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# FROM REPUBLIC TO EMPIRE

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ROME'S PERSECUTION  
OF THE CHRISTIANS

Christians were subject to very unsystematic treatment until the middle of the third century, for much of the early empire there is little real evidence for their persecution, except for Nero's accusations of arson. The martyrdoms of the second century largely occurred because of the refusal by Christians to acknowledge the state religions, leading to charge of atheism. This culminated in the edict of Decius (249 AD) followed by two edicts of Valerian which paved the way for systematic persecutions under Diocletian. In this essay, however, I plan to concentrate on the early empire, on the reasons why Christians were persecuted, the legal framework for their persecution and the political reasons behind the persecutions.

To understand the reasons behind the Roman persecution of the Christians, we must first examine the nature of the Roman state religions, how they were observed and what religion meant to Romans. Although some scholars have suggested a move towards monotheism during the late Republic & early Empire, modern views of religion cannot be superimposed on the Roman world. Roman religion was a cluster of beliefs aimed at bringing about the co-operation of the gods, who were themselves intimately, bound-up in the day-to-day workings of Roman life. There was not a personal relationship with the gods, as there is in Christianity and worship was a very public, rather than a secret, phenomena. Religion was not seen as fulfilling one's own spiritual needs, but rather those of the state. Other religions, however, were allowed in Rome, and the authorities tended to adopt a relaxed stance with such foreign religions, even turning to them during times of stress, such as the importation in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, at the order of the senate, of Æsculapius from Greece following a particularly bad plague. Broadly speaking, Roman citizens were free to experiment with other cults, as long as they remained loyal to the state religion, and as long as the cult did not pose a threat to the state (practices such as druidism and the cult of Bacchus, were repressed for their challenge to the authority of the state). However, Christianity was different; its followers were perceived as criminals and reviled throughout the Empire, though few really understood why.

It is not exactly clear why many Romans so detested the new believers, though Christians were often confused with Jews who were accused of being rebellious (with some reason, since the Jews of Judæa more than once created insurrections against the Roman provincial government) and lazy (since they rested on the Sabbath). Scandalous rumours about obscene Christian rituals circulated at an early date, and it is known that they were accused of disloyalty because of their refusal to perform the token ritual acknowledging the divine status of the Emperor. Perhaps the earliest measure of this hatred is provided by Tacitus who refers to "*those people called Christians, who were infamous for their abominations,*"<sup>1</sup> though this, it should be made clear is in the context of Nero's allegations of arson against them.

Why then, were these people so reviled? Much of the rumour surrounding them seems to have been based on a woeful ignorance and misunderstanding of their practices. The Eucharist, for example, was taken literally to involve cannibalism, 'their secret meetings were said to practice incest and child murder and to resort to group sex' (Lane Fox, 427). Chief amongst the accusations was that of atheism. The monotheistic nature of Christianity precluded its followers from worship of any other gods, and in a society where the well-being of the state was so intimately bound to the will of the pagan gods, this could only be viewed as dangerous. The 'atheism' of Christians could therefore be used as an excuse for any manner of ill-fortune; one fourth century proverb sums up the situation well: "No rain, because of the Christians" (*ibid.*, 425).

The impression that early persecutions were as much a reflection of the will of the people rather than that of the authorities can be seen through numerous occurrences and serve to reflect

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<sup>1</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*. XV. 44.

the detestation that much of the populace held for Christianity, Polycarp for example is told by the proconsul to "Persuade the People!" following his eloquent speech at the arena.

However, the nature of Christianity itself must also share the blame. The teachings of Jesus are unusual for the time and appealed to all segments of Roman society. Its evangelical nature led to charges of apostasy, and its particular appeal to women threatened the very heart of Roman society, it was by no means unusual for a family to become divided as the case of Vibia Perpetua, a well-born woman, ably demonstrates:

*"... I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian.' At this my father was so angered by the word 'Christian' that he moved towards me as though he would pluck my eyes out."*<sup>2</sup>

The apostle Paul's exhortations against marriage could also have been viewed as an attack on 'family values':

*"Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife ... Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life and I will spare you from that ... let even those who have wives be as though they had none ... So then, he who marries his fiancée does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better."*<sup>3</sup>

Strong parallels may also have been drawn between Christianity and the Bacchanalian affair, which also placed emphasis on secret, nocturnal meetings and the practising of foreign rights. However, unlike Christianity, the cult of Bacchus had the advantage of age, a factor which was always respected by the Romans and which moderated their behaviour towards it. The followers of Christ had no such advantages.

Particularly perplexing to the Romans, was the manner in which they readily accepted their fate. Martyrdom was idealised by the Christians as 'fast-track' route to salvation. Tertullian saw that the persecution of the church by the Roman authorities actually strengthened the Church of Christ:

*"It is bait that wins men for (our) school. The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow: the blood of Christians is seed [of the church]."*<sup>4</sup>

The eagerness with which condemned Christians met their death, even guiding the executioner's hand,<sup>5</sup> must have baffled the Roman authorities and served to heighten the lack of

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<sup>2</sup> *The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas*. IN: Musurillo, 1978, 109.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 7: 25 – 31, 36 – 40.

<sup>4</sup> Tertullian.

<sup>5</sup> *The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas*. IN: Musurillo, 1978, 109.

understanding between them. Obstinance and evasiveness were equally annoying to the Romans; Pliny's irritation at the *contumacia* of those who appeared before him is evident,<sup>6</sup> as is that of the proconsul in the case of the Scillitan Martyrs.<sup>7</sup>

However, were there deeper reasons for the persecutions? Christianity, for example, was heavily influenced by Mithraism, absorbing from it such aspects as the celebration of December 25<sup>th</sup>, Sunday as the day of rest and the concept of the baptism of the blood. Mithraism was also the semi-official religion of the army. Could the Roman State have feared that the pacific nature of Christianity might spread to the legions? The lack of any official proscription in this respect would seem to deny this, though there were clearly military concerns at a later date.

The nature of the legal framework within which Christians were charged has attracted much debate amongst scholars. The charge of Christianity was a peculiar one in itself, for unlike other crimes, the simple act of repentance was generally enough to get the accused acquitted. It was a crime that could only be punished in the present, rather than the past. However, the nature of the crime is still uncertain, some have stated that Christians were tried on grounds of *collegia illicita*, though this seems unlikely; Pliny, for example, had already experienced trouble with *collegia* in Bithynia, but he makes no mention of it when asking Trajan for advice on how to deal with Christians. Others have cited a general disobedience of civil authority, the *coercitio* theory, as forming the foundation for their persecution, charges of *maiestas* have also been suggested, but despite these theories, no one basis for the prosecution of Christians seems to have been established by law prior to the edicts of the mid-third century. It seems more likely that Christians were tried under a complex of offences and that it is the lack of any one charge and procedure that caused Pliny to write to Trajan. As Barnes (1963, 48) states 'there is no evidence to prove earlier legislation by the Senate or the emperor. Indeed the exchange of letters between Pliny and Trajan implies that there was none.'

The whole subject of the Christian persecutions therefore, is one that is riddled with uncertainties and doubts. There is clearly no one cause for the hatred felt by the people, though the charge of atheism must rank high amongst their reasons, and there was also no specific legislation to deal with Christians. They were simply accused of being Christian and condemned on that fact alone. 'It is in the minds of men, not in the demands of Roman law, that the roots of the persecution of the Christians in the Roman Empire are to be sought.' (Barnes, 1963, 50).

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<sup>6</sup> Pliny. *Letters*. X, 96.

<sup>7</sup> *The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*. IN: Musurillo, 1978, 88 – 89.

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