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Identity Games in Early Christian Texts: The *Letter to Diognetus*

Judith M. Lieu

The explosion of interest in ‘identity’ as an organizing principle for the study of early Christianity and its literature has prompted new readings of familiar texts as well as bringing others out of obscurity. Among the latter is the anonymous writing, probably from the second century, known as the *Letter to Diognetus*. Not only does it include within its vocabulary many of the key terms and catch-phrases in the debate, but it also explicitly articulates the tension between separation and belonging that is a hallmark of any investigation into the social experience as well as the textual construction of the early Christian movement. Indeed, for this reason it has long served as a proof-text for systematic and pastoral theologians even before it grasped the critical analytical attention of those more attuned to the rhetorical strategies that accompanied the emergence of early Christianity. It was *Diognetus* that provided for the present author an entrée into the vigorous discussions of the constructed nature of ethnicity both in contemporary analysis and in studies of classical antiquity, and provoked a much more extensive attempt to map early Christian identity through a conversation between contemporary models and a close reading of the literature, Jewish and Greco-Roman as well as Christian, of the first two centuries.¹

Over the twenty years since that first foray the analysis of identity has become ubiquitous even as it has also evolved, moving in new, sometimes conflicting, directions both in contemporary theory and application and in the analysis of antiquity, including Christian antiquity. The ubiquity can generate a degree of blandness, the restating of familiar observations in the truisms of a flattened theoretical base – appeals to boundaries and to the construction of ‘the other’ – both on the side of those who, unsurprisingly, find ‘identity’ everywhere and of those who deny its applicability either to the past in general or to early Christianity in particular. One of the consequences of this is that whereas the investigation of a textually constructed identity arose in part from the emphasis on the diversity of early Christianity that dominated the

¹ Judith M. Lieu, ‘The Forging of Christian Identity and the *Letter to Diognetus*’, *Mediterranean Archaeology* 11 (1998): 71–82, reprinted in *eadem*, *Neither Jew nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity*, 2nd edn ([2003] London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 185–203; *eadem*, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

last quarter of the twentieth century, which was resistant to notions of a uniform orthodoxy, the Christianity-as-constructed that has emerged is in danger of assuming a certain homogeneity, reinforcing the gap between it and any attempt to recover lived experience. It is within this context that this essay returns to *Diognetus* to reflect on how it fares within the established world of identity scholarship and to bring it into dialogue with new questions as well as with old texts.

The value of *Diognetus* for questions of identity-formation is established by the question it purports to answer in the opening prologue: 'And why indeed as new has this *genos* or practice entered life now and not previously?' (καὶ τί δὴ ποτε καινὸν τοῦτο γένος ἢ ἐπιτήδευμα εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸν βίον νῦν καὶ οὐ πρότερον. 1.1). The more familiar translation, 'this new race', has proved to be a highly quotable point of appeal for discussions of the ethnic dimension of early Christianity.² Yet equally quotable has been the later claim that 'Christians are not distinguished from other people in country, language or dress (*or customs*)³ ... every foreign place is their homeland, and every homeland foreign' (5.1, 5). Hence *Diognetus* can be understood as introducing an ethnic understanding of early Christianity (as γένος) and at the same time as transcending one. This apparent contradiction might be understood simply as a consequence of what appears to be the composite character of a text whose original context and shape have been lost: Despite attempts to do so it is difficult to find a coherent structure or theology across all twelve chapters. Nonetheless, what follows will trace these tensions through a unitary reading of the early chapters of *Diognetus* and will seek to show how as a consequence it can be seen as engaging in a complex play with then contemporary appeals to forms of identity.

The prologue implies that the question and hence the language of γένος are posed by the addressee, Diognetus, who is assumed to be an interested 'outsider'; hence, this is presented primarily as an ascribed, or etic, identity. Supporting evidence for the external origin of the label has readily been found: Suetonius describes the Christians as 'a *genus* of people holding a new and mischievous *superstitio*' (*Nero* 16.2), which itself may draw on Livy's presentation of the Bacchic controversy of 168 BCE where, using a more politically loaded term, the threat posed is summarized by the emergence of 'almost a second (or 'alternative') people' (*alterum populum*: *Hist.* 39.13.14; cf. 16.10, '*superstitio*').⁴ In the same trajectory, Tertullian, a century later, describes the 'peoples of the nations' as crying out 'for how long the third race!' (*usque quo genus tertium*: *Scorp.* 10), although the meaning of this supposedly popular catcall is far from evident; elsewhere he subjects the epithet to characteristic ridicule, exploiting the ambiguity of *genus* which might be applied to either *natio* or *superstitio* and objecting that in neither case would the Christians count as third (*Nat.* 1.8). As shall be seen, the wide semantic range of

² So Clayton N. Jefford, ed., *The Epistle to Diognetus (with the Fragment of Quadratus): Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (Oxford Apostolic Fathers; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 135; *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. and ed. Bart D. Ehrman (LCL 25; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), II:131; for its use, see Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

³ The manuscript tradition is 'dress' (ἔσθῃσι) although many editors/ translators follow the emendation 'customs' (ἔθεσι).

⁴ On *superstitio*, see pp. 62–5. Pliny's account of the Christians, although possibly echoing Livy, uses the language of *superstitio* but not of *genus/ populus* (*Ep.* 10.96).

genus/γένος, and their fluidity even within a single author, is much discussed, and is only exacerbated by the mismatch with notions of ‘race’ in the modern period. Undoubtedly it can be used in polemical denigration of the characteristics of other ‘peoples’, as when Cato famously described the Greeks as ‘the most wicked and uneducated *genus*’ (*apud* Pliny, *Nat.* 29; cf. Vergil, *Aen.* 8.321), but perhaps in the case of Suetonius ‘class’ would be a more appropriate translation – although to deny any explicitly ethnic categories does not exclude the overtones of threat and possible subversion. Thus, at first reading Diognetus’ question is potentially less innocent than it may sound.

On the other hand, it is not at all obvious that *Diognetus* presupposes an antagonistic relationship with its audience. The label ‘letter’ is probably not original; although to some extent it is supported by the singular address, it remains not entirely apposite, for the verbs used are of speaking and listening, not of writing (1.2; 2.1, etc.).⁵ It has often been aligned with the apologetic writings of the second century, but it is not directly polemical, and while at times persecution appears to be the norm, there is nothing to give such references any precision in terms of time and context (5.11–17; 6.5, 9).⁶ Others have described it as a protreptic text, an introduction and invitation to an enquirer to engage in the philosophical life. Certainly the author describes himself as ‘a teacher of the nations’ (11.1), but the invitations with which the text closes are remarkably understated (12.1, 8). In any case, while the implied audience is external, the actual, and probably the intended, audience was internal. The opening move, therefore, must be read as a literary device, using models chosen by the author, and it needs to be examined alongside his other literary strategies. Its effect is sustained by the phrases ‘I expect you are keen to hear ... I do not think you need to learn from me’, which act as prompts to new stages in the argument (3.1; 4.1). Putting the question with the specific label γένος in the mouth of his addressee offers the author the possibility of interrogating and negotiating it without needing to justify its use.

The same purpose is served when Diognetus’ interest is described as ‘concerning the *theosebeia* of the Christians’ (1.1). This term would support placing *Diognetus* amongst the apologists for whom it is a primary epithet.⁷ A recent edition translates θεοσέβεια four different ways in six passages: religion (1.1), worship (3.[1], 3; 6.4), reverence (4.5), devotion (4.6);⁸ none quite fits and the problem illustrates the difficulty of applying the category of ‘religion’ to the ancient world. θεοσέβεια both parallels and, in many Christian writings, replaces the more common Greek virtue of εὐσέβεια; εὐσέβεια provided a *koiné* among all groups for claims to religious and civic or familial piety, and there is some evidence that Jewish apologetics similarly found in θεοσέβεια some competitive advantage (4 Macc. 7.6, 22, etc.; *Jos. Asen.* 4.9; 8.5–8). Among the Christian apologists it is used in particular in competition with the claims of both Judaism and civic society, and in the later period it does become a preferred way of referring to the Christian ‘religion.’⁹ Although exhibited by individuals, both εὐσέβεια and θεοσέβεια

⁵ The title may have been simply ‘To Diognetus’; cf. 11.1: ‘I speak’ (ὁμιλῶ).

⁶ See p. 68.

⁷ On this and what follows, see Judith M. Lieu, ‘The Race of the Godfearers,’ *JTS* 46 (1995): 483–501, reprinted in *eadem*, *Neither Jew nor Greek?* 66–85.

⁸ Jefford, *Epistle to Diognetus*.

⁹ Cf. Eusebius *Praep. ev.* 1.5.12, who contrasts Christianity with Hellenism and Judaism as a ‘new *theosophia*’.

are corporate virtues, just as impiety, ἀσέβεια – which the author directs to the Jews (4.3) – matters not as a private position but for its social manifestations, as also does ‘atheism’. Contemporaneous with *Diognetus* both the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (3.2) and Melito’s lost ‘Apology’ to Marcus Aurelius (*apud* Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.26.5) combine θεοσέβεια with the language of γένος: the ‘godfearing race’ or ‘race of godfearers’. Such language deliberately exploits the semantic breadth of γένος, inasmuch as it mimics its ethnic characteristics at the same time as, by adopting a delimiting identifier that refers neither to place nor to ancestry, it undermines the strategies of differential labelling that belong to the latter.

Here that θεοσέβεια, about which *Diognetus* is so eager to learn, has three elements: (1) the identity of the God in whom the Christians trust, together with the manner of their worship; (2) the nature of their love for each other; and (3) the question discussed earlier, ‘Why, indeed, this *genos* or *epitēdeuma* as new has entered life now and not previously?’ The relationship between these questions is not clear; in part this is because the first question (τίνι θεῷ ... πῶς) has been disrupted by an addition that grammatically now constitutes the main clause – namely, that they disdain the world and despise death, and neither recognize those considered gods by the Greeks nor observe the superstition of the Jews.¹⁰ The logic of the argument suggests that the first part of this expansion itself has been displaced and should properly accompany the love for one another. *Diognetus* would, therefore, be asking about the nature first of their God and worship (which contrasts with that of Greeks and Jews), and, second, of their mutual affection (which is matched by their disdain for the world and for death). For an insider these two might be seen as echoing the dual command of love for God and for neighbour or internal ‘other’ – although there are no explicit allusions even in the vocabulary used, other than a possible echo of Rom. 12.10 (εἰς ἀλλήλους φιλόστοργοι).¹¹ For an outsider, religious allegiance and corporate commitment would align the Christians with other cult groups or associations, even if the latter on occasion could be seen as politically dangerous. While the third element does add a new aspect – why *now*? – it also serves to summarize the first two as constituting γένος or ἐπιτήδευμα.

1 Which god and what manner of worship?

The insertion into the more general question, ‘which god and what sort of worship?’ (*Diogn.* 1), of the contrast between ‘Greeks’ and ‘Jews’, together with the loaded language of ‘reckoned’ and ‘superstition’ (νομίζω, δεισιδαιμονία), reinforces the shift from an outsider to an insider discourse: ‘Neither the gods reckoned by the Greeks nor the superstition of the Jews’. The alternative draws on Jewish antecedents, although there it usually takes the reverse order (‘Jews and Greeks’), and it forms a conceptual opposition that should not be confused with debates as to whether ‘Judaism’ was ‘hellenized’. Both are treated as unitary, and in the original formulation there is no

¹⁰ Hence the questions are now followed by participles, leading translations to represent the main verbs within a result clause: ‘In which god they trust ... so that they all ignore the world’.

¹¹ Φιλοστοργία was among the admired values of family affection.

further or third option – it is a binary opposition that functions on both the universal and the local levels. In a Jewish framework the context is not normally ‘religious’: for example, Josephus distinguishes between Jewish and Greek authorities for his own apologetic and historical work, while he also identifies the conflict in Alexandria as between Jews and Greeks (*Apion* 1.72; *War* 1.17, 94; *Ant.* 18.257; cf. 2 Macc. 4.36). As an external observer, by contrast, Cassius Dio describes the Jews in Cyprus as killing Greeks and Romans (*Hist.* 68.32). However, the stereotyped pairing Jew/Greek is much more frequent in Christian sources, particularly in the context of the new alternative to both, and it occurs in this sense already in Paul (Rom. 1.16; 3.9; 1 Cor. 1.22; 12.13, etc.).¹² There, however, it belongs to a world system shaped by the history of God’s dealings with humankind, without the specifically political and cultural resonances.¹³

In what follows the author implicitly, but not explicitly, addresses Diognetus as belonging to the Greeks: ‘Those considered by the Greeks as gods’ becomes ‘those you (pl.) consider gods’ (1.1; 2.1, 7). Similarly, the singular ‘you’ (‘Come now!’) gives way to the plural, although this is in part qualified by the initial call, ‘Purify yourself (sing.) from all the reasonings that constrain your understanding ... and become as it were a new human being’ (2.1). Again, this may betray the incorporation of earlier material with a more directly polemical tone.¹⁴ Yet it also serves to reinforce the fact that the Jews consistently represent a separate third party, about whom the author assumes Diognetus knows as much as he does himself (3–4). Thus the Jews function as ‘Other’ both to the implied audience and to the implied author; in context, as shall be seen, this provides a cover for the harsh direct invective that sets Jews against Christians. Despite this, the author does not locate himself within the universe he is describing; even while the authorial first-person singular is sustained (1.1–2; 3.1; 4.1, 6; 7.1), the Christians are also consistently referred to in the third person, ‘they’.¹⁵

The account of those whom ‘you’ consider as gods takes the form of a stereotypical denunciation of the worship of items of wood or metal, fashioned in much the same way as everyday utensils (2.5–6); parallels elsewhere in Jewish and Christian writings abound and there is little sense of immediacy.¹⁶ Besides a passing comment regarding ‘your’ hatred of Christians, this is seen as sufficient explanation of why Christians ‘are not enslaved’ to such gods (2.6, 10).¹⁷

The question as to why ‘they’ (Christians) do not practice their piety (θεοσεβείν) in a similar fashion to the Jews occupies rather more of the author’s attention, and is clearly more pressing. The recurrence of the vocabulary of θεοσεβεία, absent from the account of the Greeks, confirms that herein lies an urgent competition (3.1, 3; 4.5, 6). Unlike the Greeks, the Jews might have some claim to θεοσεβεία, on the grounds that

¹² Acts 14.1; 18.4; 19.10 is closer to Josephus. See Clement of Alexandria, *Protr.* 11.112 for the threefold ‘barbarian, Jew, Greek’.

¹³ It may be that we should therefore be sceptical of Eusebius’ account of the two apologists Apollinarius and Miltiades as addressing separately ‘Jews’ and ‘Greeks’ (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.27; 5.17).

¹⁴ However, the variation between singular and plural continues in 11.7–8; 12.1, 7.

¹⁵ The first-person plural in 8.11; 9.1, 2, etc., is generic, ‘humankind’. The *Apology* of Aristides similarly uses the third person in its account of the Christians, but it also does so with reference to the Greeks.

¹⁶ For other similar early Christian polemic, see Jefford, *Epistle to Diognetus*, 203–8.

¹⁷ The perfect passive should be retained rather than a more anodyne ‘do not serve’. There may be an echo of Gal. 4.9–10 here.

they also revered, σέβειν, one God, θεός (3.2);¹⁸ however, this claim is swiftly proved void. Even though they properly avoid the practices of the Greeks just described, and recognize one God – both potentially although not explicitly shared with the Christians – the worship (θρησκεία) of the Jews is reduced to the same level as that of the Greeks, simply by their participation in a sacrificial system which offers God that which God does not need (3.3-5). Despite the absence of scriptural quotations, in a post-70 context these are biblical Jews and most likely would be persuasive as such only to an internal audience. However, the following chapter adds a further characterization of the Jews that would probably have been more widely shared – their food laws, sabbath, circumcision, and fasting and new moon, and then their close attention to stars and moon in order to determine the seasons and liturgical cycle (4). These are condemned not only in philosophical terms for misunderstanding God's oversight as creator but more directly by a litany of derogatory nouns, 'superstition', 'pride', 'naivety', 'deceit', 'pretence', 'meddling', 'folly'. Far from being 'pious' (godfearing), they are exposed as impious (4.3).

There can be little doubt that the urgency of the author's polemic lies in the differentiation from the Jews, and that its rhetorical effectiveness is reinforced by implicit intertextual resonances. Some of these would be effective for insiders, recalling internal strategies of differentiation from practices associated with the (Jewish) law (Gal. 4.10; Col. 2.16);¹⁹ stronger associations probably lie elsewhere, in the long history of hostile comments on the Jews by both Greek and Roman authors. The author had already used 'superstition' (δαισινισμός) of the Jews in his initial question (1.1), and its repetition here reinforces the rejection of any more positive label. 'Superstition' was a charge that was regularly levelled against the Jews, as it was against other foreign cults seen as dangerous to civic society;²⁰ it had of course also been directed against the Christians, although at the most that is only indirectly being refuted here.²¹ The accusation of pride would echo the widespread denunciation of Jewish unsociability and hostility to everyone else; the mockery, in particular of their pride in 'mutilation of the flesh' as a sign of election and divine preference (4.4), partly recalls the polemical association of circumcision with Jewish self-separation,²² even if couched in language more familiar among Christian circles. 'Meddlesomeness' may have recalled complaints about their involvement in local civic disputes as well as their proselytism.²³ On the other hand, there was already a Jewish apologetic tradition that refuted these negative charges and celebrated as marks of Jewish piety (εὐσέβεια) the spread throughout the empire among non-Jews of those very practices that the author has identified for condemnation (Josephus, *Apion* 2.282-4).²⁴ However, the author

¹⁸ If the emendation 'correctly' (καλῶς) is to be read here, then the author makes some grudging concession, only then to withdraw it.

¹⁹ For parallels, see Jefford, *Epistle to Diognetus*, 213-17.

²⁰ For example, Cicero, *Flac.* 67 for whom Judaism is a *barbara superstitio*.

²¹ Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44; Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96.

²² Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.2: 'They introduced circumcision of the genitals in order to be recognized by their difference.'

²³ See the full discussion of charges against the Jews in Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 440-77.

²⁴ Josephus here largely ignores circumcision.

provides no hint that he is aware of this. Indeed, although it is hard to imagine that his audience, internal or external, would have had no knowledge of commonalities between Jews and Christians, for this author they simply do not exist, not even to be refuted. Indeed, neither here nor later in his account does the author give the slightest hint that Jewish history and experience had any role to play in the sending of the Son by God or in the Christian claims to a past or to an identity.²⁵ Instead, he closes this part of the argument by reducing the Greek and Jewish alternatives to Christian concepts of the divine to a matter of somewhat anodyne moral qualities – the reverse side of their own *θεοσέβεια* is their avoidance of the general emptiness and deceit (perhaps of the Greeks), and meddling and pride of the Jews (4.6).

2 The *θεοσέβεια* of the Christians

Thus far the argument seems to presume that Christians are ‘the same sort of thing’ as Greeks and Jews; the process of answering Diognetus’ question has led the reader to expect a parallel account of how the Christians themselves understand God, and perhaps why they live as they do, although this has not been addressed directly with reference to Greeks or Jews. Instead the author gives up the rhetoric of differentiation, and moves to a new way of structuring reality, an undifferentiated one overlaid on a binary model structured around citizenship. The Jews now overtly disappear from his conceptual, cultural, and spatial world, although perhaps we may detect their shadowy presence. Instead, his claim that Christians live equally in ‘Greek and barbarian’ cities (5.4) does not refer to Greeks and Jews, as it might elsewhere, but to what was a familiar pairing within the Hellenistic and then the Roman empires, in particular in relation to the cities of Asia Minor with their different histories and structures.²⁶

With this, in contrast to the formulaic opposition to and between the worship of the Greeks and Jews, the imagery assumes an urban context, not merely as a sociological reality but by evoking the city as the defining locus of communal and civilized living (cf. *πολιται*, 5.5) – contrary to the uncouth inhabitants of the fields and forests. A civic model would not of itself be incompatible with an ethnic one (cf. 2 Maccabees). Rather, by opening his account with a denial that Christians differ from all other people²⁷ in ‘land, tongue or dress (customs)’ (5.1),²⁸ the fundamental principles of ethnic reasoning are being evoked and simultaneously undermined; it was axiomatic that people do differ amongst themselves precisely in these ways, and that these differences have far-reaching consequences. Language, dialect, customs, and lifestyle are what make a Greek Greek, and equally a barbarian barbarian – and in other contexts, a Jew,

²⁵ The references to being ‘dishonoured by the people’ and to ‘the fathers ... the law ... and the prophets’ in 11.3, 5-6 do not seriously change this.

²⁶ Plutarch, *Per.* 20.1: ταῖς μὲν ἑλληνίσιν πόλεσιν ... τοῖς δὲ περιοικοῦσι βαρβάροις ἔθνεσι (the Greek cities ... while to the neighbouring barbarian nations); cf. *Luc.* 26.1; Thucydides, *Hist.* 1.6.6; 7.80.3.

²⁷ Contrast Cassius Dio who says of the Jews that they ‘are separated from all other people (τῶν λοιπῶν ἀνθρώπων)’ in all other matters of daily life and especially in their failure to honour any of the other gods. (*Hist.* 37.17)

²⁸ See note 3.

a Jew. For Strabo it is fundamental that the nation (ἔθνος) of the Armenians, and those of the Syrians and Arabs display a commonality of race (ὁμοφυλία) in dialect, life, and types (character) of body, and that all three belong in Mesopotamia (*Geogr.* 1.2.34). At the same time the potential malleability of 'language, customs and lifestyle' made it possible for the barbarian to become Greek, or even for the Greek to become Jew or barbarian, although this only underlines that such malleability is predicated on a prior differentiation: Apollonius of Tyana rejects the rights of the Ionians to retain the name 'Greeks' just on the grounds that they were a Greek colony, for Greekness also requires 'customs, laws, tongue and personal life' (*Epist.* 71). As the author further reduces such variation, even between Greek and barbarian, to being a matter of 'local customs' (τοῖς ἐγχωρίοις ἔθουσιν, 5.4), and as followed as such by the Christians, contemporary models both of Greekness and of citizenship are being consciously decentred: 'Local' (ἐγχώριος) is routinely used in contrast both to a shared 'Greek' elite culture and to its civic embodiment.²⁹ Josephus claims both to surpass his fellow-nationals (ὁμοεθνῆς) in their local education (τὴν ἐπιχώριον ... παιδείαν), and to have learnt Greek prose and style, although ancestral practice (πάτριος ... συνήθεια; i.e. using his own language) impeded his pronunciation (*Ant.* 20.263).

Lucian, himself exemplary of the malleability of identity, provides a provocative dialogue partner for a reading of *Diognetus*, when he describes the visit of Anarchasis from Scythia to Athens, where he finds himself a 'foreigner and barbarian' (ξένος καὶ βαρβάρος), not least because no one speaks his language and the Greeks mock his clothing.³⁰ About to give up, he is prevented from so doing by a chance meeting with Toxaris, who himself was also originally from Scythia but moved to Athens out of love for Greece and the best ways of life (ἐπιτηδεύματα); while Toxaris recognizes Anarchasis by his dress, the latter had no way of knowing he was 'of the same people' (ὁμοεθνῆς) because of his Greek clothing, his shaven chin, his lack of belt or sword, and his fluent speech. Indeed, states Lucian, he was an aboriginal (αὐτόχθονος) Attic, so changed by time (*Scyth.* 3). There is certainly more than a little irony here, for Lucian had already explained that Toxaris was worshipped as a 'hero' in Athens and thus demonstrated that the attribution of immortality to someone was not only a local (ἐπιχώριος) practice among Scythians but also possible in Greece; even so, cult was paid to him as 'the Foreign Physician', and his shrine was decorated with the recognizable figure of a Scythian man.

Yet our author now takes a new tack as he acknowledges that Christians as individuals do have a native land or place of citizenship (πατρίς), but denies that these in any way determine who they are and where they belong (5.5). While this may seem to be an effort to distance Christians from the identity politics of the day, his strategy nonetheless continues to reflect the degree to which any predication of customs and lifestyle onto specific place increasingly required careful negotiation, as indeed was bound to happen in the wake of the spread of Greek colonies – as Apollonius' letter to the Ionians illustrates. Josephus, perhaps reflecting contemporary dilemmas, imagines

²⁹ Thus it carries some of the nuances of the English, 'the locals', and is used of customs, gods, animals, etc., that are encountered as strange by a visitor or invader.

³⁰ Lucian, *The Scythian*. Lucian tells this story to explain his own experience as a Syrian seeking an entrée in Greek cities.

the Midianite women, once they had persuaded the Hebrew youths to marry them, demanding that they worship their gods; if they refuse so to do 'they must seek some other land wherein to live alone according to their own laws' (*Ant.* 4.134-8). On the other hand, Cassius Dio, after expressing uncertainty as to why the land he knows as Palestine was called Judaea and its inhabitants Jews, goes on to explain that the label was transferred to other people, even of other nations, who adhered to their practices, and that 'this race (τὸ γένος τοῦτο) is even to be found among the Romans' (*Hist.* 37.16-17). A recurring concern for the Jews of the diaspora, celebrated by Josephus in a long cache of letters, was their need for imperial support to follow their ancestral customs (τὰ πάτρια) and also to send money to Jerusalem, something Augustus granted because of the support the 'Jewish nation' gave him, namely by the leadership in Judea (*Ant.* 16.160-78).

It is within this trajectory that the apologist Athenagoras stands when he claimed that Roman permission to other peoples to follow their own customs and laws ought equally to apply to the Christians (*Leg.* 1). *Diognetus* adopts a very different tactic of negotiation – Christians are content to follow local practice in clothing, lifestyle, and other aspects of life; he would, presumably, plead not guilty to Celsus' accusation that the Christians transgress the fundamental principle that everyone should live according to their ancestral customs (τὰ πάτρια), when they abandon these, even though they are not an *ethnos* like the Jews (see Origen, *Cels.* 5.35). But then, with a sudden twist, the author asserts that in so doing the Christians demonstrate the extraordinary and counter-intuitive 'constitution of their own polity' (κατάστασις τῆς ἑαυτῶν πολιτείας, 5.4) – although here too even while claiming difference he draws on the conventional terminology of analysis of different political systems or patterns of organization (cf. Plutarch *Publ.* 6.6; *Cam.* 1.2).

To illustrate that 'paradoxical' constitution, the author moves into an asyndetic litany founded on a set of antitheses: 'They happen to be in flesh, but they do not live according to the flesh' (5.6-15). Only the first part of this litany (5.6-10) directly addresses differentness, although subsumed under similarity ('like everyone else they marry'), and even here the examples are conventional: The avoidance of exposing their young and strict marital fidelity (5.6-7) in practice were shared with the Jews and perhaps more widely valued – something that is not conceded but would determine any apologetic effectiveness. Although it might be expected that they married and shared a table only among themselves, this is not stated – and it is difficult to ignore the fact that the Jewish separation of table and marriage bed was regarded with disgust and suspicion: 'Separated at meals, isolated in their beds, a race (*gens*) most prone to lust, they abstain from intercourse with foreign women, while among themselves nothing is prohibited' (Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.2). Nonetheless, it is striking that there are no hints of a set of distinctive communal practices among the Christians. The initial assertion of their love for one another is not illustrated, as in other apologetic writings, by any practical examples.³¹ Unlike many contemporary Christian writings, *Diognetus* does not introduce the language of family and kinship.

³¹ In chapter 10 not oppressing one's neighbours and supporting the needy is validated as being a form of imitation of God.

In the second part of the litany a series of passive verbs, ‘persecuted, condemned, put to death, dishonoured’, begin to problematize the initial assertion of conformity (5.11-15). If, as is possible, this is traditional material, it is recontextualized by the return to the tripartite model at the close, although now expressed in the vocabulary of national or civic conflict and enmity (ἔχθρα) – ‘they are warred on by the Jews as belonging to a foreign nation,’³² pursued by the Greeks’. However, the main target is not the unjust suffering: In the following chapter the abuse and hatred Christians endure is as much in the nature of things as is the antipathy between body and soul (6.5-6). Instead, the primary focus is rather on how their identity is almost entirely defined in their antithetical response to the treatment meted out to them. Although the connection is not made explicit, this recalls the initial specification of their ‘disdain for death’ (1.1). This was a known characteristic of the Christians, perhaps deliberately mocked by Lucian in his account of Peregrinus (*Peregr.* 23; 33), but it was more positively valued in philosophical circles (Epictetus, *Diatr.* 4.1.70-71). It could therefore find a place in apologetic competition: Josephus celebrates the readiness to despise death in war as a God-given gift to the Jews, and through them to the world (*Apion* 2.293-4). Yet, in contradistinction to Jewish tradition, in *Diognetus*’ account Christians have no ancestral practices of their own; neither do they die for them nor yet for their πολιτεία. In contrast to the *Martyr Acts* where the martyrs defiantly claim ‘Christian’ as fulfilling every dimension of their ethnic identity,³³ here the label has no added value.

This abnegation might be seen as a highly distinctive application of the theme of Christians as ‘sojourners and foreigners’ that introduces the litany (πάροικοι ... ξένοι, 5.5).³⁴ This much-studied topos hearkens back to a long tradition in Jewish thought, and is then adopted within Christian tradition, most notably as stimulated by 1 Peter (which also uses the language of γένος; 1 Pet. 1.1, 17; 2.9, 11).³⁵ In *Diognetus* the alternation with the language of ‘homeland’ (πατρίς), and the qualifying ‘as’ (ὡς), subvert the stability of the metaphor as one of either sustained alienation or relocation: They are, after all, ‘citizens’, perhaps unlike the ‘migrants’ (παρεπίδημοι) of 1 Peter 1.1. The contrast between how they ‘spend time on earth but exercise citizenship in heaven’ similarly maintains rather than transcends the metaphors of space (5.9).³⁶ In a new set of images chapter 6 compares Christians in the world to the soul in the body, and so develops further the dialectical relationship with the constraints of spatiality.

³² Not ξένοι as in 5.5, but ἀλλόφυλοι, the term used to translate the Philistines in the LXX and the opponents of the Maccabees, and more generally of non-Greek ‘foreigners’ by Josephus.

³³ See Judith M. Lieu, “‘I am a Christian’: Martyrdom and the Beginning of a ‘Christian Identity’”, in *eadem*, *Neither Jew nor Greek?* 223-43.

³⁴ ‘They live in their own homelands, but as sojourners; they share in all things as citizens, and endure all things as foreigners; every foreign land is their homeland, and every homeland foreign’.

³⁵ Besides commentaries and discussions of 1 Peter, see Benjamin H. Dunning, *Aliens and Sojourners: Self as Other in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), especially 64-77 on *Diognetus*.

³⁶ ‘Spend time’, διατρίβω, is how Toxaris describes his long and permanent move to Athens (Lucian, *Scyth.* 4). It is important to capture the active verbal force of πολιτεύομαι (Mid.), contrary to the translation ‘their citizenship is in heaven’; in 10.7 the same expression is used of God, although translators normally ascribe ideas of governing to the verb there.

The moves that *Diognetus* makes have been readily aligned alongside other contemporary and competing claims to transcend the local – archetypically by Greekness, but then also by Romanness.³⁷ These, too, however, are no less predicated on a deep consciousness of place: Other peoples may have fixed boundaries, but when it comes to Rome's space, city and world are one (Ovid, *Fast.* 2.683-4). Philo, perhaps courting political danger, sees Caligula's moves against Jerusalem as endangering the 'more universal *politeia* of the Jews', in contrast to their particular conflict in Alexandria (*Legat.* 194). By contrast, the philosophical aspiration of being a citizen of the world remained an aspiration predicated on specifically Hellenistic ideals; in particular it could provide a framework for dealing with the experience of exile and dislocation, thus recentring the *locus* of philosophical authority.³⁸ Citizenship of heaven, however, is restricted to Jewish and then Christian sources. Philo, who can speak of a citizenship of the world (e.g. *Vit. Mos.* 2.51), pursues a characteristically idiosyncratic negotiation of this second concept: Interpreting Genesis 47 where Joseph's brothers settle in the despised Egypt, he imagines the response, 'we came to sojourn not to dwell' (παροικεῖν, οὐ κατοικεῖν), explaining that for the soul of the wise man heaven is the homeland, earth a foreign one (πατρίς ... ξένη; *Agr.* 64-5). This is not *Diognetus*' position, which here is characteristically ambiguous, both disclaiming overt political claims and yet evoking them through the expectation of not just being reviled, but being warred upon.

3 As new this γένος or ἐπιτήδευμα

So what does it mean for them to be described as a γένος ἢ ἐπιτήδευμα? Within this framework, here, as elsewhere, the use of γένος has provoked considerable debate: Is it best translated as 'race' or as 'kind/type'? The debates that lie behind this choice have often been rehearsed; it is not a matter of whether antiquity knew the concept of race as it has been developed in the modern period – few would make that claim although there might be more disagreement as to whether its antecedents may be found there.³⁹ Rather it is a question of how the criteria for differentiation, and the rhetorical strategies that justify and reinforce this, are to be interpreted. Those who prefer 'kind/type' draw attention to the concern with religious practice, and to the theological debates over idolatry and/or law observance in the accounts of 'the Greeks' and 'the Jews'. Each of these, as has been seen, has its own historical and literary antecedents in contexts where ethnic/racial categories are not always determinative. Arguably implicit within this approach is the assumption that whatever term is used must presuppose some degree of articulation in social practice, whether confirmatory or contradictory.

Those who prefer to translate γένος as 'race' do so in terms of what Denise Buell has succinctly described as 'ethnic reasoning'.⁴⁰ The introduction by *Diognetus* of the term ἐπιτήδευμα does not diminish an ethnic dimension: As with Lucian's *Toxaris*,

³⁷ Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 212–15.

³⁸ For example, Epictetus, *Diatr.* 2.10.3; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 11.16, 18.

³⁹ Isaac, *Invention*.

⁴⁰ Buell, *This New Race*, 30–3, 36.

customs belong firmly to the aspects of an ethnic identity; similarly, Galen identifies his audience as including 'even those whom nature made barbarian by race but who desire Greek ἐπιτηδεύματα' (*De santitate* 6. 51). One of the recognized challenges of a concentration on rhetorical strategies is that the definitional boundaries between categories of race, ethnicity, and, in the modern context, nationhood, as well as even 'culture', become blurred. As has been seen, the particular association of identity with place and hence any clear distinction between 'ethnic' and 'cultural' identity were breaking down in the early Empire if not before. From this perspective the emphasis is on discourse and hence on rhetorical strategy more than on social practice. Certainly *Diognetus*' strategy of comparing the practices of the Greeks and the Jews with those of the Christians, and the static and formulaic terms in which these are described, could be seen as an exercise in ethnic reasoning: Difference is being constructed by ignoring anything that might be shared. There is no suggestion that there are Greeks or Jews who think differently, nor that some have moved naturally to join the Christians, or might do so. On the other hand, the negative account of 'the other' is not accompanied by a demonstration of the civilized self. Do we know how Christians *do* worship?⁴¹

The issue has not been helped by the tendency to read *Diognetus* in the light of the *Apology* of Aristides and of the *Preaching of Peter*. Aristides describes humankind as divided into three (in the Greek version) or four (Syriac) races (γένος), largely defined in terms of their beliefs and practices concerning the gods; in the Syriac these are the barbarians, Greeks, Jews, and Christians; in the Greek they are 'worshippers of those called gods by you', later further subdivided as Chaldeans, Greeks, and Egyptians, and then the Jews and the Christians. Yet an important part of Aristides' scheme is the origins and 'genealogy' of each of these, something in which *Diognetus* has no interest. In the fragmentary *Kerygma Petri* the audience, purportedly those already taught by Peter, are urged 'not to worship (σέβεσθαι) according to the Greeks' nor 'according to the Jews', but to 'worship God through Jesus Christ in a new way (καινῶς)' (Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 6.5.39-42). The criticism of both Greek and Jewish worship follows closely that made by *Diognetus*, suggesting some literary links. These, and a further link with Aristides' *Apology*, might be strengthened if the *Kerygma* is the source for the immediately following appeal to Jeremiah's prophecy of a new covenant, and for the concluding words, 'For the things of the Greeks and the Jews are old, but we Christians (are those) who worship him in a new way (καινῶς), in a third *genos* (τρίτῳ γένει).' Here too there is considerable debate as to whether the phrase should be translated 'in a third style', 'as a third type', or 'as a third race'.⁴² However, it is as likely that this final comment is not part of the *Kerygma* but is by Clement himself.⁴³ Moreover, the differences from *Diognetus*, who apparently shows no interest in how Christians worship (σέβεσθαι), are no less striking.

Here, however, lies the answer to *Diognetus*' initial question with its deliberate emphasis, 'Why new (καινόν), now?' This question is not to be answered in terms

⁴¹ The term used in *Diognetus*' question, 'how they worship him' (θρησκεύω), is used of Greeks and Jews but not of the Christians (1.1; 2.8; 3.2).

⁴² See p. 60 on Tertullian.

⁴³ In *Strom.* 5.14.98 Clement interprets Plato's three forms of πολιτεία as representing the Jews, the Greeks, and the Christians; cf. also 3.10.70.

of prophecy or of a divine economy: What they have learnt owes nothing to ‘the consideration or insight of meddlesome people’,⁴⁴ nor yet to human doctrines (5.3). Whereas other apologists answered the accusation of innovation by providing the Christians with a history reaching back to the origins of the world or of the scriptural past,⁴⁵ Diognetus is warned that he will never understand unless he becomes ‘as a totally new person’ and is ready to be a hearer of ‘a new form of speech (λόγος)’ (2.1). The Christian θεοσέβεια is a mystery (μυστήριον, 4.6), just as it is also invisible (ἀόρατος, 6.4): these two assertions bracket the chapters we have been studying, and through them θεοσέβεια becomes radically redefined, no longer an attribute of those who practice or display it, but determined by its source, the invisible God (7.1-2). Hence the author now drops the term and speaks instead of mystery (7.1-2; 8.10; 10.7; 11.2, 5).⁴⁶

The author of *Diognetus* has neither affirmed nor denied the categories of ‘race and way of life’, nor yet has he reinterpreted them within the categories of a transfigured citizenship. Indeed, all the categories that he does evoke have to undergo some degree of transfiguration, or, in more contemporary terms, of repeated deferral. On one level this expresses itself as a point-blank refusal to engage in the religio-ethnic competition that the terminology invites. Yet there have been hints that beneath what might be seen as a high level of abstraction from time and place a sophisticated (counter-)offensive is being prosecuted, if not against Judaism itself, then against the popular perception and presentation of Judaism, which was irreducibly a γένος καὶ ἐπιτήδευμα. Whether this was conscious, or, despite the author’s best efforts, was in the nature of things is impossible to determine. No less impossible to determine must also be that aspect of identity that in the end matters — how, for the readers of the text, it was to be performed.

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⁴⁴ The term echoes the criticism of the Jews in 4.6.

⁴⁵ Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 84–6; but 11.4, ‘who appeared new but was discovered old’ slightly moderates this.

⁴⁶ On this, see T. J. Lang, *Mystery and the Making of a Christian Historical Consciousness: From Paul to the Second Century* (BZNW 219; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), 52–62.