamb. letter 3 fr. 4), a motif Lactantius uses in his *doctor iustitiae* Christology.

25 Vinzenz Buchheit, 'Die Definition Der Gerechtigkeit Bei Laktanz Und Seinen Vorgängern', *Vigiliae Christianae* 33, no. 4 (1979): 360.

unverifiable speculation, using a Ciceronian scepticism which credits humans only with discovering what is false (3.2.15-16).²⁶ His epistemology is indebted to the Pauline idea of divine wisdom's apparent folly (1 Cor. 1:18-31; 3:18-20=Cyp. *Quir.* 3.69). When he agrees with the philosophers, Lactantius says they stumbled over the truth; he takes their disagreements with each other to indicate a mutual ignorance, their immorality as discrediting their ethics, and their restricting wisdom to the educated as showing they do not possess a universally-accessible truth (*DI.* 2.7.2; 3.13.7–16.10; 3.25.2-5; cf. 4.3.1-3; 4.23.8-10).²⁷ The argument against philosophy in Book 3 corresponds to the claims Lactantius will make about Jesus, the true *doctor iustitiae*, in Book 4.

Epistemological questions were pertinent during the great persecution. An Apollonian oracle implied that Christians, polluted through abandoning traditional cult, could no longer perceive truth and reason (Porph. Smith 343F). Hierocles and Porphyry insinuated that Christians, their doctrines, and their holy books were foolish (Eus. *Hier.* 2.1-2; cf. Porph. *Marc.* 24; Lact. *DI.* 5.2.17; 5.3.3, 16). Calling Christians foolish was more than a criticism of their intellectual ability: *voũç* was a Neoplatonistic divine hypostasis, so Christian folly led them away from the divine. Reclaiming Christianity's rationality was essential for defending its claim to worship the true God, and we can see why Lactantius would think truth obscure when so many opposed his religion.

Lactantius responds by using a Hermetic-Gnostic motif of a hidden divine truth which grants immortality but which must be revealed to be comprehended, as Wlosok showed.²⁸ However, contra Wlosok and Loi, Lactantius' use of Hermetic motifs is

26 Bryce, *Library*, 59–60. Similarly, Tertullian and Cyprian prioritised revelation over philosophy, which they thought contained some truth mixed with error (despite Tertullian's famous dictum 'what is there between Athens and Jerusalem?') (Tert. *Praes. Haer.* 7; *An.* 26.1; *Pall.* 6.2; Cyp. *Ep.* 16.55). W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984), 282; Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Latin Church*, 17–18, 36–37.

27 For what this reveals about Late Antique education, see Jean-Yves Guillaumin, 'Arts libéraux et philosophie chez Lactance', in *Autour de Lactance*, ed. Jean-Yves Guillaumin and Stéphane Ratti (Besançon: Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2003), 27–42.

28 Wlosok, *Laktanz*, 209–14. Loi agrees: Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 621.

propaedeutic rather than foundational: Colot argues persuasively that Lactantius uses these motifs to legitimise the Bible as genuinely revelatory.²⁹ As Walter notes, knowledge of God is epistemologically important for Stoics, Neoplatonists, and John's gospel, so cannot by itself be used to determine a Gnostic influence.³⁰ Furthermore, Grossmann shows that Lactantius fills his Hermetic terminology with Christian content. She argues that Lactantius' association of revelation, belief, and knowledge of God derives from the New Testament.³¹ Lactantius ultimately locates revelation in the Christian scriptures, which he ranks higher than the Hermetica, and in the life and especially passion of Jesus,³² a far more embodied source of revelation than those philosophical texts prefer. However, he urges his readers to evaluate ancestral traditions rationally, rather than ceding their reason to the ancients (2.7.1-6). We can, therefore, posit an epistemological hierarchy of revelation above reason above tradition.

Pedagogy of Virtue

Knowing what is good is insufficient for possessing virtue; it must be enacted. Lactantius defines virtue as enduring and resisting evil: *[virtus] nisi agitetur, nisi vexatione adsidua roboretur, non potest esse perfecta, siquidem virtus est perferendorum malorum fortis atque invicta patientia* (3.29.16). Virtue and vice constantly oppose each other and compete for supremacy in a person's life (6.3.13; 7.1.12-18).³³ Lactantius uses the image of two paths, a difficult path which leads to

29 Colot, *Lactance*, 36–38.

30 Jochen Walter, *Pagane Texte und Wertvorstellungen bei Lactanz* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 219.

31 Grossmann, 'Pietas', 172–78. Grossmann's tying Lactantius' ideas to specific biblical passages is less convincing, but her overall assessment of Lactantius' epistemology is sound, since it appeals to broader biblical themes which Lactantius was more likely to have known.

32 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 149.

33 Similarly, philosophers thought the passions needed to be restrained to develop virtue (e.g. Cic. *Off.* 2.18; *Tusc.* 1.31.75; 1.33.80). The rhetoricians pointed to oratory's power to persuade people to virtue (*Rep.* 1.3; Lucr. 1.935-50; 4.10-23; Quint. 2.16.10), using images Lactantius borrows to describe his own task (*DI.* 5.1.14).

heaven, and an easy, luxurious road to judgement, to describe the choice (6.3.1–4.24).³⁴ Virtue is necessarily more difficult and unpleasant than vice, and its value is hidden in the present world (7.1.19-20; 7.5.23-26).³⁵ Here Lactantius aligns with Seneca, who taught that everything virtuous is difficult (Sen. *Ben.* 2.18.1).

Theodicy

Lactantius' favourite theodicy depends on this assumption that virtue is only gained through struggle. For Spanneut, 'C'est là un point dominant de l'éthique de Lactance.'³⁶ Epistemologically, God permits evil's existence so people can identify goodness and learn wisdom (Porph. *Marc.* 24 5.7.3-5; *ID.* 13.13-25).³⁷ And morally, virtue consists in resistance and must be developed amidst pain and opposition (*DI.* 3.12.35-36). The conditions for learning justice are a frugal life, but to become vicious one needs only pleasure (*ID.* 20.1-2). Therefore, God intended evil's existence, deliberately making humans mortal and frail so that they would face this challenge and develop virtue (*DI.* 7.5.15). God is like a general training his army to keep it fit and battle-ready (2.17.1-2; 7.5.27af). Heck sees Christian precedents for this idea (Heb. 12:6; Tert. *Apol.* 37.3);³⁸ it also recalls Seneca's theodicy, which teaches that the gods allow the virtuous to suffer to strengthen their *virtus* through combat with *fortuna* (Sen.

34 For the antecedents of this motif, see Robert E. Aldridge, 'Peter and the "Two Ways"', *Vigiliae Christianae* 53, no. 3 (1999): 233–64; and M. Jack Suggs, 'The Christian Two Ways Tradition: Its Antiquity, Form, and Function', in *Studies in New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, ed. David E. Aune, 1972, 60–74. For Lactantius' interpretation of the tradition, see Pichon, *Lactance*, 133; and Monat, *Lactance et la Bible*, 249–51. Digeser argues that Porphyry's use of a similar motif indicates Lactantius was responding to that philosopher. Digeser, 'Religious Toleration', 140. I am unconvinced because the motif is common, and her arguments that other anti-Christian writers did not use the motif depend on silence.

35 Kendeff, 'Lactantius as Spokesman of a Mystery', 435–39. Given Lactantius' emphasis on the virtuous path's difficulty, Fisher's describing it as 'the hidden secret path by which [one] might escape the miseries of the world and find his way back to his original happy state' seems misleading. Arthur L. Fisher, 'Lactantius' Ideas Relating Christian Truth and Christian Society', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 43, no. 3 (1982): 371.

36 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 145.

37 Cf. *Ascl.* 16.

38 Heck, *Mē Theomachein*, 193.

Prov. 2.4; 4.2-8).³⁹ This is like a father disciplining his son (1.5-6), one of Lactantius' favourite images for God.

As Hansen affirms, Lactantius followed Seneca's solution to the problem of evil (*DI.* 5.22.11-13).⁴⁰ Lactantius does not think humans could be good or receive immortality without fighting and overcoming evil. He thus makes the fall necessary to salvation, and virtue dependent upon evil's existence: good and evil are each other's metaphysical requirements.⁴¹ Coleman shows that he lacked a privation theory of evil and accounted for evil as a substance which God permitted, thus avoiding suggesting that evil was outside of God's control. Lactantius' theodicy originates not in his metaphysics but in his ethics, and he projected its idea of purification through struggle onto his cosmology to preserve God's providential control.⁴² Lactantius uses this theodicy to explain why God allows his people to be persecuted. Protecting the *pax deorum* was key to the persecutors' ideology. To defend his religion, Lactantius had to show his God to be the true cosmic governor. Lactantius attributes the persecution partly to demonic opposition but ultimately says that earthly goods are trivial, and God trains his people in virtue through persecution so that they can receive a greater reward (5.21.3-11). The immortality gained through enduring evil is a greater good than the absence of persecution (7.5.16-18; *ID.* 13.23).

Directing the passions

Despite his ethics' stringency, Lactantius rejects the Stoic claim that one must extirpate the passions to be virtuous (*DI.* 6.15.1-15; cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 4.17.38; 4.38.82-84). Rather, the emotions are natural and help develop virtue, since virtue is directing an

³⁹ Unlike Seneca (*Prov.* 2.1-2), Lactantius does regard suffering as an evil, and rejects the Stoic injunction to apathy (*DI.* 6.15.12-14).

⁴⁰ Hansen, 'Preaching to Seneca', 549. In another context, Grossmann argues that Lactantius' thought is driven by Paul's contrast between flesh and spirit in Gal. 5:17-24, which might also influence Lactantius' theodicy. Grossmann, 'Die Neutestamentlichen Grundlagen', 399-400.

⁴¹ Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 139.

⁴² Coleman, *Lactantius*, 130-31.

emotion towards the proper object (*DI.* 6.14.10; 6.16.7-11). Emotions directed towards earthly ends produce vices, but emotions directed heavenward grow virtues (6.17.13-14).

Grace and Forgiveness

Though Lactantius mentions grace rarely, he does acknowledge a divine assistance in striving for virtue (6.24.20-25), particularly given through baptism (7.5.22).⁴³ He admits the possibility of forgiveness when one repents, likening God to a human father, who is clement towards his children (6.24.1-6). Confession and repentance are prefigured in the Jewish rite of circumcision (4.17.18-20), but are only available in the catholic church (4.30.13) and obtained particularly through almsgiving (6.13.1-14).

Goal of Virtue

The *summum bonum* is Immortality

Lactantius' ethics contain a strong eschatological orientation. Immortality is virtue's goal, proper reward, and the *summum bonum* of human existence.⁴⁴ Identifying the *summum bonum* is Lactantius' test case for whether philosophies possess truth (3.7.6), and he denies that it is pleasure or virtue, which cannot be its own reward (3.11.16; 3.27.4-12; cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 5.15.43; 5.28.80-81; Sen. *Ben.* 4.1.3–2.2).⁴⁵ Rather, the *summum bonum* is virtue's goal, and as courage and other bodily virtues preserve the body so the spirit's virtues keep the spirit from vice and eternal death. Hence virtue's

43 Wlosok, *Laktanz*, 216–22; Mattias Gassman, 'Et Deus et Homo: The Soteriology of Lactantius', *Studia Patristica* 80, no. 6 (n.d.): 40–41. While Wlosok sees the reference to baptism in *DI.* 7.5.22 as indicating Lactantius associated this sacrament with Gnostic rites, Lactantius explicates it in a traditionally Christian sense. Grossmann, 'Pietas', 173–74.

44 See 7.9.1–13.11 on the soul's immortality. There is some ambiguity about whether Lactantius believes the final state will be embodied.

45 Michel Perrin, *L'homme antique et chrétien : l'anthropologie de Lactance, 250-325*, Théologie historique, 59 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1981), 470–73. Cicero thought pursuing virtues for anything but their own sake would lead to *malitia* (*Leg.* 1.48-49). His response to the problem of Gyges' ring is that base character is its own punishment (*Off.* 3.36-39). Lactantius thinks he avoids this problem by deferring virtue's reward to the afterlife, and positing an omniscient God of a higher order than those Cicero considered (*DI.* 6.24.11-20).

proper end is immortality, which is a divine gift (*DI.* 3.12.3-8; 5.18.1-3; cf. 7.8.1; 7.10.8).⁴⁶ Lactantius constructs his ethics in a salvation-historical frame: God created humans so that they would know him, worship him, and thereby win immortality (7.6.1-2; 7.26.5).⁴⁷ By identifying the *summum bonum* as immortality rather than a community-focused εὐδαιμονία (cf. Arist. *NE.* 1.2.7-8), Lactantius individualises virtue's goal. In this regard, he is closer to the Hermetists, who regard the human telos as escape from the body and divinisation (*CH.* 1.28; 10.3-8, 16-19).

Lactantius believes immortality to be the best and only true motivator of ethical behaviour (*DI.* 7.1.3-4; cf. 6.9.18-20) and the only way justice can be perfectly realised (7.5.20). If good behaviour has no eternal reward, Lactantius' culture is foolish to praise those who die to preserve their virtue (3.12.22).⁴⁸ This undergirds his argument that suffering for justice's (and by extension, Christianity's) sake is wise; Lactantius replaces Cicero's idea of a self-sufficient *virtus* with an ethic of martyrdom.⁴⁹ This is his ultimate theodicy: God allows the good to suffer so they can obtain eternal life, presumably a potent hope for Lactantius' persecuted coreligionists.

Being Truly Human

Lactantius links the *summum bonum* to the human telos, arguing that the highest good must be unique to humans and not shared with animals. He identifies the *summum bonum* as religion, since this alone is uniquely human (3.10.1-9; 7.6.1). Thus, rejecting (true) *religio* entails rejecting what is distinctive of humanity, akin to turning earthwards, abandoning one's *humanitas*, and living the life of an animal (*DI.* 3.10.14). Lactantius illustrates this with his characteristic *status rectus* anthropology: the human

46 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 141.

47 Walter, *Pagane Texte*, 229. Those who know God but whose evil deeds outweigh their good ones will also be punished (*DI.* 7.20.6; 7.21.6-8).

48 He also rejects philosophical praise of suicide (Cic. *Tusc.* 1.5.10–11.25; 1.47.113-4; Lucr. 3.830-42, 870-91, 978-1020; *DI.* 3.18.8-10; 3.19.2-5).

49 Heck, '*Iustitia civilis*', 173.

body's upright posture indicates that humans are meant to contemplate heavenly things. Doing so makes one wise, just, worthy of heaven, and truly human; the opposite posture, which represents being obsessed with material things, makes one like earthbound animals (2.18.6).⁵⁰ Lactantius believes that creation physically represents human eschatology.⁵¹

The *status rectus* motif was common, found in classical and Hermetic literature, as well as the church fathers.⁵² Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* says contemplating the heavens teaches virtue and prepares the soul for immortality (Cic. *Rep.* 6.29). Yet Lactantius turns the motif against the philosophers, placing the heavens which Scipio contemplated in the same category as the earthly trivialities Scipio rejects: both are material, and both take one's vision off the true God (*DI.* 3.12.30-31). Lactantius damns all Roman religion and philosophy as bodily, a cornerstone of his religious polemic. He connects *status rectus*, heavenly orientation, virtue, and religion with being human; and materialism, irreligion, and irrationality with being like an animal.

The epistemological need for revelation, the necessity of conflict between good and evil to inculcate virtue, and an eschatological orientation emerge as themes in Lactantius' ethics. We have also seen how the persecution drove Lactantius to formulate his moral theology. These ideas form the foundation on which Lactantius builds his conception of justice, to which we now turn.

50 Wlosok, *Laktanz*, 206–9 sees this as influenced by the Hermetica; Grossmann, 'Pietas', 173–74 doubts this.

51 Monat, *Lactance et la Bible*, 177.

52 Cic. *Leg.* 1.26; *ND.* 2.56.140; Ovid *Met.* 1.84-6; Sen. *Ep.* 90.13; *Ascl.* 6-8; *CH.* NF. fr. 14; Cyp. *Dem.* 16. See Perrin, *L'homme antique et chrétien*, 68–77. Wlosok argues that Lactantius was inspired by the Hermetic treatment of philosophy to incorporate Roman formulae into his soteriology, but the shared elements she identifies between Lactantius and the Hermetica are fairly generically Christian. Wlosok, *Laktanz*, 208–11.

Justice in *Institutes* Books 1–4

It is essential to remember that Lactantius defines justice in a polemical context. Apologetic discourse tends to be constructed *ad hoc*, using premises which the author may not accept to reach conclusions she affirms. The *Institutes* are propaedeutic, so this section will explore how Lactantius' depiction of justice unfolds prior to Book 5's definitive explication of the virtue.

Justice in Books 1-3

Books 1–3 constitute Lactantius' attack on false religion and philosophy, and the following books, including the passages on justice, are part of Lactantius' positive theological case. Only after he has deconstructed false *religio* and *sapientia* can he teach on justice. Lactantius uses *iustitia* and cognates 49 times in Books 1–3 and 55 times in Book 4, fewer than the hundreds of references in Books 5 and 6.⁵³ The negative form is correspondingly rare: *iniustus* occurs five times in Books 1–4, and *iniustitia* four times. Lactantius uses these words in a conventional sense in Books 1–3 and begins to construct his own definition in Book 4.

In Book 1 Lactantius evaluates the Graeco-Roman gods and heroes, in part by the standard of justice. Lactantius reports pagan opinions about justice and, though he disputes whether the gods deserve to be called *iustus*, he does not challenge the virtue's definition itself (1.9.6; 1.11.50-1; 1.12.1-2; 1.13.1-3). In Book 2, Lactantius introduces the idea that the just are those who worship God, who is *Pater et Dominus: iusti autem id est cultores Dei* (2.15.3; cf. 2.1.3-4; 2.12.19; 2.18.6). Souls can be just or unjust; just souls receive an eternal reward (2.12.8, 19; cf. 3.19.3-5); and God's judgement of people is just (2.15.5; 2.17.3). The use of *iusti* and *iniusti* as eschatological categories is common in early Christian literature (e.g. MF. 11.5; 34.12; 35.4; Cyp. *Dem.* 24; *Pat.* 4,

⁵³ He uses the word once in a conventional sense in *Opif.* 1.4, his only extant work written prior to the *Institutes*. It does not add to our picture of how Lactantius' presentation of the virtue developed.

24); thus far Lactantius does not advance *iustitia*'s definition beyond the classical and Christian traditions' uses of the word.

Book 3 begins to refine the definition. Humans were created to worship God, which is serving him *bonis operibus tueri et conservare iustitiam* (DI. 3.9.14-15). Justice is subordinated under worship and parallels good works, so is probably social. Contemplation of God is *venerari et colere communem parentem generis humani* (3.9.16-17). Lactantius concludes Chapter 3.9 by identifying the human telos as *humanitas*. But *humanitas* is nothing other than *iustitia*, which is *pietas*, which is *Dei parentis agnitio* (3.9.19). *Iustitia* has a social resonance like *humanitas*, but was also closely aligned with *pietas* in classical sources; *pietas* has the requisite religious nuance to reach Lactantius' goal, worship of God. *Iustitia* and *pietas* become the linking virtues which allow him to connect being truly human with worshipping the creator. These passages increase the elements of affect, allegiance, and obligation towards the thing contemplated; in 3.9 Lactantius slides Cicero's philosophical injunction of contemplating the heavens towards a Christian concept of worship.

Later in Book 3 Lactantius glosses *scientia* and *virtus* as *Dei cognitio ac iustitia provenire* (3.12.18). He commonly uses pairs of virtues, one cognitive and the other active;⁵⁴ here, *iustitia* represents the more active virtue. Philosophers have failed to teach justice, which is one of the reasons Lactantius rejects their attempts at finding wisdom (3.13.7, 13; 3.18.10); Lactantius will discuss the perfect *doctor iustitiae* in the following book. Lactantius pre-empts his later discussion of justice in his criticism of Plato's abolishing families for Kallipolis' guardian class (3.21.1–22.11). Book 3 centres around wisdom and virtue, which are logically prior to justice. Lactantius' goal is to

54 Carmen Palomo Pinel, 'The Survival of the Classical Idea of Justice in Lactantius' Work', *Studia Patristica* 80, no. 6 (2017): 177–78.

rebut the philosophers, and he anticipates his later definition of justice when doing so allows him to discredit these rival purveyors of wisdom.

Doctor Iustitiae

Books 1–3 tend to use *iustitia* as the pagans did. Lactantius uses pagan *exempla* and authorities because he seeks to undermine Roman religion and philosophy from within itself. In Books 1–3, Lactantius associates justice with worshipping God and virtue, but elaborates on it no further. This makes the *doctor iustitiae* motif, a significant Christological idea, the first constructive thing he says about justice.⁵⁵ If we take the *Institutes*' propaedeutic nature seriously, the first three books being deconstructive and the latter four establishing Lactantius' own theology, the prolegomenon of justice is that it is definitively displayed and understood in Christ.

Lactantius uses the exact expression *doctor iustitiae* only once (4.13.1) but expresses the idea using other expressions, including *magister iustitiae* (4.24.19) and *praeceptor iustitiae* (4.24.10).⁵⁶ As Philonenko observes, the genitive is objective, indicating that Christ teaches justice rather than meaning *doctor iustus*.⁵⁷ Lactantius uses the related expression *docere iustitiam* six times (4.10.1; 4.11.7; 4.12.15; 4.16.5, 14; 4.22.3) and calls Christ *doctor* in the context of his teaching justice five times. Lactantius uses the related expressions *doctor virtutis* four times (4.11.14; 4.24.11, 15, 17), *magister virtutis* twice (4.24.11; 4.26.25), and *docere virtutem* twice (4.16.4; 4.26.26). *Virtus* and *iustitia* seem to be used interchangeably, with *iustitia* slightly more common.

55 Cf. Colot, *Lactance*, 146–47.

56 For the structure of Book 4, see Pierre Monat, ed., *Lactance: Institutions divines IV*, SC 377 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1992), 11–14.

57 Marc Philonenko, 'Magister iustitiae: note sur la christologie de Lactance', in *Paganisme, judaïsme, christianisme*, ed. Marcel Simon (Paris: Ede Boccard, 1978), 228.

Content of the doctor *iustitiae* motif

Lactantius' Christology is one of the better-covered aspects of his thought, and his *doctor iustitiae* motif places Christ's teaching at its centre.⁵⁸ The goal of Christ's teaching was to direct people towards *iustitia* (4.25.5). Other purpose statements for Christ's mission place teaching justice alongside teaching correct worship, revealing wisdom, correcting errant behaviour, and embodying a new law (4.14.17). Yet nowhere does Lactantius specify what one ought to learn about justice from Christ. He does not attribute any speech to Christ nor summarise the gospels' account of his magisterium.⁵⁹

Lactantius commonly associates teaching justice with introducing right worship (4.10.1; 4.11.7). Since God deplored the lack of justice on earth, he sent a teacher, *quasi viva lex*, to teach the identity and worship of the true God and restore his *religio* (4.25.2; cf. 4.13.1). Christ is a living, immediate law, which alludes to the philosophical tradition of the wise lawgiver who understands justice's requirements perfectly (4.17.1-7).⁶⁰

Relatedly, Christ's ministry marks a new stage in God's self-revelation. Christ educates Jews and Gentiles alike about God's nature and requirements (4.12.15),⁶¹ his death reveals God's mystery (4.20.1-5), and his miracles symbolise his enlightening those who were ignorant of God (4.20.12-13; 4.26.4-16).⁶² Christ's incarnation made truth more universally available, an important advance in human epistemic ability.⁶³ This may be why Lactantius begins his discussion of justice with Christology, because

58 As Heck observes, Lactantius bases Book 4 on the prophets rather than the gospels because pagans would find them more persuasive. Heck, 'Lactanz und die Klassiker. Zu Theorie und Praxis der Verwendung heidnischer Literatur in christlicher Apologetik bei Lactanz', 171–72.

59 Monat, *Lactance et la Bible*, 191.

60 Hansen, 'Preaching to Seneca', 546.

61 The Jews are solely a historical phenomenon in Lactantius, and never his contemporaries.

62 Lactantius emphasises the miracles' being predicted and spiritual significance rather than their occurrence *in se*, though he does not deny their historical reality. Monat, *Lactance et la Bible*, 191–92.

63 John McGuckin, 'Researches into the Divine Institutes of Lactantius' (Durham University, 1980), 238; Kendeffy, 'Lactantius as Spokesman of a Mystery'. As Buchheit argues, Lactantius follows two Pauline texts (Rom. 16:25ff.; 1 Cor. 2:7) for Christ fulfilling this role in salvation history. Buchheit, 'Cicero Inspiratus', 365–66.

Christ is the one who enables humans to understand the good. Along with his miracles, Lactantius takes Christ's teaching of justice to demonstrate his divinity (4.16.5).

Justice as a social virtue is a present, though underdeveloped, aspect of Christ's magisterium. Lactantius quotes the tradition of a Davidic ruler who loves justice and rules with a rod of equity (4.13.9, citing Ps. 44:6-7), and who teaches peace (4.16.14-17, citing Ps. 71:6-7; Isa. 53:1-6; *Orac. Sib.* 8.257).⁶⁴ Christ's advent signalled the return of the golden age, which comes through worshipping God, but which has social consequences.⁶⁵ We can also discern *iustitia's* meaning by exploring its negative: *iniustus* describes unfair legal proceedings, of which Jesus' trial is the definitive example (*DI.* 4.18.5, 26). Injustice occurs in parallel to sinfulness, lack of virtue, harmfulness, lust, and a disposition which opposes God (4.25.5-10; 4.26.22).

As with the philosophical sage, Christ's example was didactic. Christ is *ipse virtus et ipse iustitia*, the definitive embodiment of those qualities (4.16.4). In contrast to a long series of philosophers who failed to live out what they endorsed, Christ substantiates his teaching's truth through his perfect life (4.23.3-10).⁶⁶ Christ's obedience to the Father complements his teaching of true worship. As Coleman observes, Jesus teaches more than ideas; he leads people to the worship of the one God. 'What human beings learn from Jesus the pedagogue is not simply the nature of justice, but the *praxis* of justice.'⁶⁷ Alongside true worship, Christ's endurance of suffering and death is a core part of the *doctor iustitiae* motif. Christ suffers crucifixion silently, like the patient suffering of the *sapiens* (4.18.7-9), and surrenders his spirit willingly

64 The motif of a Messianic *regnum iustitiae* is common both in the biblical and patristic traditions. Vinzenz Buchheit, 'Goldene Zeit Und Paradies Auf Erden (Laktanz, Inst. 5,5-8) 2', *Würzburger Jahrbücher Für Die Altertumswissenschaft* 5 (1979): 229–30.

65 Coleman, *Lactantius*, 212.

66 Colot, *Lactance*, 82.

67 Coleman, *Lactantius*, 212. Emphasis original.

(4.19.2).⁶⁸ Lactantius exhorts his readers to gain immortality by imitating Christ's *patientia* (4.26.27), thus teaching an idea of virtue as *mortis dolorisque contemptio* (cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 2.18.43).⁶⁹ But in many places Lactantius fails to exploit the connection between Christ's actions and his understanding of justice. The feeding of the five thousand displays Christ's power, but is not exemplary of charity or feeding the hungry as it could have been. As with Christ's teaching, Lactantius gives little content to Christ's example of justice.

We can conclude that Christ's magisterium, though it draws on key Lactantian motifs, is under-developed. Lactantius names its various elements, such as justice, right worship, living virtuously, and obeying God's new law, but does not describe them more richly than this. Christ established the true temple, but Lactantius does not describe its worship practices. He describes Christ as teaching people how to live correctly but does not explicate what this entails beyond resisting one's lusts and suffering patiently. The *doctor iustitiae* does not teach the content of justice Lactantius will outline in subsequent books, and if Lactantius refrains from describing the contents of these virtues in philosophical terms, neither does he illustrate his claims with gospel stories. He omits a fuller narrative of Jesus' life because he regards it as part of the *sacramentum fidei*, which a person receives only after they have begun to thirst for the scriptures. If such a person read the gospels after reading Lactantius' account of justice, they would understand that Christ ate with lepers out of *aequitas*, healed the sick to display *miser cordia*, endured his arrest patiently to demonstrate non-violence, and taught much more about righteousness, true worship, and resisting one's lusts.

68 Lactantius' description of Jesus' death recalls the *Verrine Orations*, where Cicero rages about the unjust crucifixion of the innocent *municeps* Gavius (*Ferr.* 5.61.158-66.170). Bryce, *Library*, 27-28.

69 Hansen identifies the parallels Lactantius draws between Jesus and the martyrs in *DI.* 4-5. Benjamin Hansen, 'The Martyrs and Their Master: Persecution, Christ and Christian Witness in Lactantius' (Oxford Patristics Conference, Oxford, 2019); Vincenzo Loi, *Lattanzio nella storia del linguaggio e del pensiero teologico pre-niceno* (Zürich: Pas-Verlag, 1970), 263.

Lactantius' failure to connect Christ's example with his subsequent account of justice is deliberate, indicating that he believed this information to be too advanced for his readers. The paucity of content indicates that Lactantius uses the *doctor iustitiae* motif not to teach his readers about justice, nor to emphasise Christ's teaching,⁷⁰ but to raise their view of Christ, as we shall see below.

Sources of the doctor *iustitiae* motif

In order to reflect fully on the motif's rhetorical purpose, however, we must first consider its origin. Philonenko observes that the expression 'master of justice' comes from two Old Testament passages as they came to be translated in Latin Bibles (Hos. 10:12; Joel 2:23). Philonenko takes Lactantius' use of the motif to contain a Qumranian echo, since that tradition had a quasi-Messiah called the 'master of justice'.⁷¹ It seems more likely to me that Lactantius found the expression in Hosea or Joel, though he does not cite these texts. We have seen that Lactantius deliberately refrains from exploiting the connections he could have made between the biblical material and the ethic he teaches in Books 5 and 6, so it seems appropriate to search for the antecedents to the *doctor iustitiae* motif in his pagan sources.

Several sources have been suggested. Digeser finds precedents for Lactantius' Christology in the philosophical-spiritual guides of Hermetic-influenced Neoplatonism – Hermes Trismegistus, Apollonius of Tyana, and Plotinus. All saved their followers through their teaching and example of virtue.⁷² Loi sees Gnostic influence in Christ's redeeming through his teaching and Lactantius' frequent use of enlightenment vocabulary to describe salvation.⁷³ Freund notes that Lactantius gives Christ the philosophic role of *dux* along the path of virtue within the two ways motif, and that he

70 As those who limit Lactantius' Christology to an exemplary soteriology assume.

71 Philonenko, 'Magister iustitiae: note sur la christologie de Lactance', 229–31.

72 Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 77–78.

73 Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 612–13.

inserts Christ into a Lucretian passage which acclaims Epicurus as teacher and saviour (*DI.* 7.27.6-7; cf. *Lucr.* 6.24-28).⁷⁴ Lactantius depicts Christ as truly fulfilling philosophy's role as *dux vitae*. And we can add that Cyprian describes Jesus as an exemplar of *patientia* and *innocentia ipse et ipse iustitia*, ideas which must have influenced Lactantius (*Cyp. Pat.* 6-7).

However, Lactantius adapts these ideas to respond to a Stoic discussion which Cyprian does not address. The most plausible background to Lactantius' *doctor iustitiae* Christology is the Stoic *sapiens*, as Benjamin Hansen has shown. Lactantius presents Christ as the fulfilment of the Stoic hopes for a *sapiens* who would perfectly embody *ratio* and be an imitable source of ethics for those around him (*Sen. Ep.* 115.3-4). Such a figure would appear outwardly poor and miserable to the unwise (66.3-4; *Prov.* 4.8); in reality, he would approach and embody divine wisdom. However, the Stoics despaired of finding such a figure on earth.⁷⁵ Lactantius' presentation of Christ as the incarnation of virtue and law, embodied because virtue must be learned through suffering and fearlessly embracing death so he could communicate virtue in its entirety, asserts that Christ is the *sapiens* for whom the Stoics hoped.⁷⁶ We will revisit these conclusions after examining Lactantius' purpose in using the motif, but initially we may say that Lactantius uses the Latin Bible's expression *doctor iustitiae* to present Christ as the wise teacher of virtue whom the Stoics sought.

Does it indicate a defective Christology?

Some Lactantian scholars see the *doctor iustitiae* motif, with its moral exemplar soteriology, as indicating an ignorance or rejection of more orthodox Christologies.

74 Freund, 'When Romans Become Christians', 72-73. I disagree with Freund that these statements exhaust Lactantius' Christology.

75 Hansen, 'Preaching to Seneca', 545-48.

76 Hansen, 554-56.

Lactantius is called almost Arian⁷⁷ and a gnostic, world-escaping teacher.⁷⁸ One commentator writes, “it was only possible to find Christian doctrine anticipated in pagan philosophy by watering Christianity down to a vague deism.”⁷⁹ As we have noted, our appraisal of Lactantius’ theological skill will colour how we interpret his aims and other arguments.

In Digeser’s eyes, Lactantius intended to open Christianity to ‘philosophical monotheists’, seeking rapprochement with people like Porphyry, who depicted Jesus as a pious sage. In her eyes, Lactantius would regard such people as his co-religionists if they ‘accepted Christ’s message of monotheism and [took] up the life of virtue he exemplified ... anyone would be saved who accepted that Christ articulated such a message’ (cf. *ID.* 2.1-2).⁸⁰ Lactantius does not mention philosophical monotheists in his chapter on heresies (*DI.* 4.29), so Digeser concludes that he accepted their teaching.

However, 4.29 addresses deviations from Christianity, omitting also the Jews who are nevertheless criticised throughout Book 4. Lactantius addresses those whom Digeser would call philosophical monotheists in 5.3.25-26, and criticises them for not abandoning polytheistic worship. Against Digeser’s rapprochement theory, Lactantius makes immortality contingent upon worshipping in Christ’s temple, which for him always means the community of Christians (4.14.2).⁸¹ And his Christology is higher than Digeser allows. He writes *fuit igitur et Deus et homo, inter Deum atque hominem medius constitutus – unde illum Graeci μεσίτην vocant, ut hominem perducere ad Deum*

77 Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 76; Digeser, ‘Religious Toleration’, 141; Loi, *Lattanzio nella storia del linguaggio e del pensiero teologico pre-niceno*, 203–7; Alois Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (London: Mowbray, 1975), 201–2; Basil Studer, ‘La Sotériologie de Lactance’, in *Lactance et Son Temps*, ed. Jacques Fontaine and Michel Perrin (Paris: Editions Beauchesne, 1978), 253–69.

78 Fisher, ‘Lactantius’ Ideas’, 371. Fisher does not acknowledge the contradiction with Lactantius’ also describing Jesus as restoring the earthly golden age.

79 Isichei, *Political Thinking and Social Experience; Some Christian Interpretations of the Roman Empire from Tertullian to Salvian*, 59.

80 Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 83.

81 See Hugo Koch, ‘Der Tempel Gottes Bei Laktanz’, *Philologus* 76 (1920): 235–38.

posset id est ad immortalitatem (4.25.5). As McGuckin notes, *medius* and μεσίτης do not describe a confusion of nature, which would make Christ neither *Deus* nor *homo* but midway between them, but rather Christ's mediatorial function.⁸² Lactantius uses Christ's two births⁸³ and advents to convey Christ's dual natures. Lactantius' *doctor iustitiae* argument depends on Christ's being both human and divine, and he makes worshipping the Son necessary for worshipping the Father (*sicut filium non colit ita ne Patrem quidem*, 4.29.14).⁸⁴ Like much in Lactantius, his Christology is protreptic and catechetical, and his later statements nuance the earlier ones.⁸⁵ McGuckin has demonstrated a large degree of continuity between Lactantius' Christology and other pre-Nicene Christologies; he writes that Lactantius' oddities usually stem from his preserving an ancient doctrine which subsequently died out.⁸⁶ We can conclude that Lactantius sought to place himself within the stream of orthodox Christianity as he knew it.

Furthermore, the *doctor iustitiae* motif does not mean that Lactantius regarded Jesus' work as merely exemplary; it was necessary for salvation.⁸⁷ The loss of right worship caused the fall from the golden age. Christ's restoration of that worship enables the ingression of justice, which is necessary for receiving immortality; thus Christ's teaching of justice is genuinely salvific.⁸⁸ Lactantius also alludes to other understandings

82 McGuckin, 'Researches', 429–30.

83 Digeser writes that he does so to reconcile Christian λόγος theology with Hermetic teaching, since the Hermetica call God 'fatherless and motherless', and the Son had one motherless birth and one fatherless one (4.13.2-4). Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 73. No Hermetist would accept Lactantius' interpretation of these texts. However, if we assume that Lactantius' audience is Roman civil servants rather than Hermetically-inclined philosophers such as Porphyry, his use of the text becomes more plausible: he wants to bolster his position with foreign, antique religious wisdom. McGuckin argues that Lactantius' use of the terms derives from Tert. *Prax.* 27, which seems more likely. McGuckin, 'Researches', 410.

84 Coleman, *Lactantius*, 223. For Lactantius' pneumatology, see Paul McGuckin, 'Spirit Christology: Lactantius and His Sources', *Heythrop Journal* 24, no. 2 (1983): 141–48.

85 Paul McGuckin, 'The Christology of Lactantius', *Studia Patristica* 17, no. 2 (1982): 816.

86 McGuckin, 'Spirit Christology', 145; McGuckin, 'Christology', 813–16; McGuckin, 'Researches', 390–451.

87 Despite the prominence of justice in his thought, Lactantius does not mention the biblical concept of justification, that *iustitia* is a status conferred by God on the believer.

88 Coleman, *Lactantius*, 213–14; McGuckin, 'Christology', 817–18.

of Christ's work.⁸⁹ He is prophet, priest, and king; the conqueror of death and giver of immortality who experienced death for humanity's sake (4.12.15; 4.20.5; 4.26.2, 27-28); the sacrificial, paschal lamb (4.26.37-40); and the priest who founds a new temple (4.25.2). Christians are described as adopted and purified (4.20.12-13; 4.26.11-12).⁹⁰ McGuckin observes that Lactantius' Christology corresponds to the two areas of pagan error he indicts: as priest, Christ restores true *religio*, and as pedagogue, he teaches *sapientia*, giving him authority over both philosophers and traditional religions.⁹¹ Lactantius does not use these motifs from ignorance or rejection of other Christologies, and his Christology is not reducible to the *doctor iustitiae* motif. He affirms the content of the church's Christology, but seeks to present it in a fresh way through the deliberate predominance of *doctor iustitiae*, presumably for apologetic reasons. In what follows, we will investigate why Lactantius expected it to resonate.

Purpose of the doctor *iustitiae* motif

We have observed that though the phrase *doctor iustitiae* comes from the prophet Joel, the strongest influence on Lactantius' use of the motif is the Stoic *sapiens* tradition. And we have seen that Lactantius gives little content to the justice that Christ taught apart from associating it with true worship and *patientia*. Instead, Lactantius describes the main events of Christ's life so that he matches the depiction of the *sapiens* in Stoic literature: Christ embodies virtue perfectly, endures suffering patiently, and functions as a *viva lex* and moral exemplar to his community (4.25.2). The motif is used to commend Jesus to Lactantius' pagan readers rather than to comment on the nature of justice. When we consider the pagan rhetoric prevalent in Lactantius' day we can see why this was necessary. Though regarding Jesus as a pious man, Porphyry rejected the

89 Contra Fisher, 'Lactantius' Ideas', 370.

90 McGuckin, 'Researches', 403-7, 443, 464; Gassman, 'Et Deus et Homo', 37; Coleman, *Lactantius*, 224-25; contra Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 75.

91 McGuckin, 'Researches', 392-93.

idea that the λόγος could become incarnate (Smith 345F; Beck. 66-68F; cf. Orig. *Cels.* 3.41; 4.14; 5.2) and quoted an oracle which called Jesus a ‘dead god’ who was justly executed (Smith 343F; cf. *Cels. Orig.* 2.9, 32; 6.10; 7.53). Hierocles criticised Jesus for being unable to escape execution as Apollonius did (*DI.* 5.3.10).⁹² Christianity’s critics objected particularly to the incarnation and crucifixion, as these ideas challenged philosophical doctrines about divine transcendence. Digeser, for example, thinks that Porphyry wrote his polemic against Christianity to incorporate Jesus within a pagan religious ontology.⁹³

In response, Lactantius’ Christology aims to show the rationality of worshipping the crucified Christ. He writes of the passion that *hic est virtus, hic ratio, hic sermo Dei, hic sapientia* (*Epit.* 37.2; cf. *DI.* 4.16.1). In 4.22, when Lactantius begins to address pagan challenges to Christian doctrines, he explains the import of his *doctor iustitiae* Christology. He encourages his readers to imagine a hypothetical *doctor iustitiae perfectus*, then identifies Jesus with that figure. His opponents claim that God could have taught humans justice without an incarnation, but Lactantius counters that effective teachers need to enact their precepts to be believed. Morally inconsistent legislators are despised and accused of demanding the impossible. The philosophers were not able to match their actions to their teaching, so they concluded that no true *sapiens* had existed (4.23.2-9). The perfect teacher’s life will show that humans are morally culpable for their actions by illustrating that virtue is possible and undercutting arguments for sin from weakness, necessity, or fear. By embodying virtue, the teacher’s precepts are vindicated, and he provides a path where their pupils can also learn to resist sin (4.24.8-

92 Both men rejected the gospels’ veracity, leading Lactantius to narrate his Christology using what he regarded as Jewish, Sibylline, and Hermetic prophecies rather than the New Testament.

93 Digeser, ‘Religious Toleration’, 136–37.

15). But this requires that the teacher be human, subject to the same passions and frailties as others, since resisting such temptations is how one acquires virtue.⁹⁴

Conversely, a perfect teacher must have perfect knowledge and virtue, but no human can perfectly resist the flesh's disposition towards vice. Only a heavenly teacher can teach with authority (4.24.18-9); hence, the perfect teacher must come from heaven (4.24.2-5). Lactantius criticises philosophy for being human, factional, and thus illegitimate in Book 3. By contrast, he depicts Christ as God's spoken Word who has the perfections of eternal divine wisdom, which as we saw must be revealed to be comprehended.⁹⁵ Thus the perfect teacher of justice must be from heaven and yet be embodied, passible, and mortal, so that they can give an example of their teaching. Under these criteria, only an enfleshed divine being could truly be a *doctor iustitiae*. He must be free from the epistemic limitations other humans face and perfectly embody the virtue he teaches.⁹⁶ Rather than being an abhorrence, Lactantius uses Stoic principles to argue that the incarnation is the pagans' only hope of learning true justice. It is in this context that Lactantius labels the Son *et Deus et homo* (4.25.5); though he introduced the perfect teacher as heavenly, Lactantius in fact believes that he needs to be God to teach with God's authority.⁹⁷ Christ's humanity enabled him to give people a genuine example of virtue, and his deity gave him superhuman authority and *virtus* to point people towards justice (4.25.3-5).

We saw earlier that *patientia* is central to the virtues Lactantius attributes to Christ, but this virtue also renders the crucifixion logically necessary. *Patientia* is how the *iustus* responds to violence, enduring harm rather than perpetuating it. Perfect virtue includes *patientia* in suffering, a second reason why the perfect teacher must be

94 Hansen, 'Preaching to Seneca', 555.

95 McGuckin, 'Researches', 455–56.

96 Loi, *Lattanzio nella storia del linguaggio e del pensiero teologico pre-niceno*, 262; Gassman, 'Et Deus et Homo', 38.

97 Coleman, *Lactantius*, 218–19.

embodied (4.24.7, 19). To exemplify justice in every area of life, Christ needed to suffer and to die. Only thus could he teach *doloris quoque patientia mortisque contemptum*, by which virtue is completed (4.26.27).⁹⁸ Like Socrates, Jesus is a faithful teacher who died rather than forsake the good and true.⁹⁹ Seneca writes that by suffering courageously the wise person may surpass God, who does not experience evil and cannot attain the glory of having triumphed over evils (Sen. *Prov.* 6.6). Lactantius replies that his God possesses even this perfection: Jesus' death is presented as willingly embraced and silently endured, the ultimate example of Stoic fearlessness when facing death.¹⁰⁰ And Christ's manner of death, which Lactantius' fellow elites deemed shameful, enables people of every status to imitate him (*DI.* 4.26.30). It was important to Stoics like Seneca that wisdom be accessible to people of all ranks.¹⁰¹ Thus, the crucifixion becomes a display of supreme Stoic virtue: Christ appears decrepit and downtrodden, as Seneca predicted, but is really the source of true wisdom, power, and goodness.

Several scholars see the passion as unimportant for Lactantius' Christology.¹⁰² Lactantius certainly mentions the cross less than other soteriological motifs and omits much that the church has said about its importance.¹⁰³ But he thought that Christ's work would have been incomplete and ineffectual without it; it is the crown of Christ's example of *patientia*, opening the way of immortality to his followers, and promising the believer's triumph over death.¹⁰⁴ Though the cross is not as prominent in Lactantius' presentation as it might be, it is crucial to the substructure of his theology.

98 Cyprian also described Jesus as an exemplar of *patientia* who died so his example of the virtue might be perfect. He describes the crucified Jesus as *innocentia ipse et ipse iustitia*, though he does not connect this to Jesus' ability to teach virtue (*Cyp. Pat.* 6-8).

99 McGuckin, 'Researches', 458.

100 Hansen, 'Preaching to Seneca', 555-56.

101 Miriam T. Griffin and Brad Inwood, eds., *Seneca: On Benefits* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 2.

102 See e.g. Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 75; Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, *Christianity and Political Philosophy* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978), 94; Freund, 'When Romans Become Christians', 68.

103 Edwards argues the cross was generally less prominent in Christian theology before Constantine. Edwards, *Religions*, 241.

104 Monat, *Lactance et la Bible*, 234.

The *doctor iustitiae* motif enables Lactantius to construct a Stoic-flavoured defence of the incarnation and crucifixion, areas of pagan reproach towards Christianity.¹⁰⁵ The Stoic motif specified a *doctor virtutis*; I think Lactantius emphasises *iustitia* as the content of Jesus' teaching partly because of the biblical use of the phrase *doctor iustitiae* and partly because justice is so prominent in the *Institutes*' subsequent books. We can agree with McGuckin, who calls the motif 'a remarkable apologetic feat rather than evidence of a limited theological mind,'¹⁰⁶ and with Pichon, who labels it 'un artifice assez adroit', capable of touching the heart as well as persuading rationally.¹⁰⁷

But if the *doctor iustitiae* motif is an apologetic manoeuvre designed to defend the incarnation and crucifixion, what does Book 4 teach Lactantius' readers about the nature of justice? Firstly, it trains the reader so that they recognise the similarity between Christian martyrs and the *doctor iustitiae*. Hansen has identified that Lactantius uses similar terminology to describe Jesus in Book 4 and the martyrs in Book 5.¹⁰⁸ Book 5 aims to define justice such that Christian martyrs appear wise, and the comparison with Christ is necessary for this argument. Lactantius hopes that when his readers encounter his discussion of the persecution they will see the supreme embodiment of justice reflected in the faces of persecuted Christians. But there is another element of the comparison between Jesus and the Stoic *sapiens* which Hansen has not noticed. Seneca's sage was the only person he deemed to possess true virtue, who alone knew how to assess properly how he should act.¹⁰⁹ But if Lactantius claims that Jesus is the only true *sapiens* (*DI*. 4.23.9-10), then he claims an authority for the ethics Jesus taught which surpasses what any other, non-wise teacher may think. Hansen says that Lactantius locates law and wisdom within the Christian community, but he does not

105 Monat, 234.

106 McGuckin, 'Researches', 465.

107 Pichon, *Lactance*, 126–27.

108 Hansen, 'The Martyrs and Their Master'.

109 Inwood, *Reading Seneca*, 79–80; Hansen, 'Preaching to Seneca', 546.

connect this to Lactantius' context. In fact, the *doctor iustitiae* argument claims Stoic grounds for Christian non-conformity, at a time when Christians were oppressed for deviating from traditional Roman ethics. Ahead of his argument that the martyrs are just and thus wise, Lactantius asserts that only the *doctor iustitiae* and his students have the capacity to perceive what justice entails.

Chapter 4: Defining Justice

The previous chapter showed that Lactantius' readers arrive at *Institutes* Book 5 with only a thin definition of justice and the instruction that one can learn it from Christ. Books 1–4 are preparatory, and in Book 5 Lactantius' discussion reaches the present day and its rhetorical point.¹ Book 5 is where the rubber hits the road, and justice gives it its traction. The present chapter is constructed from a word study on *iustitia* and cognates in Lactantius' corpus, supplemented by studies on key terms such as *pietas*, *aequitas* and *fides*. We focus particularly on *Institutes* 5–7. Previous treatments of Lactantian justice have focused on a few key passages and neglected the overall synthesis of the virtue; to remedy this, I have collated all of Lactantius' uses of *iustitia* and cognates, explored the terms' associated duties, then categorised these and used them to structure the next three chapters. These philological results are situated against the first two chapters' findings, exploring how Lactantius uses his sources to reply to the persecutors' charges.

Throughout Book 5 Lactantius disputes with his pagan readers about justice's definition, why injustice flourishes, and whether justice is foolish. He repeatedly quotes what other authors have said about justice, but he recontextualises quotations to change *iustitia*'s meaning, arguing through word games.² After describing his literary purpose and introducing his opponents (chs. 1–4), Lactantius gives an archaeology of Roman society which links justice to right worship (chs. 5–8). He then explains why the violence of Roman religion destroys justice and piety (chs. 9.1–12.4) and responds to Carneades' claim that justice is foolish, since the persecutors claimed that Christianity

1 Colot, *Lactance*, 78–80.

2 Monat, *Lactance: Institutions divines V*, 1973, 1:58–59.

was dangerously foolish (chs. 12.5–18).³ Finally, he responds to sundry arguments the persecutors used against Christianity (chs. 19–23).

We find that Lactantius divides justice into rendering what is due to God and to other humans; religious and social ethics are treated more fully in Chapters 5 and 6. Here we explore how Lactantius grounds these duties in the divine nature and human ontology, whereby he likens God to a Roman *paterfamilias*, with humans filling the dual roles of his children and servants. The remainder of the present chapter relates Lactantius' definition of justice to the motifs we found in Chapter 2, asking how he uses the ideas of justice as the totality of virtue, justice as ordering according to reason, justice as faithfulness in contracts, and justice as conformity to natural law. The last of these is the most resonant, as Lactantius affirms Cicero's understanding of natural law but grounds it in his divine *paterfamilias* motif rather than Cicero's cosmopolis.

Lactantius uses different language to explain his definition of justice in different contexts, which Loi reads as a fundamental tension within Lactantius' definition of justice.⁴ However, my study has found no reason to reject the idea that a consistent framework underlies Lactantius' variable vocabulary. Progress in research since Loi's article enables us to identify the logic that undergirds Lactantius' conception of justice, enabling us to integrate Lactantius' different terms into a coherent whole.

Justice' relation to virtue

Justice has a central place in Lactantius' ethics. He gives no systematic account of the cardinal or theological virtues, instead summarising morality using his conception of justice.⁵ Lactantius begins his account of justice by designating it *summa virtus aut fons*

3 Christian justice as responding to charges of impiety and folly is made explicit in *Epit.* 50.4.

4 Vincenzo Loi, 'La Funzione Sociale Della Iustitia Nella Polemica Anti-Pagana Di Lattanzio', in *Letterature Comparate*, ed. Ettore Paratore (Bologna: Pàtron, 1981), 843.

5 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 155–56.

ipse virtutis (DI. 5.5.1). It is *summa virtus* (5.14.7), or better, the summation of all the virtues (*iustitia quamvis omnes simul virtutes amplectatur*, 5.14.9).⁶ *Virtus* and *iustitia* are closely related to worship: *scientia est Deum nosse, virtus colere; in illo sapientia, in hoc iustitia continetur* (6.5.19). Worship of God teaches virtue; fulfilling one's religious duty is essential for developing justice (7.5.27). Justice governs Lactantius' understanding of the other virtues (1.9.6). It is destroyed by sins, crimes, or lack of virtue, and *iniustitia* is often associated with indulging fleshly desires (5.9.18, 6.5.13-19); this is justice or righteousness in the biblical sense of eschewing sin.⁷ Justice requires successively expunging evil deeds, words, and thoughts from oneself (6.13.6). As justice is the collection of virtues, removing one virtue means justice is abolished as well.⁸ Since justice requires right worship, which only the Christians practise, Lactantius argues that only Christians can be just (6.17.29). Because *iustitia* denotes a religious identity, its ethical sense can then be exclusively attributed to members of that religion. However, elsewhere Lactantius says that *pietas summa virtus est* (5.22.8) and the necessary virtue to make the others animate or productive (6.9.8-12). This shows how closely *pietas* and *iustitia* are related for Lactantius; *pietas* is part and generative of justice, and Lactantius can logically call them both *summa virtus*.

Archaeology of Justice

Firstly, we will explore Lactantius' account of prehistory, which explains how this chapter's themes connect through narrative.⁹ He does not begin his account of justice with philosophical argumentation but with this story. In Lactantius' view, prehistory

6 Similarly, Cicero called *iustitia* the *domina et regina virtutum* (*Off.* 3.28). The Sermon on the Mount also uses *δικαιοσύνη* to indicate virtue *in toto*. Perkins, 'Justice, NT', 475.

7 Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 594–95.

8 The Stoics said that virtue needs to be perfect to be present at all (e.g. Cic. *Tusc.* 2.14.32). For the way that Cicero uses justice to evaluate the expression of other virtues, see A. A. Long, 'Cicero's Politics in *De Officiis*', in *Justice and Generosity*, ed. Andre Laks and Malcolm Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 225–29.

9 For the way Lactantius' chronology of world history underlies his accounts of protology and eschatology, see Nicholson, 'The Source of the Dates in Lactantius' *Divine Institutes*'.

gives tangible evidence for the connection between religious and social virtues. Following the poets, he claims that justice existed on earth during Saturn's reign but fled to heaven because of human evil after Jupiter's accession (5.5.2), contradicting the pagan story that justice fled to Jupiter's celestial kingdom (cf. Cic. *Arat.* 23; Virg. *Aen.* 8.314ff). In the golden age only the true God was worshipped, and therefore (*ideo*) there were *neque dissensiones neque inimicitiae neque bella*; people lived simply and generously (*DI.* 5.5.3-8).¹⁰ Lactantius invokes the idea of justice as holistic societal flourishing, common to the classical and biblical traditions.

This peace was ruptured by Jupiter declaring war on his father and deifying himself (5.5.9; 5.6.6-8).¹¹ By worshipping him, people lost the knowledge of good and evil and destroyed the *communitas vitae* and *foedus societatis humanae* (5.5.13). The people imitated the king's vice, impiety became habitual, greed and hatred raged, and in Lactantius' evocative phrase, they sought *gloria sibi ex humano sanguine* (5.5.14; 5.6.9-10).¹² They diverted God's providential blessings into private stores, authorising laws to protect their stolen goods, and created honours and offices to cement their superiority into a tyranny (5.6.1-5).¹³ Worship failed first, then moral knowledge, then the social compact, and finally society descended into violence. Lactantius summarises the account: the golden age was ended by *desertio divinae religionis*, the only effective motivator for *homo hominem carum habeat* and human fraternity (5.6.12).¹⁴ Since

10 Lactantius illustrates this picture with quotations from Aratus (112-13), Cicero (*Arat.* 21), Virgil (*Georg.* 1.126-7), and Ovid (*Met.* 1.111). Lactantius concludes that Saturn's kingdom was monotheistic because the tradition said it was just, for which he thinks monotheism is the necessary precondition. Vinzenz Buchheit, 'Goldene Zeit Und Paradies Auf Erden (Laktanz, Inst. 5,5-8) 1', *Würzburger Jahrbücher Für Die Altertumswissenschaft* 4 (1978): 168.

11 Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 32-40 sees this as a criticism of the tetrarchy. Lactantius' polemic against Jupiter and Hercules is definitely directed against the emperors, but as Lactantius did not criticise the tetrarchs for self-deification in *de Mortibus*, where his polemic is strongest, it is unlikely he does so here.

12 Lactantius sees this as foreshadowing the treatment of Christians under the tetrarchy (5.5.11-12).

13 Lactantius provocatively alludes to symbols of magistrates' authority. Bowen and Garnsey, *Lactantius: Divine Institutes*, 293 n. 33.

14 The tetrarchs claimed to have restored the golden age, a claim Lactantius' account seeks to undermine. Buchheit, 'Goldene Zeit 1', 185.

Lactantius views the human telos as worship, he interprets human history through this anthropological-liturgical lens.¹⁵

In this passage, justice is the social flourishing which flows from right worship; it intimates the key themes of Lactantian ethics. Justice entails treating others as equals; non-violence; and sharing resources, which are God's fatherly provision given to all. Stated positively, the *iustitiae officia* are *humanitas*, *aequitas*, and *misericordia*, the main threads of Lactantius' social ethics (5.6.4).¹⁶ Lactantius appeals to God's divine fatherhood to create fraternal obligations among humanity.

Lactantius' archaeology was influenced by the classical tradition of a primeval golden age. Common features of this tradition are holding the abundantly-fertile earth in common and the flourishing of justice (Virg. *Georg.* 1.125-8; Lucr. 2.1144-74). During Seneca's golden age, wise men ruled, who ensured all had sufficient resources and protected the weaker from exploitation by the stronger. Peace prevailed, and all had equal care for each other (*Ep.* 90.5, 40-41). The main reason for the golden age's collapse was *avaritia* (*Ep.* 90.3, 38-39). After this, tyrants arose and destroyed the *societas iuris humani* and its requirement of harmlessness (*Ben.* 7.19.8-9; cf. *Clem.* 1.19.1-2).¹⁷

Like these authors, Lactantius affirms common ownership of nature's abundance during the golden age, but adds violence and especially impiety to Seneca's reasons for its fall.¹⁸ His contribution to the tradition is to locate polytheism as the root of social evil.¹⁹ Cicero's archaeology of Roman kingship does not describe the golden age but does comment on the relationship between virtue and Roman religion. Numa, Romulus'

15 Coleman, *Lactantius*, 231.

16 These terms commonly entail non-violence and charitable giving. Buchheit sees this passage as enjoining right worship and charity, but in fact it summarises Lactantius' entire social ethic. Buchheit, 'Die Definition Der Gerechtigkeit', 358.

17 Inwood, *Reading Seneca*, 230-31.

18 He emphasises violence to show the persecutors cannot have inaugurated a golden age.

19 Pichon, *Lactance*, 138.

legendary successor, distributed common land among the people to encourage agriculture and discourage plundering. He codified Roman religion and turned their martial spirit towards upholding the rites and games he instituted. By promoting *iustitia*, *fides* and *religio*, he secured the state's longevity (Cic. *Rep.* 2.26-27). Cicero identifies religion and private property, which discourages theft, as forces which pacify society. Lactantius evaluates Numa differently: Rome's ancient king introduced new superstitions which he knew were false (*DI.* 1.22.1-8). His privatisation of common land was an act of violence against the poor which caused them to be enslaved, taxed, and shut off from God's common blessings. His innovations were inherently violent, involving bloody sacrifices to immoral gods and the destruction of human life for entertainment, which made violence habitual. Lactantius asserts, contra Cicero, that the institutions Numa introduced made Roman society more violent and unjust.

Some scholars see contradictions between Lactantius' golden age archaeology and the protology of Book 2, which attributes the fall to Adam's error rather than Jupiter's self-deification (2.12.15-20). Boas writes that Lactantius was unaware of the contradiction and kept the stories in separate compartments of his mind.²⁰ However, Nicholson has shown that Lactantius' account of world history integrates the stories coherently. *Ur*-monotheism remained after Adam's fall, but was gradually abandoned by societies after Noah's flood, starting with the Canaanites and ending with Rome (2.13.7-13).²¹ The Jovian fall in Book 5 is one instance of this trend. Buchheit identifies Lactantian allusions to the typological interpretation of Christ and the church as paradises, which restores the beatitude of the original state.²² As with the church, the

20 George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 36–37; see also Louis J. Swift, 'Lactantius and the Golden Age', *American Journal of Philology*, 1968, 144–56.

21 Nicholson, 'The Source of the Dates in Lactantius' *Divine Institutes*', 291–93.

22 Buchheit, 'Goldene Zeit 2', 227–29.

golden age realised paradise partially, which explains how, within Lactantius' pedagogy of virtue, people could be virtuous while evil was generally absent.

The account is peppered with quotations from classical poets, indicating that Lactantius sought to present his reformulation of Roman prehistory as authoritative for Romans. *Iustitia* is typically social, and Lactantius connects this social justice, which his audience would have accepted, to right worship. He then uses the connection to impugn Roman religion because of its violence. By depicting ancient worship as monotheistic, Lactantius asserts that Christians maintained ancient doctrine more faithfully than pagans,²³ addressing the challenge that Christians were dangerous innovators who abandoned their ancestors' wisdom.²⁴ By tying societal decay to polytheism, he undercuts the further charge that Christians destroy society. Rather, Lactantius attributes the monotheism, asceticism, and charity that characterised his Christian community to the golden age, and describes Christ as its inaugurator (*DI.* 5.7.1–8.3).²⁵ Lactantius begins his account of justice with a narrative that links it to activities the Christians plausibly practised, bolstering his claim that they possess the true worship which safeguards justice and which should be tolerated and adopted.

Definitions: *Pietas* and *Aequitas*

Having surveyed how Lactantius prepares his readers for his redefinition of justice, we are now equipped to consider the content he gives it. This section will map out how Lactantius describes justice and then begin to explore its sources and

23 Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, 'Persecution and the Art of Reading: Lactantius, Porphyry, and the Rules for Reading Sacred Texts', *Studia Patristica* 80, no. 6 (2017): 141.

24 Interestingly, Porphyry also retold prehistory to legitimise his preferred worship practices, attributing animal sacrifice to the violent period after the fall from a peaceful and vegetarian golden age (*Abst.* 2.5.1–12.2; 4.2.1–9). While I do not think this similarity demands that Lactantius knew Porphyry's *de Abstinencia*, it shows the potency of the argument from antiquity.

25 Pichon, *Lactance*, 138; Buchheit, 'Goldene Zeit 2', 222.

conceptual background, though our ultimate conclusions on that topic are reserved for the final chapter.

At the centre of Book 5, while debating with Carneades about whether justice is foolish, Lactantius gives his first definition of justice. He begins by criticising pagan philosophers' inability to understand justice, which he attributes to their ignorance of its foundations. Justice is the *summa virtus, cuius origo in religione, ratio in aequitate est* (5.14.7). He says further:

iustitia quamvis omnes simul virtutes amplectatur, tamen duae sunt omnium principales quae ab ea divelli separarique non possunt, pietas et aequitas. nam fides temperantia probitas innocentia integritas et cetera eiusmodi vel natura vel institutis parentum possunt esse in iis hominibus qui iustitiam nesciunt, sicuti semper fuerunt. nam Romani veteres, qui iustitia gloriari solebant, iis utique virtutibus gloriabantur quae, ut dixi, proficisci a iustitia possunt et ab ipso fonte secerni. pietas vero et aequitas quasi venae sunt eius, his enim duobus fontibus constat tota iustitia. sed caput eius et origo in illo primo est, in secundo vis omnis ac ratio (5.14.9-11).

Justice is the highest virtue (*summa virtus*, §7), and the summation of all other virtues (*omnes ... virtutes amplectatur*, §9).²⁶ It is constituted by two other virtues, *pietas* and *aequitas*, which cannot be separated from it (*ab ea divelli separarique non possunt*) and which comprise justice in its totality (*his enim duobus fontibus constat tota iustitia*). He uses the images of veins and springs to describe how these two virtues flow together to form justice. All justice's duties and dispositions can be resolved into either *pietas* or *aequitas*, and when these virtues are absent, it departs. As the necessary, constitutive parts of justice, *pietas* and *aequitas* relate to justice differently to the other virtues. It is possible to display other virtues, listed in section 10, without being just, but if one is *pious* and *aequus* one has all the qualities which make a person *iustus*. Though one could read this statement as implying the possibility of being *pious* without being

26 Reminiscent of Plato's definition of justice as the harmonious function of the other virtues.

iustus, we will see that *iustitia* is expressed in *pietas*, and *aequitas* is one way *pietas* is expressed socially; thus, the virtues are inseparable.

However, *pietas* and *aequitas* relate to justice in different ways: *pietas* is its source (*caput et origo*), while *aequitas* is its customary expression (*vis omnis ac ratio*). Later Lactantius will return to the image of *pietas* as a *caput*, writing that as a head animates a body, so a person's justice is like a body, comprised of many constituent virtues but only productive and alive when *pietas*, the head, is present (6.9.8-12). Altering or removing either source of justice destroys *virtus* and *veritas*, and justice flees (5.15.1).

Lactantius then explains how he understands *pietas* and *aequitas*. *Pietas*²⁷ is defined as *Dei notio*, a formulation attributed to Hermes Trismegistus (5.14.11), then as *cognoscere Deum*. The highest form of *cognitio* is *colere* or *religio Dei tenere* (5.14.12). Lactantius slides the Hermetica's rational, cognitive *notio* into *religio*, which for Lactantius is affective and communal. And the singular *Dei* is crucial: Plato's search for justice was thwarted by his tolerance of *deorum religiones*, which are contrary to *pietas* (5.14.13). Anyone who worships improperly, by which Lactantius means worshipping anything but the Christian deity described in Books 1–4, cannot be just, but this worship requires revelation.²⁸ And though, as we noted, Lactantius defined *iustitia* minimally before Book 5, this definition prompts the reader to realise that the previous discussions of *pietas* and the attacks on false religion and wisdom were also educating them in justice.

Lactantius defines *aequitas* not as *bene iudicandi*, though the just person will do this, but *se cum ceteris coaequandi*, which Cicero called *aequabilitas*. Walter translates

27 *Pietas* was a richly resonant virtue in Roman self-understanding, and meant fulfilling one's duty to family, homeland, and the gods. We explore how Lactantius interacts with this definition in Chapter 4; to anticipate that conclusion, Lactantius resolves *pietas*' duties into two spheres, to God and to humans, through using his *paterfamilias* motif.

28 Walter, *Pagane Texte*, 218.

Lactantius' *aequitas* as Gleichheitsbewußtsein, literally a consciousness of equality.²⁹ Lactantius distinguishes his *aequitas* from the classical sense of the virtue to claim it for the Christians. This equality is creational: God *omnes aequos id est pares esse voluit* and so bestowed his providential blessings and hope of immortality upon all. God is a Father to all, so humans should regard each other not as *servi* or *domini* but *liberi aequo iuri* (5.14.15-17). Lactantius' anthropology and theology generates his social ethics, and both can be expressed through his *paterfamilias* metaphor, as we will see below. Lactantius then criticises the Roman class system: the poor are those who lack justice, and no one is *dives*, *egregius*, *clarissimus*, *perfectissimus* except those who possess *omnes gradus virtutis* (5.14.18).³⁰ Rome's class distinctions and honours are meaningless or destructive, and their presence destroys the possibility of justice being realised within her empire (5.14.19-20).³¹ In the next chapter, Lactantius addresses the church's varied social composition; *aequitas* requires treating all as equal, irrespective of their social classes, and regarding them as siblings (5.15.2-3). Three more reasons for such behaviour are given: God measures people by virtue, not by status; the incarnate Christ made himself *inferioribus coaequavit*; and God rewards making oneself lowly rather than fighting for short-lived honours (5.15.6-11).

In this passage, *pietas* and *aequitas* resolve into one's duty to God, or religious ethics, and one's duties to humans, or social ethics. This division is made explicit in a later definition of justice which occurs at the fulcrum of Book 6.³² Having discussed *quid debeatur Deo*, Lactantius turns to *quid homini tribuendum sit* (6.10.1).³³ He continues to bifurcate obligations to God and to humans throughout the discussion (e.g.

29 Walter, 216.

30 These terms denoted the different ranks or *gradus* of Roman bureaucracy.

31 This passage reveals the absoluteness of Lactantius' requirements of justice. See Buchheit, 'Die Definition Der Gerechtigkeit', 359.

32 See Colot, 'Pietas', 2001, 27-28; and Ingremeau, 'Lactance et la Justice', 49 for the structure of Book 6.

33 Colot, *Lactance*, 108.

6.12.4). In this next definition of justice, the idea of duty is explicit: *primum iustitiae officium est coniungi cum Deo, secundum, cum homine. Sed illud primum religio dicitur, hoc secundum misericordia vel humanitas nominatur*. This latter virtue contains *vitae communis ratio* (6.10.2). *Coniungi*, meaning to unite or yoke, recalls Lactantius' definition of *religio*, to be bound to God (*re-ligare*) by the obligation of *pietas* (4.28.3), and we can see the close relationship between *religio* here and *pietas* in 5.14.

There is more variation in Lactantius' use of terminology for the social obligation in Book 6's definition of justice. Instead of *aequitas*, he specifies *misericordia*, *humanitas*, and later *pietas* as virtues which cause humans to care for, love, and cherish each other (*tueri, diligere, fovere*, 6.10.3-4). The virtues also involve offering *auxilium* and refraining from harm and violence. Again, Lactantius appeals to humanity's interrelatedness, this time located in the universal descent from Adam which makes all humans consanguineous (6.10.3-10, 19). The social virtues are also worshipful: everything given to humans is also given to God, *quia homo Dei simulacrum est* (6.10.1). This passage is more affective than 5.14–15 and links the human telos to preserving the community of humanity. Lactantius' work should be read as progressively revealing his opinions, so the addition of divine law as loving God and fellow humans is telling; it moves justice towards a more characteristically Christian conception of law.

Lactantius describes justice yet again in *de Ira Dei*, a less exoteric work. It is *iustissimus* to love (*amare*) the providential God and humans with whom we form a common society (*ID.* 14.3). These duties are *religio ac iustitia*. *Deus ergo vult omnes homines esse iustos, id est Deum et hominem caros habere, Deum scilicet honorare tamquam parentem, hominem diligere velut fratrem; in his enim duobus tota iustitia*

consistit. Acting thusly fulfills divine law (14.4-6).³⁴ The repeated use of affectionate, relational language shows that Lactantius is again drawing from the Christian tradition. Also noteworthy his use of *iustitia* both for the specifically social virtue as well as virtue as a whole.

Finally, in the *Epitome* Lactantius introduces Carneades' refutation of justice using classical motifs. It gives to each their own (*suum cuique tribuat*) and seeks *aequitas*; it is an outward-directed virtue which aims at benefitting others and does not seek its own *utilitas* but rather the interests of others.³⁵ He accuses philosophers of restricting justice to magistrates and denying its use among ordinary people; Lactantius thinks all can possess justice (*Epit.* 50.5-7). *Iustitia* is *veri Dei cultus*, or *Deum agnoscere ut parentem, venerari ut Dominum eiusque legi et praeceptis obtemperare*. This is Lactantius' characteristically Christian definition of the virtue, and he says that failure to grasp it meant that Carneades could overturn the philosophers' inadequate descriptions of justice (51.1).

Justice has two *officia*: *religio* owed to God as Father and *caritas* owed to humans (29.4-9).³⁶ Justice's first duty is to acknowledge (*agnoscere*) God: *metuere ut Dominum, diligere ut Patrem* (54.4). Social virtue requires sparing (*parcere*) and loving (*diligere*) others, enduring evils and despising pleasures, using riches only to benefit the poor, and not injuring anyone, even in retaliation (29.4-9). Secondly, justice requires acknowledging humans as siblings: our creation by the same God on the same terms establishes a *vinculum* and *societas inter se hominum* (54.5-6). The *radix iustitiae* and *fundamentum aequitatis* is not doing to another what you would not wish done to

34 The language of love makes the reference to the Christian great commandment (Matt. 22.37-40 and parallels) more explicit than in the earlier texts. See below.

35 As Pichon noted, the *Epitome* is not just a restatement of the *Institutes*; rather, Lactantius took the opportunity to reformulate his ideas in this very different political climate. Pichon, *Lactance*, 154 ff.

36 Lactantius introduces justice earlier in the *Epitome* than in the *Institutes*, indicating that the propaedeutic function is less important in the later work. He uses *caritas* here since his audience is more exclusively Christian.

yourself, helping (*prodesse*) and refraining from harming (*non nocere*) others (55.3-5). These chapters summarise all the elements which form Lactantius' definition of justice, including his polyvalent social ethics.

These passages make explicit that Lactantius' primary definition of justice is due rendering, *cuique suum tribuere*, giving to God and humans what they deserve. The language of rights and obligations reveals a legal mindset which was characteristic of Romans.³⁷ Walter writes that Lactantius rejects *suum cuique* as his definition of *aequitas*,³⁸ but Lactantius actually rejects the restriction of *aequitas* to the legal sphere, since he explicitly affirms *suum cuique tribuere* in *Epit.* 50.5. Lactantius accepts the principle of justice as right distribution but denies that pagans can assess what is deserved accurately. He consistently divides ethics into obligations to God and fellow humans, though he can use different virtues to summarise each obligation. For this reason I disagree with Loi, who claims that the different vocabulary indicates a conceptual discrepancy or even incompatibility between the different formulations.³⁹ As Buchheit notes, the different passages have a consistent structure and content.⁴⁰ Loi has failed to notice that each definition of justice is undergirded by appeals to God's rights as Father and to human fraternity: the different social virtues thus become the components of the fraternal piety which Lactantius says is owed to all. The failure to treat substantially with Lactantius' *paterfamilias* language limits how effectively Loi can explain Lactantius' concept of justice.

37 Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 586.

38 Walter, *Pagane Texte*, 221.

39 Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 588; cf. Monat, *Lactance: Institutions divines V*, 1973, 1:58f.

40 Buchheit, 'Die Definition Der Gerechtigkeit', 361; Ingremeau, 'Lactance et la Justice', 49. Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 155–56 agrees.

Potential Sources

Having explored the contours of Lactantius' conception of justice, we turn to its potential sources. Ultimately, we must reserve judgement until the end of the thesis, since the following exploration of his ethics will better equip us to respond to the question. Lactantius' terminology for justice's duties is variable, but the two-fold structure of duty to God and duty to humans is constant, indicating the latter is more fundamental to the concept. The labels he chooses are driven by rhetorical purpose. However, searching for precedents to his terminology is also instructive, particularly the triad of *iustitia-pietas-aequitas* he specifies in *DI*. 5.14. Ultimately, however, it is not only the terminology he uses but the content he gives it which tells us about his ideas' origins.

Several scholars have considered this question, and they arrived at various conclusions. Walter, Buchheit, and Grossmann argue that Lactantius' understanding of justice is basically biblical. Digeser locates it in Cicero, though also attributing significant Neoplatonic, juristic, and Hermetic influence to Lactantius' theology.⁴¹ Colot takes Cicero to be Lactantius' primary interlocutor, and Wlosok argues for a substantial gnostic-Hermetic influence. One of the fullest expositions of Lactantius' view of justice is Loi's article 'Concetto di Iustitia', where he attributes different components of Lactantius' thought to different sources. Though finding some biblical influence, he concludes that Lactantius has transposed a Stoic frame of virtue into a gnostic or Hermetic key.⁴² Monat agrees, and regards the *Epitome* as reprising the question from a more clearly Christian perspective.⁴³ Among these perspectives, there is also disagreement about whether Lactantius is ultimately trying to reconcile Christian

41 Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 48, 60–63 makes Ulpian important for Lactantius' view of justice. His definition revolves around rendering to each their own and refraining from harm (*Just. Dig.* 1.1.1.10). Lactantius would affirm both ideas, but they do not elucidate his framework for understanding justice.

42 Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 620.

43 Monat, *Lactance: Institutions divines V*, 1973, 1:18.

thought with his pagan sources, or whether his use of pagan authorities is more polemical and hostile. These suggestions identify the lines of enquiry, though we note the relative absence of the Sibylline Oracles and Lactantius' patristic forebears in previous scholarship. These authors' disagreement warrants our taking a fresh look at the question.

Platonists

The division of ethics into religious and social parts has precedents in both classical and Christian sources. These are often designated εὐσεβεία/*pietas* and δικαιοσύνη/*iustitia*; justice can also be designated the highest virtue.⁴⁴ Firstly, we will consider the Platonists, relevant because the Neoplatonists are often posited as Lactantius' antagonists, and theirs was the dominant philosophy of his period. In Plato's *Euthyphro*, Socrates and Euthyphro suggest that δικαιοσύνη can be divided into ὁσιότης, giving the gods their due, and an obligation towards humans (*Euth.* 12de). Having accepted that holiness is a subset of justice, Euthyphro suggests it is the justice of fulfilling one's obligations to the gods, which Socrates accepts (12d–13e). This bipartite structure of justice does not recur in any of Plato's more mature dialogues, though scholars suggest that the later Plato still assumes piety to be a subset of justice.⁴⁵ Buchheit concedes the formal similarities between the *Euthyphro* and Lactantius' definition are striking but says we do not know that Lactantius knew Plato, and none of Plato's successors transmitted the definition to Lactantius.⁴⁶ He therefore thinks it unjustified to posit a connection between Platonic and Lactantian justice.

44 Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 605.

45 Rachana Kamtekar, 'Ethics and Politics in Socrates' Defense of Justice', in *Plato's 'Republic': A Critical Guide*, ed. Mark L. McPherran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 74; Darrell Dobbs, 'The Piety of Thought in Plato's "Republic", Book I', *The American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (1994): 670.

46 Buchheit, 'Die Definition Der Gerechtigkeit', 363.

However, there are plausible intermediaries through whom Lactantius may have encountered Platonic ideas, including Apuleius' Latin epitome *de Platone*. Ogilvie suggests that Lactantius may have known Plato through an anthology;⁴⁷ Apuleius' is a plausible candidate. Lactantius may well have read his countryman Apuleius' epitome during his education, since the latter was one of the most prominent Latin authors of the second century. Contra Buchheit, Plato's successors did continue to use the two-fold division of justice. Apuleius associates *iustitia* with *religiositas*, which translates ὁσιότης. *Religiositas* honours and appeases the divine, while *iustitia* preserves human society (*hominum societatis et concordiae remedium atque medicina est*, Apul. Plat. 2.7). Apuleius divides ethics into obligations to the divine and humans, though he uses *iustitia* to denote only the social virtue. Further, Apuleius did not regard justice as summarising all virtues, but restricts it to the fourth cardinal virtue.

Though Porphyry is often named as Lactantius' interlocutor, his thought has not been linked to Lactantius' definition of justice. Porphyry links justice to piety, along with abstinence, lawfulness and reason. He gives a negative version of the bipartite division of justice: ὁ ἄδικος is ἀνόσιος towards god and ancestors and παράνομος towards all other people; to be such is ἀσεβής, ἄθεος καὶ ἱερόσυλος (Porph. Marc. 14).⁴⁸ Porphyry divides justice into two domains, though he includes ancestors in the first domain. The context condemns those who love bodily things as ἄθεος καὶ μιάρός; he likely criticised Christians using similar terms, since he thought they worshipped a lowly *daimon*. We note that Christians were charged with impiety towards ancestors and lawlessness in the persecution (cf. Beck. 6F).

47 Ogilvie, *The Library of Lactantius*, 80–81.

48 The *Letter to Marcella* is usually dated to the early fourth century. It appears intended for circulation beyond Marcella, and Lactantius could have known it; even if he did not, Porphyry shows these ideas were current and intelligible in Lactantius' time. See Whittaker, 'The Purpose of Porphyry's Letter to Marcella', 162–63.

Another passage connects justice and piety even more explicitly: piety towards the gods is justice in its finest aspect (τῆς δὲ δικαιοσύνης τὸ κάλλιστον ἐν τῇ πρὸς τοὺς θεοὺς εὐσεβείᾳ κεκτημένης, *Abst.* 3.1.2), essentially what Plato affirms in the *Euthyphro*. Porphyry then acknowledges justice's duties towards other people and says that these two spheres of duties do not conflict with each other. Porphyry provides evidence that a two-fold ethical division was used in Lactantius' day and connects justice to the arguments used in the persecution. Even if Porphyry did not actively foment violence against Christians himself, his writing indicates that others would have combined these ideas while criticising Christianity. And, as we shall see, Lactantius responds to each of these ideas, showing that Christians show all the elements of true justice while their pagan opponents fail each criterion. All three Platonists divide justice into human and divine obligations, and Plato and Porphyry designate the religious duty with word which could be translated as *pietas*, though Apuleius, the only Latin author, uses *religiositas* instead. However, they use justice and lawfulness to describe the social virtue, rather than *aequitas* like Lactantius.

Cicero

A bipartite division of ethics is also attested in the Roman philosophers, who provide a closer parallel to Lactantius' understanding of justice. Seneca writes that philosophy teaches *colere divina, humana diligere* (*Ep.* 90.3), though as we saw he gives no definition of justice. Like Plato, Cicero's most prominent descriptions of justice do not divide it into divine and human parts; in fact, Cicero usually uses *iustitia* as a social virtue. Cicero locates justice in the dictates of divine reason, whose universal application to gods and people creates a *communitas* between them which must be preserved. His ethics derive from regarding others as fellow citizens of this cosmopolis.

In *Partitiones Oratoriae*, a work on rhetoric, Cicero divides *iuris omnis ratio* into *natura* and *lex*, the latter dividing further into *divinum et humanum ius*. *Ius divinum* is concerned with *religio*, while *ius humanum* is concerned with *aequitas* (Cic. *Part. Orat.* 37.129). Though given in a legal rather than ethical context, this passage is clearly relevant for Lactantius' definition. *Ius* is cognate with *iustitia*, and Cicero thought that it was natural law which created the requirements of justice. This passage is the only one to summarise the duties to humans as *aequitas*, perhaps because of the legal context.

Cicero defines *aequitas* in two senses, one being the general *veri et iusti et ... aequi et boni ratio*, which we may call a principle of fairness, and the other a more specific principle of repayment (37.130). Neither of these senses align with Lactantius' use of the term, and though it may suffice to summarise law, neither Lactantius nor Cicero would think it a sufficient summary of social ethics. Elsewhere Cicero derives *pietas*, *iustitia* and the rest of the virtues from contemplating the heavens, though this is not particularly bipartite (*ND.* 2.61.153). The only place in Cicero where *iustitia*, *aequitas* and *pietas* occur together is *Topica* 23.90, which divides *aequitas* into three parts: one towards the supernal gods, which is *pietas*; the next towards the *manes*, which is *sanctitas*; and thirdly towards humans, which is called *iustitia* or *aequitas*. Again, *iustitia* is used for the social virtue, though *aequitas* summarises all of them. The addition of a duty towards the *manes* does not markedly alter the framework he gives in *Partitiones Oratoriae*, but none of these passages provide an exact parallel to Lactantius' definition of justice.

Hermetica

Following Wlosok's influential study, several scholars have posited Hermetic influence on Lactantius' conception of justice. Finding authority in their antiquity, Lactantius uses Hermetic motifs to justify important ideas in his theology. He concludes

his account of worship using Hermes' definition of worshipping god as avoiding evil and offering only verbal or mental sacrifices (*DI.* 6.25.10-11; *CH.* 12.23; *Ascl.* 41).⁴⁹ Appealing to the Hermetica, he defines *pietas* as *notio Dei* (*DI.* 5.14.11-12; *CH.* 9.4), which Wlosok regards as the Latin translation of a technical Hermetic expression. Religious duty thus becomes knowing God; similarly, in the Hermetica one cannot be pious without philosophy (*CH.* NF. fr II B.2).⁵⁰ This knowledge produces enlightenment; the human *status rectus* enables θεοπτία and contempt for the earth, expresses the human's religious duty, and enables the soul's immortality. Wlosok regards all these ideas as gnostic.⁵¹ Loi writes that Lactantius understands *religio* in the gnostic sense of *Dei parentis agnitio* or *notio Dei*. Justice, since it encompasses religion, is also included in this confluence of terms.⁵²

In a few places the Hermetists discuss social ethics, though always in very general terms such as 'do no one harm' or 'do good to all.' However, Lactantius only uses the texts to justify his theology and anthropology (e.g. *DI.* 2.10.14; 4.6.4-9; 4.7.2-3; 4.8.5). Justice is less programmatic in the Hermetica than in Lactantius, possibly because it was regarded as a distributive, social virtue, while the Hermetists sought to leave society and possessions behind. One passage gives a bipartite ethic and associates the absence of virtue with ἀδικία (*CH.* 10.21). Initially, we must conclude the Hermetica are a plausible source only for Lactantius' religious ethics.

Bible

Finally, we must add to this picture one of Christianity's most influential ethical statements: Jesus' summary of the law as loving God and loving neighbour describes virtue as being directed towards God and towards other humans (Matt 22:36-40/Mark

49 Lactantius adds a reference to justice which the original quotation lacks.

50 Wlosok, *Laktanz*, 212–13.

51 Wlosok, 201–5.

52 Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 620–21.

12:30-31/Luke 10:27). It claims for this two-fold obligation the status of the greatest commandment and the fulfillment of all the law and divine revelation. We can be sure that Lactantius knew it because it is transmitted in Cyprian (*Fort.* 2.17-18), though the centrality of the command in the Christian tradition and Lactantius' own exposure to the *Vetus Latina* Bible in liturgical contexts make it likely that he would have encountered it elsewhere.⁵³ Though the law referred to is most obviously the Torah, we can see that Lactantius would have taken it to mean divine law, the highest form of law posited by the philosophers. The allusion to the great commandment is clearest in *Ira* 14.3-5, but several of the other passages explored above describe the duty to God as *diligere*. The language of loving the divine is a classically Christian formulation of religious ethics.

More broadly, the Bible constructs justice as obeying God's law, which is distinctively relational and revelational.⁵⁴ Loi points to Lactantius' uses of the phrases *opus/opera iustitiae*, *operari iustitiam*, and *facere iustitiam* to refer to charitable works, a distinctively Christian phraseology which comes from the *Vetus Latina*. *Operari* is intransitive in classical usage, but frequently transitive in biblical Latin.⁵⁵ This clearly shows Christian influence on at least Lactantius' linguistic use of *iustitia*.

Divine *Paterfamilias*

I asserted above that we misconstrue Lactantius' understanding of justice if we ignore the *paterfamilias* motif which undergirds his ethics. We must now explore that motif in greater detail. In naming God *Pater et Dominus*, Lactantius likens God to a Roman *paterfamilias*. The motif is one of his most significant theological ideas, and occurs in discussions of God's unity, religion, moral commands, patience, and

53 Grossmann, 'Die Neutestamentlichen Grundlagen', 398.

54 Schrenk, 'Dikē', 198.

55 Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 606–10.

providence.⁵⁶ It undergirds his theology and ethics,⁵⁷ but also has apologetic value, which has not been previously appreciated.⁵⁸ Lactantius uses it to rebut the charge of Christian impiety and redirects his audience's pious instincts towards the Christian God.

Palomo Pinel argues that Lactantius' conception of divine fatherhood does not depend on Stoic or Platonic philosophy, but on the role of father in Roman law.⁵⁹ The *paterfamilias* was one of the most basic institutions in Roman law and characterised Roman society. A *paterfamilias* had complete legal authority over his children and slaves until his death, when his children became autonomous and his sons gained authority over their own dependants (Ulpian in Just. *Dig.* 1.1.6.4). This authority, the *patria potestas*, included ownership of all property and the power of granting life or death (*ius vitae necisque*).⁶⁰ Because children could not own property, their relationship to their father was similar to the relationship between a master and slave; both might receive an allowance (*peculium*), which granted some independence but ultimately belonged to the master.⁶¹ Saller argues that though the law granted *patresfamiliarum* wide-ranging powers, these were either not used or moderated by mutual piety.⁶² The *paterfamilias* was *pater et dominus*, but this did not lead to dual roles; rather, the father exercised the power of ruling and disciplining as *dominus* and caring and providing as *pater* as fulfilling one office.⁶³

56 Coleman, *Lactantius*, 171.

57 Fisher, 'Lactantius' Ideas', 359.

58 For instance, this is missing from Wlosok, *Laktanz*; and Coleman, *Lactantius*.

59 Carmen Palomo Pinel, *Nec in mérito: paterfamilias Dicitur: el paterfamilias en el pensamiento de Lactancio* (Madrid: Dykinson, 2017), 114.

60 *Ius necis* was not commonly used, except for exposing infants. Richard Saller, "'Patria Potestas" and the Stereotype of the Roman Family', *Continuity and Change* 1, no. 1 (1986): 15–19. See Palomo Pinel's account of the legal powers associated with the *patria potestas*. p 100-7

61 Dennis P. Kehoe, 'Law and Social Formation in the Roman Empire', in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World*, ed. Michael Peachin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 145.

62 Saller, 'Patria Potestas'; Richard Saller, 'Pietas, Obligation and Authority in the Roman Family', in *Alte Geschichte Und Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, ed. Peter Kneissl and Volker Losemann (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988), 393–410.

63 Wlosok, *Laktanz*, 233–34.

Divine beings were associated with *patresfamilium* in earliest Roman religion, with *pater* used as a divine epithet in ceremonial invocations (cf. Cic. *ND*. 2.25.64).⁶⁴ However, in these cases divine fatherhood prompted vassal-like relations with worshippers, while Jews and Christians used the idea to indicate a personal relationship with the divine.⁶⁵ Cicero and Seneca emphasised God's fatherly care over his lordly severity,⁶⁶ though Lactantius stresses the two roles equally. The titles are also present in the *Hermetica*: the greatest God is *pater vel dominus omnium*, and no human name names him precisely. He is ever fertile and of both genders; always pregnant with, creating and pervading all things (*Ascl*. 20-21; *CH*. 5.9-11; 12.23).

Pater and *Dominus* are also significant divine titles in Christianity, as Lactantius acknowledges (*DI*. 1.6.4). In Latin Christianity, Tertullian calls God *Dominus et Pater*, associating *potestas* with the former and *pietas* with the latter. He denies the analogy with human *patresfamilium* because he wants to preserve *Dominus* as a name exclusive to God (*Tert. Apol.* 34.1-2). In response to Marcion's separation of God's love and judgement, Tertullian asserts the inseparability of God's roles as *Pater* and *Dominus*. Each office deserves both love and fear (*Marc.* 1.27.3).⁶⁷ Minucius Felix says that God's uniqueness means that he does not need a name, and the names *Pater*, *Rex* and *Dominus* all contain problems, though he does call God *Dominus Parensque* (*MF*. 18.4-10). Cyprian exhorts his readers to imitate God's patience, since God is *Pater* and *Dominus*, and his servants and sons ought to obey him (*Cyp. Pat.* 3). The image of God as *Pater et Dominus* has precedents in Latin and Christian literature, but Lactantius adapts the image in new ways, for theological and apologetic purposes.

64 Wlosok, 236–37.

65 Loi, *Lattanzio nella storia del linguaggio e del pensiero teologico pre-niceno*, 82.

66 Wlosok, *Laktanz*, 237–38.

67 Wlosok, 239–41. Tertullian uses the motif for polemical purposes, and it has little significance in his own theology.

Lactantius expresses this image using several phrases. The most common is *Pater et Dominus* (e.g. *DI.* 4.28.3-6, 12), but God is also *Deus parens* (1.7.12; 3.9.19) and *communis parens generis humani* (2.5.3; 3.9.17).⁶⁸ The image occurs throughout Lactantius' corpus, but it receives fullest exposition at the beginning of *Institutes* Book 4, where Lactantius begins to outline true wisdom and religion. The *paterfamilias* image thus introduces Lactantius' exposition of Christianity, and it governs his positive theology and ethics.

God's fatherly aid is expressed in his providence and giving of life.⁶⁹ As *Pater*, God creates, inspires, illuminates, and provides humanity with life and food (4.3.11; 5.18.13).⁷⁰ He prefaces his theology with providence, creating the requirement that a true God must provide and care like a father.⁷¹ This argument has purchase because pagan gods were invoked as father, as we saw.⁷² Cicero likens rejection of philosophy to parricide (Cic. *Tusc.* 5.2.6); Lactantius responds that the greater parricide is rejecting God, who made humanity and gave them wisdom (*DI.* 3.14.8-10). Thus fatherhood, resemblance to a *paterfamilias*, is a requirement for true divinity.

Lactantius argues that a truly divine *Pater* will also be *Dominus*, who has ultimate authority to rebuke and punish. His fatherliness is seen in his creating and providentially caring for humanity; his lordship is expressed in his right to judge and his possessing *vitae ac necis potestas* (*Epit.* 54.4).⁷³ This justifies Lactantius' assertions that God may be angry with evil and that he rules and judges the world. Using a military metaphor, Lactantius says that anyone who deserts their *Dominus, Imperator et Pater* will be

68 This last term was used of the emperors. Corcoran, *Tetrarchs*, 209.

69 Palomo Pinel, *Nec in mérito*, 114–15. For the significance of providence in Lactantius' theology, see Coleman, *Lactantius*.

70 Lactantius disputes Cicero's claim that this supreme God is called Jupiter, a name which derives from *iuvens pater*, helping father. Lactantius regards *iuvere* too weak to describe either divine or paternal benefits, so Jupiter is an inappropriate name for the providential deity (*DI.* 1.11.39-43).

71 Wlosok, *Laktanz*, 232.

72 cf. Wlosok, 241.

73 This phrase denoted a Roman *paterfamilias*' legal authority over his dependents. Saller, 'Patria Potestas', 19.

punished (*DI.* 7.27.15). A *paterfamilias* governs both sons and slaves, and Lactantius argues that the one man will be *dominus* to his sons due to his legal power over them and *pater* to his slaves, since they take his name upon manumission. Lactantius reads in *paterfamilias* a double power, of being generous (*indulgere*) as father and restraining (*coercere*) as master (4.3.14-17). In placing equal weight on these functions, Lactantius appeals to the ancient understanding of *patresfamiliarum*; in his own day, the *patria potestas* had been softened and the father's care predominated.⁷⁴ Wlosok argues Lactantius takes the identification of son and slave further than Roman law did,⁷⁵ but Palomo Pinel's study adduces legal parallels to Lactantius' account of the roles.⁷⁶

If God is *paterfamilias*, humans must acknowledge their relationship with him, which creates the obligation to worship him.⁷⁷ Humans are God's *fili* and *servi*, his *familia*, and Lactantius explains worship in these terms. Humans owe God the double honour due to the *paterfamilias* as *Pater et Dominus* (*DI.* 4.4.5).⁷⁸ Wise sons ought *amare, diligere et honorare* their father, slaves *timere, colere ac vereri* their master,⁷⁹ as father and master are one, the love and fear owed to him cannot be severed from each other (4.4.1-2; *ID.* 24.3-5).⁸⁰ Lactantius presents the Christian God as the original deity, from whom other cultures have wandered, and writes that all people are invited to return to their soul's true parent.⁸¹ Linking several motifs of this study, Lactantius says that *humanitas, iustitia, and pietas* all require recognising God as our parent (3.9.19). No one may know humanity's *telos* without knowing God as their soul's parent; lack of this knowledge causes the great crime of worshipping other gods (6.9.1). Conversely, the

74 Palomo Pinel, *Nec in mérito*, 119–20.

75 Wlosok, *Laktanz*, 242.

76 Palomo Pinel, *Nec in mérito*, 125–26.

77 Coleman, *Lactantius*, 171–72.

78 Wlosok, *Laktanz*, 242–43.

79 For Lactantius' use of fear as a virtue, contrary to pagan ethics, see *DI.* 6.17 and Bryce, *Library*, 134–35.

80 This is the same as Tertullian's argument (*Tert. Marc.* 1.27.3ff; 2.13.5).

81 Colot, *Lactance*, 259.

key to wisdom and salvation is to know God the true Father, worship him only, obey him, and serve him, with every thought and action aimed at pleasing him (6.9.24).

Thus, Lactantius depicts non-Christian philosophers as disinherited sons and worshippers of gods as fugitive slaves, who seek neither father nor master. God is an *indulgentissimus Pater* to the pious, but a *severissimus iudex* to the impious (1.1.15). As disinherited sons forfeit their inheritance, so philosophers cannot obtain the *summum bonum* of eternal life; neither will *cultores deorum* escape God's punishment of eternal death, which is his judgement on those who flee his power and name (4.4.5-6). Though other gods claim these names, the only Father is the creator; the only Master is the cosmic ruler, who has power over life and death. Whoever does not worship him is an *insipiens servus*, fleeing his true Master, and an *impius filius* who hates or ignores his true Father (4.4.11). If he is *Pater ac Dominus universorum*, then he loves humans' virtues and is provoked by their vices; therefore he rewards the just and punishes the impious (*ID.* 19.6-7).

Lactantius uses the *paterfamilias* image to associate filial piety with the need to honour and revere God. It undergirds his religious ethics. *Pietas* was an important virtue in Roman society, and Lactantius attempts to direct this towards the Christian God through the metaphor. In the following chapter we will see how Lactantius uses the image to argue that the providential God must be singular, as one can only have one father, and to respond to the charge that Christians are impious innovators. But the second benefit of this image was that it also justified Lactantius' social ethics, though its centrality to Lactantius' view of justice is absent from many of the major studies on the virtue. Loi, Buchheit and Grossmann observe facets of the motif, but not its foundational role in Lactantius' ethics, and only Colot gives it the fundamental place it

deserves. Even Wlosok's study, the first to give the motif sustained attention, does not explore how it generates Lactantius' social ethics.

Lactantius appeals to Lucretius' statement: *denique caelesti sumus omnes semine oriundi; omnibus ille idem pater est* (Lucretius, 2.991-2). A description of mother earth flourishing because of this father's gift follows, indicating that the father is the sky (cf. 1.250-3). Lucretius does not mean the gods by 'father', because he later affirms that nature produces all things, including humans, by herself without providential aid (2.1090-4).

However, Lactantius interprets the quotation to refer to the fatherhood of the providential God, and concludes that all are his children who therefore have equal rights (*DI.* 5.6.12; 5.14.17).⁸² He glosses Lucretius according to the Christian doctrine of divine creation and human siblinghood, found in Genesis and Acts 17:28.⁸³ Since God's fatherhood renders all his children, all people are siblings and ought to treat each other with *fraternitas*. The use of fraternal language in social ethics was more common in the Christian than classical tradition, where social ethics were justified using civic metaphors.⁸⁴ But Lactantius makes expressing this fraternal piety dependent on knowledge of God as Father, because only thus will humans recognise their interrelatedness. As we shall see, this *fraternitas* is more fundamental to Lactantius' social ethics than *aequitas* or any of the other words Lactantius uses to describe the duties humans owe each other. Rather, *aequitas*, charity, non-violence, and the other

82 Bryce, *Library*, 235–36 argues Lactantius knows what Lucretius meant, but thinks the poet stumbled across the truth despite himself.

83 cf. Monat, *Lactance et la Bible*, 252. The Latin Christian tradition supports the idea (Tert. *Apol.* 39.8-9). Cyprian transmitted Malachi 2:10, which asks *nonne Deus unus condidit nos? nonne Pater unus est omnium nostrum? quid utique dereliquistis unusquisque fratrem suum?* (*Quir.* 3.3). In its original context this fraternity probably applied only to the Jews, but Cyprian gives no indication of any ethnic or religious boundary to this fraternity. Malachi 1:6 labels God *Pater* and *Dominus*, the other key ingredients to Lactantius' paterfamilias doctrine. Fraternal love is thematic elsewhere in Cyprian's florilegium (*Quir.* 1.3; 3.9). The Roman and Hermetic origins of the paterfamilias motif are well documented, but Lactantius also found support for the idea in Cyprian.

84 Christians tended to use fraternal metaphors to refer to spiritual adoption, whereas Lactantius sees fraternity as a genealogical fact that applies to all. Colot, *Lactance*, 157–61.

components of Lactantius' social ethics flow out of this sibling relationship. Piety is the virtue appropriate to familial relations; hence one acts justly by fulfilling one's relational obligation of piety in the two domains. Thus we can say that justice is expressed in piety, and this is why the two virtues are inseparable.

Other Justice Motifs

Justice and Wisdom

Lactantius' division of justice into duties to God and to other humans forms the basis of his ethics, and he justifies this approach using the *paterfamilias* motif. Lactantius places several other classical conceptions of justice within this framework. These are justice as ordering according to reason, faithfulness in contracts, and lawfulness; for the most part these too are divided into virtue towards God and virtue towards humans.

Justice is closely associated with the first cardinal virtue, wisdom. Plato made justice entail ordering according to reason; it was also important in the Stoic tradition, since *recta ratio* pervading the world generates natural law and justice. Lactantius associates justice with wisdom when considering the claim that just actions are often foolish. *Institutes* 5 is structured around charges that Christians are impious (chs. 5-11), and foolish (chs. 12-23), a division made explicit in *Epit.* 50.4. The first impugns Christian *religio*, and the second *sapientia*.

Lactantius invokes justice to respond to both charges. He defines justice in the middle of his argument with Carneades, via Cicero's *Republic*, about whether justice is foolish since it can entail harm to one's life or livelihood. Several scholars think that Carneades' arguments were current in Lactantius' day.⁸⁵ Carneades asks whether it is

85 Pichon, *Lactance*, 135; Colot, 'Pietas', 2001, 28.

preferable to be a bad man deemed virtuous or a good man thought to be criminal – pertinent, because the latter is how Lactantius describes persecuted Christians (*DI.* 5.12.5-7; cf. Cic. *Rep.* 3.27). Philus, Carneades’ spokesman, says that religious, legal, and moral diversity shows that justice is merely conventional and thus governed by expediency rather than an objective good. He gives examples where *prudentialia* requires different actions to *iustitia* (3.14-18). Dissociating justice from natural reason, Carneades claimed that justice is folly when it causes loss and that no state ever prizes justice over expediency (3.7-17). Lactantius cites Cicero’s examples: should a vendor declare his product’s faults and lower his profit? Should one spare another’s life at the cost of one’s own? Should the Romans return their empire, acquired by conquest (*DI.* 5.16.4-12)? Carneades thought justice dangerous for individuals and states because it neglects one’s interest; it exists but cannot be realised in the world.⁸⁶ Civil justice is wise but not just, and natural justice is just but not wise.

Cicero affirms natural law and argues that injustice is never expedient (Cic. *Off.* 3.7.34), though Lactantius deems his arguments inadequate. Cicero answered Carneades by saying that a pure conscience outweighed wealth and honour (*Rep.* 3.28). This was also Plato’s solution to the question. Plato defines justice as the healthy functioning of the soul and says that it is ludicrous to harm one’s soul for any amount of external gain (Plat. *Rep.* 445a-b; 589d-590a).⁸⁷ Lactantius minimises the force of the philosophers’ assertions that virtue is worth pursuing for its own sake, claiming that virtue can be denied its reward by hostile societies (*DI.* 5.17.14-16; 5.18.4-10).

Lactantius asserts that the only solution to Carneades’ dilemmas is that justice is rewarded eschatologically. He invokes Carneades in order to deny the adequacy of the

86 Heck, ‘*Iustitia civilis*’, 171–76.

87 Burnyeat, ‘Justice Writ Large and Small in Republic 4’, 228; Kraut, ‘The Defense of Justice in Plato’s Republic’, 327.

philosophers' definitions of justice (5.14.5-7). Justice's apparent folly is crucial to his rhetorical strategy,⁸⁸ and plausible non-Christian proofs that justice is always wise undermine his argument. Justice entails preferring immortal, invisible goods over temporary earthly ones, and so from a material perspective it will often involve loss or suffering. However, virtue produces immortality; no act is foolish which secures this ultimate good (5.18.2-16). Lactantius believes that Christian eschatology is needed to justify Cicero's argument that the *honestum* is always *utile* (*Off.* Book 1).⁸⁹ He invokes classical tropes of dying for friendship to depict Christians as *constans*, *paciens* and *fidelis* (*DI.* 5.13.17; 5.17.24) and associates seeking one's interest with animal cunning (5.17.29-34). Eventually, using a Stoic motif, he asserts that one cannot be just without also being wise, since justice depends upon knowing good and evil (5.17.25-26).⁹⁰

Lactantius thus depicts justice as governed by accurate judgements about how one should act. It entails acting on the basis of the *paterfamilias* relationship which undergirds human ontology. Though he lacks Plato's idea of justice as a rightly ordered soul, he approximates Cicero's sense of acting on the basis of the obligations generated by the *ratio* of human existence.⁹¹

Of course, this is about persecution: those thought foolish are the Christians who refuse to sacrifice to escape martyrdom.⁹² They are really wise, because they pursue a true, eschatological good rather than immediate security (5.18.12-16). The association of justice with folly means that Lactantius could respond to those who criticised Christian foolishness by making it demonstrative of their justice. In Lactantius'

88 Paul, and particularly 1 Corinthians 1–4, is influential here. Heck, '*Iustitia civilis*', 173; Monat, *Lactance et la Bible*, 249; Kirsten H. Mackerras, 'Foolish Faith: Defending Christian Wisdom in Paul and Lactantius', *Studia Patristica* 100 (2020): 143–53.

89 Long, 'Cicero's Politics in *De Officiis*', 227.

90 Cf. Quint. 12.1.4.

91 Lactantius' focus on wisdom indicated to Loi that his view of justice is Hermetic. Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 614–15. Loi thinks he equates *sapientia* with *iustitia*, but this misreads *DI.* 2.15.5, which pairs *sapientia* with *cognitio Dei* and *religio* with *iustitia*.

92 Walter, *Pagane Texte*, 215.

reconfigured ethical landscape, the wisdom of the pagans becomes materialistic self-preservation, which fails in wisdom because it disregards their actions' eschatological ends. Conversely, following God's law makes one truly wise and just. Only Christian *sapientia* can make the just appear more prudent than the expedient. The Neoplatonists regarded νοῦς as a divine hypostasis, and one's duty to the divine entailed rationality. Folly was not only stupid but irreligious. We know that Porphyry accused Christians of being foolish, and this charge may have deterred moderates from supporting the Christians, reasoning that they brought their suffering upon themselves. The classical tradition provided Lactantius with an association between (apparent) folly and another cardinal virtue, justice, which he exploits to rebut the charge that Christians forsake wisdom and reason. This may be why Lactantius' ethics privilege justice, because it enabled him to refute the charges of both impiety and folly. He reframes the charge that Christians are foolish, depicting it as materialistic; the strong association of piety with asceticism in contemporary philosophy gave this argument its power.

Fides

A standard part of classical accounts of justice was *fides*, keeping faith or upholding one's obligations in contracts and relationships. Associates' reciprocal trust stemmed from believing the other to be reliable.⁹³ Cicero writes that justice is compromised by betraying secrets or friends and by neglecting obligations. *Fides*, which he glosses as *dictorum conventorumque constantia et veritas*, is a *fundamentum iustitiae* (Cic. *Off.* 1.23, cf. 1.63; 2.39; *Tusc.* 2.13.31). It has resonances of honesty, steadfastness, and faithfulness. In Lactantius' era, the *Latin Panegyrics* praise the emperors for sharing power harmoniously (X.9.1-5; 11.1-3; XI.7.6-8.5; 11.4; 12.3-5) and eliciting their armies' loyalty (VI.16.2; 18.1-2).

93 Davie and Reinhardt, *Seneca*, xvi.

Lactantius sometimes uses *fides* with its general sense of faithfulness or loyalty (*DI.* 5.10.14; 5.12.5; 7.15.9). He refers to the Pythagoreans, who remained faithful friends even to the point of death (5.17.22-24). *Fides* is associated with justice: the fall of the golden age caused every *foedus* to be abandoned (*Epit.* 54.6), while justice's reign would replace treachery and adultery with *fides* (*DI.* 5.8.6-8; cf. 3.21.5; 6.23.23, 29). *De Mortibus* explains how persecuting the Christians accustomed the emperors to act unjustly, leading them to betray each other (*DMP.* 18.1-2; 28.1-2; 32.4). Part of *fides* is honesty; Lactantius forbids all lying (*DI.* 6.18.4-6) and, contra Carneades, believes it is unjust to sell goods without declaring their faults (5.16.5-7; 5.17.32-34; cf. Cic. *Rep.* 3.29-31; *Off.* 3.57). Ultimately, *fides* is a virtue which non-Christians may possess and is not inseparable from justice as *pietas* and *aequitas* are.

Classical ethics held *fides* to be a social virtue, but in Christianity it characteristically describes belief in and loyalty towards God. Lactantius also uses the word in this sense. *Fides* can mean belief in God (*DI.* 4.10.3; 4.13.15; 4.30.11; 5.3.21) or summarise Christian belief (5.4.7).⁹⁴ However, its more common resonance is loyalty or adherence to God (4.13.26; 5.2.15-16), especially in persecution contexts (5.5.11; 5.7.6; 5.9.12; 5.19.6; *DMP.* 16.7-9; cf. *DI.* 4.3.22-23). In Book 4 it describes Jesus' loyalty to God his Father (*DI.* 4.12.19; 4.14.18). Lactantius likens Christians to soldiers who complete their duties for their king at the cost of their lives; he deems Christian fidelity equally praiseworthy (5.19.22-6). He makes *fides* as martyrdom an explicit part of justice in *Epit.* 61.1-10. Lactantius invokes the classical conception of the *sapiens*, who is constant in opinion and purpose, enduring torture rather than betraying her obligations or acting unjustly.⁹⁵ He applies this to persecuted Christians who are tortured

94 Contra Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 162–63, who writes it rarely has this theological sense in Lactantius. Grossmann writes that Lactantius' linking belief to knowledge and revelation indicates a biblical definition of *notio Dei*. Grossmann, 'Pietas', 176.

95 Hansen, 'Preaching to Seneca', 545–48.

rather than forsake *fides iustitiaque*, praising their faithfulness towards God (*DI.* 5.13.15-17; cf. 6.12.23).⁹⁶

Lawfulness

The classical concept of justice as lawfulness depended on the close connection between civil law and natural or divine law. Plato understands civil law as a contingent expression of divine Reason, which produces a natural justice (*Laws* 713c-716a; 762e).⁹⁷ Cicero grounded justice in natural law, which is the dictates of right reason or divine intelligence (*Cic. Leg.* 1.42; 2.8-10). Humans participate in divine Reason through their reason, and participating in the same law places humans and the divine within the same commonwealth (1.21-5).⁹⁸ Justice's natural origin is shown in a tendency to love others and live well together; it shows that the human race is knitted together and undergirds justice (1.32-35, 43). Justice thus becomes respecting humans and the gods as fellow-citizens. Similarly, Seneca writes that natural law binds humans together and thus constitutes society (*Sen. Ep.* 48.2-3). The cosmos is the sole parent of all, and since all share this cosmic parenthood, every human deserves respect (*Ben.* 3.28.2).⁹⁹ Humanity is a family or body, made from the same material for the same goal, which prompts *amor mutuus* and forms them into a *societas* with the gods (*Ep.* 95.51-53).

Cicero grounds law in nature, but human societies implement it imperfectly. He believes that an unjust or harmful law is no law, and that laws can be applied unjustly

96 In Paul, faith in God is the precondition for receiving the status of righteous, a sense Cyprian transmits (*Quir.* 1.5=Hab. 2:4). Lactantius does not relate these words as Paul does. Instead, faithfulness to God characterises God's people who are marked by religious virtue = justice.

97 André Laks, 'The Laws', in *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought*, ed. Christopher Rowe and Malcolm Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 291–92.

98 Schofield labels this Cicero's theological approach to justice, which complements the *oikeiōsis*-based approach Cicero gives in *Fin.* 3 and *Off.* 1. Schofield, 'Two Stoic Approaches to Justice', 205–9.

99 Bett, 'Did the Stoics Invent Human Rights?', 154.

(Cic. *Leg.* 1.42; *Off.* 1.10.33).¹⁰⁰ Practically, citizens attain justice by following laws given by wise lawgivers, of whom Rome's ancient lawgivers were the greatest (*Tusc.* 1.1.2). This gave Romans confidence that their laws reflected natural justice well. However, Lactantius exploits Cicero's admission that he possessed only *iustitiae ... umbra et imagines* (*Off.* 3.69). Civil law reflects natural law imperfectly, since humanity's grasp of justice is vague and its application is governed by expediency and society's desires (3.17.70; cf. Sen. *Ira* 2.28.2). These factors created doubt that justice could be realised in human societies.

The extent to which natural law is biblical is debated.¹⁰¹ Paul describes something like natural law in Romans 1–2: all humans have knowledge of God from creation and are obligated to worship and obey him, as some Gentiles do (Rom 1:19-21; 2:12-16).¹⁰² Origen thought this passage described natural law (Orig. *Rom.* 2.9.1); if Lactantius knew it he probably would have interpreted it similarly. The Bible also links justice with fair legal judgements and their expression in society (Deut 16:18-20; 24:7).

Legal fairness

Justice as lawfulness could describe a disposition to follow the laws, as in Aristotle; it could also refer to following due legal process. Lactantius does not have the first sense, understandably given he writes to challenge the persecutory edicts. The second sense is more prominent. Though dismissing it as a definition for *aequitas*, Lactantius affirms the *iustus* will *bene iudicare* (*DI.* 5.14.15). He uses the obligation of fair legal procedures to criticise the persecutors. Throughout *de Mortibus* he describes

100 Contra E. M. Atkins, "'Domina et Regina Virtutum': Justice and Societas in De Officiis", *Phronesis* 35 (1990): 260, 281.

101 Matthew Levering, *Biblical Natural Law: A Theocentric and Teleological Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 23–58.

102 Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 153; Brendan Byrne, *Romans* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1996), 74; A. Deagon, 'Rendering to Caesar and God: St Paul, the Natural Law Tradition, and the Authority of Law', *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, 2014, 11.

how due process was abandoned and citizen privileges removed, the governors corrupting society by ignoring Roman customs (*DMP.* 7.11-12; 13.1; 15.2-5; 22.1). The tetrarchs called Christians names, such as *iniusti*, *inhumani*, and *impii*, which better suited themselves. The real crime is not Christianity, but preventing the worship of the true God (*DI.* 5.19.1). Through sarcasm and irony, Lactantius depicts the persecutors' laws as achieving justice's exact opposite.

Lactantius likens the persecution to the state of chaos after the golden age. After justice fled, judges and officials began claiming official license for violence and mistreating the innocent, defending their stolen property with *leges ... iniquissimae iniustissimaeque* (5.5.11–6.3).¹⁰³ Though the classical philosophers acknowledged their laws' imperfection, Lactantius is far more pessimistic about the possibility of inculcating justice using Roman law. They exist because of the need to regulate injustice in a fallen world.¹⁰⁴ Conversely, civil laws, courts, and punishments would be redundant if all adopted Christianity; people would be just instinctively (5.8.9; cf. Plat. *Laws* 874e-875d). However, Lactantius affirms the need for human judges to punish evil, and uses them as an analogue to argue that God's judgement is just (*Lact. ID.* 17.5-7).¹⁰⁵

Natural law in Lactantius

Lactantius' understanding of natural or divine law depends heavily upon Cicero. He quotes *Republic* 3.27, which describes divine law as the universal expression of *recta ratio*, and accepts the definition wholesale.¹⁰⁶ However, he thinks that Cicero

¹⁰³ For Seneca, law-codes were given by wise legislators, attempting to regulate the damage caused by tyrants after the golden age fell (*Ep.* 90.6).

¹⁰⁴ Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 148.

¹⁰⁵ This is similar to his *paterfamilias* metaphor. Neither analogy implies that Lactantius thought the social institutions should govern theology, since he critiques the institutions from deviating from God's example; rather, they are apologetic arguments.

¹⁰⁶ Interestingly, the passage occurs in Laelius' speech against Carneades/Furius, which Lactantius deems inadequate in *DI.* 5.14–18. Ingremeau, 'Lactance et la Justice', 46–47.

understands what natural law is but not what it requires (*DI.* 6.8.6).¹⁰⁷ Divine law has two *capita*: the first is *Deum nosse, soli obtemperare, solum colere* (6.9.1). The second is directed towards humans, and is called *miser cordia, humanitas* or *iustitia*, expressed in charity and harmlessness, and justified by humanity's fraternity (6.10.2-8). Christ's role as *doctor iustitiae* included revealing a new law: he is *viva lex*, and revealer of a new covenant (4.25.2, cf. 4.10.6; 4.17.1-21). Other passages use *lex Dei* and *iustitia* in parallel, indicating their close relationship, though *lex* occurs much less frequently than *iustitia* (6.17.24; 6.24.29). In several places, Lactantius invokes divine law to state a specific biblical commandment, using *lex* for a part rather than the whole. *Lex Dei* discusses how to sacrifice (6.25.5) and requires offering God virtue and a pure heart (6.24.29). Socially, *divina lex* requires charity towards orphans, widows, and other impoverished people (6.12.21-22). It entails *constantia*, faithfulness to God in persecution, chastity, and marital fidelity (6.17.24; 6.23.19). All the duties discussed in 6.8–24 are part of God's law, but this is an adumbration; the full law is found *ex fonte*, a characteristically veiled reference to the Bible (6.24.30-31).

However, unlike in Cicero, natural law does not create justice by joining people in a universal commonwealth, but a family.¹⁰⁸ Lactantius substitutes his *paterfamilias* motif for Cicero's universal *civitas*, and his familial metaphor creates a different set of moral requirements. Whereas in Cicero this relationship was undergirded by sharing in *recta ratio*, in Lactantius it is undergirded by universal divine parenthood and consanguinity. Hence, Lactantius can say that Cicero understood the nature of divine law but misunderstood its content, because he misconstrued the relationship that unites humans with the divine. Colot was the first to identify this relationship, and it is missing

107 See Buchheit, 'Cicero Inspiratus', 360–63 for how Lactantius relativises Cicero's insight into divine law.

108 We saw that Seneca used familial metaphors to ground natural law, but these are less common than the political ones.

from other studies of Lactantius' ethics, even those which acknowledge the *paterfamilias* motif's importance.¹⁰⁹ Occasionally, Lactantius describes becoming a Christian as accepting *lex divina* (5.13.5), which we can understand as accepting divine law's obligations, namely worshipping God and caring for others as siblings. As any Roman would have known, one rendered one's family what was due to them through piety, filial piety towards one's father and fraternal piety towards one's siblings. Thus, we have arrived at an initial conclusion of why Lactantius describes justice as he does: the cosmic relationships which undergird law and justice are familial. *Pietas*, which already carried religious overtones, was an appropriate way of describing one's obligation to the Father God, and since all humans are siblings, they ought to be treated with *aequitas*.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown the fundamentally bipartite nature of Lactantian justice. Justice divides into religious and social obligations, and Lactantius' archaeology asserts that without correct religion, social justice will go astray. Lactantius' understanding of justice draws from an eclectic group of sources; we have considered the Platonic tradition, Cicero, the Hermetica, and the biblical tradition as possible influences. We found no traces of Aristotle's distinction between corrective and distributive justice, and it seems likely that Lactantius did not know of it. Lactantius does not consider virtue to be an indivisible whole, as the Stoics did, but thinks that social virtue is dependent upon religious virtue. However, justice is the summary of all the virtues or the situation where all the virtues function harmoniously, which has Platonic overtones. The biblical sense of justice as sinlessness is present, as are both the Roman and biblical senses of justice as *fides*, keeping faith. Appealing to the Stoics and to Paul, Lactantius argues that justice

¹⁰⁹ e.g. Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 586–87; Buchheit, 'Die Definition Der Gerechtigkeit'; Coleman, *Lactantius*, 182.

will appear foolish, and its wisdom becomes apparent only when one constructs it within an eschatological frame; this is why the philosophers did not understand it. This argument is designed to maximise the resemblance between the *iustus* and the Christian martyr.

Ultimately, the *paterfamilias* metaphor undergirds Lactantian justice, and he uses this ontology to generate the obligations of filial piety towards God and fraternal piety towards humanity. We have seen his debt to Cicero's conception of natural law here. Having given an overview of Lactantius' conception of justice, we now explore his understanding of religious and social obligation in more detail.

Chapter 5: Religious Virtue

Introduction

Traditional religion saturated public and private space in the Roman empire, and it would have been impossible for Christians to escape its impact. City and countryside were filled with temples and statues, and the gods' power was thought to permeate physical space through association with their places of worship. Watts likens this to a network of pipes, which channels power either to give life or to unleash destruction. Religion also demarcated time amidst life's changing seasons through festivals and rituals, such as naming ceremonies, commemoration of ancestors, and the agricultural seasons. Public festivals would have impacted the lives even of those who chose not to attend: processions created traffic and noise, and offerings produced pungent aromas of incense or burning.¹ Roman religion suffused Lactantius' world, and in reformulating justice he set himself the task of undermining its core assumptions.

The fundamental charge during the Diocletian persecution was that Christians worshipped wrongly: they refused to sacrifice to the traditional gods. To counter this charge, Christians needed to give an alternative account of pious worship, one which defended Christian rejection of the customary means, and objects, of worship. This was Lactantius' goal. This chapter outlines Lactantius' account of justice's obligation to God or religious virtue. It considers how he constructs this virtue to respond to the persecutors' charges, explores his positive theology and ethics, and analyses his rhetorical strategy in doing so. Particular attention is given to Lactantius' use of sources, especially Cicero and the *Hermetica*, and Lactantius' intellectual milieu as displayed in Porphyry and the *Latin Panegyrics*.

¹ Watts, *The Final Pagan Generation*, 37–67.

This chapter begins by considering Lactantius' use of *iustitia* to mean religious virtue, and his definition of *pietas*, a key religious virtue. Lactantius fills *pietas* with Christian content so he can claim that Christians embody this quintessentially Roman virtue better than pagans. Lactantius writes that to worship properly one must correctly discern what (*quid*) and how (*quomodo*) to worship (*DI.* 4.3.6; cf. 6.5.19). Proper worship is this chapter's topic, and 'what' and 'how' form the rest of its structure. I explore Lactantius' answers to these questions by focusing on two metaphors: God as *paterfamilias* and the Christian mind as the true temple. The *paterfamilias* metaphor undergirds his case against polytheism and for a providential, monotheistic deity. By describing the true temple as the Christian mind, Lactantius internalises and individualises worship, and describes those who violate Christian consciences as sacrilegious. I also trace how his construction of religious virtue responds to key points of the persecutory ideology, which is missing from other accounts of Lactantius' view of worship. Lactantius' religious ethic is not just positive moral philosophy but was crucial to his defence of Christianity, because it explicates Christian forms of worship using the categories of Roman religion.

Definitions

Iustitia

Religion is foundational to Lactantius' ethics. We begin our consideration of religious virtue by exploring how Lactantius uses *iustitia* to denote religious virtue or Christianity itself. This is not a common classical usage. Cicero regarded *iustitia* as god-honouring because it preserves the *societas* the gods established among humans, but he reduced *iustitia* to a virtue which governs only human interactions (*Cic. Off.* 3.28). By contrast, Lactantius regards true worship to be justice's first duty, as we saw, and one

which secures the rest of morality.² *Verus cultus* and *iustitia* are inseparable, and *iustitia* is achieved by serving God appropriately; Lactantius can say *iustitia ... nihil aliud est quam Dei unici pia et religiosa cultura* (DI. 5.7.2; cf. 6.2.17; 6.5.19; 6.25.16).³ Justice depends on worshipping the right, monotheistic God; consequently, justice and polytheism are mutually exclusive (5.8.4).

Lactantius expresses this identification of justice with Christianity by using *iusti* to mean Christians, and *iustitia* to designate Christianity.⁴ The adjective denotes the people who show religious virtue, and the noun (the) right religion. Loi ascribes different nuances to the phrases '*iustitia est cultus Dei*' and '*cultus Dei est iustitia*', the second phrase entailing the moral sanctity conveyed by the Christian religion, and its efficacy at producing virtue (5.19.29-32).⁵ This religious meaning of the substantive *iustus* is seen in Lactantius' claim that the persecutors attack *cultores Dei summi hoc est iustos homines* (5.1.6). Similarly, demons are afraid of the *iusti autem id est cultores Dei* (2.15.3). Lactantius describes the eschatological tribulation of the *iusti et sectatores veritatis* (7.17.10) and the deliverance of *iustus et cultor Dei populus* (7.15.5).⁶ He glosses *iustus* as referring to the people who (rightly) worship (the true) God; he equates *iusti* with *Christiani*. This gloss is particularly common in persecution and eschatological contexts.

Labelling Christians *iusti* brings the injustice of persecution into sharper relief by contrasting the charges made against Christians with their true moral status. Christians are pious and *iustitiae sectatores*, but treated as *hostes* (5.9.3). *Iustitia* is the object of the persecutors' hatred and legal machinations (4.27.3; 5.4.1), and the reason the Christians are pursued (5.12.7; 5.21.4; 5.23.4). The name *iusti* defines Christians by

2 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 161–62.

3 Ingreteau, 'Lactance et la Justice', 43.

4 Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 595.

5 Loi, 598.

6 Colot agrees this passage is periphrastic. Colot, *Lactance*, 74.

their blamelessness, emphasising the legal inequity of their treatment; Lactantius encapsulates this felt unfairness by accusing the persecutors of hating and condemning justice (5.11.1, 10; 5.12.2). Lactantius combines this religious meaning with the more traditional sense of social harmony: the persecutors mourn societal justice's absence while they persecute its religious manifestation (5.9.1). Ironically, the Romans' religious policies hinder their deepest desires for their society. Lactantius regards the different elements of justice as facets of a whole. *De Mortibus* labels Christians *iusti* (DMP. 1.5), *iustus populus* (3.2), *iusti atque innocentes* (16.3), and those possessing *iustus sanguis* (5.1). The noun refers unambiguously to Christianity: Peter converted many *ad iustitiam* and founded the *templum Dei* in Rome, while the emperors tried to destroy it, meaning the church (2.5-6; 4.1). This is the most common nuance of *iustitia* language in *de Mortibus*.⁷ Similarly, the dedications to Constantine praise him for restoring justice and wisdom, and for stopping Christians being condemned for practicing justice (*DI*. 1.1.13-16; 7.26.11).

Lactantius also uses *iusti* to describe Christians' eschatological vindication. Again, he makes the connection between their justice and their worship clear (2.12.19). Even Cicero, he says, acknowledges that the *iusti* will receive a different post-mortem fate to the *impii* (3.19.5). Throughout the eschatological narrative in Book 7, *iusti* describes God's people (7.17.6-10; 7.19.2; 7.22.8; 7.24.2; 7.26.1, 4, 7; cf. 4.12.21). The just will be tested by fire: those with many sins will be punished with the impious, people with wrong religion; those who are fully imbued with justice and virtue will be rewarded (7.21.6).⁸ This passage describes two groups called *iusti*, both following the Christian God, but only one whose actions are just. In the first case, *iusti* denotes not behaviour

7 It is strange *de Mortibus* does not condemn the emperors for injustice more frequently. In Chapter 6, I suggest Lactantius invokes classical motifs of justice to depict the persecutors as unjust without using the word.

8 Bidez and Cumont find a Mazdean or Hystaspean background for this teaching. Bidez and Cumont, *Les mages hellénisés*, 373.

but one's allegiance to the Christian God. A similar sense is given in Lactantius' discussion of repentance, which places the ethical strictness which Lactantius says is requisite for justice in tension with the fact that those he calls *iusti* are not just in every instance of action (6.24.1-10).

Buchheit sees precedent for calling Christians *iusti* in the Pauline use of δικαιοσύνη as a status, given to all who believe and are baptised.⁹ However, Lactantius' use of *iustitia* is primarily ethical, and he never describes it as a status gifted by grace, as 7.21.6 shows. Lactantius expects that Christian behaviour is generally characterised by justice, though the church offers forgiveness for occasional sins. A person who worships appropriately but lacks other virtues is like a person missing a limb: hampered, but still alive (6.9). A better background for Lactantius' use of *iusti* is the Hebrew *šaddîqîm*: it does not refer to sinlessness, but to those who are in a state of general obedience to God.¹⁰ In the Psalms, the righteous are those who do God's will and keep his covenant through eschewing idolatry and obeying his law.¹¹ The themes of worshipping God alone and keeping his law are highly resonant in Lactantius, and I think that this is the best background for understanding his expectations of Christian behaviour. In Lactantius, *iusti* designates a characteristic set of behaviours, but also a social identity as God's people, who acknowledge him as Father and Lord. This social identity persists despite individual sin, as long as the Christian maintains contact with the church and continues to repent (6.24).

Colot observes that Lactantius frequently uses semantic ambiguity propaedeutically, to speak to pagans and Christians on different levels. He appears to create a consensus between the Christian and pagan referents of a term such as *iustitia*,

9 Buchheit, 'Die Definition Der Gerechtigkeit', 367.

10 J. J. Scullion, 'Righteousness, OT', in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 5 (New York ; London: Doubleday, 1992), 734; Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings*, 94; Johnson, 'Šādaq', 258. By contrast, the Stoics thought one had to display virtue perfectly to possess it at all.

11 Turner, 'The Righteousness of God in Psalms and Romans', 292–93.

but then he qualifies the definition so that only the Christian referent is accepted.¹² The term *iusti* allows Lactantius to speak on two levels: pagans hear a positive term, with less ideological baggage than *Christiani*, while Christians understand that the term denotes themselves, the true worshippers of God.¹³ This metonymy also shows justice's centrality in Lactantius' apology: Christianity's story is summarised as the history of divine justice.¹⁴

Observing the antonym Lactantius typically associates with *iusti* enables us to hear this dual resonance more clearly. Colot identifies the antonym of *iusti/Christiani* as *iniusti*;¹⁵ however, a more thorough word study reveals that Lactantius opposes *iusti* with *impii* almost twice as frequently as he does with *iniusti*.¹⁶ In Book 7's eschatological narrative, which describes the final battle between the *iusti* and their opponents, the adjective *iniustus* occurs three times, while *impius* occurs eighteen times, usually in the plural.¹⁷ This reflects a broader trend: throughout his corpus, Lactantius uses *iniustus* fifty times and *impius* 110 times, despite using the *iustus* word group around two and a half times more frequently than the *pious* word group.¹⁸

This word pair is significant, because it reveals one of the sources of Lactantius' idiom. The collocation of *iustus* and *impius* is rare in the classical corpus, occurring only a handful of times in Cicero and Seneca. However, it occurs abundantly in the Latin Old Testament, particularly the Psalms and Proverbs, where the words translate the common Hebrew antonyms *šaddîqîm* and *r^ešā'îm*.¹⁹ Lactantius describes God's

12 Colot, *Lactance*, 67–68.

13 Colot, 'La problématique de la justice dans les Institutiones divines de Lactance', 117–18.

14 Colot, *Lactance*, 71–75.

15 Colot, 71–75.

16 *Iustus* and *impius* are opposed in the same section in *DI*. 1.12.2; 2.17.3; 3.19.5; 5.11.1; 5.12.8; 5.19.5; 7.14.3; 7.15.8; 7.17.10; 7.18.5; 7.19.5; 7.21.7; 7.26.4, 7. *Iustus* and *iniustus* are opposed in the same section in *DI*. 5.22.1, 3, 10; 6.9.6; 7.5.20, 24; 7.15.8; *ID*. 16.9.

17 *Iustus* occurs 23 times in the same section.

18 I counted 640 uses of the *iustus* group and 266 of the *pious* group.

19 e.g. Gen 18:23-28; Exod. 9:27; Ps 1:5-6; 10:5 LXX; Prov 3:33; 10:2, 3, 11, 16, 20, 24-25, 28-32; 11:8-11; 12:5-7; 15:27-28; Eccl. 3:17; 8:14; Ezek. 13:22 18:20-27; Mal. 3:18. This use of the *Vetus Latina* and Vulgate mirrors the Septuagint, which uses δικαιοῖ and ἄσεβεῖς for *šaddîqîm* and *r^ešā'îm*.

people using the language of God's people. Lactantius may well have acquired the collocation liturgically, where the Psalms were read regularly.²⁰ Proverbs is common among the citations of other church fathers, indicating the book was well-known.²¹

This, then, is another place where Lactantius speaks on two levels: both words were common among pagans, yet their combination recalled the church's language, evoking biblical language and experiences of worship. The use of *impii* underscores that both words are religious in meaning; Christianity's opponents ultimately oppose God. The Psalms and Proverbs often use the words in eschatological contexts, as Lactantius does. In designating Christians and their opponents *iusti* and *impii*, Lactantius locates himself and his co-religionists within the salvation-historical tradition, where the antagonism of the *iusti* by the *impii* is inevitable, but so is God's ultimate deliverance.

Pietas

Pietas is one of Lactantius' favourite ways to denote religious virtue, and it is integral to his definition of justice. Though this chapter focuses on religious virtue broadly conceived, exploring Lactantius' use of *pietas* is instructive because it reveals how he modifies Roman virtues for apologetic reasons. We will survey the semantic range of this term in Roman culture and during the Diocletianic persecution, before comparing these with Lactantius.

Johnson, 'Ṣāḏāq', 258; Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings*, 94. The collocation is much less common in the New Testament. Tertullian and Cyprian use these terms in opposition to each other, but much less frequently than Lactantius does. Hence it seems likely that the Latin Old Testament is where Lactantius acquired the turn of phrase.

20 Mark J. Edwards, 'Scripture in the North African Apologists: Arnobius and Lactantius', in *The Bible in Christian North Africa, Part 1*, ed. Anthony Dupont and Jonathan Yates (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 186.

21 Especially Ignatius, Clement, and Origen.

Traditional Roman Usage

The virtue of *pietas* was central to Roman identity.²² It was originally the key familial virtue, expressed in ‘reciprocal affection and obligation’, and depicted in Aeneas’ carrying his elderly father on his back (Virg. *Aen.* 2.704-20; cf. Sen. *Ben.* 3.37.1).²³ It prompted protectiveness and care in fathers, obedience in children, and duty and affection among both parties.²⁴ Over time its semantic range widened to include reverence towards ancestors, the state and emperor, and the gods.²⁵ Outside the family, it required reverence for Roman society’s customs and institutions. The three domains could be combined, as we saw in the marriages edict, or in the Parentalia festival, where one offered sacrifices to one’s ancestors.²⁶ The emperor became the locus of political piety during the imperial period; his relations with citizens were modelled on a family, and he was responsible for mediating the people’s relationship with the gods.²⁷ Romans believed their empire was achieved through their superior religious piety (Cic. *ND.* 2.8). These three domains form my analysis’ framework; for convenience I will designate them filial or familial piety, religious piety, and political piety.

Cicero

Cicero definitively articulated how Romans understood their defining virtue *pietas* and its religious obligations.²⁸ In Cicero’s early writings, *pietas* meant fulfilling one’s duties towards one’s ancestors (*Verr.* 4.6.12), parents (*Part. Orat.* 22.78), family members, country, or all these categories (*Inv.* 2.22, 65; 2.66; *Pro Planc.* 90; *Rep.* 6.16).

Several of these passages name *religio* as the corresponding virtue towards the gods.

22 Colot, ‘Pietas’, 2001, 25.

23 Saller, ‘Pietas’, 399.

24 Cynthia Jordan Bannon, *The Brothers of Romulus: Fraternal Pietas in Roman Law, Literature, and Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 12–13.

25 Blandine Colot, ‘Pietas (Latin)’, in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin, Steven Rendall, and Emily S. Apter (Princeton ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 784; Colot, ‘Pietas’, 2001, 25.

26 Watts, *The Final Pagan Generation*, 57.

27 Colot, ‘Lactantius and the Philosophy of Cicero’, 91.

28 Colot, *Lactance*, 104.

Wagenvoort argues that Cicero's definition of *pietas* shifted towards virtue regarding the gods in 46 BC (*Fin.* 3.22.73; *ND.* 1.3; 1.116).²⁹ After this, *pietas* included *iustitia adversum deos*, responding virtuously to knowledge about the gods (*ND.* 1.116; 2.153). Cicero believed that social virtues, including *pietas* and *iustitia*, depended upon maintenance of their religious roots (1.2.4).³⁰ One's duty to the state surpasses even familial piety; Cicero ranks the obligations to *patria* and *parentes* first, because they give the greatest aid, and then to children and household (*Off.* 1.57-58). In the *Somnium Scipionis*, Scipio is charged *iustitiam cole et pietatem, quae cum magna in parentibus et propinquis, tum in patria maxima est* (*Rep.* 6.16). Cicero preserves the traditional tripartite understanding of *pietas*, yet provided valuable materials for Lactantius to develop in his own definition.

Hermetica

Lactantius appeals to Hermes Trismegistus to justify his definition of *pietas* as *notio Dei* (*DI.* 5.14.11-12; *CH.* 9.4). Many scholars take this as determinative for Lactantius' conception of piety.³¹ Another Hermetic treatise describes ἡ γνῶσις τοῦ θεοῦ as the only σωτήριον for humanity (10.15). εὐσέβεια entails knowing the divine and doing no person an injustice (τὸ γνῶναι τὸ θεῖον καὶ μηδένα ἀνθρώπων ἀδικῆσαι, 10.19). This involves several elements of Lactantian justice, including a bipartite division into duties to God and humans, and the prominence of piety and justice, though they are arranged differently.

However, the contexts of these texts include ideas Lactantius explicitly rejects. The knowledge of the divine did not denote external knowledge but the assumption of the initiate's soul into the divine, or their attaining divine attributes while embodied

29 H. Wagenvoort, *Pietas: Selected Studies in Roman Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 7–11.

30 Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 41.

31 Wlosok, *Laktanz*, 209–13; Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 602.

(10.24-25; 11.20; 12.1; *Ascl.* 6.22).³² The author understands salvation as ascent to Olympus, which depends on the cosmic soul and separation from the body, and which enables the soul to become daimonic or divine. Conversely, irreverent souls, which are attracted to the body, seek other human bodies to enter (*CH.* 10.15-19). Here, εὐσέβεια never describes a social virtue as it does in the Roman texts. Overall, these texts teach a more noetic, contemplative, and disembodied piety than Lactantius does.

Porphyry

As one of the foremost philosophers of the era, Porphyry is an important foil for Lactantius, whether or not Lactantius responded to him directly. Porphyry accuses Christians of abandoning both Graeco-Roman and Jewish religious traditions (Beck. 6F).³³ Porphyry's uses of piety in the filial or political sense are rare (cf. *Abst.* 3.26; 4.8, 10; *Marc.* 35). For him, piety is primarily religious; he uses the expression εὐσέβεια πρὸς θεον or πρὸς θεοῦς in multiple places (*Abst.* 4.5.3-6; *Marc.* 17), and defines it as justice towards the gods (*Abst.* 3.1). Elsewhere he divides injustice into impiety towards gods and forefathers, and lawlessness towards other people (*Marc.* 14); this mirrors Lactantius' bipartite division, but adds ancestors to the category of piety. Given this context, his labelling Christians impious is primarily a religious criticism (Smith 343F). Piety honours the gods κατὰ τὰ πάτρια (*Marc.* 18), but Porphyry reinterprets this reference to custom to support his own philosophical religious practices rather than to denote the conventional cult.³⁴

Lactantius' Contemporaries

Pietas was ideologically significant for Diocletian and his tetrarchy, and it was invoked in the persecution as we saw. The tetrarchs called themselves *pious*, placed

³² Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, 110–11.

³³ Johnson, 'Philosophy, Hellenicity, Law', 57–67.

³⁴ The context qualifies that this means a mind which imitates and is united to the divine, not sacrifices or offerings (Porph. *Marc.* 18-19; cf. *Abst.* 2.34.1–37.4). Cf. Johnson, *Religion and Identity*, 137.

images of gods on their coins, and forbade deviations from traditional Roman morality and religion to maintain divine favour.³⁵ Diocletian sought to stabilise the empire by restoring traditional virtue,³⁶ and as a civil servant, Lactantius would have been familiar with his project.

The *Latin Panegyrics* show all three traditional domains of *pietas*. Religious piety is invoked the least and is used to praise imperial temple building (*Pan. Lat.* XI.6.1-2; VI.22.4).³⁷ Familial piety is displayed in the emperors' concord and loyalty to each other (XI.6.1-2, 7; VII.14.4-7; VI.7.4; 22.4),³⁸ which benefits the empire through securing the royal dynasty (VII.2.2-3; 13.3-4) and mirrors the honours shown to the gods (XI.6.3). Politically, piety denotes the emperors' concern for their subjects and earns imperial stability or *felicitas* through both good governance and divine gift (XI.18.1-5; V.7.4-6; VII.5.1; IX.17.5). *Pietas* is a favourite virtue of the panegyrist, and they use it to give a multifaceted picture of imperial virtue.³⁹

Christian impiety was thought to have political consequences. Socially, it destabilised important ancient institutions and expressed disloyalty to the empire,⁴⁰ and religiously, it threatened the divine protection the gods gave to the empire in exchange for worship.⁴¹ The imperial persecution edicts indicted Christian impiety: Christians pollute their cities through refusing to sacrifice and cause the gods to withhold benefits from the region (Eus. *HE.* 9.7.8-14). Galerius justified the persecution by appealing to the need to uphold ancient laws, ancestral customs, and public discipline (Lact. *DMP.* 34.1-3). Eusebius summarises charges against the Christians: they abandon Greek and

35 Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change*, 244; Corcoran, *Tetrarchs*, 184 n. 59.

36 Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 242.

37 For the *Panegyrics*' use of divine epithets, see Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change*, 238; Rodgers, 'Divine Insinuation in the "Panegyrici Latini"'.

38 An essential virtue in the aftermath of the third century crisis!

39 See Seager, 'Some Imperial Virtues in the Latin Prose Panegyrics'.

40 Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 1:361; Daniel C. Ullucci, *The Christian Rejection of Animal Sacrifice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 121; Larson, 'The Trouble with Religious Tolerance in Roman Antiquity', 53.

41 Schott, 'Porphyry on Christians and Others', 312–13.

barbarian customs for strange, new, seditious ones. Christians are *δυσσεβεῖς* and *ἄθεοι* for abandoning the universally-accepted gods who protect the empire; they fight against their benefactors (Eus. *PE.* 1.2.1-3). More broadly, the Marriages edict expresses familial duty in religious and political language; familial piety honours the emperors and the gods (*Coll.* 6.4.2). Though piety has three domains, it is one virtue, and all its aspects were resonant in Lactantius' day.

Lactantius

Lactantius redefines *pietas* to aid his defence of Christianity. Lactantius primarily understands *pietas* as virtue towards the divine: *pietas* is *notio Dei*, and expressing justice towards God (*DI.* 5.14.11-12). Lactantius defines *religio* as being bound to God by the chain of piety; piety describes humanity's obligation towards God (4.28.12). Regardless of their ethical conduct, a person who does not worship the Christian God cannot be just or pious (5.10.14). For Lactantius, the emphasis on filial and political obligation in traditional *pietas* erred by substituting other loyalties for loyalty to God (cf. 3.14.8-10).⁴² Instead, Lactantius coopts filial piety language to promote worship of God. God is humanity's *paterfamilias*, who provides for and rules the cosmos as a divine *Pater et Dominus*. The *paterfamilias* motif is central to Lactantian *pietas*, because piety was the virtue governing paternal relationships, yet its religious element rendered it transferrable to the Christian God, who was already known as Father and Lord. Lactantius uses the *paterfamilias* image to depict *pietas* as a distinctly Christian virtue, harnessing his audience's strong instinct towards filial piety to lead them to worship his God.⁴³ As we saw, he embeds *pietas* in his definition of justice by reconstituting Cicero's cosmopolis as a family. Conversely, *impius* and *impietas* refer to failures in duty towards God (e.g. 2.1.7-12; 4.10.13, 17; 4.11.1, 7). God also

⁴² Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 193.

⁴³ Colot, *Lactance*, 316.

demonstrates piety in his compassion, mercy, and faithfulness towards his people (4.11.15). Lactantius often labels religious virtue the supreme virtue, the reason for human existence and the quality which distinguishes humans from animals (3.12.26-27; 3.28.1). If the virtues form a body, piety (right worship) is the head, without which all other virtues are dead and do not grant eternal life (6.9.8-12, 16). Piety is the virtue which orders and animates the others.

Lactantius does not outline a concept of filial or political piety as traditionally understood, though he uses these aspects of piety to accuse pagans of inconsistency.⁴⁴ He rejects ancestral precedent as a criterion for religious truth, accusing his countrymen of abdicating their reason to their predecessors and ranking filial piety above religious piety (2.6.7-11). He avoids acknowledging an obligation to the emperors because it would have highlighted Christian disobedience to the imperial persecution edicts. Instead of affirming duties towards *maiores* and *patria*, Lactantius affirms a duty to all humans, irrespective of nationality or status (6.6.18-24; cf. Cic. *Off.* 3.6.28). This is fraternal piety reformulated: as God is the universal Father, so all humans are God's children and therefore siblings (*DI.* 5.22.7-8). Piety's duties include mutual care, particularly for the destitute (6.10.3-9; 6.11.12; 6.12.15-30; 6.20.21). Violence is inherently impious, an idea which grounds Lactantius' critique of Aeneas, the paragon of traditional piety (5.10.2-10). The next chapter demonstrates that Lactantius' social ethics centre around *aequitas*, *prodesse* and *non nocere*, each of which Lactantius derives from the fraternal relationship humans share under God's fatherhood. He resolves piety's three fields of reference into two, virtue towards God and virtue towards humanity, the same division of ethics he gives in his definition of justice. This does not mean he denies the traditional domains of *pietas* or renders familial relationships

⁴⁴ He criticises Romans for failing to enact traditional piety (*DI.* 1.20.25; 1.21.10; 5.20.6), though he defines the term differently. For instance, Jupiter and Saturn failed to treat each other with familial piety (1.10.10; 1.12.2; 1.21.9-10).

unimportant. Rather, he extends social *pietas* so that family and state are no longer privileged.

Several sources have been suggested for Lactantius' understanding of *pietas*. Loi writes that *pietas* is primarily an intellectual knowledge of God. Defining *pietas* with a Hermetic formula (*CH.* 9.4) reveals Lactantius' profound dependence on Gnostic-Hermetic literature.⁴⁵ However, Lactantius treats the Hermetic passage more hostilely than Loi realises. Schott writes that Lactantius often takes Hermetic sayings out of context,⁴⁶ and that is the case here. The Hermetist describes the effect of θεοῦ γνῶσις: it grants its possessor divine thoughts and prompts separation and hostility from the multitude. Lactantian piety also provokes hostility from others, as the persecution demonstrated, but it creates an awareness of kinship between all and charges its possessors to think themselves lower than others (*DI.* 5.14.15–15.6). Lactantian *pietas* is expressed in *aequitas*, but this does not appear possible for the Gnostic whose thoughts have become divine.⁴⁷ Hermetic piety produces different social relations to Lactantian piety, making it unlikely Lactantius' definition is driven by the Hermetic concept. When we consider the Hermetic teaching in its context, as Buchheit alone has done, we find that Lactantius excerpted a phrase from a passage affirming an elitism he rejects.⁴⁸

Lactantius evaluates the Hermetica according to criteria he found elsewhere; therefore the Hermetica are not governing his ideas. Rather, the Roman and Ciceronian background is primary; Lactantius is clearly modifying a Roman concept, as is evident in the *paterfamilias* metaphor and transposition of Ciceronian natural law. Loi, Grossmann and others have attempted to explain Lactantian *pietas* without referring to the *paterfamilias* metaphor, consequently missing the underlying logic behind his

45 Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 602.

46 Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*, 87.

47 The passage also says that θεοῦ γνῶσις enables the knower to experience all things as goods, which Lactantius explicitly rejects (*DI.* 3.27.5).

48 Buchheit, 'Die Definition Der Gerechtigkeit', 365–66.

construction of the virtue.⁴⁹ But if this is the case, we must ask why Lactantius uses a Hermetic formula in such a programmatic place? Romans would not naturally have described filial piety as knowing one's father; they would have preferred the language of affection or obligation. This suggests that the statement *pietas est Dei notio* is designed to use Hermetic language to appeal to those who prized *sapientia*. As Walter notes, an emphasis on knowing God is central not only to Gnostics and Hermetics, but also to Neoplatonists and Stoics, as well as the Fourth Evangelist.⁵⁰ In the Bible, knowing God carries an affective and commitment-oriented sense,⁵¹ uniting the philosophical and religious senses of piety given by Lactantius. Again, Lactantius speaks on two levels: his pagan audience would initially have heard a cognitive reference, but this is ultimately resolved into the relational sense the Christians heard. Lactantius resolves *notio Dei* into a more affective, communal, and sacramental worship than is taught in the *Hermetica*, by employing the filial affection appropriate to *patresfamiliarum*.

Therefore, Lactantius reformulates a characteristically Roman virtue so that it aligns with a Christian ethic. The word is used in a religious or traditional sense by the earlier Latin fathers without the richness Lactantius ascribes to it.⁵² As with the *paterfamilias* metaphor, the reformulation is his original work. By claiming *pietas* for the Christians, Lactantius asserts that Christianity is the best way to maintain the Roman identity which piety expresses.⁵³ Lactantius' transposition of the virtue from a pagan to a Christian key helped further the transition of the empire from pagan to Christian.⁵⁴

49 Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*'; Grossmann, 'Pietas'.

50 Walter, *Pagane Texte*, 219.

51 E. Schütz and E. D. Schmitz, 'Knowledge, Experience, Ignorance', in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1975), 395–405; Rudolf Bultmann, 'Ginōskō', in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. G. W. Bromiley, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich: Erdmans, 1965), 698–713.

52 Cyprian uses *pietas* primarily for religious virtue (*Pat.* 6; *Ep.* 59.4, 13). His use reflects the Latin Bible's, and he does not incorporate the word's traditional Roman sense.

53 Mark J. Edwards, 'The Flowering of Latin Apologetic: Lactantius and Arnobius', in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire*, ed. S. R. F. Price et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 210.

54 Colot, 'Pietas', 2001, 32.

What to worship

Worship's Object

The most important aspect of religious virtue is its object. Whom one worships is critical, more than one's manner of worship or prayer (4.28.11). Lactantius' *Divine Institutes* assert that the true divinity is one, and is only revealed in Christianity. Lactantius seeks to convince pagans to stop worshipping their gods and turn to the *summus Deus*. Much Christian literature is similarly motivated; Lactantius' reading and liturgical experience would have impressed upon him God's unity and the importance of worshipping him exclusively (e.g. Deut. 6:13; Dan. 3:16-19=Cyp. *Quir.* 3.10; John 17:3=Cyp. *Quir.* 2.1). Religious virtue must apprehend its proper object if it is to be considered true worship.⁵⁵ Thus *religio* is inseparable from and dependent upon *sapientia*, a characteristic motif of Lactantius' epistemology (*DI.* 4.3.6; 4.4.3-5).⁵⁶ Lactantius makes religious virtue the chief virtue, and a requirement of meaningfully possessing other virtues (6.9.1-24). Thus rendering worship to the right deity is necessary for possessing not just religious virtue, but the rest of the virtues and their prize, immortality.

The persecution can be understood as a contest to define the appropriate object of religion. Christianity's critics agreed that religious virtue depended upon accurate knowledge of the divine, but they denied that Christians possessed such knowledge.⁵⁷ Porphyry thought that Christians had rejected the gods and their messengers; despite their similar worship practices he considered Christian worship illegitimate because it was directed towards the wrong beings (Porph. Smith 346F). He called Christianity

55 Though he does not discuss Jewish sacrifice, this point means Lactantius would probably rate it higher than pagan sacrifice.

56 Cf. Wlosok, *Laktanz*, 213–14.

57 They also denied the masses could discern this, often subordinating the pantheon to higher beings (Porph. *Abst.* 1.57.2; 3.27.2; *Marc.* 15, 17; cf. Plat. *Tim.* 29d-30c; *Laws.* 631c-d; *Phaedr.* 246d-247c; 747d-e; 897c-d; Cic. *Leg.* 2.15-16).

senseless, impious, polluting, and arrogant for claiming a religious knowledge that surpassed philosophical insights (*Vit. Plot.* 16; Smith 343F). Claiming higher knowledge of divine matters was a strategy for justifying one's deviation from traditional beliefs, and in the case of philosophers this was deemed permissible. Christians and pagan philosophers used such strategies to justify their beliefs, and each contended for the right to define truth and wisdom.⁵⁸ Lactantius imitates this tactic, claiming to possess the higher religious knowledge needed for true piety. He positions himself as a philosopher, or corrector of philosophers, and claims that Christian deviance from traditional cult is justified by reason.

Religio and superstitio

Lactantius' redefinition of *religio* and *superstitio* follows this idea. He sees *superstitio* as worship of false gods; *religio* is worshipping the one true God (*DI.* 4.28.13). Traditionally *religio* and *superstitio* did not involve questions of truth and falsehood, but rather appropriate, traditional ways of honouring the gods and excessive or non-state approved religious practices (cf. Cic. *ND.* 1.61).⁵⁹ Scheid writes that the distinction between *religio* and *superstitio* is essentially a differentiation between public and private.⁶⁰ *Religiosus* behaviour merited divine favour through piety; *superstitio*, of which the worst form was magic, endangered religion and the state and risked offending the gods by subverting established customs. Traditionally the senate determined which practices were *religiosus* or permissible; Christianity was excluded and thus deemed superstitious (cf. Plin. *Ep.* 10.96).⁶¹ In redefining *superstitio*, Lactantius marshals the term against paganism instead of Christianity.

58 Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, 'Porphyry, Lactantius, and the Paths to God', *Studia Patristica* 34 (2001): 528; Marx-Wolf, 'High Priests', 482–84, 510.

59 Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*, 105–6; Edwards, *Religions*, 26.

60 John Scheid, *Religion et piété à Rome* (Paris: Découverte, 1985), 162.

61 Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 216–18, 230.

Lactantius redefines *religio* in conversation with Cicero, rejecting Cicero's derivation of *religio* from *relegere*, to re-read, indicating the study of ancient religious matters. Instead, Lactantius derives the noun from *religare*, to bind or fasten, referring to piety's bond of obligation to God (*DI*. 4.28.3-12; Cic. *ND*. 2.28.71-2).⁶² Cicero's etymology emphasised that by returning to the wisdom of the *maiores*, the bond they established between Rome and the gods could be upheld.⁶³ Cicero understood *superstitio* as excessive repetition of *religiosus* practices; Lactantius criticises him for differentiating *superstitio* from *religio* only by means of degree (*DI*. 4.28.3-8). Cicero also differentiated the terms according to the worshipper's attitude: *superstitio* fears the gods groundlessly, which *religio* avoids through reason's influence (Cic. *ND* 1.62.117).⁶⁴

Instead, Lactantius differentiates *religio* and *superstitio* by their objects. *Religio* means worshipping the true God, and *superstitio* is worshipping false gods; for Lactantius true religion is inherently monotheistic (*DI*. 4.28.11-13). Furthermore, *religio* means being bound (*religati*) to the true God by the obligation to worship him, which Lactantius calls *vinculum pietatis* (4.28.2).⁶⁵ Lactantius accepts the definition of *superstitio* as creating new rituals for dead people and diverting worship from the true divinity, but he asserts that all pagan worship falls into this category. And while Cicero described *religio* in terms of (particular) cultural memory, Lactantius defines it as accepting doctrines which gain authenticity from their transcendence of culture.⁶⁶ Lactantius' redefinition of *religio* and *superstitio* aims to reconfigure the principles on which *religio* is evaluated, privileging reason over tradition.

62 Modern scholarship has not advanced the question of the word's etymology. Bryce, *Library*, 183.

63 Colot, *Lactance*, 291.

64 Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 41.

65 Aubin rightly observes that Lactantius defines *religio* around *pietas* rather than a sacred/profane dichotomy. Jeffery Aubin, 'La religion, et l'opposition sacré et profane, dans les *Diuinae institutiones* de Lactance', *Laval théologique et philosophique* 70, no. 2 (2014): 229.

66 Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*, 105–6.

Against Polytheistic Cults

Lactantius' reasons for abandoning worship of the traditional deities are threefold. Lactantius begins his apologetic by attempting to undo the justification for common religious practice, before giving his arguments for Christianity in later books. He organises his work to rebut obstacles to the truth, so people may come to true religion; he must overturn the false before people will accept what is true (1.23.7-8). These arguments against polytheistic worship are primarily outlined in *Institutes* Books 1–2, and summarised at the end of Book 2. Firstly, *religiones deorum* are false because they are directed towards dead humans, who cannot give the benefits which are credited to them (1.8–23). Secondly, worship of images and other created things places creatures above their creator (2.1.1–7.7). Finally, pagan rites worship evil demons, who are condemned by God, who cannot benefit their worshippers, and whom Christians can expel (2.7.8–17.5). Such worship constitutes rebellion against the true Father and creator of humanity, is contrary to reason, and violates all that is religiously proper (2.17.6-12). Lactantius draws on Lucretius and Cicero's *de Natura Deorum* to make his case, but also follows Cyprian closely (*Quir.* 3.10, 59). He starts with arguments that were more acceptable in Roman society, which had a history of philosophical euhemerism. His second argument appeals to humans to take their rightful place at the head of the created order, a motif that also occurs in his final, most provocative argument that pagans worship demons.

Polytheism Worships Dead Humans

Lactantius' first argument is euhemeristic, justified by his renarration of Roman history: the traditional gods are deified humans. Lactantius cites Euhemerus (via Ennius), who claimed to have discovered records proving that the Olympians were

ancient kings (*DI.* 1.11.33-36).⁶⁷ Euhemerism was an accepted part of the Roman religious landscape: Ennius' writings were part of the Latin canon, and Roman mythology included deified humans such as Romulus and deceased emperors.⁶⁸ However, Lactantius extends it to explain Roman religion *in toto*, claiming that what Romans thought to be myth was in fact documented history.

Unlike Arnobius, Lactantius accepts that the poets wrote embellished history; he denies the gods' deity but accepts the stories of their actions (1.9.8-10; 1.11.23-36; 1.19.4-5).⁶⁹ Doing so enables him to accept the elements which undermine traditional cult while denying those that support it, while ultimately affirming the texts which were so formative in his (and his readers') education. The gods were contingent: they had ancestors, depended on physical resources, feared threats to their power, and their deaths and tombs are known (1.8.3-8; 1.13.4-5; 1.16.4-17; 2.1.1; 5.19.14-19). They ruled not in heaven, but as kings on earth (1.8.8; 1.13.11-15).⁷⁰ And they ruled violently and impiously, showing physical power but failing to conquer their own vices (1.10.1-14; 1.12.1-2; 1.17.9-17; 1.20.1-13; cf. *Orac. Syb.* 3.110-55). As Gehrke observes, the gods' mortality and immorality both display a lack of *virtus*, which Lactantius employs to mean divine power and the moral uprightness which aligns with that power.⁷¹ Furthermore, Lactantius claims that pagan gods inculcate vice in their worshippers, corrupting society, because worship is mimetic (*DI.* 1.21.1-19; 5.10.15-18; cf. *Plat. Rep.* 377b-382d; *Laws* 716ce).

67 For Lactantius' knowledge of Ennius, see Bryce, *Library*, 315–48.

68 Edwards, *Religions*, 19.

69 Louis J. Swift, 'Arnobius and Lactantius: Two Views of the Pagan Poets', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 96 (1965): 446–48; Bryce, *Library*, 292–301.

70 This explains the geographical diversity of cults; each region honoured their founders and forebears (*DI.* 1.15.7-10). See Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*, 96–97, though I think Lactantius' polemic is more historical than geographical, and more religious than cultural.

71 Gehrke, 'Lactantius's Power Theology', 697–99.

Lactantius classifies and rejects all polytheistic cults as ruler cults. Furthermore, those whom pagans considered deified humans were deified for trivial, immoral or self-interested reasons, particularly when compared to the creative wisdom and power of the true God (*DI.* 1.15.17-33; 1.18.18-25). Lactantius requires a genuine God to be creator and sustainer; Jupiter, whose name derives from *iuvans pater*, is too weak to deserve the title (1.11.39-43; cf. Cic. *ND.* 2.64, 66).⁷² Lactantius' anti-polytheist polemic applies equally to imperial cults, which developed when simple people became overawed by their leaders' power,⁷³ panegyrics were taken literally, and rulers exaggerated their ancestors' status to claim divine descent for themselves (*DI.* 1.15.1-13; 5.5.9-6.13). Lactantius asks how humans can grant a divine status which they do not possess themselves (1.15.28).

Correctly noting that Lactantius criticises the tetrarchs' patron deities Jupiter and Hercules more than others,⁷⁴ Digeser has read Book 1 as a veiled criticism of the tetrarchs' religious ideology. Digeser argues that this critique is implicit because of the political consequences of attacking the emperors openly.⁷⁵ However, I think she overemphasises the importance of the imperial cult in the persecution, as Lactantius does not criticise the persecutors for demanding worship in *de Mortibus* or the *Epitome*, when it would have been safe to do so.⁷⁶ Rather, Lactantius' attack on the deification of humans is directed at the traditional gods, whom Christians were persecuted for failing to worship. Book 1 is far more religious than it is political.

72 Legally, true fatherhood also entailed generation and education. Palomo Pinel, *Nec in mérito*, 123. Conversely, henotheists believed lower *daimones* and the traditional gods also deserved worship for upholding parts of the world (Orig. *Cels.* 7.68; 8.28, 33).

73 Lactantius echoes the criticisms of the apostles' uneducated, lowly status.

74 Also noted by Pichon, *Lactance*, 77.

75 Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 36-45.

76 Furthermore, I doubt that Saturn consistently represents Augustus, as Digeser claims. Saturn is portrayed positively in Book 5, to contrast with Jupiter, but not in Book 1, where he is accused of impiety (*DI.* 1.12.1-2). Lactantius would not have deemed Augustus' reign golden, because although he resisted an imperial cult, polytheism flourished.

Euhemeristic accounts of traditional religion were popular among the church fathers (Tert. *Apol.* 11; MF. 20; 29.3-5). Lactantius also read the *Hermetica* as teaching that Uranus and Saturn were human (*DI.* 1.6.1-5; 1.11.61; cf. NF. *CH.* 10.5; fr. 5a). Lactantius' argument draws from Epicurean and Stoic critiques of traditional religion alongside Ennius' Euhemerism.⁷⁷ The Stoics understood the divine to be the rational mind which ordered the universe, and the traditional deities anthropomorphisations of its functions (cf. Sen. *Ben.* 4.8.1-3).⁷⁸ Epicureans thought the gods were remote and utterly at rest, attributing the pantheon to dreams of super-humans whom people thought were real (Lucr. 5.146-52; 1169-82; 6.59-79). Though the priests reject Epicureanism, traditional religion has caused more crimes and impiety, such as the filicide of Iphigenia (1.80-84).

Though he drew from each of these sources, Lactantius rejects the pagan apologies for the traditional myths (e.g. *DI.* 1.12.3-10). He accuses pagans of rejecting their ancient religion to worship deceased humans, precisely the charges made against Christians. Porphyry regarded Jesus as pious but human (Smith 345F), and Celsus wrote that Christians worshipped not a God, nor a *daimon*, but a corpse (Orig. *Cels.* 7.68). Galerius appealed to the need to maintain the ancient institutions their forefathers had established (*DMP.* 34.1-3; cf. Cic. *Leg.* 2.27). Lactantius challenges the criterion from antiquity, labels it an abdication of one's reason (*DI.* 2.7.1-16), and attempts to use historical analysis to counter the charge that Christianity is foolish.⁷⁹ However, Book 1 uses the criterion of antiquity to assert that paganism's origins are recent, traceable, tendentious, and therefore illegitimate (1.22.1-28; 2.13.8-13). *Non ergo isti gloriantur*

77 His treatment of these philosophers is more complex than Kristina A Meinking, 'Anger and the Apologists: Lactantius in His North African Context', *Rivista Di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa* 53, no. 3 (2017): 425, realises.

78 Davie and Reinhardt, *Seneca*, xiii. Torre suggests Lactantius could have drawn his anti-pagan polemics from Seneca's lost works. Torre, 'Seneca and the Christian Tradition', 169–70.

79 For many centuries traditional cult had not needed rational justification; ancestral and pragmatic arguments were sufficient to justify its continued existence. Colot, *Lactance*, 17–19.

sacrorum vetustate, quorum et origo et ratio et tempora deprehensa sunt (1.23.5).

Lactantius' euhemeristic account of polytheism asserts that the persecutors' charges of novelty and worshipping humans apply more accurately to Roman than Christian religion.

Polytheism Worships Creation

Secondly, Lactantius criticises paganism for worshipping created things rather than their creator (2.1.1–7.7). This includes traditional cult statues as well as the cosmic bodies worshipped by Stoics and Neoplatonists.⁸⁰ Worshipping inanimate, fragile, irrational idols is foolish, since they are ontologically lower than their creators (2.2.11-17; 2.4.1-9).⁸¹ Lactantius knows that polytheists claim to worship the spirits behind the statues (cf. Porph. Smith 321F, 352F) but asks why the gods need intermediaries (*DI.* 2.2.1-2)? An inanimate *simulacrum* is not *similis* to a sentient and moveable deity; the true divine image resides in *ipse homo* (2.2.3-10). He applies the same criticism to those who regarded the universe or heavenly bodies to be divine, drawing on *reductio ad absurdum* arguments against Stoic theology (Cic. *ND.* 2.21-45; 54; 3.23-53; Porph. Smith 297F; Lact. *DI.* 1.12.3-10; 2.5.4-42; cf. Lucr. 1.146-54; 2.655-60).⁸²

Using his *status rectus* anthropology, Lactantius claims that one must worship something greater than oneself to retain one's humanity.⁸³ Worship means orienting oneself towards or placing oneself under something; the human posture indicates that humans ought to worship the heavenly God, but those who worship created things orient

80 For Lactantius' use of Stoic principles in his response to the idea that the universe is divine, see Bryce, *Library*, 91–99. Schott misses that this is part of Lactantius' anti-pagan polemic, because he believes that polemic to end in Book 1. Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*, 99–100.

81 Similarly, the Sibyllists asks why the Greeks sacrifice to idols and the dead, while abandoning the living, creator God (*Orac. Syb.* 3.29-35, 545-50, 586-90, 715-23; 4.6-11; 5.77-85). It is axiomatic that there is one God who should be worshipped, while his creation should not be. Buitenwerf, *Sibylline Oracles*, 334.

82 The Hermetica describe the cosmos as a material god and intermediary between God and humanity (*CH.* 10.10-14), which Lactantius omits to mention so he can maintain the work as a source of truth, but which mitigates the suggestion that Lactantius accepted that work unquestioningly.

83 Cyprian gives a similar argument (*Cyp. Dem.* 16).

their bodies towards the ground like animals (*DI.* 2.1.19; 2.2.19-22; *ID.* 20.9-11). If one worships something dead one will die; to live one needs to worship what lives (*DI.* 2.2.24). Lactantius uses the idea that pagans worship creation to defame paganism as inherently materialistic. Turning away from heaven means turning both to terrestrial gods and terrestrial goods, which also inevitably resulted in abandoning heavenly virtues for earthly vices (4.1.3-4; cf. *Cyp. Quir.* 3.10=*Rom.* 1:25-6). Pointing to the traditional cults' opulent offerings, he depicts all non-monotheists as obsessed with bodily pleasures (*DI.* 2.2.24; 2.6.2-6; 7.11.3; cf. *MF.* 22.1-5), a charge to which Porphyry would have objected (*Abst.* 2.34.1–37.4).⁸⁴

Aware of pagan critiques of traditional cult, Lactantius presents Christianity as the mean between two errors. Cicero realised that public cults were empty yet sought to maintain them out of misplaced deference to ancestral tradition (*DI.* 2.3.2-7; *Cic. ND.* 3.6).⁸⁵ Conversely, the Epicureans rightly attacked traditional cult and its practices, but could not find a true religion to establish in its place and so concluded that all religion was futile (*DI.* 2.3.10-21; *Lucr.* 1.80-111).⁸⁶ Lactantius portrays Christianity as the mean between denying providence and worshipping the objects which God providentially orders.

84 Andrew Smith, 'Porphyry and Pagan Religious Practice', in *The Perennial Tradition of Neoplatonism*, ed. John J. Cleary (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 1997), 34; O'Meara, *Platonopolis*, 37–38.

85 Lactantius assumes Cotta speaks for Cicero (though cf. *ND.* 3.95). *ND.* 3 aimed to show Greek philosophy inadequate to explain Roman religion, but Lactantius interpreted it as admitting Roman religion was nonsensical. Nicholson, 'The Christian Sallust: Lactantius on God, Man and History', 122.

86 Lactantius basically equates Epicureanism with atheism or irreligion. As Lucretius and Lactantius both battle against pagan mythology, Lactantius employs the poet as an ally in Books 1 and 2, though opposing his 'atheism'. Bryce, *Library*, 229–33. Goulon concludes that while Lactantius' description of Epicureanism is polemical, most of the ideas he attributes to the school can be found in Epicurus or Lucretius. Alain Goulon, 'Une présentation personnelle de l'épicurisme par Lactance (Inst. 3.17): objectivité, habileté, ou rouerie?', in *Autour de Lactance*, ed. Jean-Yves Guillaumin and Stéphane Ratti (Besançon: Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2003), 25.

Polytheistic Cults are Empowered by Demons

Lactantius' final argument against traditional cult alleges that pagans worship not gods but evil demons. This argument had a long heritage in Christian apologetics (cf. 1 Cor. 10:20-21; MF. 26.1-9; Cyp. *Dem.* 15);⁸⁷ it was also used by philosophers against the Christians (Porph. Smith 346F).⁸⁸ The traditional gods were credited with giving oracles, miracles, prodigies, and avenging sacrilege, which Stoics thought proved the gods' existence (Cic. *ND.* 2.6-8). They were worshipped so that they would treat the empire propitiously; the gods were believed to be active within human society and easily offended (Eus. *PE.* 1.2.1-5; Porph. Beck. 65F). The empire's safety and prosperity depended on maintaining traditional religion.⁸⁹ However, Lactantius attributes these signs to demons, who reside in household shrines, empower priests and magicians, try to obtain worship, and distract people from God (*DI.* 2.1.13-14; 2.14.1-14).⁹⁰ In worshipping demons, pagans worship their enemies, and as they offer animals to their murderers and robbers, they lay their own souls on the altar (5.20.1).

Demons harm their worshippers but can be dispelled with God's power (2.15.1–16.15-21; cf. Cyp. *Quir.* 3.10; 3.80).⁹¹ The failed auguries in Antioch impacted Lactantius powerfully; he concluded that the sign of the cross is stronger than the powers animating pagan religion (*DMP.* 10.1-2; *DI.* 4.27.3-5). He describes persecution as a battle with the devil, in which the Christian conquers through endurance or martyrdom and fails by apostasy (*DMP.* 16.5-12). He questions the identity of the providential deity to undermine the assertion that Christians prevent the empire from

87 Cf. Edwards, *Religions*, 21–22. Only the Christian Sibyllists used this argument in their polemic against polytheism (e.g. 8.378-98).

88 Porphyry regarded *daimones* as low-level divine beings, and believed in both good and evil *daimones* (*Abst.* 2.40.1–24.3). Others posited only good *daimones* (e.g. Orig. *Cels.* 7.68; 8.24, 33, 55).

89 Schott, 'Porphyry on Christians and Others', 312–13.

90 The section includes a discussion of God's creation of the world to explain demons' origins (*DI.* 2.8.8–14.3).

91 Lactantius appeals to the Hermetica to justify his demonology, particularly their nature as corrupted angels, role in tormenting and testing people, and the power that piety gives over them (*Ascl.* 25, 28, fr. 10).

receiving divine favour. Demons cannot bring benefits and can only restrain their evil; instead of worshipping them to appease them, Christians expel them using the divine name (*DI.* 2.15.1-3).⁹² Epicureans observed the gods failing to protect their worshippers and temples and so denied providence entirely (*Lucr.* 5.1229-40; 6.387-95). However, Lactantius interprets such occurrences to show that the temples were dedicated to the wrong deity (*DI.* 3.17.15). Polytheists' inability to account for divine interaction with the world led them to posit *fortuna* to explain seemingly-random calamity, but Lactantius attributes this to genuine divine punishment (3.28.6; 3.29.9-13). Lactantius' demonology asserts that pagans cannot account consistently for divine interaction with the world, though they persecute Christians to uphold it. He attributes the signs used to prove the pagan deities' existence to minor, malevolent beings. Rather, he claims that it is the Christian God who upholds and protects the empire.

Lactantius' Positive Theology

Monotheism

Lactantius avers that the providential deity is by definition singular; this forms the basis of his doctrine of God. Lactantius argues for monotheism by analogy with human government. One perfect ruler will govern more effectively than several leaders who share power and authority, since multiple rulers will be imperfect, lacking power outside their jurisdiction and conflicting with other deities.⁹³ Like the Roman army or a human body, the whole will not be deployed effectively unless one mind governs it (1.3.2-21; *ID.* 11.2-5; cf. *Virg. Aen.* 6.724-7; *Georg.* 4.221-224). As Gehrke notes, this argument is rooted in a pre-Nicene power theology, where a being's power indicates its nature or character. The gods' imperfect power and morality show their inferior *virtus* compared to the Christian God. The perfection and completion of the Christian God's power

⁹² cf. Porph. *Abst.* 2.40.1-43.3.

⁹³ Contra Meinking, 'Anger and the Apologists: Lactantius in His North African Context', 425.

shows that he is one nature rather than several.⁹⁴ This gives philosophical justification to what would otherwise be an *ad hominem* argument against the gods. Digeser argues that the analogy between monotheism and monarchy is a veiled polemic against the tetrarchy, which would have been seditious had Lactantius voiced it explicitly.⁹⁵ However, in this period it was no less dangerous to challenge traditional cult. Lactantius' argument depends on one part of the analogy being accepted, so it can justify the other. Pichon writes that the appeals to unity and order fitted with Roman sensibilities,⁹⁶ and Lactantius' explicit purpose is to argue for monotheism, so it seems best to read the contention as primarily religious.

Lactantius takes *deus* as the name of the supreme power, which necessitates his being *incompactibilis, perfectus, impassibilis, nulli rei subiectus* (*DI*. 1.3.23). God is also transcendent, nameless, incorporeal, and *aeterna mens* (7.3.4).⁹⁷ God's uniqueness means that he needs no proper name (1.6.4-5). Lactantius attributes this idea to the Hermetica, though it is also found in the Latin fathers (NF. *CH*. fr. 3a; MF. 18.10).⁹⁸ He also thinks that when pagans or henotheists cry to *deus* they address the Christian God (*DI*. 2.1.6-13). Beyond this, Lactantius uses three titles which express God's identity positively: *Deus summus*, *Deus unus ac singularis*, and *Deus Pater et Dominus*.⁹⁹

Digeser thinks that the emphasis on God's singularity and use of ambiguous titles like *Deus summus* shows that Lactantius seeks rapprochement with 'philosophical monotheists' like the Neoplatonists.¹⁰⁰ She writes, 'both systems were monotheistic in that worship was ultimately focused on the Supreme God. The primary difference was

94 Gehrke, 'Lactantius's Power Theology', 689–92.

95 Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 33.

96 Pichon, *Lactance*, 75–76.

97 See Coleman's summary of Lactantian theology: Coleman, *Lactantius*, 94–109.

98 The Hermetica are henotheistic rather than strictly monotheistic (*CH*. 1.6-13, 26; 10.3-14), though Lactantius implies otherwise.

99 John McGuckin, 'The Problem of Lactantius the Theologian', *Studia Patristica* 80, no. 6 (2017): 23.

100 Apuleius also uses the title *summus deus* (*Apul. Plat.* 2.1).

that Christians saw the human aspect of Jesus as the means by which they could know and worship God the Father, whereas Porphyry and other ‘philosophical monotheists’ saw the Roman pantheon as fulfilling a similar, albeit more limited, function for ordinary people.¹⁰¹ Digeser argues that Porphyry justified the persecutors’ agenda philosophically, and could have regarded Diocletian’s divine father as the One rather than Jupiter as Diocletian claimed.¹⁰² This is highly implausible. Porphyry regarded the One as accessible only through ascetic and pacifistic contemplation, impossible for a military emperor; an emperor’s tutelary deity would have been a lower-grade *daimon* like Zeus, and possibly even an evil one (*Abst.* 2.34.1–40.5; Smith 337F).¹⁰³ Designating Porphyry and Hierocles as monotheists stretches the term to breaking point. The Neoplatonists’ hierarchy of divine beings was complex, and there is no explanatory power in trying to make it akin to a Christian monotheism.¹⁰⁴

101 Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 7.

102 Digeser, 30.

103 For Porphyry’s divine ontology, see Johnson, *Religion and Identity*, 96–101.

104 The debate about pagan monotheism continues (see e.g. Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede, *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999); Stephen Mitchell and Peter van Nuffelen, *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).) Frede argues that some ancient philosophers who acknowledge only one divine being can be called monotheistic. Michael Frede, ‘The Case for Pagan Monotheism in Greek and Graeco-Roman Antiquity’, in *One God*, ed. Peter Van Nuffelen and Stephen Mitchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 53–81. However, monotheism more properly designates worship practices as well as intellectual beliefs. Fürst shows that while philosophers and Christians may have agreed that the first principle was singular and to be called ‘god’, they thought their differences in religious practice were more important, whereby ‘pagan monotheists’ worshipped other beings alongside the supreme God, while Christians did not. Philosophers and Christians thus approached the first principle very differently: while philosophers were content to worship within the traditional cult and offer the first principle an intellectual reverence, Christian thought it essential that worship be offered to the One God alone. The ancients would not have regarded Christian and philosophical monotheism as basically equivalent. Alfons Fürst, ‘Monotheism between Cult and Politics: The Themes of the Ancient Debate between Pagan and Christian Monotheism’, in *One God*, ed. Peter Van Nuffelen and Stephen Mitchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 86–87; Mark J. Edwards, ‘Pagan and Christian Monotheism in the Age of Constantine’, in *Approaching Late Antiquity*, ed. Mark J. Edwards and Simon Swain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 211–16. This aligns with what we saw in Chapter 1, that Christians were condemned for errant practice rather than belief. Furthermore, Chaniotis and Belayche show that cult language of monotheism often served to celebrate the worshipper’s favoured deity or express competition between cities, rather than express a metaphysical opinion about the number of divine beings in existence. Angelos Chaniotis, ‘Megatheism: The Search for the Almighty God and the Competition of Cults’, in *One God*, ed. Peter Van Nuffelen and Stephen Mitchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 112–40; Nicole Belayche, ‘Deus Deum ... Summorum Maximus’, in *One God*, ed. Peter Van Nuffelen and Stephen Mitchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 141–66.

Furthermore, Lactantius is far more negative towards the Neoplatonists' henotheism than Digeser allows. Lactantius believes that henotheism fails because the lesser gods are not truly divine but rather servants of the supreme God, since slave and master cannot be on the same level (*DI*. 1.3.21-22). He approves of the titles Hierocles gives to *summus deus* and identifies this God with his own, but criticises the judge for failing to reject other gods and worship within the church (5.3.23-26). Lactantius commonly characterises religious error as worshipping gods, which separates the henotheist from the exclusive monotheist (1.5.28).¹⁰⁵ The *Epitome* makes his rejection of henotheism explicit: *nec sibi de summo Deo vel Iudaei vel philosophi blandiantur: qui filium non agnovit, nec Patrem potuit agnoscere. haec est sapientia et hoc mysterium summi Dei* (*Epit.* 44.2). Only those who know the Son worship *summus Deus* appropriately. Colot offers a more plausible explanation for Lactantius' use of generic titles for God, labelling this tendency controlled ambivalence: Lactantius employs terms with wide semantic ranges, gradually glossing them until his own interpretation predominates. In this case, he uses *Deus summus* to hint at henotheism, before finally narrowing the meaning to the Christian God alone.¹⁰⁶ Thus, Lactantius asserts the impossibility of worshipping *summus Deus* alongside other gods, because God's *religio* requires believing that he is the *unus ac solus Deus*. If he is given the same honours as other gods or angels he is dishonoured (*DI*. 1.7.4-5; 2.16.5).

One of Lactantius' key apologetic uses of the *Pater et Dominus* image is his argument for monotheism. He introduced God's oneness briefly in *Institutes* 1.3, but when he expounds the doctrine, the *paterfamilias* motif does much of his rhetorical and theological work (4.3.1-4.11). The true God is paternal because he is providential; as

105 This exclusivism, fundamental to Christianity (cf. e.g. Exod. 20:3-6; 1 Cor 8:6; Cyp. *Quir.* 2.6), was not required in Roman religion, so persecutors were often surprised at how vehemently Christians resisted what seemed to them a minor act. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change*, 198, 212.

106 Colot, *Lactance*, 67-68.

nature prevents a person from having multiple fathers, so it is *contra naturam et pietatem* to worship multiple gods (4.3.11-13). Arguing from creation, Lactantius asserts that Cicero and Plato thought that a single god created the world, which is reflected in common mythology. But creating is essential to divine fatherhood; *ergo fas non est venerari eos a quibus non sit homo generatus* (4.4.9). Similarly, a person cannot serve multiple masters because the masters' orders may conflict (4.3.18). Therefore, since gods deserve the titles *pater* and *dominus*, which necessarily exist only in the singular, there cannot be multiple gods.¹⁰⁷ No one will be able to hold onto truth when different gods send them in different directions; *religio* is unstable when it lacks a sure and certain domicile (4.3.19-21). Hence the polytheist is like a vagrant, chasing different obligations from house to house, but lacking the security of belonging to one home where he may find protection. Lactantius then changes his metaphor, arguing that as 'marriage' applies when a woman has one husband but not when she has many, a *religio deorum* is also a perversion, *impudica et incesta*, which destroys its faithfulness by adding multiple objects (4.3.22-23). *Pietas* is a virtue which demands exclusivity.

Finally, Lactantius avers that *summus Deus* must be worshipped through his Son. The Son is *legatus et nuntius et sacerdos summi Patris*, who grants access to the Father and to heaven (*DI.* 4.29.14-15).¹⁰⁸ Lactantius even fits his binitarianism within the *paterfamilias* metaphor.¹⁰⁹ In Roman law, a father may allow his dependent son to use his name and power, though the law acknowledges only one house and master. Similarly, there is one world, and the Father and Son occupy it in unanimity as one God (4.29.7-9). The intra-divine relationship is characterised by fatherly piety and filial

¹⁰⁷ Also noted by Palomo Pinel, *Nec inmerito*, 117.

¹⁰⁸ Lactantius adduces support for God's Son, *λόγος*, or *δημιουργός* from the Hermetica. The Hermetica describe God as *ἀπάτωρ* atque *ἀμήτωρ* or autofather and automother, which Lactantius takes as indicating Christ's two births (*DI.* 1.7.2; 4.6.4-9; 4.8.5; 4.13.2; cf. *CH.* 1.6-10; fr. 13; *Ascl.* 8, 26). It is unlikely any Hermetist would accept Lactantius' interpretation; they should be regarded as apologetic proof-texts.

¹⁰⁹ Lactantius gives minimal place to the Holy Spirit and is essentially binitarian. See McGuckin, 'Spirit Christology'.

obedience.¹¹⁰ McGuckin rejects Loi's claim that this image is subordinationist, showing that it occurs amidst classic analogies for the relationship between Father and Son (sun/ray, spring/stream), and is explained in terms of mutual dependence (4.29.9-10), which reflects Saller's description of the mutuality of familial piety.¹¹¹ Lactantius' ultimate claim about *religio* is that it requires worshipping the God of the Christians through the Son.

Providence

The second major feature of Lactantius' theology is that the one God upholds the universe providentially.¹¹² He thinks it natural to conclude that the universe was constructed and is upheld by a superior intellect, and appeals to a near-consensus on the question (1.2.5; 2.8.40; cf. Sen. *Prov.* 1.2-3; *CH.* 5.3-8; *Ascl.* 22; MF. 17-18; *Cyp. Pat.* 4).¹¹³ As the world was created by God, so it is sustained by him, both at the cosmic and individual levels (*DI.* 3.20.14; 7.3.25-6; *ID.* 9.1-8; 17.1-5).¹¹⁴ God created the world for the sake of humanity; the human is *simulacrum sensibile atque intelligens* and has *imaginis suae forma* (2.10.3). He created humans to appreciate him as their maker, worship him, and receive immortality, serving God in his kingdom forever (*DI.* 7.5.3-5; 7.6.1). And Lactantius believes that God's providence may be witnessed in human politics. *De Mortibus* claims that God guides imperial history so that persecutors of Christians are always punished (*DMP.* 44.5; 46.2-11; 47.1-3).

110 Wlosok, *Laktanz*, 245.

111 The image comes from Heb. 3:1-6, where it is used to explain Christ's high status. McGuckin, 'Christology', 817, 820 n. 30.

112 Loi, *Lattanzio nella storia del linguaggio e del pensiero teologico pre-niceno*, 61.

113 Contra the Epicureans (e.g. *Lucr.* 2.1090-104; 5.156-234). For Lactantius' critique of Epicureanism, see *DI.* 3.17.16-20; *ID.* 10.1-53. Late antique students would debate the question of providence as a rhetorical exercise; Coleman shows how Lactantius employs the conventional Stoic arguments. Coleman, *Lactantius*, 62-92. The Stoics divided theological discussions under the headings of the gods' existence, nature, governance of the world, and interest in humans' affairs, making providence central to their theology as it was to Lactantius'. Bryce, *Library*, 213.

114 This responds to the philosophical claim that providence only governs the world as a whole, and that parts may suffer for the whole's preservation.

Lactantius considers belief in providence important for motivating virtue, since denial of divine judgement removes a deterrent for unrestrained immorality (*DI*. 2.1.3-6; 3.17.38-43). He rejects the idea of personal annihilation upon death, deeming it unworthy of God and providence (7.6.3-9), and thinks Epicureanism a threat to religion and social morality (*ID*. 6.2). If God does not respond to human worship, he is ungrateful and unworthy of that worship, and there is no obligation to bind humanity to him (8.2-9; 16.1-5). Similarly, fear of God sustains human society and keeps people obedient to the laws (12.2-5). Divine anger towards wrongdoing emerges as a key attribute of Lactantius' God, which Lactantius defends in *de Ira Dei*. He argues that God's justice and love require his anger towards evil. If God may not punish those who break his law, then neither may human judges. Apathy towards acts of great evil indicates either agreement or condonement (17.1–18.14). Meinking writes that Lactantius interprets God's anger literally as an emotion, distinguishing between just and unjust anger.¹¹⁵ But Coleman rightly observes that Lactantius affirms divine impassibility, and understands God's anger analogically (16.7; *Epit.* 3.1).¹¹⁶

Is the providential God for the Christians?

Providence is a crucial doctrine for Lactantius, not only because it allows him to build a pagan-Christian consensus, but because it was central to the persecutors' ideology. Above we considered Lactantius' case that the pagan gods do not maintain the empire's prosperity. Yet Lactantius' argument invited the question of why the Christian God did not defend his people from persecution or give them the benefits the pagans enjoyed. *De Mortibus*, written after the persecution ended, describes God's judgement on the church's oppressors and Christianises the persecutors' argument about worship bringing divine benefits (*DMP*. 1.3-5).¹¹⁷ But it is worth surveying the arguments for the

115 Meinking, 'Anger and the Apologists: Lactantius in His North African Context', 427–28.

116 Coleman, *Lactantius*, 113; Edwards, *Religions*, 31.

117 Heck, *Mē Theomachein*, 212.

Christian God's sovereignty that Lactantius gave while the persecution was still occurring. In this period, providence is mysterious, and the path of right worship appears foolish.¹¹⁸ Lactantius' own theodicy does not require justice to be realised perfectly within history, but rather awaits eschatological rectification.

In one sense, Lactantius rejects the question. He avers that when pagans coerce others to worship like them, they reveal disbelief that the gods can defend themselves (*DI.* 2.4.16-37; 5.20.2). One worships what one thinks is powerful, but how will a god bring justice to others when he cannot defend himself (5.20.4)? By contrast, Christians do not feel the need to coerce universal worship of their god, because they trust he can avenge himself. Christians are persecuted because pagans take every slight against their gods into their own hands, while Christians entrust defence of their religion to God (5.20.9-11). Persecution of Christians is inadmissible as evidence about whose God oversees the world because pagans are interfering with the experiment.

Lactantius also claims that the persecution continues because God allows it. His reasons are several: persecution increases the number of God's worshippers through attraction to Christian endurance, repulsion from pagan practice, or opportunity to hear Christian doctrines. When God's vengeance follows, 'as always happens', it further encourages belief (5.22.18-23). But a major reason God allows persecution is that it strengthens his people's virtue. *Patientia* is only inculcated when the just and wise are in the power of the unjust (5.22.2-5). As generals test their armies to train them, God creates and permits adversaries to fight against his people to strengthen them and display their faithfulness (5.22.17). The testing is finite and serves a positive purpose.

Finally, Lactantius asserts that the question mistakes the true nature of the good. Power and wealth appear good but are most easily obtained through injustice, and lead

118 Kendeff, 'Lactantius as Spokesman of a Mystery'.

one away from the *summum bonum* of immortality (5.22.6). God allows the Christians to suffer because that is how true, spiritual, imperishable goods are obtained (5.21.7-11; cf. Tert. *Apol.* 37.3; Heb. 12:6). God usually avenges his people within history, but nevertheless bids his people to wait until final judgement for perfect vindication (*DI.* 5.23.1-4).¹¹⁹ In Lactantius' rhetoric, a delayed realisation of divine justice becomes not a challenge to God's power, but a display of his patience and mercy (2.17.3; *ID.* 20.12-13). Immortality is essential to his theodicy since it provides justice for wrongs which were not righted in the present age. This eschatological reward enables him to answer Carneades' challenge that justice sometimes appears foolish.

***Paterfamilias* and persecution motifs**

Fisher labels the *paterfamilias* image simple and says it neither depends on Christianity nor necessarily leads towards it.¹²⁰ But to evaluate the image we must ask how Lactantius used it in his argument. When we do so, we discover a sophisticated and polyvalent apologetic tool, which resonates with several claims used to justify the persecution.

The persecutors claimed Christian impiety threatened their communities with divine vengeance. Tertullian said that no person's religion brings divine punishment on others (Tert. *Scap.* 2), but Lactantius grants the possibility that wrong religion incurs divine wrath; his argument centres around the identity of this punishing God. In *De Mortibus Persecutorum* Lactantius attributes the persecutors' deaths to God's vengeance, as Heck saw.¹²¹ But Lactantius' response to this claim goes further: he constructs his theology around the doctrine of providence because protecting providence

119 For the tensions between intra-historical and eschatological judgement in Lactantius, see Heck, *Mē Theomachein*, 192–227.

120 Fisher, 'Lactantius' Ideas', 358.

121 Heck, *Mē Theomachein*, 227.

was one of the persecution's aims.¹²² The divine *paterfamilias* motif asserts that the providential deity is singular, and not identifiable with any Roman god. Christians do not threaten divine benefits because no pagan god can give those benefits; these come from the Christian God. Therefore there is no justification for persecuting Christians to preserve those benefits; this only angers the providential deity further.

We have seen that Lactantius used the image to argue for monotheism, a major aim of his apologetic. Christians were persecuted for failing to worship the gods; in response, Lactantius claims that the only pious worship is monotheistic. Far from being impious, Christians are the most pious members of Roman society, because they alone revere the supreme Master and Father. Lactantius' characteristically Roman metaphor for religious piety applies to Christianity but not traditional religion. Jews and Christians had argued for monotheism before; Lactantius' innovation was to use an analogy with Roman institutions which expressed Roman identity. This is part of his case that Christians most truly display *Romanitas*.¹²³ Romans need not fear the consequences of Christian impiety in their society, for Christians are not impious. The *paterfamilias* image allows Lactantius to turn a potent charge in the persecution around.

But if Christian worship is pious, pagan worship is not; Lactantius uses the *paterfamilias* image to urge his readers to worship the Christian God. The image strikes a nerve, alleging from pagan premises that Roman religion violates one of Rome's most lauded virtues. Pichon depicts the image as making Christianity more palatable, less disorienting, for a Roman public,¹²⁴ but I think it was sharper, asking Romans to choose between a valued virtue and polytheism. To use Lactantius' imagery, pagans are vagrants who cheapen filial affection by dividing and misdirecting it; they fail to love

122 A surprising omission to Coleman's otherwise insightful study.

123 Edwards, 'Latin Apologetic', 204.

124 Pichon, *Lactance*, 115–16.

their Father. Lactantius denies that offering incense to pagan gods is trivial; people suggesting this do not know how *nefas* it is to worship anyone but the creator God (*DI.* 5.18.13). Human *paterfamiliarum* offer their sons and slaves little help compared to the care God gives his people, so God is just in punishing the impious for rejecting him (5.18.14-16; *ID.* 24.2). The image of God as *paterfamilias* naturally creates the requirement to give God honours and obedience, obligations Lactantius' audience would have recognised. The *paterfamilias* image, and the obligation of worship it creates, accomplishes many of Lactantius' goals for his theology and religious ethics. He uses the metaphor to coopt Roman filial loyalty and reverence and direct them towards the Christian God.

Secondly, I suggest that the *paterfamilias* motif mimics the tetrarchic ideology, which justified their rule through divine descent. Lactantius asserts that Christians have a better claim to divine filiation, and thus more right to modify ancestral customs, than the tetrarchs. Diocletian promoted conservative forms of religion and maintained that a new religion should not criticise an ancient one. The gods ordered the universe so that these ancestral traditions preserved wise principles; thus it is criminal to re-examine what the ancients have determined (*Coll.* 15.3.2-3).¹²⁵ The persecution edicts assume the necessity of maintaining traditional religion.

However, the tetrarchic ideology was innovative. It held that each dyarch was descended from a god, Diocletian from Jupiter and Maximian from Hercules (cf. *Pan. Lat.* X.2.3; XI.3.1-8; VIII.4.1-2; IX.8.1-2). This was new; earlier emperors claimed to be the sons of divinised emperors.¹²⁶ In one panegyric, Maximian and Diocletian are

125 Even Porphyry had to defend his religious practices from the charge of innovation (*Abst.* 2.33.1-2).

126 Third-century emperors increasingly justified their rule by association with the divine. Diocletian's ideology was the culmination of this process. Garnsey and Humfress, *The Evolution of the Late Antique World*, 25–28; Rodgers, 'Divine Insinuation in the "Panegyrici Latini"', 76. Liebeschuetz sees this theology as closer to Hellenistic ruler cult than Roman precedents. Liebeschuetz, 'Religion in the *Panegyrici Latini*', 394.

described both as sons and visible manifestations of the gods (XI.10.4-5). Amidst the third century crisis, Diocletian realised his reign needed a stronger justification than the acclamation of the army, whom another claimant might buy or defeat. His new dynastic theology grounded his right to rule in divine appointment and descent.

Diocletian also appointed co-emperors to guard the empire's multiple contested borders and instituted a system of succession and abdications, which incorporated potential rivals into the imperial college. Though the empire was technically an elective monarchy, with new emperors selected for their leadership capabilities, in practice succession was always hereditary when a suitable son existed; other emperors approximated this by adopting their successors.¹²⁷ Thus, by rejecting Constantine and Maxentius as Caesars in 305, Diocletian deliberately rejected hereditary succession in a way that had not previously occurred.¹²⁸ The tetrarchs likely justified their constitutional and religious innovation by promoting conservatism in other areas of religion. Drake writes that the great persecution was severer than those of previous centuries because the emperors' use of theology rather than senatorial appointment to justify their reign meant their legitimacy was threatened by Christian theology more than previous emperors' had been.¹²⁹

Even given this constitutional innovation, it is striking how infrequently the Latin panegyrists appeal to imperial ancestors or ancestral custom to justify the emperors' imperium. The early panegyrics are all but silent about Rome's imperial past. They are similarly silent about the emperors' ancestors, who were generally of low status; instead, the emperors' divine ancestors are invoked to justify the emperors' rule through their shared attributes (X.2.3-5; 4.2; 7.5-6; XI.3.3-9).¹³⁰ One panegyrist grounds the

127 Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 8.

128 Drake, 'Lessons from Diocletian's Persecution', 55.

129 Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 147-48.

130 This was typical when mentioning the honorand's origin might cause embarrassment. Sabine MacCormack, 'Latin Prose Panegyrics: Tradition and Discontinuity in the Later Roman Empire',

tetrarchy in nature, where the number four is plentifully attested (VIII.4.1-4). This unprecedented political constitution is legitimate because the gods and cosmos show that it should be so. In an age that prized tradition, the tetrarchs invoked religious piety to justify modifications to ancestral traditions which would otherwise be deemed impious.

As an imperial civil servant, Lactantius was familiar with the tetrarchic ideology and its justifications. He rejects ancestral precedent as a criterion for religious truth, accusing his countrymen of abdicating their reason to their predecessors, and ranks religious piety above filial piety (*DI.* 2.6.7-11). Digeser notes that his critique of paganism focuses on the tetrarchy's patron deities and reads the *Institutes* as a veiled criticism of tetrarchic ideology.¹³¹ Lactantius' *paterfamilias* argument gives another veiled response to imperial ideology. He saw that Christians were castigated for abandoning ancestral traditions. Yet the persecuting emperors had abandoned the conventional way the imperium was distributed, justified, and transmitted, by appealing to a divine father's authority. I suggest that Lactantius mimicked this motif to justify Christian religious non-conformity. He predicates his argument against Christian impiety on the authority of a divine Father which trumps any obligation to uphold ancestral traditions. Where the panegyrist finds fourness manifested in nature (*Pan. Lat.* VIII.4.1-2), for Lactantius nature shows that God is providential Father and thus unitary. Of course, God's fatherhood has been central to Christianity since its inception. Yet obligations to a father god whose authority overrides family and tradition find new resonance under the tetrarchy. The intellectual culture represented by the panegyrists may have even inspired the argument, given how they praise the subordination of familial piety to political or religious piety (cf. XI.12.3; VII.9.2–11.7; VI.8.3-6). If

Revue d'Etudes Augustiniennes et Patristiques 22 (1976): 33; Barbara Saylor Rodgers, 'The Metamorphosis of Constantine', *The Classical Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1989): 235.
131 Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 32–40.

Diocletian's divine father could authorise his breaking with ancestral tradition, Lactantius may have reasoned that Christians, the pious children of the supreme deity, can appeal to a higher paternal authority. Thus, the *paterfamilias* motif mirrors the logic of the imperial theology, granting that divine fathers determine appropriate religious practice, but challenging the identity of this father, and disputing and democratising who can claim divine sonship. This subversive argument presents imperial claims to legitimacy as a weaker version of an ideology they proscribed. The emperors could not appeal to ancestral legitimacy; they had to engage with Lactantius rationally and prove the supremacy of their gods through argument. Such was the goal, I suggest, of Lactantius' *paterfamilias* rhetoric.

How to worship

Lactantius argues extensively about the appropriate recipient of worship, as we have seen. Yet he also criticises pagan religious practices, considering their mode of worship as errant as their theology (*DI.* 6.1.11). His primary liturgical image is his description of Christians, collectively and individually, as the true temple (cf. 1 Cor. 3:17; 6:19-20; Tert. *Marc.* 5.6).¹³² He uses pagan religious imagery to describe Christian practices, and, as ever, to argue against the persecution, depicting persecutors as sacrilegious.

The Church as the true Temple

Lactantius describes the church, meaning God's people, as the true temple. This temple was established by Christ to spread true and pious worship through the world (*DI.* 4.25.2; cf. 1 Pet. 2:5). Peter founded a *templum fidele ac stabile* to God in Rome through performing miracles and teaching justice (*DMP.* 2.5). On his deathbed, Galerius

¹³² For the other terms which Lactantius uses for the church, such as *populus*, *gens*, *societas*, and how they create a dialogue with pagans, see Colot, *Lactance*, 59–67.

announced he would restore God's temple and rescind the persecution (33.11). Koch writes that Lactantius has no conception of sacred space; he regards the true temple as the church or the collection of believing hearts. *Templum Dei* always refers to the church as a community of people, and never to buildings of worship, which Lactantius calls *conventicula* (1.2, 1.5, 2.6, 15.7; 48.13; *DI*. 5.2.2). For example, Constantius preserved God's temple unharmed, though he allowed church buildings to be destroyed; he committed no violence against Christian bodies (*DMP*. 15.7).¹³³ Colot identifies this use of *templum Dei* as describing Christianity accessibly for pagans; it means that Lactantius describes the church as a spiritual whole and minimises its institutional character.¹³⁴ The church is the eternal temple to God, where all nations come to God's true religion. It is *domus fidelis, immortale templum*, God's new creation, city, and people, in which one must sacrifice to win immortality.¹³⁵ Christ is the eternal priest and temple builder, and no one may enter it but through him (*DI*. 4.14.1-3; cf. *Cyp. Quir.* 1.17).¹³⁶ Yet only the catholic church is the *fons veritatis, domicilium fidei, templum Dei*, where one may receive life and salvation (*DI*. 4.30.11).¹³⁷ This last passage indicates Lactantius' commitment to the institutional church; though he avoids mentioning it for apologetic reasons, I suspect that its practices are determinative for how Lactantius understands religious virtue.

Persecutors as temple violators

Roman religious culture had a much thicker conception of sacred space than Lactantius, and protecting these spaces from sacrilege was crucial. Romans understood

¹³³ Koch, 'Der Tempel Gottes Bei Laktanz', 236–37.

¹³⁴ Colot, *Lactance*, 197.

¹³⁵ Speigl, 'Zum Kirchenbegriff des Laktanz', 20.

¹³⁶ Cyprian also describes Christ as the temple or house of God (*Quir.* 1.15).

¹³⁷ This excludes the heresies of the Phrygians, Novatians, Valentinians, Marcionites and Anthropians (*DI*. 4.30.10). The marks of the true church are *confessio et paenitentia* (4.30.11-13), indicating Lactantius' catholic position in the Novatian (and presumably Donatist) controversy. Lactantius follows the African soteriological tradition, and particularly Cyprian. Studer, 'La Sotériologie de Lactance', 268.

sacred space to be a location of divine action, where the deity was manifested within the material and historical universe.¹³⁸ Legally, sacred spaces had been publicly dedicated to the gods after imperial fiat (Ulpian in Just. *Dig.* 1.1.8.9). Romans took protecting their rites from sacrilege very seriously. Mistakes necessitated the repetition of a whole ritual, and sacrilege was regarded with the same horror as parricide (Cic. *Leg.* 2.20-22).¹³⁹ On this basis, Digeser regards pagan priests and oracles as potential instigators of the great persecution. After the Antiochene auguries were interrupted, the overseers of the empire's religious life became concerned about the purity of these essential civic rituals, so the emperors were obliged to act.¹⁴⁰ An oracle of Zeus at Dodona called Christians *profani* (Arn. 1.26), and Porphyry cites oracles which call Christians impious and polluted. Porphyry himself regarded sacrilege as a facet of injustice, alongside impiety and lawlessness (*Marc.* 14). The persecutors invoked the domain of religious pollution and sacrilege, and it makes sense that Lactantius would use the domain in his counterargument.

Bryce identifies that Lactantius charged the persecutors with committing sacrilege by sacrificing while defiled, due to their violence against Christians (*DI.* 5.20.3; cf. Cic. *Leg.* 2.19, 24).¹⁴¹ But the apologetic purpose of the 'church as temple' image has not previously been explicated. If the communion of Christians is God's temple, then those who attack the church are temple violators. The image allows Lactantius to reconfigure Christian bodies as sacred spaces. After the auguries were interrupted, the persecutors *se(que) vero sacrilegio contaminarent* (*DI.* 4.27.5); true sacrilege is the destruction of God's people. Persecution is described as overturning (*evertere*) or cutting down (*excidere*) God's holy temple (*DMP.* 1.5, 2.6). On this logic, Christian minds are due the

138 Clifford Ando, *The Matter of the Gods: Religion and the Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 151; Aubin, 'La religion', 232.

139 Ando, *The Matter of the Gods*, 128–30.

140 Digeser, *Public Piety*, 174–75.

141 Bryce, *Library*, 169.

same respect that temples receive; violence against Christian bodies becomes sacrilegious. Though claiming pious motivations, the persecuting emperors are sacrilegious and impious. As Koch writes, ‘es gibt nur ein wirkliches Sakrileg: die Verfolgung der Kirche’.¹⁴² Furthermore, the God residing in that temple will avenge the insult, seen in the persecutors’ deaths (*DI.* 2.4.16-37; *DMP.* 1.2-5). The image of *ecclesia* as *templum Dei* appeals to Roman scrupulousness in treating temples, even foreign ones, with appropriate respect. The persecutors appealed to the need to avoid sacrilege to justify the persecution; Lactantius claims that their stated motivation should lead to the opposite policy.

The Mind or Heart as the true Temple

More common than the ‘church as temple’ image is Lactantius’ image of the heart or mind as the true temple, where virtue and praise are the true sacrifices. Again, Lactantius describes this mental temple by analogy with pagan religious architecture. The true temple is humans bearing God’s image, or the human heart (*pectus* or *cor*). It is decorated with eternal virtues, not perishable gold; it is secure and incorruptible; it contains the true and great *ara Dei*; and it is indwelt by the true God (*DI.* 1.20.23; 5.8.4; 6.24.29). Lactantius applies pagan religious language to interiorised worship, claiming that internal religiosity is more valuable than external practices, because the former develops virtue, self control, and purity.

The image has precedents in Lactantius’ forebears, as well as in the Christian tradition. Cicero writes that the philosopher will see something divine, *simulacrum aliquod dicatum*, inside himself, which will lead to worthy behaviour (*Cic. Leg.* 1.59). The Hermetists affirm that humans were made in God’s image, like ensouled, conscious statues of the gods, and they tried to map this onto the individual limbs of the human

¹⁴² Koch, ‘Der Tempel Gottes Bei Laktanz’, 237.

body. (NF *CH.* 1.12; fr. 8; *Ascl.* 24; cf. *DI.* 2.10.14; 7.4.3). Porphyry describes the wise man's mind as an image of the divine νοῦς (*Marc.* 11).¹⁴³ In each case Lactantius' use of the image is more developed and more democratic; he applies it to all Christians rather than elite philosophers. And none of these authors discuss the consequences of violence against those mental temples; this was Lactantius' innovation, used to argue against persecution.

Lactantius' use of the individual temple image more frequently than the collective one indicates a priority for individual religion. Roman religion emphasised collective rites, whereas the philosophers and Hermetists privileged an ascent to the divine, which was necessarily individualistic. Fisher writes that Lactantius has no interest in individual conversion, seeing the golden age as a collective state,¹⁴⁴ but Lactantius' very conception of worship requires that it be accepted by individual minds. The 'mental temple' image necessitates that worship be interiorised and thus individualised and freely chosen.

Internal worship

An immaterial deity requires immaterial offerings. Lactantius describes Christian worship using the language of sacrifice, arguing that Christian worship is more appropriate than physical pagan offerings. God needs no animals, wine, or light; he does not enjoy cloth, gold, or jewels as humans do (*DI.* 6.2.1-9; 6.25.1-4). Lactantius thinks that pagan rituals involve only the body and not the mind. He sees paganism as inherently materialistic, offering things humans desire and pursuing pleasure rather than God (4.3.1-9; 5.19.29; 6.1.5-11; *ID.* 24.7-8; cf. *Cic. Leg.* 1.60-1). Cicero described the

143 Porphyry also criticises those who cannot see anything but matter in statues, probably indicating Christians (Smith 321F, 352F). See Irini-Fotini Viltanioti, 'Divine Powers and Cult Statues in Porphyry of Tyre', in *Divine Powers in Late Antiquity*, ed. Anna Marmodoro and Irini-Fotini Viltanioti (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 61–74.

144 Fisher, 'Lactantius' Ideas', 372.

need to approach the divine purely and without wealth, lest one incur divine displeasure (2.19), a passage Lactantius quotes to justify Christian worship practices.¹⁴⁵

Since the true temple is mental, correct worship involves not material but contemplative and ethical offerings. He recommends incorruptible gifts and sacrifices: integrity of soul, hymns of praise, prayers, and seeking to please God through virtue and charity. Gifts are permanent offerings, such as virtue and integrity, whereas sacrifices are prayers and hymns offered repeatedly (*DI.* 6.13.13; 6.25.5-7; *ID.* 16.2; *DMP.* 52.2-4; cf. *Corp. Herm.* 12.23; *Ascl.* 41; *MF.* 32.3; *Cyp. Quir.* 3.14).¹⁴⁶ Worship should be offered in humility, thankfulness, and love (*DI.* 6.25.12; *ID.* 23.8; cf. *Orac. Syb.* 5.358-9). It involves abstinence from lusts and desires, endurance of pain, and contempt of death, and since it seeks the soul's good, it will be rewarded after death (*DI.* 7.11.8). This does not exclude the Christian sacraments; rather, Lactantius speaks of these as *mysteria, sacramenta, arcana*, which he finds embarrassing or inappropriate to mention to pagans for protreptic reasons.¹⁴⁷ The fact that Christians worship mentally rather than physically is a key facet of Lactantius' argument that Christianity is the religion of true rationality.¹⁴⁸ Lactantius tries to convince ascetics and intellectuals to abandon material worship, and the persecution that went alongside it.¹⁴⁹

This argument is not entirely a straw-man. Generally, Romans regarded a ritual's success to depend on its being performed according to the proper processes. Dolansky writes, 'Roman polytheism stressed the necessity of orthopraxy over orthodoxy in ritual

145 Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 109.

146 The *Sibylline Oracles* recommend a variety of religious practices, which show the disparate origins of these texts; these range from temple sacrifices to righteous and lawful living, hymns, prayers, and loving Christ (e.g. 3.246-7, 573-9, 591-4, 772-5; 5.357-60, 397-407, 420-7; 7.71-84; 8.329-36, 485-500).

147 Speigl, 'Zum Kirchenbegriff des Laktanz', 19-20; McGuckin, 'Researches', 237.

148 Porphyry and other contemporary philosophers were strongly ascetic, and would have found this statement objectionable.

149 McGuckin, 'The Problem of Lactantius the Theologian', 28.

affairs—proper practice rather than thought process.¹⁵⁰ Many classical philosophers also criticised the externalism of traditional cult; this is thematic in Porphyry's *de Abstinentia*. Seneca claims that the gods have no need for service from humans (*Ep.* 95.47-8), and Lucretius writes that piety is found not in lavish and bloody offerings, but in a peaceful mind (*Lucr.* 5.1194-203).¹⁵¹ The *Hermetica* privilege mental worship, because the divine mind loathes sensory or bodily things (*CH.* 1.22, 26, 31-32; 5.11; 10.21; 12.1; *Ascl.* 22).¹⁵² The *Asclepius* ends by recommending thanksgiving and prayer in place of incense; material offerings are sacrilegious because the divine needs nothing (*Ascl.* 41).¹⁵³ The tradition of immaterial worship was also prominent in Judaism and Christianity, on the grounds that God did not require material offerings (*MF.* 29.8; 32.1-3; *Cyp. Quir.* 1.16; 3.5).¹⁵⁴ We cannot quote from Lactantius' liturgical experience as from his literary sources, but it is difficult to overestimate the impact it would have had upon his conception of religious virtue, and we note that he commends such practices as the church taught.¹⁵⁵ Speigl concludes that Lactantius' criticisms of an externalistic cult gives the same reasons as his contemporaries' philosophical criticism.¹⁵⁶ Given the prevalence of the motif, it seems best to understand Lactantius as drawing from a broad tradition. And yet, as Spanneut suggests, I suspect that Lactantius makes the church's liturgical practices determinative of true worship.¹⁵⁷

150 Fanny Dolansky, 'Household and Family', in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Ritual*, ed. Risto Uro et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 172.

151 Pichon, *Lactance*, 131.

152 Scott and Ferguson, *Hermetica*, 2:167-8.

153 Quoted in *DI.* 6.25.10-11. However, this text regards the masses as incapable of proper worship (*Ascl.* 9), with which Lactantius would disagree.

154 Cyprian gives these passages when responding to Judaism, while Lactantius moves the concept to a pagan context. For the development of these attitudes towards material sacrifice among Christians, see Maria-Zoe Petropoulou, *Animal Sacrifice in Ancient Greek Religion, Judaism, and Christianity, 100 BC to AD 200* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 246-50.

155 Though he does not mention the eucharist.

156 Speigl, 'Zum Kirchenbegriff des Laktanz', 18-19.

157 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 163-64.

Virtuous Worship

Furthermore, pagan worship is inadequate because it does not inculcate virtue. Pagans wash their bodies before worshipping but do not cleanse their minds, and their sins contaminate their offerings.¹⁵⁸ And since pagan religion is externalistic, involving only the fingers, worshippers leave the temple unchanged (*DI*. 5.19.27-34). By privileging virtuous practices, Lactantius necessarily interiorises worship.¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, some pagan practices, such as human sacrifice, actively inculcate injustice (*Epit.* 18.1-9). Lactantius rejects the Roman deification of virtues, because inculcating virtue requires placing it in a mental temple rather than a physical one (*DI*. 1.20.14-24).¹⁶⁰ This argument is almost definitional, as Lactantius believes that one cannot be truly virtuous without worshipping the correct God (6.5.18-19; 6.9.1-24; cf. *Cyp. Quir.* 1.24). Virtue was an important part of worship for the philosophers and Hermetists (*Cic. ND.* 2.28.71-2; *Off.* 3.28; *Porph. Marc.* 16; 24; *Ascl.* 41), so Lactantius is appealing to an intellectual consensus to oppose traditional cult. However, he ultimately defines religious virtue to exclude these traditions.

For Lactantius, pious worship seeks to please God with every thought and action. He can say the whole Christian *religio* is *sine scelere ac sine macula vivere* (*DI*. 5.9.21). Virtues are better sacrifices, since they endure and purify the heart's altar (6.9.24; *ID.* 24.13-15).¹⁶¹ Such offerings include *bona mens, purum pectus, innocens vita* (*DI.* 5.19.30); *continentia, misericordia, patientia, caritas* and *fides* (7.27.11); *actus boni, iustitia, patientia, fides, innocentia, castitas* and *abstinentia*. This is *verissimus ritus, lex Dei*, and whoever follows this law will live *iuste ac legitime* (6.24.26-29).¹⁶² Serving

158 Cicero agrees: *Leg.* 2.24.

159 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 164.

160 Minds are cleansed by virtue and baptism (*DI*. 5.19.30-34). Cf. Wlosok, *Laktanz*, 216–20.

161 A common motif in Christian ethics; cf. *Tert. Apol.* 30; *Cyp. Quir.* 2.18; 3.11, 20. Cf. Monat, *Lactance et la Bible*, 255–56.

162 Probably answering the charge that Christians were lawless (*Eus. PE.* 1.2.1-5; Beck. 6F=Eus. *HE.* 6.19.6-8).

God by consecrating one's heart to him perfects justice and satisfies religion's obligations (6.25.12-16).

The diversity of virtues mentioned above indicates Lactantius that regards all morality, and particularly justice, as part of worship.¹⁶³ It explains why Lactantius outlines moral duties in Book 6, *de Vero Cultu*, and not Book 5, *de Iustitia*.¹⁶⁴ Virtue is useful to God because it grants the worshipper immortality, so she may serve God forever, and because such behaviour fulfils God's intent in creating her (6.25.8-9). As Coleman writes, fulfilling the earthly purpose of practicing justice leads to attaining the heavenly purpose.¹⁶⁵ Lactantius sees pagan worship as externalistic and ineffectual; conversely, Christian worship is internal, ethical, and transformative. As a union of *sapientia* and *religio* it is robust enough to encompass all of life; Christians carry their temple with them and worship God perpetually (4.3.4-9; 6.25.14-15).¹⁶⁶ All morality is dependent upon religion, and moral living is an act of worship. For this reason, the entire contents of the next chapter ought to be understood as part of true worship too; social virtue is also given to God.

Uncompelled Worship

Lactantius' 'mind as temple' image interiorises religion; in doing so, it renders external coercion ineffective and inappropriate for securing genuine worship. Lactantius' case for religious toleration has received much scholarly attention,¹⁶⁷ but its relation to this image has not been noticed. According to Lactantius' logic, if the mind is a temple, the person worshipping there is a priest who has authority over how its

163 Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 600.

164 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 136.

165 Coleman, *Lactantius*, 206.

166 The Roman *paterfamilias* had total legal power over his household. Wlosok, *Laktanz*, 245. Lactantius thinks that God's dominion should be similarly extensive.

167 See e.g. John R. Bowlin, 'Tolerance among the Fathers', *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 26, no. 1 (2006): 3-36; Digeser, 'Religious Toleration'.

worship is performed, and persecution forces that temple to violate its customary religious practices.¹⁶⁸ Thus Lactantius claims for Christians the legitimacy of established temples. This privatizes and individualizes religion, to which his opponents would have objected. As we have seen, Roman religion required correct performance of rites above particular beliefs or attitudes of worship; they also regarded private religion as inherently suspect.¹⁶⁹ Persecutors argued that Christian religious compliance needed to be enforced (Eus. *PE.* 1.2.1-5). Lactantius argues persecution is a sacrilegious assault on Christian bodies and minds. The persecutors wrench hearts that have been religiously devoted to God (*dicatas Deo mentes*) from disembowelled bodies, *dicare* placing a cultic gloss on Christian mental worship (*DI.* 5.1.7). Since the human person is God's *imago* and *similitudo*, destroying Christian bodies is akin to destroying a statue of a god.¹⁷⁰ Lactantius uses his mental temple image to accuse the persecutors of several kinds of sacrilege. As we saw, Romans believed that the security of the empire depended upon avoiding sacrilege. Lactantius attempts to pit the persecution against Roman religious scrupulousness, claiming for the Christian body the same protection from violation that was granted to Roman temples.

If God values only mental worship, religion cannot be forced through external pressure. It must be chosen by the will, *verbis potius quam verberibus* (5.19.11). Lactantius regards it axiomatic that God accepts only freely-chosen worship, characterised by *devotio ac fides*; an unwilling sacrifice is no sacrifice at all, and religious acts not *sponte* and *ex animo* are meaningless and abominable (*exsecratio*, 5.19.13-26; 5.20.7). Lactantius regards the moral choice as necessarily internal, one

168 This transfer of the meaning of priest is present in earlier Christian literature (cf. Rom. 15:16; 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6). Neoplatonists also claimed to be priests, and the authority to judge religious matters it entailed. Marx-Wolf, 'High Priests'.

169 Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 124–25.

170 Ancients regarded violation of statues as equally serious as the same crime against the one the statue represented. Price, *Rituals and Power*, 205.

where freedom is both possible (in terms of the will not being bound by sin) and necessary, meaning free from coercion. The religious act, because it is morally the highest, ought to be the most free and motivated *sua sponte*.¹⁷¹ A deity who wants coerced worship does not deserve human honour (5.19.13; 5.19.26; cf. Tert. *Scap.* 2; Cyp. *Quir.* 3.52). And force does not produce devotion, love, or faith.¹⁷² If the true temple is the mind, only freely-willed offerings will please God; God disregards coerced, physical offerings such as the persecutors sought (*DI.* 5.19.27-34). The mind cannot and should not be coerced; attempting to do so is both futile and sacrilegious. Instead, persecutors should seek to persuade the Christians' minds using *sermo* and *ratio*, *philosophia* and *eloquentia*, but instead they use *vis* and *tormentes* (5.19.6-9; cf. Cyp. *Dem.* 14). It is presumptuous to compel or forbid worship, which Lactantius describes as forbidding someone from lifting their eyes to heaven (*DI.* 5.13.17-18). Lactantius assumes that one may compel another's actions, but not their thoughts and desires. Thus Lactantius depicts religious coercion as an assault on freedom of conscience.¹⁷³ As many have noted, this argument also entails Christians tolerating other religions.

Previous Latin apologists had also appealed to the need for religious freedom. Cyprian writes that persecutors should engage Christians on the rational level, and begins a chapter of his florilegium with the title '*credendi vel non credendi libertatem in arbitrio positam*'; the chapter includes references to the interiority of religion and the necessity of choosing God (Cyp. *Quir.* 3.52; *Dem.* 14). Though developing the ideas further than Cyprian, Lactantius probably read the latter passage as giving biblical warrant to his argument for religious freedom. Tertullian's argument for religious freedom on the basis of free conscience is similar to Lactantius'. He argues that

171 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 146–47.

172 Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 109.

173 cf. e.g. Digeser, 'Religious Toleration', 142.

meaningful worship must be volitional and that denying freedom of religion is irreligious (Tert. *Apol.* 24.5; 28.1; *Scap.* 2). However, Tertullian appeals to the fact that other nations were allowed their own religions; pagans would have rejected this argument, since the other religions upheld ancestral customs while Christianity was new.¹⁷⁴

Lactantius responds to this problem by redefining piety to privilege rational worship of God above maintaining ancestral customs. In doing so, he challenges the way Romans understood religion at a fundamental level. By discarding ancestral traditions as a sufficient determinant of religious truth and by interiorising worship, Lactantius renders reason the superior criterion by which religions were assessed and undermines the public/private distinction that Romans understood to demarcate *religio* from *superstitio*. Furthermore, by using pagan religious architecture to describe an individual Christian's worship, he marshals Roman religious scruples to a conclusion contrary to that of the persecutors. Lactantius' response to persecution addressed the fundamental assumptions of Roman religious philosophy more closely than his predecessors' did. He invokes Roman taboos such as sacrilege to depict Christianity as the true fulfillment of the Roman religious instinct and attempts to invert the way these taboos were applied to Christianity. Readers who followed his logic would see that persecution, not Christianity, was the true threat to Rome's religious purity.

Conclusion

Lactantius' account of religious virtue responds to pagan charges against Christianity, making his case using two images from Roman society. The persecutors alleged that Christians were superstitious, impious, and foolish for worshipping a dead man; Christians had forsaken ancestral customs and provoked divine wrath. In response,

¹⁷⁴ cf. Bowlin, 'Tolerance', 11–19.

Lactantius redefines *pietas* and *religio* to privilege obligation to God above maintaining ancestral traditions, and distinguishes *religio* from *superstitio* by dividing true from false, rather than public from private and moderate from excessive. He argues that religion's object is all-important; it should be determined by reason rather than tradition.

Lactantius asserts on this basis that the true deity is the Christian God. It is traditional religion, not Christianity, which worships inappropriately deified men, created things, and demons. By depicting God as a *paterfamilias*, Lactantius shows that God must be monotheistic and providential. Thus, Romans are impious for denying their creator worship, and they expose themselves to his judgement. The *paterfamilias* image undercuts the charge that Christians threaten divine benefits, the importance of filial piety in Roman ethics granting this argument its persuasive power. And Lactantius describes the church and human person as the true temple, individualising, dematerialising, and internalising worship. Lactantius believes it is both impossible and sacrilegious to compel worship in this mental temple; those who attempt to coerce Christian consciences are like temple violators. This image appeals to Roman *mores* about treating religious sites respectfully.

This chapter has shown how carefully Lactantius has constructed his account of religious virtue to respond to the charges made against the Christians in his day. Furthermore, we have seen that he uses *iustitia* to denote Christianity and regards only worship made through the Son in the catholic church as legitimate. Though he appeals to a wide array of sources to justify Christian religious non-conformity, his ultimate goal is not building a consensus between different kinds of intellectual worship, but urging these intellectuals to worship the Christian God.

Chapter 6: Social Virtue

Lactantius pairs humans' duty to God with their duty to each other. This chapter is based on the previous word studies, exploring and categorising the kinds of social actions justice requires. Lactantian social virtue is more polyvalent than his religious virtue, and he uses several terms to describe it. Social justice depends on right religion, or justice towards God (*DI.* 5.8.1-5). He describes justice as flourishing, the absence of social evil such as strife and war, treachery, murder, theft, and adultery. Rather, right worship produces a world characterised by *mansuetudo*, *pietas*, *pax*, *innocentia*, *aequitas*, *temperantia* and *fides* (5.8.6-8).

Sometimes Lactantius uses *iustitia* solely for social duty. Likening a human's virtues to a body, he describes justice as the lower body, meaning the collected virtues, and piety as the head which animates them; without piety a person is dead and their virtues unproductive (6.9.9-12). His first definition of justice labels the social component *aequitas* (5.14.9-11). In Book 6's discussion of divine law, he divides ethics into *quid debeatur Deo* and *quid homini tribuendum sit*; justice's obligations bifurcate into *coniungi cum Deo* and *cum homine*. The social duty is *misericordia* or *humanitas*, and contains *vitae communis ratio*; it is *propria iustorem et cultorem Dei* (6.10.1-2; *Epit.* 29.5). These three virtues are related elsewhere: Lactantius says the *iustitiae officia* are *humanitas*, *aequitas*, and *misericordia* (*DI.* 5.6.4).¹ Lactantius also describes social duty using *pietas*, *fovere*, *diligere*, *caritas* and *tueri*. Social virtue preserves the *societas* and *vinculum* between humans; it means *non nocere*, *prodesse*, and not doing to another what one would dislike oneself (6.18.3; *Epit.* 50.5-7; 55.3-5). *Perfecta iustitia* means selfless charity (*DI.* 6.12.1-2); *iustitiae summa* entails avoiding harming others

¹ This passage shows that Lactantius thinks his different terms for social virtue form a coherent whole, rather than existing in tension with each other as Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 588 suggests.

(6.23.32). Lactantius resolves social obligation into treating others as one's equals, providing for their needs, and harmlessness.² These three duties, and the virtues which we have not yet explored, *aequitas*, *miser cordia* and *humanitas*, will form this chapter's structure. These duties and virtues do not pair up exactly – for example, Lactantius describes charity using both *miser cordia* and *humanitas* – but they are sufficiently close that treating them in pairs is beneficial.

Lactantius' description of social duty recalls a Ciceronian conception of justice. Cicero gives justice two main purposes: restraining unwarranted *iniuria*, and using property for the right ends (*Off.* 1.20; 3.76).³ Appropriate use of force and wealth is central to Lactantius' own understanding of *iustitia*. But Lactantius adds a third domain, *aequitas*. While he claims his ethics concerning force and wealth surpass what the philosophers taught, he thinks that they completely disregarded the third domain. Monat says that in each case, Cicero said most of what Lactantius wanted to teach.⁴ We will explore whether this is correct.

Less attention has been paid to Lactantius' social ethics than to other elements of his thought. Previous work on Lactantius' definitions of justice have focused on the social virtues he names in those passages, rather than exploring all the social nuances Lactantius assigns to justice. Theologians are more interested in his religious thought,⁵ and historians jump straight to his political ideas.⁶ Loi's account of Lactantian justice is nearly complete, but minimises harmlessness as well as the persecution context. Spanneut does not discuss his sources or the persecution. Colot acknowledges this

2 Similarly, the *Sibylline Oracles* single out greed, violence, and sexual immorality for special criticism (e.g. 8.182-9).

3 Long, 'Cicero's Politics in De Officiis', 225.

4 Monat, *Lactance: Institutions divines V*, 1973, 1:23.

5 e.g. Wlosok.

6 e.g. Digeser.

chapter's components, but does not synthesise them into a holistic picture of Lactantian social virtue, nor explore their Christian antecedents as thoroughly as I hope to do.

Universal Siblinghood

As with the rest of his ethics, Lactantius grounds his social ethics in the *paterfamilias* metaphor. This means that piety is an important value within them. By locating human origins in a single couple (*DI.* 6.10.5, 19), Lactantius makes all consanguineous and thus extends the *sanguinis coniunctio*, which defined the family for Cicero, to all humanity. Lactantius describes this consanguinity using *fraternitas*, a word Cicero did not use for human social relations.⁷

However, classical Rome used fraternal piety metaphors to regulate broader social relationships. Brotherly relationships became a model for relationships between friends, lovers, and soldiers, and were extended across the whole citizen body, sometimes through reference to a common ancestor like Romulus.⁸ Within the schools, teachers and students regarded each other as a second family, a culture that would have been formative for Lactantius.⁹ Fraternal piety normalised cooperation, conflict resolution, and devotion rooted in common kinship; it came to epitomise traditional political and social morality.¹⁰ Changes to the *mos maiorum* could thus be seen as abuses of fraternal piety, as in the late Republican civil wars; this charge was probably leveled against Lactantius' co-religionists. Alongside impiety towards gods and state, the threat that Christians posed to fellow-citizens could be regarded as akin to fratricide. Bannon shows how the relationship of mythical brothers like Romulus and Remus, Castor and Pollux, were invoked to bring stability amidst social change during the first century

7 Colot, *Lactance*, 156–60.

8 Bannon, *The Brothers of Romulus*, 192.

9 Watts, *The Final Pagan Generation*, 83–87.

10 Bannon, *The Brothers of Romulus*, 5–10.

BC;¹¹ Lactantius appeals to *fraternitas* to bring a similar stability to the turbulence of his own day.¹² In framing his social ethics using fraternal piety, Lactantius claims that Christians exemplify the virtue the persecutors accused them of lacking. He appeals to a resonant set of moral images, making his ethics highly persuasive in that culture. However, some of his applications of fraternity, such as his view of *aequitas*, were revolutionary within Roman society.

Aequitas

Social inequality was a fact of late-antique life. Distinctions in social class were increasingly emphasised in late antiquity, due to the desire to differentiate between the ranks of the expanded army and bureaucracy.¹³ After Caracalla's grant of citizenship in 212, the citizen/peregrine dichotomy became less important in Roman society and was replaced with an *honestiores/humiliores* dichotomy, though the distinction between slaves and free people remained important.¹⁴

As we saw in Chapter 4, Lactantius defines *aequitas* as *se cum ceteris coaequandi*, acknowledging *omnes aequos id est pares esse*. Lactantius grounds this equal status in the equal relationship all humans have with their divine *paterfamilias*; this paternal relationship governs all others and renders all people siblings (5.14.15-17; 5.15.2-3). Loi regards *aequitas* as extraneous to Lactantian justice, since the word is not prominent in Book 6,¹⁵ but he misses that all Lactantian social virtues express this underlying *fraternitas*.

11 Bannon, 5.

12 Lactantius' social ethics are a collective ideal and are remarkably universal; though he emphasises God's role as *paterfamilias* he has little to say to human *patresfamiliarum*. For the little Lactantius says about familial morality, see Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 175.

13 Garnsey and Humfress, *The Evolution of the Late Antique World*, 83–95.

14 Peter Garnsey, 'Roman Citizenship and Roman Law in the Late Empire', in *Approaching Late Antiquity*, ed. Simon Swain and M. J. Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 140–43.

15 Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 591.

Lactantius differentiates his definition of *aequitas* from that found in Graeco-Roman philosophy and jurisprudence. *Aequitas* is fundamentally an attitude of regarding others as equals, rather than *bene iudicandi* as Roman law understood it.¹⁶ In Roman law, *aequitas* meant considering every aspect of a case before reaching a decision.¹⁷ It balanced two sets of interests, while justice, understood as *aequitas totius rei*, operated in multilateral contexts.¹⁸ Quintilian understood equity as a corrective for when the law was inadequate or imprecise, and thought the legal system should be status-blind (Quint. 12.7.1-6; cf. Arist. *NE*. 5.10.4-6). Cicero defines *aequitas* in two senses, generally as a principle of the fair and good, and more specifically to mean reciprocity in repayment (Cic. *Part. Orat.* 37.130). In a discussion on democracy, he describes what Lactantius calls *aequitas* as *aequabilitas* (*Rep.* 1.43), which he restricts to legal contexts and regards somewhat disparagingly.¹⁹ This section will explore why Lactantius defined *aequitas* differently, and his sources for doing so.

Lactantius is deeply critical of his society's institutions and customs, believing that a class-based hierarchy is symptomatic of injustice. In his archaeology, the markers of elite status in Roman society such as *honores*, *purpurae* and *fascēs* signify injustice and illegitimate rule (*DI*. 5.6.4-5). Later he makes the criticism of his peers explicit: neither Roman nor Greek societies could be just, because they kept people *disparēs multis gradibus*. *Aequitas* requires *universi pares*, and *inaequalitas* and *iustitia* are mutually exclusive. Lactantius reformulates equestrian and senatorial honorifics: the titles *egregius*, *clarissimus*, and *perfectissimus* may only be gained through virtue.

16 As Walter notes, Lactantius believes non-Christians could judge fairly, meaning this is not part of the exclusively Christian *pietas* and *aequitas*. Walter, *Pagane Texte*, 221.

17 Palomo Pinel, 'The Survival of the Classical Idea of Justice in Lactantius' Work', 179.

18 Thomas Finkenauer, 'Iustitia und iustus bei den römischen Juristen', *Fundamina* 20, no. 1 (2014): 287–300.

19 Bryce, *Library*, 171.

Fundamentally, humans are equal because they enter life in an equal condition, and a society which does not recognise this cannot be just (5.14.18-20).²⁰ In designating all people equal, Lactantius reformulates what elites owe their poorer neighbours, making these obligations more directly reciprocal and bringing them under the golden rule.²¹ As Garnsey says, ‘this is an extraordinary thing for a Roman, any Roman, to say. Social inequality was a given in ancient society.’²² Lactantius’ understanding of *aequitas* goes far beyond fair legal procedure to require genuine, universal reciprocity. The attack on social inequality is part of Lactantius’ claim that Roman law explicates divine law less perfectly than Christianity, responding to the charge of Christian lawlessness.

Humilitas

Fundamentally, Lactantius regards *aequitas* to be a humble attitude which regards others as equals. *Aequitas*’ biggest obstacle is arrogance (3.22.3-4). Despite their material differences, in the Christian community *et liberi servis et divites pauperibus humilitate animi pares [sumus] ... Iustitia est parem se etiam minoribus facere*, as Christ did (5.15.5-6). This rare appeal to Christology shows that the *doctor iustitiae* embodies and teaches humility (cf. 4.16.12; 7.1.25; *Epit.* 62.3).²³ The Christian life can be summarised as *humiles vivere* (*DI.* 7.1.15-16). Again, Lactantius justifies this

20 Within the family, *aequitas* applies between spouses, seen in the equal requirement for chastity Lactantius places on both genders (*DI.* 6.23.24-32). However, universal siblinghood does not abolish a *paterfamilias*’ authority over their children and slaves (6.19.7). Contra Wayman, ‘Lactantius’s Power Struggle’, 317.

21 Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 193.

22 Peter Garnsey, ‘Lactantius and Augustine’, in *Representations of Empire: Rome and the Mediterranean World*, ed. Alan K. Bowman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 169–70.

23 In Pichon’s eyes, Lactantius’ Christology triumphs over the aristocratic prejudices of his audience, revealing the ‘héroïque beauté dans le feint abaissement du Sauveur’. Pichon, *Lactance*, 127. Based on *de Mortibus*’ aristocratic tone and the *Institutes*’ additions, Inglebert argues Lactantius adopted a more elitist, gnostic Christianity which rejected the masses’ religion towards the end of his life. Inglebert, *Les Romains chrétiens*, 141–43. However, this ignores *aequitas*’ continued prominence in the *Epitome*; that Lactantius’ ethics are governed by the *paterfamilias* metaphor, in which equality is inherent; and it assumes that Lactantius affirmed the elite Roman values to which he appeals in *de Mortibus*. The additions are not substantially more gnostic than the original text, and make no comment on social hierarchy; Inglebert assumes that Lactantius’ dualism must have been accompanied by a gnostic elitism, for which there is no evidence. Coleman, *Lactantius*, 130.

eschatologically: earthly status markers are transitory, and will be nullified in heaven. He supports this with biblical promises of eschatological reversal (1 Cor. 1–3; Luke 14:11//Matt. 23:12),²⁴ and Euripides’ comment that present ills are thought goods in heaven (*DI*. 5.15.8-11).²⁵ The Euripides quotation says only that earthly trials develop virtue and bring heavenly reward; the stronger ideas of wisdom’s apparent folly and God’s lowering those who trust in earthly status markers must be biblical.²⁶ Lactantius concludes by identifying the equitable and humble person as the one God esteems (5.15.10).²⁷ The distinctly Christian nature of this idea is perhaps why Lactantius justifies it with a rare Christological appeal and an explicit quotation from the gospels, though the Pauline allusion drives the argument as well.

Against Plato, Lactantius says that *aequitas* requires holding minds, not property or families, in common. Equality’s enemies are *adrogantia*, *superbia* and *tumor*, attitudes which cause people to think themselves above others. *Aequitas* means all acknowledging that they are *animi pares*, which applies even amidst economic inequality, and only worshipping God can achieve this (3.22.2-4). Lactantius takes this as another example of pagan materialism: they apply justice only to material things, not realising it is fundamentally attitudinal (3.22.5). It also shows the interiorising nature of Lactantian ethics.²⁸ Though economic justice is important, justice must be realised internally before it may be expressed socially.

Therefore, Lactantius understands *aequitas* to entail *humilitas*. This was not suggested by his classical sources, which regarded humility as a moral failing (Cic.

24 Lactantius was dependent upon Cyp. *Quir.* 3.69, which contains 1 Corinthians 1:17b-24 and 3:18-20, and *Quir.* 3.5, which attributes the gospel quotation to Luke. I have argued elsewhere that Lactantius knew more of Paul’s polemic against worldly wisdom than Cyprian transmitted. See Mackerras, ‘Foolish Faith: Defending Christian Wisdom in Paul and Lactantius’.

25 Euripides fr. 1100 (Nauck), though the attribution to Euripides is uncertain. Bowen and Garnsey, *Lactantius : Divine Institutes*, 312 n. 71.

26 Contra Monat, *Lactance et la Bible*, 249.

27 This section discusses *humilitas* as a social virtue, but Lactantius also commends it in one’s attitude towards God (*DI*. 6.25.12; *Epit.* 62.3).

28 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 167–68.

Tusc. 5.10.29). Cicero advises that private citizens avoid servility as well as self-aggrandisement; lowering oneself too far becomes a vice (*Off.* 1.124). Quintilian thought that modesty might discourage a rhetor from developing their skills (Quint. 12.5.2). This challenges the suggestion that Lactantius' ethics are fundamentally pagan.²⁹

Instead, Lactantius drew this connection from his Christian predecessors, particularly the chapter on humility in *ad Quirinum* (3.5). Cyprian's chapter is titled *humilitatem et quietem in omnibus tenendam*, and includes the Lucan passage quoted in *DI.* 5.15.9. It also quotes Psalm 81:3, from which Cyprian excerpts *humilem et pauperem iustificare*. *Iustificare* translates *šdq*, and originally indicated care or legal protection for the lowly. However, in Cyprian's new context the reader is instructed to be *humilis*, rather than merely protecting others who are *humiles*. I suggest that Lactantius inferred from this recontextualisation that the Bible required the *iustus* to be *humilis*, considering themselves equal to the poor and lowly. The chapter strengthens the connection between justice and humility by citing Romans 13:7, *reddite omnibus quae debentur*; due rendering is a basic component of justice. Tertullian also connects justice and humility using the parable of the pharisee and the tax collector, which teaches that humility leads to being justified before God (*Tert. Marc.* 4.36).³⁰ This is further from Lactantius' usage, however, because justice is performed by God and not humans. Lactantius' interpreting *iustitia* as requiring *aequitas*, and *aequitas* entailing *humilitas*, were suggested through Cyprian's editorial choices in *ad Quirinum*.³¹

29 Walter, *Pagane Texte*, 227.

30 Edwards observes that Tertullian often anticipates Lactantius' exegesis, but the similarities are not so strong to show Lactantius systematically excerpted from Tertullian. Edwards, 'Scripture in the North African Apologists', 175–76.

31 For the connection between justice and humility in later writers, see Allan Fitzgerald, 'Humility, the foundation for Justice in Ambrose and Augustine', in *L'amour de la justice*, ed. Anne-Isabelle Bouton-Touboulic (Pessac: Ausonius Publications, 2017), 173–82.

Having criticised Roman society for lacking *aequitas*, Lactantius responds to the objection that Christians do not practise such an equality either. He concedes that the church contains poor and rich, slaves and masters, but claims that their spiritual siblinghood renders these physical differences meaningless. He characteristically prefers the spiritual to the physical, and spiritually slaves are *spiritu fratres, religione conservi* (DI. 5.15.2-3). Virtues, not riches, make a person distinguished; he applies the Stoic idea that wealth is freedom from lack to the Christian poor (5.15.4-5).

Loi writes that this contradicts the definition with which he indicted classical society. Lactantius requires social and economic equality among pagans, but only an internal moral equality for Christians. By internalising the virtue, Lactantius empties it of any concrete socio-political function or revolutionary meaning.³² Loi attributes this to Lactantius' fundamentally conservative attitude towards Roman society and law.³³ But as Walter notes, Lactantius expects *aequitas* to be realised not in the state but within the church (3.22.2-4).³⁴ As a proposal for reordering social institutions, Lactantian *aequitas* is insufficient, but this suggests that he was not trying to write political philosophy; instead, he argues that the church embodies justice more perfectly than Roman society. Palomo Pinel writes that Lactantius is conservative regarding institutions, but posits a real change at the heart level.³⁵ The implicit step in Lactantius' argument is that Romans do not realise their social classes are arbitrary and meaningless; they lack the fraternal attitude that justice requires. And Lactantius' locating *aequitas* in the mind does not hinder its economic consequences. Genuine equity obliges the rich to mitigate their poorer siblings' social vulnerability, but this giving is organised voluntarily rather than institutionally.³⁶ Loi's atomisation of Lactantius' social ethics means he does not connect

32 Loi, 'La Funzione Sociale', 845–46.

33 Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 589–91.

34 Walter, *Pagane Texte*, 222.

35 Palomo Pinel, 'The Survival of the Classical Idea of Justice in Lactantius' Work', 179.

36 It seems anachronistic to criticise ancients for failing to imagine our welfare state.

aequitas with Lactantius' economic ethics, but the latter is the necessary expression of the former, and this renders Lactantius' conception of *aequitas* more consistent than Loi allows.

Sources

Lactantius' account of *aequitas* presents Christian justice as surpassing its classical, pagan counterpart. As Loi observes, his description is clearly polemical.³⁷ But is Lactantius' criticism fair? This section will explore how Lactantius' account of the virtue compares to that found in Platonic and Stoic philosophy.

Plato

In Book 3, Lactantius interacts with Plato's infamous suggestion of an ideal city holding 'wives and children in common'. In its context, this passage is Lactantius' argument for rejecting Platonic philosophy *in toto*. The policy was designed to improve the guardians' gene pool and extend familial affection throughout the class (*Rep.* 457c-465c). The idea revulses Lactantius' *Romanitas* as well as his Christianity, and he argues against it using three different justice motifs. Lactantius affirms Plato's acknowledgment that justice's power lies in equity, which comes from all being born into an equal condition. Plato thought that this required economic sameness, and so abolished private property. Like Cicero, Lactantius hates involuntary redistribution of property.³⁸ However, he rejects holding families in common even more strongly; this abolishes virtue, including *aequitas*.

Firstly, Plato's suggestion is unfair because it will prevent children from treating their true fathers with filial piety. Lactantius thinks that *aequitas* involves each getting what is fair or appropriate to himself, rather than an arithmetically equal portion.

37 Loi, 'La Funzione Sociale', 844.

38 We return to the passage on page 247.

Lactantius regards Plato's suggestion as akin to theft: it takes people's property away and gives it to others (*DI.* 3.21.6). Plato hoped that the policy would extend familial affection across the whole governing class and thus strengthen social cohesion, but this is not how Lactantius believes that virtues and affection are inculcated. *Caritas* is produced from exclusivity, *fides*, and *castitas*; a common family will dilute familial piety (3.21.7-9). If children misidentify their fathers they will fail to show filial piety (3.12.9-10), which is an injustice. 'Wives and children in common' fails to satisfy the definition of justice as due rendering.

Furthermore, by weakening familial bonds, in removing the most basic Roman social institution, the policy undermines social cohesion and harms the common good. Taking away private property destroys *frugalitas*, *abstinentia*, *temperantia*, *castitas*, *verecundia*, *pudor* and *modestia*, since these virtues all involve controlling one's passions and refraining from taking what is another's (3.22.6; cf. 3.21.5–22.9). Plato modelled his account of justice on a parallel between humans and herds of animals,³⁹ which violates Lactantius' axiom that virtue must be distinctively human. By undermining these virtues, Plato's suggestion destroys justice, understood as *virtutum omnium mater*, the summation of the virtues (3.22.5).⁴⁰

Plato's error is an error in distribution, which causes him to misconstrue virtue. His mistake illuminates that defining justice as giving each their due is insufficient, because different ways of assessing one's due can conflict. In Lactantius' view, virtue governs what is fair, and virtue is determined by the fraternal relationship which all people share; this fraternity is more basic to Lactantius' social ethics than an abstract notion of equality. Lactantius claims that Christianity achieves what Plato sought: a way of extending familial piety through a society, without weakening the bonds which join

39 Bryce, *Library*, 173.

40 Aristotle also used this argument (*Pol.* 2.1.3-17).

people together. Furthermore, Diocletian's marriage edict attributed concern for citizens' familial morality to the gods and emperors; this argument also claims that Christians are best able to inculcate the familial piety that the emperors promoted. Rather than being destructive of society, Christians exemplify the qualities which, according to the tetrarchs' values, ensure that virtue and society flourish.

Stoics and Seneca

More broadly, Lactantius thinks his definition of *aequitas* is fairer than that of the philosophers and Roman society. Many philosophers believed that slavery or at least class differences were natural and good (e.g. Arist. *Pol.* 1.2.4-15; Cic. *Rep.* 1.53, 61-2; 2.69; 3.36-37; *Off.* 1.150-1).⁴¹ Graeco-Roman society's hierarchicalism meant that commending universal social equality required a large imaginative leap.⁴² Seneca came closest to articulating a universal human equality, and Lactantius' silence about his view of *aequitas* is telling. Both authors justified their social ethics by appealing to a universal relationship. For the Stoic, Nature made all humans kin through their shared ontology and telos. This relationship binds people together and obliges them to consider each other's needs (Sen. *Ep.* 95.51-3). This common composition and cosmic parentage means that only virtue and skill grant nobility (*Ben.* 3.28.1-2). Seneca's ideas are very similar to Lactantius' and could well be his source. Masters should treat their slaves as long-term employees, since bodies can be owned, but minds remain free and unpossessable (*Ben.* 3.18.2-20.2; 3.22.1). *Aequi bonique natura* and *commune ius animantium* require sparing prisoners and slaves, even if civil law permits their mistreatment (*Clem.* 1.18.1-2). Seneca went further than other Stoics, arguing that slaves deserved the same treatment that free humans owe each other.⁴³ However, Seneca

41 Bobonich, 'Elitism in Plato and Aristotle', 309; Long, 'Cicero's Politics in De Officiis', 229; Malcolm Schofield, 'The Fourth Virtue', in *Cicero's Practical Philosophy*, ed. Walter Nicgorski (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 213.

42 Inwood, *Reading Seneca*, 65.

43 Griffin and Inwood, *Seneca: On Benefits*, 7.

does not specify that slaves are their masters' equals as Lactantius does. Stoics understood slavery and poverty to be indifferents, which disinclined them to eradicate such social evils.⁴⁴ And his idea seems to have had minimal social impact on ancient understandings of slavery as indicated by extant declamatory literature.⁴⁵

Stoics regarded social prestige as a preferred indifferent,⁴⁶ but for Lactantius, class differences are unjust. Though Seneca and Lactantius both undergird their social ethics with a natural, universal kinship, Lactantius goes further in labelling all people siblings. Seneca's language of kinship creates a familial responsibility to all, but it allows differences in prestige to remain; Lactantius' fraternal language explicitly makes all equals. Lactantius' concept of equality produces stronger imperatives to reject class distinctions, at least in the individual's actions, and obliges the wealthy to protect others from the vulnerabilities of low social status. He is more concerned that his doctrine be expressed practically than Seneca, and thinks that the church is the only place which expresses Stoic kinship. Finally, humanity being equal is far more prominent and central to Lactantius' ethics than Seneca's. It therefore seems fair to grant that Lactantius' equality ethic goes beyond what the classical world taught and practised.⁴⁷ This conclusion is affirmed by others: Lactantius' challenge to social inequality is innovative⁴⁸ and revolutionary, one of the (few) places where Christians challenged the late-antique status quo.⁴⁹

Christian

While the classical tradition considers justice in terms of distribution according to merit (Aristotle's distributive justice),⁵⁰ the Christian tradition prioritised distribution

44 Bett, 'Did the Stoics Invent Human Rights?', 150.

45 Corbeill, 'Rhetorical Education', 78–79.

46 Seneca, *Dialogues and Essays*, xi.

47 Contra Inglebert, *Les Romains chrétiens*, 141.

48 Palomo Pinel, 'The Survival of the Classical Idea of Justice in Lactantius' Work', 179 n. 32.

49 Garnsey and Humfress, *The Evolution of the Late Antique World*, 7; Walter, *Pagane Texte*, 221–22.

50 Cf. Plat. *Laws* 757a-758a; Arist. *NE*. 5.2.12; Cic. *Off.* 2.41-2.

according to need, disproportionately focused on the lowly and indigent. In the biblical tradition, justice means ensuring the vulnerable and low-ranking can flourish, and removing systemic obstacles to this flourishing (e.g. Deut 16:18-20; 24:7; Amos 5:24). Regarding others as fellow covenant members creates an equality that is more significant than differences in social status. The evangelists consciously reject human status as a category for valuing or ranking people (Mark 10:35-45; Matt 19:16-30; 20:20-28; Luke 18:18-30). For Paul, worldly honour is at best eschatologically meaningless and at worst condemnable (1 Cor. 1:18-31). Similarly, the Sibylline oracles criticise social inequality and posit an eschatological levelling (*Orac. Syb.* 3.373-80; 8.17-36, 107-21). In this tradition, social stratification is not the result of meritocratic distribution, but a potential source of injustice. Lactantius grounds *aequitas* in this reversal.

We saw how Lactantius followed Cyprian's association of justice with humility. Unlike Cyprian, Lactantius associates these virtues with *aequitas* in a systematic moral framework. Cyprian justifies fraternal generosity by appealing to God's common, paternal providence, an *aequitatis exemplum* to humans (*Cyp. Op.* 25; *Pat.* 4). However, his chapter on humility advocates maintaining the social order, without asking whether society misidentifies how honours should be distributed (*Quir.* 3.5=Rom. 13:7). Cyprian makes an analogy between divine and human lordship which emphasises the equality of humans, but draws no social ethics from it as Lactantius does (*Dem.* 8). Furthermore, Lactantius supplements Cyprian's Pauline quotations with Paul's doctrine of the eschatological abolition of status markers (1 Cor. 1:27-31), which is not in *ad Quirinum*.⁵¹ Cyprian connects justice and humility, grounds *aequitas* in God's universal fatherhood, and understands human fraternity as more basic than social differences. The pieces of Lactantius' understanding of *aequitas* are latent but unconnected in Cyprian,

51 Mackerras, 'Foolish Faith: Defending Christian Wisdom in Paul and Lactantius', 148-50.

and they are not programmatic for Cyprian's ethics. Pre-Nicene Christian ethics were largely individual and focused on avoiding sin, rather than social and revolutionary.⁵² Recovering a biblical and Sibylline emphasis, Lactantius goes further than earlier Christian authors; he describes humility and common grace using the legal language of *aequitas* and places it within a social framework, his own contribution to the tradition.

Anti-Christian

Lactantius' attack on Roman inequality also responds to critics who found Christianity lowly and contemptible. Celsus, Hierocles, and Porphyry all sneer at Christianity's lower-class, rustic origins (Porph. Beck. 18T; 70F; 81T; Ps-Eus. *Hier.* 2.2; Lact. *DI.* 5.2.17; Orig. *Cels.* 3.18, 44, 49).⁵³ The disciples' lack of education compounded charges of their deception and fraud. By contrast, Lactantius thinks that Christianity's appeal to all people validates its veracity. Unlike philosophical educators, Christians invite people of every sex, race, and age to the path of wisdom and virtue, since God denies immortality to no one (*DI.* 6.3.14-16). Learning philosophy required the luxury of education, which Lactantius deems exclusionary; God's precepts are clear and simple, and able to teach virtue to all (3.25.2-26.9).⁵⁴ Christ came in humility so that even the lowest could imitate him and be saved (4.26.26-30). Lactantius boasts in Christianity's appeal to all people, seeing it as a sign that Christianity is the true religion.⁵⁵ He inverts the charge of Christian lowliness, arguing that it shows that Christianity's critics are materialistic and wedded to earthly status, which opposes justice (5.22.1-10; cf. MF. 36.3-9). If philosophers praise poverty for showing

52 Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 419–20.

53 Simmons thinks Porphyry emphasised finding a way for ordinary people to receive salvation. Simmons, *Universal Salvation*, 34. However, Porphyry's disparagement of popular religion and civic concerns argues against this conclusion (cf. *Abst.* 1.36.2-3; 2.7.2–8.2; 4.18.6-10; *Marc.* 11, 16; Smith 245F). See Johnson, 'Rethinking the Authenticity of Porphyry, Contra Christianos, Fr. 1', 57.

54 For what this teaches about Late-Antique education, see Guillaumin, 'Lactance et la Justice'.

55 Digeser locates this in the context of Porphyry's supposed quest for a universal way of salvation. Digeser, 'Persecution and the Art of Reading', 145.

detachment from wealth, then this praise applies to lower-class Christians. This criticism actually attacks a virtue.

Lactantian equity is fundamentally an attitude of humility. Lactantius posits Christianity as able to inculcate familial piety across a large group, and so realise a meaningful equality, as Plato sought but did not secure for Kallipolis' guardians. Lactantius glosses *humilitas* as *aequitas* because of its greater prominence in classical sources, particularly in connection with justice. Additionally, the idea of giving what is deserved is more basic to *aequitas* than to *humilitas*, which supports Lactantius' claim that thinking oneself equal with the lowly is not a charitable fiction but an accurate expression of human ontology. However, the basis of the doctrine is biblical, and influenced by Cyprian's editing in *ad Quirinum*.

Misericordia

Iustitia is Lactantius' most important word describing social virtue, but he often uses it synonymously with other virtues, and these virtues reveal the contours of Lactantian justice more fully. As ever, these virtues occur in interlocking relationships. Generally, *misericordia* is the disposition that prompts sparing others or treating them kindly, particularly when they are vulnerable. Lactantius names ransoming captives, feeding beggars, defending widows and children, comforting the sick and poor, and burying paupers as the *opera* and *officia misericordiae* (*DI.* 2.1.10; 6.12.15-41; *Epit.* 60.7).⁵⁶ *Misericordia* and *humanitas* are closely related, and sometimes identical (*DI.* 5.6.4; 6.10.2; 6.11.1-5; 6.17.19). Lactantius calls both *officia* and *adfectus*, though he only calls *misericordia* a *virtus* in *Epit.* 33.6. *Misericordia* is a characteristic of the *sanus, iustus, perfectus* person (6.24.25), and an aspect of pleasing worship (7.27.11;

⁵⁶ *Misericordia* is more prominent in Lactantius' discussion of giving in the *Epitome*, showing it uses more Christianised language than the *Institutes*.

Epit. 60.7).⁵⁷ All Lactantian morality is governed by love, but this is particularly true of *miseriordia*; ‘elle n’est rien autre qu’un nom profane de la charité.’⁵⁸

Lactantius’ regard for *miseriordia* was not universally shared. He criticises the Stoics for regarding *miseriordia* as a *vitium* or *morbus*, which needed to be extirpated through philosophy (*DI.* 3.23.8; Cic. *Tusc.* 3.10.23; 4.17.38; 4.38.82-84; *Off.* 2.18). Seneca calls *miseriordia* a *vitium animi*, and sees it as the defective version of *clementia*. *Miseriordia* reacts instinctively to a person’s plight without considering whether their suffering is merited; it is an emotional sadness or fear provoked by others’ distress. But no emotion can cloud the *sapiens*’ mind. The wise man will do what others do out of pity, but deliberately, calmly, and out of concern for the common good (*Clem.* 2.4.4–6.4).

Lactantius disputes with the Stoics about the emotional state in which generosity is performed. Our author wants to reclaim pity’s emotive element, which he sees as a divine gift which prompts concern for others. While God gave other animals teeth or claws for their defence, he gave people the distinctively human *adfectus misericordiae*. *Miseriordia* contains almost all the *ratio humanae vitae*; the alternative is fighting each other like animals, which means failing in justice’s duty to be harmless (*DI.* 3.23.8-10; 6.10.2-12; cf. *Epit.* 60.2). The philosophers have treated humanity’s distinctive virtue as a vice (*DI.* 6.14.1).

More generally, Lactantius prefers a Peripatetic moderation of the passions to the Stoic command to remove them, as he believes that emotions are innate and irremovable. However, he thinks both psychologies deficient because they consider the

57 Along with *pietas* and *venia*, *miseriordia* describes God’s attitude of forgiveness towards sinners (*DI.* 6.25.13; *Epit.* 62.1), as well as the human virtue which prompts forgiveness (*DI.* 6.12.41; *Epit.* 60.8). Lactantius denies that God ought always to show *miseriordia*, since judgement is an appropriate response to unrepentant human evil (*ID.* 17.9).

58 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 169; cf. Loi, ‘Concetto di *Iustitia*’, 593.

emotions only within an earthly framework. It is not an emotion's size which determines its moral rectitude but its object or direction. While fear of death or poverty leads to vice, fear of God generates all kinds of virtue, as the martyrs' *patientia* illustrates.⁵⁹ Spending riches on pleasures is much worse than spending the same sum to feed the poor (6.14.1–17.23). Lactantius asserts that there is a consensus around the goodness of *miser cordia*, both from divine and human testimonies (6.14.1).⁶⁰ The failure to identify *miser cordia* as a virtue is Lactantius' reason for rejecting Stoicism as a reliable source of wisdom, indicating that he saw it as their most egregious, or at least most obvious, fault (3.23.8-10). We will now explore how Lactantius believes *miser cordia* should be expressed.

Prodesse

In 6.10, Lactantius' introduction to his social ethics, he glosses fraternal obligation as *malum numquam facere, semper bonum*. Specifically, doing good means helping the sorrowful and struggling, and feeding the hungry (6.10.8-12). The *perfecta iustitia* which preserves *humana societas* spends *opes* and *divitia* on *salus multorum* rather than one's own *voluptas* (6.12.1). Virtuous economic behaviour is thus an important part of Lactantian justice.

Lactantius gave these injunctions in a time of economic uncertainty, which particularly affected the lower classes. The third century saw decreased prosperity, due in part to political turmoil harming economic productivity, with inflation a particular problem.⁶¹ Diocletian's bureaucratic innovations included reforming the coinage,

59 Lactantius emphasises fear because it was the one passion to which Chrysippus assigned no positive alternative. Bryce, *Library*, 133.

60 The *Latin Panegyrics* do seem to support this claim. In those texts, *miser cordia* is the affective manifestation of a pious disposition, which prompts clement actions (V.5.3; IV.6.2-5). The panegyrists may use *miser cordia* in a popular rather than philosophical sense, or its resonance may have become more positive since Seneca's time.

61 Richard Duncan-Jones, 'Economic Change and the Transition to Late Antiquity', in *Approaching Late Antiquity*, ed. Simon Swain and M. J. Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 20–52;

taxation system, and limiting the prices of goods and services, designed to mitigate this decline.⁶² He aimed to make taxation more efficient and fair, and to limit inflation and curb greed through his prices edict, so that ordinary people could afford food.⁶³

Attitude to wealth

Lactantius' anti-materialistic ethics lead him to privilege spiritual goods over bodily goods. Anyone wanting to follow God and gain eternal life will despise wealth and earthly power; it is hard to walk the road to life while encumbered by material possessions (6.17.10-12; 7.1.19-20). Wealth does not indicate divine favour; it is usually obtained through greed or violence, and is valuable only for resourcing virtuous acts (5.15.4; 5.21.8–22.9; 6.1.8). A similar asceticism was common among philosophers. Cicero valued justice and the common good above pleasure and riches (Cic. *Off.* 3.24).⁶⁴ Though very wealthy, Seneca lived abstinely and regarded riches as false and fleeting compared to virtue's permanence (*Ep.* 108.11-16; *Prov.* 6.3-5). Porphyry closely connects abstinence with justice. Abstinence imitates divine self-sufficiency, while materialism pursues the soul's prison (*Abst.* 3.27.4-6). And in the *Hermetica*, wealth prompts evil impulses which hinder the soul's ascent (*CH.* 1.25). Lactantius' rejection of

Emanuele Papi, 'A New Golden Age?', in *Approaching Late Antiquity*, ed. Simon Swain and M. J. Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 53–81; Robert M. Grant, 'Christians and Imperial Economic Policy in the Early Fourth Century', in *Studies in New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, ed. David E. Aune and Allen Paul Wikgren, 1972, 215; though cf. Colin Adams, 'Transition and Change in Diocletian's Egypt', in *Approaching Late Antiquity*, ed. Simon Swain and M. J. Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 85–86; Garnsey and Humfress, *The Evolution of the Late Antique World*, 20.

62 The tetrarchs established a gold *solidus* for large amounts, and bronze and silver coins with smaller values. The *solidus* was stable and increased the wealth of those who were paid using it, while the other coins were repeatedly debased, leading to economic vulnerability for those who could not access the *solidus*. Watts, *The Final Pagan Generation*, 93–95; Duncan-Jones, 'Economic Change and the Transition to Late Antiquity', 44.

63 The expanded bureaucracy meant that taxes could be collected more fairly, since a reduced workload meant that magistrates could estimate tax requirements more accurately. Watts, *The Final Pagan Generation*, 92. Yet papyrological evidence shows that the anti-corruption measures largely failed. Adams, 'Transition and Change in Diocletian's Egypt', 98–107.

64 Cicero's *de Officiis* argues that traditional Roman goods like glory and wealth are only good if they are combined with justice. Long, 'Cicero's Politics in *De Officiis*', 215.

materialism placed him within a respected, though perhaps uncommon, tradition of thought.

Yet Lactantius is more ambivalent towards wealth than some of these writers: wealth may enable virtue or vice, depending on its ends.⁶⁵ He criticises ascetic philosophers who destroyed their wealth rather than donating it; their failure to prevent people from starving was *inhumanus* (*DI.* 3.23.2-4). Romans traditionally praised *frugalitas*, and the philosophers describe life's divergent paths as *frugalitas* and *luxuria* (6.3.6).⁶⁶ Lactantius is more circumspect. He denies that one should use wealth moderately: *frugalitas* is virtuous when it refrains from spending on pleasures, but vicious when it hoards possessions and fears poverty. If *humanitas* and *iustitia* require spending one's inheritance charitably, if generosity can spare a human life, then frugality is a vice. True economic virtue requires freedom from both the love of possessing and restraint in giving towards good ends (6.6.10-15; 6.17.15-20).⁶⁷ The object, not the amount of expenditure, determines its virtuousness or viciousness.

Economic virtue's real enemy is not wealth but greed.⁶⁸ Greed binds one to the material world and is inimical of heaven (cf. 7.1.19-20).⁶⁹ In Lactantius' archaeology, *cupiditas* and *avaritia* destroyed society and caused justice to flee after Jupiter's self-deification (5.6.1-3; cf. *Orac. Syb.* 3.234-47; *Sen. Ep.* 90.3). It is similarly socially

65 Tertullian is similarly ambivalent towards wealth. It enables works of charity, but God's blessing the poor may negatively impact the rich (*Tert. Marc.* 4.15). He labels money *iniustitiae auctor et dominator totius saeculi* (*Tert. Marc.* 4.33.2; cf. Luke 16:13). Cyprian privileges seeking God's kingdom above material possessions, which entails renouncing earthly things (*Quir.* 3.11; 3.60-1). Similarly, the Jewish Sybillists do not regard wealth as inherently evil, naming it an eschatological blessing (5.260-1), but a Christian Sibyllist believes wealth will be abolished eschatologically (8.224). Stewart Lester, 'Prophetic Rivalry, Gender, and Economics', 199–202.

66 Teresa Morgan, *Popular Morality in the Early Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 184.

67 Aristotle sees temperance and liberality as the mean virtues between luxury and hardship (*Pol.* 2.3.5). As with his critique of Aristotelian psychology, Lactantius argues that true virtue is found not in moderation but in directing actions to the right object.

68 The anti-Christian polemicists accused the apostles of being motivated by greed, showing that the charge was potent (e.g. *Porph. Beck.* 70F; cf. *Mac.* 3.32.2).

69 Though cf. *DI.* 6.19.6, which says *cupiditas* exists so we can acquire basic necessities.

destructive for the Sibyllists (*Orac. Syb.* 8.17-36). The unnamed philosopher's pretence to virtue is unmasked by his greed, which spawns gluttony, theft, and perversion of justice (*DI.* 5.2.3-7). Interestingly, Lactantius mirrors the values of rhetorical education. Extant declamatory literature criticises the rich not for owning wealth but for its concomitant vices: greed, envy, and cruelty.⁷⁰ Cicero also denounced lust for money, and recognised its ability to threaten justice (*Off.* 1.25-6, 68), though he protected private property rights fiercely.⁷¹

Giving

For Lactantius, the key economic virtue is generosity. Generosity, beneficence, and patronage were key to Graeco-Roman social relations. The patronage system fostered social cohesion among members of different classes.⁷² Patrons expected that their gifts and favours would elicit a return of loyalty, gifts, or services. However, Lactantius disagreed with this tradition, both about what help ought to be given and to whom.

Lactantius understands the requirement to help others to include a wide variety of acts, which he outlines in *Institutes* 6.12. Cicero praised ransoming captives as a great *munus iustitiae* (*DI.* 6.12.15; cf. *Cic. Off.* 2.63). For Lactantius, aiding widows and orphans is no less important.⁷³ Justice also looks after the sick (*curo, foveo*) and buries paupers and strangers, an act omitted from classical treatments of justice because it could not benefit the doer (*DI.* 6.12.21-30).⁷⁴ As Ingremeau observes, these duties are ordered by the increasing impossibility of receiving repayment.⁷⁵ Lactantius does not

70 Corbeill, 'Rhetorical Education', 80–81.

71 Long, 'Cicero's Politics in *De Officiis*', 225.

72 Griffin and Inwood, *Seneca: On Benefits*, 1.

73 God commands this partly so no one will apostatise to protect their dependents from poverty.

74 Christians practised this: during the Great Persecution, magistrates sent to confiscate treasures from a church in Cirta found a stockpile of provisions for the needy. Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, AD 200-1000*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 70.

75 Christiane Ingremeau, ed., *Lactance: Institutions divines VI*, SC 509 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2007), 27.

exclude hospitality, but it should be offered to the *humiles* and *abieci* rather than the distinguished so that it is not motivated by self-interest (6.12.3-9).⁷⁶ Part of charity's purpose is to establish relationships between the different classes, an expression of *aequitas* and *fraternitas*. Lactantius rejects the objection that giving will erode the giver's estate. Even pagan philosophers commend poverty, but as a concession he advises the wealthy to donate what they would have given to public games to the poor.⁷⁷ This better investment will bring forgiveness of sins and a divine reward (6.12.32-41). Charity is worship: pagans adorn their gods' statues with gifts, but Christian offerings give sustenance to God's true images (6.13.13-14).

Palomo Pinel rightly comments that Lactantius understands Christian *iustitia* to surpass legal obligation and encompass giving one's all to God and to humans.⁷⁸ However, our analysis of justice's polyvalence in Chapter 2 allows us to specify more precisely how Lactantius modifies classical justice. The concept of rendering social (rather than legal) obligations is important within his criticism of classical justice, but more prominent is not harming, which, Lactantius asserts, surpasses the classical idea of justice as liberality. Lactantius understands helping others as the positive expression of justice as not harming, a common classical motif. *Si nocere homini contra naturam est, prodesse igitur homini secundum naturam sit necesse est* (6.11.2).⁷⁹ *Non nocere* clears away vices, and *prodesse* implants virtue (*Epit.* 55.3-5).⁸⁰ Classical archaeologies locate human society in the mutual quest for protection from wild animals; anyone who does

76 Monat notes resonances with the Old Testament prophets and wisdom literature, the Sermon on the Mount, and Jesus' parable about hospitality (Luke 14:12-13). Monat, *Lactance et la Bible*, 253–55.

77 Loi writes that though he subordinates private property to the injunction to give to the poor in *DI.* 5.14–15, this is reversed in 6.12.32ff., where he commands giving only what is superfluous so familial estates may be protected. Loi, 'La Funzione Sociale', 849. Loi does not recognise the concessional nature of the permission to preserve estates. Book 6's ideal is voluntary poverty.

78 Palomo Pinel, 'The Survival of the Classical Idea of Justice in Lactantius' Work', 178–79.

79 It also helps maintain the common good and human *societas*, another component of classical justice (cf. 6.12.1).

80 Cicero (*Off.* 3.76) and Seneca (*Ep.* 95.51-53) both require these actions, but Lactantius argues they understand them imperfectly.

not offer another help assumes he is self-sufficient, lives alone like a beast, and thus denies his humanity (*DI.* 6.10.24-26).⁸¹ Therefore, Lactantius connects aiding others with humanity's uniqueness and telos. He takes this association between *non nocere* and *prodesse* as far as saying that anyone who can help a dying man but refuses is a murderer (6.11.17).

Lactantius rejects his interlocutors' distinction between universal threats like misadventure, where an obligation to help exists, and particular threats such as poverty, from which the rich are protected and which brings no obligation to help (6.11.6-7). Instead, *conservare humanitatem* means *diligere hominem quia homo sit et idem quod nos sumus*, locating obligation in shared nature and not shared threat (6.11.1). As Loi says, this is a polemic against classical ethics.⁸² In extending *non nocere* to include a positive requirement, Lactantius turns the silver rule into the golden rule. In locating charity within *non nocere* rather than *liberalitas*, Lactantius increases its scope and level of obligation.⁸³ The statement that gifts are only just when they prevent an evil, such as the recipient's death, illustrates why (*DI.* 6.11.27). Lactantius uses the need to prevent evils to determine the appropriate recipients of gifts, which more properly belongs to *non nocere* than *liberalitas*. He does so, I suggest, to expand the concept of generosity and place a greater obligation on the rich to help others, limiting their ability to give from self-interest. Doing so asserts the insufficiency of Roman benefaction. Lactantius' goal is not harmony within a fixed class structure, but that all have enough to survive.

Lactantius wraps a Christian charity ethic in the language of piety (5.22.7-8). Humans are to care for and protect each other, as they would for their family (6.10.3-9). Lactantius extends the obligation to care for one's family, and all the emotive weight it

81 Lactantius rejects these archaeologies, but appeals to them for argument's sake.

82 Loi, 'La Funzione Sociale', 847.

83 Stoics held that only the sage can truly understand what benefits and repayments are appropriate. Inwood, *Reading Seneca*, 78–80. Identifying Jesus as the true *sapiens* asserts that only he can discern what gifts and repayments are appropriate, justifying the Christian charity ethic using Stoic logic.

carries, to all people. Piety is particularly to be directed towards the destitute and vulnerable: ransoming captives, guarding vulnerable women and children, caring for the sick, not exposing one's children,⁸⁴ and burying strangers and paupers (6.10.3-9; 6.11.12; 6.12.15-30; 6.20.21). This inverts traditional *pietas*, which was generally directed towards one's superiors; Lactantius sees it as especially owed to the lowly. This is essentially what Christians called charity, as many have noted (cf. *Epit.* 60.1).⁸⁵ Loi calls such charity the high point of his social ethics.⁸⁶ However, Lactantius rarely uses the word *caritas*, though that kind of love-motivated giving is clearly his topic in 6.10–13.⁸⁷ Spanneut is surprised by this, as *caritas* is a Ciceronian virtue, where it designates affection for friends or family, love of country, and a general human sympathy.⁸⁸ However, Colot's suggestion is plausible: Lactantius describes the *vinculum fraternitatis* as *pietas*, not *caritas* as Cyprian had done (*Pat.* 15), to distinguish his ethics from the Stoics', who also used the term. Furthermore, classical thought connects *pietas* more closely with *iustitia*,⁸⁹ and *pietas* was more resonant within the imperial and persecutory ideologies.

Appropriate Recipients and Seeking a Return

Benefaction was central to Roman social relations, so Rome's thinkers reflected extensively on how to give and receive well. Benefactors needed to choose their recipients astutely, and recipients to repay gifts appropriately. Lactantius overturns these two major components of Roman benefaction, replacing it with a Christian charity ethic. While Roman imperial doles prioritised the well-off and freeborn rather than the

84 This is attributed to a false piety; people exposed newborns to provide for their older siblings (6.20.21).

85 E.g. Buchheit, 'Die Definition Der Gerechtigkeit', 360; Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 169; Monat, *Lactance et la Bible*, 252.

86 Loi, 'La Giustizia Sociale', 160.

87 It occurs twice in Book 6 and twelve times in Lactantius' entire corpus.

88 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 169.

89 Colot, *Lactance*, 306–7.

destitute,⁹⁰ for Lactantius the needy are the most appropriate recipients of donations. Lactantius constructs his economic ethics in dialogue with Cicero and particularly his *de Officiis*. However, Seneca's ethic of generosity went further than Cicero's, though Lactantius does not mention it.⁹¹ This section will investigate whether Lactantius is justified in claiming that Christian charity is superior to Ciceronian and Stoic beneficence.

Cicero and Seneca counsel benefactors to choose worthy recipients (Sen. *Ben.* 1.1.2).⁹² *Dignitas* is assessed by the recipients' character, affection, and history of partnership and obligation with the giver. Affection is the most significant category, but no one who is virtuous should be totally ignored (Cic. *Off.* 1.42-47). Cicero counsels against giving to useful people before the needy, but also says that the common interest is best served by prioritising one's friends to preserve one's resources (1.49-52). He considers assisting others according to their need to be benevolence, not justice, though this benevolence may aid the common good (cf. *Rep.* 2.26, 33, 38, 59).⁹³ Helping poor but honest men is often better than aiding an elite because it may aid one's political popularity (*Off.* 2.70-71). Justice also requires that benefits cause no harm (1.43-4).

For Seneca, benefits are fundamentally a compliment to the recipient's virtue, so indiscriminate giving dilutes their value like a prostitute's favours (*Ben.* 1.14.1-4; 4.9.3-10.3). Seneca cautions against *largitio*, since the multitude is not a proper recipient of generous giving (1.2.1). Recipients should primarily be chosen for their virtue; Seneca advises selecting the poor but virtuous man over a rich and vicious man (4.10.4-5). He would not give to some needy people because after his gift they would still be in need

90 Connolly, *Lives behind the Laws*, 152.

91 Hansen suggests Lactantius omits Seneca from his discussion of social ethics because the Stoic also grounded his ethics in a shared *humanitas*. Hansen, 'Preaching to Seneca', 550.

92 Cf. also Arist. *NE.* 4.1.22.

93 Long, 'Cicero's Politics in *De Officiis*', 237.

(*Vit. Beat.* 24). These authors counsel against giving from utility alone, but mitigate this injunction with other cautions that Lactantius found greedy.

Traditional benefaction promoted social cohesion through reciprocity between patrons and clients. It was important that recipients repay their donors, through political loyalty and honour along with economic return.⁹⁴ However, this existed in tension with the understanding that expecting a return turned a favour into a transaction or investment (Cic. *Leg.* 1.48).⁹⁵ Seneca devotes a work to the topic. The primary benefit one gives is always good will, and the primary means of repayment is the similarly intangible gratitude (*Ben.* 1.5.2–6.1).⁹⁶ A willing recipient repays the benefit mentally, through returning a giver's good intentions, and any material return is an additional blessing (1.2.3; 2.31.1–34.1). This is because Stoics considered material possessions to be indifferent, and mental goods the only true goods.⁹⁷

Lactantius considers such accounts of generosity to be self-interested, harmful, and inhumane. He posits neediness as the only appropriate criterion for choosing recipients. Cicero cautioned against exhausting one's resources through giving; Lactantius glosses this as *arcam quam iustitiam conservare* (*DI.* 6.11.9-10; Cic. *Off.* 2.52). Cicero concedes that *largitio* ought sometimes be given to suitable (*idonei*) people (*Off.* 2.54), which Lactantius interprets to mean those who can repay the benefit (*DI.* 6.11.11-12). Invoking the philosophers, Lactantius claims *iuste, pie, humane facere* means to act *sine spe recipiendi*. Virtue should be sought for its own sake, which is epitomised in giving to someone who cannot return the gift (6.11.13-16). Seneca made gratitude sufficient repayment for a benefit, but did not abolish reciprocation entirely.

94 Inwood, *Reading Seneca*, 65–66.

95 Inwood, 86.

96 Seneca justifies this with a religious analogy: in sacrifice, the real gift is the worshippers' pious intention, not the material offered. The poor can offer the gods more with cereal offerings than the rich with gilded bulls, removing the advantage the rich would otherwise have (Sen. *Ben.* 1.6.3).

97 Inwood, *Reading Seneca*, 83.

Burying paupers is Lactantius' highest duty of justice because of the impossibility of any repayment, even through gratitude.

Lactantius makes giving to the needy an obligation and not just an act of benevolence like Cicero. This means giving to the blind, sick and destitute to keep them alive. Such people should be cherished (*fovere*) because of their common humanity, and because God values them equally to oneself (6.11.17-19).⁹⁸ Loi writes that classical ethics did not ask how one ought to relate to the poor; the inclusion of such people in the duties of *humanitas* was motivated by the Christian tradition, and prompted by the declining empire's economic problems.⁹⁹ Lactantius attempts to pit Cicero's identification of the *utile* with the *honestum* against his endorsement of typical Roman beneficence. Lactantius does not mention Cicero's instruction to give to the virtuous, a silence which bolsters his argument.¹⁰⁰ However, to one whose ethic prioritises the indigent, even selecting recipients for their virtue may appear selfish, as it still understands the benefit to display the giver's good judgement. He also omits Cicero's discussion of whether gifts can harm their recipients. In identifying the poorest and lowliest as the ideal recipients of *beneficia*, Lactantius rejects an *aequitas* which treats all people alike, preferring an *aequitas* which attempts to rectify the inequity present within society.¹⁰¹ In this instance, Lactantius vehemently rejects the idea of justice as distribution according to merit. Rather, as in the biblical tradition, resources should be distributed according to need, to prevent the greatest amount of harm.

Roman beneficence was regularly expressed by donating games and public buildings. Lactantius rejects this understanding of *largitio utilis* as well, regarding only eternally beneficial gifts as *utile*. Games and buildings cannot benefit givers after their

98 Illustrated in his universal gift of common grace, cf. Matt. 5:45; Cyp. *Quir.* 3.48; *Pat.* 5.

99 Loi, 'La Funzione Sociale', 848.

100 For Lactantius' use of Cicero in this section, see Monat, *Lactance et la Bible*, 254.

101 Bryce thinks that Lactantius identified a 'most significant fault in the ancient character', and concurs that the Christian ethic went further than classical giving. Bryce, *Library*, 157–58.

death, and both are soon forgotten (6.11.20-24). As Cicero says, human works decay from old age, while *iustitia et lenitas* flourish forever (Cic. *Mar.* 11). Recalling justice as not harming, the only *vera et iusta largitio* is that which prevents evil: Lactantius reconfigures and spiritualises *utilitas*, whereby truly useful gifts earn forgiveness of sins and an eternal reward (6.11.26; cf. *Cyp. Op.* 2). Furthermore, divine rewards are destroyed if a gift receives an earthly return (*DI.* 6.12.1-2).¹⁰² *Beneficia* need to be *salva et incorrupta*, which is only possible when they remain unreturned (*DI.* 6.12.7-8).¹⁰³ The *iustus* will accept all opportunities to act mercifully without seeking a profit, and will not accept a gift from a poor person (6.18.9-10). Lactantius undermines the reciprocity of Roman benefaction, arguing that the exchange of favours which sustained that society turned *iusta beneficia* into virtue-less economic transactions. In response to the charge that this would corrode social bonds, Lactantius would say that Christian fraternal piety creates more equitable social bonds, which unite people not according to their wealth as patron and client but according to their nature as brother and sister.

For Lactantius, benefactions given to family, neighbours or friends are not praiseworthy; they are obligatory, and their omission is reason for censure.¹⁰⁴ *Iustitia* exists *ubi ad bene faciendum necessitatis vinculum nullum est* (6.12.17-18). It provides for all people out of *humanitas* what is given to one's family from *adfectus* (6.12.31). As Palomo Pinel writes, this goes beyond the narrower concept of legal obligation to entail *caritas*, which surpasses and completes justice.¹⁰⁵ However, this definition of *iustitia* contrasts with Lactantius' explanation of *pietas* as meeting the obligations of the *vincula*

102 Cf. Matt. 6:1-4.

103 Despite this theology, the Christian charitable ethic did positively benefit their communities. Almsgiving increased Christian communities' cohesion and size, and made churches more financially stable than pagan temples which depended on gifts from fewer, wealthier donors. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 69–70.

104 For Monat, this means Christian justice does not oppose the institution of the *familia*. Monat, *Lactance et la Bible*, 255. However, by extending familial obligation across the human race Lactantius relativises its importance.

105 Palomo Pinel, 'The Survival of the Classical Idea of Justice in Lactantius' Work', 178–79.

between God and humans (4.28.3). 6.12 uses *vinculum* to describe the obligations Romans acknowledged, while 4.28.3 refers to the obligations of divine law. Yet given that *iustitia* means *distribuere suum cuique* in classical thought, this is an extraordinary understanding of the virtue. Lactantian justice is necessarily supererogatory, at least according to how Roman society evaluated obligation. Rather than working outwards from one's familial responsibilities, justice begins with the neediest and works upwards. Piety not only obliges one to treat all people as family members; one's obligation to others increases as does their inability to help themselves. This understanding of obligation is unprecedented in the classical world, but aligns closely with the biblical picture of justice. Lactantius believes that obligation must be Christianised before 'rendering to each their own' defines justice accurately.

Lactantius' polemic against greed reflects and inverts the tetrarchic rhetoric. Diocletian's prices edict sought to curtail *avaritia*, declaring it to oppose *iustitia* and *humanitas*, key Lactantian virtues. It placed the needs of the poor above freedom of contract.¹⁰⁶ Like this document, Lactantius privileges the common good and protecting the poor over economic liberty, and identifies greed as the main enemy of just economics. This was no accident; Lactantius is claiming that Christians truly embody the economic ideals which the tetrarchs publicised. Lactantius expounds his economic ethics in conversation with Cicero, but necessarily against the backdrop of the economic practices of his own day. He polemicises against traditional Roman forms of generosity, implicitly challenging the tetrarchs' claim to secure their citizens' economic wellbeing. Lactantius asserts that only Christians know how to use their money justly and without greed. While Diocletian's attempt to provide the poor with basic necessities failed, Christians could and did ensure that the needy survived. Thus Lactantius denies that Christians are dangerous and destructive of society. Through their charity they achieve

¹⁰⁶ Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 175.

what imperial policy sought but failed to realise. As with so much Lactantius says, his economic ethics assert that Christians are the only ones who truly practise the values their persecutors prize.

Involuntary Redistribution of Property

Cicero made preservation of property rights central to his definition of justice. Land was privatised legitimately, through longstanding occupancy, gains in warfare, law, bargain, contract, or lot (Cic. *Off.* 1.20-21). Numa divided the land among citizens to encourage agriculture and disincentivise plunder, allowing *pax*, *clementia* and *iustitia* to flourish (*Rep.* 2.26-27). The government's giving the propertied class's goods to others, through appropriation or taxation, is unjust, inexpedient, and equivalent to theft (*Off.* 2.79-85). Though the rich ought to give to the republic and its poor, the state must not intervene or engage in public welfare.¹⁰⁷ Cicero does not apply justice to assess whether a society's distribution of property is fair; he seeks maintaining the status quo (2.78, 84). Involuntary redistribution is occasionally justifiable to preserve the common good, but this seeks the state's utility and presumably benefits only the elite (3.29-31). There is no obligation to aid the needy which trumps an individual's right to retain their property.¹⁰⁸

Lactantius' rejection of Platonic communism shows that he accepts much of Cicero's view on redistribution. Though he finds common possessions more tolerable than common families, the former is still impossible and unjust (*DI.* 3.21.2-3).¹⁰⁹ The philosopher-kings' redistribution is *iniustus*, *iniquus*,¹¹⁰ tyrannical; *aliis abstulisset sua*, *aliis condonasset aliena* (3.21.6). An attitude of equality is more conducive to justice

107 Cf. J. M. Carter, 'Cicero: Politics and Philosophy', in *Cicero and Virgil*, ed. H. K. Hunt and John R. C. Martyn (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1972), 20–21.

108 Long, 'Cicero's Politics in De Officiis', 235–37.

109 A contemporaneous philosophical tradition did regard common ownership of possessions as eradicating greed and injustice (Iamb. *Pyth.* 30.168).

110 These adjectives are given in their positive form, but the context is clearly sarcastic.

than economic communism, since it addresses the cause of injustice and can motivate charity (3.22.3-5). By locating *aequitas* in minds rather than property, Lactantius affirms the fundamental Roman value of property rights, against Plato's communism.¹¹¹

However, unlike Cicero, Lactantius is critical of Rome's historic acquisition of property. In Lactantius' golden age, private property existed, but people shared it generously so that no one lacked anything (5.5.5-8).¹¹² Contra Seneca (*Ep.* 90.3, 36-40), justice's enemy is not private property, but the *rabida et furens avaritia* which causes people to hold their property out of others' reach (5.5.6).¹¹³ Again, attitudes are more significant for justice than economic distribution. However, greed produces unjust economic structures: Jupiter's henchmen stockpiled common resources and created unjust laws to protect their acquisitions (*DI.* 5.6.1-3). Unlike Cicero, Lactantius does not believe that custom legitimises owning property which was gained unjustly. If the Romans really wanted to live justly, they would return the stolen property which constitutes their empire and return to their pre-imperial squalor (5.16.4).¹¹⁴

De Mortibus criticises the tetrarchs for taxing excessively and leaving people without sustenance (*DMP.* 31.2-6). Lactantius regards excessive taxation as theft; it distributes unfairly, confiscates rightfully-owned property, and violates the requirement not to cause harm.¹¹⁵ Ultimately, his goal is not imagining a fairer economic system, but teaching the rich to use their money virtuously within his economic context. Hence he advocates almsgiving, mandated by religious duty rather than political might. To use a modern category, a giver's consent is necessary for redistribution to be just.

111 Loi, 'La Funzione Sociale', 846.

112 Contra Wayman, 'Lactantius's Power Struggle', 310. Allo Isichei's parallel with Marxism is also overdrawn. Isichei, *Political Thinking and Social Experience; Some Christian Interpretations of the Roman Empire from Tertullian to Salvian*, 62-64.

113 Unlike Cicero, Seneca does advocate common property as expressing human *societas* (*Sen. Ep.* 95.51-53).

114 The *Sibylline Oracles* (4.30-32) and Latin Fathers (MF. 25.1-6) are likely sources for this critique.

115 I suspect that this is what Lactantius would imagine by involuntary redistribution of wealth, and that he would struggle to imagine a state-orchestrated redistribution of wealth which supported the poor.

Sources

We have already explored how Lactantius used the Roman philosophers to formulate his ethic of giving; his rejection of classical beneficence has precedents in the biblical and patristic tradition. As Loi has noted, Lactantius uses specifically Latin Christian expressions such as *opera iustitiae*, *operari iustitiam*, and *facere iustitiam* to describe almsgiving.¹¹⁶ While the classical world used economic exchange to maintain customary relations between different classes, the biblical tradition requires that giving be disproportionately focused towards the poor, vulnerable, and needy (Ps. 9:7-12; 10:17-18; Isa. 1:11-17; Jer. 22:3-16; Amos 5:21-24; cf. Tert. *Marc.* 4.14.2-7; 4.31). For example, the prophetic tradition attributes Israel's exile to injustice, social violence and the exploitation of the poor (Isa. 1:12-17, 21; 5:7-12; 59:8-11; Jer. 7:1-15; Ezek. 18:7-8). At its foundation, justice is the holistic flourishing of the community in relationship with each other and God. The vulnerable, often described as orphans, widows, and foreigners, are more likely to be denied access to social goods; their treatment is a litmus test of a society's righteousness.¹¹⁷ Blessing is distributed not for being worthy, but for being needy, upending the usual distribution according to desert (Matt. 5:3-5).¹¹⁸ The Sibylline oracles criticise greed, the antonym of which is charitable giving (*Orac. Syb.* 3.40-42; 8.17-36). Conversely, the Jews act righteously by using just measurements, not moving boundaries, and providing for the poor and widows, because God gave the earth in common to all (*Orac. Syb.* 3.234-47).¹¹⁹ Lactantius' requirement that goods be distributed according to need rather than merit indicates his economic ethics come from this tradition.

116 Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 606–10.

117 Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings*, 88.

118 Thom, 'Justice in the Sermon on the Mount', 326.

119 Buitenwerf, *Sibylline Oracles*, 341.

Furthermore, Cyprian's conception of justice prioritises charitable giving; he provides a plausible intermediary between Lactantius and the biblical tradition. The ethical section of Cyprian's florilegium begins with a chapter called *de bono operis et misericordiae*, in which *iustitia* features prominently.¹²⁰ Justice entails fairness in contracts, giving generously, feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting prisoners, and laying down one's life for one's siblings. The passages link almsgiving with true worship and eschatological reward (Cyp. *Quir.* 3.1; cf. Matt. 19:21; 25:31-46; Luke 19:8-9). One loves God by loving others, who are one's siblings, and this fraternity is derived from creation: *nonne Deus unus condidit nos? nonne Pater unus est omnium nostrum? quid utique dereliquistis unusquisque fratrem suum?* (Cyp. *Quir.* 3.3 quoting Mal. 2:10).¹²¹ The connection between worship, fraternal love, justice, and almsgiving recurs throughout the work (*Quir.* 3.3; 3.9). Justice as charity ought to be directed primarily towards the lowly. As in the Bible, orphans and widows are the quintessential recipients of justice (*Quir.* 1.24; cf. Tert. *Marc.* 4.16).

Cyprian also devotes an entire work to almsgiving. The work makes forgiveness of post-baptismal sin dependent upon generous giving, which he calls *opera iustitiae* or *misericordiae*. He cites the prophetic tradition that social justice rather than sacrifice earns God's favour (*Op.* 4-8; cf. Isa. 58). Cyprian wrote to Christians, and assumes the association between almsgiving, justice, and Christianity rather than explicating it. He discusses almsgiving primarily as a religious act, rather than highlighting its social benefits or describing what it entailed in practice.

¹²⁰ It is possible that Lactantius' copy of *ad Quirinum* began a new scroll at Book 3, and its opening chapters are disproportionately important in Lactantius because he could refer to them easily. Working from Brandt's indices, Edwards writes that Lactantius makes no use of *Quir.* Book 3, but this ignores several extra allusions identified by McGuckin, which come from *Quir.* 3, and that some biblical citations Edwards identifies are also found in *Quir.* 3 (*DI.* 5.15.8-9=*Quir.* 3.5, 69; *DI.* 7.20.5=*Quir.* 3.31). Edwards, 'Scripture in the North African Apologists', 186; McGuckin, 'Researches', 527-32.

¹²¹ In its original context this fraternity probably applied only to the Jews, but Cyprian gives no indication of this limit.

Moreover, the Latin fathers magnify almsgiving's importance in social expressions of justice. As we saw in Chapter 2, the Hebraic conception of justice encompassed every aspect of life; Tertullian and Cyprian make its economic domain primary. Tertullian interprets Micah's injunction *facere iudicium, diligere misericordiam, et paratum esse sequi Dominum Deum tuum* according to Christ's instructions to the rich young ruler, *vende quae habes, da egenis, et veni, sequere me* (Tert. *Marc.* 4.36.6-7; cf. Mic. 6:8; Matt. 19:21). Quoting Ezekiel, Cyprian describes the *iustus* as avoiding usury, oppression and robbing others, and as providing for the needy. Ezekiel also mentioned the need to avoid idolatry, adultery, wrongdoing, and unfair legal judgement, but Cyprian omits these requirements (Ezek. 18:5-9; Cyp. *Quir.* 3.48). Cyprian therefore emphasised justice's economic aspect to the exclusion of its other social elements. Cyprian does not explain why he makes almsgiving the definitive social virtue and deemphasises other aspects of biblical justice. Matthew 25:31-46, which categorises humans as *iustus* or *iniustus* based upon their treatment of the poor, seems to be programmatic for Cyprianic *iustitia* (cf. *Op.* 23). Evidently, third century Christians associated social *iustitia* with acts of charity, rather than general moral purity, legal justice, or avoiding wrongdoing.¹²²

This tradition explains not only why Lactantius formulates his economic ethics as he does, but why they are central to his view of justice. Yet Lactantius' dependence on Latin Christianity here has not previously been recognised. Spanneut thinks that Lactantius' ethics lack familiarity with the Bible.¹²³ Monat writes that Lactantius did not draw any fundamental argument from Scripture, but cited it to reinforce what he

122 Bolkestein associates how *humanitas* increasingly designates aiding the vulnerable with a corresponding ascription of that meaning to *φιλανθρωπία*. This began in the Stoics but was particularly caused by Philo and Clement of Alexandria. Similarly, *δικαιοσύνη* takes on an increased meaning of *ἐλεημοσύνη*. Hendrik Bolkestein, 'Humanitas bei Lactantius: christlich oder orientalisch?', in *Pisciculi*, ed. Theodor Klauser and Adolf Rucker (Münster in Westfalen: Aschendorff, 1939), 62–65. We have observed a similar change in *iustitia*.

123 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 178.

established philosophically.¹²⁴ This accurately describes Lactantius' argumentative strategy, but misconstrues the source of his arguments' content. In my view, Cyprian's thought alone explains why Lactantius formulates economic ethics as he does. In following Cyprian's interpretation of biblical ethics, Lactantius understood his position to be biblical and traditionally Christian.

This conclusion is reinforced by the ways that Lactantius differentiates his understanding of justice from the Stoics'. The Stoics viewed wealth as a preferred indifferent, but Lactantius, while praising poverty as liberating one from worry, treats it as an evil when it threatens the lives of the hungry, naked, or infirm. Rhetorical training typically normalised the divide between rich and poor,¹²⁵ but Lactantius requires that wealth be used to mitigate the consequences of this divide. Though opposing state-sponsored redistribution, he encourages the wealthy to give their fortune for the poor (*DI*. 6.12.32-35), advocating a more permeable boundary between rich and poor than his contemporaries did. He asserts that his society's distribution of wealth is unjust and harmful, and echoes the prophetic claim that this breeds social injustice. His use of affective language (*foveo, diligo, carus*) indicates that he understood almsgiving as neighbour-love. Lactantius exploits Cicero's admission that he understood justice hazily to claim that the Christian understanding of justice, and specifically economic justice, surpasses classical generosity as reality surpasses shadow (6.11.18; *Cic. Off.* 3.69). Lactantius understood himself to be commending Christian justice as almsgiving using the language of classical philosophy.

124 Monat, *Lactance et la Bible*, 255.

125 Corbeill, 'Rhetorical Education', 80–81.

Non Nocere

Harming as Injustice

Lactantius regarded *prodesse* to be the positive requirement of justice as *non nocere*, but he also gives *non nocere* its usual sense. Not harming was a common component of classical definitions of justice. Popular Roman morality praised harming enemies alongside doing good to friends,¹²⁶ but the philosophical tradition criticised this. For Cicero, harm includes failing to protect another; it can be active or passive. Harmlessness is predicated on needing to aid one's community; failure to do so destroys one's *humanitas* and is equivalent to abandoning *parentes, amici, patria*, a piety analogy. The person who would rather harm another than suffer death or poverty privileges bodily goods over the soul (Cic. *Off.* 1.23; 3.25-6). However, avenging an injustice is permissible (*noceat nemini nisi lacessitus iniuria*, 3.76). *De Officiis* argues that *virtus, laus, and gloria* are vicious unless governed by justice; power must be used not for personal gain but the common good, which extends beyond Rome's borders.¹²⁷ The law of nature which allowed Roman conquests also obliges them to protect the universal human *societas*.¹²⁸ However, a Ciceronian fragment claims that some nations are anthropologically suited to be ruled by others, as reason governs the emotions (*Rep.* 3.36-37; cf. Aug. *Iul.* 4.12.61; *Civ.* 19.21).¹²⁹ Cicero's definition of harmlessness extended justice beyond Rome's borders yet still affirmed her imperial rule.

Lactantius' exposition of *non nocere* asserts that Christianity gives a better foundation for ethics than Roman philosophy. *Iustitia* as *non nocere* is important for Lactantius as it pertains so directly to the persecution he opposed. Consequently, his prohibition against harming is more universal than what traditional Romans would have

126 Morgan, *Popular Morality*, 39.

127 Long, 'Cicero's Politics in *De Officiis*', 214–17.

128 Wagenvoort, *Pietas*, 11–14; Colot, 'Lactantius and the Philosophy of Cicero', 88.

129 Heck, '*Iustitia civilis*', 181–82.

accepted. Those with power need to control the discourse around force as well as force itself; oppressed peoples seek to undermine the ideologies that justify violence, often by accusing their oppressors of failing to adhere to their espoused ideals.¹³⁰ This is Lactantius' aim, to marshal Roman philosophy and culture to delegitimise violence against Christians. Lactantius gives several arguments against religious violence, each asserting that Roman violence contradicts the values that society prizes. Harm compromises justice, but it is also *impius* and *inhumanus*. Justice as harmlessness reveals the ultimate goal of Lactantius' apologetic and ethical discourse.

For Lactantius, harmlessness requires complete non-violence or pacifism. Harming another is unjust, contrary to human nature and divine law (*ID.* 14.6). He derives this prohibition from the fraternal piety demanded by the *paterfamilias* metaphor. Cicero prohibited unprovoked aggression but allowed retaliation against aggressors (*Cic. Off.* 3.76); Lactantius forbids retaliation even regarding unjust injuries: it is no less evil to return evil than to initiate it. Returning a hurt imitates the injurer, and imitating a bad person mars one's character.¹³¹ The *iustus* avoids positions of power so that they do not cause anyone injustice; they do not defend themselves against theft, and they endure injustice patiently (5.22.7-10). This is fundamentally opposed to *virtus* as military prowess (6.10.11).¹³²

Lactantius bans all killing, because God made humans sacred creatures (6.20.15-17). This includes military service, suicide, performing or even watching executions, and exposing infants. Attending the games incites bloodlust and pollutes the conscience; he regards Roman displays of military power as vitiating Roman society (3.18.8-10;

130 Gaddis, *No Crime*, 10.

131 Lactantius concedes that Romans will despise this, since they praise those who defend their honour against insult (*DI.* 6.18.12-25).

132 Bryce, *Library*, 155.

6.20.9-26). Banning all forms of killing was necessary for him to argue that executing Christians was unjust, rather than lawful punishment as the state said.

Lactantius applies his pacifism to Roman imperialism, criticising her tolerance for violence towards her subject peoples (1.18.7-10). Earlier Christians had challenged the belief that Rome won her empire through piety, instead attributing it to theft and violence (MF. 25.1-6). Lactantius rejects the idea that virtue puts one's country's needs first; Romans tended to equate the common good with Roman interests, but for Lactantius this denies *humanitas*.¹³³ Justice is far from the person *qui nocet, qui odit, qui spoliat, qui occidit*, all actions of imperial soldiers. One country's interest is another's disadvantage; working and taxing stolen ground is theft, not justice. Though Cicero criticised Rome's expansionism, Lactantius believes that he compromised justice by teaching on duties in war (*DI*. 6.6.18-25). If Romans truly want justice they should surrender their empire and its wealth, and live again in mud huts (5.16.4). Lactantius promises divine punishment on Roman imperialism (7.15.18, citing *Orac. Sib.* 8.165-73).

Rather, Lactantius believes that it is better to die and preserve one's virtue than to kill. The virtuous person allows good to conquer through passive resistance.¹³⁴ But without an eternal perspective, there is insufficient incentive to choose virtue over utility (*DI*. 5.17.14-17; 6.6.3-9); this is why Cicero could not refute Carneades' dilemmas between causing harm and suffering loss. Lactantius promises that innocence earns divine protection as well as an eternal reward. Furthermore, the classical tradition praises people for dying for friendship, and it is similarly laudable to die for innocence or virtue. Protecting oneself by harming another is never wise, but *callidus, astutus*, and

¹³³ Wagenvoort, *Pietas*, 4. For other ways Lactantius breaks down the barrier between rulers and provincials, see Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity*, 102–4.

¹³⁴ Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 171.

bestial (5.17.19-34). Ultimately, Lactantius connects this to the persecution: if it is praiseworthy to die for a friend it cannot be foolish to die for God.

Sources

Lactantius' horror at violence contrasts starkly with Rome's acceptance of it. Roman society normalised and glorified warfare, and violence was inherent in their mythical founding. Roman iconography, games, and military triumphs depicted and celebrated military victories over barbarians. Violence gained honour for the individual and the empire, as it displayed the power which guaranteed the empire's security.¹³⁵ The *Latin Panegyrics* display this normalisation of violence, but also demarcate legitimate and illegitimate violence. These texts celebrate military victories, describe imperial battles, and praise emperors for their military careers (X.2.3-5; XI.7.1-2; VI.2.5).¹³⁶ Rome's military successes indicate divine favour and the presence of the golden age (XI.16.1–18.5; IX.18.4-5). Violence exercised by lawful emperors towards foreign nations or those deemed usurpers is celebrated (VIII.15.2–19.3; VI.6.1; 10.1-7; XII), while civil war is rued, and the violence of the emperors' enemies deplored (X.4.4). The panegyrists spoke what they thought would please the emperor, meaning their attitude towards violence and warfare was conventional.

The Roman philosophers support traditional institutions but are less enthusiastic about Roman militarism. Cicero applies the prohibition against harming beyond the state to the *communis humani generis societas*; to do otherwise destroys justice and rebels against the gods, who established the human *societas* (Cic. *Off.* 3.28). Military

135 Martin Zimmermann, 'Violence Reconsidered', in *Violence in Late Antiquity*, ed. H. A. Drake (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 345–50.

136 Rhetorical education was a way of normalising the status quo and the place of violence within it. Joy Connolly, 'The Politics of Rhetorical Education', in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Rhetoric*, ed. Erik Gunderson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 128. However, through astute praise of clemency and other virtues, panegyrists could also check imperial violence. Gaddis, *No Crime*, 17.

competition breaks the bonds between the human race.¹³⁷ Humans resolve conflict through negotiation, while beasts use violence; war is legitimate only when defensive and declared beforehand.¹³⁸ Imperialism is not inherently vicious, and Romans epitomise just warfare, though Cicero laments that an earlier clemency and moderation has given way to expansionism (1.34-5; 2.26-7). Within the state, people should be punished for the common good, to reform the criminal, remove him from society, and deter others (1.88; Sen. *Clem.* 1.22.1). Lactantius' *Institutes* do not discuss the state's role of punishing criminals, and assert that any support of warfare betrays justice.

Lactantius comes closer to his philosophical contemporaries' view of violence.¹³⁹ Porphyry's definition of justice requires harmlessness towards anything that does not do harm (*Abst.* 3.26.9). Cicero and Plato affirmed the harm prohibition while endorsing political violence, but Porphyry's opposition to violence is more universal.¹⁴⁰ Harmlessness makes a person rational and godlike, so ὁ δίκαιος will avoid harming even animals (3.27.1-2). He justifies this by appealing to a peaceful primaeval golden age, as Lactantius does (4.2.1-5); both writers associate harmlessness with justice, rationality, and holiness. These similarities suggest that Lactantius aligns himself with his society's more rigorous position on the question.¹⁴¹ However, if Porphyry were the unnamed philosopher we would expect Lactantius to accuse the vegetarian philosopher of treating animals better than humans, since the distinction between animals and

137 Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 194.

138 Cochrane, 49.

139 The *Corpus Hermeticorum* treats social ethics only briefly. Violence and murder are impure and materialistic, but because they harm the soul rather than for their social consequences (*CH.* 9.3; 10.21; 12.4, 23).

140 Plato's *Republic* concludes that it is always wrong to do another person harm (*Rep.* 331c-d; 335b-d), but only the philosopher may define harm. Philosophers or lawgivers may purge the cities of undesirables who damage it (*Rep.* 342de; *Laws* 735c-736a). In particular, private religious practices are forbidden in Magnesia (909d-910e). Such a philosophy could justify persecuting Christian dissidence for the common good. However, Porphyry's extant works do not call for eliminating religious dissidents to protect the state from harm, assuming that Eus. *PE.* 1.2.1-5 = Harnack fr. 1 is not Porphyrian.

141 Lactantius may have known Porphyry's opinions directly; it is probable he knew some Neoplatonist philosophy from the schools and imperial courts.

humans is central to the Christian's ethics. Rather, their similarities show a shared intellectual culture, within which appealing to harmlessness could justify religious or social non-conformity. Pacifism held credence among some intellectuals, and Lactantius thought such arguments could counter the persecutors' ideology.

Like Lactantius, the *Sibylline Oracles* abhor violence and bloodshed. The third Sibyl says 'Alas for a race which rejoices in blood' (*Orac. Syb.* 3.36-38).¹⁴² The Sibyllists criticise surrounding empires' warmongering; war is both a consequence of immorality and divine punishment for impiety (3.202-5).¹⁴³ Eschatological judgement returns their violence on their own heads (3.310-11; 8.125-30). These texts' polemic against violence likely informed Lactantius' own.

Finally, the early Christian tradition was strongly pacifistic. For Cyprian, Jesus' commands to turn the other cheek and pray for one's persecutors mean that Christians ought to eschew anger, discord, hatred, and murder (*Cyp. Pat.* 5, 16; cf. *Quir.* 3.3). Rome suffers because she is violent and cruel, not because of Christian impiety (*Dem.* 10). Tertullian forbids all kinds of violence, including capital punishment and warfare; Christians must forswear force and love their enemies (*Tert. Apol.* 37.1).¹⁴⁴ Tertullian sees the army as utterly opposed to God's kingdom, and forbids Christians from any military service, which would conflict with one's loyalty to Christ (*Idol.* 19; *Cor.* 11; cf. *Matt.* 26:52). Both the Sibylline oracles and Latin fathers condemn violence; unlike Cicero, they could ignore political questions about governing and defending a polity.

However, Lactantius had worked in the imperial bureaucracy, trained judges and panegyrist, and could see how intrinsic violence was to the state's continuation. Earlier fathers could assume the state's existence without having to sustain it, but Lactantius'

142 Trans. Charlesworth.

143 Buitenwerf, *Sibylline Oracles*, 338–39.

144 Osborn, *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West*, 230.

audience included governors and bureaucrats who held that task. His complete adoption of early Christianity's pacifism implies that, at least in the *Institutes*, he had not considered what ethical situations a Christian empire would entail.¹⁴⁵ It also shows that he locates himself within the Christian tradition, though he justifies pacifism using classical concepts of justice as harmlessness. Monat misses the Christian background to the discussion and Lactantius' claims that Christian ethics surpass Roman ethics.¹⁴⁶ Pichon and Spanneut recognise Lactantius' injunction against harm is stronger than Cicero's; Spanneut calls it a remarkable theory of non-violence.¹⁴⁷

However, this complete prohibition of killing is not maintained in Lactantius' later works. He praises Constantine for conquering the persecutors and their armies in *de Mortibus* and the additions to the *Institutes*. Constantine did not expand the empire's borders, and even pagans thought his opponents Maxentius and Daia were less legitimate than Constantine or Licinius,¹⁴⁸ making those wars virtuous by ordinary Roman standards. In his later works, Lactantius continues to forbid more kinds of killing than the public law proscribed. He denounces wars, charging someone with a capital crime, and gladiatorial shows. Watching slaughter is as bad as killing, and it is impious to destroy what God has made (*Epit.* 34; 58.3-4). However, he does not proscribe military service or performing executions in the *Epitome*, though neither does he permit such acts (*Epit.* 59.5).

In the *Institutes*, Lactantius defines military deaths and lawfully-conducted executions as 'harm' so he can reject the execution of martyrs as unjust. This creates a tension with his later praise of Constantine which his extant works do not resolve. The

145 However, this tension was not unprecedented; Plotinus and Iamblichus advised governors and emperors while also teaching non-violence.

146 Monat, *Lactance: Institutions divines V*, 1973, 1:22-23.

147 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 171; Pichon, *Lactance*, 142.

148 Maxentius was a usurper, and no Augustus recognised his legitimacy as Galerius did for Constantine. Daia illegitimately proclaimed himself head of the college after Galerius' death, and could be depicted as a tyrant, at least to a Christian audience.

complete inviolability of life becomes relativised; Walter regards it as a genuine modification in content in response to the changed circumstances.¹⁴⁹ Nicholson suggests that Lactantius came to realise that military service was more morally ambiguous than he previously thought. His later works retain his ‘horror of bloodshed’, but may also tacitly acknowledge that political necessity makes pacifism difficult to enact.¹⁵⁰ I suggest that the need to present a maximal argument against persecution in the *Institutes* led to the totalising nature of the earlier argument, which perhaps went beyond his normal position. Perhaps, also, a Christian emperor’s defeat of the persecutors led him to consider that Christians could endorse violence in some contexts, or that God might use the state’s exercise of violence for his purposes.

The *Institutes*’ prohibition of all harm is broader than the classical philosophers’, rejecting almost all forms of violence. Lactantius does not discuss political philosophical questions such as how the state may be harmed, how it should punish wrongdoers, or secure its borders. By focusing on physical acts of violence and killing, he reframes ‘harm’ so that the persecutors’ violence appears more harmful than Christian religious dissidence. Granting states the right to punish criminals would have undermined this, because the persecutors saw martyrdoms as legal executions. This is why Lactantius extends not harming to prohibit acts the philosophers deemed appropriate, such as warfare and execution, and why he makes harmlessness identical to non-violence.

Harming as Impiety

Justice as not harming is basic in the philosophical canon, but Lactantius also connects non-violence with piety. Catherine Conybeare explores factors which mitigated late-antique violence, writing ‘the solution to violence lies in remobilising the

149 Walter, *Pagane Texte*, 228.

150 O. P. Nicholson, ‘Lactantius on Military Service’, *Studia Patristica*, no. 24 (1993): 182.

webs of interlocution: persuading those over whom one has influence, recognising their human interconnectedness.¹⁵¹ This is precisely Lactantius' strategy. He introduces his social ethics by labelling *pietas* or *humanitas* the virtue which prompts human sociability. *Pietas* evokes fulfilling one's familial obligations, and *humanitas* the qualities which distinguish humans from animals.¹⁵² God makes all siblings, so they should never harm each other; the harmful person is *nefarius* and *parricida*, great crimes in the Roman moral imagination (*DI.* 6.10.3-8). By redefining fraternal piety as an obligation to all humans, Lactantius vastly extends the realm in which care, protection, and harmlessness are required. Lactantius illustrates this using Aeneas, the paragon of filial piety. Roman tradition praised Aeneas for carrying his father and household gods out of Troy (*Virg. Aen.* 2.704-20).¹⁵³ However, Lactantius says that Aeneas' violence invalidates his claim to piety: Rome's hero raged, sacrificed prisoners, and killed those who begged for mercy in his father's name (*DI.* 5.10.3-9).¹⁵⁴ Instead, *pietas* exists where war, discord, and uncontrolled anger are absent, where people care for their enemies and love all like brothers (5.10.10).

Fraternal piety requires peacemaking and non-violence, but these obligations also apply to religious acts. Piety's duties to God and other humans cannot be pitted against each other: an act which honours God but harms his children is an 'impious piety' (5.20.6). Lactantius believes that religious error fosters violence. In his archaeology, the loss of monotheism led to ignorance of good and evil, and people seeking *gloria sibi ex humano sanguine* (5.5.3-14; 5.9.2). Seneca attributed the golden age's collapse primarily to greed;¹⁵⁵ Lactantius makes violence a much more prominent factor.

151 Catherine Conybeare, 'Making Space for Violence', *Journal of Late Antiquity* 6, no. 2 (2013): 214.

152 Arguments pertaining to *humanitas* will be discussed below, though Lactantius places them alongside the *pietas* arguments.

153 For Seneca, Aeneas is the example *par excellence* of a son benefitting his father (*Ben.* 3.37.1).

154 Citing *Virg. Aen.* 7.523; 10.517-20; 11.81-111; 12.946. Lactantius would likely have seen Seneca's praise of Aeneas as indicating that Seneca was insufficiently pacifistic.

155 The golden age's decline was accompanied by the advent of violence, though *avaritia* receives more emphasis (*Ep.* 90.40-41).

Conversely, right worship would abolish discord and war, plots and treachery, because people would heed their fraternal obligations and God's omniscience (5.8.5-6).

Furthermore, violence nullifies the value of religious acts. Roman mythology is pedagogic, inculcating violence in worshippers who imitate gods who want bloody sacrifices (1.18.4-5; 5.10.15-18; 5.11.18; cf. *Orac. Syb.* 8.378-98).¹⁵⁶ Animal sacrifice desensitises people to bloodshed, making them more likely to treat humans violently; hence the persecution. Though Romans boast of their *mansuetudo* and *humanitas*, they offer sacrilegious human sacrifices like barbarians (*DI.* 1.21.4-12; 5.11.1). Religion is defended by dying, not killing, and is polluted by bloodshed, torture, and violence. When worshippers avenge insults towards their gods they deny that their gods can defend themselves (5.20.9-11). Coercion destroys worship, because worship is primarily attitudinal; gods that want coerced worship, floods of human blood and tears, deserve only detestation (5.19.22-34; 5.20.7-8; cf. Tert. *Scap.* 2; Cyp. *Quir.* 3.52).

Again, Lactantius constructs *pietas* to oppose the persecution. Christians were persecuted for their impiety; by presenting *pietas* as inherently non-violent Lactantius asserted that persecution is always impious, worse than the Christians it coerced. Violence delegitimises religion; the persecutors' service to their gods is recast as fratricide. Christianity's oppressors fail to practise their own ideals. Lactantius tells Romans that in order to display definitively Roman virtues they must cease persecuting Christians.

Humanitas

Before considering Lactantius' final argument against harming, we will explore his third social virtue, *humanitas*. Romans associated *humanitas* with cosmopolitanism,

¹⁵⁶ Cicero says Hercules was deified for giving benefits (*Cic. Off.* 3.25). Lactantius counters that if killing one person gets one banned from temples, how can killing thousands result in deification (*DI.* 1.18.10)?

education and culture; it also expressed a moral nobility, understood as *caritas generis humani*.¹⁵⁷ Cicero defines it as one's self-respect as a human being (*Verr.* 4.6.12). Gellius labels *humanitas* 'eruditio institutioque in bonas artes' as well as 'scientiae cura et disciplina'; it entails intellectual skill and moral diligence (*Gell. NA.* 13.17). By contrast, Lactantius universalises the virtue, locating it within *aequitas*. Derived from *homo* (*DI.* 1.11.10), *humanitas* is the virtue of being human, of preserving what distinguishes humans from animals, and fulfilling the human telos. This distinctiveness has two senses: worshipping the true God (3.9.19), and preserving the bond between humans. *Humanitas* means *diligere hominem* because the other is like ourselves; this entails harmlessness and help (6.11.1-2). Lactantius uses *humanus* in the dual senses of 'human' and 'humane', the wordplay allowing him to connect several of his anthropological assumptions.

Like other Lactantian virtues, *humanitas* is directed both towards God and other humans.¹⁵⁸ As a religious virtue, Lactantius uses it to connect the human telos to right worship. *Humanitas* is the antonym of 'bestial' and 'animalistic'. As we saw in Chapter 3, Lactantius sees humanity's *rectus status* as indicating their purpose. Animals look towards the ground, and their lives are fixated on the earth and its desires; humans look up towards heaven, are capable of reason, and live lives oriented to God. To worship other gods is to turn earthward and forfeit the title 'human'; by abandoning true religion people also forsake their humanity and become bestial (2.1.14-16; 2.18.6; 3.10.14; 7.5.3-9). Worshipping properly makes one just, wise, truly human, and worthy of heaven (2.18.6; 3.10.1, 14). *Humanitas* enables Lactantius to depict Christianity as the rational and heavenly-oriented religion.

¹⁵⁷ Colot, *Lactance*, 304; Wagenvoort, *Pietas*, 2–15.

¹⁵⁸ Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 168–70 only acknowledges the social sense.

Alongside *misericordia* and *pietas*, *humanitas* also is the virtue of preserving human *societas*, and is grounded in universal fraternity (3.23.9-10; 6.10.2-8; *Epit.* 33.8). *Humanitas* produces actions towards all people like those *adfectus* prompts towards one's family. It is a *pietatis adfectus* given by God (*DI.* 6.10.3), a more affective definition of *humanitas* than the classical world used.¹⁵⁹ Lactantius grounds the *ratio humanitatis* in knowing and worshipping the true God; it is particular to those who worship rightly (4.1.1; 6.10.2). Lactantius' earliest extant work says that human interdependence produces *ordo*, *ratio*, *humanitas*, and creates the desire for relationship (*Opif.* 4.18-21).¹⁶⁰ Thus, human nature requires aiding those in affliction, since only beasts are solitary (*DI.* 6.11.1-7). Lactantius' view of *humanitas* implicitly entails the golden rule.

Humanitas upholds society by refraining from harming others and by actively caring for them, through the economic obligations we considered above (6.11.1-2). Lactantius also uses the phrase *ius humanitatis*, referring not to civil law but a higher, natural obligation based in the *societas* which governs human interactions. Specifically, it entails fair legal treatment which refrains from torturing or harming the innocent (5.1.2; 5.19.7; 6.10.8; *DMP.* 23.8). Lactantius grounds *ius humanitatis* in God's making all *eadem condicione* and binding them by *ius fraternitatis* (*DI.* 5.22.7). The social obligations of *iustitia*, *ius humanitatis*, and *ius fraternitatis* are identical, and derive from the fraternity of the *paterfamilias* metaphor. This relationship means that social obligations have the force of *iura*, grounded in divine law and human ontology.

¹⁵⁹ Spanneut, 170.

¹⁶⁰ Lactantius uses Stoic presuppositions to argue that humans helping each other is normative. Similarly, in Seneca, the social virtues are divine gifts given to protect humans from attacks by other species. Griffin and Inwood, *Seneca: On Benefits*, 9.

Harming as Inhumanity

Thirdly, harm is *inhumanus*. Lactantius makes extensive use of the dual meaning of *humanus* as ‘human’ and ‘humane’. To deserve the name human, one must not harm others, instead loving them for their shared humanity (6.11.1-2). Though animals display shrewd self-preservation, seeking material gain, only humans can be wise, since it is part of human nature to be *socialis ac benefica* (5.17.33). Lactantius creates a complex association which links *humanitas* with reason, virtue, non-violence, and religion; *inhumanitas* entails violence, being animalistic, irrationality, materialism, and paganism.¹⁶¹ To harm another human is bestial, *contra ius humanitatis et fas omne*, since it denies that one might require help oneself (6.10.8-25). Again, justice is derived from the golden rule.

Humanitas and Persecution

Lactantius uses ‘harm as inhumaneness’ to reject religious persecution. He describes the persecutors using animalistic imagery; they are bloodthirsty and irrationally angry (5.1.7-8).¹⁶² Lactantius draws on a commonplace association of tyranny and cruelty with bestiality (cf. Plat. *Rep.* 571a-6b; Cic. *Rep.* 2.48; Sen. *Clem.* 1.26.3-4). Seneca sees *crudelitas* and *saevitia*, epitomised in enjoying bloodshed, as making one like a beast (1.25.1-2;). For Lactantius, the persecutors lack *humanitas*, and are *carnificinae vires, veluti sanguinem sitiunt* (*DI.* 5.9.10-14). They rage like wolves; they are *beluae, saeviores, sanguinariae bestiae*; they tear humans limb from limb (5.11.3-6; 5.9.4). Using anger against those not in one’s power is impious, destructive, and violates *humanitas* (6.19.7). Lactantius despairs of the persecutors’ treating

¹⁶¹ Loi fails to notice the aspect of non-violence in this association, and thus how Lactantius uses it to argue against persecution. Loi, ‘Concetto di *Iustitia*’, 615.

¹⁶² Seneca’s account of the just emperor emphasises moderation and restraint, loving peace and forbearing violence when possible (*Clem.* 1.1.3–3.2). It was inappropriate for emperors to display anger, as it showed a loss of self-control. Kristina A Meinking, ‘Anger and Adjudication: The Political Relevance of *De ira dei*’, *Journal of Late Antiquity* 6, no. 1 (2013): 96.

Christians rationally, since they prefer just people's blood to their words (5.1.8). He sees this irrationality in the persecutors' labelling the Christians by their own qualities, such as 'evil' and 'impious', *ipsi scilicet pii et ab humano sanguine abhorrentes* (5.9.13-14; 5.12.1; 5.19.6).

Lactantius repeats this imagery in *de Mortibus*, where he attributes bestial qualities and irrational anger to the persecutors. The tetrarchs' reign was *tyrannorum nefaria et cruenta imperia* (DMP. 1.3). They are *nocens* (1.5; 2.6), *animal* (4.1), *bestia* (9.2; 16.1; 32.4), and they rave with anger (5.1). Lactantius emphasises the persecution's horrific violence, which saw men and women of all ages slaughtered without confession or proof of guilt (15.2-4). The tetrarchs profess *clementia*, but their actions belie their profession (36.6-7).

Lactantius particularly uses blood imagery to underscore the persecution's illegitimacy. The persecutors are bloodthirsty, stain themselves with *innocentium cruor*, wrench hearts given to God from disembowelled bodies, and even their language drips with innocent blood (*DI.* 5.1.7; 5.9.4-5; 5.11.3-5). Violence against Christians sheds *iustus sanguis* (DMP. 5.1), and persecutory edicts are *cruenta scripta* (6.2). Shed blood, whether of animal sacrifices or Christians, shows that the persecutors' talk of piety and justice is a pretence. Eventually they extend the cruelty they developed against the Christians across the empire, torturing even those whose status exempted them (22.1-3; *DI.* 6.20.11-14). Lactantius shows that an increase in violence in one area of society corrodes that society's *humanitas*. Violence is totalising and destroys all respect for human life.

This imagery depicts the persecution as bestial raging rather than a rational policy which pursues the empire's good. Depictions of extreme violence delineate the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable violence, aiming to create disgust,

shock, fear, and horror towards the latter.¹⁶³ Lactantius' aim in *de Mortibus* is to depict the tetrarchs as transgressive in every sense, possessing every vice, and shedding blood without restraint. Furthermore, since religion distinguishes humans from animals, the persecutors' animalistic tendencies prove that they are harming not helping religion. Since justice is always non-violent, persecution is never a just religious policy, but destroys any religion which practises it.

I suggest that Lactantius magnifies the persecution's bloodiness to create revulsion for the policy, particularly among moderates and perhaps Neoplatonists. Porphyry's *de Abstinencia* teaches a similar aversion to blood. He made harmlessness and avoidance of all bloodshed central to justice, and both authors associate blood sacrifices with the inculcation of vice (*Abst.* 1.57.1-4; 2.60.1-4; 3.27.2; *DI.* 1.18.10; 1.21.12; 5.8.6; 5.10.14-18).¹⁶⁴ Lactantius may have sought to convince vegetarian philosophers or those committed to harmlessness to reject the persecution, or to expose their inconsistency in supporting it.¹⁶⁵ This does not require identifying Porphyry with Lactantius' unnamed philosopher, but suggests that Lactantius was aware of the philosophical trends which Porphyry exemplified. By appealing to such values, Lactantius sought to discourage violent opposition to Christian religious heteropraxy.

Humanitas entails both rationality and religion, so persuasion rather than coercion is the appropriate means of religious competition. Appropriate religious disputes appeal to reason; they become illegitimate when they become violent.¹⁶⁶ Since God values mental worship alone, religion must be volitional and achieved *verbis potius quam verberibus* (5.19.11). Nothing truly religious can be achieved by purely material means.

163 Zimmermann, 'Violence Reconsidered', 355.

164 Their similarities show that, despite their mutual hostility, Christian and pagan intellectuals shared many philosophical assumptions and hermeneutical methods. Schott, 'Living Like a Christian', 262.

165 Lactantius knew of the practice of philosophical vegetarianism (*DI.* 3.19.19), and may have known of vegetarian Neoplatonists, since Plotinus had also moved in imperial circles.

166 Cyprian also describes persecution as entailing insanity and bloodlust, and criticises persecutors for not persuading using reason (*Dem.* 13-14).

Lactantius attributes pagan violence to the fear that Christians will refute them in argument. Responding to the charges that Christians abandoned their ancestral religion for an irrational superstition, he depicts pagans as unable to account for their religion's origins and abdicating reason to their ancestors (5.1.5-8; 5.19.2-5). Violence proves that pagan religion is irrational: humans compete through reasoned discussion, while animals resolve conflicts violently (5.19.6-8). Lactantius argues that religious violence cannot achieve its goal; the more it coerces bodies, the more it disgusts minds. The above argument has shown how Lactantius exploits *humanus*' dual meaning to associate reason, humaneness and right religion with being human; and fury, irrationality, materialism, wrong religion, and violence with being bestial. These constellations, which he uses to create contempt and disgust towards persecutory violence, render it impossible that religion ever partner profitably with violence.¹⁶⁷

Responding to Violence

Innocentia

Instead of retaliation, Lactantius commends *innocentia* and *patientia* as appropriate responses to violence. We have seen the strongly non-retaliative cast Lactantius gives to 'justice as not harming'. This is described using the virtue *innocentia*, the antonym of the *nocere* word group, which also carries the meaning of purity and absence of guilt. Lactantius glosses *innocentia* as having *pectus purum ab omni sceleris contagione* (5.12.2). It is one of the supreme human virtues, which distinguishes human from animal behaviour (5.17.31). Without it, people are grasping and covetous, injurious, full of vice and sin, proud and power-hungry (5.22.5); it is akin to humility, and eschews vice and causing harm. It is inculcated by Christian worship;¹⁶⁸

167 For the subsequent history of the Christian belief that religion should not be coerced, see H. A. Drake, 'Intolerance, Religious Violence, and Political Legitimacy in Late Antiquity', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79, no. 1 (2011): 193–235.

168 Possibly referring to Romans 12:17 (Cyp. *Quir.* 3.23) or Matthew 5:39 (Tert. *Pat.* 8).

Lactantius claims that it is misunderstood by pagans because virtue is foreign to their worship (5.19.30; 6.1.4). In some cases he uses it substantively to describe Christians (*DMP*. 16.2). The *iustus* will prioritise preserving her innocence, not only by not initiating harm but by refraining from retaliation, knowing that God is perpetually watching and will judge perfectly (*DI*. 6.18.12, 15-17). As we saw, Lactantius prizes innocence so highly that he thinks it worth dying to maintain it (5.17.24).

Patientia

Patientia is the second virtue Lactantius commends with respect to violence. Popular Roman morality associated patience with courage and regarded it uniformly positively.¹⁶⁹ For Cicero, it was philosophy's goal. He regards pain as less evil than dishonour, distortion to one's soul, or avoiding pain by base means (*Cic. Off.* 3.105; *Tusc.* 2.14.33; 2.17.41–18.43; cf. *Sen. Clem.* 1.5.5). For Lactantius, *patientia* is *verus virtus*, praised but not shown by the philosophers. The wise person is immovable *de sententia et proposito*, willing to be tortured to preserve *fides*, and unable to be swayed by *metus mortis aut dolor* (*DI*. 5.13.15). *Patientia*, enduring insults and torments, demonstrates fortitude, reason, and self-control. Impatience exacerbates evil, like oil on a fire, whereas patience is like water; if everyone were patient there would be no evil (6.18.18-20; cf. *Cyp. Pat.* 20). Lactantius disagrees with the Stoics, who think virtue alone sufficient for happiness, and the wise man happy despite torture (cf. *Cic. Tusc.* 5.15.43; 5.28.80-81). Lactantius counters that virtue requires only enduring evil (*perferre ac sustinere*). He thinks virtue insufficient to be its own reward; rather, it is the means to eternal life (*DI*. 3.27.4-13).

¹⁶⁹ Morgan, *Popular Morality*, 136.

Patientia is inherent in Lactantius' dualistic pedagogy of virtue, and is necessary for any other virtue to grow.¹⁷⁰ This is why God permits Christians to be persecuted.¹⁷¹ *Patientia* soothes vices and troubled emotions before they cause harm (6.18.30-33). The *bonus et iustus* will leave redress to God; *patientia* is thus a form of dependence upon God (6.18.11; cf. *Cyp. Pat.* 21; *Dem.* 17).¹⁷² It also imitates God's patience in delaying the persecutors' punishment to permit them to repent,¹⁷³ and the *doctor iustitiae's* life, the primary virtue displayed in Lactantius' Christology. Christ chose the cross, enduring it silently¹⁷⁴ and without retaliation (*DI.* 4.18.13-20; 6.18.30; Ps. 35:15-16; Isa 50:5-6; 53:7; *Sib. Orac.* 8.287-304; cf. *Tert. Pat.* 3; *Cyp. Pat.* 6-7).¹⁷⁵ Lactantius' picture of the patient Christ is mirrored by the martyrs, who embody his endurance and non-retaliation (*DI.* 5.9.9; cf. 1.4.7).¹⁷⁶

Tertullian and Cyprian both wrote works on patience, each grounding the virtue in God's and Christ's patience (*Tert. Pat.* 2-3; *Cyp. Pat.* 2). They regard endurance of trials as purificatory and formative of character, key ideas for Lactantius (*Tert. Pat.* 11; *Cyp. Pat.* 17). Cyprian criticises philosophical patience as arrogant posturing; one gains the virtue by knowing and imitating divine patience (*Cyp. Pat.* 2-4). Both works are general treatments of patience, but Cyprian mentions enduring persecution more than Tertullian (*Cyp. Pat.* 12), and is thus a more likely source for Lactantius. Though *patientia* was

170 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 158.

171 Heck, *Mē Theomachein*, 193.

172 O. P. Nicholson, 'Preparation for Martyrdom in the Early Church', in *The Great Persecution*, ed. D. Vincent Twomey and Mark Humphries (Dublin: Four Courts, 2009), 86–87. Drawing on Matthew 5:39-44, *Cyp. Pat.* 5 requires loving enemies, and *Tert. Pat.* 8 praises turning the other cheek.

Grossmann's locating Lactantian justice in 1 Cor. 13:4-7 based on the shared value of patience is tenuous, as other keywords are missing. Grossmann, 'Die Neutestamentlichen Grundlagen', 402–3.

173 G. W. Trompf, *Early Christian Historiography: Narratives of Retribution* (London: Equinox, 2000), 120.

174 Lactantius admits he cried out at the moment of death. In the philosophical tradition, the brave man groaned or grunted only when it aided his athletic activity, and not even women should shriek aloud (*Cic. Tusc.* 2.23.55-56).

175 Cyprian cites the Isaianic passages while discussing Christ's patience (*Pat.* 6-7).

176 Hansen, 'The Martyrs and Their Master'.

universally admired, Lactantius' constructing it as fear and imitation of God mark his account as distinctly Christian.

Digester argues that Lactantius praises *patientia* in 5.19-21 to encourage toleration for others' religious beliefs, a case we will assess in the following chapter.¹⁷⁷ Here we note a different rhetorical goal: by making *patientia* the correct response to violence, Lactantius depicts persecuted Christians as exemplars of harmlessness and thus of justice.¹⁷⁸ Christians were thought impious, a supposition reinforced by the gods' allowing them to suffer; and foolish, shown in their willingness to be tortured rather than forsake superstition (*DI*. 5.13.2). Lactantius' response is theodicean, aiming to show that Christian suffering does not prove their God-forsakenness. He employs the Stoic tradition of the afflicted *sapiens* who appears wretched to the rich and powerful,¹⁷⁹ and appeals to an eschatological reversal. But *patientia* was perhaps the most empirically verifiable virtue Lactantius could claim for persecuted Christians. He asserts that Christian women and children endured tortures which no one could withstand without divine help (5.13.11-14). *Fortitudo* entails contempt of pain and death; Cicero associates this with *virtus* and manliness (Cic. *Tusc.* 2.18.43). By crediting women and children with this 'masculine' virtue, Lactantius claims that Christianity is supremely powerful to teach virtue. Since the *sapiens* is patient, Christian endurance of persecution shows that Christians are not foolish but wise, since they endure such pain to avoid compromising *iustitia* or *fides* and to preserve eternal goods (*DI*. 5.13.17; 7.5.27pq).¹⁸⁰ Prioritising *patientia* enabled Lactantius to depict Christian martyrs as virtuous and verify Christianity's ability to inculcate justice.

177 Digester, 'Religious Toleration', 129.

178 Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 619.

179 Hansen, 'The Martyrs and Their Master'.

180 Edwards comments that by presenting his work as a manual for living, Lactantius responded to the charge that one could not claim a philosopher's death without living a philosopher's life. Edwards, *Religions*, 27.

Lactantius transmits the early church's praise of pacifism and patience, uniting them with the classical tradition of justice as harmlessness. He uses classical philosophical language to commend the Christians' position. Yet the most innovative parts of Lactantius' account of violence are his arguments from *pietas* and the constellation of ideas he associates with *humanitas*, both core ideas in his theology. The topic weaves Lactantius' key themes together, showing he developed them to build an argument against harm from Roman presuppositions. Each part of this argument shows that delegitimising persecution of Christians was foremost in his mind.

Preserving the common good

We have seen how fundamental preserving the common good, the relational bonds or *societas* between people, is to Lactantius' concept of justice. He says repeatedly that only Christianity can safeguard the *societas hominum*; this depends on accepting God's fatherhood, which motivates one to treat all humans as siblings. Cicero thought preserving the common good required avoiding harm and using wealth for the right ends (*Off.* 1.20). Lactantius agrees with this statement; his disagreement is over what the common good entails, and he supplies *fraternitas* and *aequitas* to correct what he perceives as Cicero's errors. Again, one needs to understand the common good in a Christian sense before it may usefully determine what is just.

However, some philosophers also thought harming individuals and protecting the state from dissidents and destabilisation could be part of protecting the common good (*Cic. Off.* 3.29-32; *Plat. Rep.* 342de; *Laws.* 735c-736a). Lactantius understandably rejects this sense, as permitting coercion in any context could be used to justify persecuting Christians. He makes justice depend on right worship, and right worship on volition. Hence, Lactantius gives a higher place to individual consent in the quest for

justice, and understands the virtue as constructed within a community rather than imposed from above. The way an individual subordinates their passions and desires to the common good also differs in his account: instead of submitting to civil laws, this is achieved by following divine law. Instead of the state bearing responsibility for preserving the common good, this falls on all people, but particularly on the wealthy and powerful, who must forsake the privileges which injustice affords them for their siblings' benefit. Lactantius opposes the tradition of justice as preserving the common good, which may require coercion, using the motif of justice as not harming.

Imperial Vices: Ira, Cupiditas, Libido

The discussion above has focused on Lactantius' philosophical works. The theme of *de Mortibus Persecutorum*, that God punishes persecutors with horrible deaths, is so moralistic that it would be surprising if this work said nothing else about ethics.¹⁸¹ Yet the prominent ethical vocabulary of the philosophical works is curiously lacking in *de Mortibus*. Lactantius uses *iustitia* and cognates eleven times and *pietas* twelve times, mostly in the opening and closing chapters. Furthermore, for a work on persecution, Lactantius barely criticises the persecutors' religious errors and, after describing the persecution's onset (chs. 10–16), directs his polemic elsewhere. The bulk of the work describes the tetrarchs' greed and lust, and their suffering as death approached. Instead, Lactantius' ethical commentary is given through depicting imperial vices rather than telling the reader why the emperors' actions were unjust.

In the *Institutes*, Lactantius calls vices *commotiones et perturbationes animi*, and identifies three or four such *commotiones*: *ira*, *cupiditas/avaritia*, *libido*, and sometimes *invidia*. Lactantius names *cupiditas* the desiring of *opes*, indicating a specifically

¹⁸¹ Lactantius uses the Bible as a 'narrative canon' which allows him to analyse present events; he interprets the persecutors' deaths through the lenses of 2 Maccabees and 1–2 Kings. McGuckin, 'The Problem of Lactantius the Theologian', 21–22.

economic greed. None of these are evil within the boundaries God set for them, but outside these they become the source of *omnia facinora* (*DI.* 6.19.4; cf. 6.5.13; 6.15.9; 7.10-6; *Epit.* 56.1; Cic. *Tusc.* 3.11.25; Hor. *Ep.* 1.1.41).¹⁸² Connecting them to injustice, Lactantius labels them the means of gaining power, wealth, and honours, exercised at the cost of mistreating others (*DI.* 5.22.6-10). These *commotiones* form our framework for assessing *de Mortibus*' ethical commentary. Additionally, the justice motifs identified in Chapter 2 enable us to see how Lactantius gives a multifaceted picture of imperial immorality through describing the emperors' failure to fulfil justice's obligations.

Throughout the work, Lactantius uses traditional tropes of tyranny to criticise the tetrarchs and their policies. This makes it less certain that the moral opinions he espouses here are his own, particularly when they contrast with opinions he expresses elsewhere. Inglebert writes that the emperors are judged for their treatment of Christians and the Senate, a combination of Christian and elite Roman perspectives.¹⁸³ This is accurate, but Inglebert over-identifies these perspectives with Lactantius' own. He says that Lactantius shows a typical Roman disdain for provincials, when in fact, while Lactantius decries Rome's mistreatment, he is similarly horrified at Diocletian's demolition of Nicomedian homes (*DMP.* 7.8-10) and his empire-wide savagery. Lactantius does not criticise empire in *de Mortibus* because his focus is narrower; he assumes Roman institutions and values to create a consensus that the persecuting tetrarchs were tyrants. We should take the *Institutes*, which he regarded as more exhaustive, to show his opinions more clearly.

182 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 156–57. For instance, anger may be used to discipline dependants, though not one's equals (6.19.7).

183 Inglebert, *Les Romains chrétiens*, 133–41.

However, though we are cautious in letting *de Mortibus* contribute to our overall picture of Lactantian justice, it is instructive to survey its use of moral language. By parodying tetrarchic propaganda, associating the tetrarchs with the tropes of bad rule, and omitting good emperors from his history of persecutors, Lactantius claims that persecuting emperors are bad by Roman as well as Christian standards.

Ira

The classical tradition praised even-temperedness and clemency. In Seneca's view, anger is never appropriate; the just emperor spares blood wherever possible, and moderates his anger to prevent him punishing unjustly (*Ira* 3.23; *Clem.* 1.1.3). The emperor and his staff were to avoid showing anger as it indicated a loss of self-control.¹⁸⁴ Lactantius depicts the tetrarchs as raging and impulsive, with anger connoting madness, bestiality, and violence (e.g. *DMP* 5.1; 17.9). He describes how *tres acerbissimae bestiae*, the persecuting emperors of the first tetrarchy, *saeviebant* across their territories (16.1). When Christians interrupted the auguries at Antioch, Diocletian purged the army of them. Diocletian acted *ira furens*, and Galerius *inflammatus scelere*, the fire metaphors indicating their lack of self-control (10.4-6). The persecution was fomented by Galerius' barbarian mother, offended the Christians would not attend her sacrificial feasts (11.2), and the emperors gradually extended the cruelty they devised for the Christians against the whole society, devolving to become more rabid and bestial (13.1; 21.3-4; 22.1-3). The *Latin Panegyrics* connected just rule with fairness and moderation, and Lactantius' polemic invokes the opposite domain. Lactantius appeals to late-republic ideals which forswore unnecessary violence, though the citizen protections of that time had been eroded by his own day.¹⁸⁵ Acting rationally was an important part of justice in the classical tradition, as was avoiding harm; Lactantius depicts the

184 Meinking, 'Anger and Adjudication', 96.

185 Garnsey and Humfress, *The Evolution of the Late Antique World*, 87-88.

emperors' anger as leading them to act unfairly and irrationally, the opposite of the *iustus imperator*.

Cupiditas and Avaritia

Imperial violence was manifested in economic contexts: Lactantius accuses the tetrarchs of plundering their own people through greed. Diocletian's bureaucratic reforms are ascribed to *avaritia et timiditas*. He multiplied armies and bureaucracies, increasing taxation to fund them, but would not let the treasuries be depleted. When inflation increased he issued the prices edict, causing bloodshed and death over formerly cheap items (7.1-7).¹⁸⁶ Greed produced other kinds of violence: Diocletian habitually confiscated property he desired by bringing false accusations against its owners (7.11-12; 8.4). Parodying the dyarchs' iconography, Lactantius agrees they shared *mens una, eadem cogitatio, par voluntas, aequa sententia* (8.1; cf. *Pan. Lat.* X.11.1-3; XI.7.3-7). Diocletian's *avaritia* was greater, though his *timiditas* restrained him, whereas Maximian's greed was smaller but his malevolence greater, mimicking the panegyrist's claim that Diocletian planned good and Maximian enacted it (*DMP.* 8.1-2; *Pan. Lat.* X.11.6).

Galerius' greed surpassed even Diocletian's; the Caesar's census inflated earnings and ages to increase revenue, sometimes through torture (*DMP.* 23.1-7). This passage contains a rare use of *pius*: in an action Lactantius deems *contra omne ius humanitatis*, Galerius 'piously' drowned beggars to eliminate poverty from his jurisdiction,

¹⁸⁶ It was a stock criticism of antique historiography that bad emperors taxed excessively, a repeated motif in *de Mortibus*. Arne Søby Christensen, *Lactantius the Historian* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 1980), 80. Ziche concludes that it is unlikely the tetrarchs would have been able to increase taxes as Lactantius describes, but says that civic elites, who were responsible for distributing the tax burden among their cities, may have placed a greater amount of that burden on the poor, leading to increased violence in collecting taxes in Lactantius' day. Hartmut Ziche, 'Making Late Roman Taxpayers Pay: Imperial Government Strategies and Practice', in *Violence in Late Antiquity*, ed. H. A. Drake (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 129–36. Grant thinks it likely that Diocletian's stockpiling gold and silver while debasing copper exacerbated inflation, though he attributes this to Diocletian's difficulties managing a complex economic problem rather than malevolence. Grant, 'Christians and Imperial Economic Policy', 218–23.

sarcastically parodying the panegyric motif of imperial beneficence (23.8-9; cf. *Pan. Lat.* IX, V). People starved from over-taxation; Lactantius likens the magistrates to executioners (*DMP.* 31.3-4). Daia's particular form of avarice glutted his soldiers with luxury obtained by theft (37.3-6).

The tetrarchs also hungered for power and domination. Galerius appointed manipulable rather than competent Caesars, putting his interest above the empire's (18.11-14). He sought to rule an absolute monarchy, resenting the Roman institutions which moderated his power and violence (20.1; 21.1-2). Maximian's return from abdication showed his envy, impatience and power-hungriness (28.1-2). Lactantius uses the language of avarice and bloodshed to describe the tetrarchs' actions as unjust; as well as perpetuating harm, they fail to respect private property, one of Cicero's most basic senses of injustice.

Libido

Lactantius mentions *libido* less than the other *perturbationes*, as this chapter's survey demonstrates. He addresses *libido* in his chapter on pleasures of touch; it is given by God for procreation, but is easily misdirected or corrupted, with grave consequences (*DI.* 6.23.2-40). *Abstinentia cupiditatum ac libidinum* is an integral part of the *cultus Dei* (7.11.8), and *libido's* misuse is *impius* (1.10.12; 6.23.10).¹⁸⁷ Maximian's lust led him to seize the daughters of eminent citizens, and he judged his *felicitas imperii* to depend on indulging his *libido et cupiditas mala* (*DMP.* 8.5-6).

Lust is Daia's characteristic vice; he violated women of all ranks of society or forced them to marry his slaves and barbarian followers (38.1-40.6). Lactantius evokes horror with his depictions of noble women unable to hide from Daia's predation. The passage recalls Livy's description of Lucretia's suicide, implying that Daia's

¹⁸⁷Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 620.

unrestrained *libido* disqualified him from ruling as Tarquin's did (Liv. 1.58). The Sibyllists commonly criticise practices such as pederasty, homosexuality, incest, and prostitution; they see sexual immorality as characterising Roman society (3.762-5; 4.30-34; 5.165-77, 386-96).¹⁸⁸ These texts show a similarly strict sexual ethic to Lactantius, and use that ethic to criticise other nations and religious traditions, indicating another likely source for Lactantius' polemic. Through depicting imperial lust, Lactantius accuses the emperors of failing to abstain from what is not theirs, violating right distribution and *fides*; his descriptions are meant to horrify Romans as well as invoke Judeo-Christian criticism of Roman sexual immorality.

Invidia

The emperors' vices ultimately undermine their shared rule and lead to civil war. Lactantius depicts how ambition and jealousy corrode tetrarchic fraternity: the injustice shown to Christians becomes habitual, and the emperors betray each other.¹⁸⁹ Lactantius paints Diocletian's abdication as Galerius' lack of *fides* towards his adopted father (*DMP.* 18.1-5). Galerius too is surprised when Daia, appointed because Galerius thought he would be compliant, demands equal rank (32.4). The emperors' untrustworthiness, even towards each other, is further evidence of their injustice.

Other Justice motifs

Lactantius employs a few other justice motifs in his polemic. The emperors are impious: Galerius claimed to be Mars' son, though it meant accusing his mother of adultery (9.8-9). While Constantine is *sanctissimus adulescens*, Maxentius refuses to honour his father or father-in-law (18.9-10). Socially, Galerius' census corrupted familial piety; magistrates sought inflated declarations of income by torturing family

¹⁸⁸ Buitenwerf, *Sibylline Oracles*, 338; Stewart Lester, 'Prophetic Rivalry, Gender, and Economics', 188.

¹⁸⁹ For *invidia* in *Inst.*, see Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 158.

members (23.1-3). This contrasts with the *fides ac devotio* of the confessor Donatus (16.7-9). Furthermore, the emperors fail to show justice as due process. They placed altars outside lawcourts so that litigants had to sacrifice before entering court (15.5). The entire persecution is a miscarriage of justice; judges penalised the *iusti atque innocentes* (16.3). By highlighting the emperors' vices, Lactantius paints a multifaceted picture of their injustice, though rarely using the word itself.

Emperors as anti-Roman

One of Lactantius' rhetorical tactics to delegitimise the persecutors is to depict them as anti-Roman: they treat the Roman people as usurpers do and erode Rome's traditional institutions. Diocletian rebuilt Nicomedia, aiming to make it a second Rome, but this destroyed large districts and rendered citizens homeless, as if the city had been captured by invaders (7.8-10). By leaving Roman citizens like they were conquered by barbarians and by establishing a rival to Rome, Diocletian opposes his own people. Lactantius uses *subvertere* and *evertere* to describe Diocletian's reforms, indicating upheaval and destruction (7.2; 9.11). The first persecution edict was enacted lawlessly, with liturgical materials confiscated like plunder (*rapitur, trepidatur, discurritur*, 12.2). Galerius' mother was a barbarian, and he showed an un-Roman bestiality and barbarity (9.2). He taxed the historically-exempt capital (26.1-2); tried to besiege it, underestimating its size because he had never seen it; and wanted to kill the *senatus* and *populus*, the two bodies which traditionally constituted Rome (27.2). Having been defeated, his fleeing army plundered and ravaged Italy. Lactantius calls him the devastator of Italy and enemy of the Roman people (27.6-8).

Furthermore, the emperors failed to protect the traditional privileges afforded to Roman citizens and elites. The first persecution edict stripped elite Christians of legal privileges. All Christians lost their right to defend themselves legally and any exemption

from torture (13.1); Lactantius sees this as stripping away the civilising and pacifying elements of Roman society. Galerius wanted to rule as a Persian absolute monarch, treating subjects as slaves rather than Roman citizens. He degraded and tortured even *primores civitatum, egregii ac perfectissimi viri*. Crucifixion became the standard punishment, and nobles were punished like slaves (21.1-4; 22.1-3). He filled the civil service with soldiers *humanitatis litterarum rudes* and treated learned people as public enemies (22.4-5). As a member of the literate class, Lactantius found this highly objectionable. Daia forced upper-class Roman women into adultery or base marriages (38.4-7).

In this context, Galerius' decree repealing the persecution, appealing to *leges veteres et publica disciplina Romanorum* and his own *clementia* and *indulgentia*, reads as hypocritical (34.1-4). The 'persecutors are anti-Roman' theme allows Lactantius to undermine the claim that the persecution was needed to uphold ancestral customs. *De Mortibus*' goal is again to delegitimise persecution, using whatever rhetorical strategy Romans will find persuasive. It displays Lactantius' view of justice more opaquely than his other works, but does illuminate how he used ethical language to rhetorical effect.

Conclusion

Lactantius' social ethics are founded on *fraternitas* or fraternal piety, derived from the *paterfamilias* image. We found three basic domains for social justice, *aequitas*, *prodesse*, and *non nocere*, which ultimately end up as the Christian virtues *humilitas*, *caritas* or almsgiving, and pacificism and *patientia*. I suggested that Lactantius based this framework on Cicero's division of justice into right use of wealth and force, and supplemented it with *aequitas*, which is an outworking of *fraternitas* and governs the expression of the other virtues.

Lactantius' three key social virtues often overlap. All three are centripetal, bringing people closer to each other through reminding them of their interrelatedness and mutual obligation. However, *aequitas* has a more explicitly vertical nuance than *humanitas* and *misericordia*. *Aequitas* is the virtue of not exalting oneself above others, and *misericordia* and *humanitas* the virtues of not separating oneself from others. *Aequitas* operates across a social hierarchy, reducing the vertical or class distance between its members, while *humanitas* and *misericordia* pull people together across the horizontal and vertical planes.

Lactantius claims that his ethics are more stringent than those taught by Cicero and Seneca, a claim our study has verified. Lactantius regards *humanitas* and *misericordia* as exclusive to Christians, since he makes the former dependent on right religion and the latter an instinct which non-Christians reject. Both are expressed through charity and non-violence, and he argues that pagans simulate these virtues but do not embody them fully. This indicates that Lactantius understands them as integral to justice like *aequitas*, since he defines justice's components as being exclusively Christian. Contra Loi, Lactantius' social virtues form one coherent whole, one's obligations to fellow humans, of which the most basic component is *fraternitas*. Lactantius asserts that pagans misconstrue the virtues because they fail to render them in an eschatological framework, a perspective essential to his moral epistemology.

Lactantius understood himself as critiquing and surpassing the social ethics of the classical tradition according to the biblical tradition as mediated by Cyprian. In each area of his social ethics, he critiques Cicero's description of an obligation according to categories he found in Cyprian. Cyprian's selection of texts influenced how Lactantius understood biblical justice, seen particularly in his associating justice and humility, and in his privileging the economic domain over other elements of social justice. Lactantius'

interpreting harmlessness as requiring pacifism is also common within the Latin Patristic tradition, for instance in Tertullian's writings on military service. Other scholars have not observed this, though it is intelligible given the deep impact of North African traditions upon Lactantius' Christianity. More broadly, Lactantius may have seen himself as conversing with contemporary philosophers about abstaining from harm. The Sibylline oracles contain polemics against greed, violence, and inequity which we find mirrored in Lactantius. These texts also contain a significant polemic against sexual immorality, which is deemphasised in Lactantius and not specifically associated with justice. Lactantius' Christian influences are more clearly visible in his social ethics than they were in his religious ethics, showing that he saw himself as a participant in that tradition.

This is the area where Lactantius departs furthest from the persecutors' challenges. As a whole, his description of Christian social virtue claims that Christians do not harm society, but Lactantius' primary rhetorical goal lies elsewhere. The implication of his claim that Christians surpass Romans' social virtue is that Christians understand the whole of justice better than their pagan neighbours. This includes justice's obligation to God. He uses interpersonal virtue as the test for whose religious virtue and ultimately theology is superior. The divine is hidden, and its receptivity to pagan and Christian worship cannot be reliably measured, so Lactantius proposes social virtue as a test for justice in both its domains. This is why Lactantius insists so strongly on the inseparability of justice's religious and social components. And this is why he begins his account of justice by claiming that social vice flows out of wrong worship. 'Can the same spring produce both fresh and salt water?' (James 3:11). He takes Christians' superior social virtue as empirically verifiable, and traces that virtue upstream to the right religion which, he argues, must have caused it. This reflects the logic of the

marriages edict; the tetrarchs believed the gods held them responsible for the empire's social morality as well as its religion. Lactantius uses their belief that religious and social virtue are connected to support a different religion. His account of social ethics contributes to his case that Christians are *iusti*, surpassing the justice of the best of Roman ethics; therefore they should not be persecuted.

Chapter 7: Final Arguments

Having surveyed Lactantius' view of justice and its constituent parts of religious and social morality, we now return to the questions we left unresolved. These are the ideological basis of Lactantian justice, whether he seeks to polemicise against his non-Christian sources or synthesise them with Christianity, and what kind of political ideology he teaches.

Lactantius' sources

Parsing Lactantius' use of sources is essential to understanding his goal. The task reveals where he is traditional and where he innovates; whether an idea is a premise cited for the sake of argument or a conclusion that he accepts himself. It shows what ideas he thinks commonplace or controversial, what influences governed his thought, and it contributes to the age-old conversation of how Christian he was. As we have repeatedly seen, commentators differ on how they weigh the importance of Lactantius' different sources. We note again Monat's caution that Lactantius often decontextualises or alters the meaning of quotations concerning justice,¹ so we cannot assume that quotation of a source means unquestioning affirmation. In this chapter we assess what each of Lactantius' major sources contributed to his justice concept. We found that bipartite divisions of ethics into religious and social ethics are common in the classical and Christian traditions. We can assume that Lactantius thought he was combining these two approaches, and do not need a specific antecedent for this motif. Instead, we will investigate the sources of his terminology and the content he gives to those terms.

1 Monat, *Lactance: Institutions divines V*, 1973, 1:58–59.

Hermetica

Lactantius quotes Hermetic ideas in programmatic places; they justify important concepts in his religious ethics. He finds monotheism, the association between εὐσέβεια and γνῶσις, and the divine names *dominus et pater* within the texts. These ideas are all central to his definition of justice. Several scholars think this indicates a determinative Hermetic influence on Lactantius' thought. Loi identifies Lactantius' justice-concept as a Hermetic modification of Stoic ethics. Ogilvie writes that Lactantius had almost a blind faith in Hermes Trismegistus,² and Frend asserts, 'on major theological questions [Hermes'] was the guiding voice'.³

However, we must challenge this conclusion; Lactantius distorts and disagrees with the Hermetists in important ways. Firstly, these scholars seem to have overlooked the rarity of δικαιοσύνη and social ethics in the Hermetic texts. Lactantius inserts *iustitia* into one Hermetic quotation (*DI.* 6.25.10); in the original texts the ultimate virtue was not δικαιοσύνη but εὐσέβεια, piety towards God (*Ascl.* 9-11), or abstinence from material desires.⁴ Occasionally they advise against ἀδικία, violence and evildoing (*CH.* 10.21; 12.23), but this means ceasing to love the body, not refraining from harming others.⁵ Lactantius takes no social morality, half of his understanding of justice, from the *Hermetica*; this minimises the likelihood that they determine the rest of his ethics.

Secondly, Lactantius often decontextualises Hermetic texts, omitting the aspects of their thought which disagree with his. Significantly for this study, he does this with his definition of piety. The Hermetic passage says θεοῦ γνῶσις separates a person from the multitude since their thoughts become divine (9.4). Lactantius also believes the unjust

2 Ogilvie, *The Library of Lactantius*, 36.

3 Frend, 'Some North African Turning Points in Christian Apologetics', 13.

4 Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, 107.

5 Scott and Ferguson, *Hermetica*, 2:371. Scott has missed the religious component to Lactantian *iustitia*, but his reading of the *Hermetica* is apposite.

will mistreat the just, but he emphasises humanity's fundamental kinship, and the importance of thinking oneself lower than others. Lactantian *pietas* is expressed in *aequitas*, but this does not appear possible within the divinised mind of the Gnostic. This purported source of Lactantian justice in fact rejects one of its essential components.⁶ The kinship language which undergirds Lactantius' ethics is usually absent from Hermetic texts, and I suspect the Hermetic community would find Lactantius' affective language (*fovere, diligere, carus*) reminiscent of the passions. Colot writes that Lactantius' presentation of divine fatherhood is much stronger and more concrete than the metaphor of paternity given in the Hermetic corpus.⁷ Digeser emphasises the fact that Lactantius and the Hermetica both describe tripartite processes of salvation (Lact. *ID.* 2.1-3, *CH.* 4.1-6),⁸ but apart from their involving cognitive action, the steps are entirely dissimilar.

One of the most significant similarities between Lactantian and Hermetic thought is the connection between worship and wisdom. Both sources make wisdom, knowledge of God, and enlightenment central to religious ethics. However, I suggest that the dominant term differs in each case. The Hermetica privilege philosophical contemplation of the divine, resolving worship into the rational-mystical. One cannot be pious without philosophy (*CH.* fr II B.2). Conversely, for Lactantius *sapientia* is ultimately expressed in *religio*, the will's correct response to the knowledge of God. Wisdom is needed to direct religion to the correct object, but religion is more properly the end of wisdom than the reverse.⁹ *Sapere nihil aliud est nisi Deum verum iustis ac piis cultibus honorare* (*DI.* 4.3.10; cf. *Epit.* 36.2). Neither justice or wisdom can be maintained without worship, which Lactantius ultimately locates within the Christian

6 Cf. Buchheit, 'Die Definition Der Gerechtigkeit', 365–66.

7 Colot, *Lactance*, 153.

8 Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 82–83.

9 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 161.

tradition and catholic church. Book 4's structure shows that Christ's life exemplifies the union of *sapientia* and *religio*, and Lactantius ends this discussion by leaving his reader at the doorway of the church, to use Speigl's image (*DI*. 4.30.11-13).¹⁰ For Lactantius, revelation ultimately occurs not through philosophy or contemplation, but through the life and death of the incarnate Christ,¹¹ while the Hermetists regarded the material world as the source of blindness and error.

Since Lactantius distorts Hermetic phrases and concepts in this manner, it is unlikely that they determine his own theology. He uses *paene* to restrict the degree of insight he attributes to Hermes (4.9.3), placing him below the Bible or Sibylline oracles, *quae sunt multo certiora* than Hermes (1.6.6).¹² This distinguishes them from his use of the Sibyls, which as we saw understand monotheism and social vice similarly to Lactantius and do not receive this distortion. Therefore, Lactantius must appeal to Hermetic literature because it was more persuasive to his audience than the Bible or the Sibyls, or at least to add to a geographical consensus around the truth of monotheism. Iamblichus' esteem for the texts supports the idea that they had some persuasive power (cf. *Iamb. Myst.* 1.1.1–2.6). In Lactantius' eyes, the Hermetica are able by their antiquity to access a pre-lapsarian monotheism, and one which is legitimated by their author's connection to the men whom Romans worshipped. They corroborate biblical doctrines from within the pagan myths themselves. Contra Digeser,¹³ Lactantius does not identify Christianity with Hermetic spirituality, but claims the latter source justifies the former religion in spite of itself. The Hermetica are useful authorities to persuade Lactantius' readers rather than sources of his own theology.

10 Speigl, 'Zum Kirchenbegriff des Laktanz', 20.

11 Gassman, 'Et Deus et Homo', 37.

12 Grossmann, 'Pietas', 174–75; McGuckin, 'The Non-Cyprianic Scripture Texts in Lactantius' Divine Institutes', 155.

13 Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 84.

Cicero

We have found definite Ciceronian influence on Lactantius' understanding of justice. Several scholars have identified him as the source for Lactantius' bipartite division of ethics.¹⁴ Colot, an author with whom I often agree, says that the centre of Lactantius' thought was not the Bible, so often absent from his writing, but the Roman universalism he found in Cicero.¹⁵ Cicero divides *ius* into *religio* and *aequitas* (Cic. *Part.* 37.129), the closest formulation we have found to Lactantius' triad of *iustitia*, *pietas* and *aequitas*, and Lactantius closely follows his conception of justice in *de Legibus*. Loi writes that the definition of 5.14.9 is almost certainly taken from Cicero, since Lactantius cites him explicitly.¹⁶

And yet several authors caution against regarding Cicero as the decisive influence on Lactantius' thinking. Lactantius presents his definition of justice as unprecedented in classical literature and culture. He constructs it from two virtues which must be divinely revealed, and says explicitly that Cicero grasped only a shadow of justice (*DI.* 6.6.25-28).¹⁷ *Fraternitas*, which undergirds Lactantius' social ethics, was not part of Cicero's vocabulary, though the jurists often created an analogy between society and the family.¹⁸ And justice as relating rightly to God is much less prominent in the classical tradition than the Christian tradition (cf. Cic. *ND.* 3.38). Buchheit thinks the pair *pietas/iustitia* insufficient to explain the origins of Lactantius' justice, because it lacks *aequitas*. The *Partitiones Oratoriae* passage addresses jurisprudence rather than ethics, and Lactantius explicitly distinguishes his definition of *aequitas* from the one Cicero gives in this

14 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 155–56.

15 Blandine Colot, 'To Discard the "Porphyry Hypothesis" Applied to Institutes V, 2, 3-11 : The "Interpretatio Romana" of the Christian Lactantius' (Oxford Patristics Conference, Oxford, 2019).

16 Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 589. However, in Lactantius, citation does not necessarily mean affirmation or foundational influence.

17 Buchheit, '*Cicero Inspiratus*', 361–62.

18 Colot, *Lactance*, 187; Pierre Monat, ed., *Lactance: Institutions divines V*, vol. 2, SC 205 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1973), 79.

passage.¹⁹ Walter cautions that this passage regards *ius*, not *iustitia*, as the superordinate concept, and it is differentiated not into *religio* and *aequitas*, but *natura* and *lex*. Nor is justice superordinate in other Ciceronian virtue lists; sometimes it designates social virtue alone; and Cicero does not distinguish *pietas* and *aequitas* from the other virtues as sharply as Lactantius does.²⁰ Monat writes that the three key terms *iustitia*, *pietas*, and *aequitas* come from Cicero, but Cicero never gives a consistent description of their relation to each other.²¹

Furthermore, bipartite ethics are present but not dominant in the classical tradition. Those who argue that Lactantius draws mainly on Cicero or other classical sources need to explain why the structure of Lactantius' ethics differs from Plato's or Cicero's, who both emphasise the cardinal virtues more than a two-fold division. Cicero does not make justice bipartite in any of his major ethical works; it occurs rather in a rhetorical work. One can infer that justice requires upholding the *societas* between gods and humans from *de Legibus*, but he does not define the virtue based on this insight. Nor does he divide his ethics into 'what is due to the gods' and 'what is due to humans', instead structuring *de Officiis* around the cardinal virtues and the relationship between *honestum* and *utile*, which do not feature in Lactantius' ethical structure. Lactantius has made minor features of classical philosophy foundational to his ethics.

Lactantius makes worshipping Christ in the church a necessary part of religious virtue and excludes all other objects and modes of worship.²² Digeser claims that Lactantius uses pagan literature, and names God *summus Deus* to create a consensus between various groups of monotheists, including Hermetists and Neoplatonists.²³ But as Walter writes, Lactantius draws the boundary between Christian and non-Christian

19 Buchheit, 'Die Definition Der Gerechtigkeit', 363–64.

20 Walter, *Pagane Texte*, 225.

21 Monat, *Lactance: Institutions divines V*, 1973, 1:84.

22 Walter, *Pagane Texte*, 228.

23 Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 68, 84–90.

very clearly. He rightly concludes that the conciliatory statements about pagan ideas are apologetic, encouraging pagans to accept Christian ideas.²⁴ If we conclude that Lactantius' thought comes from pagan ideas, we must explain why he defines their virtues such that they cannot practise them. Furthermore, Lactantius' social ethics privilege *humilitas*, a Christian virtue which Graeco-Roman society derided, and Christian almsgiving instead of classical benefaction. As Loi concludes, Lactantius' conception of justice transcends classical ethics.²⁵

Bible and Christian Tradition

If the bipartite division of ethics was present but not prominent in the classical tradition, it was programmatic in the Christian tradition. The great commandment's division of ethics into duties to God and neighbour and its describing these duties as 'love' explain more persuasively why Lactantius structures his ethics as he does. Many have noticed this. Loi identifies the overtones of the great commandment in *ID.* 14.5, but does not use the biblical text to explain Lactantius' general conception of the virtue.²⁶ Loi's approach is hampered by his reluctance to synthesise the different definitions Lactantius gives or understand their differences as motivated by rhetorical purpose rather than conceptual evolution. Buchheit identifies that though the great commandment does not mention δικαιοσύνη, Justin divides justice into divine- and neighbour-love by alluding to Luke 10:27/Matt 22:36-40 (*Just. Dial.* 93.3).²⁷ We can plausibly say that Lactantius' selection of Ciceronian motifs was guided by the great commandment, which predisposed him to make these ideas more prominent than they were in Cicero.

24 Walter, *Pagane Texte*, 230.

25 Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 584.

26 Loi, 610.

27 Buchheit, 'Die Definition Der Gerechtigkeit', 368.

Lactantius also uses other biblical justice motifs. Loi identifies justice as avoiding sin and phrases like *opera iustitiae* to indicate almsgiving.²⁸ Schrenk gives two criteria which distinguish the biblical δικαιοσύνη from Graeco-Roman ethics: the centrality of relationship to God, and the necessity of revelation.²⁹ Both of these are abundantly present in Lactantius. The *Hermetica* privilege revelation, but as we noted, use familial language for the divine less prominently than the Christian tradition. Like Lactantius, the Bible understands justice and lawfulness as imitating God.³⁰ Lactantius' rejecting merit as a criterion for determining distribution of social goods is fundamentally biblical. Furthermore, several key themes in Lactantius, including God's creation and providential care, role as Father, human descent from one man, and Christ's role as judge occur in Paul's Areopagus speech, though we cannot prove Lactantius knew it (Acts 17:24-31). The use of *iustitia* to designate Christianity, and *iusti* for Christians, surely stems from this tradition. Several Lactantian themes, such as the polemic against idolatry, greed, and violence, are also important to the Sibyllists.

One of this thesis' original findings is Cyprian's importance as a source for Lactantius' ethics. Lactantius places himself within the North African Christian tradition, which was dominated by the previous generation's bishop and martyr, a fact reflected in his writing. Monat's edition of *Institutes V* gives the fullest consideration of the patristic sources for Lactantian justice. Monat concluded that Cyprian is Lactantius' least significant source because of justice's unimportance in *ad Demetrianum* and because Lactantius' method is closer to Minucius Felix's.³¹ Ogilvie considers Lactantius' explicit allusions to Cyprian, and concludes his debt was more rhetorical than theological.³²

28 Loi, 'Concetto di *Iustitia*', 585, 594.

29 Schrenk, 'Dikē', 198.

30 Monat, *Lactance: Institutions divines V*, 1973, 1:25.

31 Monat, 1:26–30.

32 Ogilvie, *The Library of Lactantius*, 89.

However, this illustrates the error of determining Lactantius' influences using only his explicit citations. Lactantius assesses previous Latin apologies to be inadequate (*DI*. 5.1.22-28; 5.4.3-8), which is perhaps why his dependence upon that tradition has not been explored more fully. McGuckin thinks Lactantius denigrates Cyprian, appealing to Lactantius' rejection of previous apologies, his different apologetic method, and the lack of direct verbal citation. The similarities other scholars have identified between Lactantius' and Cyprian's ideas are merely theological commonplaces.³³ But as Speigl notes, Lactantius' criticisms of his predecessors in 5.1-4 are given from a strictly literary perspective.³⁴ This allows us to posit conceptual influence where Lactantius disavows a literary influence. Lactantius saw himself as supplying the necessary prequel to Cyprian's writings, using a more accessible method. The present study has sought to supply a fuller account of their conceptual similarity.

Cyprian does not synthesise a concept of justice as Lactantius does, but several important building blocks of Lactantius' thought are present in the bishop's writing. The components of Lactantius' *paterfamilias* doctrine are present in Cyprian's florilegium (*Cyp. Quir.* 3.1-3), and Cyprian's biblical citation influenced Lactantius' social and particularly his economic ethics.³⁵ Cyprian also gave Lactantius important biblical texts on humility and patience. Furthermore, uncovering Lactantius' dependence on *ad Quirinum* reveals that his intention was to be biblical. In following that source he understood himself to be teaching a normatively Christian conception of justice, though our access to electronically-searchable Bibles reveals emphases of biblical justice he omits. Lactantius' contribution was to connect these ideas with Ciceronian philosophy

33 John McGuckin, 'Does Lactantius Denigrate Cyprian?', *JTS*, 1988, 119-24.

34 Speigl, 'Zum Kirchenbegriff des Laktanz', 18.

35 Monat observes that the biblical sources of Lactantius' ethics are more visible in *DI*. 6.10ff. Monat, *Lactance et la Bible*, 252.

and systematise them into a moral philosophy which he hoped would be genuinely Christian, but accessible to educated Romans.

Yet those who make the Bible Lactantius' primary influence also struggle to explain why he formulates his ethics as he does. Grossmann identifies two Pauline passages which she thinks drive Lactantius' description of justice,³⁶ but is forced to explain why he does not include Paul's theologies of grace, the Holy Spirit, or justice as a divinely-gifted status. She correctly identifies that neighbour-love and justice are important for both John and Lactantius, but thinks that this explains fraternity's prominence in our author, when the New Testament makes only believers children of God. She identifies key Lactantian concepts in 2 Pet. 1:5-8, but does not demonstrate a shared ordering of those virtues.³⁷ Grossmann's analysis identifies shared concepts, but not the logic underlying Lactantius' ethics.

Evaluation

Those who want to make the Bible Lactantius' most significant influence have not appreciated how intrinsic Ciceronian ideas are to his theory of justice. They miss how Lactantius structures his ethics around a Christianised version of Ciceronian natural law, governed by the *paterfamilias* motif. Thus I do not follow Walter in concluding that because Lactantius excludes all but Christians from practicing justice, he could not have been influenced by pagan ideas which he modified or Christianised.³⁸ Walter notices the *paterfamilias* metaphor, but not how fundamental it is to Lactantius' thought. Though this idea uses biblical divine names, it appeals to a Roman institution, and its force depends on the affective strength of *pietas* in the Roman moral imagination. Monat identifies two biblical concepts of justice: obedience to God's law, and treating others

36 Grossmann, 'Die Neutestamentlichen Grundlagen', 400.

37 Grossmann, 'Pietas', 178–80.

38 Walter, *Pagane Texte*, 229–30.

mercifully because of their relationship with God. He thinks that Lactantius combines them clumsily, and consequently says that our author's justice theory is not entirely clear.³⁹ Yet Monat's biblical motifs are united and given a consistent justification through the *paterfamilias* metaphor. Unlike many scholars, Colot has observed the fundamental role Lactantius gives to natural law. She also identifies piety's significance in Lactantius' thought, which as we have seen retains its Roman character of fulfilling relational obligations, though Lactantius directs these towards new ends.⁴⁰ Lactantius did not acquire these fundamental ideas from the Patristic tradition, which did not exploit *pietas*' apologetic potential as Lactantius did. Rather, he constructed them from his rhetorical education, his deep familiarity with Cicero, and his embeddedness within Roman culture.

Yet one still needs to explain why Lactantius packages his ethics as he does. Walter is correct that Lactantius' arrangement of the virtues was his own work.⁴¹ There are many biblical justice motifs Lactantius omits; nor does he use its terminology. The most likely source for the language of justice's duties is Cicero. In particular, *aequitas* is not obviously indicated by the Bible or the two-fold division of ethics, indicating a Ciceronian origin. Yet those who reduce Lactantius' conception of justice to the triad *iustitia, pietas, aequitas* ignore the other virtues he incorporates into justice's social expression, and that he makes all three uniquely Christian virtues.

If we take the definition *pietas+aequitas* as inspired by Cicero, but acknowledge that Lactantius defines religious and social virtue in Christian terms, we arrive at a coherent explanation of Lactantius' aim. He fills a Ciceronian framework with Christian content; he redefines Roman terms using Christian ideas. This is also what he does with

39 Monat, *Lactance: Institutions divines V*, 1973, 1:26.

40 Colot, *Lactance*, 145–49.

41 Walter, *Pagane Texte*, 226–27.

the *paterfamilias* motif: he projects a Roman institution onto the divine-human relationship, as Cicero did in describing natural law in *de Legibus*. However, Lactantius understands each component in a Christian sense, so that divine Nature becomes the singular Christian deity, *Pater et Dominus*, and his fatherhood binds humanity not into a society but a family.

Lactantius uses his sources on two levels: some construct legitimacy for his ideas, and others govern what he understands to be true. Cicero is supreme in the first category, and the biblical and Christian tradition in the second. Lactantius has construed his project so that both are essential, but they play different roles. The biblical tradition is authoritative and determines which ideas Lactantius accepts,⁴² but the classical tradition shapes these ideas into forms and language an educated pagan might accept. Lactantius' skill is visible not when we consider his handling of either one of these traditions (which leads to the judgement that he is an amateur theologian, or overly dependent upon his classical sources), but when we see how they are combined.

Lactantius' Political Thought

Lactantius is often portrayed as a political thinker. Digeser thinks that Lactantius explores what a Christian polity might look like and claims a place for Christianity within mainstream Roman tradition.⁴³ Meinking calls him Constantine's theological advisor and thinks his works ought to be read as addressing Constantine's task of ruling.⁴⁴ Monat suggests that *Institutes* Book 5 sought to show Constantine's legislators how Christian ethics could buttress new institutions.⁴⁵ In this section I assess the political implications of Lactantius' view of justice. For this task it is helpful to separate Lactantius' thought during and after the persecution; new political possibilities emerged

42 So McGuckin, 'Researches', 146.

43 Digeser, 'Persecution and the Art of Reading', 148, 154.

44 Meinking, 'Anger and Adjudication', 94–95.

45 Monat, *Lactance: Institutions divines V*, 1973, 1:31.

after the persecution ended, and Lactantius' goals may have shifted. Hence, this section compares the *Institutes* with the *Epitome* to see how Lactantius' priorities have changed. We will revisit his arguments for religious toleration. We will also investigate Lactantius' attitude towards the Roman empire, being a good citizen, and using political power well, all elements of a political philosophy; and how he understands God relating to the state, which forms his political theology. Ultimately, we will search his thought for a political programme or anticipation of Rome's Christianisation.

During the Persecution

We have seen that Lactantius mounts several arguments that Christians should be tolerated rather than vilified; these arguments invert the persecutors' rhetoric. Because of this, Lactantius has been celebrated as an early champion of religious freedom. Lactantius certainly thinks Christians should be tolerated; whether he sought to dissuade all religious coercion is another matter.⁴⁶ Digeser helpfully distinguishes between forbearance, toleration, and concord. Forbearance endures something objectionable; toleration does so from some moral or political principle, with no hope the situation will change; and concord exercises forbearance in the hope that the objectionable party will change. In Digeser's view, Lactantius encourages Rome to tolerate Christians because religion involves free will and because only God can punish impiety. A Christian state founded on Lactantius' ideas would pursue concord, because he thinks that Christianity would be widely adopted if it were not proscribed.⁴⁷ The present study has identified further reasons Lactantius gives for tolerating Christians: violence towards Christian bodies is temple violation; the *ara Dei* is within the heart, necessitating volitional and immaterial offerings; religion and humanity cannot be combined with violence; and piety requires fraternal harmlessness towards all people.

46 So Edwards, *Religions*, 28.

47 Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 110–11.

Bowlin identifies how political belonging impacted the question of toleration. Earlier Christians' pleas for toleration failed because community membership was expressed through civic religion. Failure to participate in traditional religion made Christians not objectionable insiders but outsiders; this necessitated their exclusion.⁴⁸ Tertullian's arguments for religious toleration are similar to Lactantius', but the former failed because he asked for toleration before establishing Christian membership in Roman society. Tertullian asked for Christianity to be tolerated like Egyptian religion and attempted to redefine worship as a volitional rather than material offering (Tert. *Apol.* 27). However, Egyptian religion, however distasteful Romans found it, was traditional and indexed community belonging.⁴⁹ In Tertullian's day, Christian identity was regarded as replacing Roman identity; a Christian in court declared '*Christianus sum*' where any other Roman would have said '*Romanus sum*', and Christianity was thus deemed incompatible with civic belonging.⁵⁰

Perhaps responding to this failure, Lactantius tried a different tactic. He sought to show that Christianity embodied and fulfilled Rome's most cherished values. Unlike Tertullian, Lactantius justified religion's interiority using classical sources (e.g. Cic. *Leg.* 2.19). He argues that Christians exhibit Roman virtues and all the characteristics of *Romanitas*, and then asks for permission for Christian dissidence.⁵¹ Lactantius' reframing *pietas*, labelling religious violence sacrilege, and his apologetic method itself all have this function. Appealing to the legitimisation of antiquity, he presents Roman history as an abandonment of monotheism and Christian-like worship.⁵² Adopting 'Roman' religion in fact led to social decay and the golden age's departure; these goods are now restored in the Christian community (*DI.* 5.5–8). In *de Mortibus*, Lactantius

48 Bowlin, 'Tolerance', 15–16.

49 Bowlin, 16–18.

50 Colot, *Lactance*, xxxiii–xxxiv.

51 Bowlin, 'Tolerance', 25–28.

52 Edwards, *Religions*, 40.

expresses a typically Roman distaste for anything barbarian, and is horrified at the emperors' disregard for Latin literacy and citizen privileges. Lactantius' depiction of Christianity as coherent with *Romanitas* responds to the claim that Christianity harms the state.⁵³ Colot has argued at length that Lactantius' aim was showing that Christianity was compatible with Rome and Romanness.⁵⁴ In depicting Christianity as the original and universal religion, Lactantius asserts that all nations, including Rome, flowed from a community of people who worshipped like the Christians.⁵⁵ This renders Christians insiders, consanguineous with Romans, who can be tolerated without threatening society. Consequently, Lactantius attempts to separate Roman religion from what defines *Romanitas*.

However, as we saw, Lactantius is not uncritical of how Rome wields imperial power. The Roman people tolerate violence towards conquered peoples too easily (1.18.7-10), and their empire is built upon theft of others' lands.⁵⁶ The violence inherent in acquiring and maintaining an empire is inhumane and unjust, and one country's advantage necessarily disadvantages another (5.16.4; 6.6.18-24; 6.9.4-5).⁵⁷ Rome rejoices in social inequality, and her institutions, status markers, and offices originated in theft and injustice (5.6.5; 5.14.18-20).⁵⁸ Lactantius identifies his era as Rome's old age and decrepitude (7.15.16). Yet he regards Rome as having some role in restraining evil before the final tribulation, and expresses grief when predicting her fall (7.15.11).⁵⁹

53 Digeser, 'Religious Toleration', 143.

54 Colot, *Lactance*, xli.

55 Colot, 251–52.

56 Contra Inglebert, who thinks Lactantius' critique of Rome in the *Institutes* was confined to Capitoline religion. Inglebert, *Les Romains chrétiens*, 144. Lactantius' Patristic predecessors were also hostile towards Rome, or at least relativised the claims Rome made about her preeminence. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 418.

57 There is no sense that Lactantius criticises Rome from a self-consciously North African perspective.

58 Pichon overrates Lactantius' praise for Rome, not taking this criticism into account. Pichon, *Lactance*, 354–55.

59 Heck, *Mē Theomachein*, 204.

Lactantius is ambivalent about Rome's value. He is embedded in her literary heritage, and praises several aspects of her culture. He does not hate the Roman sources he cites; he respects them deeply, and compliments them through imitation.⁶⁰ Yet he is wholly negative about how Rome gained and retained power, and believes that its culture contains truth despite itself – after all, Lactantius had to cobble his account of the truth together from different sources after filtering out the errors. And of course, Roman religion was rooted in injustice and vitiated the rest of society. Rome and her culture failed to realise the potential of her moral aspirations; she was less than the sum of her parts. Lactantius presents Christians not only as true Romans, but as the truest Romans, who embody definitively Roman virtues, who alone can determine when Rome's pursuit of justice has gone astray and correct it. He thus claims to evaluate Roman authorities and customs according to higher criteria, namely Christian doctrines. Lactantius was one who could declare both *Romanus sum* and *Christianus sum*, but the latter identification governed the former.

Lactantius' claiming *Romanitas* for Christians was certainly intended to mark them as social insiders who could then be tolerated, as Bowlin says. But did Lactantius have broader aims of Christianising the empire? Some scholars have found such a political programme within the *Institutes*. Most influentially, Elizabeth DePalma Digeser's *The Making of a Christian Empire* argues that the *Institutes*' subtext reveals a 'strongly political tract'.⁶¹ The polemic against paganism is a veiled critique of the emperors, via their patron deities Jupiter and Hercules. Digeser argues that Lactantius' praise of Saturn in *Institutes* 1 seeks a return to an Augustan principate, since Augustus did not claim divine honours like the tetrarchs.⁶² Lactantius begins the *Institutes* by alluding to Cicero's *Laws*, which 'suggests that, like Cicero, he is teaching laws or legal

60 Bryce, *Library*, 350–53.

61 Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 33.

62 Digeser, 33–45.

principles appropriate to an ideal state, a state that Rome should strive to become'.⁶³ Digeser reads *Institutes* 5 as outlining the justice and toleration which Rome should practise.⁶⁴ Like Cicero, Lactantius addressed a political crisis by drafting a new Roman constitution.⁶⁵

However, even Lactantius' most overt criticisms of the tetrarchs do not accuse them of claiming divine honours. Rather, the persecution centred around worship of the traditional gods, an error Augustus shared. Lactantius grounds his argument for monotheism in the necessity of a unitary authority in governments and the military. However, this argument works best if the political point is relatively uncontroversial, since it is used to justify the contentious theological claim. Wherever he makes this argument, the context is clearly theological rather than political. Lactantius' criticism of paganism does allude to the tetrarchs, but in snarky asides rather than in an exposition of a new Roman constitution, as Digeser claims.

Nor does Lactantius magnify the polemic against the tetrarchs in the *Epitome*.⁶⁶ the attack on Hercules accuses him of lust, impiety, and suicide, qualities Lactantius also attributes to Maximian (*Epit.* 7.3-5; *DMP.* 8.3-6; 30.1-6). However, Lactantius does not emphasise Jupiter's similarities with Diocletian, or recall *De Mortibus*' polemic in his later description of Roman religion (*Epit.* 10.1-4). If *Institutes* Book 1 was designed to challenge the tetrarchy and dominate, I suggest that Lactantius would have made this purpose explicit in the *Epitome*, since he no longer needed to write between the lines. He could have declared the ideal constitution openly, had he so desired. The *Epitome*'s continued focus on religion indicates that that was the *Institutes*' function too.

63 Digeser, 57.

64 Digeser, 59, 110–13.

65 Digeser, 142.

66 The *Epitome* is a fresh reworking of the *Institutes*' content. Loi, 'La Giustizia Sociale', 160.

After the Persecution

Lactantius wrote several works after Constantine's triumph and, helpfully for our study, revised the *Institutes* by adding dedications to Constantine as well as writing the *Epitome*, enabling us to see any changed perspective. In this period he taught Constantine's son Crispus and presumably had contact with Constantine's involvement in ecclesiastical politics. A Christian Roman empire became much more imaginable in this period, and Lactantius does reflect more on political exigencies. *De Mortibus* censures abuses of imperial and judicial power, but gives no indication that the institutions are inherently corrupt. Lactantius says that punishments ought to be proportionate, and censures both cruel and lenient judges. In either case the state suffers: insufficient punishments will embolden criminals, while excessive punishments will remove those who might have been reformed (*Epit.* 33.6-9). Courage is good when fighting for one's country, but evil when attacking it; this is an analogy for how the passions' praiseworthiness depends on their object, but Lactantius may not accept the premises about warfare himself. He adds correcting subjects to the list of permissible uses of anger (*ira ... ad regendam subiectorum disciplinam data est a Deo*, 56.4). Similarly, *de Ira* adds legal justice as a legitimate place for expressing anger (*ID.* 17.6–18.3). Christianity's opponents having the political power to threaten them is no longer seen as inevitable (*Epit.* 47.3). However, Lactantius' arguments against persecution are the same, though the folly of trying to protect a god receives more space, and his confidence that God will (temporally) avenge his followers is greater, as we would expect (47–49).

Overall, the *Institutes'* Christian and religious elements are heightened in the *Epitome*; there is no increased political focus. Digeser thinks that Lactantius used the *Institutes* to instruct Constantine's court in religious policy: 'No longer required to

appeal for tolerance, the *Divine Institutes* became, I argue, a manifesto for political and religious reform, a program that inspired Constantine's religious policy once he achieved sole rule.⁶⁷ However, if the *Institutes* took on an increased political significance, we would expect it to be expressed in the *Epitome*, but this does not occur. Political philosophy does not become more important to Lactantius' work after Constantine converted, when he could plausibly have imagined a Christian empire.

The addresses to Constantine display Lactantius' political theology most vividly. Lactantius does not discuss the ideal Christian emperor, as Eusebius did; instead, he Christianises a Roman understanding of the *pax deorum*. Lactantius praises Constantine for restoring justice and peace, in language reminiscent of the panegyrists celebrating deliverance from tyranny. Because of Constantine's virtue, God will give him *imperium*, *felicitas*, and a long, prosperous reign (*DI*. 1.1.13-16). Constantine's holiness, acceptance of truth and of God make him a worthy recipient of this divine favour (7.26.17).⁶⁸ In *de Mortibus*, Licinius' prayer looks to God for imperial *salus*, *felicitas* and *victoria* (*DMP*. 46.6), which God grants. Constantine's and Licinius' victories illustrate that the Christian God can defend the empire from usurpers and tyrants. Instead of the auguries and sacrifices with which Romans discerned the divine will and ensured divine favour, Lactantius' God gives dreams and writes prayers that grant victory. Therefore, Lactantius claims that Christianity can preserve the empire's *victoria* and *salus*. That imperial *pietas* earns *felicitas* is a common panegyric trope (*Pan. Lat.* XI.18.1-5, 19.6; VI.8.5), and it makes sense that a rhetorician would use panegyric categories to describe how God favours an emperor. The idea is Lactantius' theme of providence, transposed into its most confident key. Constantine's reign allows Christian

67 Digeser, *Christian Empire*, 13, 134–38.

68 Contra Meinking, Lactantius does not regard Constantine as embodying God's rule on earth. Meinking, 'Anger and Adjudication', 97. Meinking reads the places where Lactantius makes an analogy between the political and divine spheres as making a political point, whereas I argued above that the religious is primary.

worship and thus justice to flourish. This is a Christianised version of the tetrarchs' and panegyrist's theology; pagans sought from their gods the same benefits Lactantius describes. Lactantius does not reconfigure how the divine interacts with the empire, but merely changes the identity of the providential deity. This is not a political philosophy, but rather a Christian version of Rome's political theology.

Throughout this thesis I have disagreed with several presuppositions of Digeser's scholarship. Blandine Colot, a scholar whose conclusions I accept more frequently, has advanced a different proposal for understanding Lactantius' aims. In her eyes, Lactantius ultimately sought Rome's conversion to Christianity, since Christianity is lawful and beneficial for the Roman state, and argued 'Rome serait plus authentiquement « elle-même » en devenant chrétienne'.⁶⁹ Lactantius gave fourth century Christians a way of integrating their faith with Rome's politics, where previously Christians had been outside political frameworks.⁷⁰ She takes Lactantius as illustrating a new Christian will to assume Rome before the eschaton, which she finds fully illustrated in the *Institutes*' first edition.⁷¹

Colot argues that as Cicero used the idea to argue the Roman state could guarantee a universal justice, so Lactantius sees Christianity as truly realising what Cicero sought. This was already present in the *Institutes*' first edition, which sought to justify replacing paganism with Christianity as the religion which undergirded Rome's rule and role in realising global justice.⁷² While Eusebius and Augustine minimise the importance of the 'Romideologie', the religious myth which safeguarded Rome's existence, Lactantius modifies it. In the former authors, Christianity replaces or obliterates Rome, but in Lactantius Christianity assumes Rome.⁷³ Unlike Digeser, Colot does not identify a

69 Colot, *Lactance*, 57; cf. Colot, 'Pietas', 2001, 24.

70 Colot, *Lactance*, 210.

71 Colot, 181–82, 194.

72 Colot, 194, 263–64, 315.

73 Colot, 209, 230–31.

Lactantian political philosophy, but rather a political theology, whereby Christianity ensures God's protection of the empire and realises a universal conception of justice. We have seen this political theology displayed in the addresses to Constantine. However, I cannot see that the *Institutes*' first edition sought to tell Rome she could or should be Christian.

Evaluation

Lactantius' political aims are much more modest than some have claimed. We have seen that the *Institutes*' arguments against violence permitted no exceptions. Justice requires complete pacifism. Lactantius forbids warfare, military service, retaliation, and any participation in capital charges, even watching executions. He criticises the project of maintaining the empire (*DI*. 5.16.4). Political power is obtained through injustice and greed, and the *iustus* will necessarily be oppressed by the wicked. However, these passages can all be regarded as rhetorical exaggerations. By making power and wealth dependent on injustice, Lactantius asserts that the just person will necessarily be decrepit; thus Christian suffering does not indicate divine disfavour (5.22.6-10).⁷⁴ The maximal force of Lactantius' argument against killing made it harder to argue that persecution was legitimate. He could not include a possibility of lawful killing, because that is what the persecutors claimed to be doing to Christians. Lactantius softened these injunctions in later works: he omits performing executions and military service from his list of unjust killing, and tones down his theodicy and its expectation of suffering. However, he does not explain how a Christian could wield imperial power justly and says very little about how to be a good citizen. Lactantius

74 Contra Wayman, 'Lactantius's Power Struggle'. Wayman thinks Lactantius forbids Christians from holding political power, a position which would exclude Lactantius' own imperial employment. He misconstrues the political implications of Lactantius' pedagogy of virtue because he reads the book as about states in general rather than the persecution in particular.

certainly told the tetrarchs to tolerate Christianity, but he was not interested in justifying a Christian policy of concord.

Institutes Book 5 is often considered political, but careful consideration of how its argument unfolds shows its underlying question is not ‘how can Rome become just?’ but ‘who are the *iusti* in Roman society?’ Book 5’s thesis is that Christians are just and therefore should not be persecuted. It asserts that Christians are good citizens, but it is not about citizenship. Lactantius does not even claim Christians are good citizens because they pray for the emperor, as Tertullian did (*Tert. Apol.* 30.1–33.4).⁷⁵ Contra Monat, by restricting justice to Christians Lactantius does not assert that only Christians can be good citizens,⁷⁶ though his ideas might lead to that conclusion. Rather, he seeks to prevent Christians from being killed as bad citizens.

Lactantius says that justice would be realised if everyone worshipped the Christian God, but this is not a political proposal, since he gives no political steps for achieving it. Rather, he describes justice as causing the state to wither, since governments would not need to legislate or punish. The adoption of Christianity is rather the inevitable consequence of Christians being able to worship and evangelise freely (*DI.* 5.8.8-9). Lactantius hypothesises about a universal justice between the golden age narrative, where justice flows from monotheism (5.5–6), and his description of justice’s realisation within the Christian community (5.9). The passage about universal justice is not intended to show Rome how to make the empire just, but to accuse the persecutors of attacking justice’s fullest expression within their society. Next, he claims that vice is more prevalent among pagans, and that Christians’ superior virtue is empirically verifiable; this demonstrates that Christians are just and therefore right about religion

75 Perhaps citizens’ increased responsibility to safeguard the *pax deorum* in Lactantius’ day meant he thought the offer would be considered inadequate.

76 Monat, *Lactance: Institutions divines V*, 1973, 1:32–33.

(5.9.15-23). He interacts with a Ciceronian passage about Rome's imperial expansion, but the argument's purpose is to show the martyrs can look foolish and yet embody justice, as he specifies in 5.18.12-16. Carneades asked how to resolve conflicts between justice and the state's needs; Lactantius' solution is to surrender to oppression and wait for divine vindication (5.17.10-34). This is hardly a programme for how Christians should hold political power. He counters injustice with *patientia*, always construed on an individual level, and says nothing about how states might contain evil.⁷⁷

Book 5 argues that religion must be freely chosen, and while his argument would logically apply to a Christian state, that is not Lactantius' intended topic. Rather, he wants to argue, with maximal force and using any argument he thinks will persuade, that the present government should not persecute Christians. Hence, Lactantius' arguments are somewhat *ad hoc*, and have implications which he does not develop, either here or in his later works. Evidently, expounding these implications was not his goal. If this is the case, we do not discern Lactantius' intentions by teasing out what is hinted, but by heeding his own statements about each argument's purpose, as the above analysis has attempted to do. Lactantius' horizon in the first edition of the *Institutes* is the little peace of the church, the end of persecution, and not a Christian empire.

This silence about how to use political power Christianly is surprising, even in the first edition of the *Institutes*. If Lactantius could not imagine a Christian emperor before 312, he could certainly imagine Christian civil servants, because he had been one and presumably knew others. Furthermore, he also knew of Christian soldiers, because they interrupted Diocletian's auguries in 299 (*DMP*. 10.1-4). His own experience prior to 303 would have shown him what moral and political quandaries the *iustus* employed

⁷⁷ It is significant for his (absence of) political philosophy that he does not locate the origin of societies in the need to protect each other from evil, but in a reflection of divine relationality. His aetiology naturally generates families rather than states.

within the courts would have to navigate. The fact that he does not discuss these questions indicates that he was not trying to write a political-philosophical work. His modification of the comments on warfare and his own subsequent employment by Constantine suggests that the *Institutes*' arguments against violence and power are not primarily directed against imperial or military service, but rather seek to dissuade persecution and defend the justice of downtrodden Christians. The *Institutes* is not a new Roman constitution; rather, it appeals to Cicero's *Laws* to make a wide-reaching case against one imperial policy.

This argument obviously rejects Digeser's findings, but I think it challenges Colot's claims as well. I agree with Colot that Lactantius gives a political theology, a Christianised 'Romideologie', in his addresses to Constantine. However, I am less convinced this was the *Institutes*' original and overriding aim. It is fundamental to Colot's thinking that Lactantius sought more for Christianity than the toleration of the Little Peace.⁷⁸ However, the fact that Lactantius uses Cicero's arguments from *de Legibus* does not mean he uses them for the same purpose. Cicero grounded law and justice in Nature to justify Rome's imperial aspirations as preserver of a universal justice, and Lactantius' addresses to Constantine do replace Cicero's divine Reason with the Christian God. However, I suggest that this was not Lactantius' primary reason for Christianising Cicero's legal philosophy. As we have seen, the *Institutes*' first edition does not regard a Christian Rome to be the institution which guarantees a universal justice. Lactantius understands justice to spread throughout society by evangelism and conversion to Christianity, which are not functions of the state. 5.13.5 claims a kind of Christian universalism, but it is an apolitical universalism, whereby Christianity is adopted by people of every race, gender, and class.

⁷⁸ Colot, *Lactance*, 194.

Rather, if Lactantius identifies an institution which can realise justice in society, it is the church.⁷⁹ As Buchheit has shown, Lactantius alludes to the Patristic image of church as paradise in his description of the golden age.⁸⁰ Colot writes that Lactantius presents Christianity as a spiritual entity and deemphasises the institutional church: he uses *iusti* in place of *Christiani* and discusses practices of justice rather than the sacraments.⁸¹ However, this is an apologetic manoeuvre, as Colot acknowledges, and it ought not preclude the conclusion that the church is important to his thinking; the Bible is similarly tacit but fundamental. In fact, the Bible is a useful parallel to Lactantius' ecclesiology. Lactantius sought to direct people to the *fons veritatis*, but this is not solely the Bible, but also the church (*DI*. 4.30.1). *Sola igitur catholica ecclesia est, quae verum cultum retinet. hic est fons veritatis, hoc domicilium fidei, hoc templum Dei. quo si quis non intraverit vel a quo si quis exierit, a spe vitae ac salutis alienus est* (4.30.11). The worship which is necessary to justice occurs only within the catholic church.⁸² Lactantius wrote to encourage entry into the church, where he believed justice was realised.

The suggestion that Lactantius identified the church as the institution which could universalise justice gains traction when we remember his dependence on the North African Christian tradition and particularly on Cyprian. Colot thinks that the only universal structure imaginable in the early fourth century was the Roman empire, and that Lactantius' universalising claims for Christian justice sought to integrate Christianity within it.⁸³ But there was another universal structure imaginable at that time, modelled on the empire: the catholic church as conceived by Cyprian. During the

79 This is suggested by Edwards' comment that Lactantius sees Rome's pretensions realised in the church, which is the polity where wisdom and religion combine. Edwards, *Religions*, 24.

80 Buchheit, 'Goldene Zeit 2', 227–29.

81 Colot, *Lactance*, 197–98.

82 Similarly, Walter argues that Lactantius thought *aequitas* was realised in the church rather than the state. Walter, *Pagane Texte*, 222.

83 Colot, *Lactance*, 56.

Novatian schism, Cyprian defined a true bishop not doctrinally, since the Novatians were orthodox, but by likening a bishop in his diocese to a proconsul in his *provincia*, paralleling the imperial bureaucracy. A seat could have only one lawful occupant, and all who usurped that authority were sacrilegious (Cyp. *Ep.* 55.8.4–10.2).⁸⁴ Brent writes, ‘faced with a state commanding and enforcing a universal sacrifice to the gods of the empire, Cyprian had devised a robust ecclesial constitution, uniting all churches (dioceses) throughout the Roman world into a network of bishops in intercommunion with each other, mutually agreeing ... on doctrine and discipline. ... What Decius had thus unintentionally created, paradoxically with Cyprian’s assistance, was a rival, empire-wide system of authority, a state within a state.’⁸⁵ This doctrine would have remained important for North African Christianity in the generation after Cyprian’s death.⁸⁶ Cyprian’s universalising ecclesiology which paralleled the Roman state made it natural for Lactantius to expect the church to fulfill Cicero’s hope of a universal justice. This is yet another place where our author uses his classical education to flesh out an idea given by the bishop.

To evaluate Colot’s claim that Lactantius sought Rome’s Christianisation, let us consider more closely the kind of victory Lactantius’ later works celebrate, and particular their hopes for the future. Lactantius celebrates Constantine’s Christianisation, but Rome’s Christianisation requires more: if not a modification of institutions or the collapse of paganism, at least a widespread adoption of Christianity and the proliferation of its ideology throughout the empire and its institutions. The final chapter of *de Mortibus* praises God for restoring his afflicted people, asks him to confirm that peace, and *florescentis ecclesiae perpetuam quietem custodiat* (DMP. 52.4-5). Lactantius asks

84 Brent, *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, 58–66.

85 Allen Brent, *A Political History of Early Christianity* (London: T & T Clark, 2009), 286.

86 The impact of the North African church can be seen in Lactantius’ following its line on the Novatian controversy (4.30.10-13).

God to preserve not a Christian Rome, but the church, as we would expect if he sees the church as justice's inculcator.

However, *de Mortibus* is addressed to a confessor, so it is perhaps natural that this work should focus on the church. Lactantius' fullest political theology occurs in the addresses to Constantine, so this is where we would expect to find his vision of a Christianised Rome. The addresses celebrate Constantine's reign abolishing error and restoring justice and wisdom, through punishing the persecutors and allowing Christians to worship freely. Lactantius desires to defend God's *religio cultusque divinus*, and so addresses Constantine, the restorer of justice (*DI.* 1.1.13-16). *Figmenta* have been put aside, and Constantine has restored *iustitiae domicilium* and its *sancta religio*. Truth is revealed, and Christians are no longer punished for sacrilege or irreligion (7.26.11-15). The persecutors are defeated, and God has enabled Constantine to flourish.

7.26.12 states why providence allowed Constantine's accession: to rescind the persecutors' decrees; *peccata corrigere*; *saluti hominum ... providere*; and remove *mali* from the state, so all would know what is true majesty. Two of these clauses could possibly describe future Christianisation: *peccata corrigere* and enabling all to know true majesty. On this reading, correcting errors or sins could mean opposing paganism, and revealing majesty pointing his subjects to the true God. However, the passage focuses on Constantine's overthrow of the persecutors, and *peccata corrigere* more likely echoes Lactantius' celebration that Christians no longer suffer legal injustices in 7.26.11. God's majesty was revealed through defeating the persecuting emperors, as Lactantius says in 7.26.13-14 and *de Mortibus*, where the persecutors' deaths publicly display God's *virtus ac maiestas* (*DMP.* 1.6-7). The second dedication prays that God would guard Constantine and his faith, *quod est omnibus salutare: felicitas* for Constantine, and *quies* for everyone else (*DI.* 7.26.17). *Salutare* carries its usual

panegyric sense of ensuring the safety of the empire, as is indicated by *quies* rather than a more religious public benefit.

These passages contain many surprising omissions. Lactantius does not ask Constantine to promote or favour Christianity, *veritas*, or *iustitia*. This is particularly surprising in the prayer that ends the second dedication. Constantine's faith benefits the empire through securing the divine favour which ensures its peace, as any panegyrist could have written, but does not bring an interior or religious benefit as the rest of the *Institutes* might lead us to expect. Lactantius does not even suggest that Constantine's piety might give the empire an example of *iustitia* so that *vera religio* spreads. All Constantine's actions regarding *iustitia*, excepting his own possession of the virtue, are in the past and refer to ending the persecution. In the present, Lactantius ascribes defending divine religion to himself, not to Constantine (1.1.16).

Lactantius has done nothing more than replace the deity of Roman political theology with a Christian one. His redefinition of *religio* and belief that religion is volitional, individual, and interiorised are not expressed here. He gives no suggestion that paganism might wither, either through direct suppression or mass conversion to Christianity. He only speculates about Christianity's universal adoption in the *Institutes'* first edition, but I argued above that this hope is independent of Rome and cannot be regarded as a wish to Christianise the empire. Panegyric functioned to influence the honorand's behaviour and policies through astute flattery,⁸⁷ but the addresses do not suggest that Constantine adopt any Christianising activities or hope that these will eventually emerge. Thus, this silence is telling.

Rather, the primary hope of Lactantius' later works is that the empire would continue to allow Christians to worship freely, and for the establishment of a

87 Rees, 'Panegyric', 145.

Constantinian dynasty. They celebrate a Christian emperor, but do not celebrate or seek a Christian empire. Their horizon is the maintenance of Christianity's legality. Therefore, we must conclude that Lactantius' extant works express no explicit desire that Rome become Christian. Watts helpfully cautions against reading fourth century history as if its ending were obvious: 'both ancient and modern accounts of the fourth century see as inevitable an ending that no one could possibly have anticipated when the final pagan generation was born.'⁸⁸ Christians could imagine a society in which they were tolerated, but they saw this toleration as leading not to a Christianised empire, but an eschaton where Christ ruled directly.⁸⁹ Watts' comments are apposite for interpreting what we have found in Lactantius. He is not as politically creative as modern commentators hoped he might be, but this is because his interests lie elsewhere. Attending to that focus helps us discern better the intellectual culture of this turbulent period of history, and the horizons of Christian imagination and hope.

Lactantius' goal

Our consideration of justice in Lactantius has shown that he does not consider his sources equal. He frames justice in Ciceronian categories, but redefines them to carry Christian content. This privileging of Christianity was suggested by Lactantius' insistence that *iustitia*, *pietas*, and *aequitas* are exclusively Christian virtues. On this basis, we cannot say that Lactantius sought to synthesise Christianity with philosophical monotheism or traditional Roman ethics, if 'synthesise' implies a blending on equal terms. Rather, Lactantius forces classical and Hermetic ideas to testify to Christianity's truth against the original authors' intentions. Nicholson expresses the matter well: 'when they used familiar and potentially ambiguous images and expressions Christians were not sparing the feelings of their pagan contemporaries, they were trying to infiltrate and

⁸⁸ Watts, *The Final Pagan Generation*, 24.

⁸⁹ Watts, 66.

manipulate them.’ It was not an era of religious toleration, but of revolution and conversion.⁹⁰

Above I responded to Colot’s case that Lactantius modifies Ciceronian justice to give a Christian foundation for universal justice within the Roman state. However, if Lactantius does not use Cicero to further Rome’s Christianisation, why does his account of justice borrow so heavily from Cicero’s *Laws*? I suggest that Lactantius’ Christianised natural law theory undermines all the persecutors’ challenges to Christianity that we identified in Chapter 1. As Monat says, by correcting the philosophy that undergirded Rome’s conception of justice, Lactantius showed how Rome could have malfunctioned and allowed an unjust policy like persecution.⁹¹ The persecutors’ ideology prioritised piety and mentioned justice less frequently; in privileging justice, Lactantius uses philosophers and Roman classics to refute that ideology. We saw the constellation of justice, piety, and lawfulness in Porphyry, who also asserted that justice’s duties to divine and human will never contradict (Porph. *Marc.* 14; *Abst.* 3.1.2). These are all important ideas in Lactantius, and their appearance in Porphyry shows their resonance in that era. Lactantius asserts that Christians worship the sole providential deity, so they are pious; God’s commands generate divine law, so they are lawful; following divine law is rational, so they are not foolish. They worship the providential deity and thus bring no threat of divine displeasure on their fellow-citizens, and their religion is identical to Rome’s ancient traditions, so they are not barbarous or innovative. They obey divine law and treat all people as siblings, which preserves the human *societas*, so they are not anti-social or destructive of society.

90 O. P. Nicholson, ‘Caelum Potius Intuemini : Lactantius and a Statue of Constantine’, *Studia Patristica* 34 (2001): 184.

91 Monat, *Lactance: Institutions divines V*, 1973, 1:32.

Given piety's centrality within Lactantius' response to persecution, one must ask why *Institutes* Book 5 is called *de Iustitia* and not *de Pietate*? Why does Lactantius construct his response to persecution around *iustitia* and not *pietas*? Colot has rightly identified how fundamental *pietas* is for Lactantius' theology.⁹² However, justice connects more naturally to lawfulness and protecting society. It enabled him to invoke the Ciceronian natural law tradition, Carneades' association of justice with folly, and Seneca's writing on the decrepitude of the *sapiens et iustus*. Justice also connects to the Christian social justice tradition. He claims that religious and social virtues are inextricable and thus that Christians' social virtue indicates their theological correctness. And, suggested by the legal unfairness Lactantius witnessed, justice more properly pertains to governance and policy than piety does. Lactantius constructs his ethics around justice because justice gave him one concept to refute all the persecutors' charges.

Cochrane calls Lactantius' ethic insipid: 'the brand of Christianity which he expounds is relatively innocuous in itself and hardly likely to prejudice the existing economic and political structure'.⁹³ This fails to understand Lactantius' purpose. If he sought an alternative political philosophy, then his failure to reimagine Roman institutions is censurable. But I have argued that his primary goal was refuting the persecution's ideology, by arguing that Christianity truly realised the ethical ideals of Roman literature and society. Having found Roman values realised within Christianity, he sought to direct his readers to the Christian scriptures and church, where this truth was undiluted (*DI*. 4.30.1; 7.25.1-2). Lactantius says repeatedly that justice depends on worshipping the true God, imitating the *magister iustitiae*, and obeying the divine law contained in the Bible. These assumptions make him unlikely to think that mere

⁹² Colot, 'Pietas', 2001, 27–28.

⁹³ Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 196.

institutional reform within the empire could inculcate justice.⁹⁴ Rather, justice is promoted by precisely the method Lactantius has chosen: encouraging people to adopt the true *religio* and find within it *sapientia*, *iustitia*, and the only safeguard for human *societas*. Rather than giving a veiled political programme, his point was more straightforwardly apologetic. Lactantius' definition of justice meant it was more properly the evangelist than the legislator, or even the Christian emperor, who could inculcate justice within a society.

94 However, Constantine may have applied Lactantian theology when dealing with pagans and resolving ecclesiastical disputes, but this application lay outside Lactantius' own objectives. Digeser, 'Lactantius and Constantine's Letter to Arles'.

Conclusion

This study has shown how Lactantius uses ethical discourse to reframe the religious conflict of his day. His argument is carefully constructed, redirecting the persecutors' espoused values to different ends. I have used those values to reveal another layer to Lactantius' rhetoric. The first two chapters established two different frameworks for analysing the topic. The first chapter collated evidence for the persecutors' rhetoric, which prompted Lactantius' writing. The second chapter surveyed his most important sources, to discern what ways of understanding justice were available to him. The centre of the persecutors' charges was Christians' impiety, which expressed not only their failure to worship the gods correctly, but their foolish abandonment of their ancestors' traditions; lawlessness; anti-social behaviour; threatening the *pax deorum*; and rejection of the justification for imperial rule. Lactantius' sources gave him a plethora of justice motifs from which to draw.

Next I explored Lactantius' introduction and definition of justice. For Lactantius, justice's prolegomenon is that it is definitively displayed by Christ, the *doctor iustitiae*. However, he does not explain what Christ's life teaches about justice; the motif defends objectionable Christian doctrines by identifying Christ as the longed-for Stoic *sapiens*, who appears decrepit, but who alone possesses perfect virtue. Furthermore, only Christ the *sapiens* can define virtue; those who have learned justice elsewhere should expect to misunderstand it. The *doctor iustitiae* motif legitimises Christian religious dissidence using Stoic categories.

Lactantius' definition of justice is bipartite, dividing into obligations to God and obligations to humanity. He describes these obligations using several words: *pietas* and *religio* denote the former; *aequitas*, *misericordia*, *humanitas*, and *pietas* the latter.

Lactantius' different formulae combine into one holistic picture of justice, shown by their derivation from the same image. This is the *paterfamilias* metaphor: Lactantius likens God to this mainstay of Roman civic life, to whom love is due as *Pater* and obedience as *Dominus*. Lactantius connects God's fatherhood to his providential rule; since one can have only one father, the metaphor allows him to argue for monotheism using premises from Roman religion. Furthermore, he uses divine fatherhood to grant to Christians the right of innovation the tetrarchs claimed based on their divine lineage. Socially, all humans are God's children, rendering them fundamentally equal, and obliging all to show each other fraternal piety. This *fraternitas* is expressed through humility; through helping the needy; and through pacifism and patient endurance of harm. This is justice as *distribuere suum cuique*, giving to God and humans what they deserve, but unless one understands how God and humans relate one cannot discern what people deserve.

Lactantius uses his *paterfamilias* metaphor to reformulate Cicero's understanding of justice. He reconfigures Cicero's metaphysics so that the relationship at the heart of the cosmos is not a polity but a family. Natural law, which generates the requirements of justice, is God's commandments which flow from this divine-human relationship. Hence the connection between piety and justice in Lactantius' thought: justice, keeping divine law, means upholding the obligations of piety one has to God as Father and humans as siblings. Though piety was more significant in the tetrarchs' ideology, Lactantius forms his response around justice so that he can incorporate the legal unfairness Christians faced, the natural law tradition, and the church's charity and pacifism, which paralleled Cicero's definition of justice in *Off.* 1.20. Lactantius extends piety from gods, state and ancestors to all people, but he does so using a Ciceronian model of justice.

Lactantius asserts that worship's object is all-important. This is how he differentiates *religio* from *superstitio*, rather than by illegal or excessive worship practices as Romans did. *Institutes* Books 1 and 2 attack polytheism, asserting that it worships dead humans, created things, and demons. Lactantius' own theology centres around monotheism and providence. These arguments help him counter the claim that Christians endanger the empire through their false worship. By identifying the providential deity with the Christian God, Lactantius indicts pagan religion with the error of which it accused Christians. The *impii* are pagans, whom Lactantius invites to choose between their religion and the virtues they prize. Lactantius also criticises the civic cults' externalistic worship, identifying the true temple as the Christian community or human mind. He internalises worship, privileging rational and ethical offerings. However, these ideas' connection to the persecution has not been previously appreciated. By depicting Christian minds as temples, Lactantius paints the persecutors as temple violators. If worship is internal, religious acts must be freely willed to be meaningful; true worship cannot be compelled by external means. Lactantius' account of religious virtue appeals to several Roman instincts about right religion which he inverts and subverts, redirecting them away from persecution and towards Christianity.

Socially, justice involves three virtues, *aequitas*, *miser cordia*, and *humanitas*. These virtues create three duties, *humilitas*, *caritas*, and non-violent endurance of harm. Lactantius claims that Cicero misunderstood each duty. He extends *aequitas* to all, redirects generosity towards the neediest, and requires complete pacifism, at least in the *Institutes*' original edition. He claims *patientia* for the martyrs, showing that Christianity is supremely able to inculcate virtue. Lactantius' social ethics aim to depict Christians as virtuous members of Roman society, refuting the charge that they were anti-social.

Lastly, I applied these findings to two major questions in Lactantian scholarship: what sources drove his thinking, and what political implications did his ideas have? Lactantius' conception of justice uses a Ciceronian framework but ultimately fills it with Christian content. His terminology is Ciceronian: his combining *iustitia*, *pietas*, and *aequitas* recalls Cicero's definition of *ius*, and he explains justice using the model in Cicero's *Laws*. Yet as Lactantius defines each constituent part of justice, he criticises Cicero for failing to appreciate what it entailed. He thinks Ciceronian religion misdirected and Ciceronian social ethics insufficient. In their place he institutes what he regards as divine law, which comes primarily from the biblical tradition as mediated by Cyprian. Cyprian's influence on Lactantius has been one of this thesis' major findings, and the relationship between the two authors merits further exploration.

Furthermore, this study indicates that Lactantius had no intention of synthesising Christianity with Roman culture, philosophy, or Hermetic wisdom. Rather, he uses these texts' presuppositions to construct an argument his audience will follow, but which leads to Christianity. Each portion of our study found contact with the persecutors' rhetoric and showed that Lactantius counters this rhetoric using ethical arguments from non-Christian sources. This renders his ethics interesting not just because he expounds the first Latin Christian moral philosophy,¹ but because he reveals the points of conflict during a contentious period of pagan-Christian relations. Heeding how Christians and pagans used moral claims to negotiate this changing relationship would provide a fruitful lens for studying the fourth century, a project I hope to pursue in post-doctoral research.

This study has found the suggestion that Lactantius sought to Christianise the Roman empire to be unjustified. We found no political programme or philosophy.

1 Spanneut, *Tertullien*, 178.

Lactantius mounts creative arguments that Rome should tolerate Christianity but does not develop the implication that Christianity should tolerate other religions. *Institutes* Book 5, which is often touted as Lactantius' political manifesto, does not ask how Rome can become just, but asserts that Christians are *iustissimi* within Roman society. The *Institutes*' first edition forbids executions and military service; though Lactantius omits these commands from the later edition, neither it or its *Epitome* have an increased political focus. He gives no consideration of how a state might use power justly or how civil servants might fulfill their office virtuously. Given his experience within the imperial bureaucracy, Lactantius had the experience to address these questions had he so chosen; his silence on the subject indicates that his focus lay elsewhere. Instead, the elements of the *Institutes* which Digeser identified as political in fact address religious disputes. The most political texts in Lactantius' corpus are the addresses to Constantine, which identify the Christian God as the empire's protector. God grants Constantine a peaceful empire because of his piety, as the panegyrists claimed, but Lactantius does not develop this theology further. Lactantius did not seek to Christianise Rome, and envisages justice spreading through society via the church, not the state. Colot thinks that the Roman empire was the only universal institution a Roman could imagine, but Cyprian's theology enabled Lactantius to attribute this role to the church. None of Lactantius' works look beyond the horizon of maintaining Christians' freedom to worship as they chose.

This study has contributed to Lactantian scholarship in several ways. Firstly, I hope the method of giving Lactantius' historical and literary-theological contexts equal emphasis will become more common. I have sought to show how Lactantius' ethics are deeply embedded in contemporary ideological conflicts; following these debates enables us to hear new resonances in his thought. Lactantius' apology is intricately woven and

commonly functions in multiple registers, further evidence against the claim of his mediocrity. Estimations that he lacked skill or originality are rooted in misunderstanding his objectives: he is a mediocre theologian but a highly creative apologist.

Secondly, I have shown how Lactantius' *paterfamilias* metaphor is foundational to his theology and ethics. The *paterfamilias* metaphor has been recognised since Wlosok, though not all subsequent commentators have connected it to his account of justice. Colot showed how Lactantius recasts Cicero's account of natural law; I have taken this idea further, and showed how both ideas responded to the persecutors' ideology.

Thirdly, if this research is cogent it corrects the perspective that Lactantius was a political theorist. Digeser has done an enormous amount to increase interest in Lactantius, and her portrait of the apologist is highly influential, particularly in anglophone countries. Yet my research found several occasions where assuming that Lactantius' goals were primarily political has derailed other investigations. Understanding him as focusing on the religious and then social spheres will help us interpret him better, because it accounts better for the context of his thought. The present work will help bring to the anglophone world the insights of French, German, and Italian scholarship on this topic, which I have followed more closely than I follow Digeser.

Finally, this study gives a new perspective on the early fourth century's intellectual culture and religious conflict. I have argued that we need to consider Lactantius on his own terms before using him as a witness to his historical context, lest we misconstrue his highly complex apologetic. However, having done so, we may investigate what he tells us about his age. Christians did not foresee a Christian empire from the moment Constantine professed Christian faith; they took a while to formulate a distinctively Christian political theology. Lactantius shows how an elite might balance his Roman

and Christian identities, denying neither, but carefully subordinating the former to the latter. We see what might have attracted elites like Lactantius to Christianity: rigorous ethics regarding wealth and force, without entailing the Neoplatonists' social withdrawal, and a form of worship which emphasised the intellectual and ethical over the material. And we see where Christianity was most revolutionary: claiming the warrant of reason and antiquity to revise Roman religion, and regarding all, even the slave and non-citizen, as siblings. Studying Lactantius' ethics has helped us shine more light on the complex, ambivalent, and dynamic world of the early fourth century. Lactantius used justice as a framework to contest his culture's approach to the divine, social belonging, and, above all, religious coercion. The impact of his ideas is hard to assess, but his objective was accomplished: Rome never proscribed his religion again, and in the coming decades, scores of Roman elites did adopt Christian faith.

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