The *Res Gestae*: Christianity through the Eyes of a Passive Aggressive Pagan

Despite the increasing Christianization of the Empire in the 4th century, Marcellinus was a pagan. As a high-ranking member of the Roman army under Christian emperors, Marcellinus had to conceal his paganism, even after retirement. This paper demonstrates that Marcellinus deliberately uses ambiguous terminology to slander Christianity. Marcellinus held a traditionalist point of view and demonstrates subtly that the empire was becoming weak because of Christianity. His subtle criticisms allowed him to attack Christianity in a manner that he could avoid unwanted attention from Christian emperors and authors. As a result his *Res Gestae* is not only a written history of the times, but also a subversive attack on the religion that he believed had a negative impact on the empire.

Although Marcellinus does not directly convey his feelings on Christianity, his language holds an ‘insidious bias [against Christianity] that reflects deep hostility and contempt’ (Barnes 1993: 69). Marcellinus’ negative attitude can be seen in his dismissive description of Christian terms, the Christian impact on the Roman army, and his use of the term *cantilenae*. I propose that he was subtle in his attack because the empire, under Theodosius, had become unquestionably Christian.

At the onset it is important to mention that scholars agree that Marcellinus was a pagan. Marcellinus identifies himself as *Graecus* in the last passage of the *Res Gestae* (31.16.9). This could simply be a Latin synonym for the term *Hellen* (Barnes 1998: 79), which can mean a Greek, but it can also mean someone who is hostile to Christianity. Eunapius, writing at the same time as Marcellinus, uses the term *Hellen* multiple times to show that someone was had negative feelings about Christianity (*VS* 6.5.3 [465]; 7.3.12 [477]; 10.6.3 [490]). This definition of the word *Hellen* is useful because even though Marcellinus referred to himself as *Graecus* in the Latin language, he would have heard the word *Hellen* in his own mind since it was his original language (Barnes 1998: 79). Therefore, when Marcellinus called himself *Graecus* he was reinforcing that he was Greek, but he was also identifying himself as someone hostile toward Christianity. This reference to the word *Hellen* is plausible when considering Marcellinus’ attitude toward Christianity throughout his work, which although subtle, is negative.

During a time when Christianity was gaining more favor with the emperors, it would have been wise to be cautious when writing about Christianity. Marcellinus began writing the *Res Gestae* while living in Rome in the 380s, during the reign of Theodosius I. By the early 380s he had reintroduced Constantine’s anti-pagan laws,  which banned blood sacrifice and continued to pass anti-pagan legislation until the end of his reign in 395. These anti-pagan laws stated that anyone who made sacrifices to pagan gods would ‘suffer the infliction of a suitable punishment’ (*CTh* 16.10.2). The code also included laws of Constantius which ordered that anyone who illegally made sacrifices would be ‘struck down by the avenging sword’ (*CTh* 16.10.4). When discussing the same law, Libanius was less cryptic and explained that the punishment for shedding sacrificial blood was the death penalty (*Or*. 1.27). No such law stated that citizens could not write in opposition to Christianity, but they might have been discouraged from being as polemic. Since he was writing at the same time as Theodosius’ reign, he chose his words carefully when he held a negative view of Christians. Burckhardt questions the validity of these anti-pagan laws, claiming that because the  early evidence comes from the distorted view of Eusebius, the laws themselves have been distorted (Burckhardt 1949: 293). Bradbury argues that such scholars ‘underestimate the depth of Christian conviction about blood sacrifices’ (1994: 129). Marcellinus, who was living in Rome at the time, would have been aware of these laws and therefore used caution whenever he discussing Christians so that he would not attract attention from Theodosius.

Besides fear of the fanatic Christian emperor, Marcellinus also had right to fear negative attention from non secular authors. Writers who publicly shamed Christianity attracted unwanted attention from Christian writers. Porphyry was publicly condemned for his work titled *Against the Christians.* Porphry describes a man named Origen, who was learned in Greek teachings and ‘went over to barbarian recklessness’ i.e. Christianity (qtd. in Eus., *Hist. eccl.*, VI, 19:1-12). Since Porphyry was writing around 300 it is likely that his work would have been accepted due to the anti-Christian attitude at the time, which included the Great Persecution of the Christians under Diocletian. However, once Constantine established Christianity as the religion of the empire, Porphyry’s work was condemned. Eusebius and Jerome, both prominent Christian writers in the later 4th century, called Porphyry an impious and false man for his negative comments toward Christians (Jer., *On the Beginning of Mark;* Eus., *Hist. eccl.*, VI, 19:1-12). Jovinian was a writer in the late 4th century who also wrote in opposition to certain Christian beliefs such as celibacy before marriage. Jovinian was himself a Christian monk and although his teachings were popular amongst the Christian community in Rome, he was eventually condemned as a hypocrite. Jerome wrote an entire work titled *Adversus Jovinianum* in the early 390s in order to rebuke Jovinian’s teachings on celibacy and marriage. Although Jerome’s work against Jovinian was written after Marcellinus had completed the *Res Gestae,* Jerome was certainly a well known name before he wrote *Adversus Jovinianum.* It would have been unwise for a writer to publicly criticize Christianity because men such as Jerome would have publicly condemned them. Jerome or other church father such as Ambrose, Augustine, and Eusebius would have rebuked any attack made on Christianity.. Marcellinus, rather than being openly polemic, hid his critical comments in irony.

Although subtle, Marcellinus does reveal his opinion of Christianity in between the lines. For instance, his treatment of Christianity is dismissive and passive. In 21.16.18 he describes that Constantius II *Christianam religionem absolutam et simplicem anili superstitione confundens,*  confuses the plain and simple religion of the Christians with an old woman’s superstition (21.16.18). Most interesting is that Marcellinus describes Christianity as ‘plain and simple,’ because it is not found anywhere else in Marcellinus descriptions of other religions. This description of the religion is not openly polemic, but does reveal his low opinion of Christianity. Moreso, whenever he must write using Christian terms he is dismissive. For instance, he describes the titles of Christian officials: ‘a deacon, as the Christians call them’ (*inductus est ut appellant Christiani diaconus*) (14.9.7) and ‘Christian presbyter (to use their own term)’ (*Christiani ritus presbyter ut ipsi appellant*) (31.12.8). T.R. Glover comments that these phrases show that Christianity was an ‘alien religion’ to Marcellinus since he shows uncertainty when he describes the Christian titles (1924: 40). However, considering that he grew up around Christianity, it seems more likely that Marcellinus depicts himself as an outsider on purpose in order to distance himself from it. Barnes adds that Marcellinus avoided such terms because he was polemical toward Christianity. On multiple occasions Marcellinus does not used proper Christian terminology, such as when he twice glossed over the term *synodus* and wrote ‘*ut appellant’* instead*.* By avoiding the official terms, Barnes argues that Marcellinus intended to marginalize Christianity and “[left] out completely the ecclesiastical affairs” during Constantius’ time. Marcellinus’ descriptions trivialize Christianity, but also display that the official imperial religion was inferior.

Marcellinus also demonstrates his negative attitude when he subtly blames Christianity for lack military discipline. Marcellinus’ descriptions demonstrate his belief that if soldiers were Christian they were incapable of performing their duties. For instance, when Valentinian was at war with the Alamanni, Marcellinus describes that Prince Rando of the Alamanni and his armed men were able to sneak into Mainz and carry off men, women, and goods because there happened to be a Christian festival going on (27.10.1-2). This plunder was far too easy for Rando and his band because there were no Roman soldiers guarding Mainz (27.10.1-2), possibly because they themselves were attending the festival. In another instance, Christian soldiers were unable to prevent Palladius from committing suicide because they attending a vigil (28.6.27). These soldiers’ attention to Christian practices made them lack in their military discipline. Marcellinus blames the soldiers’ dedication to Christianity for failing to fulfill their duties.

Marcellinus also uses the term *cantilenae* to subtly insult Christianity and Christian soldiers. *Cantilena* is a prime example of Marcellinus’ subversive language, which is meant to attack Christianity.When he describes Julian’s visit to Constantinople, he writes that the emperor discovered the soldiers singing *cantilenas molliores* (effeminate ditties). In this section he begins by describing the songs as *maculosis…disciplinae castrensis* (defects in military discipline) and then subsequently lists out the weaknesses of the soldiers: that they lay on soft beds rather than ones made of stone, that they drink more than they fight, and were cowards in the presence of their enemies (22.4.6-8). The term *cantilenae* is especially worth noting since it contains a derogatory meaning. At its root the word simply means a ‘song’ or ‘tune,’ however Boeft notes that it could also be used offensively as a ‘ditty’ (1995: 44; as seen in Sen. *Ep*. 24.18; Verg. *Ecl.* 1.2). Marcellinus then adds on the adjective *molliores*, which describes the songs as ‘effeminate music-hall songs’ (Hamilton 1986) or ‘effeminate ditties.’ (Rolfe 1940). This action of singing feminine music implies that the soldiers themselves had become effeminate.

However, Woods argues that there is more to Marcellinus’ use of *cantilenae* than those translations provide. Marcellinus is actually referencing the Christian prayers being recited by soldiers at Sunday services when he chooses *cantilenae* (1998: 145). These services had been established by Constantine and required that any non-Christian soldier at court should attend and recite memorized prayers (Woods 1998: 146; Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 4.19-20). By the time Julian was ruling these prayers likely still existed and would have been a normal part of life for those at court (Woods 1998: 145-146). These soldiers are weak primarily because they had become accustomed to singing Christian prayers. A weak army meant that the empire was not being properly defended, but was instead left in the hands of effeminate, that is, Christian, men.

Spiritual men such as Jerome (*Vulgates*), Ambrose (*Explanatio Psalmorum* XII.1; XII.48), and Augustine (*Enarrationes in Psalmos* 94; *Sermones* 153) were using *cantilena* in a specifically Christian context to refer to prayers (Warren 1911: 282). Therefore, it is clear that *cantilena* was used in both religious and secular contexts during the 4th century. In 22.4.6 Marcellinus does not make it clear that the songs sung by the soldiers were Christian in nature, but an educated reader would have known that the term was also used by Christians. Thus Marcellinus cleverly snuck the term *cantilenae*, which held an ambiguous meaning in the 4th century, into a clearly negative context.

In summary, a closer look at Ammianus’ treatment of Christianity reveals that his work was not only meant to be read as a history of the times, but also as negative critique against the religion that was currently dominating and, in his opinion, weakening the empire. Marcellinus had to conceal his paganism and hatred for Christianity because openly doing so in a Christian empire would have been too risky. Therefore, he subtly criticized the religion with passive aggressive descriptions, examples of unfit Christian soldiers, and  by using a derogatory form of *cantilenae.*

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