



2. Why did Rome persecute Christians?

1. Emperor Worship in Asia Minor:

2. How the Emperor Cult Affected Daily Life:

(1) Public Events:

(2) The Jewish Exception:

(3) The Christian Shift:

3. How Christians Responded to the Emperor Cult:

4. How the Romans Responded to Christians:

a. Rumors:

b. Persecution (see Hebrews 10:34; 12:4; 1 Peter 4:14, 16; 5:9):

(1) Example—The Martyrdom of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna (ca. A.D. 156):

[Polycarp] was met by Herod the chief of police and his father Nicetes, who after transferring him to their carriage sat beside him and tried persuasion. "What harm is there in saying 'Lord Caesar' and sacrificing? You will be safe then." At first he made no answer, but when they persisted he replied: "I have no intention of taking your advice." Persuasion having failed they turned to threats, and put him down so hurriedly that in leaving the carriage he scraped his shin. But without even looking round, as if nothing had happened, he set off happily and at a swinging pace for the stadium. There the noise was so deafening that many could not hear at all, but as Polycarp came into the arena a voice from heaven came to him: "Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man." No one saw the speaker, but many of our people heard the voice.

His introduction was followed by a tremendous roar as the news went round: "Polycarp has been arrested!" At length, when he stepped forward, he was asked by the proconsul if he really was Polycarp. When he said yes, the proconsul urged him to deny the charge [of being a Christian]. "Respect your years!" he exclaimed, adding similar appeals regularly made on such occasions: "Swear by Caesar's fortune; change your attitude; say: 'Away with the godless!'" But Polycarp, with his face set, looked at the crowd in the stadium and waved his hand towards them, sighed, looked up to heaven, and cried: "Away with the godless!" The governor pressed him further: "Swear, and I will set you free: execrate Christ." "For eighty-six years," replied Polycarp, "I have been His servant, and He has never done me wrong: how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"....

As he said this and much besides, he was filled with courage and joy, and his features were full of grace, so that not only did he not wilt in alarm at the things said to him, but on the contrary the proconsul was amazed, and sent the crier to stand in the middle of the arena and announce three times: "Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian." At this announcement the whole mass of Smyrnaeans, Gentiles and Jews alike, boiled with anger and shouted at the tops of their voices: "This fellow is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches numbers of people not to sacrifice or even worship"... Then a shout went up from every throat that Polycarp must be burnt alive....

The rest followed in less time than it takes to describe: the crowds rushed to collect logs and faggots from workshop and public baths, the Jews as usual joining in with more enthusiasm than anyone....

When [Polycarp] had offered up the Amen and completed his prayer the men in charge lit the fire and a great flame shot up....

Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, translated by G. A. Williamson (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965). The excerpt is taken from Book 14, Part 8, through Book 15, Part 40 (pp. 168-73).

(2) Example: The Correspondence of Pliny and Trajan (A.D. 111-112):

Pliny to the Emperor Trajan

It is my custom to refer all my difficulties to you, Sir, for no one is better able to resolve my doubts and to inform my ignorance.

I have never been present at an examination of Christians. Consequently, I do not know the nature or the extent of the punishments usually meted out to them, nor the grounds for starting an investigation and how far it should be pressed. Nor am I at all sure whether any distinction should be made between them on the grounds of age, or if young people and adults should be treated alike; whether a pardon ought to be granted to anyone retracting his beliefs, or if he has once professed Christianity, he shall gain nothing by renouncing it; and whether it is the mere name of Christian which is punishable, even if innocent of crime, or rather the crimes associated with the name.

For the moment this is the line I have taken with all persons brought before me on the charge of being Christians. I have asked them in person if they are Christians, and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution; for, whatever the

nature of their admission, I am convinced that their stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished. There have been others similarly fanatical who are Roman citizens. I have entered them on the list of persons to be sent to Rome for trial.

Now that I have begun to deal with this problem, as so often happens, the charges are becoming more widespread and increasing in variety. An anonymous pamphlet has been circulated which contains the names of a number of accused persons. Among these I considered that I should dismiss any who denied that they were or ever had been Christians when they had repeated after me a formula of invocation to the gods and had made offerings of wine and incense to your statue (which I had ordered to be brought into court for this purpose along with the images of the gods), and furthermore had reviled the name of Christ: none of which things, I understand, any genuine Christian can be induced to do.

Others, whose names were given to me by an informer, first admitted the charge and then denied it; they said that they had ceased to be Christians two or more years previously, and some of them even twenty years ago. They all did reverence to your statue and the images of the gods in the same way as the others, and reviled the name of Christ. They also declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honour of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery and adultery, to commit no breach of trust and not to deny a deposit when called upon to restore it. After this ceremony it had been their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of an ordinary, harmless kind; but they had in fact given up this practice since my edict, issued on your instructions, which banned all political societies. This made me decide it was all the more necessary to extract the truth by torture from two slave-women, whom they call deaconesses. I found nothing but a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths. I have therefore postponed any further examination and hastened to consult you. The question seems to me to be worthy of your consideration, especially in view of the number of persons endanger-ed; for a great many individuals of every age and class, both men and women, are being brought to trial, and this is likely to continue. It is not only the towns, but villages and rural districts too which are infected through contact with this wretched cult. I think though that it is still possible for it to be checked and directed to better ends, for there is no doubt that people have begun to throng the temples which had been almost entirely deserted for a long time; the sacred rites which had been allowed to lapse are being performed again, and flesh of sacrificial victims is on sale every-where, though up till recently scarcely anyone could be found to buy it. It is easy to infer from this that a great many people could be reformed if they were given an opportunity to repent.

(Pliny, "Letters and Panegyricus," Book X, Letter XCVI, in *PLINY: VOLUME II*, Loeb Classical Library Vol. 059, translated by Betty Radice, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969, pp. 284-291)

Trajan's Reply to Pliny

You have followed the right course of procedure, my dear Pliny, in your examination of the cases of persons charged with being Christians, for it is impossible to lay down a general rule to a fixed formula. These people must not be hunted out; if they are brought before you and the charge against them is proved, they must be punished, but 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. But pamphlets circulated anonymously must play no part in any accusation. They create the worst sort of precedent and are quite out of keeping with the spirit of our age.

(Pliny, “Letters and Panegyricus,” Book X, Letter XCVII, in PLINY: VOLUME II, Loeb Classical Library Vol. 059, translated by Betty Radice, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969, pp. 290-293)

Summary

C. Possible Christian Responses to Persecution:

1. _____
2. _____ (but see Revelation 21:8)
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____ (compare Matt 22:21; 1 Pet 2:17; 1 Cor 8:1-13; 10:14-11:1)
6. _____ (Rev 13:10)