

Galen and the Christians of Rome

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Abstract. This paper addresses Galen's reputation and influence amongst Christians of his own day. Specifically, it examines the view that contemporary Christians mistrusted Galen because of his critical remarks about them. It required several centuries before his reputation among Christians began to grow. I shall argue that Galen's estimation of Christianity was a mixed one. On the one hand, he was the first important pagan writer to treat Christianity as a philosophy and not a superstitious sect, comparing it with such philosophical schools as Stoicism and Epicureanism. On the other hand, he criticized Christians' failure to base their doctrines on reason (*logismos*) rather than solely on faith (*pistis*). For Galen, the proper method for the acquisition of knowledge was scientific demonstration rather than claims to divine authority. His critique of Christian fideism was taken seriously by some Christians, whom it encouraged to engage in the kind of philosophical speculation that would attract Galen's approval. The followers of Theodotus of Byzantium attempted to meet the deficiencies that Galen had identified by employing a philosophical garb with which they framed their unorthodox adoptionism. They began to engage in the kind of philosophical speculation that they believed would attract Galen's approval. In doing so they demonstrated that they could learn from their critics. From being universally regarded by many educated Romans in the second century as a mere superstition, Christianity came, as the result of the Apologists, to be recognized by the third century as a school of philosophy.

Keywords: Galen, Adoptionism, Theodotus of Byzantium, Pope Victor, early Christian apologetics

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Galen's reputation and influence amongst Christians of his own day is a topic that, while not at the forefront of Galenic studies, has attracted considerable attention since Richard Walzer addressed the subject in a short book that was published in 1949, but that remains the starting point of modern discussion of the subject [1]. Since then Fridolf Kudlien (1981), Robert Wilken (1984), Stephen Gero (1990), J.H. Blum (1993–1994), Vivian Nutton (2001), Teun Tieleman (2005), and Philip van der Eijk (2014), among others, have addressed the subject [2–8]. In this paper I wish to examine the view that contemporary Christians mistrusted Galen because of his critical remarks about them and that it required several centuries before his reputation among Christians began to grow.¹

¹ This is the view of Professor Nutton, "God, Galen and the Depaganization of Ancient Medicine" [6, p. 17–19]. For a somewhat different perspective, see his treatment of Christian attitudes to medicine (and Galen) in Nutton, *V. Ancient Medicine* [9, p. 291–298].

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I shall argue that, on the contrary, Galen's estimation of Christians was a mixed one that played some role in overcoming the uniformly negative opinion of educated Romans regarding the new movement; and that Galen's critique of Christian fideism was taken seriously by some Christians, whom it encouraged to engage in the kind of philosophical speculation that they believed would attract Galen's approval.

Galen was acquainted with both Jews and Christians and he refers several times in his philosophical and medical works to their beliefs, morals, and theological doctrines. He was the first important pagan writer to treat Christianity with respect – as a philosophy rather than a superstitious sect, as did many educated Romans, such as Fronto, Marcus Aurelius, Lucian, and Celsus, all of whom were his contemporaries. He dignified Christianity with his use of the term "school," by which he meant a philosophical sect. He took the trouble to study its theological beliefs and he compared them with the dogmatic philosophical schools, such as Stoicism and Epicureanism, of which he was nevertheless

critical, accusing them of valuing loyalty to their philosophical system or founder over truth, and substituting a sectarianism that was based on uncritical dogmatism for knowledge that was acquired by scientific demonstration.²

Galen came to admire Christians for their contempt of death, sexual purity, self-control in regard to food and drink, and pursuit of justice, all virtues that were praised by philosophers. He regarded them as not inferior to pagan philosophers in their moral behavior. But, he believed, they lacked *phronesis* (intellectual insight), which provided the rational basis for these virtues [10]. Galen was a philosophical moralist, and the fact that he defends Christians for practicing the same virtues as those that were taught by the philosophers suggests that his knowledge rested not on hearsay but on a personal familiarity with Christian beliefs and standards of conduct. But Galen's own philosophical theology reflected Greek ideas that were at odds with those of Jews and Christians. In a familiar passage in *De usu partium* (*On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*), which was written in Rome between 169 and 176 CE, Galen distinguishes between his own views of divine providence and those of Jews and Christians, whom he treats as a single entity. Although Galen believed in one god, his depiction of him as a divine craftsman was drawn not from Judeo-Christian sources but from Plato's *Timaieus*, as was his argument from design.³ Galen criticizes Moses for holding, in the Genesis account of Creation, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and the belief that nature was created as an act of the will of a capricious and arbitrary deity who had no regard for the consequences of his creative action.⁴ For Moses, the Creation of the world had (in Aristotelian terms) an efficient but not a material cause: the god of the Jews merely spoke and the world came into existence. The biblical account stood in contrast to the view of Greek philosophers, who believed that the

demiurge had created matter from pre-existing material.⁵ In the Greek view the demiurge was neither above the cosmos nor was he exempt from the laws of nature. For Galen, as for most Greek philosophers, god was a part of nature or nature itself, governing the universe by laws that could be discovered through reason.⁶ A transcendent deity who created the world from nothing was a concept that was almost universally rejected by Greek philosophers.

Where Galen differed in method from Christians and Jews, he maintained, was in their refusal to base their doctrines on reason (*logismos*) rather than solely on faith (*pistis*) and revealed authority. Here we come to a familiar distinction between Christians and Jews, on the one hand, and Greeks, on the other. It was a distinction that offended the rationalistic sensibilities of pagans, who rejected the Christian preference for faith over reason [10]. Galen speaks in several places of "the school of Moses and Christ," who talked, he wrote, of "undemonstrated laws."⁷ It was the complaint of both Galen and his contemporary, Celsus, another pagan critic of Christianity, that Christians could not give reasons or arguments for their doctrines. In Galen's view, while they had reached the *moral level* of philosophers, they nevertheless did so without using demonstrated logic. Instead they fell back on parables (stories about rewards and punishments in the afterlife), myths, and poetry [1, p. 58–59]. Galen did, however, give them greater credit than did Celsus, for whom Christians resembled the mystery cults in holding to mere superstition. Christians, wrote Celsus, ask no questions, they

² Walzer's view that Galen owed his knowledge of Genesis to Posidonius is no longer generally accepted. See [7, p. 140–142].

³ Galen uses the terms "nature" and "creator" synonymously with "god." He believed that god was good and wise, but beyond that, because the question lacked any possibility of empirical confirmation, he believed that we cannot know whether he is corporeal or transcendent. See [7, p. 129].

⁴ *De usu partium* 11.14.

⁵ Studies by G. Schuttermayr (1973) and G. May (1978) have argued that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was a late formulation that was popularized in Christian circles in the second century and that it became the subject of debate between Christians and pagans, who held to the belief in Creation from pre-existing matter. See [7, p. 126–127], [3, p. 88–89, 93].

⁶ J. Jouanna, [11]. Cf. Van der Eijk: "In this philosophy, the divine works not against but through the laws of nature, and not in the form of divine intervention but mediated by natural structures and mechanisms. Any recourse to views and practices that ignore these rational, natural principles would seem to be unacceptable." [8, p. 136]. Matter itself limits what can be achieved by God or nature, as seen by the continuing existence of disease [8, p. 368].

⁷ *De pulsuum differentiis* 3.3; cf. 2.4; cf. also *On Hippocrates's Anatomy*.

consider foolishness to be good, and they rely on faith (*pistis*) alone.⁸

Professor Vivian Nutton has argued that Galen's attack on the absence of a rational Christian philosophy alienated Christian contemporaries from an appreciation of his ideas. They considered the profession of medicine to be a pagan one and the speculative philosophy of Galen and Hippocrates as dangerous to Christian theology. "An ambiguity towards pagan medicine at a popular level," he writes, "contributes to a certain suspicion of doctors at a higher level" [6, p. 22]. Yet some contemporary Christians had little trouble with Galen, whom they came to appreciate for his prolific output of medical and philosophical treatises. Clement of Alexandria (c. 160-c. 215) seems to have been acquainted with his work [12]. Robert Grant has adduced evidence that Origen had read several of Galen's medical and philosophical treatises, of which Grant finds echoes in the works of Origen himself [13]. Writing in about 240 CE, less than a quarter of a century after Galen's death, Origen appears to allude to Galen's assertion in the *De usu partium* that each part of the body was created for a particular purpose.⁹ A century later, Jerome too seems to have been familiar with Galen's writings, which he cites with approval [17, p. 81–82]. Later still, Nemesius of Emesa's (fl. c. 390) Christian anthropology *On the Nature of Man*, relies on Galen's works and those of other prominent medical writers [18, p. 11–14, 23–25]. The evidence, while scanty at best, hardly demonstrates a wholesale hostility to Galen on the part of those Christians who were familiar with his writings in the generations immediately following his own, in spite of their pronounced disagreement with his theology. In fact, just the reverse was true: he enjoys their respect.¹⁰

One account, which Eusebius has preserved from the so-called *Little Labyrinth*, a second-

century work whose authorship Lightfoot attributed to the apologist Hippolytus (who died c. 235 CE and is therefore a nearly contemporary source), has been taken as evidence that early Christians saw in Galen a malign influence.¹¹ During the pontificate of Victor, who was the first Latin-speaking bishop of Rome (c. 189-c. 198), a group of Roman Christians in Asia Minor, led by a leather-worker by the name of Theodotus of Byzantium, attempted to present Christianity in philosophical terms that would appeal to educated pagans. They are said to have admired Galen, who for them became "nearly an object of worship," according to Hippolytus. They also studied Euclidean geometry and revered Aristotle and Theophrastus. They were apparently influenced by Galen's philosophical, rather than medical views. According to a lengthy section of the work quoted by Eusebius, Theodotus came to Rome from Byzantium in 190. While he is likely to have had little education, Robin Lane Fox points out that theological debate was often carried on in the second century at a high level by relatively humble Christians [19, p. 330]. Theodotus attempted to redefine the orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation, which Greek philosophical dualism found repugnant, by arguing (on the basis of an emended text of Luke 1:35) that Jesus was a mere man who had received the heavenly Christ at his baptism, in the form of a dove, as a reward for his virtue. For teaching an unorthodox christology, Theodotus and his followers were excommunicated by Pope Victor. Theodotus may be said to have been the founder of the heresy known later as adoptionism or dynamic monarchianism.¹² His views, although espoused by several subsequent teachers in Rome, remained a distinctly minority point of view, and no leading theologian espoused them other than Paul of Samosata, bishop of Antioch, whose views were condemned in 268.

Galen's familiarity with the biblical text of Genesis as well as his respect for Christian morals suggest that he may have had some personal contact with Christians in Rome since his first arrival in 161–162 CE, perhaps at the imperial court, with which, as an imperial physician, he

⁸ Ap. Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.9, 6:11; see [1, p. 53].

⁹ *Philocalia* fr. 2.2. Grant identifies as well *De Libris Propriis* and *De Ordine Librorum Suorum* for possible borrowings. [13, p. 535–536]. An additional point in Galen's favor with the Christians was his apparent belief in the spiritual nature and immortality of the soul. For detailed arguments that Galen was not a materialist see D.A. Balalykin's works [14–16].

¹⁰ Cf. [1, p. 77, 68–69] and [4, p. 411].

¹¹ Eusebius, *Eccles. Hist.* 5.28.9–14. See also Hippolytus, *Haeresis* 7.35 and 10.23; and Epiphanius, *Panarion* 54.

¹² On adoptionism see [20, p. 115–119].

maintained a close contact for the rest of his life. We know of Christians or Christian sympathizers who were resident at court during the reigns of Commodus (180-192 CE) and the Severan emperors (193-235 CE), and whom he might have met. Several of them were women [21, p. 124–125, 133–134, 209–210].¹³ Marcia, who became the mistress of the emperor Commodus, was one such example. Septimius's first son Bassianus (who was born in 188 in Lugdunum) had a Christian wet nurse.¹⁴ Julia Mamaea, the mother of the emperor Alexander Severus, who ascended the throne in 222 (after Galen's death), became the virtual ruler of the Empire during the reign of her young son. Origen described her as "a most religious woman" and she attended his lectures in Alexandria and furnished him with a military escort when she summoned him to discuss religious questions [22, 272–273]. She evidently had some Christian influence on her son, who had statues of Abraham and Jesus placed in his private chapel along with those of Orpheus and Apollonius of Tyana, testifying to an age of polytheistic syncretism and tolerance, modelled by the Severan emperors, who encouraged (in the words of Arthur Darby Nock) "a theology of unity and mutual understanding." Another highly placed Christian woman who appeared at court following the death of Severus Alexander was the wife of the emperor Philip the Arab (244–249 CE), Otacilia Severa. She corresponded with Origen and seems to have influenced her husband, the emperor, who showed some favor to Christianity.

It is possible to imagine that Galen, finding himself in a court that fostered religious dialogue and one in which Christianity is likely to have been debated, discussed the philosophical doctrines of the new religion with Christians at court, or perhaps with those distinguished pagans who had been admitted to the literary circles of Julia Domna, wife of the emperor Septimius Severus (193-211 CE), or of her sister and her niece, the mother and daughter Julia Maesa and Julia Mamaea.¹⁵ Philosophical ideas were

frequently entertained in the circles that formed around these talented women, which attracted, besides Galen, such figures as the sophistic writer Philostratus and the jurist Ulpian.¹⁶ Nock argues that the Severan Dynasty was not particularly interested in Christianity, but in eastern religions in general [24, p. 128–129]. The family hailed from Emesa, which was a prominent religious centre in Syria, and it actively promoted Syrian mystery cults in Rome, introducing the worship of several. Julia Domna demonstrated a special interest in leading religious figures and she commissioned Philostratos to write a biography of Apollonius of Tyana, the celebrated wandering ascetic philosopher and miracle-worker, whom one contemporary writer compared with Christ.

The precise relationship between Galen's views and those of his Christian admirers is impossible to ascertain and we can only speculate. I suggest that his writings provided a philosophical framework for Christian theological ideas that were rejected by Christians at Rome, not because they reflected the views of a prominent pagan physician and philosopher, but because they represented a perversion of the central doctrine of the Christian faith, namely, the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The issue that concerned Pope Victor, as Eusebius relates it, was the adoptionist theology that constituted an unorthodox theological doctrine. The term *adoptionism* was applied to Theodotus's doctrine that Jesus was "a mere man" (*psilos anthropos*) of great virtue, who was adopted by God to be his divine son. Theodotus rejected the traditional Christian belief that Jesus was the eternal Son of God and second person of the Trinity. According to his view, adoption made Jesus uniquely the Son of God while at the same time he remained fully human.

There is little evidence, however, that contemporary Christians regarded Galen as a threat to Christianity [4, p. 384–385]. His brief comments on the Christians, scattered throughout his writings, are far from being, in

¹³ On the influence of Christian women in pagan society, especially on the conversion of their pagan husbands, see [22, p. 95–128].

¹⁴ Tertullian, *Ad Scap.* 4.6.

¹⁵ On Julia Domna's literary circle see [23, p. 272] and [21, p. 241].

¹⁶ Gero thinks that Galen may even have discussed with Marcus Aurelius the Christians' willingness to die for their faith, which Galen admired, while the Emperor considered it the result of sheer obstinacy (see his *Meditations* 11.3) (*Galen on the Christians*, p. 407 and n. 110).

the words of Vivian Nutton, “scathing about the intellectual failings of the Christians” [6, p. 19]. In fact, his brief assessment in *De usu partium* of both Jews and Christians (and Galen does not distinguish between them insofar as their beliefs are concerned) is mixed.¹⁷ He considers Christian virtues to represent a kind of popular Stoicism, which in both teaching and practice encouraged a type of behavior (askesis, moral discipline) that he respected as a philosopher. In fact, he praises Christians for some of the same philosophical virtues that he thinks make the best doctor also a philosopher.¹⁸ Thus, the best physician must be “self-controlled and just and immune to the temptations of pleasure and money; he must embody all the different characteristics of the moral life which are by their very nature independent.” A predominant feature of this moral life for Galen was philanthropia, which manifested itself especially in the care of the poor [1, p. 82].¹⁹ At the same time Galen rejects their philosophy on grounds that must have been familiar to Christians whenever they took part in debates with pagan philosophers in the schools of Alexandria, Pergamum, or Rome. Indeed, some of Galen’s knowledge of Christian theology was likely acquired in debate with Christians in the schools of those cities and not merely from the reading of books. There was something in Galen’s approach to philosophy that made him an attractive model for Theodotus and his followers. But it is unlikely to have been merely the fact that he was a prominent physician or even a pagan philosopher.

Galen makes it clear in several places that he rejected knowledge that claimed to be based on divine revelation [1, p. 19]. For Galen, as for most Greek philosophers, the proper method

for the acquisition of knowledge was rational demonstration rather than claims to divine authority. In Moses’s theology, God’s power was unlimited and nothing was impossible for him, given the fact that he was a transcendent Being. The Jews maintained that God created the cosmos by his will rather than by choosing rationally between the various possibilities that were available to him and making the best possible choice. Moreover, the fact that Moses taught that God created the world *ex nihilo* contradicted the Greek view that nothing comes from nothing (*nihilo ex nihilo fit*) [1, p. 25–27]. God can do nothing that is contrary to nature or reason. This distinction, which developed in the High Middle Ages into the intellectualist and voluntarist debate regarding God’s causative activity in nature, set God’s rationality over against his omnipotence [27].

In spite of the differences between early Christian and Greek understandings of divine activity, Galen’s assessment of Christians was a mixed one. He admired their pursuit of the philosophical virtues, thinking them in this regard not inferior to the philosophers. In fact, he honored them by calling them philosophers, even though they relied on faith rather than reason. It appears that his recognition of the positive features of Christianity were taken by Theodotus and his followers to suggest that if they were able to study philosophy they could make of themselves rational philosophers. It is not surprising that some of them attempted to do so. Theodotus and his friends began to study Galen’s philosophy at a time when many of their co-religionists distrusted philosophy, thinking it a pagan subject. Christians who undertook its study faced the challenge not merely of failing to meet the standards of pagan philosophers but of risking the condemnation of their fellow Christians. They were not, of course, the only Christians to incorporate philosophy into their theology. From Aristides, Athenagoras, and Justin Martyr in the first half of the second century, to Clement and Origen in the first half of the third, a school of Christian Apologists came into existence that was able to meet the arguments of their cultured despisers on their own ground by creating the doctrine of the *logos* (reason). It was not without risk, as Justin demonstrated by his martyrdom in 165 CE, which resulted when a rival Cynic

¹⁷ Van der Eijk notes that Galen tends to subject authors with whom he is in basic agreement to criticism, “Especially in contexts where they are too close for comfort and where he perceives a danger of being associated with some of their errors or weaknesses,” and that perhaps he engages the Judeo-Christian doctrine of omnipotence over what he regards as a weak point advocated by a sect with whom he sees some attractive features [8].

¹⁸ See Galen’s short treatise entitled *That the Best Physician Is Also a Philosopher* (*Quod optimus medicus sit quoque philosophus*, Kuhn edition 1:53–63). The treatise has been translated into English by P. Brain [25].

¹⁹ On philanthropia as a virtue in pagan society, see [25].

philosopher charged him with being a Christian. But the Apologists of the latter half of the second century began to create space for a distinctly Christian philosophy. In a single generation Clement of Alexandria and Origen, both able philosophers, produced an apologetic that was taken seriously by their pagan opponents. The fact that Julia Mamaea, mother of the emperor Severus Alexander, attended Origen's lectures and invited him to court indicates a broadening of her intellectual circle to include Christians and will have increased his respectability in high circles. Indeed increasing numbers of Christians were coming to claim the philosopher's cloak. By the third century A.D. the religion of Christian believers was ceasing to be viewed by some educated Romans as merely a *superstitio*.²⁰ Some Christian intellectuals gained the dignity that came with taking the name of philosopher. And when they ceased to appear as mere fideists and employed scientific demonstration in defense of their faith, they came to be reckoned by at least some of their opponents as deserving the respect that came with a reasoned approach to learning and a life of virtue.²¹

Hence the condemnation of Theodotus and his followers by Pope Victor should not be seen as an example either of early Christian anti-intellectualism or of Christian hostility to Greek philosophy. The Christian Apologists came over time routinely to borrow from Greek philosophy to buttress their theological arguments and to refute pagan ideas. The paramount issue in the condemnation of Theodotus was one of unorthodox belief. Galen's residence in Rome at the imperial court during the last decade of the second century coincided with the controversy in the Roman church over adoptionism. It was one of the earliest unorthodox theologies to challenge the Western Christian church and, because it threatened to replace the central doctrine of the

Incarnation – the belief that Jesus was God – with a merely human Jesus, it came under strong attack by the clergy.

Theodotus's efforts to create a more philosophical approach to Christian speculative theology certainly played a part in the controversy. It was criticized by many Christians and it was held up to ridicule by Hippolytus. But in Hippolytus's contemporary account it does not appear to have been the crux of the matter. Indeed Galen enjoyed the respect of some intellectual Christians, who were influenced by his criticism of those Christians who argued solely from faith instead of reason. Finding in his philosophy a useful platform with which to construct a framework for their adoptionist Christianity, they in turn attracted criticism from orthodox Christians because their novel views. One wonders if the opposition of the bishop of Rome would have been as strong if Theodotus had attempted a philosophical defence of more orthodox views. For the increasing willingness of Christians to employ Greek philosophical categories in the language of apologetic discourse, perhaps Galen's criticism is partly responsible. In objecting to the fideism of contemporary Christian discourse, Galen identified a weakness that prevented the educated classes of the Roman Empire from giving serious consideration to its arguments. In encouraging the Christians to adopt a philosophical approach, he made it possible for Theodotus and his followers, through trial and error, to participate in the learned discourse of pagan philosophers. Although he was clumsy – and ultimately unsuccessful – in his enterprise, Theodotus served as a pioneer for an approach to Christian philosophy in which Galen played some role. It was, I suggest, in this specific criticism of the second-century Christians that his influence led a group of them to attempt to meet the deficiencies that he had identified, not in their propagation of an unorthodox theology, but by employing the philosophical garb with which they clothed it. In doing so they demonstrated that they could learn from their critics. Perhaps Galen's criticism of the early Christians deserves more credit than it usually receives.²²

²⁰ Dodds observes that apologists like Athenagoras and Origen recognized the necessity of using logismos to supplement biblical authority, while in the third century CE pagan philosophers, especially Neoplatonists, "tended increasingly to replace reason by authority" [10, p. 121–123].

²¹ For more detailed information see [10, p. 121–123], [3, p. 79–80]. For early examples of Apologists presenting Christianity as a philosophy see Melito, fr. 7 and Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho 8.

²² Cf. [3, p. 23].

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