

Classicist: 'Modern' view of religion dates to 303 AD

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A theory of religion considered "modern" by many scholars was actually described 1,700 years ago, according to new research by Toni Alimi, a Klarman Postdoctoral Fellow in classics and philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences.

Soon after 303 A.D., the scholar Lactantius argued in "Divine Institutes"

for the philosophical validity of Christianity. Alimi identifies three features of so-called modern religious views in this text, that:

- Religion is a universal practice, found in all communities;
- Religions can be true or false; and
- Christianity is the true religion.

Alimi's paper, "Lactantius's 'Modern' Conception of Religio," published in the *Journal of Religious History*.

"Sometimes, scholars of religion argue that these ideas, or their confluence, emerged in modernity, as European Christian colonizers encountered 'new peoples,'" Alimi said. "If I'm right, that we already find them in the fourth century, in Lactantius, it means we have to seriously rethink what is modern about modern conceptions of religion.

"This doesn't imply that there are no distinctively modern conceptions of religion," he said. "But it does mean that scholars of religion need to do more work to specify just what makes the modern conceptions modern."

Alimi embarked on this research while writing his book "Slaves of God," which explains Augustine's reasons for justifying slavery. The fourth- and fifth-century Christian philosopher borrowed from and built on Lactantius' ideas about [religion](#).

Born in North Africa in the middle of the third century, Lactantius studied philosophy with Arnobius, a North African Christian, in Numidia. Lactantius became a teacher of rhetoric, eventually being promoted by Emperor Diocletian to a position in Nicomedia, the eastern capital of the Roman Empire.

"Lactantius had achieved a remarkable level of professional success," Alimi said.

But then he converted to Christianity. Around the same time, the emperor started an official program against Christians. Lactantius resigned his post in 303, just before Diocletian fired all the Christians in his employ.

"Lactantius' defense of Christianity was immediately motivated by the persecutions Christians suffered and by the philosophical arguments against Christianity that Lactantius had encountered in Porphyry. His writings bear the urgency of a person fearing persecution," Alimi said. "Especially in 'On the Deaths of the Persecutors,' but also in 'Divine Institutes,' the text I focus on in this article, Lactantius makes the existential stakes of his arguments clear."

These two texts refer specifically to Roman rhetoric and philosophy, particularly Cicero's (106-43 B.C.), Alimi said; in his arguments, Lactantius relied more on classical Roman history, rhetoric, philosophy and poetry rather than Christian ideas or theology because he aimed to convince non-Christians of his views. As an educated Roman, Lactantius knew Cicero and other classical Roman authors very well. Cicero, especially, commanded the respect of Christians and non-Christians alike.

Lactantius' writings create important links between past and present, Alimi said.

"As a form of history, intellectual history is concerned with changes," he said. "But you can't know what changed unless you know what stayed the same. So, my paper argues for some important continuities between Lactantius and modernity. In doing so, I hope it clears away some brush in a way that makes it possible for us to see what really changed."

More information: Toni Alimi, Lactantius's "Modern" Conception of Religio *, *Journal of Religious History* (2023). [DOI:](#)

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