

Kierkegaard and the Roman World

Edited by
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Tacitus:

Christianity as *odium generis humani*

Jon Stewart

Although Tacitus was a profoundly influential historian who has been read throughout the ages, he is not generally considered an important part of Kierkegaard's universe of thought. Indeed, he is usually not even counted among the group of Kierkegaard's most important ancient sources, where names like Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca figure prominently. Further, most Kierkegaard scholars would regard it as outright preposterous to turn to Tacitus as a source for Kierkegaard's conception of Christianity.

In this article, I wish to re-examine some of these intuitions. I hope to demonstrate that Kierkegaard in fact had an active interest in Tacitus' writings throughout his authorship. In addition to a number of scattered references to different passages in Tacitus' texts, Kierkegaard also repeatedly returns to a single motif in Tacitus' description of early Christianity, specifically his characterization of Christianity as a doctrine which teaches an "*odium generis humani*" or "hatred of the human race." Somewhat surprisingly, I wish to argue, Kierkegaard finds information in Tacitus that he uses to form his own view of Christianity. Thus, paradoxically, this pagan author ultimately proves to be an important source for Kierkegaard's Christian thinking.

I. The Life and Work of Tacitus

Cornelius Tacitus is generally recognized the greatest historian of imperial Rome. He was born presumably in Gaul or in northern Italy around AD 56, although the exact place is uncertain. In 77 he married the daughter of Agricola, the Roman governor in Britain. He had political career, beginning as praetor in 88, and subsequently passing through a series of important positions. He was consul in 97 and became proconsul of Asia in 112. Tacitus was apparently well known in Roman literary circles. He was close to Pliny the Younger, with whom he corresponded.¹ He is thought to have died sometime around 117. Tacitus is, however, better known for his historical writings than for his political career. It is through his surviving texts that we obtain the most detailed picture of the first century of Imperial Rome.

¹ See Ronald Syme, "Tacitus and Pliny" in his *Tacitus*, vols. 1–2, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1958, vol. 1, pp. 59–131.

The work often considered Tacitus' first is the *Dialogus de Oratoribus* or *Dialogue on the Orators*. (Its dating is, however, uncertain, and some scholars place it after the *Germania* and before the *Histories* in the chronology of Tacitus' works.) This treatise portrays a dialogue, which purportedly took place in 74–75, in which the interlocutors address themselves to the question of why Roman oratory had declined under the empire after so many flourishing centuries. This text is modeled on Cicero's famous accounts of the art of oratory such as *De Oratore*.

Tacitus penned two other short early works, which were both published in AD 98. The first, *De vita Iulii Agricolae* or simply the *Agricola*, is a eulogy for Tacitus' father-in-law, Gnaeus Julius Agricola. This brief biography lauds Agricola's management of Britain, where he was governor from AD 70 to 74 and again from 78 to 84, and Aquitania, where he held the same post in the intervening period from 74 to 77. This work also contains a famous and charming description of early Britain (Chapters 10–12).

The other work is *De origine et situ Germanorum* or *On the Origin and Geography of Germany*, generally referred to simply as the *Germania*. This is a short book that describes the nature and customs of the German tribes that the Romans encountered in their conquests. It follows in the tradition of Julius Caesar's observations on the Germans in Book VI of his *Gallie War*. The *Germania* was particularly topical at the time due to the fact that Trajan, in 97, a year before becoming emperor, had been made governor of Upper Germany, where he had previously waged many campaigns. Tacitus is remarkably sympathetic in his portrayal of the German tribes who are painted as simple and innocent savages, free from the corruption and decadence of the civilized world in Rome. Both of these works are interesting ethnographical studies of foreign peoples, which occasion Tacitus to reflect on the mission and destiny of Roman power.

Tacitus' two masterpieces are clearly the *Annals* and the *Histories*. These works rank among the most important sources for the history of the early empire. The *Annals* cover the period from AD 14, from the death of Augustus, until the death of Nero in 68, thus portraying in detail the reigns of Tiberius, Gaius (better known as Caligula), Claudius, and Nero. This work originally consisted of 16 or 18 books, of which only some survive. (We have Books I–IV, parts of V and VI, Books XII–XV, and parts of XI and XVI.)

The *Histories* takes up the narrative on January 1, AD 69 and runs until the death of Domitian in 96, providing a fascinating overview of imperial power, civil wars, assassinations, and political intrigue. The work originally consisted of at least twelve books, of which four survive *in toto* and a large part of a fifth. Here Tacitus covers the brief and chaotic reigns of Galba, Otho, and Vitellius in the troubled year of 69, and then moves to the longer, more stable reigns of Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian.

In the pages of these works, Tacitus' criticism of his contemporary age comes out clearly. In the *Annals*, Tacitus explains his view of the task of history: "It seems to me a historian's foremost duty is to ensure that merit is recorded, and to confront evil deeds and words with the fear of posterity's denunciations."² Tacitus was thus keen

² Tacitus, *Annales*, Book III, 65; English translation quoted from *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. by Michael Grant, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1971, p. 150.

to praise virtue and censure vice, but his history writing contains much more of the latter than the former. Like other Roman historians, he was critical of the institution of the Principate and had a nostalgic longing for the Republic. He believed that the early emperors had forgotten the traditional Roman military virtues and had thus made the state weak and corrupt. Tacitus is not sensational and does not dwell on moral vice and corruption in the same way as Suetonius. He is more concerned with giving a sound historical overview of the events. He is generally acknowledged to be a careful and accurate historian in contrast to, for example, Livy or Nepos. Famous for his conciseness and precision, he is also known as a remarkable stylist and ranked among the best writers of the imperial period.

Tacitus' influence was slow in coming. He was apparently little read during the Middle Ages, and only a single medieval manuscript of his works, which dates from the eleventh century, survives. He was, however, widely read in the Renaissance and modern period. Today there are several editions of his texts and numerous commentaries. In addition, there is an extensive body of secondary literature on his works.³ His vivid accounts of power, intrigue, and loyalty betrayed have captivated many generations and continue to do so.

II. Kierkegaard's Knowledge of Tacitus

In his extensive Latin studies at the Borgerdyd School in Copenhagen, Kierkegaard as a young man seems not to have read Tacitus. Tacitus' writings were not a part of the fixed Latin curriculum at the school.⁴ Moreover, in the account of the readings that he presented for his examination, one finds other Roman historians, specifically, Livy, Caesar, Sallust, and Nepos, but no mention is made of Tacitus.⁵

However, there can be no doubt that Kierkegaard later developed a clear interest in Tacitus since he owned four different editions of his works. In the *Auction Catalogue* one finds that he had a Latin edition of Tacitus' works: *C. Cornelii Taciti Opera ex recensione Ernestiana*, edited by the famous German philologist and classicist

³ See, for example, Clarence W. Mendell, *Tacitus, the Man and His Work*, New Haven: Yale University Press; Toronto: Oxford University Press 1957; Syme, *Tacitus*; Richard Reitzenstein, *Aufsätze zu Tacitus*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1967; Donald R. Dudley, *The World of Tacitus*, London: Secker & Warburg 1968; Ronald Syme, *Ten Studies in Tacitus*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1970; F.R.D. Goodyear, *Tacitus*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1970; Herbert W. Benario, *An Introduction to Tacitus*, Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press 1975; Harold Y. McCulloch Jr., *Narrative Cause in the Annals of Tacitus*, Königstein/Ts.: Verlag Anton Hain 1984; Judith Ginsburg, *Tradition and Theme in the Annals of Tacitus*, Salem, New Hampshire: The Ayer Company 1984; Etienne Aubrion, *Rhétorique et histoire chez Tacite*, Metz: Centre de recherché "Littérature et spiritualité" de l'Université de Metz 1985; Ellen O'Gorman, *Irony and Misreading in the Annals of Tacitus*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000.

⁴ See Per Krarup, *Søren Kierkegaard og Borgerdydskolen*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1977, pp. 25–6.

⁵ *B&A*, vol 1, pp. 4–5 / *LD*, 5, Document V. (See also Bruce H. Kirmmse (ed.), *Encounters with Kierkegaard*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996, p. 273.)

August Immanuel Bekker (1785–1871) and published in Berlin in 1825.⁶ In addition to this, he also owned an older German translation entitled *Des C. Cornelius Tacitus Sämmtliche Werke*. This work was translated in three volumes by Johann Samuel Müller (1701–73) and published in Hamburg from 1765 to 1766.⁷

In addition to these works, Kierkegaard owned two different Danish translations. The first of these is a three-volume edition entitled simply *Cajus Cornelius Tacitus*, which was translated by the critic and linguist Jacob Baden (1735–1804) and published in Copenhagen from 1773 to 1797.⁸ A professor at the University of Copenhagen, Baden published a series of Danish translations of various Latin authors: Quintilian, Horace, Suetonius, Cicero, and others. The second translation is a Danish edition of the *Dialogue on the Orators*, entitled *Dialog om Talerne eller om Aarsagerne til Veltalenhedens Fordærvelse*.⁹ This work, published in 1802, was also from the hand of Baden. The fact that Kierkegaard owned these four different works, totaling in all eight separate volumes, clearly suggests a serious interest in the Roman historian.

Kierkegaard, of course, also owned a number of books that discuss Tacitus, either briefly or extensively. Many of these were by German authors, for example, Christoph Meiners' (1747–1810) *Geschichte des Verfalls der Sitten, der Wissenschaften und Sprache der Römer, in den ersten Jahrhunderten nach Christi Geburt*, from 1791.¹⁰ In this work Tacitus is used throughout as a source text. Another important work is Wilhelm Adolf Schmidt's (1812–87) *Geschichte der Denk- und Glaubensfreiheit im ersten Jahrhundert der Kaiserherrschaft und des Christenthums*, published in Berlin in 1847.¹¹ This book likewise uses Tacitus extensively throughout.

Kierkegaard also owned a number of Danish works, where Tacitus' writings play some role. Johan Frederik Hagen's (1817–59) treatise on the concept and development of marriage contains references to Tacitus in the context of an analysis of the legal institution of marriage in the Roman world.¹² Kierkegaard also owned works by Jakob Peter Mynster (1775–1854) and Frederik Ludvig Bang Zeuthen

⁶ *C. Cornelii Taciti Opera ex recensione Ernestiana*, ed. by Immanuel Bekker, Berlin: G. Reimer 1825 (ASKB 1282).

⁷ *Des C. Cornelius Tacitus Sämmtliche Werke*, trans. by Johann Samuel Müller, vols. 1–3, Hamburg: Johann Carl Bohn 1765–66 (ASKB 1283–1285).

⁸ *Cajus Cornelius Tacitus*, vols. 1–3, trans. and ed. by Jacob Baden, vols. 1–3, Copenhagen: trykt hos Morten Hallager 1773–97 (ASKB 1286–1288).

⁹ *Dialog om Talerne eller om Aarsagerne til Veltalenhedens Fordærvelse*, trans. by Jacob Baden, Copenhagen: Johan Frederik Schultz 1802 (ASKB 1289).

¹⁰ Christoph Meiners, *Geschichte des Verfalls der Sitten, der Wissenschaften und Sprache der Römer, in den ersten Jahrhunderten nach Christi Geburt*, Vienna and Leipzig: Joseph Stahl 1791 (ASKB 669). Tacitus is also mentioned in Meiners' *Geschichte der Verfalls der Sitten und der Staatsverfassung der Römer*, Leipzig: bey Weidmanns Erben und Reich 1782, p. 25; p. 78; p. 85 (ASKB 660).

¹¹ W. Adolf Schmidt, *Geschichte der Denk- und Glaubensfreiheit im ersten Jahrhundert der Kaiserherrschaft und des Christenthums*, Berlin: Verlag von Veit und Comp. 1847 (ASKB 771).

¹² Johan Frederik Hagen, *Ægteskabet. Betragtet fra et ethisk-historisk Standpunct*, Copenhagen: Wahlske Boghandels Forlag 1845, p. 134n; p. 149n; p. 172n (ASKB 534).

(1805–74) on the historical development of early Christianity, both of which use Tacitus as a central source.¹³ Kierkegaard's library was thus well stocked for the pursuit of an interest in Tacitus, in the form of both the primary texts and modern studies which made use of them for different purposes.

III. Scattered References to Tacitus in Kierkegaard's Writings

This first reference to Tacitus in Kierkegaard's *corpus* appears in his *Notebook I* from 1833–34. The passage in question comes from Kierkegaard's notes to the theologian, Henrik Nicolai Clausen's (1793–1877) "Lectures on Christian Dogmatics" which were given at the University of Copenhagen during Winter Semester 1833–34.¹⁴ In these entries Kierkegaard adds a number of marginal notes at a later period of time, presumably when Clausen repeated the lectures in Winter Semester 1839–40.¹⁵ There, in one of these notes, Kierkegaard records Clausen as listing a number of sources for various portrayals of the Messiah. After listing the sources from the Old Testament and the Apocrypha, Clausen, according to Kierkegaard's notes, says, "This is also seen from Mth: 2:2, Luc. 2:26, also from Suetonius and Tacitus—about a predecessor for the Messiah."¹⁶

The commentators of *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* claim that the passage Clausen has in mind is Tacitus' *Annals*, Book XV, 44.¹⁷ This conclusion seems sound since this is the only place where Tacitus mentions Christ. In the passage in question Tacitus recounts how a great fire ravaged Rome in AD 64. As a consequence, serious efforts were made to appease the gods so that such an event would not happen again. Rumors abounded that a criminal element was responsible for starting the blaze, and the inevitable search for scapegoats began, with the blame quickly falling on the Christians. In this context, Tacitus writes:

But neither human resources, nor imperial munificence, nor appeasement of the gods, eliminated sinister suspicions that the fire had been instigated. To suppress this rumor, Nero fabricated scapegoats—and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians (as they were popularly called). Their originator, Christ, had been executed in Tiberius' reign by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilatus. But in spite of this temporary setback the deadly superstition had broken out afresh, not only in Judea (where the mischief had started) but even in Rome. All degraded and shameful practices collect and flourish in the capital.¹⁸

¹³ Jakob Peter Mynster, *Den hedenske Verden ved Christendommens Begyndelse*, Copenhagen: Schultz 1850, p. 8n, p. 12n, p. 23n, p. 47n, p. 48n (ASKB 693). Ludvig Zeuthen, *Om den christelige Tro i dens Betydning for Verdenshistorien. Et Forsøg*, Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandels Forlag 1838, p. 18, p. 37, p. 48, p. 51 (ASKB 259).

¹⁴ SKS 19, 7–74, Not1:1–8.

¹⁵ See Niels W. Bruun and Steen Tullberg, "Tekstredøgørelse" to *Notesbog 1*, in SKS K19, 8ff.

¹⁶ SKS 19, 39m, Not1:7.

¹⁷ SKS K19, 49.

¹⁸ Tacitus, *Annales*, Book XV, 44; *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. by Grant, p. 365.

This passage from Tacitus is of course very different from the biblical references to the Messiah that Clausen lists first. This is rather an account, through the eyes of a skeptical Roman, of the problems arising from Christ and his followers and not a portrayal of a Messiah from the pen of a religious believer. In any case, this is, for obvious reasons, a well-known *passus* in the *Annals*. While the statement in Kierkegaard's notebook should probably be attributed to Clausen and not Kierkegaard himself, nonetheless this passage in Tacitus did make its mark on the young student, who, as we shall see, returned to it much later. This passage is also important in tracing Kierkegaard's exposure to Tacitus. Although, as was seen above, he did not read Tacitus in school, nonetheless from this passage it is clear he learned about him in his first years at university.

As is well known, after defending his dissertation, Kierkegaard left for Berlin in the fall of 1841 in order to attend the lectures of Schelling on "The Philosophy of Revelation." In his lecture notes, which he wrote down in *Notebook 11*, Kierkegaard records Schelling as making an allusion to Tacitus. In the lecture held on February 2, 1842, Kierkegaard writes the following:

Sabianism is always where there are no fixed buildings; Tacitus describes the Germans in this way. Since man turns away from the universal god, from the boundless, he demands limitation, but when he has experienced the deficiencies of civic life, he longs again for the infinite, for the vast dome of heaven.¹⁹

In this lecture Schelling continues an analysis from his previous lectures on Indian, Egyptian, and Greek mythology. Here he refers to the religion of the Sabians, who worshiped the heavenly bodies such as the sun and the moon. The point is that it was natural to worship these kinds of deities outdoors and not in a closed temple or church.

Here Schelling has in mind a passage from Tacitus' *Germania*, where the historian describes the religious beliefs of the ancient Germans. There the Roman historian writes: "The Germans do not think it in keeping with the divine majesty to confine gods within walls or to portray them in the likeness of any human countenance. Their holy places are woods and groves, and they apply the names of deities to that hidden presence which is seen only by the eye of reverence."²⁰ Tacitus observes that the German tribes do not have temples like the Romans but instead have certain holy places outdoors in nature. For Schelling this indicates a desire for the infinite.

While he was in Berlin attending these lectures, Kierkegaard was also busy writing *Either/Or*. In this work there is a hidden reference to Tacitus. In Part Two, in "The Esthetic Validity of Marriage" Judge William says, "An ancient pagan—I believe it is Seneca—has said that when a person has reached his thirtieth year he ought to know his constitution so well that he can be his own physician. I likewise believe that when a person has reached a certain age he ought to be able to be his own

¹⁹ SKS 19, 365, Not11:38 / *SBL*, 410.

²⁰ Tacitus, *Germania*, IX; English translation quoted from *The Agricola and the Germania*, trans. by H. Mattingly, translation revised by S.A. Handford, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1970, p. 109.

pastor.”²¹ The reference to Seneca has thrown commentators off. In fact, Kierkegaard apparently remembers incorrectly or intentionally has Judge William do so.²²

The reference is instead to Tacitus’ *Annals*. There the story is told of the ailing emperor Tiberius, who, in AD 37, had difficulty appointing a successor. After a series of predictions about what fates will befall the immediate candidates, Tiberius was all but ready to give up the attempt. Tacitus writes, “However, despite failing health, Tiberius did not ration his sensualities. He was making a show of vigor to conceal his illness; and he kept up his habitual jokes against the medical profession, declaring that no man over thirty ought to need advice about what was good or bad for him.”²³ In the context of *Either/Or* the use of this story seems to be little more than anecdotal. In any case, nothing more seems to be made of it or its disguised source in this context.

Tacitus appears again in 1846 in a draft of a polemical article in connection with Kierkegaard’s well-known conflict with the *Corsair*. This time the reference is somewhat more cryptic. In the draft Kierkegaard writes:

What if contemptibleness is feared and has power? To be sure, the elder has said that it has never reached that point in the world. But I may, after all, imagine the worst without in the remotest manner worrying about any actual situation that might keep me from thinking the thought through and even though I am glad that such a thing can never happen. Would power in the remotest way alter the dialectic of contemptibleness? By no means, for when suppressed and downtrodden, contemptibleness is in a way almost defended; when it has power, it is completely defenseless.²⁴

In the margin to this, Kierkegaard then writes, “and just as Tacitus detected the contemptible slave mind in the Jewish King Agrippa, because he exercised tyrannical power, so contemptibleness is always seen most readily when it possesses power.”²⁵

The Hongs take this as a reference to Book V, Chapter 8 of the *Histories*,²⁶ where Tacitus describes the conquest of Judaea and the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus Caesar in AD 70. As a prelude to this account, he explains to his Roman readers the history of the Jews:

While the Assyrian, Median and Persian Empires dominated the East, the Jews were slaves regarded as the lowest of the low. In the Hellenistic period, King Antiochus made an effort to get rid of their primitive cult and Hellenize them, but his would-be reform of this degraded nation was foiled by the outbreak of war with Parthia, for this was the moment of Arsaces’ insurrection. Then, since the Hellenistic rulers were weak and the Parthians had not yet developed into a great power (Rome, too, was still far away), the Jews established a dynasty of their own. These kings were expelled by the fickle mob,

²¹ SKS 3, 75 / EO2, 70.

²² See SKS K2–3, 272.

²³ Tacitus, *Annales*, Book VI, 46; *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. by Michael Grant, op. cit., p. 224.

²⁴ *Pap.* VII–1 B 11, p. 175 / COR, 164.

²⁵ *Pap.* VII–1 B 11, p. 175 / COR, 164n.

²⁶ COR, 297, note 278.

but regained control by force, setting up a reign of terror which embraced, among other typical acts of despotism, the banishment of fellow-citizens, the destruction of cities, and the murder of brothers, wives and parents. The kings encouraged the superstitious Jewish religion, for they assumed the office of High Priest in order to buttress their regime.²⁷

While there is here a reference to “acts of despotism,” there is no mention of the Jewish King Agrippa as in Kierkegaard’s text. While Tacitus does mention King Agrippa elsewhere both here in the *Histories*²⁸ and in the *Annals*,²⁹ he is not referred to anywhere as a tyrant. Similarly, the editors of the *Papirer* edition of Kierkegaard’s *Nachlaß* refer to the following chapter, that is, Book V, Chapter 9 of the *Histories*,³⁰ but this passage is no more plausible since it, too, fails to mention King Agrippa. It should be noted that Agrippa appears in Acts 25–26, where he hears Paul’s case. There as well he does not make any particularly tyrannical or contemptible impression. Given that this reference cannot be localized, it is difficult to know what conclusions can be drawn from Kierkegaard’s allusion.

In 1849 in the *Journal NB14*, Kierkegaard alludes to another motif about the early Christians. Here he refers to Tacitus’ description of the terrifying forms of punishment exacted on the Christians:

During the persecution of Christians there was also the cruel practice of smearing the martyrs with pitch and the like, igniting them as torches, and using them to illuminate the festivities. Basically the same thing is always repeated in Christendom—the unbloody martyrs in particular have had to burn slowly—and their suffering has thus been the light in the Church.³¹

Kierkegaard thus draws a parallel between Christianity’s early martyrs and the “unbloody martyrs” of later Christendom. Since, according to Kierkegaard, the age of passion is past, modern Christians are not persecuted in the same way with torture and execution, but rather with public scorn and derision. These are thus the modern “unbloody martyrs” with whom he identifies his own efforts. The image that he paints here concerns the “light,” which was literal in the sense of the light of the flames that burnt the ancient martyrs but can be understood metaphorically as symbol of hope in the sense of “the light in the Church.” So also the modern martyrs, although they are not subject to flames, nonetheless “have had to burn slowly.” They too represent a positive light for true Christianity insofar as they refuse to capitulate to corruption and compromise despite all the criticism and mockery that they are made the object of. Kierkegaard thus finds here a useful image that he can apply in a metaphorical manner to the modern situation.

²⁷ Tacitus, *Histories*, Book V, 8; English translation quoted from *The Histories*, trans. by Kenneth Wellesley, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1972, p. 276.

²⁸ Tacitus, *Histories*, Book II, 81; *The Histories*, p. 130. *Histories*, Book V, 1; *The Histories*, p. 271.

²⁹ Tacitus, *Annales*, Book XIII, 7; *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. by Grant, p. 287.

³⁰ See the footnote in *Pap.* VII–1 B 11, p. 175.

³¹ *SKS* 22, 411, NB14:111 / *JP*, 3, 2657.

The source of Kierkegaard's information is presumably Tacitus' *Annals*, Book XV, 44. In his account of how the Christians were made scapegoats for the aforementioned fire in Rome in 64, Tacitus writes:

First, Nero had self-acknowledged Christians arrested. Then, on their information, large numbers of others were condemned....Their deaths were made farcical. Dressed in wild animals' skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight.³²

The commentators of *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* also refer to a passage in Karl Friedrich Becker's (1776–1806) *Verdenshistorie*, which refers to the same incident.³³ Thus the source is either Tacitus directly or via Becker indirectly. In any case it is clear that Kierkegaard is primarily interested in Tacitus' depiction of the treatment of the early Christians. He uses this as a parallel to what he regards as the corrupt state of Christianity in his own day.

IV. References to Tacitus' "sine ira atque studio"

In addition to these scattered references to Tacitus' works, there are also a couple of others which recur in Kierkegaard's authorship. The first of these is the phrase "*sine ira atque studio*." In his master's thesis *The Concept of Irony*, from 1841, Kierkegaard begins his treatment of the condemnation of Socrates by noting that the trial and execution of Socrates were factual events. Thus here, Kierkegaard speculates, it may be possible to obtain a degree of objectivity, which might otherwise have been lacking in the accounts given by those who had vested interests since they knew him. At the beginning of the section on this topic, he writes:

Everyone will promptly perceive that here we are dealing with something factual, and therefore the issue cannot be a view as with Xenophon, Plato, and Aristophanes, for whom the actuality of Socrates was the occasion for and a factor in a presentation that sought to round off and to transfigure his person ideally—something that the solemnity of the state could not possibly enter into, and therefore its conception is *sine ira atque studio*.³⁴

At first glance the Latin phrase "*sine ira atque studio*," meaning "without indignation or partisanship," seems unmotivated.

It is in fact a quotation from Tacitus' prefatory statements in his *Annals*. There Tacitus notes that the history of the Roman Republic has already been treated by distinguished historians, and even the Augustan period has been well recorded. By contrast, however, the post-Augustan age has not been adequately treated due to the fact that the historians during this period had to bow to the pressure and coercion

³² Tacitus, *Annales*, Book XV, 44; *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. by Grant, p. 365.

³³ *Karl Friedrich Beckers Verdenshistorie, omarbejdet af Johan Gottfried Woltmann*, vols. 1–12, trans. by J. Riise, Copenhagen: Fr. Brummers Forlag 1822–29, vol. 3, p. 716 (ASKB 1972–1983). See SKS K22, 523.

³⁴ SKS 1, 215 / CI, 167.

of tyrannical emperors. Tacitus thus proposes to undertake an account of this period that will be objective and impartial. The passage reads:

Famous writers have recorded Rome's early glories and disasters. The Augustan Age, too, had its distinguished historians. But then the rising tide of flattery exercised a deterrent effect. The reigns of Tiberius, Gaius, Claudius, and Nero were described during their lifetimes in fictitious terms, for fear of the consequences; whereas the accounts written after their deaths were influenced by still raging animosities. So I have decided to say a little about Augustus, with special attention to his last period, and then go on to the reign of Tiberius and what followed. I shall write without indignation or partisanship [*sine ira atque studio*]: in my case the customary incentives to these are lacking.³⁵

Tacitus makes a similar claim in his introductory remarks to his *Histories*, where he refers to writing "*neque amore et sine odio*" or "without partiality and without hatred."³⁶ There he goes out of his way to demonstrate that he is a neutral and objective historian since he is beholden to no one.³⁷ In any case, the statement "*sine ira atque studio*" seems simply to have become proverbial for anyone claiming objectivity in the treatment of his or her subject matter. In the context in which Kierkegaard invokes it, this phrase is thus perfectly appropriate.

In *Stages on Life's Way*, from 1845, Kierkegaard returns to the same expression. In the "Letter to the Reader" by Frater Taciturnus, the expression "*sine ira et studio*" is used in the discussion of Quidam and Quaedam. Of Quidam we read:

His sympathetic nature must be illuminated from all sides, and therefore I had to have a female character who can make the whole thing as dialectical as possible for him and among other things can bring him into the anguish of seeing her break with the idea, as he calls it, even if she does nothing else (if she does that) than that she, *sine ira et studio* without losing her feminine loveliness, acquires for herself a new partner in the dance of life—in other words, if a person cannot have the one, then take the other, unembarrassed by prolixity of ideas, and precisely for that reason lovable.³⁸

Given that the statement "*sine ira et studio*" was originally a part of Tacitus' description of his impartiality as a historian, in *Stages on Life's Way* it seems far removed from its original context and is simply reduced to a general *bon mot*. It should be noted that this frequent use of foreign words or phrases is a fixed element in Frater Taciturnus' style. It is difficult to make much more of the use of Tacitus in this context.

³⁵ Tacitus, *Annales*, Book I, 1; *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. by Grant, pp. 31–2.

³⁶ Tacitus, *Histories*, Book I, 1; *The Histories*, trans. by Wellesley, p. 21. Wellesley translates this passage as follows: "But partiality and hatred towards any man are equally inappropriate in a writer who claims to be honest and reliable."

³⁷ See Herbert W. Benario, "Historical Integrity," in his *An Introduction to Tacitus*, Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press 1975, pp. 148–65.

³⁸ SKS 6, 421 / *SLW*, 456.

V. References to Tacitus' "odium generis humani"

Another slogan from Tacitus that Kierkegaard uses more than once is the phrase "*odium generis humani*" literally "hatred of the human race." This appears repeatedly in his later writings from 1849 onward. In the *Journal NB10*, for example, Kierkegaard quotes this passage in Latin without mentioning a source. He writes, "Humanly speaking Christianity is, however, a hostility towards the human; humanly speaking paganism was indeed correct to call it the *odium generis humani*. And even Christianity itself says this: that it is hatred of the world."³⁹

This is a slightly modified quotation from Tacitus' *Annals*, which was presumably quoted from memory. This is in fact a quotation from the same general passage, referred to previously in Clausen's lectures and in the *Journal NB14*, where Tacitus reports on the persecutions of the Christians on occasion of the fire in Rome. Again, it reads: "First, Nero had self-acknowledged Christians arrested. Then, on their information, large numbers of others were condemned—not so much for incendiaryism as for their hatred of the human race [*otio humani generis*]."⁴⁰ Here although the wording is not exact, it is clearly close enough for us to infer that Tacitus is the source.

At this time, Kierkegaard returned to this same formulation again and again in his attempt to understand the strict demands of true Christianity. In his *Journal NB11*, also from 1849, Kierkegaard begins his criticism of the corrupt version of Christianity in his day. In the entry in question he begins with the claim, "The situation is neither more nor less than that Christianity has been abolished in Christendom, and that Christendom nevertheless will still not give up the claim of being Christian."⁴¹ He then continues:

Christendom has repeated the parable of the vineyard workers who killed the lord's messengers and finally also his son, "because this is our vineyard." We think we might just as well be a Christian—who knows, it might be prudent. But there is no ear for what Christianity requires regarding self-denial, renunciation, and seeking *first* the Kingdom of God. And then once in a while someone comes along who either is a true Christian or is so concerned for the truth that he makes no secret of what is understood by being a true Christian. He is shouted down as a traitor, an *odium totius christianitatis* (*ad modum odium generis humani*), as the earliest Christians were called, and killed.⁴²

Here it is the true Christian of modern times who is rejected for his "*odium totius christianitatis*" or "hatred of all Christendom" in the sense of a hatred of the human race, "*ad modum odium generis humani*." The ancient pagan description of the early Christians given by Tacitus is used, in Kierkegaard's eyes, as a perfectly fitting description of the true Christian in modern times. However, the change in the social-political status of Christianity renders it ironic. While the ancient Christians were persecuted for, among other things, their hatred for humanity, the true Christian of

³⁹ SKS 21, 297, NB10:77.

⁴⁰ Tacitus, *Annales*, Book XV, 44; *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. by Grant, p. 365. Translation slightly modified.

⁴¹ SKS 22, 95, NB11:160 / JP, 1, 383.

⁴² SKS 22, 95, NB11:160 / JP, 1, 383.

the nineteenth century is subject to a similar kind of persecution at the hands not of the pagans but of self-proclaimed Christians. The point is clearly that the modern complacent Christians do not realize the difficult demands of Christianity, which require them to reject the world in a way that looks like misanthropy. Kierkegaard thus refers to the same passage as previously from Tacitus' *Annals*. He notes that the designation of the Christians as having a hatred for human beings is in a sense wholly correct since they do not lose sight of these difficult demands.

This same quotation appears in *Journal NB12*, from the same year. There Kierkegaard writes:

To the natural man the Christian view of life must seem to be a hatred toward life, and the pagans were justified as pagans in calling Christians: *odium generis humani*. "Established Christendom" has messed the whole thing up with human sympathy, and therefore the natural man is almost highly pleased with—yes, with Christendom, which, of course, is not Christianity.⁴³

This passage can in a sense be seen as an explanation of the previous one. The same parallel is drawn between the ancient Christian and the modern one. The critical parallel between Christendom and paganism is also present as before. The irony is that Christendom criticizes and persecutes true Christianity for its hatred of humanity in the same way paganism did in the Roman world.

The passage then finally appears in printed form in *Practice in Christianity*, from 1850. Kierkegaard has his pseudonym write the following, as if a commentary to the previously quoted passages from his journals: "For a pagan to think himself to be doing his god a service by killing an apostle is not as mad as the persecution of the 'true Christian' in 'Christendom'—and that 'the Christians' then consider this a service to God and 'Christ.'"⁴⁴ Here the parallel in the previous passages is made explicit. Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author then continues:

Here one also sees the connection between this and a frequently made objection to Christianity that in a certain sense is quite correct and in any case has more point to it than the silly defense of Christianity usually made in this regard. The objection is that Christianity is misanthropic, as indeed the early Christians were called *odium totius generis humani*.⁴⁵

So far, this appears to be more or less what was said in the previously quoted journal entries, which make use of this quotation from Tacitus' *Annals*. Now, however, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author explains explicitly what he takes this to mean:

The connection is this. In relation to what the natural man, who loves himself selfishly or loves himself in a womanly way, regards as love, friendship, and the like, Christianity resembles a hatred of what it is to be a human being, the greatest curse and torment upon what it is to be human. Indeed, even the more profound person can have many weaker moments when to him it is as if Christianity were misanthropy, because in the weaker

⁴³ SKS 22, 150, NB12:8 / JP, 1, 507.

⁴⁴ SKS 12, 123 / PC, 116.

⁴⁵ SKS 12, 124 / PC, 117.

moments he wants to coddle himself, whimper, have an easy life in the world, live in rather quiet enjoyment.⁴⁶

True Christianity must, according to this view, resist this impulse towards comfort. It requires that one reject things such as friendship and love and, instead, embrace suffering and persecution. This is something that Christendom has forgotten, while it has eliminated the possibility of offense.

There can be no doubt that the portrayal of the early Christians in the *Annals* XV, 44, 2–5 was what interested Kierkegaard most in Tacitus' writings. He returns to different aspects of this passage on several occasions. He is fascinated by the pagan perspective of Christianity, which represents a kind of common-sense response. By bringing this out, Kierkegaard wishes to make clear that Christianity is not something that is obvious or straightforward, although this is what it has become in Christendom. He wishes to indicate that there is an important insight in the pagan perspective. Tacitus' shock at Christianity is precisely what has been lost in Christendom, where everything has been reduced to bourgeois pleasantries and there is nothing frightening or offensive left. In a sense Kierkegaard enjoins his readers to look at Christianity again through the eyes of Tacitus and to come to terms with the hard demands that it issues. We should resist the urge to domesticate and soften the radicality of the Christian message.

From this, it is only a short step to other aspects of Christianity that the later Kierkegaard wants to emphasize. Thus this same passage also interests him for its account of the persecutions of the early Christians. This is useful for him as he develops his own concept of martyrdom and its role in Christian faith and practice. As a Christian, one should be prepared to be mocked and cast out. The true Christian cannot expect to enjoy a comfortable or pleasant life; this is the province of the hypocrite and the corrupt Christian in Christendom.

Given all this, there can be no doubt that Kierkegaard, somewhat paradoxically, finds inspiration for different aspects of his conception of Christianity in this pagan historian. Beginning with the notion of Christianity as a hatred of humanity, Kierkegaard can then move on to the whole constellation of Christian concepts that he wishes to sketch and contrast to the corrupt and complacent Christianity of Christendom.

⁴⁶

Ibid.

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