Tertullian's *Apology* entered no empty world. The arena of late antiquity bristled with debates regarding the nature of religion, society, and the gods. As the empire expanded, those discussions inevitably came to question the status of "new" or "foreign" religions, such as Christianity. If we can rely on Dio Cassius' report of Maecenas' speech to the emperor Augustus, we have an early record of the Roman distrust of such aberrations: "Those who attempt to distort our religion you should abhor and punish, not merely for the sake of the gods, but because the emergence of new divinities in place of the old persuades many to adopt foreign practices, from which spring up conspiracies, factions, and political clubs which are far from profitable to a monarchy." Within this world which was skeptical of intrusions on the hallowed ground of "tradition," Tertullian's treatise was by no means the first attempt at a Christian apology. Such responses could already by this time look to the precedent of a developing genre. Before this apologist's contribution had appeared, Christian apologetics already claimed a mature literary tradition in the Greek realm, and the internal evidence of this first Latin apology suggests that Tertullian was not unaware of these arguments. Of course, it must also be said that Christianity was not the only religion which fell under severe criticism, nor were Christians the only ones who raised a critical voice regarding the "pagan" religious traditions. The Romans themselves had spoken critically of their myths and religious practices, subjecting them to scrutiny, revision, and even mockery by rhetors and playwrights, philosophers and emperors. Thus, in the broader sphere of Latin letters, a Christian writer such as Tertullian was by no means a pioneer in criticizing the Roman worship of the gods. He could depend, for example, upon the philosophical precedent of Cicero; his own use of irony
as a weapon against Roman traditions reflected a measure of the biting satire of Lucian. Indeed, this was a world in which rhetoric spoils all sincerity.

Christian apologists were by no means unaware of the arguments levelled against them. In the case of Tertullian as among the earlier Greeks, the defense of Christianity became essentially a redefinition of "antiquity" and "novelty," of *vetera et nova*. Apologetics could not afford to avoid the question of history. The apologists in general did not see themselves as defenders of any "new" phenomena upon the landscape of religious cults or philosophical schools in the Roman world. Rather, they cast their defense upon the ancient foundations of the Jewish heritage, one which they held to be far superior to the novelty of Roman institutions and practices. Thus, the dialogue provided by such an apology became a complex web of arguments—with the defenders of Roman institutions, with indigenous critics of Roman traditions and practices, and with Jewish historians. The margins of Tertullian's text spill over with voices of a long, ongoing debate, belying his suggestion at the outset of his treatise that truth should be allowed to advance "by the hidden path of silent literature." This world is no empty place, nor should we miss the irony of Tertullian's contention that literature was in any way "silent."

Tertullian's *Apology* is on the surface a forensic defense of the legitimacy of Christianity, a legal argument regarding the status of Christians within the Roman Empire. On a more profound level, however, it must be understood as a treatise on origins—the origin of Christianity, of course, but also origins having a more immediate bearing upon "pagan" society. Thus, the forensic "defense" of the Christian truth is interspersed with explanations regarding the origins of Roman worship and law, the origin and function of the demons, the cause of contemporary Roman "superstitions" and of the "irreligiosity" which stood to condemn not Christian but Roman traditions. In this sense, Tertullian here articulates a complex historical argument which, breaking beyond the limits of strictly "intramural" categories, presses the criticism to the very heart of Roman religious sensibilities. Not only does this Latin apologist defend Christians from the legal charges set against them, as had his Greek predecessors, but he also forwards a positive argument, a startling "retorsion" of the Roman indictment which underscored the constructive role of Christianity in and for Roman society. With this "apology" we hear much more than a defen-