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Beyond Borders: Selected Proceedings of the 2010 Ancient Borderlands International Graduate Student Conference

Title

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Author

Whiting, Colin

Publication Date

2010-03-31

Peer reviewed

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Martyrdom as a Spiritual Test in the Luciferian *Libellus Precum*

One of the many ways in which Christians throughout antiquity defined themselves in relation to Jews and pagans was the special role that martyrs played in the Christian tradition.¹ Ironically, in the fourth century martyrdom frequently served to draw boundaries not between Christians and Jews or pagans, but between different groups of Christians. Christians readily adapted their old mental frameworks to fit the new circumstances of an empire supportive of Christianity. This process is most clearly apparent with regard to one such group, the Luciferians. No scholar has yet pointed out how the Luciferians construct their group's history by who persecutes and who is persecuted. Their unique emphasis on martyrdom as a spiritual test has also escaped notice. Although in many respects these are typical behaviors for late antique Christians, the Luciferians offer a great – and overlooked – example of a schismatic group developing a separate identity from these same, typical behaviors.

This schismatic group developed after a disciplinary dispute. The Council of Alexandria was called in 362 to decide if a group of bishops who had signed the “Sirmian Creed” at the Council of Rimini should be allowed to return to the Church and retain their clerical rank – bishops remaining bishops, deacons remaining deacons, and so on.² They agreed to this. A small group of Christians, however, disagreed with the decision of the council. Lucifer of Cagliari, an exiled bishop who had expressed dissatisfaction with the council, probably led this group. They called the bishops who had sworn to the Arian creed “*praevaricatores*” (‘traitors’), much like the Donatists called their enemies “*traditores*.” They refused to hold communion with most other bishops of the Church, because those bishops held communion with these *praevaricatores*. By the 380s, other Christians identified them as “Luciferians,” after Lucifer of Cagliari.

These Luciferians then penned a petition in late 383 or 384 to the Emperor Theodosius. In the petition they describe the various persecutions they have suffered (from Arians and other Christians) and ask for imperial help to stop further persecution. Concerning their petition, Victor de Clerq writes, “A mere reading of the flagrant absurdities and impossibilities contained in this amazing pamphlet should convince anyone of its manifestly calumnious nature and historical worthlessness.”³ The petition was successful. Their petition is important because it demonstrates not only how Catholics viewed the Luciferians, but also how the Luciferians viewed themselves. This is, more specifically, a rare glimpse into how schismatic groups viewed their own history, martyrs, and martyrdom itself.

¹ See especially Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) and G.W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

² The Council of Alexandria is described variously by Rufinus, *Hist.* 1.28-29; Jerome, *Lucif.* 20; Socrates *Hist. eccl.* 3.7; Sozomen *Hist. eccl.* 5.12; Theodoret, *Hist. eccl.* 3.2.

³ Victor de Clerq, *Ossius of Cordova: A Contribution to the History of the Constantinian Period* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1954), 528.

The Luciferians used their experience of martyrdom under Constantius to connect themselves to the Christian tradition. For example, they have an obvious dislike for Hilary of Poitiers, because he agreed with the Council of Alexandria.⁴ However, they still mention that under Constantius he was sent into exile in the same circumstances as Lucifer.⁵ Since they have such apparent disdain for him, the inclusion of Hilary appears jarring at first. However, the Luciferians use him to indicate that they too shared in the persecution of the Nicene faction that occurred under Constantius. This connection is important because the Luciferians consider themselves the ‘true’ Nicene faith. If they are the ‘true’ Nicenes, then they must have shared the experience of suffering under Constantius. As Elizabeth Castelli observes, “Claims to collective memory...operate in part to rationalize innovations in societies where ruptures with the past create cultural anxiety.”⁶ In other words, it is imperative for the Luciferians to emphasize that they are *not* being innovative and that they share the same history as other Christians.

The petition also includes a lengthy story about Gregory of Elvira and Ossius of Cordoba.⁷ Ossius, who was Constantine’s adviser at the Council of Nicaea, later ‘fell’ into Arianism. This was clearly a serious blow to the Church, as Victor de Clerq collects no fewer than fourteen 4th-, 5th-, and 6th-century sources that discuss his decision to sign an Arian creed.⁸ Only in the Luciferian account, however, does Ossius then return to Spain and try to force other bishops, including Gregory, to sign the Arian creed. In every other source, Ossius merely gives in to heresy. Athanasius even reports a deathbed recantation.⁹ A community’s sense of identity does not only arise from shared suffering but from the identity of the Other.¹⁰ In this case, the Luciferians (but not their other contemporaries) emphasize that their persecutors were former Nicene Christians who have betrayed the faith. Although the Luciferians mention Ursacius, Valens, and other well-known ‘Arian’ bishops,¹¹ they do not focus on them in the same way that other Christian authors do. Instead, they focus on the Nicene-turned-traitor Ossius and a few others like him. Thus although they are connecting themselves to the same history as other Christians, they differ in regards to their emphasis. The reason is clear. The cause of the group’s separation was a disagreement over these *praevaricatores*, and by 384, the Arians were no longer as threatening to the Luciferians as other Nicene Christians were.¹² Thus the Nicene Ossius, who becomes a persecutor, is a far more vivid enemy for the Luciferians than the Arian of the past.

⁴ *Lib. Prec.* 24 (SC 504:130-1) and Rufinus, *Hist.* 1.30. On the reason why, see: Duval, "Vrais et faux problèmes concernant le retour d'exil d'Hilaire de Poitiers et son action en Italie en 360-363," 48(1970). I will refer to the *Libellus Precum* as *Lib. Prec.* in this text. The best edition is Aline Canellis, ed., *Supplique aux empereurs: Libellus precum et lex augusta. Precede de Faustin, Confession de foi: Faustin et Marcellin; introduction, texte critique, et notes* (SC 504; Paris: Cerf, 2006).

⁵ *Lib. Prec.* 24 (SC 504:130-1).

⁶ Elizabeth Castelli’s interpretation of Maurice Halbwachs’s view: *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 13. See also Lucy Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity* (London: Duckworth, 2004), 4-5, for the social necessity of retelling martyr stories to connect Christianity’s past to the reteller’s present.

⁷ *Lib. Prec.* 32-44 (SC 504:138-51).

⁸ Mostly from the 4th and early 5th centuries, including the Luciferian petition. de Clerq, *Ossius of Cordova*, 507-509.

⁹ *H. Ar.* 45.

¹⁰ Michael Gaddis, *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 96.

¹¹ *Lib. Prec.* 14 (SC 504:124-5). They are merely named as the authors of the Sirmian Creed. See also Canellis, *Supplique aux empereurs*, 54.

¹² Like most 4th-century Nicene Christians, the Luciferians refer to the Arians as a bloc rather than address the mottled patchwork of beliefs concerning the relationship of the Father and Son which existed in the 4th century.

The Luciferians brush off the Nicene Christians persecuted under Valens after the Council of Alexandria; as far as the Luciferians are concerned, these persecutions just further demonstrate the “inconstancy of faith” in the greater church.¹³ Their description of Valens’ reign takes up only a few short lines, most of which are spent explaining how more Nicene Christians caved in to the Arians. After Valens’ reign, the persecution of the Luciferians by other orthodox Christians takes up the second half of the text.

The Luciferians also reuse certain storylines which reinforce the implied connection between the *praevaricatores* and Nicene persecutors. For example, the stories of Gregory and Macarius, a presbyter of Rome, both relate a courtroom drama wherein the judge sides with the Luciferian.¹⁴ Gregory was persecuted under Osius, the arch-*praevaricator*; Macarius was persecuted under Damasus, Bishop of Rome.¹⁵ This parallel structure emphasizes the similarity between *praevaricatores* like Osius and Christians like Damasus. There are other similar examples in the text.¹⁶

Unlike their adversaries, the Luciferians do *not* present the history of the fourth century as a struggle against Arianism. The structure of Luciferian history has a very clear turning point established by the form of the text and by the literary tropes: the Council of Alexandria in 362. Before this council, all of the Nicene Christians were on the same side against the Arians and the *praevaricatores*. Afterwards, Christianity was divided between the *praevaricatores* (and their Nicene allies) and the ‘true’ Christians, that is, the Luciferians. History, in the eyes of the Luciferians, hinges on men like Osius: who sides with *praevaricatores*, who opposes them to the bitter end. This is also a history defined by martyrdom.¹⁷ The important facts for the Luciferians are not the names of councils, the debates over creeds, or the reigns of emperors.¹⁸ History is defined by persecutors and persecuted, which allows the Luciferians to always remain on the ‘correct’ side while clearly demonstrating that other Christians have shifted into impiety. Since the question of “who suffered when?” is such an integral part of their history, it is no surprise that the Luciferians come to stress the spiritual necessity of martyrdom for the truly faithful.

The effects of this conceptualization of history are reflected in the very way the Luciferians describe the bishops who ‘fell’ at Rimini. Close to the beginning of the work, when discussing the *praevaricatores*, Faustinus and Marcellinus write:

¹³ *Lib. Prec.* 66: *inconstantiam fidei* (SC 504:170-1).

¹⁴ An instance of genre-flipping, since the judge was generally expected to sentence the defendant to torture: Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity*, 60-61. The Luciferians emphasize the Catholics as the persecutors, not the state; the Luciferians use the same motifs of old, but have adapted them for a new era.

¹⁵ The current emperors are presumed ignorant of Luciferian suffering (*Lib. Prec.* 106: *ignorantibus vobis* (SC 504:214-5)).

¹⁶ For instance, the Luciferians write early in their petition that the *praevaricatores* committed no less an impiety than sacrificing to an idol during a pagan persecution: *Lib. Prec.* 29 (SC 504:134-7). Later, when two Catholic bishops persecute Vincentius in Spain, the Luciferians claim that they threw the altar from Vincentius’ church at the feet of an idol – and what more serious a thing, they ask, would even a pagan do?: *Lib. Prec.* 76 (SC 504:178-81). The implication is clear – just as the *praevaricatores* were no better than pagans, so too are the persecuting Catholics no better than pagans.

¹⁷ And divine punishment: see Canellis, “Arius et les ‘Ariens,’” 492. Canellis emphasizes the instances of divine punishment against the Luciferians’ enemies, but many Catholics persecute the Luciferians and remain unharmed in the text.

¹⁸ Although they are clearly conscious of these subtleties.

*Nonne gratum habere debuerunt, si tamen credebant futurum Dei iudicium, omnia mala perpeti quam esse venerabilis fidei proditores, cuius virtus sancti quoque Alexandri orationibus et Arrii supplicio fuerat adprobata?*¹⁹

Still, if they believed that the judgment of God was going to come, shouldn't they have been grateful to suffer all evils rather than be traitors of the revered faith, the holy virtue of which had been proven by the speeches of Alexander [of Constantinople] and by Arius' punishment?

There are really two parts to this passage. First of all, the Luciferians establish the role of violence in their theology as part of an either/or decision. The only two choices for the persecuted are to either suffer or be a traitor to the faith. Secondly, the Luciferians argue that if these *praevaricatores* had true faith, they would have gladly suffered.

Ambrose, a contemporary of the Luciferians, offers the same dichotomy to the same emperor, Theodosius. After a local bishop incited the people of Callinicum to burn down a local synagogue, Theodosius ordered the bishop to rebuild it. Ambrose defended the bishop, saying that forcing him to rebuild the synagogue "will necessarily also make him either a traitor (*praevaricatorem*) or a martyr."²⁰ Ambrose repeats the same defense for the local governor.²¹ This black-and-white view was not unique to the Luciferians then.

The Luciferians also present martyrdom as a test. The logical implication of the passage quoted above is that if they do not suffer, they do not believe the judgment of God is coming. Similarly, near the beginning of the petition, Faustinus and Marcellinus write, "This cannot be ambiguous, that the true catholics are those who affirmed [the] faith without deceit through exiles, through varieties of punishments, through the severity of death."²² Martyrdom thus becomes an easy way to test if someone has true faith. Anyone unwilling to be martyred becomes, in the eyes of the Luciferians, without true faith. This does not necessarily imply that martyrdom alone proved faith,²³ but it was a necessary component of true faith and a proof of veracity. The Luciferians specifically say that true catholics affirmed the faith "without deceit," implying that others affirmed the faith *with* deceit;²⁴ the only way to tell the two apart was exile, punishment, and death.

The historical circumstances from which the Luciferian faction emerged centralized the importance of martyrdom. What differentiated their faction from the *praevaricatores*? They were willing to suffer martyrdom. What separated their faction from other Nicene Christians? They (the Luciferians) did not hold communion with the *praevaricatores*, whom they believed to be false Christians, *and* the other Christians persecuted them (and them alone) for this. The problem

¹⁹ *Lib. Prec.* 20 (SC 504:128-9).

²⁰ *Ep.* 74 [40].7: *Necesse erit igitur ut aut praevaricatorem aut martyrem faciat.*

²¹ *Ep.* 74 [40].9: *Habebis, imperator, comitem praevaricatorem...*

²² *Lib. Prec.* 10: *...illud ambiigi non potest, hos esse vere catholicos, qui, per exilia, per genera suppliciorum, per atrocitatem mortis, illam fidem sine dolo vindicant...* (SC 504: 120-1).

²³ A position shared by many of their contemporaries: see Constantine's letter to his *vicarius* Celsus in Appendix 7 of Optatus' *Schism. Don.*; Optatus, *Schism. Don.* 3.8; Augustine, *Serm.* 283.

²⁴ A point made explicitly at *Lib. Prec.* 65-66: *Non enim correctio est ista, sed inclusio prout sunt imperatorum tempora fidem vertere...Nam utique probatur illi quod hi qui se catholicos adserebant subscripsissent prius cum haereticis, damnantes quam prius defenderant fidem* (SC 504:168-71).

for the Luciferians then became: how does one identify a false Christian? Creeds are not enough, because one can falsely swear to creeds to escape persecution. The Luciferians link their unique historical experience (these persecutions) with this question to come up with a quick and easy test: *nonne gratum habere debuerunt?* Rather than by a creed, which a *praevaricator* could falsely swear to, they identify the truly faithful by a willingness to suffer.²⁵

Furthermore, the Luciferians twist what “martyrdom” itself *is* to better suit their social needs. For the Luciferians, exile – no matter the location – is just like martyrdom involving torture or death. As quoted above, the petition says, “This cannot be ambiguous, that the true catholics are those who affirmed [the] faith without deceit through exiles, through varieties of punishments, through the severity of death.”²⁶ Martyrdom is not necessarily tied to physical suffering; the Luciferians now put exile in the same category as injury and death as the proof of a true Christian. This approach justified praise for their leaders who, like Lucifer, died peacefully, i.e. not as martyrs. This also was not unique to the Luciferians. Gaddis argues that after bishops attained legal privilege excluding them from execution, exile became the new martyrdom.²⁷ This conception was particularly prominent among the bishops whom Constantius exiled. The Luciferians use this new view of martyrdom to differentiate themselves from other Christian groups.

The Luciferian petition is a fascinating glimpse into the different ways Christians could perceive themselves in the 4th century. The Luciferians define their unique identity – through their history and their ideas of what martyrdom is – in opposition to other Christians.²⁸ Christians in general had been using martyrdom as a way to draw lines between themselves and pagans for centuries. But ironically, in the 4th century, Christian groups like the Luciferians began defining not in opposition to pagans, but in opposition to other Christians. By drawing lines between themselves and their enemies based on suffering violence, the Luciferians “generate their own sense of the past.”²⁹ This sense of the past reflected a very real sense of a present sharply divided between the ‘true church’ and other Christian groups. The history of the Luciferians demonstrates how in the 4th century communities of Christians with almost identical theological views could become so sharply and irreversibly divided by the same rhetorical methods by which Christians distinguished themselves from pagans and Jews.

Colin Whiting
University of California, Riverside

²⁵ Note that this applies only to clergy. The fact that Luciferians insisted that clergy returning to the church be admitted as laymen demonstrates that the Luciferians were willing to admit those who failed this test back into the Church – conditionally.

²⁶ *Lib. Prec.* 10: ...*illud ambigi non potest, hos esse vere catholicos, qui, per exilia, per genera suppliciorum, per atrocitatem mortis, illam fidem sine dolo vindicant...* (SC 504:120-1).

²⁷ Gaddis, *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ*, 68; see in general 69-135. He cites Hilary of Poitiers and Athanasius of Alexandria, both of whom Constantius exiled just as he did Lucifer. See also Fournier, “Exiled Bishops in the Christian Empire: Victims of Imperial Violence?,” in *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practice* (ed. Drake, Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2006), who argues that emperors used exile as a means of committing violence against bishops indirectly.

²⁸ Donatists are frequently cited similarly as a “Church of the Martyrs” opposite the Catholic Church, but see also Tilley, “Sustaining Donatist Self-Identity: From the Church of the Martyrs to the *Collecta* of the Desert,” 5, no. 1 (1997) for another view of Donatist identity. This is not to suggest that the Luciferians are a “Church of the Martyrs,” merely that an emphasis on martyrdom is just one of many ways in which the Luciferians (and Donatists and others) distinguish themselves as an independent group.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

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