

# LESSONS FROM THE HISTORY OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH FOR MODERN CHRISTIANS LIVING IN AN INCREASINGLY ANTI-CHRISTIAN SOCIETY Part I

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Only a few decades ago American culture was almost universally regarded as Christian. Most leaders, as well as people in general, not only accepted this as a fact, but also agreed that was more or less how things should be. This was true even among public officials and in public institutions. Speeches by the presidents of state universities could have passed for Christian sermons. The prayers delivered on public occasions were openly and unabashedly Christian prayers. While Christianity was viewed by some individuals with private skepticism, boredom, or even resentment, Christianity still enjoyed a certain cultural advantage.

That is no longer the case! Now public prayers, if such are even permitted, regularly omit the name of Jesus in favor of a generic supreme power. These prayers might just as easily work in a little Taoism, some Islam, or even words that can be construed as invoking the “Goddess,” whatever that might mean. While public officials might still claim membership in some Christian denomination, Christian ideals and motivations are less frequently appealed to, as if there was something embarrassing or not quite right with Christianity.

Today the Christian can be regarded as the big, bad bully who doesn't want to recognize the value of someone else's position on religion or as an individual who wants to inflict his lifestyle on others. Many believe Christianity should be humbled and punished for past misdeeds. Whether we want to admit it or not, there seems to be an irrational, but powerful, swing against Christianity. Rather than being dismayed or depressed by such activity, we need to recognize that, as Solomon long ago said, “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, ‘Look! This is something new’? It was here already, long ago it was here before our time.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), Ecclesiastes 1:9-10. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from NIV 1984.

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What we are experiencing today has been experienced before. The question before us is a rather simple one, "Can we learn from what has happened in the past?" Can the way Christians handled persecution in the past also teach us how to deal with the variety of attacks that face us today? As we contemplate those questions, we would do well also to consider whether attacks on Christianity are really increasing or whether those attacks have just taken on a new, more visible form?

### **Persecution in the New Testament**

The New Testament advises us to anticipate persecution as a part of Christian discipleship. Jesus clearly tells his disciples to expect persecution. He said, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own."<sup>2</sup> With that in mind John urges, "Do not love the world or anything in the world."<sup>3</sup> When Christians fall in love with the world, then they no longer stand against it. Unbelievers will not be offended by people who are willing to compromise their beliefs. Satan benefits from that more than if those Christians had been physically killed. Since Christians' positive effect on the world has been nullified, Satan now has them on his side. Christ therefore reminds his followers, "You do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also."<sup>4</sup>

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus spoke of the reality of persecution. "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."<sup>5</sup>

Jesus told his followers to expect a negative reaction because of him. "They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>John 15:18-19.

<sup>3</sup>1 John 2:15.

<sup>4</sup>John 15:19-20.

<sup>5</sup>Matthew 5:10-12.

<sup>6</sup>John 16:2-4.

After Jesus' ascension it did not take long before his warning about persecution became a reality. The opening chapters of the book of Acts catalogue episodes of increasing violence against the proclaimers of the gospel. In Acts 4 Peter and John were arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin. After they were questioned, they were told "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus." And "after further threats they let them go."<sup>7</sup>

In Acts 5 the apostles are beaten. In Acts 7 Stephen is stoned by the crowd. Acts 8 records that "a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria."<sup>8</sup> After Saul's conversion in chapter 9 there is a plot to kill him. Finally, in chapter 12 we hear that King Herod had the apostle James put to death. At the same time we hear that Herod arrested Peter and intended to bring him to trial.

Having experienced persecution Peter points out that we will face it too. In 1 Peter 2:21, he writes, "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." For Peter, expecting persecution meant not being surprised when it happened.

When a Christian confronts the world, it tends to react violently. Some people succumb to Satan's persecution and never confront the world because they want to save themselves from being persecuted. But Paul tells Timothy, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."<sup>9</sup> Paul also tells the Philippians that there is a connection between faith and suffering. "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and hear that I still have."<sup>10</sup> The New Testament makes it clear that everyone who follows Jesus will suffer some sort of persecution. At times that persecution will be very visible, while at other times it will be very subtle.

One of the things that led some people to doubt Paul's status as an apostle was his life of suffering. How can God be with Paul, how can he be an apostle of Jesus, when he spends his life under constant pressure? Shouldn't an apostle be a success in ministry? Instead of minimizing his sufferings, however, Paul in 2 Corinthians exults in them. He writes, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the

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<sup>7</sup>Acts 4:18, 21.

<sup>8</sup>Acts 8:1.

<sup>9</sup>2 Timothy 3:12.

<sup>10</sup>Philippians 1:29-30.

death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.”<sup>11</sup> In chapter 11 he provides that famous catalogue of affliction.<sup>12</sup> Far from being a disqualification for apostolic ministry, Paul sees his sufferings as an important part of his apostolic résumé. By suffering in his ministry, Paul bears the marks of Jesus.

Although Jesus, Peter, and Paul each spoke to specific groups and individuals, these words apply equally to believers in every generation. In fact, the church and the apostles are connected to each other and to the Old Testament prophets through the presence of persecution in their lives.

Persecution extends through all times as an expectation for all those who follow Christ. Persecution cannot be relegated to a specific period, nor can it be consigned to a specific location or group of people. From what the New Testament tells us, we can conclude that Christian persecution is the norm not the exception.

### **Lessons Learned from New Testament Persecution**

What impact did the persecutions recorded in the New Testament have on the infant church? Rather than scaring people away from becoming followers of Christ, the persecution had the opposite effect. When the numbers of believers are mentioned in Acts, the numbers always increase. “In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty).”<sup>13</sup> After Pentecost we are told, “Those who accepted his [Peter’s] message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.”<sup>14</sup> Even when Peter and John were jailed, Luke records, “But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.”<sup>15</sup> Following the incident with Ananias and Sapphira, “more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>112</sup>Corinthians 4:8-10.

<sup>124</sup>I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. <sup>24</sup>Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. <sup>26</sup>Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, <sup>26</sup>I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. <sup>27</sup>I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.”

<sup>13</sup>Acts 1:15.

<sup>14</sup>Acts 2:41.

<sup>15</sup>Acts 4:4.

<sup>16</sup>Acts 5:14.

Growth is a blessing, yet the numerical increase also brought with it new challenges. “In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Greek-speaking Jews among them complained against the Hebrew-speaking Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. . . . So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”<sup>17</sup> Sprinkled throughout the rest of Acts are reports of mission journeys and of souls being added to the New Testament church.<sup>18</sup>

By way of example, look at how Peter and John reacted to persecution.

“They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day.”<sup>19</sup> Peter and John were taken into custody by their arresters. They did not strike back. They did not start a brawl. The implication is Peter and John did not offer any resistance. They didn’t develop a martyr’s complex and say, “We will die for what we did.” They simply trusted in God. Peter and John saw that God was presenting them with a great opportunity through their persecution. If in the course of obeying the Lord you end up in difficult circumstances, consider what opportunities the Lord is placing in front of you.

In the case of Peter and John, their opportunity was being able to proclaim the gospel to the Sanhedrin, which was composed of “rulers, and elders, and scribes.”<sup>20</sup> That group was the ruling council of Israel. Even when Israel was under Roman dominance, the Sanhedrin had the right to arrest people.

God gave Peter and John the opportunity to preach to the Sanhedrin. Sometimes persecution brings with it a circumstance that opens up new avenues for the work of God. There is no other way that Peter and John would have been allowed to preach to the Sanhedrin. They submitted to persecution, and God was able to put them where he wanted them. God allowed Peter and John to carry their testimony to the Sanhedrin itself.

Peter later indicated his understanding that God was glorified when he was persecuted.

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But

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<sup>17</sup>Acts 6:1,7.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Acts 9:31,35,42; 11:21,24; 14:1,21; 16:5; 17:12.

<sup>19</sup>Acts 4:3.

<sup>20</sup>There were seventy members in the Sanhedrin, and the high priest served *ex officio* as president, making seventy-one men altogether. The scribes were the experts in the law, the elders were representatives from among the people, and other members of the Sanhedrin were people from the priestly family.

rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.<sup>21</sup>

Peter adds, "So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good."<sup>22</sup> When you are persecuted, let God control the situation.

It should also be noted that John and Peter had no legal recourse under Jewish law. The apostle Paul as a Roman citizen did seek protection under law. When the Jews in Jerusalem asked Festus to have Paul transferred from Caesarea to Jerusalem, Paul used his legal rights.

Then Paul made his defense: "I have done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar." Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?" Paul answered: "I am now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!" After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: "You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!"<sup>23</sup>

Jesus had told his disciples, "When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say."<sup>24</sup> Peter's confidence was not in himself, rather his confidence was in God's Word which he had heard from the Savior's lips and which the Holy Spirit now helped him recall. That same Word is now available to us in written form because the Spirit inspired the writers of Scripture.

Peter experienced victory because the persecution he received brought him closer to his Lord. We might say, "If I had been in Peter's shoes, I would have fallen over in fear." Peter didn't do that. He leaned on the Holy Spirit. Once Peter turned to God's promises, he didn't need anything else. The Lord assured him of victory. Any experience that forces us to look to Jesus is a good one. "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>1 Peter 4:12-14.

<sup>22</sup>1 Peter 4:19.

<sup>23</sup>Acts 25:8-12.

<sup>24</sup>Luke 12:11-12.

<sup>25</sup>Hebrews 12:2.

## Persecution in the Post-Apostolic Church

Early Christians expected suffering. Christ had died on the cross, so there was no higher honor than to imitate that death through accepting martyrdom (a witness by one's blood). Jewish history portrayed, in writings such as the Fourth Book of the Maccabees, the glorious nature of death rather than renunciation of Israel. Even without this precedent, Christianity would inevitably have held the martyr's death in high esteem. As Peter expressed it, "However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name."<sup>26</sup>

Persecution was not limited to the days when the apostles walked the earth. When John died in the final decade of the first century AD, the Christian church continued the work which the apostles had begun. New voices took over gospel proclamation, but the reaction to the message of the crucified and risen Savior continued to be much the same. There were many who accepted the good news, and there were many who violently opposed it.

It must be pointed out that the Roman Empire was not religiously intolerant. Rome had accepted into its pantheon deities from the Italian tribes and from Asia Minor. In the provinces the great territorial gods were accepted as legal religions or *religio licita*<sup>27</sup> on the grounds that their religious practices were approved by ancient tradition, even if they were considered barbarous by Roman standards. Countless local gods and goddesses, worshiped by the inhabitants of the Greco-Roman world, were often given classical names and worshiped as "Roman" deities.

In most books on ancient civilization, little is said about Roman religion. Those contributions which are celebrated and admired are Roman law, politics, road building, architecture, and administration. But if we are to understand why the Romans persecuted Christians and sought to exclude them from society, we have to look at the way Romans viewed religion.

Traditional Roman religion emphasized the "usefulness" (*utilitas*) of religious belief for the well-being of the "state" (*res publica*). For a culture nurtured on the "personal" religion of Christianity, it is easy for us to assume that the Romans did not actually believe in the gods, but rather deemed belief in the gods merely advantageous to the life of society and to the state.

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<sup>26</sup>1 Peter 4:16.

<sup>27</sup>*Religio licita* ("permitted religion," also translated as "approved religion") is a phrase used in the *Apologeticum* of Tertullian to describe the special status of Judaism under Roman Imperial rule. It is not an official term in Roman law.

The term used most frequently to designate the religious attitudes of the Roman people was *pietas* or piety. When the temple of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva in Rome was rebuilt after the civil wars of 68–69, the Roman historian Tacitus described the public dedication as an act of piety. Its rebuilding was at once a religious rite and a civic festival. It was religious in that it was an act of piety toward the gods, and civic in that it was a public occasion involving the citizens of the state. The dedication ceremony was presided over by religious as well as by civic officials. In American society it would be more like a Memorial Day celebration than a religious service of a church. In short, piety designated loyalty and obedience to the customs and traditions of Rome, as well as reverence for the gods and respect for the rituals by which the gods were honored.

In the cities of the Roman Empire, religion was closely connected with social and political life. Piety toward the gods was thought to insure the well-being of the city, to promote a spirit of kinship and mutual responsibility, to bind together the citizenry. “In all probability,” wrote Cicero, “disappearance of piety toward the gods will entail the disappearance of loyalty and social union among men as well, and of justice itself, the queen of all the virtues.” In the most profound sense, then, impiety toward the gods disrupted society, and when piety disappears, said Cicero, “life soon becomes a welter of disorder and confusion.”<sup>28</sup> For the Romans, religion sustained the life of the state. In their view Christianity undermined the state.

### Christians Viewed as Impious

According to the Roman view of religion, religious beliefs did not rest on philosophical arguments about the nature of the gods but on ceremonial rites that had been passed down from generation to generation. Religion was tied to place and to people. In the Roman way of thinking, because Christianity had no homeland, did not represent a specific people or nation, and was not the bearer of an ancient tradition, its way of life could make no claim on religious truth. Therefore Christians were considered nothing more than superstitious rebels. When the Romans called Christianity a superstition they meant that it promoted impiety. Superstitious practices did not contribute to the public good.

Luke in his gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles reassured the Roman authorities of the loyalty and general value of the Christians and points out the hostility of the Jews toward them. In spite of Luke’s efforts,

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<sup>28</sup>Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* (“On the Nature of Gods”), Book 1, Section ii, as quoted in *Christianity Unveiled* by Paul-Henri Thiry Baron d’Holbach, Hodgson Press, Kingston upon Thames, UK, 2008, p 180.



persecution in the early church occurred sporadically. But persecution was first sanctioned by the Roman government under Nero. In 64 AD, a great fire ravaged Rome. After the destruction Nero took the opportunity to rebuild the city in the Greek style and to build himself a large palace. People began to speculate that Nero had set the fire himself in order to permit the reconstruction. According to Tacitus' *Annals* and Suetonius' *Nero*, the emperor blamed the Christians for the fire in an effort to divert attention from himself. Nero is reported to have tortured Christians with great cruelties for his own enjoyment. According to Tacitus:

Besides being put to death they [the Christians] were made to serve as objects of amusement; they were clad in the hides of beast and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified, others set on fire to serve to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had thrown open his grounds for the display, and was putting on a show in the circus, where he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or drove about in his chariot. All this gave rise to a feeling of pity, even toward men whose guilt merited the most exemplary punishment; for it was felt that they were being destroyed not for the public good but to satisfy the cruelty of an individual.<sup>29</sup>

Despite these extreme cruelties, Nero's persecution was localized and short-lived. However, it was the first official persecution and marked the first time the government distinguished Christians from Jews. Tertullian referred to the persecution of Christians as *institutum Neronianum*, an institution of Nero.<sup>30</sup> After Nero, it became a capital crime to be a Christian, although pardon was always available if one publicly condemned Christ and sacrificed to the gods.

Another thirty years pass before we hear of further action against the Christians. Emperors were extremely suspicious of anything religious that seemed "unusual." For example, one Roman officer was executed for carrying a memento given to him by a Druid priest! In 95–96 AD, the emperor Domitian executed some members of his own family. The historian Cassius Dio reported:

Domitian slew, along with many others, Flavius Clemens the consul, although he was a cousin and married to Flavia Domitilla, who was also a relative of the emperor's. The charge brought against them both was that of atheism (ἀθεότης), a charge on which many others who drifted into Jewish ways were condemned. Some of these were put to death, and the rest were at least deprived of their property. Domitilla was merely banished to Pandateria.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, eds., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 3rd. ed. (Oxford UP, 1999), p 2.

<sup>30</sup>Tertullian, *Ad nat.*, 1.7.

<sup>31</sup>Cassius Dio. *Epitome*, 67.4. cf. [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cassius\\_Dio/67\\*.html#14](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cassius_Dio/67*.html#14)

It is not certain that Christianity was meant. However, Domitilla was believed to have been a Christian. The accusation of “atheism”—denial of the existence and power of the gods—was a common accusation leveled at Christians and might point in that direction here.

In 112 AD we have the earliest document on Christianity written by a Roman official. The emperor Trajan (reigned, 98–117) sent Pliny the Younger to Bithynia to tour the cities of this province and to oversee the social and economic affairs of the region. At one of the cities on the southern shore of the Black Sea, local citizens lodged a complaint against the Christians living in the region. What prompted the petition is not known, but it may have had to do with the refusal of Christians to participate in the public sacrifices to the gods.

Pliny, a lawyer by profession, had never been at a trial of Christians, so he was uncertain of how he should proceed. He finally decided on a trial before a magistrate for offenses that fell outside “normal crimes” such as treason, forgery, or theft. To his credit Pliny tried to be fair. He was told everyone believed Christians hated mankind and were dangerous criminals, and everybody agreed that they had to be punished severely. After all, it was reported that they married their “brothers and sisters,”<sup>32</sup> ate human flesh, and drank human blood.<sup>33</sup> Rather than accepting these charges at face value, Pliny conducted a thorough investigation. To his surprise, he discovered that the accusations were incorrect.

Pliny reported:

They declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery and adultery, to commit no breach of trust, and not to deny a deposit when called upon to restore it.

After this ceremony it had been their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of an ordinary, harmless kind. But they had in fact given up this practice since my edict, issued on your [Trajan’s] instructions, which banned all political societies.<sup>34</sup>

In these efforts, Pliny is not being cruel. He is simply being conscientious in fulfilling his duty to maintain public order.

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<sup>32</sup>Christians referred to each other as “brothers and sisters” in the faith. The charge of incest against Christians was also connected to a misunderstanding of the agape meal or love feast, as well as the kiss of peace.

<sup>33</sup>Roman authorities did not understand the concept of the Lord’s Supper. They viewed it as cannibalism.

<sup>34</sup>Pliny the Younger, *Epistle* 10 (to Emperor Trajan), 96. In Bettenson, p 7-8.

To what, then, does Pliny object? In his letter Pliny calls Christianity a “degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths.” The term he uses for a degenerate cult is *superstitio*. The Latin word *superstitio* has a somewhat different connotation than our English “superstition.” For second-century Romans it designated practices and beliefs associated with foreign people. Jews were thought to be tainted with superstition since they worshiped a single supreme deity, refrained from work on the Sabbath, refused to eat pork (a meat Romans loved), and circumcised their male children.

To say that a group was “superstitious” meant that its rites and customs set the people apart from the rest of society. The superstitious did not conform their lives to the traditions of most citizens. They were obviously different, just as robed Buddhist monks are different to most Americans today. Their “otherness” was, however, not simply social. It was also religious. What set them apart were not only national customs and familial traditions but also religious rituals and beliefs. In saying that Christians were “superstitious,” the Romans were making a religious judgment about the Christian way of life.

Pliny condemned to immediate execution those who confessed to being Christians, “for I held no question that whatever it was that they admitted, in any case obstinacy and unbending perversity deserve to be punished.”<sup>35</sup> Christianity itself was punishable, but the defiant, martyr-attitude of the accused left Pliny in no doubt that his action was right.

Pliny ran into difficulties when individuals agreed that they had once been Christians but were no longer Christians. His letter to the emperor indicated his preference for leniency toward them. Trajan responded:

You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it—that is, by worshiping our gods—even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance. But anonymously posted accusations ought to have no place in any prosecution. For this is both a dangerous kind of precedent and out of keeping with the spirit of our age.<sup>36</sup>

Twelve years later (124–125), Christians gained a further concession. Anti-Christian riots had broken out in the province of Asia (west-

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid, p 3.

<sup>36</sup>Trajan to Pliny, cf. <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/texts/pliny.html>

ern Asia Minor) in 122–123, and the governor had written to Emperor Hadrian for advice. In response, Hadrian's imperial order allowed cases against Christians to be brought to trial, but ordered that the Christians had to be proven guilty of illegal acts before they could be condemned. Once again, "slandorous attacks" against Christians were forbidden. This policy helped protect Christians, for now the emphasis was less on their name than on specific misdeeds. Christians might be unpopular, and their cult technically illegal, but it would take a bold man to file an accusation that, if proven untrue, could bring serious consequences. An accuser also had to await the arrival of the proconsul, who alone was able to try a capital case in the large province of Asia.<sup>37</sup>

Unlike Pliny, Tacitus, writing about 115 AD, showed no sympathy for the Christians. Recording that "Christus, from whom the name [Christians] had its origin" was executed by "one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate," Tacitus described the Christians as a "class hated for their abominations" and guilty of "hatred of the human race,"<sup>38</sup> an accusation he also made against the Jews. Tacitus believed Christianity was not a "religion" but a "deadly superstition,"<sup>39</sup> and therefore needed to be suppressed.

In Tacitus' viewpoint, Christians were hostile to humankind. By saying this, he did not mean simply that he did not like Christians and found them a nuisance; rather he believed they existed in opposition to his social and religious world. There were, at least in his mind, "spiritual" reasons for the persecution of Christians.

### Precarious Toleration

Between 125 and 160, Christians enjoyed a shaky toleration, although a few martyrdoms are still recorded. With the arrival of Marcus Aurelius as emperor in 161, however, the situation changed. Christians were becoming exceedingly unpopular, since they were blamed for causing natural disasters by refusing to worship the deities that protected communities. Christians were also accused of immorality, unnatural vice, and black magic which placed the rest of the population in peril.

In Philip Schaff's *History of the Christian Church*, the persecution under emperor Marcus Aurelius is described this way:

Marcus Aurelius, the philosopher on the throne, was a well-educated, just, kind, and amiable emperor, and reached the old

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<sup>37</sup>W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church*. London: SCM, 1986, p 7.

<sup>38</sup>Tacitus, *Annales*, XV, 44.

<sup>39</sup>Another historian, Suetonius, calls Christians a "class of persons given to a new and mischievous superstition."

Roman ideal of self-reliant Stoic virtue, but for this very reason he had no sympathy with Christianity, and probably regarded it as an absurd and fanatical superstition. . . . [H]e considered the Christian doctrine of the immortality of the soul, with its moral consequences, as vicious and dangerous to the welfare of the state.<sup>40</sup>

It was during the reign of Marcus Aurelius that an urban mob demanded the arrest of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. Polycarp was brought before the proconsul, who begged him to have respect for his great age, saying, "Swear by the genius of Caesar" and denounce "the atheists." But Polycarp, seeing "the lawless heathen" in the amphitheater, "waved his hands at them, and looked up to heaven with a groan and said, 'Away with the atheists.'" The proconsul persisted, "Swear, and I will release you. Curse Christ." And Polycarp replied, "Eighty-six years have I served him, and he has done me no wrong; how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"<sup>41</sup> He was condemned to death and burned alive.

The story shows the efforts made by an average, reasonable administrator in the second century to persuade a Christian leader not to sacrifice his life, and the latter's complete commitment to Christianity, even in the face of death. Between the two outlooks there was little room for compromise.

In 175 AD we hear of "new decrees," probably originating from the proconsul of Asia, making it easier for enemies to denounce Christians and seize their property. In one terrible persecution at Lyon in Gaul [modern France] in 177, forty-eight Christians were put to death in the amphitheater.<sup>42</sup>

The Severan Dynasty<sup>43</sup> seized power in 193 at a crucial moment in the church's relations with the empire. Though it remained illegal, the church was now much stronger than in the previous century. Christians were consolidated around urban communities governed by bishops, who were in frequent contact with one another by letter. The church had its own liturgy, its own sacred writings in addition to those writings which the Jews had, and established rules of faith on which orthodox doctrines could be built.

Most importantly, the church had recovered its mission zeal, which after Paul and his disciples seems to have diminished through much of

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<sup>40</sup>Philip Schaff, "Persecutions under Marcus Aurelius. A.D. 161–180." *History of the Christian Church*, volume 2, p 53-54.

<sup>41</sup>*Martyrdom of Polycarp in Early Christian Writings*, translated by Maxwell Staniforth, Maxwell. London: Penguin Books, 1987, p 115.

<sup>42</sup>Frend, p 7.

<sup>43</sup>Septimius Severus (193–211), Caracalla (211–217), Elagabalus (218–222), and Alexander Severus (222–235)

the second century. The result was great tension between Christians and pagans in those provinces where the church was strong.

The dynasty's individual emperors do not seem to have been personally antagonistic toward Christians. The emperors' individual dispositions, however, were nullified by the wave of anti-Christian sentiment in Carthage, Alexandria, Rome, and Corinth from about 202 to 210. The victims of this persecution were mainly converts.<sup>44</sup> The bishops and clergy do not seem to have been affected.

The end of the Severan Dynasty in 235 brought another brief period of persecution. Maximinus Thrax (235–238), according to Eusebius, attacked the “leaders of the church.” This was followed, however, by 12 years of calm in which the church expanded, and through its great teacher Origen (186–254) established for the first time an intellectual superiority over its pagan contemporaries. Origen, however, perceived the danger of the situation. There might not have been many martyrs to date, but persecution, if it came now, would be on a worldwide scale. As it turned out, he was right.

During the reign of emperor Decius the first universal and organized persecution of Christians took place. In January of 250, Decius issued an edict requiring all citizens to sacrifice to the emperor in the presence of a Roman official and obtain a certificate (*libellus*) proving they had done so. Forty-four of these *libelli* have survived. One surviving example reads:

To those appointed to see the sacrifices:

From Aurelia Charis of the Egyptian village of Theadelphia.

I have always continued to sacrifice and show reverence to the gods, and now, in your presence, I have poured a libation and sacrificed and eaten some of the sacrificial meat. I request you to certify this for me below.<sup>45</sup>

This requirement created a crisis of conscience for many Christians, as a certificate could be obtained without actually sacrificing by bribing Roman officials. It was clear that Christians should not sacrifice to a false god, but whether it was acceptable to save one's life by buying a certificate was a bit more of a gray area. Many Christians chose to defy the edict outright, refusing to buy a certificate, and were arrested or executed. Among those martyred under Decius were the bishops of Rome, Jerusalem and Antioch. However, the bishop of Smyrna performed the sacrifice, as did many others.

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<sup>44</sup>Such as Perpetua and Felicitas in Carthage (martyred 7 March 203), or the disciples of Origen in Alexandria

<sup>45</sup>Frend, p 9.

In general, public opinion condemned the government's violence and admired the martyrs' passive resistance, and the Christian movement was thereby strengthened. The Decian persecution ceased in 251, a few months before Decius' death. The Decian persecution had lasting repercussions for the church. How should those who had bought a certificate or actually sacrificed be treated? It seems that in most churches, those who had lapsed were accepted back into the fold, but some churches refused to accept them back. This raised important issues about the nature of the church, forgiveness, and the value of martyrdom. A century and a half later, Augustine would battle with an influential group called the Donatists, who broke away from the Catholic Church because the latter accepted the lapsed.

Under Valerian, who took the throne in 253, all Christian clergy were required to sacrifice to the gods. In a 257 edict, the punishment was exile. In 258 the punishment was death. Christian senators, knights, and ladies were also required to sacrifice under pain of heavy fines, reduction of rank and, later, death. Finally, all Christians were forbidden to visit their cemeteries. Among those executed under Valerian were Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, and Sixtus II, bishop of Rome. According to a letter written by Dionysus during this time, "men and women, young and old, maidens and matrons, soldiers and civilians, of every age and race, some by scourging and fire, others by the sword, have conquered in the strife and won their crowns."<sup>46</sup> The persecution ended with the capture of Valerian by Persia. Valerian's son and successor, Gallienus, revoked the edicts of his father.

Valerian's death brought more than 40 years of peace (260–303). Christians could still be arrested, but bishoprics multiplied as the church became a movement of the countryside as well as of the towns.

### **The Final, "Great Persecution"**

In 303, however, came 10 years of persecution, the so-called "Great Persecution." How and why, after 43 years of peace, did this happen?

First of all, while the church appeared to be accepted in some areas, opposition to it was never far below the surface. Since 270 the pagans, inspired by the Neo-Platonist philosopher Porphyry, had begun to mount a serious intellectual assault on Christianity. "The evangelists," Porphyry wrote in 15 books *Against the Christians* (c. 280–290) "were the inventors, not the historians, of those things they record about Jesus."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Maurice M. Hassatt, "Martyr." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume 9. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910.

<sup>47</sup>Quoted by Everett Ferguson in "Persecution in the Early Church: Did You Know?" *Christian History*, Issue 27, 1990, p 1.

This propaganda war between Christian and pagan champions intensified in the 290s.

Secondly, in 284 Diocletian seized power by a coup d'état and survived to become one of the greatest conservative reformers of the Roman Empire. In March 286 he appointed a comrade-in-arms, Maximian, as co-emperor (Augustus) in the West; and on March 1, 293, the two Augusti appointed two other military men, Constantius and Galerius, as their assistants, or Caesars. The emperors' ideal was to return to the traditional values of Rome. Uniformity and discipline were the watchwords of the age, yet Christians remained a standing challenge to the unifying and conservative ideals of the emperors.

Persecutions might not have occurred, however, but for the fortunes of war. In 296 Caesar Galerius, who was strongly anti-Christian, won a decisive victory over the Persians. With his victory his influence over Diocletian increased. Diocletian's family contained some who were pro-Christian, and he was unwilling to act against the Christians. But his hand was forced, partly by Galerius's steady pressure and partly by anti-Christian propaganda from some provincial governors. Between 298 and 302 the civil service and army were gradually purged of Christians. Late in 302 the emperors visited the shrine of Apollo at Didyma and the oracle in its pronouncements complained about the influence of Christians.

On February 23, 303, repression started. Churches were destroyed, Christian services banned, and copies of the Scriptures seized and burned. Christians in high places lost civil rights, and "those in households" (perhaps meaning "private citizens") were deprived of their liberty. There was only one concession which Diocletian was able to secure. There was to be no bloodshed.

A second edict imposed an obligation on all clergy to sacrifice, but the prisons became too full, and in the autumn of 303 this was modified and most of those imprisoned for refusing to sacrifice were released. So far the persecution had not been as severe as under Valerian. Among Christians there was often confusion and grudging compliance. Only a minority of determined souls held out. Years later, the "day of handing over" their Bibles was remembered as a day of disaster by the North African Christians.

In 304, with Diocletian ill in Rome, Galerius seized his chance and imposed a universal obligation to sacrifice on pain of death. Until then only the clergy had been involved directly; now the pressure was on every Christian. The number of martyrs increased, as did the defiance of the Christians. One inscription from a North African church lists 34 men and women who "suffered under the laws of the divine



emperors Diocletian and Maximian.” In Phrygia a whole community was wiped out, and Egypt saw eight years of ruthless repression, which among the Coptic Christians earned the reign of Diocletian the title “The Era of the Martyrs.”

In the final analysis this effort was too late. The enforcement of the anti-Christian edicts gradually vanished, and no martyrs are recorded after 310. In April 311, Galerius, realizing that he was dying, decided that enough was enough and revoked the edicts of persecution. In the spirit of Diocletian’s reform, in his Edict of Toleration he wrote, “Amongst our other measures for the advantage of the Empire, we have hitherto endeavored to bring all things into conformity with the ancient laws and public order of the Romans. We have been especially anxious that even the Christians, who have abandoned the religion of their ancestors, should return to reason.” However, too many Christians had failed to conform, and rather than they should not worship any god, “[We] have judged it wise to extend a pardon even to these men and permit them once more to become Christians and reestablish their places of meeting.” Galerius also added, “[I]t should be the duty of the Christians, in view of our clemency [mercy], to pray to their god for our welfare, for that of the Empire, and for their own, so that the Empire may remain intact in all its parts, and that they themselves may live safely in their habitations.” His last request, that Christians should pray for him, was in vain for Galerius died six days later. Galerius’ concession of failure was grudging but decisive. The empire could not be preserved by the “immortal gods” with the Christian God possessing a veto over their powers.<sup>48</sup>

In the spring of 312, Constantine began a final bid for supremacy in the West. Campaigning against his rival, Maxentius, through north and central Italy, he came within five miles of Rome on October 27. That night he supposedly had a vision or dream that convinced him that his own destiny lay with Christianity. Next day he defeated Maxentius’ superior forces and entered Rome in triumph. In February 313 Constantine met Licinius (who had succeeded to Galerius’ European dominions), and in a document that has become known as the Edict of Milan formally ended the persecution. All individuals were now free to follow their own consciences in the area of religion. In fact, the Edict proved to be the death knell of the pagan gods. Eleven years later (in 324), Constantine defeated Licinius and proclaimed his adherence to Christianity and his aim that Christianity should become the religion of the empire. The church had triumphed.

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<sup>48</sup><http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/301-600/emperor-galerius-issues-edict-of-toleration-11629640.html>

### Christian Response to Persecution in the Early Church

In the early church individual Christians confessed their faith by the lives they led. Even their pagan neighbors recognized there was a different morality practiced among the Christians. The *Epistle to Diognetus* called attention to this difference. “They marry like all other men and they beget children; but they do not cast away their offspring. They have their meals in common, but not their wives. They find themselves in the flesh, and yet they live not after the flesh.”<sup>49</sup>

Christians frequently had to confess their faith by refusing to worship pagan gods or venerate the emperor. In order to save themselves from torture or execution, all they had to do was deny Christ. Their refusal and the resulting punishment provided a strong testimony to their faith in Jesus. An early example of such a confession is found in the life of Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna. Polycarp had been arrested and faced execution. When Polycarp was put on trial, we are told:

The Proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. On hearing that he was, he tried to persuade him to apostatize, saying, “Have respect for your old age, swear by the fortune of Caesar. Repent, and say, ‘Down with the Atheists!’” Polycarp looked grimly at the wicked heathen multitude in the stadium, and gesturing towards them, he said, “Down with the Atheists!” “Swear,” urged the Proconsul, “reproach Christ, and I will set you free.” “Eighty-six years have I have served him,” Polycarp declared, “and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”<sup>50</sup>

“I have wild animals here,” the Proconsul said. “I will throw you to them if you do not repent.” “Call them,” Polycarp replied. “It is unthinkable for me to repent from what is good to turn to what is evil. I will be glad though to be changed from evil to righteousness.” “If you despise the animals, I will have you burned.” “You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and is then extinguished, but you know nothing of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. Why are you waiting? Bring on whatever you want.”<sup>51</sup>

Despite the miscarriage of justice imposed upon the believers, what was the attitude of the church toward the state during this period? Church leaders pointed to the Holy Scriptures<sup>52</sup> and urged

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<sup>49</sup>*Epistle to Diognetus*, 5:6-8. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/diognetus-lightfoot.html>

<sup>50</sup>*The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 9:2-3. <https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/polycarp/>

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid*, 11:1-2.

<sup>52</sup>“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” 1 Timothy 2:1-2

members to remain loyal to the authorities. In the *Epistle to Diognetus* an explanation is given for the aggressive stance taken by non-Christians. It also writes of the Christians' response to the hatred they received, stating that Christians "love all men."<sup>53</sup>

Tertullian, in his *Apology*, also writes of Christian loyalty, stating that Christians "call upon God for the safety of the Emperor"<sup>54</sup> and that believers should know from Scripture "that a superfluity of benevolence is enjoined on us, even so far as to pray God for our enemies and to entreat blessings for our persecutors."<sup>55</sup> So Christians were "automatically good citizens, loyal to the Emperor and willing to carry out his commands, so far as service to God allowed."<sup>56</sup>

More than other Christians, the so-called Apologists attempted to defend Christianity from the charges leveled against them by means of logical argumentation. The best known of the apologists was a convert to Christianity, Justin Martyr. He addresses the false accusations made against Christians by the Romans in his *First Apology*. He uses a variety of arguments in their defense.

"Reason directs those who are truly pious and philosophical to honor and love only what is true, declining to follow traditional opinions, if these be worthless."<sup>57</sup> He contends that the Roman judges should base their verdicts on what is proven true, not on the traditional religious opinions of the Romans. For example, the Christians were being accused of atheism, but Justin quotes extensively from the Scriptures to demonstrate that while the Christians do not believe in the "demonic gods" of the Romans, they do indeed believe in the Supreme God of the Bible.

Justin points out that the Romans are only truly pious and philosophical if they can set aside their traditional opinions and examine the evidence objectively. The Christians should be judged on their actions, whether the judges love their truth or not.

"For from a name neither praise nor punishment could reasonably spring, unless something excellent or base in action be proved."<sup>58</sup> "Wherefore we demand that the deeds of all those who are accused to you be judged, in order that each one who is convicted may be punished as an evil-doer, and not as a Christian; and if it is clear that any one is blameless, that he may be acquitted, since by the mere fact of

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<sup>53</sup>*Epistle of Diognetus*, 5:11.

<sup>54</sup>Tertullian, *Apology*, XXX, Bettenson, p 8.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Frend, p 65.

<sup>57</sup>Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chapter 2.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid, chapter 4.

his being a Christian he does no wrong.”<sup>59</sup> Justin argues here that Christians should not be condemned for their name, but for their beliefs and actions. He then goes on to explain in detail some of the commands of Christ, citing these as evidence that the Christians believe in honor and purity and peace, and are therefore innocent of the charges made against them.

“But lest we should seem to be reasoning sophistically, we consider it right, before giving you the promised explanation, to cite a few precepts given by Christ Himself. And be it yours, as powerful rulers, to inquire whether we have been taught and do teach these things truly.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, the duty of the judges, according to Justin, is to assess the good or evil of Christ’s commands, and then to judge whether the Christians are living up to this righteous standard. This argument is more valid than the first, as it gets to the heart of the accusations, and offers a concrete standard against which the Christians can be judged.

After discussing the principle of judging the Christians according to their beliefs and actions, Justin specifies one of the Christian beliefs as particularly significant to the case at hand—God’s ultimate judgment. “And more than all other men are we your helpers and allies in promoting peace, seeing that we hold this view, that it is alike impossible for the wicked, the covetous, the conspirator, and for the virtuous, to escape the notice of God, and that each man goes to everlasting punishment or salvation according to the value of his actions.”<sup>61</sup> Justin here is asserting that the Christians are innocent due to their doctrine of God as Judge. Because the Christians understand that God will perfectly punish the wicked and reward the righteous, it is reasonable to assume that Christians will act righteously. This argument fails in that it is asking the Roman judges to base their verdict merely on what Christians claim to believe as a group, rather than on the actions of a given individual.

Justin continues his defense by asserting that the teachings of the Greek philosophers, whom the Roman judges revere, are closely akin to the teachings of the Scriptures. “It is not, then, that we hold the same opinions as others, but that all speak in imitation of ours.”<sup>62</sup> “And so, too, Plato, when he says, ‘The blame is his who chooses, and God is blameless,’ took this from the prophet Moses and uttered it. For Moses is more ancient than all the Greek writers. And whatever both philosophers and poets have said concerning the immortality of the

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid, chapter 7.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid, chapter 14.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid, chapter 12.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid, chapter 60.

soul, or punishments after death, or contemplation of things heavenly, or doctrines of the like kind, they have received such suggestions from the prophets as have enabled them to understand and interpret these things.”<sup>63</sup> It is clearly in Justin’s interest to establish this connection between the Bible and the Greek philosophers, in order to win the hearts of the judges in this case, and give them a firmer perspective on how to assess the Scriptures as the motivating factor for Christians. From our perspective Justin’s assertion is misguided. Justin believes he is echoing Paul when he uses the words, “So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith” to show that the Old Testament Law points us to Christ.<sup>64</sup> Unfortunately, Justin did not understand that the Greek philosophers were not the equivalent of the Old Testament laws.

Justin closes his defense with a reference to the emperor Marcus Aurelius as a character witness for Christianity. Justin quotes what Marcus Aurelius supposedly said:

Therefore it is probable that those whom we supposed to be atheists, have God as their ruling power entrenched in their conscience. For having cast themselves on the ground, they prayed not only for me, but also for the whole army as it stood, that they might be delivered from the present thirst and famine. For during five days we had no water, because there was none; for we were in the heart of Germany, and in the enemy’s territory. And simultaneously with their casting themselves on the ground, and praying to God (a God of whom I am ignorant), water poured from heaven, upon us most refreshingly cool, but upon the enemies of Rome a withering hail. And immediately we recognized the presence of God following on the prayer—a God unconquerable and indestructible.<sup>65</sup>

Justin here is making two points to the Roman judges. First, invoking the name of the emperor not only legitimizes the Christian argument but hints at the possible negative consequences of condemning the accused. Second, Justin appeals to a miraculous event as evidence that the God the Christians serve is real, truly the author of the Scriptures and truly the Judge of his Christian followers. This story from Marcus Aurelius serves to restate and sum up some of the previous arguments well. While the testimony of the emperor is not strictly pertinent to the guilt or innocence of the Christians, the account of the miracle does give a concrete event to which the judges can point and defend their conclusion, if it is to find the Christians innocent.

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid, chapter 44.

<sup>64</sup>Galatians 3:24.

<sup>65</sup>Justin Martyr, chapter 68.

The Christians in the post-apostolic era were fine as long as they stayed with what Scripture says. To their credit these early Christians knew their Bible and quoted from it regularly. They got themselves into trouble, however, when they looked upon Scripture as a philosophical argument. Justin Martyr and the other Apologists had the best of intentions in trying to defend Christianity, yet they weakened their argument when they failed to go back to “This is what the Lord says.”

### **Why the Early Christians Won**

With the publication of the Edict of Milan Christianity became a legal religion in the Roman Empire. True, it was not yet the only legal religion, but that would happen by the end of the century when Theodosius I issued edicts in the 390s. Christianity had gone from persecution to victory. We might well ask how such a dramatic change took place?

The obvious answer is the Lord brought it about, but from a human perspective a number of things had happened. First, Christianity had become too strong to be defeated. By the beginning of the fourth century it was a large and influential social and religious force within Roman society, no longer a tiny, unknown foreign sect. In some provinces, such as Bithynia and Cyrenaica, Christians may already have formed a majority, and they were well organized.

Further, Christians attracted people, as a Neo-Platonist philosopher explained ca. 300, by their religion’s “simplicity,” its direct moral teaching, and its promise which was uncomplicated by its rivals’ mythology.

More than that, Christianity had never lost its martyr spirit. As Lactantius explained, “There is another cause why God permits persecutions to be carried out against us, that the people of God may be increased.”<sup>66</sup> People rejected the old gods because of the cruelties perpetrated in their names. People inquired what was so good that it seemed preferable to life itself, “so that neither loss of goods, nor of the light, nor bodily pain or tortures deter them.” In Egypt in 311–312, Eusebius of Caesarea was an eyewitness of the final horrors of Maximinus’ persecution. He writes that

we ourselves beheld, when we were at these places, many [Copts] all at once in a single day, some of whom suffered beheading, others punishment by fire, so that the murderous axe was dulled, and worn out, was broken in pieces, and the executioners grew utterly weary. . . . It was then that we observed a most marvelous eagerness and a truly divine power and zeal in those who placed their faith in the Christ of God. Thus, as soon as sentence was given against the first, some from one quarter and others from another

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<sup>66</sup>Lactantius, quoted in <http://wisecarver.wordpress.com/2011/01/21/great-quote-from-a-dead-guy-on-persecution/>

would leap up to the tribunal before the judge and confess themselves Christians.<sup>67</sup>

Popular opinion had been changing in favor of Christianity in the previous thirty years. Against such spirit the pagan authorities were powerless. They might sometimes win intellectual contests, proving Plato was a more clever man than Paul, but those who regarded death as liberation had the last word.

Finally, it was obvious to even hardened pagans that Christians practiced what they preached. Justin Martyr was not the only convert to Christianity who saw that Christians lived a life which was exemplary compared to the lives of non-Christians. They wanted what Christians had. This lifestyle evangelism was in many ways more powerful than anything Christians said or wrote.

### **Persecution from “Then” until “Now”**

After the fourth century one would think that Christianity had it made. Unfortunately that was not the case. Even if we disregard the persecution that took place within the church as one branch of Christianity pointed out the heresies of others, there was a more visible threat that came onto the historical scene in the seventh century with the arrival of Islam.

From the founding of Islam in the early 600s and the expansion of the early Muslim empires, through the long dominance of the Ottoman Empire (1300–1922), Christians were often captured, killed, made slaves, or suppressed. Constantinople was conquered and destroyed by the Ottomans in 1453. The Ottomans took over large areas of the Byzantine Empire and its Orthodox churches, even converting Orthodoxy’s “mother church,” Hagia Sophia, to a mosque. They removed everything from bells to altars and plastered over ancient Christian mosaics.

Islamic armies also conquered old Oriental churches, including the Coptic churches in Egypt and churches in Syria. Christians under Ottoman rule were always second-class citizens. Some sultans relied on severe and cruel persecution, some used subtle pressure through extra taxes, and some restricted access to education.

A steady stream of Orthodox Christians were killed from the time Constantinople fell. The bloody suppression of the Bulgars, an ethnic group within the Ottoman Empire, included the killing of over 110,000 Orthodox. But peak persecution actually came in the early twentieth century with the beginning of the modern Turkish Republic. Massacres cost the lives of over 900,000 Armenians, many of them Chris-

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

tians. 600,000 more were deported, many dying of starvation or illness by the roadside or in the Syrian desert. The percentage of Christians in Turkey decreased from 30 percent before World War I to a third of 1 percent by the twenty-first century.

The Ottoman Empire also killed over 750,000 Assyrian and Maronite (Lebanese) Christians. Only about 1,000 Assyrian Christians were left by the twenty-first century in their homeland.

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To be completed in the next issue.

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