

Catcalls

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [July 5, 2000](#) issue

Cats, they say, have nine lives. My cat columns, I say, will have only two. My first (April 5) was a pioneering, tentative but catastrophically flawed venture into the aelurophilic world. It spawned a cataract of letters. Fax and e-mail contributed yet more catcalls.

The catalyst for this flow was my comment on Peter Green's review of Donald Engels's *Classical Cats: The Rise and Fall of the Sacred Cat* (Routledge). Engels dealt with the benign and malign roles cats have played in religion. Here is where I got into trouble: I wrote, "Green quotes Lactantius: 'Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum,'" which I paraphrased to the effect that all religion has a potential for working evil. Green noted the unforeseen potential for cataclysmic evil on the part of Christians who killed cats as a part of antipagan ventures. They thus let rats thrive, and rats bring plagues. The result was the Black Death, which killed as many as 20,000,000 Europeans.

There was only one problem with what I wrote. A number of classicists—my classmate Edgar Krentz, retired from the Lutheran School of Theology; my colleague Robert M. Grant, teammate at the University of Chicago; industrialist/humanist J. Irwin Miller; Gary Curtis of Claremont and others—called me on a miscitation. Krentz: "That Latin line is actually from Book 3 of Lucretius's great Epicurean epic poem *De Rerum Natura*. . . . Did Lactantius cite Lucretius? I am curious to know whether Lactantius, Peter Green or Martin Marty loses the Lucretius attribution."

Answer: Martin Marty.

I retrieved the *Times Literary Supplement*, hoping to find Green lapsing. No, there was Lucretius. I checked my catalogs of ancient quotations. No luck. There seemed no way to smuggle Lactantius in. So, humiliated into catalepsy and fearing to become catatonic, I have to eat crow—if it has not been reached first by a big and hungry cat.

Robert Grant feared that “too much esCatology” had driven me mad. He also takes on Green and Engels: “Certainly in the ancient church there is no evidence for a crusade against cats . . . , and in the Acts of John the apostle owes a good night’s sleep to the kindness of strange insects.” Earlier Grant had written an unpublished essay on cats, from which I quote: “Sidney Mead has remarked that cats do not appear in the Bible. The only exception is the Epistle of Jeremy . . . , a text found in the Greek and Latin Bibles, but not the Hebrew.” You won’t find the animal in any catechism.

Grant went on to mention the nickname of the Monophysite patriarch Timothy “Ailurus” of Alexandria. “The historian Zacharius says he was called ‘cat’ because his asceticism had led to bodily weakness and thinness. Theodorus Lector more imaginatively explains that he walked alone at night like a cat and entered monks’ cells in the dark, wearing black clothes. Claiming to be an angel, he asked for their vote to make him bishop.” Thus were episcopacy and cat-burglary linked.

How did Lucius Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius catapult himself into my mind as I was supposed to be copying Lucretius? Lactantius lived a century before Timothy the Cat and a millennium before the Black Death, so he had no reason to slink into the column. He wrote *De Opificio Dei*, in which he used the marvels of the human, not the feline, body to prove God’s existence. Not much to go on there. Of course, Lactantius is an anagram for “until a cat’s . . .” but “until a cat’s *what?*” Maybe until a cat’s back where it belongs—namely, not in my column.