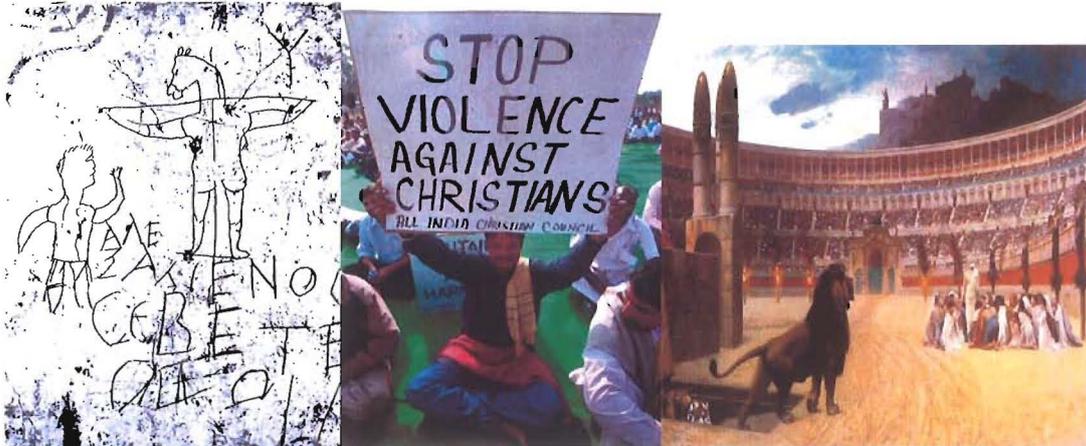


AS Religious Studies: Early Church History

Persecution 1



Persecution by the Jews

Persecution began at the hands of the Jews and started soon after Pentecost. The new teaching of the Christians created suspicion among Jews from whom the first Christians had come.

Why did the Jews persecute the Christians?

- It was **offensive** to them that the Christians would preach a **crucified Messiah**.
- Christians were preaching, as they saw it, **blasphemy** – that **Jesus was God's son**.
- Christianity was a **threat** – there was a significant number of Jews 'won over' to the gospel.

Evidence: Acts 4 - Peter and John's interrogation before the Sanhedrin:

¹The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. ²They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. ³They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. ⁴But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.

⁵The next day the rulers, elders and teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. ⁶Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and the other men of the high priest's family. ⁷They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

⁸Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! ⁹If we are being called to account today for an act of

kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, ¹⁰then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. ¹¹He is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone. ¹²Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

¹³When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. ¹⁴But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. ¹⁵So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. ¹⁶"What are we going to do with these men?" they asked. "Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle, and we cannot deny it. ¹⁷But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name."

¹⁸Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹But Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. ²⁰For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

²¹After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. ²²For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.

The first stage was imprisonment followed by warning (4:1-19); then beating (5:40); then murder. (7:54-60)

⁵⁴When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶"Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

⁵⁷At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

⁵⁹While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Stephen was the first Christian martyr. This was soon followed by that of James, at the hands of Herod Agrippa. (12:1-2)

¹It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. ²He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. ³When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also.

Paul and his companions were often strongly opposed by the Jews and were mistreated at their instigation in some of the places they visited on their missionary journeys. Look at the following 3 passages:

⁵⁰But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. (13:50)

¹At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed. ²But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. (14:2)

Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. (14:19)

Jewish persecution was sporadic and differed from community to community.

The *CHRISTIAN HISTORY* Timeline

Persecution in the Early Church

Shaded areas denote known or suspected periods of persecution against Christians. Partial shading denotes suspected periods of persecution. Many dates are approximate.

A.D.	50	100	150
35: Stephen martyred; Paul converted	64: Nero launches persecution 65: Peter and Paul executed 80s: Domitian develops emperor worship 95: Domitian executes or exiles several family members on charges of "atheism"	107: Simeon, cousin of Jesus and bishop of Jerusalem, killed for political (anti-Semitic) reasons 110: Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, martyred in Rome	155 (166?): Polycarp martyred 155, 160: Justin writes <i>First</i> and <i>Second Apology</i> 165: Justin martyred 177: Pogrom in Lyons and Vienne; 48 killed
			
42: Apostle James beheaded by Herod Agrippa I 49: Jews expelled from Rome (for disturbances with Christians?)		112: Pliny inquires of Trajan how to treat Christians	178: Celsus's <i>True Discourse</i> against Christians 180: 12 from Scilli (N. Africa) killed 197: Tertullian writes his <i>Apology</i>

Significant Social, Religious, and Political Events	100	150
18: Caiaphas becomes high priest 26: Pontius Pilate appointed prefect of Judea 30: Crucifixion of Jesus 39: Herod Antipas dies 43: Rome invades Britain; London founded 46-58: Paul's missionary journeys 48: Jerusalem Council	64: Great fire in Rome  66: Jewish War begins 70: Jerusalem taken by Romans 74: Masada captured 79: Mt. Vesuvius erupts, destroying Pompeii 95: John exiled to Patmos; Book of Revelation written	101-102, 105-6: The Dacian Wars; Empire reaches greatest extent 132: Second Jewish War led by Bar Kokhba (through 135) 140-160: Heretic Marcion and Gnostic teacher Valentinus active 164: Fifteen-year plague breaks out 172: Montanism, an apocalyptic movement later condemned, begins in church  195: Theological writer Tertullian converts to Montanism

Key Roman Emperors		100	150
Augustus (31 B.C. - A.D. 14)	Nero (54-68)	Trajan (98-117)	Marcus Aurelius (161-180)
Tiberius (14-37)	Vespasian (69-79)	Hadrian (117-38)	Commodus (180-92)
Claudius (41-54)	Domitian (81-96)	Antoninus Pius (138-61)	Septimius Severus (193-211)

From Christian History:

200

202: Emperor Septimius Severus forbids conversions to Christianity (or Judaism)

203: Origen's father and Perpetua and Felicitas martyred, among others

211–213: North African hostilities

235–36: Emperor Maximin Thrax persecutes church leaders, including Hippolytus

248: Origen writes *Against Cel-sus*; persecutions in Alexandria



The Mausoleum Collection

250

250: Emperor Decius orders universal sacrifice; church leaders arrested; Origen jailed and tortured; Pope Fabian martyred, as are bishops of Antioch and Jerusalem; Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, and Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, flee

251: Decius dies; Cyprian returns to Carthage and deals with lapsed Christians; Novatianist schism

252–53: Emperor Gallus revives persecutions of Decius

254: Origen, weakened from torture, dies

257–60: Emperor Valerian hounds clergy; Cyprian, Pope Sixtus II, and others martyred

261: Emperor Gallienus issues rescript ordering toleration

270s: Emperor Aurelian establishes state cult of the Unconquerable Sun (birthday, Dec. 25) and threatens persecution

275: Porphyry writes *Against the Christians*

298–302: Christians in army forced to resign

300

303: Great Persecution begins February 23. Four edicts call for church buildings to be destroyed, sacred writings burned, Christians to lose civil rights, clergy to be imprisoned and forced to sacrifice, and (in 304) all people to sacrifice on pain of death

305: Diocletian and Maximian abdicate; hiatus in persecution

306: Constantine named Augustus by troops; in the East, Maximinus II renews persecution (through 310); Council of Elvira, in Spain, passes severe penalties for apostates

311: On death bed, Galerius issues edict of toleration; Maximinus II continues persecution in Egypt; Donatist schism begins

Primary sources for this time are *The Rise of Christianity*, by W. D. C. Frend (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), *The Triumph of the Cross*, by Michael Walsh (London: Roxby, 1986), *A History of Christianity*, edited by Ray C. Price (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1962), *The Unconquered City*, by Bernard Grant (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982)

312: Constantine defeats Maxentius to take control of Western Empire

313: Constantine and Licinius meet at Milan; resulting "Edict" of Milan grants toleration of Christianity

324: Constantine defeats Licinius to become sole Roman emperor



200

212: Roman citizenship extended to every freeborn person

216: Mani, the founder of Manichaeism, a non-Christian sect, born

230: First Persian War (further wars in 243–44, 254)

232: First known house-churches built

248: Goths attack Rome



250

259: Shapur I of Persia captures Valerian in battle

268: Goths sack Athens, Corinth, and Sparta

270: Saint Antony, monastic pioneer, seeks solitude in Egyptian desert

285: Roman Empire divided into western and eastern empires

293–303: Emperor Diocletian creates administrative Tetrarchy; reforms army, currency, and taxation; establishes price controls



300

311: Eusebius writes *Ecclesiastical History*

314: Constantine summons Council of Arles to deal with Donatist schism; Lactantius writes *On the Death of the Persecutors*

318: Arian controversy begins

325: Constantine summons First Council of Nicea to deal with Arian question

328: Athanasius, defender of orthodoxy, elected bishop of Alexandria

330: Constantinople dedicated as Empire's new seat

337: Constantine baptized shortly before death



200

Caracalla (211–17)

Severus Alexander (222–35)

Maximin Thrax (235–38)

250

Decius (249–51)

Valerian (253–60)

300

Tetrarchy

Augusti:
Diocletian (284–305)
Maximian (286–305, 307–8)

Caesars:
Constantius I (Aug.: 305–6)
Galerius (Aug.: 305–11)

Constantine I "the Great" (306–37)

Maxentius (306–12)

Licinius (308–24)

Maximinus II Daia (310–13)

Early Church History : Persecution

Starter Activity



Read the resource entitled 'The Rise of Christianity' and then answer the following questions:

1. What is the popular understanding of the Romans' treatment of Christians?
2. What does 'laissez-faire', in context, mean?
3. Were the Romans religiously intolerant?
4. What was the attitude of the Romans to 'new' religions?
5. What caused a change in Roman attitude towards Christianity?
6. Why were Christians unpopular?
7. Define 'misanthropy'.
8. What were Christians technically guilty of?
9. How did Roman/Christian relationships improve in the second century?
10. What proved attractive about Christianity?

and versatility, sought to perfect the State machinery everywhere. It would be wrong to say that he was not a man of purpose: he made it his aim to weld the Empire efficiently together within the frontiers upon which he had decided. But efficiency for its own sake is not enough: it must have some ulterior aim, it should serve the spiritual purposes of the State. In the cosmopolitan world of Hadrian it is not easy to discover whether the State really had any high moral purpose at all. Hadrian himself had no spiritual convictions; he was only remotely interested in such things. The result was that the efficiency he succeeded in introducing into all branches of public life was basically soul-less. It could, and for a while undoubtedly did, contribute to the material well-being of the Empire as a whole: as Gibbon long ago insisted, the succeeding Age of the Antonines from the material point of view was one of the most prosperous in human history.

But departments of state that are coldly efficient become a deadening bureaucracy; officers like Hadrian's *advocati fisci* were an ominous innovation.

Hadrian's passion for organization meant that he, more than any other of Augustus' successors, introduced changes and reforms into the Principate. They were changes, however, that were to result in the growth of a bureaucratic machine, whose efficient red tape stretched its tentacles into the farthest corners of the Empire, throttled initiative and finally squeezed out its very life's blood.

CHAPTER IV

THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY

§ 1. THE ROMAN ATTITUDE TOWARDS RELIGION

OF all the institutions which developed in the Roman Empire during the period with which this volume deals, none was to be more permanent or to have a more profound effect upon subsequent history than the Christian Church, whose beginnings coincided almost exactly with those of the Principate.¹ Yet superficially at any rate Christianity did not play a very important rôle in the history of the first century and a half of our era. References to it are sporadic and casual,² the most noteworthy being in the reign of Nero when the first recorded persecution of Christians by the Roman government occurred. The brutalities perpetrated by Nero have left a widespread misconception of official policy towards Christianity. It is popularly believed that the imperial government with unceasing and uncompromising cruelty ruthlessly persecuted a band of saints and martyrs. This is not the case. Even in the third century A.D., the century of the great persecutions, government action against the Christians was far from being continuous. In our period not only did the central government fail to take steps against the new religion immediately it made its appearance, it also failed to universalize Nero's policy.

In most things the attitude of the Roman government was one of laissez faire. It did indeed lay down various regulations which it insisted should be scrupulously observed. Otherwise, however, it interfered as little as possible with the economic activities, the everyday customs and the religious practices of the various nationalities within the Empire. It did not ruthlessly impose the Latin language or the Roman religion. It did indeed foster and from the time of Domitian even demand Caesar-worship; but this could be described as a political rather than as a religious gesture.

In general, the Roman Empire tried to deal justly by all,

¹ Jesus Christ's dates cannot be definitely fixed: He was born between 10 and 4 B.C.; the crucifixion occurred in either A.D. 29, 30 or 33.

² Cassius Dio, in particular, is very reluctant to make any allusion to Christianity.

by citizens and non-citizens alike. The spread of humanitarian ideas is in fact one of the most attractive features of the Principate. The Romans cannot be accused of religious intolerance: on the contrary, throughout their history they showed a tendency to welcome and assimilate foreign gods into the Roman pantheon. This is understandable enough, since for polytheists an extra god or two will make very little difference. Sometimes the newly admitted gods were identified with their Roman counterparts: in the Roman Empire we encounter a multiplicity of local deities, many of them with outlandish names which are completed by the addition of the name of some Roman god such as Jupiter.¹

3 Actually Roman tolerance went even further than this. The central government was prepared to tolerate an intolerant and aggressive religion, provided that it remained local and did not constitute a real threat to the Empire as a whole. In Judaea at any rate their general practice was to interfere as little as possible with Jewish customs, and even in the Dispersion the Jews enjoyed certain privileges.

On the other hand, the Roman government always reserved the right to step in and take strong action where any religion seemed to constitute a threat to public order or to public morals. As early as 186 B.C. the Senate had suppressed certain Bacchanalian rituals throughout Italy even though to do so it had been obliged to disregard the treaty rights of Rome's Italian allies.² At various times certain foreign cults were excluded from Rome. The cult of Isis, for example, was banned in the first century B.C.;³ and as we have seen, Domitian expelled foreign religions from the city c. A.D. 90. A religion that was guilty of practices which outraged the Roman moral sense also obtained very short shrift. Thus Druidism with its rite of human sacrifice was relentlessly extirpated.

§ 2. THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTIANITY

Christian practices and ritual, of course, were not of the type that the Romans would regard as outrageous. Nor did the Romans at first anticipate that Christianity would constitute a threat to public order. Its founder had, indeed, aroused enough opposition among certain sects in Judaea to lead the

¹ Cf. the analogous Christus-Sol: J. Toynbee-J. B. Ward-Perkins, *The Shrine of St. Peter*, pp. 21, 74.

² Livy XXXIX, 8-10.

³ Cass. Dio XL, 47.

Jews to demand and receive the right to execute Him. But the Romans did not regard this as anything out of the ordinary, for Judaea was in a more or less permanent state of turbulence arising out of religious quarrels.

The beginning of the Christian Church is described in the first chapter of *Acts*: "Then returned they unto Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is from Jerusalem a sabbath day's journey. And when they were come in, they went up into an upper room . . . the number of names together were about an hundred and twenty." To the Romans this at first looked like just another Jewish heresy. As such it did not concern them unduly. Knowing none of these things, they regarded the persecution of Christians by Jews in Judaea as regrettable but normal among Jews: the stoning of a Stephen probably made little impression on the cynical Roman, and the attitude of Gallio at Corinth is typical. However, once the religion began to make headway among the Gentiles, the Roman government had to give it closer attention; and the spread of Christianity among the Gentiles, although at first frowned upon by a Judaizing party within the Church itself, was rapid, thanks largely to the missionary zeal of St. Paul. Paul's Epistle to the Romans implies that within a quarter of a century of Christ's crucifixion there was a fairly large Christian community in Rome itself. After the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 the new religion made even greater headway among the Gentiles, and Jewish Christianity was either absorbed into the Gentile churches or fell away in curious heresies.

§ 3. THE EARLIEST PERSECUTIONS

The Roman government could now no longer mistake Christianity for a mere Jewish heresy and regard it with a more or less cynical detachment. That, however, is not to say that the government was forthwith obliged to persecute, for it would not feel impelled to step in unless public order or public morals seemed endangered. It might be thought that a religion professing the tenets of Christianity would not endanger either. But unfortunately something that is intrinsically good and valuable in itself may provoke disorder. A golden apple is presumably a precious object; but it can sow dissension even among goddesses. The Christians could be regarded by the authorities as a source of unrest because of their unpopularity

with their pagan neighbours. There can be very little doubt that for the first 100 years after the crucifixion of Jesus Christians were generally disliked and even positively hated. For this there were several reasons. One was economic: the silver-smiths at Ephesus were not the only suppliers to the pagan cults, who saw a threat to their profitable livelihood in the number of conversions to the new creed. Another was prejudice arising out of ignorance: the Sacrament of the Last Supper was ignorantly construed as cannibalism. The habit of the early Christians of addressing one another indiscriminately as "brother" and "sister" led to the belief that they were guilty of incest. Their assertion that Christ was "King" fostered the conviction that they were actively disloyal. But probably the biggest cause of enmity towards them was their own attitude. That it tended to be self-righteous we cannot reasonably doubt. The early Christians became a sect apart, who were convinced of the imminence of the Second Coming. The Kingdom of Heaven was at hand: St. Paul himself, in his earlier days at least, obviously expected to witness it. Therefore they did not hesitate to proclaim the approaching final doom of this wicked world, a doom from which they, the chosen few, would be spared. The early Christians literally expected to see the mighty put down from their seats and the men of low degree exalted through an act of God. Relying on this conviction, they consciously or unconsciously assumed an attitude of arrogance. This was something that their pagan neighbours would hardly relish. Christian teachings might be a stumbling-block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks: to the pagans in general they sounded like downright misanthropy.¹ They naturally reacted to this by conceiving a lively hatred for the people whom they suspected of hating them. And this hatred was exacerbated by the false deduction that the Christians must be antagonistic to the existing social order since they seemed to advocate celibacy and seemed to split up families by converting certain of their members. In his famous account of the Neronian persecution Tacitus makes the revealing remark that the Christians were punished "because of hatred of the human race." It is not quite clear whether Tacitus means the hatred of the Christians *for* the human race or the hatred

¹ Consider the effect on pagan ears of such an assertion of Jesus' as Luke 12, 49, which Moffatt translates: "I have come to throw fire on earth; would it were kindled already."

of the Christians *by* the human race: in effect he means both.

The general ill-will of the surrounding pagans must have led to many an isolated and purely unofficial incident of persecution. The Roman government itself, of course, must have known that popular suspicions of Christian depravity were false. Provincial governors like Pilate, Gallio, Festus and Pliny had investigated the new religion with some care and found no vice in its adherents. The Emperor Trajan thought them such harmless fanatics that, in effect, he ordered Pliny, his governor in Bithynia, to connive at their activities. Hadrian's instructions to Minicius Fundanus, the governor of Asia, were not very dissimilar. Nevertheless, as Tertullian later pointed out, whenever natural disasters occurred such as fire, flood or famine, the pagan public would lay the blame on the Christians; and, to avoid communal rioting, the central government would respond to the popular feeling and take action against the Christians. In our period persecutions were local and probably not numerous. Yet they did occur: under Trajan, for instance, both Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, and Symeon, the bishop of Jerusalem, and under Hadrian Telesporus, the bishop of Rome, were martyred.

If the officials decided to humour the popular whim and persecute the Christians, it was easy enough for them to find a pretext. The Christians were technically guilty of forming an association, something which the Principate, sensitive to the political possibilities of clubs and organizations, had frowned upon from its earliest days. We even find Trajan, a practical man and an Emperor reasonably secure of his position, viewing the formation of a fire brigade at Nicomedia with uneasy qualms. Another charge that could be levelled against the Christians, from the time of Domitian on at any rate, was their refusal to participate in the official Caesar-worship. Faithful to their Lord's injunction to render unto Caesar the things that were Caesar's, they were usually willing, and indeed eager, to pray *for* Caesar. But that was not making the political gesture of praying *to* him. There were, then, these two charges that could be brought against Christians, and then they would suffer for His name's sake. There was apparently no universal and comprehensive edict against Christianity in our period, although it certainly seems to have been a *religio illicita* early in the second century.¹

¹ Sherwin-White, *Letters of Pliny*, pp. 778 f.

§ 4. THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

It is perhaps not irrelevant to enquire how the new religion spread so widely and so rapidly in the face of the initial hostility of a large proportion of the population. A decrease in the intransigence of the Christians themselves was no doubt primarily responsible. In the case of any new gospel later converts seldom display the same violent intolerance as the earliest adherents. This was especially true of the Christians. As prospects for the Second Coming became more and more indefinitely postponed—"until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled"—they themselves became distinctly more mellow. In the second century their spokesmen, instead of assailing pagan wickedness with fierce invective, had recourse to reasoned apologetic.¹ At the same time, as the Christians and their practices became better known, their way of life and general behaviour won men's respect. Their conduct and bearing impressed men. Instead of being regarded as anthropophagous and incestuous traitors they slowly and gradually came to be known as people who tried to pass all the days of their life in holiness and righteousness, and who tried to guide their feet into the way of peace. Their determination to love their neighbours as themselves little by little led to the disappearance of the story about hatred of the human race. Men began to be disposed in favour of these people whose word was their bond.

Simultaneously another influence was at work. We have already seen that the Roman Empire did not arouse the fiery enthusiasm of its subjects. The average inhabitant of the Empire could pursue his daily life in reasonable security, and he was content to accept the material comforts that the Empire bestowed. But this did not satisfy his spiritual needs. Nor could he make the omission good in the closed field of politics. Only to the favoured few was there an outlet in the big administrative posts. The unprivileged many were forced to find an outlet in the empty formalism of Caesar-worship, in the brutalizing spectacles of the arena, or in the sterile study of philosophy. Philosophical theories, although they appeal strongly to a more or less select group of esoterics, will never catch the imagination of the masses, who need the fervour of a religion. The spread

¹ Cf. the Apologies of Aristides and Justin Martyr addressed respectively to Hadrian and Antoninus Pius.

of the mystery religions in the Roman Empire is very significant. Their very multiplicity, however, paradoxically conditioned men's minds to monotheistic ideas, for the average worshipper, at a loss amid the conflicting claims of many religions, solved the problem by simply identifying all the many gods, and such syncretism is a long step forward on the road to monotheism. Even the philosophers with their belief in a single Universal Reason animating the world were moving in the same direction. The various mystery religions, however, tended to degenerate into mere ritual, which could not satisfy men spiritually. Men therefore began to turn to Christianity. In the spiritual desert of materialism, it was a monotheism with a message, and in it men could find a deep reality. Its devotees, at first, had seemed to be possessed merely of an inflexible obstinacy; but their steadfastness in the face of persecution and even death ultimately convinced men that they possessed a source of spiritual comfort and strength. Small wonder is it that Christianity gained additional converts, and not merely from the depressed and servile classes. Had Christianity remained a religion of the downtrodden and the slaves it could scarcely have survived: indeed the poor were so busily occupied in scrambling to obtain their daily bread that they had little leisure to reflect on the merits of praying that it be given them. Christianity gradually made its way into the middle and upper classes. Already in the reign of Domitian the evidence indicates that Christians were to be found in the very highest circles.

By the time that the great universal persecutions got under way in the third century, when the government acted on its own initiative rather than under the spur of popular resentment against the Christians, the religion had obtained too firm a hold to be suppressed. Indeed its empire-wide organization was precisely the chief reason why the government moved against it. But by then it was too late: the Christian Church was too well established to be eradicated.

Persecution by the Romans

Christianity was initially sheltered by the umbrella of Judaism, as the Romans believed that it was a sect of Judaism. Judaism was a protected religion, as it was the ancient religion of a conquered nation. Sources from the first two centuries of Church history show that there were various reasons behind the persecution of Christians, including religious, political and social factors.

Religious reasons:

- Christianity was monotheistic – worshipping any other gods or beings was idolatry. This meant that Christians would not worship the gods of the Empire and refused to honour the emperors as divine beings. This led to the charge of **atheism**. Evidence: At the martyrdom of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (mid second century), he was urged to say to the Christians: 'Away with the atheists', but instead he said this to the Roman crowd.
- Christianity was a **threat to the *pax decorum*** (the peace of the gods). The common Roman belief was that when the gods of the Empire were honoured and so kept happy, the favour of the gods was poured out on the Empire. It then, logically, followed that if anything negative happened in the Empire – floods, fires, natural disasters, defeat in battle – this was a result of the wrath of the gods. In such instances, the Christians were blamed for angering the gods. **Tertullian**, in the late second century, complained that if the Tiber in Rome threatened to flood, or if the Nile in Egypt failed to irrigate the crops, or if there was famine or plague, the public would cry, 'The Christians to the lion!' (Apology: 40.2; ANE p158)

Political reasons:

- The charge of atheism had political implications. In Roman culture, **political and religious life was inextricably intertwined**. To **reject Rome's gods** was to **reject Rome's authority**. This was interpreted as **treason**. This was even more acute in the arena of emperor worship. Political loyalty was demonstrated through showing divine devotion to the emperors. Refusing to do this was construed as a refusal to show political

allegiance. Evidence: Domitian. This charge of treason and disloyalty was enhanced by the refusal of Christians to serve in the army. Why would many Christians not serve in the army? _____

- Rome was very **nervous about 'clubs' (collegia)** and their potential for destabilising Rome's law and order. Evidence: Trajan declined Pliny's (the governor of Bithynia) request to form an association of fire fighters. The private and secret nature of Christian meetings added to this nervousness.
- The Romans granted the status 'legal religion' to the ancient religions of people who they had conquered. Such religions were tolerated and exceptions made for them. Judaism was a tolerated religion. **Christianity was a 'religio illicita'** because it was new. It was not an ancient religion and it was not contained to a certain group of people.
- Christianity **did not have any boundaries** – it appealed to people from all nations. It could not be contained within certain boundaries.
- The Roman way of life depended on **slaves**. They did all kinds of work and had no rights. They were **firmly controlled** to prevent rebellion. Christianity appealed to slaves. In Christianity slaves had important positions and were respected. This led Christianity to be viewed with suspicion by many Romans.



Social reasons:

- **Anti-social:** Roman religion touched so many social activities that Christians were seen as being anti-social. The Roman historian Tacitus, writing in the early second century about Nero's persecution of the Christians in Rome (AD64), refers the Christian's perceived '**hatred of the human race**'. Any meat that their pagan neighbours had would have been sacrificed to the gods before being sold, so Christians would have turned down invitations to neighbours' houses. Markets were often located in temple courts and membership of social clubs and trade guilds involved devotion to pagan gods. The religious festivals of the pagan calendar were social events in which the public participated. Christians therefore became quite separated from the communities in which they lived. Christians would also not have gone to the Arena – the central form of entertainment in Roman culture, adding to their division from society.



- Christianity had an effect on **local economies**. This provoked further hostility, because people's livelihoods were affected. Evidence: Acts 19:23-27 _____

Also, we have Pliny's reference to deserted pagan temples and a reduction in the trade of sacrificial victims in Bithynia.

- **Misconceptions/ accusations of immoral practices:** Early sources provide evidence that pagans associated Christians with certain immoral practices. Tacitus wrote that the Christians were a class '**hated for their abominations**'. What were these misconceptions?
 - **Cannibalism** – pagans heard Christians talking about eating the flesh of Christ and drinking his blood.
 - **Incest** – Christians called each other 'brother' and 'sister'. They greeted each other with a kiss. They took part in agape feasts (love feasts) – the pagans misinterpreted these as incestuous orgies. An agape meal/feast was actually a community meal, which initially incorporated the Eucharist.
 - **Ritual murder:** Christians spoke about 'dying to their old life' or sharing in Christ's death when they spoke about baptism.
 - **Infanticide:** This charge is referred to by Tertullian, who sarcastically says that Christians should be tortured to discover the number of butchered babies they had eaten. The claim of infant cannibalism and sacrifice most likely came from the Christian rejection of abortion and infant exposure. The pagans may have viewed this as motivated by a desire for a supply of infants.
 - **Involved in magical rites:** In *The Life of Nero*, the Roman historian Suetonius (early second century) referred to Christianity as a 'wicked superstition'. The Latin word translated 'wicked' means 'magician'. Speaking in tongues, exorcisms, prayer 'in the name of Jesus' and the sign of the cross may have led to this accusation.

Some suggest that these popular slanders were made against Christians because of a misinterpretation of their terminology. However, others believe there is evidence to suggest that such charges were made against any group

who were regarded as anti-social. This was because it was simply assumed that anti-social people engaged in such activities.

Persecution in the first two centuries

Persecution in the first two centuries was **sporadic, severe, localised and expedient**. It was often at grass-roots level and driven by the mob. There was no official Roman policy against Christians, but various emperors had various reasons why they allowed persecution to happen.

We are going to study four emperors in this time frame:

- Nero
- Domitian
- Trajan
- Marcus Aurelius

For each emperor you need to know:

- The **cause** of the persecution
- The **course** of the persecution
- Any notable **martyrs**
- What we learn from it about the **nature of the Church's relationship with society/ the State.**

The Persecuting Emperors

From A.D. 30 to A.D. 311, a period in which fifty-four emperors ruled the Empire, only about a dozen took the trouble to harass Christians. Furthermore, not until Decius (249–251) did any deliberately attempt an Empire-wide persecution. Until then, persecution came mainly at the instigation of local rulers, albeit with Rome's approval. Nonetheless, a few emperors did have direct and, for Christians, unpleasant dealings with this faith. Here are the most significant of those rulers.

Claudius (41–54)

Perhaps the first to persecute Christians—
inadvertently

Sickly, ill-mannered, and reclusive, Claudius devoted his early days to the quiet study of Etruscan and Carthaginian history, among other subjects. Understandably, he was an embarrassment to the activist imperial family. But the murder of his nephew, the emperor Gaius, in 41 propelled him to the throne nonetheless. During his reign, he wisely avoided potentially costly foreign wars, extended Roman citizenship at home, and showed tolerance toward a variety of religions.

However, "since the Jews were continually making disturbances at the instigations of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome. . . ." So writes the Roman historian Suetonius about events in Rome around 52. "Chrestus" may have been a thorn in the side of Roman politicians anxious to be rid of him and his cohorts. Or "Chrestus" may be the way uninformed bureaucrats pronounced the name about which Jews argued: Christus. Such arguments between Jews and Christians were not unknown (e.g., in Ephesus; Acts 19). Claudius likely and inadvertently was the first emperor, then, to persecute Christians (who were perceived as a Jewish sect)—for, it seems, disturbing the peace.



G. Dughl. (Brit.)

Nero (54–68)

Savage madman
in whose reign Peter
and Paul were martyred

Nero, a man with light blue eyes,



Caracallan

thick neck, protruding stomach, and spindly legs, was a crazed and cruel emperor, a pleasure-driven man who ruled the world by whim and fear. It just goes to show the difference an upbringing makes.

His mother, the plotting Agrippina, managed to convince her husband, Claudius, to adopt her son Nero and put him, ahead of Claudius' own son, first in line for the throne. Maternal concern not satisfied, she then murdered Claudius, and Nero ruled the world at age 17.

The young Nero, having been tutored by the servile philosopher and pedophile Seneca, was actually repulsed by the death penalty. But he resourcefully turned this weakness into strength: he eventually had his mother stabbed to death for treason and his wife Octavia beheaded for adultery. (He then had Octavia's head displayed for his mistress, Poppaea, whom years later he kicked to death when she was pregnant.) The Senate made thank offerings to the gods for this restoration of public morality.

Unfortunately, that is but the tip of the bloody and treacherous iceberg of Nero's reign. Yet such activities overshadowed the few constructive things he attempted, albeit without success: the abolition of indirect taxes (to help farmers), the building of a Corinthian canal, and the resettlement of people who had lost their homes in the Great Fire of Rome in 64.

Nero tried to pin the blame for that fire on the city's small Christian community (regarded as a distinct, dissident group of Jews), and so, appropriately, he burned many of them alive. Peter and Paul were said to have been martyred as a result. But the rumors persisted that Nero had sung his own poem "The Sack of Troy" (he did not "fiddle") while enjoying the bright spectacle he had ignited. That business about singing was not unreasonable, for Nero had for

years made a fool of himself by publicly playing the lyre and singing before, literally, command performances.

Political turmoil finally forced the troubled emperor to commit suicide. His last words were, "What a show man the world is losing in me!"



Domitian (81–96)

Does Revelation depict him as a hideous beast?

The historian Pliny called Domitian the beast from hell who sat in its den, licking blood. In the Book of Revelation, John of the Apocalypse may have referred to Domitian when he described a beast from the abyss who blasphemes heaven and drinks the blood of the saints.

Domitian repelled invasions from Dacia (modern-day Rumania)—something later emperors would have increasing difficulty doing. He also was a master builder and adroit administrator, one of the best who ever governed the Empire. Suetonius, who hated Domitian, had to admit that "he took such care to exercise restraint over the city officials and provincial governors that at no time were these more honest or just."

But there was something wrong with Domitian. He enjoyed catching flies and stabbing them with a pen. He liked to watch gladiatorial fights between women and dwarfs. And during his reign he was so suspicious of plots against his life, the number of imperial spies and informers proliferated, as did the number of casualties among suspect Roman officials.

Domitian was the first emperor to have himself officially entitled in Rome as "God the Lord." He insisted that other people hail his greatness with acclamations like "Lord of the earth," "Invincible," "Glory," "Holy," and "Thou Alone."

When he ordered people to give him divine honors, Jews, and no doubt Christians, balked. The resulting persecution of Jews is well-documented; that of Christians is not. However, the beast that the author of Revelation describes, as well as the events in the book, are perhaps best interpreted as hidden allusions to the rule of Domitian. In addition, Flavius Clemens, consul in 95, and his wife, Flavia Domitilla, were

From Christian History:

executed and exiled, respectively, by Domitian's orders: many historians suspect this was because they were Christians.

But what goes around, comes around. An ex-slave of Clemens, Stephanus, was mobilized by some of Domitian's enemies and murdered him



Trajan

(98–117)

Skilled ruler who established policies for treating Christians

So well did Trajan rule that senators and emperors of the later Empire wished that new emperors should be "more fortunate than Augustus, better than Trajan."

Trajan began his rule intent on conquests that would excel those of his hero Julius Caesar. Although he did not succeed, his conquest of Dacia turned out to be the last major conquest of ancient Rome.

Between military campaigns, Trajan found time to be an effective, albeit conservative, civilian administrator, protecting the privileges of the senate. He is also known for the impressive public works he undertook, especially his Aqua Trajana, the last of the aqueducts to serve Rome; Trajan's Baths, which included soaring concrete arches, apses, and vaults; and the complex and magnificent Forum of Trajan.

A series of letters with Bithynian governor Pliny display Trajan's concern for the welfare of the provinces. Unfortunately for Christians, this concern was combined with suspicious preoccupation with state security and a tendency to interfere in internal affairs of ostensibly self-governing cities. In one letter he tells Pliny how to deal with Christians: "They are not to be hunted out [Although] any who are accused and convicted should be punished, with the proviso that if a man says he is not a Christian and makes it obvious by his actual conduct — namely, by worshipping our gods — then, however suspect he may have been with regard to the past, he should gain pardon from his repentance."

Even though relatively temperate, the

great Trajan became the first emperor known to persecute Christians as fully distinct from the Jews. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, was perhaps the best known to have suffered death during his reign.

Marcus Aurelius

(161–180)

Great Stoic philosopher whose reign fueled anti-Christian hostilities

Marcus Aurelius actively pursued military campaigns nearly his entire reign. From 161 to 167, Rome battled the invading Parthians in Syria. To repel Germanic tribes who were marauding Italy and then retreating across the Danube, Marcus personally conducted a punitive expedition from 167–173. On an expedition to extend Rome's northern borders, he suddenly died in 180 at his military headquarters.

This is not, of course, the Marcus Aurelius we've come to know and love. That Marcus ruminated eloquently in his philosophical *Meditations*. Having converted to Stoicism early in life, these personal reflections display lofty and bracing austerity: we must show patient long-suffering; our existence on this earth is fleeting and transitory. Yet, there is also this humane strain in Marcus: all men and women share the divine spark, so they are brothers and sisters. "Men exist for each other," he wrote. "Then either improve them, or put up with them."

As for himself, he tried to improve them. It was during his reign that the *Institutes* of Gaius, an elementary handbook about which our modern knowledge of classical Roman law is based, was written. Also, numerous measures were taken to soften the harshness of the law against the weak and helpless.

Except those Christians. Officially, Marcus took the position of his predecessor Trajan, also followed by Hadrian and Antoninus Pius. But his philosophical mentors convinced him that Christianity was a dangerous revolutionary force, preaching gross immoralities.

So under Marcus, anti-Christian literature flourished for the first time, most notably Celsus's *The True Doctrine*. More regrettably, Marcus allowed anti-Christian informers to proceed more easily than in the past, with the result that fierce persecutions broke out in various regions. In Lyons in 177, the local bishop was martyred, bringing Irenaeus to the office. In addition, Jus-



tin, the first Christian philosopher, was martyred during Marcus's reign.

During the reign of the magnanimous, philosopher-king Marcus Aurelius, then, Christian blood flowed more profusely than ever before.

Septimius Severus

(193–211)

Consummate soldier in whose reign Perpetua was killed

Severus was a soldier, first and last. He militarily dispensed with Pescennius Niger, rival emperor in the east, in 195, and then with Clodius Albinus in 197, rival emperor in the West. In 208 he set out for Britain to shore up its defenses, and on that trip succumbed to illness in 211. At death, he is said to have summoned his two sons, Caracalla and Geta, and said, "Keep on good terms with each other, be generous to the soldiers, and take no heed of anyone else."

That generosity to soldiers was one of Severus's trademarks. During his reign he raised their pay 67 percent and ennobled the military so that it became a promising path for many different careers. In addition, the deity most popular with soldiers, the sun-god Mithras, began to edge out the competition in the Roman pantheon.

During the first part of his reign, Severus was not unfriendly toward Christians. Some members of his household, in fact, professed the faith, and he entrusted the rearing of his son, Caracalla, to a Christian nurse.

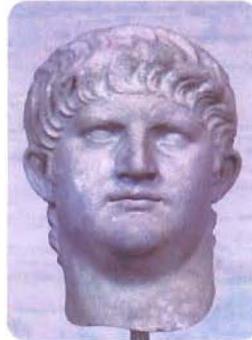
However, in 202 Severus issued an edict that forbade further conversions to Judaism and Christianity. A persecution followed, especially in North Africa and Egypt. The North African theologian Tertullian penned his famous apologetic works during this period, but to no avail. Among others, the dramatic martyrdom of Perpetua and her servant Felicitas occurred under Severus. Clement of Alexandria also perished, as did the father of Origen. (Tradition holds that Origen, in his youthful ardor, wished to share his father's fate, but his resourceful mother prevented his leaving the house by hiding his clothes.)

But the persecution ended at Severus's death, and except for a brief bout



Nero

AD54-AD68



The early Christians generally regarded Nero as the **first Roman persecutor** of the Church. In the AD190s Tertullian calls the persecution of the Christians the **institutum Neronianum**. The Church historian Eusebius and the Christian writer Sulpicius Severus were both of the same view in the fourth century.

Why did Nero persecute the Christians?

Nero's persecution of the Christians in Rome is normally associated with the **fire of Rome in AD64**. The fire lasted a week and left thousands homeless. The Roman historian **Tacitus** provides us with the most substantial source in his *Annals*, composed around AD115. Tacitus told of how Nero could not quash the rumours that he had ordered the fire to be started. It was well known that Nero had ambitious building plans for Rome. If those building plans were to become a reality he needed to make some room in the city. Tacitus does not go so far as to attribute the fire to Nero, although other early Roman writers did, such as Pliny the Elder. Tacitus said that Nero pinned the blame on the Christians in Rome in order to divert attention away from himself. Tacitus used the word '**set up**' (**subdidit**) for Nero's action, suggesting that he believed that the Christians were **scapegoats** to deflect suspicion from Nero.

Why did using them as a scapegoat work?

The early Christians proclaimed that the world in general and Rome in particular would be **destroyed by fire** (2 Peter 3:10-12). However WHC

Frend has suggested that it is possible that Nero blamed the fire on the **Jews** (known for their arsonist tendencies) and they in turn blamed the Christians.

Tacitus said that all who '**confessed**' **were arrested**, it is possible that they admitted arson, though it is usually assumed that it was a confession of Christianity.

It comes through quite clearly in Tacitus' account that the **general public resented the Christians**. Tacitus himself shared in this opinion. He described the Christians as a class of people detested for their abominations; probably a reference to the misunderstandings surrounding Christian practices. He refers to the Roman execution of Christianity's founder. He uses various terms of contempt about Christianity – evil, superstition, sordid and shameful.

What happened?

Tacitus tells us that those who confessed were **arrested**. He tells us that an immense multitude was convicted, giving evidence to the strength of the church in Rome at this time. They were convicted not so much for arson, but for hatred of the human race. The **death penalty** was carried out in a way to **entertain** the public as well as to **mock** the Christians. Christians were covered with the skins of beasts, torn to death by dogs, crucified and set on fire. Tacitus reported on how Nero satisfied his cruel nature through killing the Christians. He held a grand party at his palace. Like a showman, he mixed with the public, dressed as a charioteer, or drove around in his chariot. Tacitus reported that the manner of the persecution evoked a feeling of pity, since it seemed to be for the gratification of an individual's cruelty, rather than for the good of the public.

Famous martyrs

In the fourth century, Eusebius reported the tradition that the apostles **Paul and Peter** were martyred during Nero's reign. Paul was beheaded and Peter crucified. He supports this tradition by quoting Gaius, an early third century

writer. However, Sulpicius Severus placed their martyrdom somewhat later than the persecution connected with the fire of Rome.

Impact on the Church

Some believe that Nero's persecution represents the beginning of Christianity's status as an **illegal religion (religio illicita)** and that this situation remained until the end of the Great Persecution (AD 312). Sulpicius Severus stated that after Nero's persecution, laws and edicts were enacted which prohibited Christianity.

Others regard the persecution as having been **local** to Rome and brief in duration – a local solution to a local problem.

While no empire-wide decree against Christians was issued, to some degree at least **an imperial precedent had been set.**

In this chapter Suetonius is dealing with actions of Claudius towards various foreign races. Aquila and Priscilla moved to Corinth in consequence of this edict (Acts 18.2). The words *at the instigation of Chrestus* may well refer to disturbances caused by the preaching of Christianity among the Jews, and these disturbances could become serious in so large a Jewish community. The garbled form *Chrestus* might be taken by the authorities as the name of a contemporary individual, particularly as his supporters would insist that he was still alive. Justin (*Apol.* 1.4), Tertullian (*Apol.* 3.5) and Lactantius (*Inst.* 1v.7.5) show that 'Christus' and 'Chrestus' were pronounced in much the same way. 'Chrestus' was quite common as a personal name.

3 The Neronian Persecution

The Great Fire of Rome took place in July 64. Only four of the fourteen wards of the city escaped damage. Nero was suspected of having caused the fire. Of our ancient authorities Tacitus is non-committal, while Pliny the Elder, Suetonius, and Dio Cassius attribute the fire to the agency of the emperor. Whatever the truth, the emperor found the accusation awkward, particularly at a time when through his crimes and follies his own popularity was at a low ebb.

Tacitus, *Annals*, xv.44.2-8

- 2 But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the
 3 propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the
 4 conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of
 the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite
 5 tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by
 6 the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered
 the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one
 of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a deadly superstition, thus
 checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first
 source of the evil, but also in the City, where all things hideous and
 shameful from every part of the world meet and become popular.
 7 Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who confessed; then, upon
 their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much
 8 of the crime of arson, as of hatred of the human race. Mockery of
 every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts,
 they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or
 were doomed to the flames. These served to illuminate the night when
 daylight failed. Nero had thrown open his gardens for the spectacle,
 and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the
 people in the dress of a charioteer or drove about in a chariot. Hence,
 even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment,

there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed. (Church and Brodribb, *The Annals of Tacitus*, p. 304f., altered.)

The evidence of Tacitus is not contemporary, but dates from about 50 years after the event. By that time Christians must have increased considerably in numbers, and Tacitus, as governor of Asia c. 112, must have been perfectly familiar with them. As can be seen from the above passage, he regards them as scum.

5. *who confessed*—(?) to Christianity or to arson. While it is possible that a few Christians set fire to Rome, it is much more likely that the confession was to Christianity. We need not be surprised that Nero made the Christians scapegoats. They believed that the end of the world would come in a great conflagration (cf. 2 Pet. 3.10) in which the destruction by fire of the City was to be a leading feature (cf. Rev. 18.8-10; 19.3). It is not impossible that joy at the burning of Rome caused attention to be drawn to them. But even if a few Christians had set Rome on fire, many were punished simply as members of an unpopular group.

hatred of the human race (odium humani generis). The important Medicean manuscript reads, not *was convicted (convicti sunt)* but 'were indicted on a double charge' (*coniuncti sunt*). Thus *odium humani generis* may be a real charge. It was a charge brought against magicians, and the penalty was death by burning. The early Christians were frequently reproached with being magicians (Jesus being a chief magician), cf. 115, 185. Tacitus believes that the Christians were criminals, *who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment*.

No other ancient source pagan or Christian connects the Christians with the fire, till we reach Sulpicius Severus in the late fourth century. But Nero was universally recognized as the first persecutor.

Suetonius, *Life of Nero*, xvi.2

Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and wicked superstition. (J. C. Rolfe, *Suetonius* (Loeb Library), II, p. 111, altered.)

This reference comes in a list of miscellaneous legislative provisions: it is preceded by one concerning the sale of food in taverns, and followed by one concerning the behaviour of charioteers. Suetonius does not connect the punishment of the Christians with the Great Fire, for causing which he blames Nero quite unequivocally.

wicked (maleficus). The noun *maleficus* means 'magician', cf. 255, can. 6.

Domitian

AD 81 – AD 96



Useful evidence to support Domitian as a persecutor

- **Melito**, bishop of Sardis (Asia Minor), writing in the second century, regarded Domitian as the second persecutor of the Church.
- The historian **Eusebius** said that Domitian was **Nero's successor in terms of hostility to God**.

The problem

Early sources are clear about Domitian's harsh treatment of the Jews and those with Jewish sympathies, but it is not certain that this specifically included Christians.

Possible sources of conflict with the Church

Domitian's father Vespasian was hailed 'the restorer of the world' due to his great services in unifying the Empire after the civil strife that followed Nero's death. Domitian's brother Titus took the helm of the Empire in AD 79, but died two years later. Both rulers were given the posthumous honour of being deified after their death. **Domitian, however, did not wait until after his death to assume divine honours.** Seutonius tells us that Domitian used the title '**Our Master and our God**' as a self-reference and it became a customary form of address in correspondence and conversation. The Christians could not comply with this.

Eusebius cites **Irenaeus**, the late second century bishop of Lyons, as identifying the **beast of Revelation 13:18 with Domitian**.

Evidence to suggest that Domitian did persecute the Church

- The Roman historian **Dio Cassius**, writing in AD 225 in Bithynia, reports that in the last year of his reign Domitian acted against many charged with '**atheism**' who followed Jewish customs.
- Dio Cassius specifically mentions the emperor's cousin, **Flavius Clemens, and Clemens' wife, Flavia Domitilla (the emperor's niece)**. Clemens was executed and Domitilla was exiled. Domitian had actually designated their two young sons as his heirs. We do not know what happened to the two young boys – they have disappeared from history.
 - Seutonius described Clemens as a man of **disgraceful idleness** and this is sometimes understood as a reference to his **social withdrawal** due to his Jewish or, possibly, Christian faith.
 - The charges of **atheism and Jewish customs** were **appropriate for Christians**.
 - Domitilla's name is associated with a **Christian cemetery** outside Rome. At the so-called Cemetery of Domitilla there is inscriptional evidence that the land beneath which this burying-place was hollowed out belonged originally to Flavia Domitilla and her family. Although it is suggested that this was a mid-second century ascription and Domitilla had originally had the land for the benefit of her freedmen

Evidence to suggest that Domitian did not specifically persecute the Church

- **Dio Cassius** was writing from Bithynia, a province with a strong Christian presence, yet he **does not specifically identify the named victims of Domitian as Christians**.
- The early Christian letter, **1 Clement**, was written around the same time as Domitian's apparent persecution. It does refer to the sudden and repeated

calamities that have befallen the Roman church, but it **provides no details.**

- **Pliny was a lawyer in Rome** at the time and yet informs the emperor Trajan seventeen years later that he had **never taken part in the trial of Christians.**

- Domitian did take repressive measures against the Jews – he taxed them severely, increased the penalties for proselytization, and was on guard against a fresh Jewish rebellion.

- **F.F. Bruce – ‘this action of Domitian was really part of his general proceedings against people of a senatorial rank whom he suspected of conspiring against him.’**

Domitian’s steward, Stephanus, killed him in **AD 96**. The next emperor was an elderly statesman named **Nerva**. His short reign of two years was marked by the reversal of several of Domitian’s tyrannical measures. His acts included Domitilla’s release from the island of Pandateria.

2 Conflicts with the Greco-Roman and Jewish Worlds in the Second Century

16 The Christians in Bithynia; Pliny's Dilemma,

c. 112

Pliny, *Ep.* x.96

Pliny was sent to Bithynia, instead of the usual Senatorial governor, c. 112 by Trajan to reorganize the affairs of the province, particularly those of the self-governing cities, which had fallen into a deplorable state through the mismanagement of 'local authorities'. The extant correspondence between him and the emperor shows Pliny to be 'upright and conscientious, but irresolute, pedantic, and totally unable to think and act for himself in any unusual circumstances' (Mackail, *Latin Literature*, p. 225). The Christians were one of the unusual circumstances.

1 It is my custom, lord emperor, to refer to you all questions whereof I
am in doubt. Who can better guide me when I am at a stand, or
enlighten me if I am in ignorance? In investigations of Christians I
have never taken part; hence I do not know what is the crime usually
2 punished or investigated, or what allowances are made. So I have had
no little uncertainty whether there is any distinction of age, or whether
the very weakest offenders are treated exactly like the stronger;
whether pardon is given to those who repent, or whether a man who
has once been a Christian gains nothing by having ceased to be such;
whether punishment attaches to the mere name apart from secret
crimes, or to the secret crimes connected with the name. Meantime
3 this is the course I have taken with those who were accused before me
as Christians. I asked them whether they were Christians, and if they
confessed, I asked them a second and third time with threats of
punishment. If they kept to it, I ordered them for execution; for I
held no question that whatever it was that they admitted, in any case
4 obstinacy and unbending perversity deserve to be punished. There
were others of the like insanity; but as these were Roman citizens, I
noted them down to be sent to Rome.

5 Before long, as is often the case, the mere fact that the charge was
taken notice of made it commoner, and several distinct cases arose. An
unsigned paper was presented, which gave the names of many. As for
those who said that they neither were nor ever had been Christians, I
thought it right to let them go, since they recited a prayer to the gods
at my dictation, made supplication with incense and wine to your
statue, which I had ordered to be brought into court for the pur-

pose together with the images of the gods, and moreover cursed
Christ—things which (so it is said) those who are really Christians
6 cannot be made to do. Others who were named by the informer said
that they were Christians and then denied it, explaining that they had
been, but had ceased to be such, some three years ago, some a good
many years, and a few even twenty. All these too both worshipped
your statue and the images of the gods, and cursed Christ.

7 They maintained, however, that the amount of their fault or error
had been this, that it was their habit on a fixed day to assemble before
daylight and recite by turns a form of words to Christ as a god; and
that they bound themselves with an oath, not for any crime, but not to
commit theft or robbery or adultery, not to break their word, and not
to deny a deposit when demanded. After this was done, their custom
was to depart, and to meet again to take food, but ordinary and harm-
less food; and even this (they said) they had given up doing after
the issue of my edict, by which in accordance with your commands
8 I had forbidden the existence of clubs. On this I considered it the
more necessary to find out from two maid-servants who were called
deaconesses, and that by torments, how far this was true: but I dis-
covered nothing else than a perverse and extravagant superstition.
9 I therefore adjourned the case and hastened to consult you. The
matter seemed to me worth deliberation, especially on account of the
number of those in danger; for many of all ages and every rank, and
also of both sexes are brought into present or future danger. The
contagion of that superstition has penetrated not the cities only, but
the villages and country; yet it seems possible to stop it and set it
10 right. At any rate it is certain enough that the almost deserted temples
begin to be resorted to, that long disused ceremonies of religion are
restored, and that fodder for victims finds a market, whereas buyers
till now were very few. From this it may easily be supposed, what a
multitude of men can be reclaimed, if there be a place of repentance.
(H. M. Gwatkin, *Selections from Early Christian Writers*, pp. 27–31,
altered.)

We have no information about the early propagation of Christianity in Bithynia. The province is included in the list in 1 Pet. 1.1.

Notwithstanding Pliny's diffidence, he knew quite well what to do with Christians, i.e. have them executed. As time went on however, being 'upright and conscientious', he naturally felt doubts because some of those accused must have appeared such unlikely people to be guilty of something wicked, or of the 'crimes attached to the name'. But he had already condemned those who were obstinate Christians.

3. *I asked them a second and third time...* 'Roman law did not accept a single confession of a prisoner as proof of guilt, unless the confession was supported by external proof, but required the confession to be repeated.' (Pritchard and Bernard, *Pliny's Selected Letters*, ad loc. See also, A. N. Sherwin White, *The Letters of Pliny: a historical and social commentary* (OUP 1966), pp. 691–712.)

obstinacy and unbending perversity: 'The feature of Christianity which Pliny here points out as his personal reason for punishing, was exactly the point which, as Christianity grew, made it seem politically dangerous to the authority of the empire...' (E. G. Hardy, *Pliny's Correspondence with Trajan*, ad. loc.), cf. 108.

7. The information given by the apostates shows that the Christians met regularly on two separate occasions:

(1) *before daylight*: the meetings had got to take place before work started for the day, or after it had ceased. The first meeting mentioned was for worship: 'to recite a form of words' (*carmen dicere*) may mean 'to sing a hymn'.

they bound themselves with an oath (sacramentum). Pliny understands the apostates thus. The same idea is found in Celsus (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1.1).

(2) Later, probably in the evening, for the *Agape*, now distinct from the Eucharist, which was no longer taken at a meal time. (Pritchard and Bernard, op. cit., ad loc.). From the apostates Pliny discovered that reports of cannibalism among Christians were unfounded.

Some of Pliny's informants must have apostasized within the period of his governorship, or else they must have remained in close touch with the Christians, as they knew that the Christians, to avert suspicion from themselves, had given up their *Agape*.

clubs (hetaeriae (Greek) or collegia (Latin)). 'The right of voluntary association for some purpose of common interest not inconsistent with good citizenship was freely recognized in the Roman realm. Such organizations might be for business, social, charitable, or religious purposes' (Merrill, *Essays in Early Christian History*, p. 52f.). Some *collegia* were *licita*, i.e. authorized, they had received official sanction; most were *illicita*, unauthorized. That does not mean 'prohibited', but it does mean that action might be taken against them if they proved centres of political disaffection as happened on various occasions in Roman history (Hardy, op. cit., ad loc.). Other correspondence of Pliny and Trajan shows that the *collegia* had a bad reputation in Bithynia, and were probably in no small degree responsible for the rotten condition of the province. (*Epp.* xxxii and xxxiii, xcii and xciii. See Sherwin White, ad loc.).

Many have thought that the Christians were punished for being a *collegium illicitum*; this idea may cover part of the truth, but quite clearly it was not for this reason that Pliny condemned Christians.

8. *deaconesses (Ministrae)*, cf. Rom. 16.1.

10. *fodder for victims*: 'the farmers who brought into the various markets food for the temple victims were in danger of being ruined' (Hardy, op. cit., ad loc.); cf. Acts 19.23ff. for another instance of Christianity being bad for business. But G. E. M. de Ste Croix in *Past and Present*, No. 27, 1964, translates, 'the flesh of the sacred victims' finds etc., which makes excellent sense.

17 Trajan's Reply to Pliny

Pliny, *Ep.* x.97

1 You have adopted the proper course, my dear Secundus, in your examination of the cases of those who were accused to you as Christians,

for indeed nothing can be laid down as a general ruling involving
2 something like a set form of procedure. They are not to be sought out; but if they are accused and convicted, they must be punished—yet on this condition, that whoso denies himself to be a Christian, and makes the fact plain by his action, that is, by worshipping our gods, shall obtain pardon on his repentance, however suspicious his past conduct may be. Papers, however, which are presented unsigned ought not to be admitted in any charge, for they are a very bad example and unworthy of our time. (Gwatkin, *Selections from Early Christian Writers*, p. 31, slightly altered.)

1. *Nothing can be laid down as a general rule...* Trajan used this policy in dealing with other matters (*Epp.* lxvi, cxiii).

2. *They are not to be sought out...* 'What a decision, how inevitably entangled! He says they must not be sought out, implying they are innocent; and he orders them to be punished, implying they are guilty. He spares them and rages against them, he pretends not to see and punishes.' (Tertullian, *Apology*, 2.8, Tr. T. R. Glover (Loeb Library).) Tertullian's conclusion is a natural one, but there was a great deal of sense in Trajan's decision. It avoided constant difficulties such as those with which Pliny had been faced, while retaining sanctions that could be imposed if necessary. The pardon granted to apostates shows that it was the 'name' that was attacked.

Trajan's decision, in so far as it released Christians from anonymous accusations, worked in their favour.

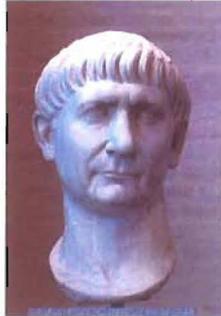
18 Rescript of Hadrian to Caius Minucius Fundanus, Proconsul of Asia, c. 125

From the original Latin as given by Rufinus, in his translation of Eusebius, *HE*, iv.9

1 I received the letter written to me by your predecessor, the most illustrious Serenius Granianus, and it is not my pleasure to pass by without inquiry the matter referred to me, lest both the innocent should be disturbed, and an opportunity for plunder afforded to
2 slanderous informers. Now, if our subjects of the Provinces are able to sustain by evidence this their petition against the Christians, so as to accuse them before a Court of Justice, I have no objection to their taking this course. But I do not allow them to use mere clamorous demands and outcries for this purpose. For it is much more equitable, if any one wishes to accuse them, for you to take cognizance of the
3 matters laid to their charge. If therefore any one accuses and proves that the aforesaid men do anything contrary to the laws, you will also determine their punishments in accordance with their offences. You

Trajan

AD 98 – AD 117



Trajan's reign was marked by a policy of **imperial expansion** – the frontiers of the empire were pushed beyond the Rhine, Danube and Euphrates.

In **AD 112** Trajan appointed the lawyer **Pliny as governor of Bithynia** (modern northern Turkey) – a province in north-west Asia Minor. Note -Pliny is usually known as **Pliny the Younger** to distinguish him from his famous uncle, who was a natural historian, of the same name.

Read the correspondence between Pliny, the governor of Bithynia, and the Emperor Trajan in A New Eusebius. Then answer the following questions:

1. **What sort of man was Pliny?** _____

2. **What was his problem?** _____

3. **Outline Pliny's procedure for investigating Christians.** _____

4. **Why did he think Christians deserved to be punished?** _____

5. **What happened to Roman citizens who were Christians?** _____

6. **What do these letters reveal about Christian practices?** _____

7. **What effect was the spread of Christianity having?** _____

8. **What surprises Pliny about Christian practices?** _____

9. **Summarize Trajan's reply.** _____

10. **What is Trajan anxious about?** _____

Through the correspondence that Pliny the Younger has left us, he reveals himself to be an **upright, conscientious and loyal** citizen, though completely unwilling or **unable to use his own initiative**. When any decision had to be taken in his province, he wrote to the Emperor to consult him. A good example of this is when Pliny thought it would be a good idea to organize fire brigades. Before taking any decisive action he consulted Trajan. Trajan instructed that each householder should be responsible for fire-fighting, as the trouble with fire brigades or any organisation is that it would inevitably deteriorate into a political club with subversive aims.

The **suspicion of clubs** or secret societies – *collegia* – was not something new. It helps to explain the objections that Trajan felt towards Christianity. As Christianity was not a legal religion it could not legally hold meetings. It was also deemed an unlicensed *collegia*. One form of *collegium* was commonly permitted – a burial club. Christians found it best to organize their communities in such a way to enjoy the freedom which friendly societies of this particular kind enjoyed in law. In practical terms, this meant meeting together at the catacombs.

As governor, Pliny had the sole right to sentence inhabitants of the province to death, although if they were Roman citizens they had the right to appeal to the Emperor. At the beginning of his time in office **he ordered the execution** of several Christians who refused to renounce their faith. He soon realized that there were so many of them in Bithynia he should write to the Emperor for a ruling on the matter.

The correspondence provides us with valuable insights not only into the **Roman treatment of early Christians** but also into **Church life and growth in early second century Bithynia**.

Pliny's letter begins with the admission of his **uncertainty about how to deal with Christians** since he has no personal experience of investigating them. This gives evidence to the **sporadic** nature of persecution throughout the empire in this period. Pliny had previously been a lawyer in Rome for ten years, yet had never experienced a Christian trial.

Pliny is **unsure if the name Christian in itself is punishable**, or just the crimes associated with it – 'whether the very profession of the name is to be punished, or only the criminal practices which go along with the name.' Pliny here also seems to be making reference to some of the popular pagan **misunderstandings or slanders** against Christians.

Pliny is also unsure if **allowance should be made** for age, or if Christians who deny their faith or former Christians should escape punishment. Pliny's confusion allows us to see that **there was no clear imperial policy regarding the treatment of Christians.**

Pliny tells the Emperor **how he has been dealing with Christians.** He has asked accused Christians if they were Christians. 'I have asked the accused if they were Christians; if they said 'Yes' I asked them a second and a third time, warning them of the penalty; if they persisted I ordered them to be led off to execution.' Pliny justified their execution by reasoning that **their stubbornness alone deserved punishment.** Most likely their refusal to comply with a Roman governor appeared to support suspicions of sedition.

Pliny had to face further trouble in the form of **anonymous letters** accusing people of being Christians. It is possible that these were vicious letters written by people with grievances. However Pliny still had to deal with the accusations. Pliny released those who denied they had ever been Christians, proving this by repeating a prayer to the gods at Pliny's dictation, by showing reverence to the emperor's statue with incense and wine, together with the image of the gods, and by cursing Christ – 'I am informed that people who are really Christians cannot possibly be made do any of those things.' Others

said they had been Christians, but had disowned the faith some years earlier. These also proved their innocence by worshipping the emperor's statue and the images of the gods, and by cursing Christ.

The information that those questioned by Pliny provided allows us an insight into the worship and fellowship of the church in Bithynia:

- **'they were in the habit of meeting on a certain day before sunrise'** - probably a Sunday (see Acts 20:7)
- **'reciting an antiphonal hymn to Christ as God'** – they offered divine worship to Christ, perhaps a hymn or a responsorial psalm.
- **'binding themselves with an oath** – not to commit any crime, but to abstain from all acts of theft, robbery and adultery, from breaches of faith, from denying trust when called upon to honour it.'
- **'it was their custom to separate, and then to meet to partake of food, but food of an ordinary and innocent kind'** – after the early morning meeting the Christians would depart and then re-assemble to take food. Pliny highlights that it was 'ordinary' food – the pagan rumours of cannibalism were untrue. This meal is probably a reference to the agape or non-eucharistic fellowship meal observed by early believers. However, 'even this, they said, they had given up doing since the publication of my edict in which, according to your instructions, I had placed a ban on private associations.'

Pliny was not convinced that he was getting the real truth and so **tortured two female servants called 'deacons' (deaconesses)**. This is the final reference to female deacons until the fourth century. What he found was **'nothing more than a perverse superstition'** rather than a conspiracy. Pliny then deferred further inquiry until he had consulted the emperor for a ruling.

Pliny concluded his letter with some comments and observations on the growth and impact of Christianity in the region. Many of all ages and classes, male and female, city-dwellers and those from the countryside had been affected by Christianity. Pagan temples had been left almost deserted, religious rites had been neglected and there were few buyers of sacrificial animals. **The Church had grown enough to impact on the social and**

economic life in province. However, Pliny informs Trajan that his own actions have reversed this trend.

Trajan's reply

Trajan's very brief reply **commends Pliny for the procedure he has followed.** Trajan admits that there is **no imperial policy** with regards Christians – 'no general decision can be made by which a set form of dealing with them could be established.'

Trajan **does not want a witch-hunt** as his **primary concern is maintaining the peace** – 'They must not be ferreted out'. Yet **those who are convicted of being Christians are to be punished.** This is a contradictory and **expedient** response. **Tertullian's** criticism of this policy is well known – it is confused because it implies that they are both innocent and guilty. However **J. Stevenson** regards Trajan's attitude as a sensible and pragmatic decision, avoiding groundless accusations on the one hand, but retaining sanctions if necessary on the other.

It is the name of being a Christian that is the crime – 'anyone who denies that he is a Christian and gives practical proof of that by invoking the gods is to win indulgence by this repudiation, no matter what grounds for suspicion may have existed against him in the past.'

Unsigned papers were to be ignored – 'they are a very bad precedent and quite unworthy of the age in which we live.'

Famous Martyrs

Name: Ignatius of Antioch (Syria)

Martyrdom: Arrested in Syria and taken to Rome to be martyred (circa AD 107 -110), possibly as part of a quota of victims for the Roman circus.

Source of information: He wrote to the Roman church, telling them of the harsh treatment he was enduring at the hands of his military escort. He urged them not to prevent his martyrdom. Ignatius welcomed a violent death that he might become a true disciple of Christ.

Influence: His enthusiasm for martyrdom was an important influence on the development of the martyr cult in the early Church.

Important analysis: His letters demonstrate that Roman persecution of Christianity was not a constant threat for the churches that he wrote to, which were mostly in Asia Minor.

Marcus Aurelius

AD 161 – AD 180



Why did Marcus Aurelius persecute the Christians?

- He had been **tutored by Marcus Cornelius Fronto**, who was an opponent of Christianity. During the first decade of the emperor's reign Fronto delivered an anti-Christian speech containing the popular accusations of infanticide and incest.
- Aurelius was a **keen student of Stoic philosophy** and so was ideologically opposed to Christianity and criticised, for example, Christians' eager readiness to die for their faith.

Under Aurelius the administrative procedures by which a Christian could be accused were apparently eased to make it worthwhile for informers to denounce them. It also seems that the Christians had finally taken over from the Jews the unenviable role of public enemies of the state.

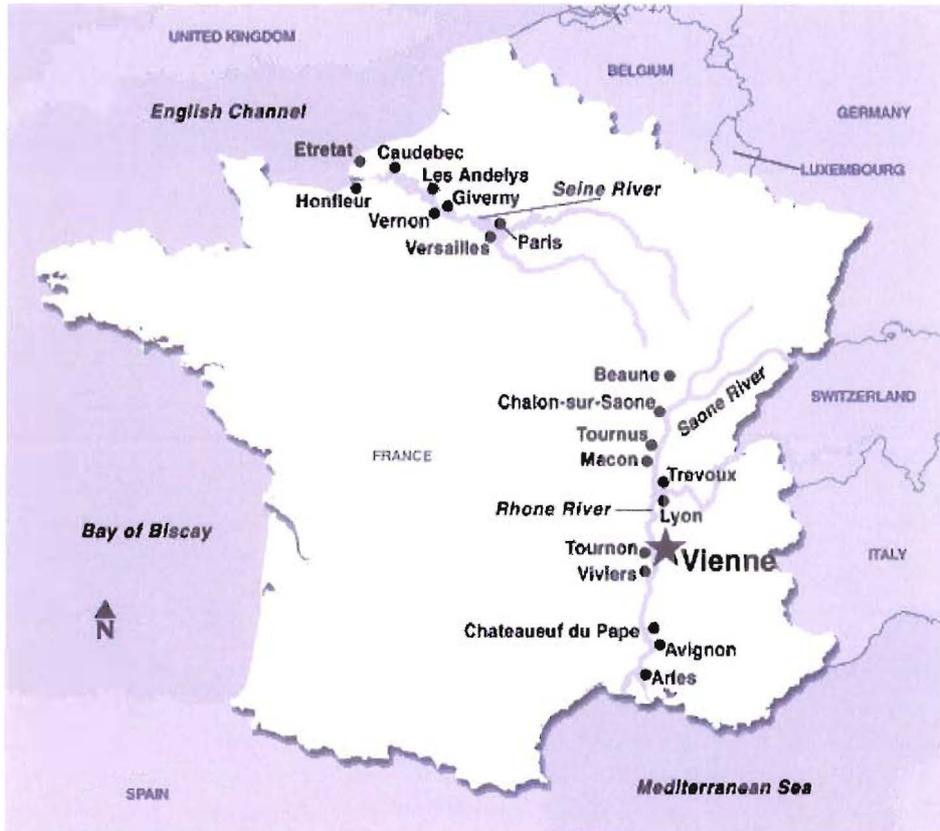
Martyrdoms during the reign of Marcus Aurelius

The martyrdom of **Polycarp**, bishop of Smyrna, is placed within the reign of Marcus Aurelius by Eusebius and some modern scholars. However some others accept the earlier date of AD 155/6.

The martyrdoms of **Justin Martyr** and his companions took place in Rome in AD 165.

Read p83-86 in Banks and then complete the following information:

The martyrs of Lyons and Vienne – AD 177



Where were they put to death? _____

What source of information do we have? _____

How were Christians being treated in the region?

Blandina was one of the martyrs of Lyons and Vienne. Accompanying her was a fifteen year old boy called **Ponticus** who was encouraged by his sister to endure the tortures before he died refusing to swear by the gods.

Pothinus, bishop of Lyons, although in his nineties endured terrible beatings to avenge the gods and died two days later in prison.

The letter mentions that **some martyrs pardoned those who were not martyrs**. This practice caused many difficulties after the Decian persecution of the next century.

When the governor realised that some of his prisoners were Roman citizens he then sought the emperor's advice. Similar to Trajan's reply to Pliny, Marcus Aurelius told the governor that _____

Note: Before this the governor had imprisoned even those who had denied the faith because of the alleged crimes associated with it.

How many Christians lost their lives in the persecution at Lyons and Vienne?

The Martyrs of Scilli, North Africa – AD 180

Where were they martyred? _____

How many martyrs were there? _____

What source of information do we have? _____

Outline the conversation between the Christians' spokesperson Speratus and the governor...

Failure to comply with Roman religion and its reverence for the emperor was regarded as political treachery. Adding to this was Speratus' comments about not recognising the empire of this age. Early Christians did pay their taxes and respect the Emperor, but they could not take part in idolatry.

PERSECUTION



PERSECUTIONS

The development of persecutions can be divided into two epochs (periods):

1. Persecutions in the first two centuries
2. Persecutions in the third and early fourth centuries.

Persecution in the First and Second Centuries

- Sporadic
- Localised
- Often spontaneous
- Not necessarily of Roman origin
- Emperor's attitude not always important
- Persecution by local authorities
- Intermittent
- On an ad-hoc basis
- Brief
- Limited in extent

Persecution in the Third and early Fourth Centuries

- Empire-wide
- Directed from the centre of government
- Deliberate government policy
- Emperors more active
- Planned and co-ordinated
- Persecutions by imperial edict
- Systematic

Why were the Christians persecuted?

- A different, distinctive minority.
- An exclusive religion – denied the validity of all other religions & prevented Christians from participating in many features of pagan society.
- Accused of being atheists – because they did not have any temples or statues, nor offer sacrifices, pagans assumed they had no gods.
- Provoked the wrath of the gods – Tertullian: *'If the Tiber reaches the walls. If the Nile does not reach to the fields [...] If there is a famine, if there is a plague, the cry is at once the Christians to the lion.'*
- 'Haters of mankind'.

- Anti-social - would not attend public spectacles in the theatre nor send their children to local schools, conversions broke up families.
- Misrepresentation – the 'secret rites' of Christians, e.g. the 'love feast' and 'eating of Christ's flesh and blood', were misunderstood and feared – suspected of cannibalism, orgies, incest etc.
- Economic reasons – impacted on sale of sacrificial food (e.g. Bithynia), wouldn't work as a silversmith etc.
- Religious competition – Christianity was winning people away from other religions which had a history; jealousy of the pagan priesthood.
- Church organisation feared – as time went on the church became organised, with its own officials and leaders, thereby bringing it under suspicion as dangerous to the State – 'Soldiers of Christ'.
- Disloyalty - many Christians refused service in the army, government, etc.

JEWISH PERSECUTIONS

- The initial persecutions were at the hands of the Jews.
- Shortly after Pentecost Peter and John were arrested and imprisoned.
- The stoning of Stephen (Acts 7).
- Renwick: *'Probably one of the worst Jewish persecutions was that which followed on the death of Stephen who was the first Christian martyr'*.
- The Jewish War AD66–AD70.
- AD70 – Christians separate from the synagogue. Link to Judaism no longer offered protection from the Romans.

The Neronian Persecution

- Nero reigned AD54–AD68.
- At the beginning of the reign Christianity was still viewed by the Romans as another faction within Judaism (a *religio licita*).
- Attitudes to the Christians changed. Rumours of cannibalism, etc.
- In July AD64 a fire destroyed large parts of Rome – of the 14 regions of Rome only 4 untouched by the fire.
- Is uncertain who or what caused the fire – whether accident or arson.
- The Roman writers Pliny the Elder, Suetonius and Dio Cassius favour Nero as the arsonist, so he could build a palatial complex. Nero looking for a scapegoat blamed the Christians.
- Tacitus (writing 50 years after the fire), mentions rumours of Nero's involvement, but maintains that the origins of the fire were uncertain.

- Tacitus in his *Annals* describes the tortures inflicted on the Christians: Nero *'inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. [...] Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who confessed [to being Christians? Arsonists?]; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of arson, as of hatred of the human race. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames'*.
- Martyrdoms of Peter (crucified) and Paul (beheaded) were attributed to these persecutions.
- **BUT** was an isolated outburst confined to the city of Rome and limited in duration.

Domitian



- Reigned AD81–AD96.
- Domitian sought to promote the Imperial cult and was the first emperor to have himself officially entitled in Rome as 'God the Lord'.
- Jews were persecuted and, according to many historians, so were Christians towards the end of the reign (i.e., brief persecution of Christians, AD95, charged with atheism and Jewish customs).
- The Book of Revelation is thought by many scholars to have been written during the reign.
- Dio Cassius: Flavius Clemens, a cousin of the emperor was martyred, and his wife, Flavia Domitilla, exiled to the island of Pandateria (Now Ventotene – off the coast of Campania, Italy).
- Apostle John exiled to the Isle of Patmos (a small Greek island in the Aegean Sea).

Trajan



- Emperor AD98–AD117.
- Pliny the Younger was governor of Bithynia.
- Pliny faced with a situation where the size of the Christian community was affecting local religions and local business.
- He was unsure how to deal with the problem so he referred the matter to Trajan, c.112.

From Pliny's letter we learn:

- Christians were accused of crimes associated with their name, e.g. cannibalism.
- Christianity no more than a *'perverse and extravagant superstition'* – investigations revealed no firm evidence of any crimes.
- Pliny did not regard Christianity as a religion – no history/ancestry.
- He viewed Christians as an obstinate group.
- How he dealt with the Christians was laid out – offered chance to recant. If they did were released; if they refused they were killed.

From Trajan's reply we learn:

- Reply is brief, expedient and vague.
- They are not to be sought out but if accused they must be convicted and punished.
- Tertullian: '*What a decision so inevitably tangled!*'
- It is the profession of being a 'Christian' that is the crime, not the crimes associated with the name.
- Anonymous accusations were to be ignored.
- Didn't want to create a situation where public order would be upset.
- Christians persecuted as distinct from the Jews.

- Hadrian (117–138) and Antoninus (138–161) adopted Trajan's expedient policy, i.e. accusations against Christians must be judicially investigated.



Hadrian



Antoninus

Marcus Aurelius

Emperor, AD161–AD180.

Notable persecution incidents during his reign were:

1. In Rome – martyrdom of Justin & companions, AD165.
2. At Lyons (and nearby Vienne), AD177.



Marcus Aurelius

The Martyrs of Lyons, AD 177

- Source: A letter preserved in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*.
- (Lyons was the capital of Gaul).
- The persecution began unofficially: Christians banned from all public places in the area, AD177.
- Whilst the provincial governor was away the mob broke loose, hounded out Christians and put them in prison to await the governors return.
- A public trial was ordered.

- The emperor, Marcus Aurelius was informed but his reply was essentially a continuation of Trajan's policy – those who persisted in confessing were to be executed, whilst those who recanted were to be freed.
- Among the martyrs were Blandina, a Christian slave girl, and the bishop of Lyons (his successor was Irenaeus).



Amphitheatre des Trois-Gaules, in Lyon. The pole in the arena is a memorial to the people killed during this persecution

The Edict of Septimius Severus, AD 202

- The edict of 202 forbade conversion to either Judaism or Christianity.
- Burnings and beheadings occurred at Alexandria and Carthage, etc.
- Focus appears to have been on Egypt and Africa (though that may well be due to survival of documentation).
- Recorded victims were mainly converts, e.g. Perpetua, a young noble woman, and the servant-girl Felicitas in Carthage, students in Alexandria, and also Leonides (the father of Origen).
- Afterwards, Christians were free from persecution for over four decades (with a brief exception under Maximin, 235–38).



Septimius Severus, emperor. AD193–AD211

Extra Resource:

Did the Christians play a full part in Roman society?

Yes:

- The Christians did not try to overthrow Roman society, for example – they made no attempt to end the practice of slavery.
- Early Christians had jobs within their communities. They only withdrew from activities which came in to conflict with their faith.
- Christians helped Roman society by helping those in need. Evidence: Eusebius tells of how the Roman Church was supporting 1,500 widows and orphans in AD250.
- The early Christians followed Roman civil law in their personal lives and actually went beyond the laws in terms of morality. For example, the early Christians did not agree with abortion or killing unwanted babies. Chadwick says, 'A new concept of the sanctity of human life had entered the world.'
- Christians were to be found in all parts of society. Evidence: Perpetua and Felicitas
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

No:

- Christians refused to take an oath to the emperor as 'Lord' – this was viewed as treason.
- Christians would not sacrifice or honour the gods of the Empire. This was viewed as disloyal and as bringing down the wrath of the gods on the Empire.
- Early Christians would not take part in public spectacles ('amusements'), as these were viewed as being immoral.

- Many Christians would not send their children to public schools as they taught the pagan religion.
- Wand says that in the beginning, Christians had a 'definite attitude of separation'.
- Christians were not allowed to marry pagans
- Many Romans accused the Christians of treating slaves as equals – they thought this undermined the social structure.
- Christians were accused of being 'imperium in imperio' – a little empire within the Empire.
- Many Romans misunderstood Christian customs and accused them wrongly of cannibalism, incest etc. These practices caused mistrust, separation and belief that Christianity was undermining Roman society.

- _____

- _____

- _____
