.

The Label Χριστιανός: 1 Peter 4:16 and the Formation of Christian Identity

DAVID G. HORRELL
d.g.horrell@exeter.ac.uk
University of Exeter, Exeter EX4 4QH, United Kingdom

It is perhaps surprising that NT scholars have not devoted more attention in recent years to the origin and significance of the term Χριστιανός, given its eventual significance as *the* definitive label for the movement that began around Jesus of Nazareth.[1] One obvious reason for this comparative neglect is the rarity of the term in the NT itself; it occurs only three times, in Acts 11:26; 26:28; and 1 Pet 4:16, becoming more frequent only later, notably in Ignatius, Polycarp, and Diognetus.[2]

---

[1] As will be evident in the notes that follow, many of the pertinent discussions of the name come from the earlier decades of the twentieth century, up to the 1960s. Notable recent discussions include Justin Taylor, "Why Were the Disciples First Called 'Christians' at Antioch? (Acts 11, 26)," *RB* 101 (1994): 75–94; and Helga Botermann, *Das Judenedikt des Kaisers Claudius* (Hermes Einzelschriften 71; Stuttgart: Steiner, 1996), 141–88. Also noteworthy as broader treatments of the making of Christian identity are Judith M. Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); eadem, *Neither Jew nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002).

[2] Ign. *Eph.* 11.2; 14.2; *Magn.* 4.1; *Trall.* 6.1; *Rom.* 3.2; *Pol.* 7.3; *Mart. Pol.* 3.2; 10.1; 12.1–2; *Diogn.* 1.1; 2.6, 10; 4.6; 5.1; 6.1–9. Ignatius is evidently the first Christian writer to employ the term with any frequency. He is also the first author to use (or coin?) the substantive Χριστιανισμός (*Magn.* 10.1; 10.3; *Rom.* 3.3; *Phld.* 6.1; also in *Mart. Pol.* 10.1). By the time of *Diognetus* the label Χριστιανός seems to be well established as a (the?) standard and accepted self-designation, as also in, e.g., Tertullian's *Apology*. Important early non-Christian references are in Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44; Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2; Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96–97; Lucian, *Alex.* 25, 38; *De morte Peregr.* 11–13, 16; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.64

Another reason is perhaps the sense that there is little to say, or at least little new to say, since the pertinent features of the word's etymology are well established. In this essay, however, I shall suggest that, despite the paucity of references, there is indeed considerable insight to be gained from examining this label and its significance, particularly when analysis is enriched with social-scientific resources relating to the possible reactions to negative labels in relation to social identity. I shall also argue, more specifically, that the reference in 1 Pet 4:16 is—despite the greater focus of attention on Acts 11:26—especially valuable with regard to illuminating the origin and significance of the term, and, indeed, that this text represents the earliest witness to the crucial process whereby the term was transformed from a hostile label applied by outsiders to a proudly claimed self-designation.

I. The Origins of the Term

It has been long and uncontroversially established that the word Χριστιανός is a Latinism, the ending -ιανός being a Grecized form of the Latin *-ianus*.[3] Generally, the formations derive from a proper name or title and denote the followers, supporters, adherents, or partisans of a person, as in *Brutianus, Augustianus, Caesarianus*, and so on.[4] The basic sense conveyed by the suffix is that of "belonging to."[5] The context could define the relation of dependence or allegiance more precisely, to include clients, slaves, and so on, as well as the more common sense of political or military support.[6]

Most scholars agree that the designation originated with outsiders, not the

<hr />

(the authenticity of which is famously disputed). The inscription from Pompey in *CIL* 4 §679 is too uncertain to be used (the editor of *CIL* comments: "Lectio inscriptionis . . . admodum incerta est").

[3] See, e.g., Theodor Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament* (3 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1909), 2:193; Henry J. Cadbury, "Names for Christians and Christianity in Acts," in *The Beginnings of Christianity*, ed. F. J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, Part 1, *The Acts of the Apostles* (London: Macmillan, 1933), 5:375–92, esp. 384–85; Elias Bikerman [Bickerman], "Les Hérodiens," *RB* 47 (1938): 184–97, esp. 193; Erik Peterson, "Christianus" (first pub. 1946), in idem, *Frühkirche, Judentum und Gnosis* (Rome/Freiburg/Vienna: Herder, 1959), 64–87, esp. 69; Ceslas Spicq, "Ce que signifie le titre de Chrétien," *ST* 15 (1961): 68–78; cited here from the reprint in idem, *Théologie Morale du Nouveau Testament* (2 vols.; Paris: Gabalda, 1970), 1:407–16, esp. 411; Taylor, "Christians," 76. I have seen no demurral from this conclusion in the commentaries or other works on 1 Peter.

[4] See H. H. Rowley, "The Herodians in the Gospels," *JTS* 41 (1940): 14–27, esp. 26; Bikerman, "Les Hérodiens," 193; Harold B. Mattingley, "The Origin of the Name *Christiani*," *JTS* 9 (1958): 26–37, esp. 27; John H. Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 37B; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 789. For many examples, see Zahn, *Introduction*, 193.

[5] Elias J. Bickerman, "The Name of Christians," *HTR* 42 (1949): 109–24, esp. 118.

[6] Rowley, "Herodians," 26. Cf. Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (ed. Conrad H. Gempf; WUNT 49; Tübingen: Mohr, 1989), 177 with n. 36, who also notes that the form could be used for adoptive *cognomina*.

Christians themselves.[7] More difficult to determine is whether the name was most likely coined by general members of the populace, as many suggest, or by Roman authorities, as Erik Peterson and Justin Taylor argue.[8] A decision on this matter depends to some extent on the likely place of origin (on which see below), but we shall assume for the moment that Luke's statement that the term was first used in Antioch is correct. There are a number of reasons that may favor an origin among members of the Roman administration. First is the etymology of the word, which suggests an "origin within Latin-speaking circles."[9] This is not a decisive support for the argument, given both the presence in Antioch of a considerable number of Romans/Italians, traders, and the like,[10] and the awareness of Latin terms and forms among the wider populace. It remains highly plausible, however, that a new term of Latin formation would originate in the encounter between Romans and the followers of Christ. Second is the use of the term χρηματίζω, the verb Luke uses in Acts 11:26, to refer to official or juridical designation rather than to informal naming, an argument developed especially by Peterson.[11] Similarly, Luke's use of πρώτως, Peterson argues, also conveys a legal or juristic sense, as in legal documents where it indicates that something is now being recorded that will henceforth have force (Peterson suggests the German word "erstmalig . . . im Sinne einer die Zukunft bestimmenden Norm").[12] It remains open to question whether these words need always or necessarily convey such legal or juristic nuances, so the arguments are again less than decisive, but a probable case begins to mount. Third is the general point, developed by Taylor, that "in the non-Christian first-century sources, the names Christ and Christian are invariably associated with public disorders and

---

[7] See Elliott, *1 Peter,* 790 with n. 609.

[8] Peterson, "Christianus"; Taylor, "Christians." See also Botermann, *Judenedikt,* 147–57; Marta Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994), 22 n. 27; Adolf von Harnack, *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (2 vols.; London: Williams & Norgate, 1905), 2:15–16 n. 1.

[9] Elliott, *1 Peter,* 789. Elliott goes on to attribute the origin of the term to "its invention by Gentile residents of Antioch" (p. 790), but one may wonder whether he, like many others, takes the indications of "origin within Latin-speaking circles" seriously enough.

[10] On the presence of Romans/Italians in Syria, especially in the large commercial centers like Antioch, see Maurice Sartre, "Romains et Italiens en Syrie: Contribution à l'histoire de la première province romaine de Syrie," in *The Greek East in the Roman Context* (ed. Olli Salomes; Helsinki: Foundation of the Finnish Institute at Athens, 2001), 127–40, esp. 130–33.

[11] Peterson, "Christianus," 67–69 ("Χρηματίζειν ist im Unterschied zu καλεῖν ein Terminus der Amtssprache. . . . [Es] bedeutet 'einen rechtmäßigen Namen (Titel) führen'. Der juristische Charakter des Wortes ist auch in der Literatur deutlich zu erkennen" (p. 67). See also Taylor, "Christians," 80, 82–83, who, however, points out that Rom 7:3 and other texts indicate that the verb need not always convey an official sense (p. 80 n. 19).

[12] Peterson, "Christianus," 68 with n. 10, who gives examples from the papyri. As Botermann (*Judenedikt,* 157–58) points out, these philological aspects of the understanding of Acts 11:26 have been somewhat neglected by NT commentators.

crimes."[13] This may also explain the reluctance of the Christians to adopt the term as a self-designation and their later apologetic efforts to argue for positive nuances inherent in the name. In the end, it is difficult to be certain about the precise circles of origin of the term, but there is a good deal to be said for the thesis that it was first coined in Latin, in the sphere of Roman administration, arising from the encounter between Christianity and the imperial regime (in the provinces?).

Given the Latin roots of the term, and its occurrence in reports about happenings in Rome by Tacitus and Suetonius, a few scholars have suggested, contra Luke, that the name *Christianus* originated in Rome.[14] The appearance of the term in 1 Peter, usually assigned a Roman origin, might add some weight to this proposal. Nevertheless, while we can be reasonably sure that the term was known and used in Rome, probably from or before the time of Nero's persecution (see below), the evidence does not constitute an entirely convincing case against the name's origins in Antioch. Luke's record is, of course, the primary datum in support of the latter location, but there are strong grounds for taking his report—or his citation of a source—seriously. The note he gives about the origins of the term Χριστιανός seems unlikely to have been constructed in service of any theological agenda or apologetic *Tendenz*; it reads rather straightforwardly like the conveying of a piece of information of which Luke was aware, without there being any particular reason to convey—or invent—it at this point. Luke was no doubt aware that the Gentile mission achieved notable success in Antioch and that the church there achieved a distinct and visible identity vis-à-vis Judaism; he could therefore have decided that this was an appropriate place—in theological as well as historical terms—to designate as the origin of the appellation. But these are equally strong reasons why a term like Χριστιανός should actually have arisen in such a location, precisely where our earliest sources report the church's practices, in a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles, as no longer conforming to a distinctively Jewish way of life (Gal 2:11–14: ἐθνικῶς καὶ οὐχὶ Ἰουδαϊκῶς ζῆν [cf. Acts 11:19–20; 15:1–35]). The Latin form of the term, moreover, is no proof against an origin in Antioch, especially if the name did originate as an official designation in administrative circles. The fact that the earliest uses of the term in Christian texts, outside Acts and 1 Peter, occur in writings linked with Antioch—perhaps the *Didache*[15] and certainly Ignatius— seems also to support Luke's information.[16] An origin in Antioch, if unprovable,

---

[13] Taylor, "Christians," 84. Cf. Botermann, *Judenedikt*, 156, 187–88.

[14] For discussion of this suggestion, by, *inter alii*, A. Gercke and F. C. Baur, see Taylor, "Christians," 79–80; Cadbury, "Names for Christians in Acts," 385; and Zahn, *Introduction*, 191.

[15] Kurt Niederwimmer (*The Didache: A Commentary* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1998], 186) suggests that the term is here "already a common and unproblematic self-designation . . . a title of honor." Given that this is the sole occurrence of the term in the *Didache* the claim that it is "common" is hardly warranted, especially given the possible doubts about its authenticity here. But in any case, Niederwimmer argues that we must remain agnostic about the provenance of the text (pp. 53–54).

[16] Cf. Taylor, "Christians," 77.

seems a plausible conclusion. Nonetheless, what the evidence of Acts, 1 Peter, Pliny, Tacitus, and so on, indicates, is that, though slow to appear with any frequency in Christian literature, the term did become known across the empire, certainly by the end of the first or in the early second century, and probably some time before this.

In terms of the date of the name's origin, many scholars, focusing primarily on Acts 11:26, presume that the term Χριστιανός originated in Antioch around 39–44 C.E.[17] Arguments in favor of this early date have recently been mounted by Taylor, but his case depends on following the Western text of Acts 11:26 and, crucially, its addition of τότε ("at that time").[18] It is unlikely, though, that this is the original reading.[19]

Indeed, even taking Luke's information with full seriousness, there are grounds for questioning this early date. If we follow the Alexandrian text generally accepted as the most likely reading here, Luke himself does not state that the term originated in Antioch at the time he had just described, but only that "it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians'" (NRSV), ἐγένετο . . . χρηματίσαι τε πρώτως ἐν Ἀντιοχείᾳ τοὺς μαθητὰς Χριστιανούς. This closing phrase is only loosely connected with what precedes and reads like a distinct item of information. Thus, as Gerd Lüdemann remarks, "Even if the information about the emergence of the name Christian is reliable, one certainly cannot say whether Luke has put it at the right chronological point."[20] Helga Botermann likewise stresses that this is a summary report about Antioch and that Luke is concerned to indicate not the time of the name's use but the place.[21]

A further reason to doubt the early origins of the name is its absence from the earliest NT writings and its rarity throughout the NT. Even if one were to concede Elias Bickerman's point that it was not a term Christians used of one another, but only of themselves in relation to the outside world,[22] the fact that Paul nowhere uses the term, despite his unquestionably close links with Antioch (Acts 11:26–30; 13:1–3; 14:26–15:35; Gal 2:11), must raise doubts about its formulation there in the time prior to any of the letters, even though such an argument from silence can hardly be decisive. Paul's own terminology is to refer to a Christian as an ἄνθρω-

---

[17] E.g., Zahn, *Introduction*, 192 (43–44 C.E.); Harnack, *Expansion of Christianity*, 18 (ca. 40–45 C.E.); Taylor, "Christians," 94 (39–40 C.E.); Sordi, *Christians*, 15 (36–37 C.E., adopted by the Christians themselves ca. 42 C.E.).

[18] D[(2)] (and gig p, sy[hmg]) reads: καὶ τότε πρῶτον ἐχρημάτισαν ἐν Ἀντιοχείᾳ οἱ μαθηταὶ Χριστιανοί.

[19] Peterson, for example, comments that the Western text represents an attempt "durch die Einführung des τότε die abrupte Notiz in 26 b rational und kausal mit dem vorhergehenden zu verknüpfen" ("Christianus," 65).

[20] Gerd Lüdemann, *Early Christianity According to the Traditions in Acts: A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1989), 138. Similarly, Hemer, *Acts*, 177.

[21] Botermann, *Judenedikt*, 145 (see further n. 27 below).

[22] Bickerman, "Name," 115.

πος ἐν Χριστῷ (2 Cor 12:2) or as someone who is simply Χριστοῦ (1 Cor 1:12; 3:23; 2 Cor 10:7; cf. also Mark 9:41). This use of the name of Christ is also evident, significantly, in 1 Pet 4:14, shortly before the crucial use of the term Χριστιανός (4:16). The early Christians, it seems, could and would choose to designate themselves as bearing the name Χριστοῦ (or Ἰησοῦ [Acts 5:40–41]).[23] To anticipate our later discussion somewhat, their own form of confession would more likely have been Χριστοῦ εἰμί rather than Χριστιανὸς εἰμί.

Tacitus's famous remarks about Nero's punishment of the Christians (*Ann.* 15.44), following the fire of 64 c.e., do provide, as Harold Mattingley notes, evidence that the term *Christiani* was known in Rome at this time. Although Tacitus's account was written later (early second century), he clearly makes the point that, back at the time immediately after the fire, the populace were already referring to the members of this new superstition as *Christiani* (*quos . . . vulgus Christianos appellabat*).[24] It is possible that Tacitus is guilty of anachronism here, but his rather deliberate statement, combined with the evidence from Acts (πρῶτως . . .) and the other indications that the name was known across the empire by the end of the century, seems to support the conclusion that the name was indeed used by, or before, 64.

It is unlikely that our sparse evidence will allow a more specific hypothesis to be sustained with confidence. There are strong reasons to doubt that the name was formed as early as the 40s c.e., not least since Luke himself—our most explicit source about the origins of the name—does not make such a claim.[25] But if it did originate in Antioch, as seems a reasonable conclusion, and was known in Rome by the mid 60s, then it must have been coined at least a little before that time, though how long must remain uncertain. It is possible, though no more than this, that Mattingley suggests approximately the right date (ca. 59–60) even though his explanation—that the term was coined as a conscious and mocking parallel to Nero's *Augustiani*[26]—does not carry conviction. Botermann's suggestion that the term was first coined ca. 57–59 c.e., perhaps by Agrippa, in the context of Paul's hearing in Jerusalem, or during his imprisonment in Caesarea, and then was written in the report sent by Festus to Rome where Paul was sent for trial and thus came

---

[23] It is uncertain what the καλὸν ὄνομα of Jas 2:7 is, though it seems likely to be the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. 2:1). Certainly there is no basis to conclude that it refers to the label Χριστιανός.

[24] It is the use of the imperfect *appellabat* rather than the present *appellat* that is significant here; see Mattingley, "Origin," 32 n. 4; Zahn, *Introduction*, 191–92; Harnack, *Expansion of Christianity*, 19.

[25] The absence of the name from Suetonius's report of disturbances among the Jews of Rome, *impulsore Chresto* (Suet. *Claud.* 25.4)—assuming that *Chrestus* is a reference to Christ—also implies that it had not been coined in the 40s c.e. See Botermann, *Judenedikt*, 142 (and, on Suetonius's report more generally, 50–102).

[26] See Mattingley, "Origin."

to the attention of the imperial authorities in Rome is intriguing but builds rather too much on a slender foundation. It is possible, though hardly demonstrable, that Luke's use of the term in Acts 26:28 indicates the point at which the term originated—but Luke gives no real indication that this was the case.[27]

If it is right that the name originated in the circles of Roman administration and jurisdiction, then this requires that the Christians came to attention in Antioch before the time of Nero's branding them as criminals. Indeed, the narrative of Acts, confirmed in part by Paul's own reports, firmly supports the notion that Christians (generally as troublemakers among the *Jews*) did come to the attention of the city administration in various places (Acts 16:19–39; 17:5–9; 19:23–40; 2 Cor 11:23–25). As Botermann comments, however, there was no reason for these local authorities, charged with keeping the peace in their domain, to involve the wider provincial Roman administration in such cases[28]—hence her suggestion that the transport of Paul the prisoner to Rome first brought the name to the attention of the imperial authorities in Rome. It is possible, of course, that the name did originate in Antioch (*pace* Botermann) but came to attention in Rome precisely because of the appearance of Paul as a prisoner there. But it is hard to feel that we can get much beyond informed speculation regarding such possibilities. Reports of Nero's actions against the Christians after the fire of 64, however, provide the first explicit indication that the adherents of this new superstition were labeled *Christiani* in Rome. Thereafter the name is available to, and used by, Roman officials to designate members of this movement, which had now come to imperial attention.

II. Χριστιανός IN 1 PETER 4

Of the three NT uses of the word Χριστιανός, Acts 11:26 seems to have received most attention. However, Luke's two Χριστιανός texts actually communicate very little about the meaning and significance of the term, the contexts in which it arose, and the nuances that attached to it. The text in 1 Peter, however, although it lacks the kind of explicit historical notice given by Luke, offers a much richer insight into the origin, meaning, and significance of the label. As such, it constitutes our earliest window "from the inside" onto this rather important development in the construction of Christian identity, one specifically forged in the

---

[27] Botermann, *Judenedikt*, 171–77. Botermann sees Acts 11:26 as recording the occasion on which Christians first adopted the name themselves, probably at a time after the narrative of Acts ends and in connection with their refusal to pay the *fiscus Iudaicus* post 70 C.E. This hypothesis requires more substantive argument than Botermann gives for taking χρηματίζω to mean active self-naming, not least since many scholars reject this interpretation (as Botermann indicates), and this claim is crucial if one wants to deny that Luke here reports something about the place of *origin* of the name.

[28] Botermann, *Judenedikt*, 168–69.

encounter between Christians and outsiders. Moreover, it reveals, as does 1 Peter as a whole, much about the ways in which the early Christians were forced to negotiate their relationships with the wider world in general and the Roman authorities in particular.

The third major section of 1 Peter begins at 4:12 with a reference to the "fiery ordeal" currently faced by those whom the author addresses.[29] The theme of suffering, which runs throughout the letter (1:6; 2:19–20; 3:14–17; 4:1, 12–19; 5:10) here finds its most vivid and explicit portrayal. This suffering, which the author insists should not come as a surprise, is explained and discussed in various ways. First, it is a cause for rejoicing insofar as it constitutes a sharing in the sufferings of Christ;[30] indeed accepting these sufferings with joy now is imperative[31] so that the addressees may rejoice far more when Christ's glory is revealed (cf. 1:5–9). The nature and cause of this suffering are described in v. 14: being reviled for the name of Christ. Again the author insists that such maltreatment be accepted positively, as a mark of blessing. Verses 15–16 reveal still more about the envisaged situation, as they distinguish between suffering that is a cause for glory and honor and suffering that is not. One of the themes of the letter has been the need for Christians to "do good," to conduct themselves honorably in the sight of the world (e.g., 2:11–12, 20; 3:8–17). So they are urged here to ensure that none of them suffers as a consequence of wicked conduct, which might result in a person's being labeled a murderer, a thief, or any kind of evildoer, or, indeed, an ἀλλοτριεπίσκοπος, probably best understood as someone who interferes in others' business.[32] Unlike being reviled for the name of Christ, such accusations (if well-founded) and their consequent suffering are not an occasion for rejoicing but are rightly seen as a cause for shame—in contrast to suffering ὡς Χριστιανός, which is no cause for shame (μὴ αἰσχυνέσθω [v. 16]). Indeed, those who suffer *this* accusation should glorify God ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τούτῳ (v. 16).

Assuming this to be the original reading,[33] there remains the question of what

---

[29] Although disagreement continues about the precise structure of 1 Peter, 2:11 and 4:12 clearly mark the beginning of new sections of the letter, indicated with the opening address, ἀγαπητοί.

[30] A notion most closely paralleled in the Pauline letters (see Rom 8:17; 2 Cor 1:5–7; Phil 3:10–11; Col 1:24), and thus one possible indication of Pauline influence on 1 Peter. See further David G. Horrell, "The Product of a Petrine Circle? A Reassessment of the Origin and Character of 1 Peter," *JSNT* 86 (2002): 29–60.

[31] Rightly interpreted as imperative, in parallel with μὴ ξενίζεσθε in v. 12, by Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1996), 306.

[32] See Elliott, *1 Peter*, 785–88, for the meaning of this *hapax*, coined here for the first time in Greek literature and appearing only very rarely some centuries thereafter.

[33] As do, e.g., Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 303–4 n. 6; Elliott, *1 Peter*, 796; Norbert Brox, *Der erste Petrusbrief* (EKK 21; Zurich: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1979), 222. The variant does not find mention in either UBS[4] or Metzger's *TCGNT*. J. Ramsey Michaels (*1 Peter* [WBC 49; Waco: Word Books, 1988], 257 note *e*) argues for the originality of μέρει (P 049) and the recent *Novum Testamentum Graecum, Editio Critica Maior* (vol IV/2; ed. Barbara Aland et al.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2000) opt for this reading.

exactly we should take ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τούτῳ to mean. Most commentators rightly agree that the antecedent to which "this name" refers is not Χριστοῦ (v. 14) but the much nearer Χριστιανός (v. 16).[34] It is, moreover, unnecessary and unconvincing to avoid the direct translation "name" here and to appeal to an idiom, as does J. N. D. Kelly,[35] since in contrast to the uses in Matt 10:41–42 and Mark 9:41, in this case there is no difficulty in taking ὄνομα in its literal sense. There is more discussion over the precise sense to be given to ἐν. Elliott distinguishes three options: instrumental ("with," "by," or "through this name"), locative ("in the sphere of this name"; RSV: "under that name . . ."), and causative (NRSV: "because you bear this name").[36] The distinctions here are not great, but Elliott makes a strong case for the instrumental sense.[37] When labeled and made to suffer as Χριστιανοί they are not to be ashamed but to glorify God with this name, bearing it as a means to honor God. A further explanation is then given as to why this suffering can be joyfully embraced: God's eschatological judgment begins with God's own household (v. 17). But if the judgment of the righteous is hard, how much worse will it be for the unrighteous (v. 18)? Thus, the author concludes drawing this section of the text to a close (ὥστε), those who suffer according to God's will—not, that is, for genuine wrongdoing—can entrust themselves to God's faithfulness (v. 19).

The context in which the word Χριστιανός appears in 1 Peter is highly significant for understanding the origin and importance of the term in the history of early Christianity. The setting is one of hostility and suffering, where believers are ridiculed for their allegiance to Christ. It is in this section of 1 Peter that this situation is most vividly and explicitly portrayed here and that the term Χριστιανός appears. This may be no accident, for the term specifies most clearly and precisely what the target of external criticism was, compared with the rather less specific references earlier in the letter: the Christians' allegiance to Christ. But it also indicates the *form* in which this criticism was expressed. The insiders' terminology, known from elsewhere in the NT, as we have seen, appears earlier in this passage: being reviled for "the name of Christ" (ὄνομα Χριστοῦ). The term Χριστιανός is functionally equivalent—it means, after all, supporters or partisans of Χριστός—but it emerges specifically as one of a number of labels (along with "murderer," "thief," and so on) that may be the direct cause of suffering. The implication—not quite explicit, to be sure—is that these labels are, or may be,[38] attached by outsiders, as accusa-

---

[34] Elliott, *1 Peter*, 796; Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 170 n. 17.

[35] J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude* (BNTC; London: A. & C. Black, 1969), 190–91.

[36] Cf. Elliott, *1 Peter*, 796.

[37] Ibid., 796–97. This sense is also preferred by Brox, *Petrusbrief*, 222; Davids, *First Epistle of Peter*, 170 n. 17.

[38] It is difficult to say whether the addressees were actually encountering accusations that they were murderers and thieves, though the kind of stock, polemical criticisms often directed against Christians makes this not implausible: see, e.g., G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, "Why Were the Early Chris-

tions. There must be no truth in accusations of being murderers and thieves, or even "those who meddle in others' affairs," for Christians are to be demonstrably those who do good and not evil (cf. 4:15, 19); but the accusation of being a Χριστιανός, evidently a reality that was leading to suffering, should be embraced with rejoicing.

III. Suffering ὡς Χριστιανός: 1 Peter AND THE LETTERS OF PLINY

What kind of suffering in what kind of situation does the text then envisage, and how does the name Χριστιανός relate to this? This question is best answered via a consideration of the relationship, if any, between the situation depicted in the letter and that reflected in Pliny's famous correspondence with Trajan (*Ep.* 10.96–97), dated to ca. 111–112 C.E. While some scholars have proposed that the similarities are close and that 1 Peter therefore dates from the same period,[39] the tendency among recent commentators is to favor an earlier date for 1 Peter and to downplay any similarities. John Elliott puts this especially forcefully: "the situation described by Pliny bears *no substantive resemblance* to the situation portrayed in 1 Peter. . . . the Pliny-Trajan exchange has *no bearing* on the import of the label 'Christian' in 1 Peter."[40]

First we must note the essential features of the situation Pliny reports. Christians are coming to trial for their faith. Those who refuse to renounce Christianity are executed (or, if Roman citizens, sent to Rome for trial); those who deny ever having been Christians are released, provided that they demonstrate their religio-political loyalty by invoking the gods and offering to the emperor's statue, and prove their nonallegiance to Christ by reviling his name. Those who admit to having previously been Christians are set the same test. Pliny does not state what he has then done with such former Christians, but he has ascertained from them and from further investigations that the cult does not seem to involve any criminal practices as such; and he evidently favors allowing such people the opportunity to repent. It is clear that those who refuse to renounce their profession of Christianity are exe-

---

tians Persecuted?'" *Past & Present* 26 (1963): 6–38, esp. 20–21; Craig S. de Vos, "Popular Graeco-Roman Responses to Christianity," in *The Early Christian World* (ed. Philip F. Esler; London/New York: Routledge, 2000), 869–89, esp. 877–85; Sordi, *Christians*, 32–33; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.7.11; 5.1.14, 26; 9.5.2; Justin, *1 Apol.* 26; *2 Apol.* 12; Tertullian, *Apol.* 2, 6–7. We can be more confident that accusations of being "meddlers" were a reality, and still more confident that they were actually derided as Χριστιανοί.

[39] E.g., F. W. Beare, *The First Epistle of Peter: The Greek Text with Introduction and Notes* (3rd ed.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1970), 32–35; F. Gerald Downing, "Pliny's Prosecutions of Christians: Revelation and 1 Peter," *JSNT* 34 (1988): 105–23.

[40] Elliott, *1 Peter*, 792 (my emphasis).

cuted for this and not for any other or associated crimes (*flagitia*). Even though Pliny professes uncertainty as to whether punishment is due for the name itself (*nomen ipsum*)—that is, merely for being a *Christianus*—or for crimes associated with the name (*flagitia cohaerentia nomini*), his practice is evidently to proceed on the basis purely of the confession of Christianity.[41] Indeed, Trajan affirms this legal procedure (*actus*)[42] in his reply to Pliny, confirming that punishment was to be executed upon any who were proven to be Christians, that is, for the name itself.[43]

Elliott gives a number of reasons why he considers the situation reflected in 1 Peter to be different from that described by Pliny.[44] The author of 1 Peter "speaks only of the 'reproach' and 'suffering'" experienced by the Christians "and says nothing of their delation by others, their arrest or examination by Roman governors/legates, their trials, or their execution. . . . Suffering public ridicule by being stigmatized as a 'Christ-lackey' (4:16) is several steps removed from being legally denounced, arrested, and punished as a criminal."[45] The exhortation to those who suffer ὡς Χριστιανός "not to be ashamed" is thought to be too weak if martyrdom were potentially in view, and appropriate rather for a context of verbal ridicule: "If being a Christian were itself a crime then its consequence would be legal punishment, not shame (v 16a)."[46] Moreover, there is, according to Elliott, "no evidence proving that at this early point in Christian history" profession of Christianity constituted a "public crime" or "violated some putative Roman law or edict."[47] Even the Pliny–Trajan correspondence, Elliott suggests, reveals no "official Roman policy proscribing Christianity," thus making "clear that for Roman authorities in the early second century Christianity was still an unknown quantity."[48] Fur-

---

[41] See de Ste. Croix, "Early Christians," passim, which demonstrates persuasively that Christians were persecuted "for the Name" beginning "either in 64 or at some time between 64 and 112" (p. 10); also idem, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?—A Rejoinder," *Past & Present* 27 (1964): 28–33, esp. 30; T. D. Barnes, "Legislation against the Christians," *JRS* 58 (1968): 32–50, esp. 37.

[42] A. N. Sherwin-White, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?—An Amendment," *Past & Present* 27 (1964): 23–27, esp. 25: "*actus* is technical for judicial procedure."

[43] This affirmation of Trajan is explicit not so much in his positive statement *si deferantur et arguantur, puniendi sunt*, which could in principle refer to an accusation regarding some form of criminal activity (*flagitium*) but in the negative that follows: *qui negaverit se Christianum esse . . . quamvis suspectus in praeteritum, veniam ex paenitentia impetret* (*Ep.* 97.2).

[44] Elliott also suggests a further difference, that the situation Pliny discusses pertains only to Pontus (from where letter 10.96 was written), whereas 1 Peter envisions a situation faced by Christians throughout the provinces of northern Asia Minor and indeed the whole world (5.9). This does not, however, mean that the situations cannot be similar, only that what Pliny describes for Pontus(-Bithynia) must also be plausible in other parts of the region, and in the empire as a whole.

[45] Elliott, *1 Peter*, 793.

[46] Ibid., 794; cf. Charles Bigg, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1901), 180; Davids, *First Epistle of Peter*, 170.

[47] Elliott, *1 Peter*, 791, citing a similar statement by William J. Dalton, "The First Epistle of Peter," *NJBC*, 903–8, esp. 908.

[48] Elliott, *1 Peter*, 792.

thermore, the author of 1 Peter does not "present any critique of Rome anywhere in the letter, an omission difficult to imagine if Roman authorities were indeed executing innocent Christians as criminals."[49]

These points, however, are by no means persuasive. It should be no great surprise that a Christian writer can reinforce the Christian duty to respect the authority of the state even in a context where the authorities are responsible for punishments meted out to Christians. Paul's infamous exhortations to the Roman Christians (Rom 13:1–7) were in essence repeated in writings that postdate Nero's scapegoating of Christians, an act that was evidently remembered among Christians and non-Christians alike.[50] And even on the point of martyrdom early Christians could reiterate their political loyalty in these terms while at the same time refusing to comply with the demand to abandon their Christian confession (*Mart. Pol.* 10–11).[51] Specifically with regard to 1 Peter, it is worth noting that this letter's affirmation of Roman imperial rule is a good deal more reserved, even implicitly critical, than Paul's.[52] Honoring the emperor (2:17) is appropriate (only) as part of a general disposition to honor all people; and the emperor is not to be revered; that attitude is reserved for God (τὸν θεὸν φοβεῖσθε, τὸν βασιλέα τιμᾶτε)—so however politically loyal 1 Peter urges Christians to be, on the basis of these instructions they would fail the "sacrifice test" with which Pliny tested Christians.[53] There is no affirmation here that the existing authorities have been instituted by God or that they act as God's servant (Rom 13:1–4), nor is there any presumption that the governing authorities necessarily fulfill their role in punishing evil and praising those who do good (1 Pet 2:14; contrast Rom 13:3–4). The author of 1 Peter is probably opti-

---

[49] Ibid., 793

[50] E.g., 1 Tim 2:1–2; Titus 3:1; *1 Clem.* 60.4–61.2. For explicit references to Nero's persecution of Christians, see, e.g., in Christian literature: Tertullian, *Apol.* 5; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.25.4–5 (quoting Tertullian); 4.26.9 (quoting Melito); in non-Christian sources: Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44; Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2.

[51] Glossing the Pauline call for submission with the "Petrine clause" of Acts 5.29 soon became a means to explain the limits to civil obedience and an expression of the Christians' circumscribed political loyalty. See further Ulrich Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer* (EKKNT 6/3, Zurich: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982), 44–45 with n. 190.

[52] I am indebted here to a comparison set out by Gerd Theissen, in lectures on "Ethik des Neuen Testaments," given at the University of Heidelberg in 2003.

[53] On the "sacrifice test," see de Ste. Croix, "Early Christians," 19–21. This is one reason to doubt the argument of Warren Carter that 1 Peter urges Christians to "go all the way" in honoring the emperor through the imperial cult, while at the same time practicing an internal form of resistance, sanctifying Christ in their hearts (1 Pet 3:15; Warren Carter, "Going All the Way? Honoring the Emperor and Sacrificing Wives and Slaves in 1 Peter 2.13–3.6," in *A Feminist Companion to the Catholic Epistles* [ed. Amy-Jill Levine with Maria Mayo Robbins; London/New York: T&T Clark, 2004], 14–33). The formulation of this text also gives reason to doubt Leonhard Goppelt's view that the issue of "divine homage paid to the emperor," which Goppelt sees arising especially in the time of Domitian, "lies quite clearly outside the purview of 1 Peter" (Leonhard Goppelt, *A Commentary on 1 Peter* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 45).

mistic that, through ἀγαθοποιΐα (1 Pet 4:19), Christians can stem the criticism and hostility that unjustly attach to them out of ignorance (2:15; cf. 2:12), a hope that also motivates an apologist like Tertullian, however false the optimism proved to be.

It is also unnecessary and unconvincing to assume that what the author of 1 Peter depicts as the Christians' suffering is *only* a matter of public hostility and verbal reproach. They are, after all, said to be suffering a "fiery trial" that some may well find a surprise and a shock (4:12). And given 1 Peter's consistent use of the verb πάσχω to refer to Christ's suffering to death (2:21, 23; 3:18; 4:1), its use in 4:15, along with the reference in 4:13 to sharing in Christ's sufferings (παθήματα [cf. 1:11; 5:1, 9]), may certainly be taken to indicate that the suffering inflicted by outsiders could be anything "up to and including execution."[54] The key point about Jesus's suffering, after all, was that he was killed, not that he suffered public ridicule. That the author describes the response to suffering in terms of "shame" (4:16) does not mean that it cannot refer to something as momentous as potentially suffering to death. As Elliott has shown, this reflects an anachronistic and culturally inappropriate perception of the importance of shame and honor, far more significant in the ancient world than in the modern West.[55] For a person judged and condemned by society, a death might well be described in terms of shame and ignominy, as indeed is Christ's death (Heb 12:2), though the author of 1 Peter insists that this verdict is not appropriate in the case of those who suffer ὡς Χριστιανός (cf. 4:6; Wis 2:18–3:5; etc.). The fact that the author describes suffering in terms of being reviled, shamed, and so on, by no means proves that the processes involved cannot include legal trials and executions, nor should we present "public hostility" and "official persecution" as alternatives, despite the tendency of commentators so to do (see further below).

There are also closer similarities between Pliny's letters and 1 Peter than Elliott and others perceive.[56] One similarity is that the hostility against Christians originates among the local populace.[57] Most commentators, like Elliott, see the suffering in 1 Peter as stemming from public hostility and opposition to the Christians, rather than from official enactment of some Roman edict defining Christianity as a crime.[58] But the same goes for Pliny's *cognitiones*, which were brought about only

[54] Goppelt, *1 Peter*, 38; cf. 336.

[55] See John H. Elliott, "Disgraced Yet Graced: The Gospel According to 1 Peter in the Key of Honor and Shame," *BTB* 25 (1995): 166–78; Barth L. Campbell, *Honor, Shame, and the Rhetoric of 1 Peter* (SBLDS 160; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998); Jerome H. Neyrey, "'Despising the Shame of the Cross': Honor and Shame in the Johannine Passion Narrative," *Semeia* 68 (1994): 113–37; Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (London: SCM, 1981).

[56] On the other hand, Beare exaggerates when he states that "Pliny's description of his experience and methods could not conceivably correspond more closely to the words of 1 Peter 4.12–16" (*First Epistle of Peter*, 33).

[57] See further de Vos, "Graeco-Roman Responses."

[58] See Elliott, *1 Peter*, 794; Davids, *First Epistle of Peter*, 10; Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 9; Steven R. Bechtler,

at the instigation of accusers, who brought Christians to the governor's attention and mounted formal accusations against them. Pliny has gone so far as to follow up names provided anonymously on a pamphlet—another sign of *public* opposition to the Christians—but is reprimanded by Trajan for entertaining such anonymous accusations, which violated the principle that the accuser must publicly face the accused (Acts 25.16).[59] To pose as alternative causes for suffering either public hostility or a Roman edict outlawing Christianity is to misunderstand the pre-Decian legal position with regard to Christianity.[60] As is often noted, it is only with Decius's edict in 250 c.e. requiring people to sacrifice to the gods that a general persecution of Christians was instigated, though even this was not specifically targeted at Christians and lasted little more than a year.[61] But prior to this, at least from Trajan and probably from the time of Nero (see below), profession of Christianity was indeed treated, albeit sporadically, as a crime punishable by death, but one in which trial and punishment depended first and foremost on persons being brought to Roman attention by an accuser and then on the disposition of particular governors, who wielded considerable power and freedom in such matters.

Another notable similarity is that the suffering is specifically attached to the label "Christian" (Χριστιανός/*Christianus*). The Christians whom 1 Peter addresses may be reviled for the name of Christ (4:14), a form of hostility that is then precisely depicted in terms of the possibility of having to suffer ὡς Χριστιανός. Those whom Pliny has executed are deemed guilty solely on the basis of their confession of being a *Christianus*, for the *nomen ipsum* rather than for any other crime; he asks the accused in person if they are *Christiani* (§3). 1 Peter thus provides the earliest Christian evidence of suffering for the *nomen ipsum* in which the specific Latinism by which the Romans identified these criminals appears.[62] Indeed, as we have already seen, the term may well have originated in the encounter between Roman official-

---

Following in His Steps: Suffering, Community and Christology in 1 Peter (SBLDS 162; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 83–105; Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 314, who notes that "Christianity was not declared formally illegal until 249 CE under the emperor Decius," referring only to David L. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter* (SBLMS 26; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1981), 140, who, however, also makes the point that provincial governors, under the procedures for hearing cases *extra ordinem*, already had the power "to martyr a Christian" without any such law.

[59] See further A. N. Sherwin-White, "The Early Persecutions and Roman Law Again," *JTS* 3 (1952): 199–213, esp. 204–5.

[60] Cf. Joachim Molthagen, "Die Lage der Christen im römischen Reich nach dem 1. Petrusbrief," *Historia* 44 (1995): 422–58, esp. 452.

[61] See further William H. C. Frend, "Martyrdom and Political Oppression," in *Early Christian World*, ed. Esler, 815–39, esp. 827–28; Sordi, *Christians*, 100–105. On the outbreak of the persecution, see Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 6.41.9–13.

[62] Although there are other NT references to suffering for "the name," none is strictly comparable, since they do not have the name Χριστιανός in view, but rather the name of Jesus and/or Christ, etc. (Matt 10:22; Mark 13:13; esp. Acts 5:40–41; cf. also 1 Pet 4:14). Moreover, in Acts 5:40–41 the cause of suffering is an encounter with the Jewish Sanhedrin.

dom and the emerging Jewish-messianic sect that came to be known as Christianity. Thus, without either text explicitly quoting these words, Pliny's letter indicates the crucial question from the Roman side, *Christianus es?*, just as 1 Peter indicates the answer that led to suffering on the part of the Christian, *Christianus sum*/Χριστιανὸς εἰμί (cf., e.g., *Mart. Pol.* 10.1; Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.20).[63]

There are, then, notable similarities between the Pliny–Trajan correspondence and 1 Peter, though this does not necessarily require that the letters date from precisely the same period, as Gerald Downing has argued, on the basis that Pliny's letter marks the beginning of persecution and trials of Christians in Asia Minor.[64] Many Roman historians believe that Christianity was effectively illegal—regarded as inherently criminal—from the time of Nero (or even before), whether or not there was formal legislation to this effect, such that Trajan's rescript largely confirms rather than innovates policy regarding the Christians.[65] And despite the self-deprecatory opening of his letter, there is good reason to believe that Pliny knew a good deal more about how to treat the Christians than he implies. He is clear enough that those who confess the name should be executed (or, if citizens, sent to Rome for trial); his main uncertainty pertains to those who confess to having been Christians but who have now renounced their faith. The key point of his letter, indeed, seems to be to argue that such people should be allowed to repent, an argument Trajan evidently accepts.[66] Moreover, Pliny's letter implies "that trials of Christians were far from rare" and had been going on for some time, even if Pliny himself had not formerly been directly involved (§§1–2).[67]

But if the similarities do not require us to date 1 Peter at precisely the time of Pliny's letter, they do enable us to sketch more fully the kind of scenario that probably underlies the Christian epistle: Christians are experiencing hostility from the populace among whom they live, suffering verbal slander and accusation. This hostility can reach the level where it takes the form of legal accusation, which results in Christians being brought before the governor for trial. It is likely that the popular slander included some of the typical kinds of criminal accusation—that the

---

[63] On the importance of martyrdom as the crucial context in which "Christian" identity was forged, see further Judith M. Lieu, "'I am a Christian': Martyrdom and the Beginning of 'Christian' Identity," in eadem, *Neither Jew nor Greek?* 211–31.

[64] Downing, "Pliny's Prosecutions."

[65] Cf. de Ste. Croix, "Early Christians," 8; Frend, "Martyrdom," 821, 835 ("a religion deemed since the Neronian persecution to be illegal"); Sordi, *Christians*, 63; A. Giovannini, "L'interdit contre les chrétiens: raison d'état ou mesure de police?" *Cahiers du Centre Glotz* [Paris] 7 (1996): 103–34; Botermann, *Judenedikt*, 156, 187, who takes from Peterson ("Christianus," 77) a definition of what the Romans understood by the term *Christiani* in the first century: "Juden, die unter dem Einfluß von Christus Unruhen verursachen." Similarly, F. Vittinghoff, "'Christianus sum': Das 'Verbrechen' von Aussenseitern der römischen Gesellschaft," *Historia* 33 (1984): 331–57, esp. 336, 355.

[66] Barnes, "Legislation," 36 with n. 49.

[67] Ibid., 37.

Christians committed incest, were murderers, cannibals, and so on[68]—and the
accusations brought to the governor may also have included mention of such *flagi-
tia*. This again is confirmed in 1 Peter, where the likelihood of accusations of var-
ious kinds of evildoing is apparent (4:15), and the author is concerned that no such
accusations should stick. But the crucial accusation, in the end, would be that of
being *Christianus*, the *nomen* coined by Romans to designate such persons. This,
if proven in the manner Pliny describes, would most likely lead to suffering like
Christ, suffering to death. And it is precisely such suffering that the author of 1 Peter
insists is a noble experience, which, far from being shameful and degrading —as
outsiders no doubt saw it—brings glory to God.

IV. Χριστιανός, Conflict, and the Construction of Christian Identity

Just as 1 Peter provides our earliest glimpse "from the inside" into the specific
contexts and experiences in which the term Χριστιανός arose and was employed,
so the term itself provides us with a window onto significant aspects of the devel-
opment of early Christian identity, particularly insofar as this relates to outsiders'
perceptions of the movement. In the final sections of this essay I want briefly to
explore the significance of the term Χριστιανός and the settings in which it arose
—as depicted in 1 Peter 4—for the development of Christian identity. My primary
theoretical resources for this task will be taken from the field of social psychology.

A first step is to see the label Χριστιανός as a form of *stigma*. That is to say,
in the words of Erving Goffman's classic definition, it is "an attribute that is deeply
discrediting" in terms of the wider society's values and assumptions.[69] Someone
who bears a stigma is "the bearer of a 'mark' that defines him or her as deviant,
flawed, limited, spoiled, or generally undesirable."[70] The forms in which stigma is
indicated and felt through the processes of social interaction vary widely, but in
the case of the label Χριστιανός, 1 Peter makes it clear that those who bore this
"mark"[71] were subject both to informal hostility and to official censure, negative
responses that could combine in the accusatorial process to bring about physical
suffering and death. Also clear from 1 Peter is the reality that, from outsiders' point
of view, bearing this mark was a cause of shame. Goffman, indeed, notes that this
is precisely a product of the process of stigmatization: "Shame becomes a central

---

[68] See n. 38 above.
[69] Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963; London: Pen-
guin, 1990), 13, taken up, e.g., by Irwin Katz, *Stigma: A Social Psychological Analysis* (Hillsdale, NJ:
Lawrence Erlbaum, 1981), 2.
[70] Edward E. Jones et al., *Social Stigma: The Psychology of Marked Relationships* (New York:
Freeman, 1984), 6.
[71] This is the terminology of Jones et al., *Social Stigma*.

possibility, arising from the individual's perception of one of his own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess."[72]

One of the key points about a stigma, of course, is that it assumes a larger role than simply being one of a number of characteristics an individual may bear. It is, or is felt to be, an identity-defining mark, one that the processes of social interaction and labeling make central to the designation of who or what someone is.[73] In Irwin Katz's words: "certain negative qualities or traits have the power to discredit, in the eyes of others, the whole moral being of the possessor."[74] In the terms used by social-identity theorists, in such cases a particular feature of a person's identity becomes especially or predominantly salient. Why certain features of a person's necessarily complex and multifaceted identity become salient at different points in time, and in different contexts, is precisely one of the things that has interested social-identity theorists such as Henri Tajfel and his collaborators and successors. As the term suggests, these social psychologists have focused on those facets of identity that may be defined as "social" as opposed to "personal," that is, "that *part* of an individual's self-concept that derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership."[75] The label Χριστιανός is a stigmatizing label associated not with a facet of personal identity—such as disability or disfigurement—but with a feature of social identity deriving from group membership. In relation to the term Χριστιανός, one thing that is interesting is that it is outsiders who heighten the salience of this label, not only by coining it in the first place but also by making it, in judicial settings, *the* crucial identifier that determines whether a person is or is not a social deviant, whether they can be permitted to remain in society or not. The *nomen ipsum*, to use Pliny's phrase, is the point on which everything hangs. The attempt to make allegiance to Christ the central and all-defining reference point for members of the early Christian movement had already been undertaken by insiders. Paul provides the clearest examples of an insistence that it is belonging to Christ, being in Christ, that is all-defining and all important and renders other facets of a person's identity—ethnic-religious, social, and sexual—insignificant, nothing (Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 12:13; Col 3:11; cf. also 1 Cor 3:23; 7:19; Gal 5:6; 6:15). An ironic and surely unintended consequence, then, of the outsiders' hostile labeling of believers as Χριστιανοί, is that it confirms and increases the salience of this aspect of the insiders' shared social identity and increases the extent to which this facet of their identity defines their commonality and sense of belonging together—increases, indeed, their sense that this badge is the one they must own or deny in the face of hostility. The outsiders' hostile criticism, which also indi-

---

[72] Goffman, *Stigma*, 18.

[73] Cf. Katz, *Stigma*, 118–23.

[74] Ibid., 118.

[75] Henri Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 255.

cates that they have come to identify Christians as distinct from Jews in general, plays its part, then, in forging and fostering a sense of shared *Christian* identity.

This last observation should also draw our attention to the importance of hostility and conflict in the formation of Christian identity, and specifically to the positive impact of conflict in strengthening group identity and boundaries, as classically identified by Georg Simmel and later Lewis Coser.[76] However negative the consequences of conflict with the wider public and the Roman imperium were for Christians, individually and corporately—and 1 Peter's attempts to provide consolation and hope are testimony to the reality of the negative pressures—we should not ignore the crucial and positive consequences, at least from a sociological perspective, for the formation of specifically Christian identity.

Another axiom of social identity theory is that people "strive to achieve or to maintain positive social identity" and that such positive social identity is "based to a large extent on favourable comparisons that can be made between the in-group and some relevant out-groups."[77] Negative identifiers, and stigmas in particular, are negative precisely because of the way in which they are judged by the wider society or by dominant social groups relative to the specific in-group identified. People who are disabled, or fat—key examples for studies of stigma—have to cope with the negative stereotypes, assumptions, and attitudes with which they are confronted. The same was the case, *mutatis mutandis*, with Christians, whose group membership was taken to indicate, as we have seen, an antisocial criminality and who were thus shamed by those among whom they lived, whether by ridicule and hostility or by the more physical shame of arrest and execution.

Henri Tajfel and John Turner have set out the options for an individual suffering negative social identity, setting these options within the framework of two contrasting patterns of social assumptions, labeled "social mobility" and "social change."[78] Where social mobility is believed to be a possibility, a likely strategy for the individual facing a negative social identity is individual mobility, that is, leaving the group.[79] This was a real option for the early Christians, as again the evi-

---

[76] Georg Simmel, *Conflict and the Web of Group-Affiliations* (1908; Glencoe: Free Press, 1955); Lewis Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956). For a broader sketch of the relevance of these perspectives to the emergence of early Christianity, see David G. Horrell, "'Becoming Christian': Solidifying Christian Identity and Content," in *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches* (ed. Anthony Blasi, Jean Duhaime, and Paul-Andre Turcotte; Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira, 2002), 309–35.

[77] Henri Tajfel and John Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in *Intergroup Relations: Essential Readings* (ed. Michael A. Hogg and Dominic Abrams; Philadelphia: Psychology Press, 2001), 94–109, here 101, originally published in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (ed. W. G. Austin and S. Worchel; Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 33–47.

[78] Tajfel and Turner, "Intergroup Conflict," 95–96. See also Michael A. Hogg and Graham M. Vaughan, *Social Psychology* (4th ed.; London/New York: Prentice Hall, 2005), 411; Michael A. Hogg and Dominic Abrams, *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes* (London/New York: Routledge, 1988), 54–57.

[79] Tajfel and Turner, "Intergroup Conflict," 103–4.

dence of Pliny confirms: cursing Christ and offering to the gods is sufficient, what-
ever a person's past commitments, to secure their pardon and reintegration into
society. And Pliny knows of Christians who have abandoned their faith, in the
recent and the more distant past. 1 Peter does not show explicit concern to warn
against apostasy, as, by contrast, does the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 6:4–8). But
the general concern of 1 Peter to offer consolation and hope and its specific plea not
to be ashamed at bearing the name Χριστιανός indicate the perceived need to
counteract pressures to abandon this commitment.

Other strategies come under the general heading of *social creativity*, that is,
where group members "seek positive distinctiveness for the in-group by redefining
or altering the elements of the comparative situation."[80] Most relevant to our con-
sideration of the term Χριστιανός in 1 Peter 4 is the strategy of *"changing the val-
ues assigned to the attributes of the group, so that comparisons which were previously
negative are now perceived as positive."* The "classic example," Tajfel and Turner
note, is "Black is beautiful."[81] In other words, terms and designators with a negative
social-identity value are retained, but reclaimed and reinterpreted, with what we
may perhaps call polemical pride, as positive ones. Gay people's (re)claiming of the
derogatory label "queer" is one recent example: the term is now used (with polem-
ical pride?) as a self-designation.[82] A recent BBC documentary on contemporary
life among British Pakistanis examined another comparable example:

> the use of the term "Paki" over the decades. Although it was deemed acceptable
> in mainstream television coverage in the seventies and early eighties, for many
> British Asians today it remains a totally unacceptable form of racist abuse. How-
> ever, some young British Pakistanis are now trying to reclaim the word as a badge   ·
> they are proud of.[83]

Ancient examples of a comparable process may exist in names like Pharisees and
Cynics, both of which may have begun as negative designations used by outsiders
but then came to be claimed by insiders as their own self-description.[84] Similarly,
in 1 Peter 4, while being "in Christ" and bearing "the name of Christ" (4:14) are
insiders' ways to describe their identity, Χριστιανός is a label applied from out-
side, in the context of accusation. It, and the suffering that can follow as its conse-
quence, are doubtless perceived by outsiders as a cause of shame, degradation, and

---

[80] Ibid., 104.

[81] Ibid.; see also Hogg and Vaughan, *Social Psychology*, 413.

[82] For one of many examples, there is a society titled Imperial Queers, which (to quote the Web site) "is the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered society of Imperial College, London" (http://www.union.ic.ac.uk/scc/IQ/about.html).

[83] "British, Paki and Proud," 9:20–11:00 P.M., BBC 2, March 5, 2005. The quotation is taken from the description of the program at www.bbc.co.uk/print/bradford/features/2005/03/paki.shtml (accessed March 21, 2005).

[84] See A. I. Baumgarten, "The Name of the Pharisees," *JBL* 102 (1983): 411–28, esp. 423–27. Baumgarten is uncertain whether the name of the Pharisees began as a denunciation, though this is certainly a possibility.

humiliation. 1 Peter 4 represents an attempt to reverse this social verdict, at least in the eyes of insiders. A label applied as an accusation, a cause for punishment and shame, is to be regarded as a badge of honor and pride. Thus, 1 Peter 4 provides a brief but unique and illuminating insight into the beginnings of the process whereby the label applied as a term of disdain by outsiders comes first to be one that insiders accept—but as a source of honor, not shame—and then one that they later claim and use themselves as their basic designation of group belonging. Ignatius reveals a further stage in the process, expressing the desire not only to be *called* a Christian but to *be* one (μὴ μόνον καλεῖσθαι Χριστιανούς, ἀλλὰ καὶ εἶναι) (*Magn.* 4.1; cf. *Rom.* 3.2): here the term is well on the way to being used by insiders as a "true" designation of what they really are.[85]

In terms of social identity theory, then, we see the author of 1 Peter here engaging in a strategy of social creativity, attempting to give a positive value to what outsiders perceive as a cause of shame, to the term Χριστιανός, insisting that the "true" value of suffering ὡς Χριστιανός is as a way of bringing glory to God. For the early Christians this is but one facet of a fundamental need, rooted in the very origins of the movement, to reverse the social value judgments through which others perceived them. Jesus's death as a criminal on a cross marked him as a rebel who ended his days in degradation and shame; but the early Christians insisted that his death was instead a moment of glory and not shame, or, at least, that the verdict of the cross was reversed by the vindication of the resurrection. Similarly, the label Χριστιανός was used to indicate an antisocial criminality that was justly a cause for shame and punishment; but the author of 1 Peter insists that the label is no shame but instead a source of honor, even and especially when it leads to suffering, precisely because it represents a sharing in Christ's sufferings (4:13), a following in his footsteps (2:21). This reversal of societal judgments, the insistence that the very opposite is in fact the case, was one means, essential to early Christianity, whereby attempts were made to construct and sustain a positive sense of group identity.

V. Conclusion

A study of the term Χριστιανός thus provides an important source of insight into the development of early Christianity, important not least since it facilitates and requires an engagement with both Christian and non-Christian Roman sources and thus brings together the concerns and approaches of NT scholars and ancient historians. Philological considerations, combined with the Roman sources, scanty

[85] Cf. Judith M. Lieu, *Image and Reality: The Jews in the World of the Christians in the Second Century* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 29: "the epithet 'Christians' ... has become his [sc. Ignatius's] most favoured name for believers and a designation of honour which represents the goal of their individual and corporate existence. One must *be* and not simply be *called* 'Christian,' and for Ignatius himself this will be most truly demonstrated or even achieved in his martyrdom."

though they are, indicate the likely emergence of the label Χριστιανός in the encounter between Christians and hostile outsiders, most likely Roman officials, and testify to the early emergence of a focus on the *nomen ipsum*. Where 1 Peter 4 is especially important is in uniquely providing a corroborating picture from the inside of the process, setting the term Χριστιανός in the context of a consolatory address to those suffering hostility, derision, and punishment for bearing this name. Moreover, 1 Peter marks a crucial point in the process whereby this hostile label comes to be borne with pride by insiders, later becoming their standard self-designation. This is but one example, yet a key one nonetheless, of the early Christians struggling to reverse, at least in their own eyes, society's verdict on them. And ironically, though unsurprising in the light of social-scientific studies of conflict, the very hostility that the label Χριστιανός/*Christianus* represents, by focusing attention precisely on this facet of the believers' social identity, plays a significant role in fostering an emerging sense of *Christian* identity, making this label, for insider and outsider alike, the most salient designation of the followers of Jesus.