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4. Jerusalem: "The Blood of the Martyrs was the Seed of the Church"

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4. Jerusalem: "The Blood of the Martyrs was the Seed of the Church"

Abstract

Sooner or later the Christians were bound to collide with the Roman government. This collision came not primarily on religious grounds, for the Romans had long tolerated Eastern faiths, even in Rome. It came simply because they could not understand as anything but subversive or treasonous some of the practices of the early Christians: their refusal to worship (even the nominal worship which would have satisfied the government completely) either living or deceased emperors or other gods of the state; their strong bent to pacifism; their withdrawal from significant aspects of community life, such as games or festivals; and, perhaps most inexcusable from the authorities' point of view, their secret and legally unauthorized meetings, often at night, concerning which there were rumors of immoral and offensive proceedings. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Christianity, gospels, Jesus, New Testament, Christians, Rome

Disciplines

Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Classics | History of Christianity | Religion

Comments

This is a part of [Section I: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem: Background of Western Civilization](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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4. "The blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church"

Sooner or later the Christians were bound to collide with the Roman government. This collision came not primarily on religious grounds, for the Romans had long tolerated Eastern faiths, even in Rome. It came simply because they could not understand as anything but subversive or treasonous some of the practices of the early Christians: their refusal to worship (even the nominal worship which would have satisfied the government completely) either living or deceased emperors or other gods of the state; their strong bent to pacifism; their withdrawal from significant aspects of community life, such as games or festivals; and, perhaps most inexcusable from the authorities' point of view, their secret and legally unauthorized meetings, often at night, concerning which there were rumors of immoral and offensive proceedings.

And yet, it is not true to say that for more than two centuries the Roman government engaged in systematic persecution of Christians. For a part of that time the Roman government had not heard of these people and for a time it thought they were only a group of Jews and entitled to their special privileges. Not infrequently the government protected Christians against the threatened violence of Jews and others; Paul was rescued on several occasions from Jewish mobs. During most of the second and third centuries the official policy was to put Christians to death only when they were legally accused and convicted, and after they refused to recant their beliefs. And, although the Church had no legal right to exist, it was tacitly allowed to hold property.

There were sporadic persecutions carried out from time to time at the imperial level. The first was initiated by Emperor Nero in the city of Rome (64-65), probably motivated by his desire to find a convenient scapegoat for the great fire in the city which was blamed on him. Peter and Paul may have perished at this time. After a long period of intermittent hostility manifested at the local level of government by authorities who were in close contact with Christians and with anti-Christian sentiment, several third century emperors issued edicts aimed at general persecution and suppression. Some of these edicts attempted to ferret out individuals, others to round up leaders and confiscate church property. These efforts were made at a time when the empire was already in serious trouble and when it seemed necessary to oppose any force which appeared strong enough to threaten it. There were many Romans who saw in Christianity the antithesis of what they believed had made Rome great and in its victory the certain defeat of Rome. However, the campaigns of persecution were usually shortlived, since emperors were coming and going rapidly, and they were rarely enforced systematically.

Persecution was not universal and not continuous

At least externally, the fourth century was the great century of victory for Christianity. After about eight years of the most determined persecution yet, the emperor Galerius admitted failure by issuing on his deathbed the Edict of Toleration (311). This was confirmed by his successors in what is often called the Edict of Milan (313). The Christians -- as yet perhaps no more than ten per cent of the population of the empire -- now had the same rights to worship as were accorded the adherents of other religions. Not until 375 did a Roman emperor refuse the title of Pontifex Maximus, which carried with it the headship of the old state religion. In 392 Emperor Theodosius I declared Christianity to be the only recognized religion of the empire, at the same time proscribing paganism. This edict did not automatically eliminate paganism, but at least on paper the battle was over and won. The blood of the martyrs, goes the saying, was the seed of the Church. Although the martyrs were not as numerous as might be imagined, there had nevertheless been many. Martyrdom, if anything, promoted the solidarity of the Church. It demonstrated that the Church had a vigor which no emperor cult or no mystery religion possessed.

If a person can go through that for his church, or religion, he must have something.

[With the political victories of the fourth century there came a number of adjustments in the life of the Church. For one thing, the state was now on its side. Its vast power could be used to support rather than to suppress -- but it could also be used to interfere. The Church was now permitted legally to receive legacies from individuals and it began receiving gifts from the state. The state recognized the simple courts to which many disputes between Christians had been referred in the past. Clergymen were granted privileges which they had never before enjoyed, such as tax exemption. It was now possible for the Church to begin persecuting its opponents, both pagans and heretics, with the assistance of the secular authorities. The idea of toleration was one for which men were not yet ready. Finally, the political victories of the fourth century implied that the Church should enter the world to a much greater degree than it ever had before, opening the door to compromise, to secularization, and to those whose motives might be less than sincere.]

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"Life of the *Caesars*"