

Apr 20th, 12:45 PM - 2:00 AM

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Chan, Lilian C., "“A Curiosity Which Has Many Eyes”: Ante-Nicene Church Fathers’ Attitudes Towards Bathing" (2017). *Young Historians Conference*. 2.

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“A Curiosity Which Has Many Eyes”:
Ante-Nicene Church Fathers’ Attitudes Towards Bathing

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Western Civilization

January 22, 2017

According to Titus Flavius Clemens, “The baths are opened promiscuously to men and women; and there they strip for licentious indulgence (for from looking, men get to loving), as if their modesty had been washed away in the bath.”¹ In *Paedagogus*, one of his greatest theological works, Clemens dedicates two whole passages to denouncing bathhouses. The Church’s distaste for bathing can similarly be seen in other works throughout the Ante-Nicene period, including the Apostolic Constitutions. When it comes to opinions of the Church Fathers towards public bathhouses, scholars are consistent on addressing how bathhouses were considered immoral to them. The scholars Johannes Zellinger, Roy Bowen Ward, and Katherine M.D. Dunbabin focus on indulgence, female sensuality, and wastefulness in bathhouses, respectively. However, there are disparities between scholars when it came to the severity of bathhouse offenses to the eyes of Church Fathers. “*A Curiosity Which Has Many Eyes*”: *Ante-Nicene Church Fathers’ Attitudes Towards Bathing* will clarify disparities between the various scholars’ works and will merge the various reasonings behind the Church Fathers’ contempt of bathhouses. This paper also builds upon other scholars’ works by explaining how the cultural and religious practices of Rome influenced the Church Fathers’ reasonings. Additionally, this essay suggests that Church Fathers found bathhouses disease-causing, a notion that is contrary to the beliefs of scholars such as Garrett G. Fagan and Katherine M.D. Dunbabin. Due to misguided medical beliefs and strict self-restraint doctrines, the Ante-Nicene Church Fathers condemned bathing, which they viewed as an immoral, promiscuous, and disease-causing act.

¹ Titus Flavius Clemens, *The Paedagogus*, in *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermes, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria*, vol. 2 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe, Alexander Roberts, and James Donaldson, (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 279.

The culture of the Ante-Nicene period in Ancient Rome heavily influenced the Church Fathers' disdain of bathhouses. To clarify, the Church Fathers were early Church leaders, such as bishops, priests, and deacons. They were significant for their contributions on developing Catholic doctrines and in writing numerous religious commentary and persuasion pieces. Timewise, this essay will analyze the particular Church Fathers from the Ante-Nicene period, which lasted from one hundred A.D to 325 A.D. The Church Fathers' contempt towards bathhouses was not based on bathing itself but rather on the social interactions, diseases, and sensations associated with bathing. Bathing in Rome was conducted in Roman bathhouses, which were used for many purposes besides just bathing; all members of the community regardless of gender and social class went to bathhouses to socialize, feast, entertain, and heal. The extravagance and unisex nature of these Roman bathhouses were mainly what invoked the Church Fathers' contempt.

Because bathhouses were mixed-gendered, Ante-Nicene Church Fathers considered them unchaste. In the *Paedagogus*, Clement of Alexandria warns that, "Disease in both is known from the look. Men, therefore, affording to women a noble example of truth, ought to be ashamed at their stripping before them, and guard against these dangerous sights . . ." ² Clement of Alexandria believed that a man and women being naked in the presence of one another in bathhouses was unchaste. Because sex outside of marriage was considered a sin of the flesh, which could endanger salvation, the Church valued complete chastity outside of marriage. Even though Clement's beliefs on bathing do not represent all Ante-Nicene Church Fathers' opinions, Clement's influence as an intellectual leader of the Alexandrian Christian Community provides

² Ibid.

him credibility as a representative of the general theological ideas of his time. The Apostolic Constitutions, a collection of ecclesiastical laws that have survived from early Christianity, provide further insight into the Church Fathers' view of promiscuity in the bathhouses: "... if she is to veil her face, and conceal it with modesty from strange men, how can she bear to enter naked into the bath together with men? But if the bath be appropriated to women, let her bathe orderly, modestly, and moderately . . . For it is convenient that thou, who art a Christian woman, shouldst ever constantly avoid a curiosity which has many eyes."³ The Apostolic Constitutions criticized bathhouses in order to restrain promiscuity and female sensuality. Mixed-gendered bathing went against Church doctrines of chastity, contributing to the Church Fathers' disdain of bathhouses.

Additionally, aspects of prejudice towards women during the Ante-Nicene period are revealed through promiscuity being attributed to women's weak natures in both the *Paedagogus* and the Apostolic Constitutions. Church Fathers believed women were easily-tempted and lustful. This argument is supported by the scholar Roy Bowen Ward who states, "Clement's teaching, the first extant Christian criticism of the baths, is dominated by his concern with female sensuality. . ."⁴ He also utilizes Cyprianus as a further example, "Cyprianus, who addressed Christian virgins in his *De habitu virginum* (249 CE), queried, 'What in fact about those [virgins] who go to common baths (promiscuae balnea) and who prostitute to eyes that are curious for pleasure (ad libidinem) bodies that are dedicated to modesty (pudor) and chastity (pudicitia) . . .

³ "Apostolic Teachings and Constitutions," in *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries: Lactantius, Venantius, Asterius, Victorinus, Dionysius, Apostolic Teaching and Constitutions, Homily, and Liturgies*, vol. 7 of *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe, Alexander Roberts, and James Donaldson, (Buffalo: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 395.

⁴ Roy Bowen Ward, "Women in Roman Baths," *The Harvard Theological Review* 85, no. 2 (1992): 142-143, accessed December 03, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/1509900>.

To the argument that the virgins could have a modest disposition and come only for refreshment and washing, [they are themselves] gazed upon immodestly.”⁵ Ward agrees that some Ante-Nicene Church Fathers disliked the mixed-nature and intimacy of bathhouses, especially emphasizing the Church Fathers’ disdain for female sensuality. This prejudice toward women is prevalent throughout Ante-Nicene Rome. Because of the creation myth of Adam and Eve, Church Fathers saw women as being deceivers, weak-hearted, and inferior to men. Notably, women had lesser power in the Church; they could become members of the clergy, but they could not teach or interpret scriptures like male Church authorities could. Because of the sexism present throughout Ante-Nicene Rome, it is likely that these views spilled over to women in bathhouses, where Church Fathers condemned bathhouses to deter women from sexual behavior.

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In addition to concerns about female chastity, the Church Fathers found bathhouses to infringe upon Ante-Nicene values of self-restraint. Self-restraint was important because the Church Fathers sought separation from worldly pleasures to prepare for the afterlife, the Kingdom of God. Roman bathhouses were considered self-indulgent because of the social events held in bathhouses and the sensation of bathing itself. The *Paedagogus* warns, “Bathing for pleasure is to be omitted. For unblushing pleasure must be cut out by the roots . . . To bathe for the sake of heat is a superfluity, since one may restore what is frozen by the cold in other ways.”⁷ This strict doctrine of self-restraint indicates that not bathing at all is preferred to bathing for

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ It should be noted that while research on the Church’s opinions of bathhouses is limited, most scholars do agree that Church Fathers were concerned about female sensuality in bathhouses.

⁷ Clemens, *The Paedagogus*, 282.

pleasure. This accords to the Ante-Nicene Church beliefs of abstaining from earthly pleasures, which were considered to be sins. The argument bathhouses were considered self-indulgent is further supported by Johannes Zellinger's *Bad und Baeder in der Altchristlichen Kirche*. In T.J. Shahan's review of *Bad und Baeder in der Altchristlichen Kirche*, Johannes Zellinger suggests the Church took measures to limit bathing because of "the recoil of the Christian conscience and the origins of a traditional medieval hostility . . . to the grievous and shameful abuses of the public baths. . . . [and the] hostile attitude of early Christian monasticism except in cases of illness or for sanitary reasons."⁸ In medieval beliefs, the Church regarded humans as insignificant and sinful. Because of the one-sided view of the world, Church rules and teachings were strict, pessimistic, and harsh. Many people also practiced Christian monasticism where individuals lived ascetic lifestyles, emphasizing abstinence from worldly pleasures. Zellinger concluded Christian authorities disapproved of bathhouses because bathing violated the emerging Medieval Church belief of self-restraint.

Furthermore, the Church Fathers mocked the extravagance of bathing, especially those of the upper class, as another immorality of the bathhouses. The *Paedagogus* states: "Besides these, there are even braziers of coals; for they have arrived at such a pitch of self-indulgence, that they sup and get drunk while bathing. And articles of silver with which they make a show, they ostentatiously set out in the baths, and thus display perchance their wealth out of excessive pride . . ."⁹ Because bathing was a way the upper classes indulged and showed off their wealth, Clement of Alexandria found the act to be excessive and wasteful. When writing the

⁸ T. J. Shahan, *The Catholic Historical Review* 17, no. 4 (1932): 470, accessed December 03, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/25012955>.

⁹ Clemens, *The Paedagogus*, 279.

Paedagogus, Clement was aware of the heavy financial burdens placed upon the Egyptian lower and middle classes in the late second century, which were caused by rapid inflation and increased taxes. This provides reason for Clement to be especially aggressive towards any wasteful activities. Even throughout the rest of the Ante-Nicene period, wealth in general was disturbing to pistic Christians who interpreted a Christian's duty as to help the poor.¹⁰ The extravagant social gatherings and feasts associated with bathhouses further made bathhouses seem wasteful. Because of these concerns, Clement of Alexandria hoped to communicate to his mainly middle and upper-class audience the manner in which they bathed disgusted the Church. Dunbabin states, "...Marcellinus draws a vivid picture of the ostentation of the Roman aristocracy, arriving at the baths with their train of fifty servants; and the immorality... is a favourite theme for many church fathers."¹¹ Dunbabin agrees that Church Fathers saw bathhouses as displays of the overindulgence and greed of the aristocracy. Altogether, the extravagance of bathhouses violated the Church Fathers' beliefs of self-restraint and frugality.

However, some evidence suggests Church Fathers showed leniency towards bathhouses. Dunbabin states, "A visit to the baths was one of the great pleasures of life in the Roman Empire. . . . Even the Christian Fathers were sometimes prepared to acknowledge this aspect of the baths. . . ."¹² This statement and the actions of the Church Fathers should not be misinterpreted as the Church favoring bathing. The Church Fathers faced opposition from the public on their stance on bathhouses. Dunbabin explains, "...for the average inhabitants of the cities of the empire, the

¹⁰ Linwood Fredrickson. "Saint Clement of Alexandria." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. November 10, 2016. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Clement-of-Alexandria>.

¹¹ Dunbabin, "Baiaurum Grata Voluptas: Pleasures and Dangers of the Baths," 7.

¹² *Ibid*, 6.

baths, large and small, were a place of refreshment and relaxation from the burdens of everyday life, an essential part of the pleasures of civilised living.”¹³ Therefore, some Church Fathers had to compromise. Fagan provides further interpretation on this subject in *Bathing in Public in the Roman World*, “. . . the early church, confronted with the wide popularity and hedonistic pleasures of the bath, dared not ban usage altogether but preferred to justify visiting baths on hygienic and medicinal grounds- as long as the bather did not enjoy it too much.”¹⁴ Although the Church Fathers were firm in their opposition against bathing, the public choose to favor tradition over the Church Fathers’ teachings. Therefore, the leniency of Church Fathers towards bathing was not because of their approval, but because of strong public opposition.

There were also cases of Church Fathers accepting bathing. Ward states, “Not all Christians agreed. Sometime before 393, Jovinianus, a Christian monk, published in Rome his views which "set the mark of approval on baths in which men and women bathe... Later in his *Adversus haereses* (ca. 190 CE) Irenaeus referred to a story he claimed stemmed from Polycarp of Smyrna, who died ca. 156 CE, about John the disciple going to the public baths (pavdiouv) in Ephesus where he saw Cerinthus. Tertullian of Carthage in his *Apologeticum* (197 CE) claimed that the Christians were no different from other people: they went to the forum, the food market, and the baths (balneia). These three passages, among the earliest references to Roman baths by Christians, suggest no ethical reservations about going to the baths.”¹⁵ In defense of this essay, these Church leaders’ accounts are exceptions; the majority of Church Fathers, as evident from

¹³ Ibid, 7.

¹⁴ Garrett G. Fagan, *Bathing in Public in the Roman World* (Ann Harbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 88.

¹⁵ Ward, "Women in Roman Baths," 145-146.

important texts such as *Paedagogus* and *Apostolic Constitutions*, did not approve of bathhouses.

¹⁶ As for the Christians enjoying the baths, that can be again explained by how Roman citizens shared different views than Church Fathers when it came to bathing. Overall, current evidence against Church Fathers condemning bathhouses is not significant enough to suggest a reinterpretation.

Besides the ideological and theological basis for which the Church deemed bathing to be unspiritual, there was also a medical reason. During this time period, the Church associated bathing with the spread of diseases, as shown in the *Paedagogus*: “Constant use of the bath, too, impairs strength and relaxes the physical energies, and often induces debility and fainting. . . . The ancients called them places for fulling men, since they wrinkle men’s bodies sooner than they ought, and by cooking them, as it were, compel them to become prematurely old.”¹⁷ Although the idea bathing causes illnesses has since been corrected, this misconception was generally accepted by the public in Ancient Rome. As a result of this widespread misconception, the early Christian Church banned bathing with the justification of minimizing health risks. However, it should be addressed there is contradicting evidence when it comes to Ante-Nicene beliefs on the relationship between bathing and health. In *Bathing for Health with Celsus and Pliny the Elder*, Garrett G. Fagan theorizes about the possibility of Roman society already correlating bathing with health: “The connection makes repeated appearances in ancient literature of all sorts . . . only the eight books of the *De Medicina* survive extant. In all, Celsus refers to baths and bathing some eighty-one times throughout his work. . . . Pliny refers to

¹⁶ Therefore, it should be noted that this essay analyzes the beliefs of the majority of Ante-Nicene Church Fathers, not every individual single case.

¹⁷ Clemens, *The Paedagogus*, 282-283.

medicinal bathing forty-seven times in his last seventeen books. . .”¹⁸ This offers the possibility the health benefits of bathing were actually widely known during the Ante-Nicene period. Even though Pliny the Elder and Celsus shared different views from those of Church Fathers, Clement himself addressed, “. . . the bath is to taken by women for cleanliness and health, by men for health alone.”¹⁹ For both genders, Clement explicitly mentions health as a reason for bathing.²⁰ It is possible Ante-Nicene Rome had conflicting viewpoints of the healthfulness of bathing because they lacked accurate and consistent medical knowledge at that point in history. If so, Clement might have emphasised the negative viewpoint over the positive viewpoint on bathing in *Paedagogus* to support his argument of bathing being unhealthy. Clement also mentions, “For the bath is not beneficial to all, or always...”²¹ This shows that even if the Church Fathers noticed the correlations between bathing and health, they tried to downplay those effects, choosing to emphasize instead how bathing supposedly caused diseases and premature aging. Overall, the actual consensus on bathing was not clear at the time, but the argument bathing caused diseases was clearly used to deter bathers.

In Ante-Nicene Rome, strict Church doctrines, sexist beliefs, and inaccurate medical knowledge gave the Ante-Nicene Church Fathers legitimate reasons to denounce bathhouses. Because of sexism and Church doctrines of chastity, the mixed-gendered nature of bathhouses were seen as promiscuous by Church Fathers. In addition, the strict Church doctrines for

¹⁸ Garrett G. Fagan, "Bathing for Health with Celsus and Pliny the Elder," *The Classical Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2006): 190-191, accessed January 16, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/4493397>.

¹⁹ Clemens, *The Paedagogus*, 282.

²⁰ This is another example of different standards for men and women in ante-Nicene Rome. Women were held to a higher standard of hygiene than men.

²¹ Clemens, *The Paedagogus*, 283.

self-restraint caused Church Fathers to denounce the sensations and extravagance of the bathhouses. Besides the Church's concerns of self-restraint and female sensuality, Roman medical beliefs also made bathhouses a medical concern. At first glance, this topic seems to be limited and niched. However, it has the potential to supplement various fields, especially concerning Church Fathers' influence and Roman beliefs. In comparing Church Fathers' teachings to common practices, it seems that the Church Fathers had limited influence in changing long-held traditions in Rome. This paper also provides evidence of contradictory medical beliefs of bathing present during Ante-Nicene Rome. This detail can be used as a rough measure of Ante-Nicene medical development.²² Additionally, part of the Church Fathers' contempt towards bathing stemmed from prejudiced views towards women. Therefore, scholars should consider this topic with concerns not only for religion, but also for sexism, such as how Church doctrines created some basis for sexism in Ante-Nicene Rome.

²² A suggestion for the field is to further explore how Church leaders' attitudes towards bathing changed as more medical discoveries regarding hygiene were made. By doing so, this can provide information on how medical discoveries affect cultures and values.

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