



## The African Church in An Age of Persecution

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It is impossible to know for certain when Christianity first came to North Africa of how it became established there. It has been suggested that the first community was probably Greek speaking and comprised of transients and expatriates, but this is purely conjectural.(1) One thing that is certain, however, is that once Christianity arrived it spread throughout North Africa at an alarming rate and by the end of the second century a Latin Christian community was well established, with it the center in Carthage. If the accounts of the Scillitan martyrs of 180 A.D. are authentic—and there is no reason to suspect that they are not—no sooner had the Church begun to organize itself than it faced with the threat of persecution continued sporadically until the time of Constantine, martyrdom remained a distinctive feature of the African Church: Even during periods of relative calm, such as that one Tertullian lived through, the threat of persecution hung constantly over Christians, shaping their attitudes towards religious doctrines and practices in rather extreme ways. As Quasten points out, it is not accidental that the aphorism, “semen est sanquis Christianum” originated with an African. (2)

Since persecution was such a central feature of life for Christians in Carthage, it would seem appropriate, and perhaps even vital to the study at hand, to ask why the African church was persecuted with such zeal by the local authorities. Certainly, before we can assess Christian attitudes and responses toward this phenomenon, it is essential to understand the motivations behind those who initiated the policy in the first place. From the perspective of the Church, it often appeared as though persecution of Christians was a capricious affair, instigated by Roman authorities out of the pure whim of harassing a minority. Tertullian, for example, claims the reason for persecution had nothing to do with Christian belief or with Christian practices, as such; rather, Christians were condemned exclusively for “the crime of a name.” (3) The question that ultimately must be asked is whether this claim has any basis in reality.

It has been suggested that, in fact, the primary motive for persecution was indeed religious, stemming from a superstitious response of pagans towards what they perceived to be Christian atheism. In some cases it appears that local communities would use Christians as scape-goats for natural disasters, since it was believed that these occurrences were brought on by some insult to the gods. Christians who rejected the gods outright and refused to appease them by offering sacrifice seemed the logical instigators of these misfortunes. This would help to explain why a gesture of honor to the gods was all that was required of accursed Christians--a mere offering to help appease the wrath of an incensed deity. The problem with this explanation is that it seems to suggest that the pagan state religion that was so active in the later empire; the evidence we have from Pliny seems to indicate that this was far from being the case. (5) Nor does such an interpretation account for the fact that often in place of sacrifice to the Gods Christians were given the opportunity to offer sacrifices to the emperor. If the motive was primarily religious, it

seems doubtful that this substitution would have been as widely practiced as it was.

Another motive that is suggested is the frequent charge of gross immorality in Christian practices, raised by various pagan critics. Such charges stemmed from misperceptions that pagans had about the nature of certain Christian rituals that were often practiced in strict secrecy: Gatherings for agape services lead to the fabrication of nocturnal orgies and incestuous activities between Christian “brothers and sisters, while the consumption of the body of Christ in the eucharist gave rise to the idea that Christians engaged in cannibalism. The colorful description of Christian ritual described by Caecilius in the *Octavius* is probably a fairly accurate appraisal of the views that some pagans had of Christian practice in the third century:

(Christians) know one another by secret marks and insignia, and they love one another almost before they know one another. Everywhere also there is mingled among them a certain religion of lust, and they call on one another promiscuously brothers and sisters.... An infant covered over meal, that it may deceive the unwary, is placed before him who is about to be stained with their rites; this infant is slain by the young pupil, who has been urged on as if to harmless blows on the surface of the meal, with dark and secret wounds. Thirstily—o horror—they lick up its blood, eagerly dividing its limbs. By this victim they are pledged together; with their consciousness of wickedness, they are covenanted to mutual silence. Sacred rites as these are more foul than any sacrilege. (6)

Although charges such as these are described frequently in Christian literature, (7) we should be careful to see them in their original polemical context. Probably few, but the most ignorant pagans took these allegations seriously, while local magistrates and the Roman emperors themselves clearly didn’t believe it worthwhile to pursue the issue at all. (8) Tertullian, then appears to be correct when he claims that Christians were not persecuted for their beliefs or practices; but this does not automatically assume that there was no legitimate reason for the ill treatment for Christians at the hands of the Roman authorities.

In fact, the primary motivations for the persecution was far more subtle than the early Christians were capable of understanding or appreciating. They did not stem from religious or moral motives, fundamentally, but from the deeply ingrained awareness that the pagans had the precarious nature of government; they did not seek to eliminate Christians from the empire, but to accommodate them within the over-arching structure of imperial society. In short, the Roman authorities were motivated almost exclusively by political concerns—to secure the continued prosperity of the empire and of those nation within it insofar as they recognized the legitimate authority of Rome.

But what have these motivations to do with the persecution of Christians in the second and third centuries? On the surface Christians seemed to have made perfect subjects of the empire. Indeed Tertullian himself rejected the idea that Christians have any sort of contempt for worldly affairs or were motivated by a desire to escape from their societal responsibilities. How is it possible, he asks, his pagan audience, that Christians can be called apathetic in the affairs of life?

So we sojourn with you in the world, abjuring neither forum, nor shambles, nor bath, nor booth, nor workshop, nor inn, nor weekly market, nor any other place of commerce. We sail with you, flight with you, and till the ground with you; and in like manner we unite with you in your trafficking—even in the various arts we make public property of our works for your benefit. How is it that we seem useless in your ordinary

business...I am not able to understand. (9)

Furthermore, Tertullian claims that unlike their pagan counterparts Christians are scrupulously honest in their business dealings and in paying the taxes they owe to the state. It would seem, then, that on one level Christians should have been praised rather than condemned for their attitude toward civic duty. Why then did other groups in the empire, and the Roman government particularly, fail to notice what was so perfectly transparent to the Christians themselves?

The ultimate problem lies in the fact that an empire does not thrive because it is filled with compliant subjects but because it is filled with highly motivated citizens, all of whom are working to secure their own interests through their active support of and participation in the community at large. They eagerly contribute to the growth of commerce; they support their government political participation (or at least minimally through some political interest); and when their country is threatened, they rush to arms in order to defend it. Christians, on the other hand, while posing no threat to the empire contributed virtually nothing to aid in its continuing prosperity. As Carrington accurately points out, "If Christians made good subjects, they made bad citizens."(10)

In a fundamental way, the very attitude that was essential to becoming a good Christian—a rejection of worldly riches and fame as illusionary--was a threat to the stability of the empire in a more pernicious way than any revolutionary movement could ever have been, because it undermined the very foundations upon which the state rested. In order for any state to thrive, it must somehow appeal to the selfishness of its citizens: it was assure them that the machinery of the state is necessary to defend their corporate material interests. As soon as material goods are no longer perceived as valuable, the state, which exists to secure these ends, becomes endangered. And when life itself, or personal liberty, is no longer are viewed as being of paramount importance, then the state, for all practical purposes, becomes irrelevant. (11) For all the prayers for the emperor and their good-will towards the empire, Christians clearly placed their priorities elsewhere than on this world and the material rewards it had to offer them, and in doing so, unintentionally undermined the very *raison d'être* of the state. Then resounding message of the second and third centuries was that Christians, as mere guests in an inhospitable world, should not place too much importance in the benefits it offers :

Christians live in their own countries but only as guests and aliens. They take part in everything as citizens and endure everything as aliens. Every foreign nation is a homeland and every homeland is a foreign country to them...They live on earth but their citizen-ship is in heaven...In a word: what the soul is to the body, the Christians are in the world. As the soul lives in the body, ye does not have its origin in the body, so the Christians live in the world but are not of the world. (12)

Since Christians did not perceive themselves as being of the world, they cared little for the glories the state was able to provide for them; nor were they extremely interested in aiding the perpetuation of the empire by fighting in its army, engaging in public life or participating in consumptive practices. Such fanatical indifference to the worldly could not go long unpunished—especially given the rapid spread of Christianity in every corner of the empire—if the state was to survive for any length of time. This appears to be the ground of Celsus' criticism of the empire were to take an equally complacent attitude toward the well-being of the state, Celsus complains, "there would be nothing to prevent (the Emperor) being left in utter solitude and desertion, and the affairs of the earth would fall into the hand of the wildest and most law-

less barbarians.(13)

A related political motivation for persecution was based upon what Gibbon would describe as the stubborn obstinacy and inherent elitism of Christianity when confronted with the tolerance of Roman society. According to Gibbon, the stability of Rome was maintained essentially by a tolerant attitude towards the practices and traditions of various nations that made up the empire. Local nations could maintain their own religions provided they realized that this privilege was due exclusively to the benevolence of the Roman emperor. And attitude towards the practices and traditions of various nations that made up the empire. Local nations could maintain their own religions provided they realized that this privilege was due exclusively to the benevolence of the Roman emperor. An attitude of respect and reverence to the gods of the empire was, therefore, an implicit recognition of the power that held the empire together and allowed for tolerance in the first place. On the other hand, to reject the gods was, by implications, to reject the emperor as the unifying element of the empire. In Gibbon's opinion, Christians were an elitist group, which separated itself from the "communion of mankind" by refusing to adopt a flexible attitude towards the gods. (14) Indeed, from the Christian perspective, every form of worship except its own was impious and idolatrous and no self-respecting Christian would ever consent to offer sacrifice to any but the true God. In the eyes of pagan magistrates and governors, such a refusal could only be motivated by disloyalty to the empire and to the person of the emperor. Hence what was essentially a religious issue in the eyes of Christians was a question of loyalty and social unity to the pagans.

As H. Richard Niebuhr points out, a given society can allow for a plurality of values only insofar as these values are subordinated beneath the blanket of a higher value--the preservation of the social order itself. As soon as these lower values become a threat to the social order they can no longer be tolerated. (15) It was for this reason that the Roman state could never have maintained a laissez faire attitude towards Christianity the way it could with an infinite number of more compatible religions. However, although Christianity couldn't simply be ignored, it was not the intention or desire of the Roman government to eliminate it either. In general, the attitude of the state towards Christians was to attempt to "absorb Christ into the Establishment, as so many earlier gods had been absorbed, or at any rate, to state the terms on which peaceful co-existence could be considered." (16) That it failed miserably in this attempt has more to do with the intractability of Christians than with the general positive intentions of the Roman government.

One has only to examine the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan to realize that the motivation of the Roman government had nothing to do with eliminating Christianity, per se, but simply to ensure that Christians formally recognized the absolute authority of the Emperor. Not knowing what to do with the growing number of Christians arrested in Bithynia, Pliny wrote to the emperor asking his advice. Trajan, in reply, instructed him not to seek out Christians; but, if valid accusations were raised against them, they had either to offer sacrifice or to die: ". . . in the case of anyone who denies that he is a Christian, and makes it clear that he is not by offering prayers to our gods, he is to be pardoned as a result of his repentance however suspect his past conduct may be." (17) It seems clear from this letter--the first official statement of imperial policy towards the Christians that we have extent -- that a token gesture of sacrifice was enough to satisfy the government of a Christian's loyalty towards the state. As was pointed out above, "sacrifice for the well-being of the emperor" was often substituted for sacrifice to the gods (18) : in either case the attempt of the government seem to have been to provide an easy way for the Christians to demonstrate their good-will towards the state, in the hopes that ultimately they could be reclaimed for the empire.

Although Gibbon may me overly optimistic when he describes Roman magistrates as

“men of polished manners and liberal educations, who respected the rule of justice, and who were conversant with the precepts of philosophy,” (19) he is correct when he asserts that overall the attitude of these men was surprisingly tolerant in the face of the “inflexible obstinacy” of the Christian community. (20) One may well ask why Christian obdurately refused to engage in a token gesture to placate the patriotic sensibilities their pagan interrogators, if, as Tertullian claims, they indeed were loyal to the empire? The answer seem to be that neither the early Christians nor their pagan counterparts really understood what the other meant by sacrifice. How could a Christian, who viewed sacrifice essentially as an issue of idolatry—a sin punishable by eternal damnation—ever have been able to understand this act in a purely temporal and political context? Likewise, a pagan whose religion was intimately connected with his political loyalties and which was in essence idolatrous, could only have been perplexed by the Christian refusal to engage in a completely symbolic act. Christian refusal to engage in a completely symbolic act. Christian resistance, in this light, could only had been taken as a blatant proof of disloyalty, leading to an escalation of persecution and an even greater resolve on the part of Christians not to offer sacrifice.

An understanding of the vicious circle of confusion surrounding the act of sacrifice is essential in order to be able to grasp precisely what was at stake in the of times fanatical opposition that Christian of the second century had towards those who refused to confess their faith. The more pagans sought to test the loyalty of Christians by forcing them to sacrifice, the more Christians of Tertullian’s time began to view attempts to avoid persecution in general as an of infidelity of God. In an atmosphere of heightened tension and anxiety, it was not enough merely to follow the negative prohibition against idolatry; one now was compelled to positively demonstrate their devotion to the will of God by freely choosing to confess ones faith, not despite the consequences, but because of them. In extreme circles, such as those inspired by the teaching of Montanus, not to willing opt to undergo persecution ultimately became an indication itself of an idolatrous disposition. It was for this reason that the question of how one should respond to the threat of persecution became the paramount ethical issue of the African Church of the third century. Only when we begin to understand this fact can approach the writings of Tertullian with some degree clarity.

#### NOTES

1. Gerald Bray, *Holiness and the Will of God: Perspectives on the Theology of Tertullian* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1977) 39. There is also good reason to believe that the first community was established from Rome, because of the frequent trade between Rome and Carthage.

2. Johannes Quasten, *Pathology*. Vol. 2 (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1950) 245. See also: Timothy Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) 164.

3. “Nullum criminis nomen extat, nisi nomins crimen est.” In Ap. 40 he claims that Christians were irrationally chosen as scapegoats for persecution, suggesting once again that violence against the Church had nothing to do with Christian behavior as such.

4. This argument is advanced by Fox, 425-426.

5. In Epistle 10.16, in fact, Pliny clearly states that by the later second century the temples of the gods were being all but abandoned by the common folk.

6. Oct. 4.177.

7. Con.Cels, 4.40; see also: Tertullian, Ap. 7 and Nat. 1.8-18.

8. Trajan, for example, advises Pliny not to address the matter of immoral practices once a Confession has been gotten from Christian (Pliny, Ep. 10.96), suggesting that he knew onlt

too well the spurious nature of most of the charges--a view that is confirmed by Tertullian in Nat. 3. See also Edward Gibbons, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Vol. 2. (London: Metuuen, 1896) 93.

9. Ap. 42.

10. Philip Carrington, *Christian Apologists of the Second Century* (New York: MacMillan, 1921) 117.

11. For an interesting discussion of culture as the temporal and material realization of values, see: H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951) 36-39.

12. Diog. 5.6, for a more critical assessment of this attitude see Oct. 8.

13. Con. Cels. 8.

14. Gibbons, 72.

15. Niebuhr, 38.

16. E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christians in a Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge: University Press, 1968) 107.

17. Pliny Ep. 10.97. This edict, confirmed by Hadrian in 122, appears to represent the official policy of the Roman government until the Decian persecutions of 249. Only with Decian do we have the beginnings of a systematic attempt to exterminate Christianity.

18. See Pass. Perp. 2.2, for example.

19. Gibbon, 91.

20. Gibbon, 81. Christian authors themselves proudly describe the unyielding attitude of Christian martyrs before Roman tribunals. In Scap. 5, for example, Tertullian recounts a story about a group of would-be martyrs before the governor of Asia. In this case their pleas for death were responded to (quite humorously, I think) with a suggestion that they jump off the nearest cliff.

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