

Christian Persecutions in the First Three Centuries

In general, the Roman Empire was tolerant of religious differences. They did not demand any certain belief system. There were no creeds. Citizens were allowed to worship the gods of their choosing. However, the Empire did require that the gods of the Empire and at times the Emperor himself be given due homage. The logic was that the gods had given the Empire military victories for centuries and not to honor them would put the Empire at risk, it was an act of treason. To pay honor to the gods was like taking an oath of allegiance to the State. The honor due was a small sacrificial offering or, at a minimum, at least some incense at the shrine or statue of the god.

The Jews had been given special dispensations from these requirements and in the early years after the death of Jesus, it was difficult to distinguish the Jews who followed Jesus from the Jews who did not follow Jesus. Later when the Jews who followed Jesus were expelled from the synagogues late in the first century, this was easier to determine. Once the distinction was clear in the minds of the Roman authorities, the offerings to the gods were required of those followers of Jesus, now called Christians. Not to make such offerings could be punished in various ways - confiscation of property, imprisonment and even death.

Bart D. Ehrman, Chairman of the Dept. of Religious Studies at the Univ. of North Carolina (Princeton Theological Seminary M.A.Div and PhD magna cum laude) outlines five “myths” about early Christian persecution in his lectures “From Jesus to Christianity”. These are:

Myth 1 - Christianity was an illegal religion in the empire, constantly opposed by the Roman emperors. In point of fact, it was never declared illegal by an emperor until the middle of the 3rd century (Decius 249-51). The emperors almost never were involved with Christian persecution.

Myth 2 - During the first three centuries, Christians were everywhere hunted down and martyred for their faith. In fact, in most times and places, Christianity was tolerated, just as other religions were.

Myth 3 - Christian had to go into hiding in the Roman catacombs to avoid detection. In fact, Christians did not have to go into hiding, and they certainly did not set up camp in the Roman catacombs.

Myth 4 - Many, many thousands of Christian died in the early persecutions. In fact, the number was probably in the hundreds.

Myth 5 - Christians were opposed because they worshipped Jesus as God, which was seen as a threat to the Roman belief that the emperor was god. In fact, there was no difficulty in worshipping Jesus as God. The problem was not who the Christian worshipped, but whom they refused to worship: the Roman gods and at times, the emperor.

We shall try to see if Ehrman's "myths" truly reflect the situation of the first three centuries. The following is a brief outline of the persecutions which have come down to us in various ancient texts (not all totally reliable):

Before Nero - In general, the Empire did not differentiate Christians from Jews in the time before Nero and thus granted them the same privileges as Jews. If anything, they were considered a sect within Judaism like these Essenes or the Pharisees. A few martyrdoms are recorded, but these were not instigated by Roman authorities. The Jewish establishment was involved in the martyrdom of James ca. 35 as recorded in Acts. Herod Agrippa I, a client of Rome, executed James the brother of John ca. 44. Paul confesses he set out to persecute Christians in Damascus. James, the brother of the Lord, was executed ca. 62 by Ananias the high priest. No persecutions by the Emperor are reported.

Nero (54-68) - The cruel persecution of Christians in Rome by Nero was not directly related to their religious beliefs. They were singled out as a scapegoat for Nero who is reported to have started a major fire in Rome to make way for his civic improvements. The fire had not touched the Jewish quarters and thus they could have been a natural scapegoat. However, the Jews comprised a sizable population in Rome and so the smaller sect of Christian Jews were targeted. Some say the Jews turned in the Christians and others say that Christians turned in other Christians. Both claims are no doubt true. In any event, the Christians became the scapegoat population. However, they were condemned for being arsonists, not for being Christians.

The persecution of Christians by Nero was terrible. Many were crucified, some were sewn in the skins of wild beasts then attacked by dogs and torn to pieces, women were tied to wild bulls and dragged to death. Others were covered with tar and burned on stakes to give light to Nero's garden. It also seems that Paul and Peter were executed during this time, ca. 64.

There is indirect historical evidence from Tertullian that Nero also set out legislation that the profession of Christianity was now illegal - *non licet esse Christianus* - not legal to be a Christian. This legislation is not mentioned again until the time of Domitian (81-96). It was accepted, but not always enforced by subsequent emperors.

After the persecution of Nero, Christians are seen as set apart from Jews. Perhaps because they met in secret, professed to eat the body and blood of the Lord, called each other brother and sister and gave each other the kiss of peace, they were accused of immorality - cannibalism, incest, infanticide, magic, etc. Because Jews had been excused from honoring the gods and Christians were seen simply as a Jewish sect, their failure to honor the gods had not been questioned. However, it soon became clear that they were not to be identified as Jews and thus their failure to honor the gods was seen in a new light - a crime against the empire. They were also condemned for their efforts to convert others to the immoral and unpatriotic ways. Most opposition came from the common people, not Roman officials. Roman officials were concerned with keeping the peace, not religious purity.

Vespasian (69-79) and Titus (79-81) There are no indications that Christians were attacked or persecuted in any way by these two emperors. During their reigns (12 years) the Church of Rome flourished and experienced a period of peace and tranquillity. In fact, many converts in Rome came from the highest circles of the imperial society. Flavius Sabinus, elder brother of Vespasian, became a Christian as did his son Flavius Clemens. Clemens' wife and two sons also converted and his wife donated land for a Christian cemetery in Rome that exists to this day.

Domitian (81-96) - In the year 95, Domitian levied a tax on the Jewish population and in determining who were circumcised Jews, his agents found many Christians. Based on the legislation of Nero, some persecutions ensued which involved banishments and perhaps some deaths. It seems that the persecutions spread to Bithynia, Asia Minor and Palestine.

Domitian was not too hostile to Christians. It was local authorities who took the initiative against Christians, often at the urging of the pagan populace. Domitian ordered that Christians were not to be sought out, but if found they could continue to practice their faith if they offered incense to the gods, if they refused they were to be punished, but rarely killed.

Nerva (96-98) - Under Nerva persecutions ended. His policy was opposite of Domitian. He did not concern himself about the religion of Christians and allowed some of Domitian's Christian exiles to return to their homes.

Trajan (98-117) - Trajan was known as one of the greatest of the Roman emperors. However, in 99 he passed a law forbidding unauthorized associations and in 112, he passed legislation condemning Christianity and its adherents. Trajan's action was partly in response to Pliny, his imperial legate in Bithynia, who was concerned about the growth of Christianity in the provinces. Pliny had received many complaints about the success of Christianity and he noted that many temples were almost empty. He was not a cruel man and his very moderation had infuriated the local populace, who had already killed some Christians on their own. Thus Pliny requested instructions from Trajan.

In reply, Trajan did not command that Christians be sought out and he did not allow anonymous denunciations, but if found they could choose to reject Christianity and be excused. If they refused, they were condemned. Thereupon, Pliny questioned many Christians hoping they would reject Christianity, but he reported to Trajan that he sent to death those who persisted in their "disobedience and their invincible obstinacy". Two famous martyrs, Simeon of Jerusalem and Ignatius of Antioch were victims.

Hadrian (117-138) - Hadrian supported the laws against Christians. However, he had an intense dislike for disorder. Popular sentiment against Christians was still fueled by such charges as ritual murders, bloody communions, sacred banquets culminating in orgies and magic. Christians still refused to pay homage to the Roman gods and many would refuse to join the army. Thus there were at times public riots against the Christians.

In these conditions, magistrates asked Hadrian for advice on how to respond. He responded that the law should be supported, but that public order should be established and that crimes against Christians must be proven. Those accusers who had lied must be punished. Christians were to be given the benefit of every doubt. During Hadrian's reign the Jewish revolt of Bar Kokhba took place. We have few details, but many Christians suffered persecution from Jews in Palestine, because they failed to join in the revolt.

Antonius (138-61) - Antonius also upheld the legislation against Christians, but took an even more benevolent attitude toward Christians. He forbade his legates and governors to give way to popular hatred against Christians and also forbade denunciations.

His orders were not always obeyed as events in Smyrna proved. Here, in 155, twelve Christians were denounced, condemned and thrown to the beasts. One recanted and only eleven perished. However, the crowd called for the 89 year old bishop, Polycarp. They had no real authority to do this, but he was dragged into the amphitheater and asked to denounce Christ. He refused and was burnt alive.

Other notables who were victims during the reign of Antonius were Mark, the bishop of Jerusalem, Popes Hyginus and Pius I, plus a priest known as Ptolemy with two laymen.

Marcus Aurelius (161-80) - Marcus Aurelius did not initiate any new laws against Christians, but he did publish a rescript to punish any new sects of any kind. While known as a philosopher, he had contempt for any sect, including Christians, that did not set store on intelligence. Christians were seen as superstitious.

The persecutions during the reign of Marcus Aurelius took place within the context of floods, famines and wars that were seen as a failure to give due honor to the gods. These catastrophes inflamed the local populations who still held Christians to be enemies of the gods, enemies of common morality and enemies of the Empire. Thus local mobs often forced the hands of reluctant local magistrates.

In 162 persecutions in Rome claimed the lives of St. Felicitas and seven other martyrs. In 165 Justin Martyr was brought before the Prefect of Rome. He was asked if he was a Christian, he replied that he was and this sentence followed: "Those who have refused to sacrifice to the gods and obey the orders of the Emperor are to be scourged and taken away to suffer the penalty of death, in conformity with the laws." There were other martyrs in Greece and Asia Minor.

In 177 Christians were tortured and condemned to death at Lyons and Vienne after several days of mob violence. Those who were Roman citizens were beheaded and the rest, some 45-50 others, were thrown to the beasts. Between 177 and 180 other martyrdoms were recorded in Rome, including that of St. Cecilia

Commodus - Under Commodus persecutions waned and finally came to an end. Commodus had a slave Marcia, who later became his wife. Marcia was a Christian by faith, although there was some question about her baptism. In any event, Marcia did

what she could to protect her Christian brethren. There were many other Christians in his court, including a freedman named Proxenes, who became Commodus' chamberlain. Surrounded by Christians in his court and family, Commodus established a peace, of sorts, between the empire and the Church. He offered pardons to Christians condemned for their religion, even those who had publicly refused to deny their faith.

Septimus Severus (193-211) - Persecutions were renewed, again at the local level, and directed at converts. There were many martyred in Carthage, including Perpetua and Felicitas. At Alexandria six students of Origen were put to death.

Alexander Severus (222-35) - Under this emperor persecutions subsided and the Church even began to own property. He established peace among all religions of the empire.

Maximinus Thrax (235-38) - There were no general persecutions, but Maximinus exiled Pope Pontian (230-35) to Sardinia in 235. At the same time he also exiled Hippolytus, a controversial theologian and antipope, who before his death was reconciled with the Christians in Rome.

Decius (249-51) - Decius was the first Roman emperor to institute an officially sponsored empire-wide persecution of atheists (this included Christians) whose failure to honor the gods was seen as the cause of the many troubles facing the empire. The reign of Decius, like that of Marcus Aurelius, was a time of civil turmoil and the threat of war. He encouraged his subjects to go to the temples and pray, many responded, but most Christians stayed away. Therefore, in 249 Decius issued an edict that commanded all citizens to offer worship to the gods.

According to the edict, Christians need not reject their faith in their own gods, but they must offer homage to the gods of Rome to save it from disaster. Decius also made Caesar worship universal, with only the Jews being exempt. Early in 250 he required all citizens to obtain a certificate (*libellus*) proving that they had made a sacrifice to the gods and burnt a pinch of incense saying "Caesar is Lord".

During that year the Bishops of Jerusalem and Antioch died in jail and the Bishops of Rome and Toulouse were put to death. The famous theologian, Origen, was tortured. Hundreds of others were sent to prison, some were beheaded and some burned alive. A few were given to the beasts. In 251 persecutions ended.

Valerian (253-60) - An extensive and perhaps the most vicious persecution of the first three centuries was initiated by Valerian in 257. Again the empire was under attack. Homage to the Roman gods was stressed to save the empire. Valerian published a rescript that read, in part, "all must conform to Roman ceremonies". Christian assemblies were publicly banned. During this persecution Pope Sixtus II was put to death with four of his deacons. In 259, Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, was beheaded. Fructuosus, bishop of Tarragona, and two deacons, Augurius and Eulogius, were burned alive at the stake.

Gallienus (261-68) - From the time of Gallienus until the persecution of Diocletian in

303 there was peace between the empire and the Christian community. It was a time of internal crisis and Gallienus did not want to alienate any of his subjects. In 260 he issued an Edict of Toleration permitting the practice of Christianity. All confiscated Christian property, wealth and cemeteries was to be restored. This Edict was no mere truce, but a real peace. Christianity had been publicly recognized and its property protected.

Claudius II (268-70) - There were reports of some local persecutions by mobs and local magistrates.

Aurelian (270-75) - Lactantius, St. Augustine and Orosius have accused Aurelian of being hostile to Christians, however, this is doubtful. In fact, he arbitrated a dispute between the Church of Antioch and the heretical Paul of Samosata and gave his judgment in favor of the Catholics who “were in communion with Rome”.

Probus (276-82)

Diocletian (284-305) - Diocletian revived and reorganized the Roman empire. The Christians in his empire had been living in peace for some thirty years. They built churches, met openly and were to be found throughout the government. The causes of the “Great Persecution” which began in 295 are unclear. Diocletian was not a religious fanatic, nor was he suspicious or cruel. He wished to maintain the unity of the empire and his reform measures and military success were going well. No need for a scapegoat.

The Christian historian Lactantius says that it was Galeus, a magistrate (Caesar) and military leader who reported disruptions in the army by Christians. Christians were also accused of disrupting divine powers in the reading of omens for the empire. Thus, in 303 Diocletian published an Edict banning Christian assemblies, calling for the demolition of Christian churches, the destruction of their sacred books, and that all public officials should recant their Christian religion. At this point there were no Christian martyrs.

Later, fires near the emperor’s palace were blamed on Christians. New edicts were ordered and a full scale persecution began to take place. It was the last and the worst of the persecutions. It lasted ten years. This time it was not the mobs who did the torture and killings, but the civil authorities. The persecutions were uneven throughout the provinces, but in many places they were brutal beyond words. In Italy we have the tradition of St. Sebastian, his body pierced by many arrows. St. Agnes was beheaded, Pope Marcellinus was killed and at Syracuse, St. Lucy was martyred. Christians were killed by the hundreds and even some villages were totally destroyed.

Diocletian abdicated in 305 and the persecutions ceased in the West, but in Egypt they continued until the Edict of Milan in 313.

Summary - As to the number of martyrdoms during these centuries, no one knows for sure. Most historians would agree that those actually thrown to the beasts were relatively few in number. But hundreds, if not thousands tasted death in other ways. Ehrman may be low in his estimate, but estimates in the many thousands may be too high.