Christian Onomastics: A Response to Frankfurter

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In his critical response to our article ‘Onomastic perspectives on conversion’, David Frankfurter doubts the validity of name-giving as an indicator for the religious background of the families involved.¹ In his view biblical names could be used by ‘pagans’ for all kinds of non-strictly religious reasons, such as the popularity of a local (Christian?) shrine. Moreover religious and in particular Christian identity was not so clear-cut as is usually thought.

That Christians continued a lot of traditional religious practices is not in doubt.² We ourselves pointed out that many Christians continued to give their children pagan names (‘false negatives’), resulting in a low sensitivity of the onomastic test for Christianity. This explains the necessity of a multiplying factor to obtain an estimate of the number of Christians based on the number of Christian names.³

We disagree with Frankfurter, however, on the specificity issue: rather than listing possible reasons why non-Christians would give their children typically Christian names (‘false positives’), we focus on the fact that proven cases of non-Christians with Biblical or other typically Christian names are extremely rare.⁴ It is of course possible to speculate that many people with ‘Christian’ names were in fact pagans, but we think that there were good reasons why in the fourth century very few non-Christians would give their children Christian names.

² Frankfurter, Response, 286-287.
³ Depauw / Clarysse, Onomastic Perspectives, 427-428.
⁴ Frankfurter, Response, 288 against Depauw / Clarysse, Onomastic Perspectives, 425-427.
In our view, Christians stand out as a group, at least up to the early fourth century, because they refused to take part in offerings and in the common meals following these;\(^5\) because they did not pay the usual honours to the emperor, causing problems in the army, in the administration and in the courts; and because they had their own organisation, with churches (or prayer houses), priests and bishops, Sunday cult and poor relief. As a result, persecutors apparently did not have problems in finding out who was a Christian and, in the wake of a persecution, \textit{lapsi} trying to return in the fold were treated as traitors, which shows that the community was already well organised by the late third century.

Even if Christians participated in many traditional religious practices, there is thus in our view little evidence for the concept of a fluid Christian identity, as embraced by Frankfurter. Christianity was digital rather than analogue: people were either Christian or pagan. To determine to which group people belonged, the state could focus on things Christians refused to do, such as offering to the traditional gods and the emperor, and use these as diagnostic tests. Only Christians would not perform traditional offerings (no false negatives—high sensitivity) and those who did not perform the traditional offerings were always Christians (no false positives—high specificity).

Unfortunately, this diagnostic test is not available to us today at the desirable scale.\(^6\) For that reason we have resorted to the adoption of Christian names. We admit that the sensitivity of this test is low, since many Christians did not give typically Christian names to their children. But we consider it unlikely that pagans would give their children names typical of what they probably saw as a separatist, intolerant and fundamentalist religion.\(^7\) Precisely because Christians were seen as a group separating themselves from society, the specificity of Christian names is high (Table 1).


\(^7\) For those born after ca. 325, appearing in the records from the mid-fourth century onwards, it is theoretical possible that non-Christians started copying Christian names, at least some of the non-Biblical ones. But the very gradual increase of the graph shows that this must have been rare: cf. the rare examples listed in Depauw / Clarysse, \textit{Onomastic Perspectives}, 426.