Tertullian’s Criticism of the Emperors’ Cult in the Apologeticum

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By referring to the topic of the emperors’ cult in his Apologeticum (apol.), Tertullian was quite innovative. Like him, his Greek predecessors among the so-called apologists generally took persecution against the Christians as the starting point for their argumentation in favour of the Christians. However, the emperors’ cult did not play a major role in their apologetic treatises. Tertullian, starting from his understanding of maiestas and his categorical distinction between God and man, in apol. 28-35 severely criticized the emperors’ cult and, at the same time, underlined a specific kind of reverence for the emperors. An analysis of those chapters shows how he acknowledged the emperors’ maiestas, but only as far as it was understood as a human being’s majesty subordinated to the maiestas of the one God. Thereby, Tertullian had to admit that the Christians rejected the gods, but he denied that the Christians were transgressors of imperial policies.

“So that is why Christians are public enemies, – because they will not give the emperors vain, false and rash honours …”

In these words from Apologeticum 35.1, Tertullian clearly expressed his opinion that the Roman authorities regarded the Christians as transgressors against imperial policies precisely because the latter abstained from the emperors’ cult – which he referred to as “vain, false and rash honours” for the emperors. So it might be interesting to take a look at Tertullian’s thoughts in the context of the topic “Emperors and the Divine”. Actually, by referring to the topic of the emperors’ cult in his apologetic masterpiece, Tertullian was quite innovative: Like him, his Greek predecessors among the so-called “apologists” generally took persecution against the Christians as the starting point for their argumentation in favour of the Christians. But the emperors’ cult did not play a major role in their apologetic treatises and in fact the emperors’ cult does not seem to have been the specific reason for persecutions against the Christians. However, Tertullian depicted the emperors’ cult as an important element in this context when defending Christians in the Apologeticum (apol.) in chapters 28-34/35. Of course, by analysing his thoughts we will not see “how the emperors’ cult and its impact on the Christians really were”, but we will get an impression of how this concrete Christian author perceived and interpreted it. Furthermore, he might have shown a subtle sense of how the conflict between imperial power and Christian faith in Jesus Christ was exemplified in the emperors’ cult and its rejection by Christians.

The interesting thing in apol. 28-35 is that while elaborating on why the Christians were not giving divine reverences to the emperors, Tertullian was, at the same time, striving to underline the emperors’ majesty and the Christians’ loyalty towards it insofar as it was understood in a Christian sense. Referring to the topic of “Emperors and the Divine” one could say that Tertullian was forced to admit that the Christians rejected the pagan gods – whereby, in Roman eyes, they in fact violated the pax deorum. However, he denied that the Christians were transgressors of imperial policies and, to this goal, explained why the Christians had to reject the gods for the sake of the emperors. In this strategy, he could rely on an already existing Christian tradition (cf. Romans 13.1; Titus 3.1; 1 Peter 2.13-14; 1 Clement 61.1-2; Theophilus, Ad Autolycum 1.11.1-5). But Tertullian, following this tradition, placed special emphasis on it and focused particularly on elements of the emperors’ cult. This is why his thoughts will be analysed here.

For Tertullian’s criticism of the emperors’ cult and his great respect for the emperors as well, two aspects were crucial: the term maiestas (“majesty”) which itself, of course, was closely related to the emperors’ cult, and the categorical differentiation between God and human beings. This can be illustrated very well by going through chapters 28-34/35 of the apol., which is what I will do in the following. Before focusing on those chapters, the importance of the term maiestas for the whole apol. and its overarching structure shall be delineated. The function of chapters 28-35 for the context of the whole treatise will thereby become clear. I will not elaborate on the apol.’s origins and historical background; I will only mention

3 See, e.g., Justin, 1 apol. 1-5; Tertullian, apol. 1-3.
4 See, e.g., Justin’s apologies, which just briefly mention this topic, as, e.g., in 1 apol. 17.3. On this topic, see Georges 2011, 462; Heinze 1910, 437-439.
5 See Wlosok 1978, 52.
6 For the following analysis, I refer to my reflections in Georges 2012, 131-143.
7 This conflict was indeed a major background for persecution. See Wlosok 1978, 52.
8 See Georges 2011, 469-484.
9 See Georges 2011, 469-470; Rankin 2001, 204.
here that it was composed as one of Tertullian’s earliest works around the year 19710 and was directed at an educated readership amongst whom the borderlines between pagans and Christians seem to have been quite fluid.11

Concerning the term maiestas, in Tertullian’s times, it generally referred to the majesty, greatness and dignity that were attached to the emperors as well as the gods. Besides, it could also refer to the importance of the populus Romanus and the res publica.12 That this term was crucial for the apol. can already be seen by its structure, in the fact that the term served to name one of the two main accusations against the Christians that Tertullian opposed in the apol.’s 50 chapters: In the fictitious scenario of a forensic speech before the “magistrates of the Roman Empire” (apol. 1.1), having countered the accusation of laesa religio, of violating religion, in apol. 10-27 (argumentatio, pars I), he refuted, in apol. 28-45 (argumentatio, pars II), precisely the charge of laesa maiestas, of violating the emperor’s (apol. 28-36; argumentatio, pars Ila) and the Roman society’s majesty (apol. 37-45; argumentatio, pars IIb). These refutations form the apol.’s core, and they were only followed, in apol. 46-50, by the peroratio.13 On closer examination the importance of maiestas reached even beyond chapters 28-45. Tertullian opposed the accusation of laesa religio (apol. 10-27) by showing that the Christians were not violating true religion at all because the alleged gods that they refused to worship were mere demons and did not possess any divine majesty. It was only the one God who owned the highest, divine majesty; therefore, the Christians were the only true worshippers of God, and the charge of laesa religio was turned against the accusers who did not worship the true God. In this conception, the accusations of laesa religio and laesa maiestas turned out to be very closely interconnected.

So it can be observed already in apol. 10-27 (argumentatio, pars I) that Tertullian used the term maiestas, which the Christians seem to have been confronted with in the second charge (laesa maiestas), in order to transform it from a Christian perspective and turn it against the Christian God’s opponents:14 they were the ones who did not acknowledge the highest maiestas of the true God and who were therefore guilty of laesa religio. With his understanding of maiestas he could then also counter, in apol. 28-45 (argumentatio, pars II), the accusation of laesa maiestas that explicitly pointed to this term. In apol. 28-36 (argumentatio, pars Ila) he started to oppose primarily the accusation that the Christians violated the emperors’ majesty, and in that context he naturally dealt with the emperors’ cult. Then in apol. 37-45 (argumentatio, pars IIb) he defended the Christians against the charge that they violated Roman society, an accusation which could also be expressed by the label laesa maiestas. For the present purpose, I will focus on the first part of Tertullian’s argumentation against the second charge (apol. 28-36; argumentatio, pars Ila). As chapters 35-36 already built a bridge towards chapters 37-45 (argumentatio, pars IIb), I will concentrate on chapters 28-34.

In apol. 28-34, Tertullian countered the accusation of violating the emperors’ majesty in three argumentations each of which was closely linked to an element of the emperors’ cult.15 In each of those argumentations he referred to the specific maiestas of the emperors and explained the Christians’ behaviour that conflicted with Roman expectations but was, in Tertullian’s eyes, the only reasonable behaviour, which showed that they were not transgressors of imperial policies.16 In 28.1-32.1, he characterized the sacrifices to the gods on behalf of the emperors as senseless and opposed the Christian prayer for the emperors against the call for sacrifice. In 32.2-3, against the practice of swearing by the emperor’s genius – which the Christians naturally refuted – he emphasized the Christians’ swearing by the salus (the welfare) of the emperor. In 33.1-34.4, he justified the Christians’ refusal to give divine names to the emperor.17

But having said that, in what way did Tertullian criticize the emperors’ cult and, at the same time, emphasize the emperors’ specific majesty and the Christians’ loyalty towards it in apol. 28-35?

First of all, in apol. 28.1-2, Tertullian connected apol. 28-45 to apol. 10-27. He started with the Christians’ general refusal to sacrifice to the gods – which had been crucial within the accusation of laesa religio – and from there he proceeded to the Christians’ resistance when urged to sacrifice to the gods to secure the emperors’ welfare: This resistance was crucial in the accusation of laesa maiestas. Right after this linking, Tertullian pointed to the topic of maiestas when, in 28.3, he stated:

So now we have come to the second charge, the charge of treason against a majesty more august… (Ventum est igitur ad secundum titulum laesae augustioris maiestatis…)

The words laesae augustioris maiestatis (violation of a majesty more august) pointed to the idea of maiestas twice, alluding of course with the term maiestas, and beyond with the comparative augustor, to an even bigger greatness. This allusion was quite subtle. The comparative referred to the majesty that had been at stake when Tertullian had argued against the charge of laesa religio, that is, to

10 On dating and on the context the apol. originated from, see apol. Tränkle 1997, 444–449; Barnes 2005, 33–34
12 See Avenarius 2010, 1136-1153; Gizewski 1999, 710-712.
14 On this, see Georges 2007, 223-235.
15 On the sacrifices, on swearing by the emperor’s genius, and on giving divine names to the emperor as part of the emperors’ cult, see Wlosok 1978, 1-52.
16 On the detailed structure of apol. 28-36, see Georges 2011, 455-457.
17 Apol. 35.1-36.1 were connected to those argumentations because there Tertullian explained why the Christians did not join their fellow citizens in celebrating the emperors’ festivals. However, as their focus was shifting they shall only be mentioned in passing.
the gods’ or rather the demons’ majesty that, in Tertullian’s eyes, did not exist at all. So, with this comparative, Tertullian repeated his judgment from apol. 10-27: As the gods, being demons, had no maiestas at all, the Christians could not violate their religio. Therefore, the “majesty more august” was naturally the emperor’s majesty. Tertullian’s following statements in apol. 28-35 show that in fact he granted the emperors this maiestas, which he did not grant the demons. It must be noted that, first of all, in apol. 28.3, the words “majesty more august” served to deride the gods, and in order to confirm the emperor’s higher majesty, Tertullian turned to his listeners saying:

For it is with greater fear and more violent timidity that you watch Caesar, than Olympian Jove himself.\(^{18}\)

In the same line of thought, he then praised this behaviour\(^{19}\) — of course, not without an ironic undertone — and explained his approval by the rhetorical question:

For who among the living, whoever he be, is not better than every dead man?\(^{20}\)

This question played with the euhemeristic thesis that the gods had once been human beings and underlined the inferiority of the “dead” or the gods under the “living” men including the emperors.\(^{21}\) However, with this reference to euhemerism, Tertullian already alluded to the basic premise that his acknowledging of the emperor’s majesty had, and which in 28.4 he then pronounced explicitly: The emperor’s maiestas was, different from divine maiestas, only a human being’s majesty. From that point of view, Tertullian ironically had to blame his listeners:

So that in this too you are found irreverent to those gods of yours, because you show more fear for the rule of a man.\(^{22}\)

In apol. 29, Tertullian underlined the thesis that the emperors as “living” men were superior to the “dead” demons and that, therefore, only the former were able to have maiestas, that is, of course, human maiestas. He challenged his audience:

... and then impeach us on the charge of treason (et *ita nos criminis maiestatis addicte*), if it appears that ... demons, in their natures the worst of spirits, do any good service; ... if the dead can protect the living.\(^{23}\)

In Tertullian’s eyes, the charge of *laesa maiestas* originating from the Christians’ refusal to sacrifice to the gods on behalf of the emperors would only have been justified if the gods had owned a higher majesty. But in fact, their gods had no maiestas at all. Therefore, the Christians did not violate the emperors’ majesty either. In this perspective, Tertullian stated in apol. 29.4, once again highly ironically:

So, after all, our crime against the majesty of the emperors comes to this: that we do not subordinate them to their property ...\(^{24}\)

Tertullian was convinced that the Christians could not violate the emperors’ majesty if they did not subordinate them to the demons.

Thus, in apol. 28-29, Tertullian had laid the foundations for his criticism of the emperors’ cult. He had explained why the Christians did not participate in the sacrifices: they rejected the Roman gods as demons, and therefore, they did not sacrifice to these gods on behalf of the emperors either. Furthermore, he had indicated what status he attached to the emperors: he granted them majesty, but not a divine one, only the majesty that befits a human being. In this context, in apol. 29, he had paid special attention to the demons’ inferiority. Then, in apol. 30, he focused on the emperors’ status as such, between the Christian God on the one side and the other human beings including the emperors and the demons on the other side. In apol. 30.1, he declared:

For we, on behalf of the safety of the emperors, invoke the eternal God, the true God, the living God, whom the emperors themselves prefer to have propitious to them beyond all other gods. They know who has given them the empire; they know, as men, who has given them life; they feel that He is God alone, in whose power and no other’s they are, second to whom they stand, after whom they come first, before all gods and above all gods. Why not? Seeing that they are above all men, at any rate as living beings they are better than dead things.\(^{25}\)

The Christian prayer to the true God “on behalf of the safety of the emperors”

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18 Tertullian, apol. 28.3: *... si quidem maiore formidine et calidiore timiditate Caesarem observatis quam ipsum de Olympo lovent.*
19 Tertullian, apol. 28.3: *“Quite right too ...” (Et merito ...)*
20 Tertullian, apol. 28.3: *Quis enim ex viventibus quilibet non omni mortuo potior?*
21 On Euhemerism, see Thraede 1966.
22 Tertullian, apol. 28.4: *... adeo et in isto irrreligiosi erga deos vestros reprehendimini, qui plus timoris humano domino dicatis.*
23 Tertullian, apol. 29.1: *... si ... daemones, substantia pessimi spiritus, beneficium aliquod operantur, si ... mortui vivos vuentur.*
24 Tertullian, apol. 29.4: *Ideo enim committimus in maiestatem imperatorum, quia illos non subodium rebus suis ...*
25 Tertullian, apol. 30.1: *Nos enim pro salute imperatorum Deum invocamus aeternum, Deum verum, Deum vivum, quem et ipsi imperatores propitium sibi praeter ceteros malunt. Scint, quis illis deedit imperium; scint, qua homines, qui et animam; sentium eum esse Deum solum, et in suis suis oculos testut sunt, a quo sunt secundi, post quem primi, ante omnes et super omnes deos. Quodini? cum super omnes homines, qui utique viventes mortuis antestant.*
Instead. Whatever the emperors might have thought, in Tertullian's eyes, the emperors knew themselves that God's favour was more desirable than the demons' and, therefore, it made sense to pray to God instead of sacrificing to powerless demons. When Tertullian elaborated on this thought, he emphasized the categorical distinction between God and man. According to him, the emperors knew, as men (sciant, qua homines), who has given them life and "in whose power and no other's they are": it was "the eternal God, the true God, the living God", who was "God alone" (Deus solus). Against the background of the emperors' cult, here the borderline became very clear and Tertullian drew on it for the emperors' maiestas: as was the case for the gods, the emperors had no divine maiestas. The emperors' relation to God was the reason for their subordination. But, at the same time, it explained their superiority above all other men – and, of course, also above demons. From God's perspective, the emperors were "second". However, as God had given them the empire, they came, after God, "first", and they were "above all men", and of course – as Tertullian had explained in 28.3 and 29.1 – "above all gods", because "as living beings they [the emperors] are better than dead things". The emperors' position as "second" after God is what Tertullian, in apol. 35.5 then called the secunda maiestas.26 With this term, his stress on maiestas and on the distinction between God and man coincided, and it illustrates how Tertullian could, at one and the same time, strictly criticize the emperors' cult and emphasize his reverence for the emperors.

In the following sentences of apol. 30, Tertullian underlined that the emperors' maiestas was conferred upon them by God and that it only persisted because it was the majesty of a human being – a being created by God to rule the empire. In this line of thought, in 30.3 he summarized:

So he [the emperor] is great, because he is less than heaven. He himself belongs to Him [God], whose is heaven and all creation. Thence comes the emperor, whence came the man before he was emperor …27

Because of the emperors' "second majesty", Tertullian of course regarded it as a Christian duty to care for their welfare. But as their power and being originated from the one God, Tertullian concluded that the Christian prayer to God was the only right way to care for their salus [welfare]. That is what he elaborated on in apol. 30.4-32.1. In order to underline Tertullian's claim for loyalty, it suffices to quote apol. 30.4:

Looking up [to God] ... we [the Christians] are ever making intercession for all the emperors. We pray for them long life, a secure rule, a safe home, brave armies, a faithful senate, an honest people, a quiet world – and everything for which a man and a Caesar can pray.28

In apol. 32.2-3, Tertullian turned to a new accusation against the Christians: to the charge of not swearing by the emperors' genius (cf. m. Scill. 5; m. Polyc. 9.2). In that context, it could be expected that his criticism of the emperors' cult would attack the emperors and their quasi-divine position more directly. In 28.1-32.1, Tertullian had attacked the gods and their role for the emperors' cult, but claimed that this criticism favoured the emperors. Now, his stress on the emperors' humanity seemed to turn explicitly against the divine honours the emperors were given. But, in fact, Tertullian goes on with the argumentation he had followed before: he distinguished between the emperors and their genius, identified their genius with demons, and so he could repeat his criticism of the demons, this time directed against their genius, and thus favour the emperors. Once he had stated that 'genius is a name for demon',29 he could play off the genius or demons against the emperors again: in apol. 32.2, he says:

We make our oaths, too, not by the genius of the Caesar, but by his health, which is more august than any genius.30

Thereby, against the practice of swearing by the emperors' genius, he set the Christians' swearing by the salus, the health or welfare of the emperors, and justified it by the fact that the emperors' salus was "more august than any genius", augustior omnibus Geniiis. It is difficult to say what Tertullian exactly meant by swearing "by the emperors' salus".31 Anyhow, with the justification for this practice, he referred to the idea of maiestas again: the genius were, as demons without maiestas, inferior to the august emperors. In this line of thought, Tertullian was able to underline the Christians' loyalty towards imperial policies again (cf. 32.2-3) while, at the same time, criticizing a major element of the emperors' cult. Thereby of course, implicitly, he sharply attacked the quasi-divine character of the emperors whose genius was honoured.

While Tertullian had up to this point avoided open criticism of the emperors, when he came to the next aspect within the accusation of laesa maiestas, the last one clearly referring to the emperors' cult, he finally could not prevent his criticism from explicitly turning against the emperors. In apol. 33.1-34.4, he countered the charge of laesa maiestas by justifying the Christians' refusal to give divine names

26 On this, see Straub 1986, 68-72.
27 Tertullian, apol. 30.3: Ideo magnus est, quia caelo minor est; illius enim est ipse, cuius et caelum est et omnis creatura: inde est imperator, unde et homo antequam imperator …
28 Tertullian, apol. 30.4: Illuc sursum suspicientes … precantes sumus semper pro omnibus imperatoribus, vitam illis prolatam, imperium secum, domum tutam, exercitus fortes, senatum fidelem, populum probum, orbem quietum, quaecumque hominis et Caesaris vota sunt.
29 Tertullian, apol. 32.2: Nescitis Genios daemonas dici …?
30 Tertullian, apol. 32.2: Sed et iuramus, sicut non per Genios Caesarum, ita per salutem eorum, quae est augustior omnibus Geniiis.
31 On this, see Georges 2011, 485-487; Rankin 2001, 211.
to the emperor ("god" and "lord"). In the context of the emperors' cult, the practice of giving divine names to the emperors was quite usual, even if it did not mean an identification of the emperors with the traditional gods. At the point where the quasi-divine character of the emperors became undeniable, Tertullian had to voice his opposition. Underlining his personal commitment by turning to the first-person singular, he states in 33.3:

For I will not call the emperor God …

But again, he depicted his opposing view as the only one that did justice to the emperors. For this goal he referred once more to his idea of maiestas and to the differentiation between God and man. His refusal to call the emperor God originated again from a clear distinction between God's and the emperors' majesty he had delineated in apol. 33.2 by saying that “… I set the majesty of Caesar below God and the more commend him to God to whom alone I subordinate him.”

According to Tertullian, his refusal to call the emperor god was precisely the way to "commend him to God," to make him please God. What Tertullian meant precisely by this becomes clear when in apol. 33.3-4 he presented the thought behind it that was clearly shaped by the contrast between God and man and reiterated the foundations of his criticism:

… he [the emperor] himself will not wish to be called God. If he is a man, it is a man's interest to yield place to God. He is satisfied to be called Emperor. And a great name it is, too, that God gives him! The man denies he is God. Unless he is a man, he is not Emperor. Even in the triumph, as he rides in that most exalted chariot, he is reminded that he is a man. It is whispered to him from behind: ‘Look behind thee; remember thou are a man.’ That he is in such a blaze of glory that the reminder of his mortal state is necessary for him – makes it more delightful to him. He would be less, if he were at that moment called a god, because it would not be true. He is greater, who is called to look back, lest he think himself a god.

According to Tertullian, the name “Emperor” was “great” only because it was delivered by God, and the emperor himself was great only as far as he himself was not called “god” (Minor erat, si tunc deus diceretur … Maior est qui revocatur, ne se deum existimet; cf. 30.3: Ideo magnus est, quia caelo minor est). The emperor was characterized by being human and not divine. Therefore, even in the utmost demonstration of his majesty, that is, in the triumphal procession (sublissimo curru; tanta … gloria), he had to be reminded of his humanity (cf. Juvenal 10.42; Plinius, nat. 28.39).

When Tertullian claimed that the emperor knew himself that he was not but a man and that, therefore, he would not have wished to be called "god", the subtle threat was evident: an emperor who claimed to be a god incurred the wrath of God. That was dangerous for him and, therefore, he could not want it.

This thought was even intensified in apol. 34, when in 34.3-4 Tertullian underlined the contrast between emperor or man and God:

Be ye religious toward God, you who wish Him propitious to the emperor. Cease to believe there is another God; and cease in the same way to call him God, who needs God. If flattery does not blush at the lie, when it calls such a man God, let it fear the uncanny side of it.

So here it became very clear that in Tertullian's eyes the awe of God commanded that the emperor not be called God in spite of his majesty, because the emperor himself was dependent on God's favour and, therefore, he had to be afraid of wrongfully being called God. So, the Christian attitude towards the emperor was to his own good. In fact, it was the only attitude that did him justice. To sum up, with the analysis of apol. 28-34, it should have become clear how Tertullian criticized major aspects of the emperors' cult while at the same time he tried to underline the Christians' loyalty towards the emperors. To achieve this goal, his concept of maiestas and his categorical distinction between God and man was crucial. He had to criticize the emperors' cult because he was convinced that the one God the Christians believed in was the only one possessing divine majesty. From that point of view, all cultic practices in favour of the emperors were directed towards the demons and, therefore senseless. As soon as the emperors' veneration tended to give divine honours to the emperors, Tertullian had to oppose it because it started to make a deity out of the emperor who was just a human being. Having confessed his fundamental criticism Tertullian could, at the same time, stress the emperors' majesty, a majesty that elevated him above all other human beings, but which remained a human majesty, and a second majesty originating from the one God and his divine majesty. In order to show how the emperors' majesty should be...
venerated in the right way. Tertullian outlined how the Christians prayed for them, swore by their salus and emphasized their humanity. According to him, this was the only way one could avoid becoming a transgressor of imperial policies because it was the only way to do justice to the emperors.

This conviction was echoed when in apol. 35.5 Tertullian depicted the Christians’ decent behaviour during the emperors’ festivals as the “religion of a second majesty”, religio secundae maiestatis. This term was very subtle. The wording secunda maiestas gave a precise label to the emperors’ majesty and its status as Tertullian had described it in the chapters before. Beyond that, the term religio,39 in Tertullian’s use, oscillated between the worship of the one God and the veneration of human dignitaries as the emperors. In the first line, Tertullian used it for the Christian attitude towards the one God (cf. 13.1; 16.14; 24.1; 39.16) and the whole argumentation in apol. 10–27 tended towards this understanding. But with the term, he could also refer to the “Christians’ religious awe … of the emperor”, to the religio … Christiana in imperatorem (apol. 33.1). This means that Tertullian not only attributed majesty to God as well as to the emperors – as far as the latter was a second, human majesty – he could also apply terms like religio or pietas (cf. 33.1) in relation to divine and to imperial majesty. It seems that Tertullian enjoyed playing with these ambiguities. But he could only do so because for him it was highly evident that religio referring to divine majesty was categorically distinct from religio referring to the second majesty. While with those linguistic techniques he underlined his fundamental criticism of the emperors’ cult, at the same time he emphasized how much the Christians venerated the emperors.

It is difficult to imagine that Tertullian succeeded in this way in convincing non-Christians that Christians were not transgressors against imperial policies.40 Nevertheless, it helped him to depict a distinct Christian self-image.

**References**

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39 On the Roman use of the term religio, see Muth 1978, 290-354.

40 As we do not have any evidence of pagan reactions, one can only speculate about the impact that apol. had in the pagan context. On the other hand, in the Christian context, the apol. had of course a certain reception. See Georges 2011, 48-50.