

CHAPTER XVI

The Conduct of the Roman Government toward the Christians from the Reign of Nero to that of Constantine

Christianity Persecuted By the Roman Emperors; Their Motives

If we seriously consider the purity of the Christian religion, the sanctity of its moral precepts, and the innocent as well as austere lives of the greater number of those who, during the first ages, embraced the faith of the gospel, we should naturally suppose that so benevolent a doctrine would have been received with due reverence, even by the unbelieving world. The learned and the polite, however they might make fun of the miracles, would have esteemed the virtues of the new sect. Instead of persecuting them, the magistrates would have protected an order of men who yielded the most passive obedience to the laws, even though they declined the active cares of war and government. If on the other hand we recollect the universal toleration of Polytheism, as it was invariably maintained by the faith of the people, the incredulity of philosophers, and the policy of the Roman senate and emperors, we are at a loss to discover what new offence the Christians had committed. What new provocation could exasperate the mild indifference of antiquity? What new motives could urge the Roman princes, who beheld without concern a thousand forms of religion subsisting in peace under their gentle sway, to inflict a severe punishment on any part of their subjects, who had chosen for themselves a singular but an inoffensive mode of faith and worship.

The religious policy of the ancient world seems to have assumed a more stern and intolerant character to oppose the progress of Christianity. About 80 years after the death of Christ, his innocent disciples were punished with death by the sentence of a proconsul of the most amiable and philosophic character, and according to the laws of an emperor distinguished by the wisdom and justice of his general administration. The apologies which were repeatedly addressed to Trajan's successors are filled with the most pathetic complaints. They claimed that the Christians, who obeyed the dictates and solicited the liberty of conscience, were alone, among all the subjects of the Roman empire, excluded from the common benefits of their auspicious government. The deaths of a few eminent martyrs have been recorded with care; and from the time that Christianity was invested with the supreme power, the governors of the church have been no less diligently employed in displaying the cruelty than in imitating the conduct of their Pagan adversaries. The design of this chapter is to separate (if possible) a few authentic as well as interesting facts from an undigested mass of fiction and error. It will relate, in a clear and rational manner, the causes, extent, duration, and the most important circumstances of the persecutions to which the first Christians were exposed.

The sectaries of a persecuted religion, depressed by fear, animated with resentment, and perhaps heated by enthusiasm, are seldom in a proper temper of mind to calmly investigate, or candidly appreciate, the motives of their enemies, which often escape the impartial and discerning view even of those who are placed at a secure distance from the flames of persecution. A reason has been assigned for the conduct of the emperors toward the primitive Christians which may appear more specious and probable as it is drawn from the acknowledged genius of Polytheism. It has already been observed that the religious concord of the world was principally supported by the implicit assent and reverence which the nations of antiquity expressed for their respective traditions and ceremonies. It might therefore be expected that they

would unite with indignation against any sect or people which should separate itself from the communion of mankind, and, claiming the exclusive possession of divine knowledge, should disdain every form of worship except its own, as impious and idolatrous. The rights of toleration were held by mutual indulgence; they were justly forfeited by a refusal of the accustomed tribute. As the payment of this tribute was inflexibly refused by the Jews, and by them alone, the consideration of the treatment which they experienced from the Roman magistrates will serve to explain how far these speculations are justified by facts, and will lead us to discover the true causes of the persecution of Christianity.

Rebellious Spirit of the Jews

Without repeating what has been already mentioned of the reverence of the Roman princes and governors for the temple of Jerusalem, we shall only observe that the destruction of the temple and city was accompanied and followed by every circumstance that could exasperate the minds of the conquerors, and authorize religious persecution by the most specious arguments of political justice and the public safety. From the reign of Nero to that of Antoninus Pius, the Jews discovered a fierce impatience of the dominion of Rome, which repeatedly broke out in the most furious massacres and insurrections. Humanity is shocked at the recital of the horrid cruelties which they committed in the cities of Egypt, Cyprus and Cyrene, where they dwelt in treacherous friendship with the unsuspecting natives.¹ We are also tempted to applaud the severe retaliation which was exercised by the arms of the legions against a race of fanatics whose dire and credulous superstition seemed to render them the implacable enemies not only of the Roman government but of humankind.² The enthusiasm of the Jews was supported by the opinion that it was unlawful for them to pay taxes to an idolatrous master; and by the flattering promise which they derived from their ancient oracles, that a conquering Messiah would soon arise, destined to break their fetters and to invest the favorites of Heaven with the empire of the earth. It was by announcing himself as their long-expected deliverer, and by calling on all the descendants of Abraham to assert the hope of Israel, that the famous Barchochebas collected a formidable army, with which he resisted during two years the power of the emperor Hadrian.³

Toleration of the Jewish Religion

Notwithstanding these repeated provocations, the resentment of the Roman princes expired after the victory; nor were their apprehensions continued beyond the period of war and danger. By the general indulgence of Polytheism, and by the mild temper of Antoninus Pius, the Jews were restored to their ancient privileges, and once more obtained the permission of circumcising their children, with the easy restraint that they should never confer on any foreign proselyte that distinguishing mark of the Hebrew race.⁴ The numerous remains of that people, though they were

¹ In Cyrene they massacred 220,000 Greeks, in Cyprus, 240,000; in Egypt a very great multitude. Many of these unhappy victims were sawn in half, according to a precedent to which David had given the sanction of his example. The victorious Jews devoured the flesh, licked up the blood, arid twisted the entrails like a girdle round their bodies. (Dion Cassius, l. lxxviii. p. 1145)

² Without repeating the well-known narratives of Josephus, we may learn from Dion (l. lxxix. p. 1162) that in Hadrian's war, 580,000 Jews were slain by the sword, besides an infinite number which perished by famine, disease, and fire.

³ For the sect of the Zealots, see Basnage, *Histoire des Juifs*, l. 1. c. 17; for the characters of the Messiah, according to the Rabbis, l. v. c. 11, 12, 13; for the actions of Barchochebas, l. vii. c. 12.

⁴ It is to Modestinus, a Roman lawyer (l. vi. regular), that we are indebted for a distinct knowledge of the Edict of

still excluded from the precincts of Jerusalem, were permitted to form and maintain considerable establishments both in Italy and in the provinces. They could acquire the freedom of Rome, enjoy municipal honors, and obtain at the same time an exemption from the burdensome and expensive offices of society. The moderation or contempt of the Romans gave a legal sanction to the form of ecclesiastical police which was instituted by the vanquished sect. The patriarch, who had fixed his residence at Tiberias, was empowered to appoint his subordinate ministers and apostles, exercise domestic jurisdiction, and receive from his dispersed brethren an annual contribution.⁵ New synagogues were frequently erected in the principal cities of the empire; and the sabbaths, fasts, and festivals, which were either commanded by the Mosaic law or enjoined by the traditions of the Rabbis, were celebrated in the most solemn and public manner.⁶ Such gentle treatment insensibly assuaged the stern temper of the Jews. Awakened from their dream of prophecy and conquest, they assumed the behavior of peaceable and industrious subjects. Their irreconcilable hatred of mankind, instead of flaming out in acts of blood and violence, evaporated in less dangerous gratification. They embraced every opportunity of overreaching the idolaters in trade; and they pronounced secret and ambiguous curses against the haughty kingdom of Edom.⁷

The Jews—A People Which Followed Their Fathers' Religion; Christians—A Sect Which Deserted Their Fathers' Faith

The Jews rejected with abhorrence the false gods adored by their king and fellow-subjects. However, they themselves enjoyed the free exercise of their own anti-social religion. So there must have existed some other cause which exposed the disciples of Christ to that calamity from which Abraham's posterity was exempt. The difference between them is simple and obvious. According to the sentiments of antiquity, however, it was of the highest importance. The Jews were a *nation*, while the Christians were a *sect*. And if it was natural for every community to respect the sacred institutions of their neighbors, it was incumbent on them to persevere in those of their ancestors. The voice of oracles, the precepts of philosophers, and the authority of the laws, unanimously enforced this national obligation. By their lofty claim of a superior sanctity, the Jews might provoke the Polytheists to consider them as an odious and impure race. By disdain what took place between other nations they might deserve their contempt. The laws of Moses had been received during many ages by a large society. His followers were justified in obeying them by the example of mankind. It was also universally acknowledged that they had a right to practice what would have been criminal for them to neglect. But this principle, which protected the Jewish synagogue, afforded no favor or security to the primitive church. By embracing the faith of the Gospel, the Christians incurred the supposed guilt of an unnatural and unpardonable offence. They dissolved the sacred ties of custom and education, violated the religious institutions of their country, and presumptuously despised whatever their fathers had believed as true, or had revered as sacred. Nor was this apostasy (if we may use the term)

Antoninus. Casaubon ad list. Aug. p. 27.

⁵ Basnage. Histoire des Juifs, 1. iii. c. 2, 3. The office of Patriarch was suppressed by Theodosius the younger.

⁶ We need only mention the purim, or deliverance of the Jews from the rage of Haman, which, till the reign of Theodosius, was celebrated with insolent triumph and riotous intemperance. Basnage, Hist. des Juifs, 1. vi. c. 17, 1. viii. c. 6.

⁷ According to the false Josephus, Tsepho, the grandson of Esau, brought the army of Aeneas, king of Carthage into Italy. Another colony of Idumaeans, dying from the sword of David, took refuge in the dominions of Romulus. For these, or for other reasons of equal weight, the name of Edom was applied by the Jews to the Roman empire.

merely of a partial or local kind. The pious deserter who withdrew himself from the temples of Egypt or Syria would equally disdain to seek an asylum in those of Athens or Carthage. Every Christian rejected with contempt the superstitions of his family, his city, and his province. The whole body of Christians unanimously refused to hold any communion with the gods of Rome, the empire, and mankind. It was in vain that the oppressed believer asserted the inalienable rights of conscience and private judgment. Though his situation might excite the pity, his arguments could never reach the understanding, either of the philosophic or of the believing part of the Pagan world. To their apprehensions it was no less a matter of surprise that any individuals should entertain scruples against complying with the established mode of worship than if they had conceived a sudden abhorrence to the manners, dress, or language of their native country.⁸

The Union and Assemblies of the Christians Considered As A Dangerous Conspiracy

The surprise of the Pagans was soon succeeded by resentment; and the most pious of men were exposed to the unjust but dangerous imputation of impiety. Malice and prejudice concurred in representing the Christians as a society of atheists, who, by the most daring attack on the religious constitution of the empire, had merited the severest criticism of the civil magistrate. They had separated themselves (they gloried in the confession) from every mode of superstition which was received in any part of the globe by the various temper of Polytheism. But it was not altogether evident what god or what form of worship they had substituted to the gods and temples of antiquity. The pure and sublime idea which they entertained of the Supreme Being escaped the gross conception of the Pagan multitude, who were at a loss to discover a spiritual and solitary God, that was neither represented under any corporeal figure or visible symbol, nor was adored with the accustomed pomp of libations and festivals, of altars and sacrifices.¹ The sages of Greece and Rome, who had elevated their minds to the contemplation of the existence and attributes of the First Cause, were induced by reason or vanity to reserve for themselves and their chosen disciples the privilege of this philosophical devotion.² They were far from admitting the prejudices of mankind as the standard of truth, but considered them as flowing from the original disposition of human nature. They supposed that any popular mode of faith and worship which presumed to disclaim the assistance of the senses would, in proportion as it receded from superstition, find itself incapable of restraining the wanderings of the fancy and the visions of fanaticism. The careless glance which men of wit and learning condescended to cast on the Christian revelation, served only to confirm their hasty opinion, and to persuade them that the principle, which they might have revered, of the divine unity, was defaced by the wild enthusiasm, and annihilated by the airy speculations, of the new sectaries. The author of a celebrated dialogue, which has been attributed to Lucian, while he affects to treat the mysterious subject of the Trinity in a style of ridicule and contempt, betrays his own ignorance of the weakness of human reason and of the inscrutable nature of the Divine perfection.³

⁸ From the arguments of Celsus, as they are represented and refuted by Origen (l. v. pp. 247—259), we may clearly discover the distinction that was made between the Jewish *people* and the Christian *sect*. See in the Dialogue of Minucius Foelix (c. 5, 6) a fair and elegant description of the popular sentiments with regard to the desertion of the established worship.

¹ (Latin text omitted.) The Pagan interlocutor goes on to make a distinction in favor of the Jews, who had once a temple, altars, victims, etc.

² It is difficult (says Plato) to attain, and dangerous to publish, the knowledge of the true God. See the *Theologie des Philosophes*, in the Abbé d' Olivet's French translation of *Tully de Naturâ Deorum*, i. p. 275.

³ The author of the Philopatris perpetually treats the Christians as a company of dreaming enthusiasts, (Greek text omitted) and in one place manifestly alludes to the vision in which St. Paul was transported to the third heaven. In

Their Manners Slandered

It might appear less surprising, that the founder of Christianity should not only be revered by his disciples as a sage and a prophet, but that he should be adored as a God. The Polytheists were disposed to adopt every article of faith which seemed to offer any resemblance, however distant or imperfect, with the popular mythology. The legends of Bacchus, Hercules, and Aesculapius, had, in some measure, prepared their imagination for the appearance of the Son of God under a human form.¹ But they were astonished that the Christians should abandon the temples of those ancient heroes, who, in the infancy of the world, had invented arts, instituted laws, and vanquished the tyrants or monsters who infested the earth. Christians had chosen, for the exclusive object of their religious worship, an obscure teacher. This Messiah lived in a recent age, and among a barbarous people. He had fallen as a sacrifice either to the malice of his own countrymen or due to the jealousy of the Roman government. The Pagan multitude, reserving their gratitude for temporal benefits alone, rejected the inestimable present of life and immortality, which was offered to mankind by Jesus of Nazareth. His mild constancy in the midst of cruel and voluntary sufferings, his universal benevolence, and the sublime simplicity of his actions and character, were insufficient, in the opinion of those carnal men, to compensate for the want of fame, of empire, and of success. While they refused to acknowledge his stupendous triumph over the powers of darkness and of the grave, they misrepresented, or they insulted, the equivocal birth, wandering life, and ignominious death, of the divine Author of Christianity.²

The personal guilt which every Christian had contracted, in thus preferring his private sentiment to the national religion, was aggravated in a very high degree by the number and union of the criminals. It is well known, and has been already observed, that Roman policy viewed with the utmost jealousy and distrust any association among its subjects. The privileges of private corporations, though formed for the most harmless or beneficial purposes, were bestowed with a very sparing hand.³ The religious assemblies of the Christians, who had separated themselves from the public worship, appeared of a much less innocent nature. They were illegal in their principle, and in their consequences might become dangerous. Nor were the emperors conscious that they violated the laws of justice when, for the peace of society, they prohibited those secret and sometimes nocturnal meetings.⁴ The pious disobedience of the Christians made their conduct, or perhaps their designs, appear in a much more serious and criminal light. The Roman princes, might have been impressed by the Christian spirit, deeming their honor concerned in the execution of their commands. However, they sometimes attempted, by rigorous punishments, to subdue this independent spirit, which boldly acknowledged an authority superior to that of the magistrate. The extent and duration of this spiritual conspiracy seemed to render it

another place, Triphon, who impersonates a Christian, after deriding the Gods of Paganism, proposes a mysterious oath. (Greek text omitted)

¹ According to Justin Martyr (Apolog. Major, c. 10—85), the demon, who had gained some imperfect knowledge of the prophecies, purposely contrived this resemblance, which might deter, though by different means, both the people and the philosophers from embracing the faith of Christ.

² In the first and second books of Origen, Celsus treats the birth and character of our Savior with the most impious contempt. The orator Libanius praises Porphyry and Julian for confuting the folly of a sect which styled a dead man of Palestine God, and the son of God. Socrates, Hist. Eccles. iii. 23.

³ The emperor Trajan refused to incorporate a company of 150 firemen for the use of the city of Nicomedia. He disliked all associations. Pun. Epist. x. 42, 43.

⁴ The proconsul Pliny had published a general edict against unlawful meetings. The prudence of the Christians suspended their Agape (church dinner); but it was impossible for them to omit the exercise of public worship.

more and more deserving of his harshest criticism. We have already seen that the active and successful zeal of the Christians had insensibly spread them through every province and almost every city of the empire. The new converts seemed to renounce their family and country, that they might connect themselves in an indissoluble band of union with a peculiar society, which everywhere assumed a different character from the rest of mankind. Their gloomy and austere aspect, their abhorrence of the common business and pleasures of life, and their frequent predictions of impending calamities,⁵ inspired the Pagans with the apprehension of some danger, which would arise from the new sect, the more alarming as it was the more obscure. "Whatever," says Pliny, "may be the principle of their conduct, their inflexible obstinacy appeared deserving of punishment."⁶

The precautions with which the disciples of Christ performed the offices of religion were at first dictated by fear and necessity; but they were continued from choice. By imitating the awful secrecy which reigned in the Eleusinian mysteries, the Christians had flattered themselves that they should render their sacred institutions more respectable in the eyes of the Pagan world.⁷ But the event, as it often happens to the operations of subtle policy, deceived their wishes and expectations. Unfortunately, they only concealed what they would have normally been embarrassed to reveal. Their mistaken prudence afforded an opportunity for malice to invent, and for suspicious credulity to believe, the horrid tales which described the Christians as the most wicked of humankind, who practiced in their dark recesses every abomination that a depraved fancy could suggest, and who solicited the favor of their unknown God by the sacrifice of every moral virtue. There were many who pretended to confess or to relate the ceremonies of this abhorred society. It was asserted that:

"...a new-born infant, entirely covered over with flour, was presented, like some mystic symbol of initiation, to the knife of the proselyte, who unknowingly inflicted many a secret and mortal wound on the innocent victim of his error; that as soon as the cruel deed was perpetrated, the sectaries drank up the blood, greedily tore asunder the quivering members, and pledged themselves to eternal secrecy by a mutual consciousness of guilt. It was as confidently affirmed that this inhuman sacrifice was succeeded by a suitable entertainment, in which intemperance served as a provocative to brutal lust; till, at the appointed moment, the lights were suddenly extinguished, shame was banished, nature was forgotten," etc.⁸

But the perusal of the ancient apologies was sufficient to remove even the slightest suspicion from the mind of a candid adversary. The Christians, with the intrepid security of innocence, appeal from the voice of rumor to the equity of the magistrates. They acknowledge that if any proof can be produced of the crimes which these lies has imputed to them, they are worthy of the most severe punishment. They provoke the punishment, and they challenge the proof. At the same time they urge, with equal truth and propriety, that the charges were not only improbable, but lacked any evidence. They ask whether any one can seriously believe that the pure and holy precepts of the Gospel, which so frequently restrained the use of the most lawful enjoyments, should inculcate the practice of the most abominable crimes. Can a large society resolve to

⁵ As the prophecies of the Antichrist, approaching conflagration, etc., provoked those Pagans whom they did not convert, they were mentioned with caution and reserve; and the Montanists were censured for disclosing too freely the dangerous secret. Mosheim, p. 413.

⁶ Latin text omitted.

⁷ Mosheim's *Eccles. Hist.* vol. 1. p. 101, and Spanheim *Remarques sur les Caesars de Julien*, p. 468.

⁸ Justin Martyr, *Apolog.* 1. 35, ii. 14. Athenagoras in *Legation*, c. 21. Tertullian, *Apolog.* c. 7, 8, 9. Minucius Faelix, c. 9, 10, 30, 31. The last of these writers relates the accusation in the most elegant and circumstantial manner. The answer of Tertullian is the boldest and most vigorous.

dishonor itself in the eyes of its own members? Can a great number of persons of either sex, and every age and character, insensible to the fear of death or infamy, consent to violate those principles which nature and education had imprinted most deeply in their minds.⁹ Nothing, it should seem, could weaken the force or destroy the effect of so unanswerable a justification, unless it were the injudicious conduct of the apologists themselves, who betrayed the common cause of religion to gratify their devout hatred to the domestic enemies of the church. It was sometimes faintly insinuated, and sometimes boldly asserted, that the same bloody sacrifices, and the same incestuous festivals, which were so falsely ascribed to the orthodox believers, were in reality celebrated by the Marcionites, the Carpocratians, and by several other sects of the Gnostics. These would deviate into such paths of heresy, motivated by both the sentiments of men and the precepts of Christianity.¹⁰ Accusations of a similar kind were cast upon the church by those who had left the church,¹¹ and it was confessed on all sides that the most scandalous licentiousness of manners prevailed among great numbers of those who affected the name of Christians. A Pagan magistrate, who couldn't tell a true Christians from a false one, may have easily supposed that their mutual dislike for one another was the reason for their common guilt. It was fortunate for the repose, or at least for the reputation, of the first Christians that the magistrates sometimes proceeded with more temper and moderation than is usually consistent with religious zeal. As the impartial result of their judicial inquiry, they concluded that the apostates, those who had left the established worship, appeared to be sincere in their professions and blameless in their manners.¹²

Conduct of the Emperors Toward the Christians

History, which undertakes to record the transactions of the past for the instruction of future ages, would ill deserve that honorable office, if she condescended to plead the cause of tyrants or to justify the maxims of persecution. It must, however, be acknowledged that the conduct of the emperors who appeared the least favorable to the primitive church is by no means so criminal as that of modern sovereigns, who have employed the arm of violence and terror against the religious opinions of any part of their subjects. From their reflections, or even from their own feelings, a Charles V or a Louis XIV might have acquired a just knowledge of the rights of conscience, of the obligation of faith, and of the innocence of error. But the princes and magistrates of ancient Rome were strangers to those principles which inspired and authorized the inflexible obstinacy of the Christians in the cause of truth. Nor could they themselves discover in their own hearts any motive which would have prompted them to refuse a legal, and as it were a natural, submission to the sacred institutions of their country. The same reason which contributes to alleviate the guilt must have tended to abate the rigor of their persecutions. As they were

⁹ In the persecution of Lyons, some Gentile slaves were compelled, by the fear of tortures, to accuse their Christian master. The church of Lyons, writing to their brethren of Asia, treat the horrid charge with proper indignation and contempt. Euseb. Hist. Eccles. v. 1.

¹⁰ Justin Martyr, Apolog. i. 35. Irenaeus adv. Haeres. i. 24. Clemens Alexandrin. Stromat. 1. iii. p. 438. Euseb. iv. 8. It would be tedious and disgusting to relate all that the succeeding writers have imagined, all that Epiphanius has received, and all that Tillemont has copied. M. de Beausobre (Hist. du Manicheisme, 1. ix. c. 8, 9) has exposed, with great spirit, the lying arts of Augustus and Pope Leo I.

¹¹ When Tertullian became a Montanist, he denounced the morals of the church which he had so resolutely defended. The 35th canon of the council of Illiberis provides against the scandals which too often polluted the vigils of the church, and disgraced the Christian name in the eyes of unbelievers.

¹² Tertullian (Apolog. c. 2) expatiates on the fair and honorable testimony of Pliny, with much reason, and some declamation.

actuated, not by the furious zeal of bigots, but by the temperate policy of legislators, contempt must often have relaxed, and humanity must frequently have suspended, the execution of those laws which they enacted against the humble and obscure followers of Christ. From the general view of their character and motives we might naturally conclude:

1. A considerable time elapsed before they considered Christians an object deserving of the attention of government.
2. In the conviction of any of their subjects who were accused of so very singular a crime they proceeded with caution and reluctance.
3. They were moderate in the use of punishments.
4. The afflicted church enjoyed many intervals of peace and tranquillity.

Notwithstanding the careless indifference which the most copious and the most minute of the Pagan writers have shown to the affairs of the Christians¹ it may still be in our power to confirm each of these probable suppositions by the evidence of authentic facts.

Christians Misunderstood As A Jewish Sect

By the wise dispensation of Providence, a mysterious veil was cast over the infancy of the church, which, till the faith of the Christians was matured and their numbers were multiplied, served to protect them not only from the malice but even from the knowledge of the Pagan world. The slow and gradual abolition of the Mosaic ceremonies afforded a safe and innocent disguise to the more early proselytes of the Gospel. As they were far the greater part of the race of Abraham, they were distinguished by the peculiar mark of circumcision, offered up their devotions in the Temple of Jerusalem till its final destruction, and received both the Law and the Prophets as the genuine inspirations of the Deity. The Gentile converts, who by a spiritual adoption had been associated to the hope of Israel, were likewise confounded under the garb and appearance of Jews.¹ As the Polytheists paid less regard to articles of faith than to the external worship, the new sect, which carefully concealed, or faintly announced, its future greatness and ambition, was permitted to shelter itself under the general toleration which was granted to an ancient and celebrated people in the Roman empire. It was not long, perhaps, before the Jews themselves, animated with a fiercer zeal and a more jealous faith, perceived the gradual separation of their Nazarene brethren from the doctrine of the synagogue; and they would gladly have extinguished the dangerous heresy in the blood of its adherents. But the decrees of heaven had already disarmed their malice. Although they might sometimes exert the licentious privilege of sedition, they no longer possessed the administration of criminal justice. Nor did they find it easy to infuse into the calm heart of a Roman ruler the rancor of their own zeal and prejudice. The provincial governors declared themselves ready to listen to any accusation that might affect the public safety. But as soon as they were informed that it was a question not of facts but of words, a dispute relating only to the interpretation of the Jewish laws and prophecies, they deemed it unworthy of the majesty of Rome seriously to discuss the obscure differences which might arise among a barbarous and superstitious people. The innocence of the first Christians

¹ In the various compilation of the Augustan History (a part of which was composed under the reign of Constantine), there are not even six lines which relate to the Christians; nor has the diligence of Xiphilin discovered their name in the large history of Dion Cassius.

¹ An obscure passage of Suetonius (in Claud. c. 25) may seem to offer a proof how strangely the Jews and Christians of Rome were confounded with each other.

was protected by ignorance and contempt. The tribunal of the Pagan magistrate often proved their most assured refuge against the fury of the synagogue.² If indeed we were disposed to adopt the traditions of a too simple antiquity, we might relate the distant travels, the wonderful achievements, and the various deaths of the twelve apostles. However, a more accurate inquiry will induce us to doubt whether any of those persons who had been witnesses to the miracles of Christ were permitted, beyond the limits of Palestine, to seal with their blood the truth of their testimony.³ From the ordinary term of human life, it may very naturally be presumed that most of them were deceased before the discontent of the Jews broke out into that furious war which was terminated only by the ruin of Jerusalem. During a long period, from the death of Christ to that memorable rebellion, we cannot discover any traces of Roman intolerance. Perhaps they could be found in the sudden, transient, and cruel persecution exercised by Nero against the Roman Christians. But this was 35 years after Christ's death, and only 2 years before Nero's. The character of the philosophic historian, to whom we are principally indebted for the knowledge of this singular transaction, would alone be sufficient to recommend it to our most attentive consideration.

Fire of Rome Under Nero's Reign; Cruel Punishment of the Christians

In Nero's 10th year as ruler, Rome was afflicted by a fire which raged beyond the memory or example of former ages.¹ The monuments of Grecian art and Roman virtue, the trophies of the Punic and Gallic wars, the most holy temples, and the most splendid palaces, were involved in one common destruction. Of the fourteen regions or quarters into which Rome was divided, only four were left intact. Three were leveled with the ground, and the remaining seven, which had experienced the fury of the flames, displayed a melancholy prospect of ruin and desolation. The vigilance of government appears not to have neglected any of the precautions which might alleviate the sense of so dreadful a calamity. The Imperial gardens were thrown open to the distressed multitude, temporary buildings were erected for their accommodation, and a plentiful supply of grain and provisions was distributed at a very moderate price.² The most generous policy seems to have dictated the edicts which regulated the disposition of the streets and the construction of private houses. And as it usually happens in an age of prosperity, in the course of a few years, the conflagration of Rome produced a new city, more regular and more beautiful than the former. But all the prudence and humanity affected by Nero on this occasion were insufficient to preserve him from the popular suspicion. Every crime might be imputed to the assassin of his wife and mother. Nor could the prince, who prostituted his person and dignity on the theatre be deemed incapable of the most extravagant folly. The voice of rumor accused the emperor as the arsonist of his own capital. As the most incredible stories are the best adapted to the genius of an enraged people, it was gravely reported and firmly believed that Nero, enjoying the calamity which he had occasioned, amused himself with singing to his lyre the destruction of

² See, in the 18th and 25th chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. the behavior of Gallio, proconsul of Achaia, and Festus, procurator of Judea.

³ In the time of Tertullian and Clemens of Alexandria, the glory of martyrdom was confined to the apostles Peter, Paul, and James. It was gradually bestowed on the rest of the apostles, by the more recent Greeks, who prudently selected for the theatre of their preaching and sufferings some remote country beyond the limits of the Roman empire. Mosheim, p. 81, and Tillemont Mem, Eccles. i. part iii.

¹ Tacit. Annal. xv. 38—44. Sueton. In Neron. c. 38. Dion Cassius, 1. lxii. p. 1014. Orosius, vii. 7

² The price of wheat (for about 2 gallons) was reduced to as much as a third of the normal price.

ancient Troy.³ To divert a suspicion, which the power of despotism was unable to suppress, the emperor resolved to substitute in his own place some fictitious criminals. Tacitus wrote:

With this view he inflicted the most exquisite tortures on those men, who, under the vulgar title of Christians, were already branded with deserved infamy. They derived their name and origin from Christ, who in the reign of Tiberius had suffered death by the sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate.⁴ For a while this dire superstition was checked; but it again burst forth; and not only spread itself over Judea, the first seat of this mischievous sect, but was even introduced into Rome, the common asylum which receives and protects whatever is impure, whatever is atrocious. The confessions of those who were seized discovered a great multitude of their accomplices, and they were all convicted, not so much for the crime of setting fire to the city as for their hatred of humankind.⁵ They died in torments, and their torments were embittered by insult and derision. Some were nailed on crosses; others sewn up in the skins of wild beasts and exposed to the fury of dogs. Others were smeared with combustible materials, and used as torches to illuminate the darkness of the night. Nero's gardens were destined for the sad spectacle. This was accompanied by a horse race, and honored with the presence of the emperor, who mingled with the people dressed up as a charioteer. The guilt of the Christians deserved indeed the most exemplary punishment, but the public abhorrence was changed into commiseration, from the opinion that those unhappy wretches were sacrificed, not so much to the public welfare as to the cruelty of a jealous tyrant. (Tacitus, *Annals* xv. 44.)

Remarks On the Passage of Tacitus Relative To the Persecution of the Christians By Nero

Those who survey with a curious eye the revolutions of mankind may observe that the gardens and circus of Nero on the Vatican, which were polluted with the blood of the first Christians, have been rendered still more famous by the triumph and abuse of the persecuted religion. On the same spot,¹ a temple which far surpasses the ancient glories of the Capitol has been since erected by the Christian Pontiffs, who, deriving their claim of universal dominion from a humble fisherman of Galilee, have succeeded to the throne of the Caesars, given laws to the barbarian conquerors of Rome, and extended their spiritual jurisdiction from the coast of the Baltic to the shores of the Pacific Ocean.

But it would be improper to dismiss this account of Nero's persecution till we have made some observations that may serve to remove the difficulties with which it is perplexed, and to throw some light on the subsequent history of the church.

The most skeptical criticism is obliged to respect the truth of this extraordinary fact, and the

³ We may observe that the rumor is mentioned by Tacitus with a very becoming distrust and hesitation, while it is greedily transcribed by Suetonius, and solemnly confirmed by Dion.

⁴ This testimony is alone sufficient to expose the anachronism of the Jews, who place the birth of Christ almost a century sooner (Basnage, *Histoire des Juifs*, 3. v. c. 14, 15). We may learn from Josephus (*Antiquities* xviii. 3) that the procuratorship of Pilate corresponded with the last ten years of Tiberius, AD 27—37. As to the particular time of Christ's death, a very early tradition fixed it to March 25th, AD 29, under the consulship of the two Gemini (Tertullian adv. *Judaeos*, c. 8). This date, which is adopted by Pagi, Cardinal Norris, and Le Clerc, seems, at least, as probable as the common era, which is placed (I know not from what conjectures) four years later.

⁵ *Odio humani generis convicti*. (Hatred for the family of living mankind) These words may either signify the hatred of mankind toward the Christians, or the hatred of the Christians toward mankind. I have preferred the latter sense, as the most agreeable to the style of Tacitus, and to the popular error, of which a precept of the Gospel (Luke 14:26) had been, perhaps, the innocent occasion. My interpretation is justified by the authority of Lipsius; of the Italian, French, and English translators of Tacitus; of Mosheim (p. 102), Le Clerc (*Historia Eccles.* p. 427), Dr. Lardner (*Testimonies*, i. p. 345), and the bishop of Gloucester (*Divine Legation*, iii. p. 38). But as the word *convicti* does not unite very happily with the rest of the sentence, James Gronovius has preferred the reading of *conjuncti* (living together), which is authorized by the valuable manuscript of Florence.

¹ *Nardini Roma Antica*, p. 487. Donatus de Româ Antiquâ, 1. iii. p. 449.

integrity of this celebrated passage of Tacitus. The former is confirmed by the diligent and accurate Suetonius, who mentions the punishment which Nero inflicted on the Christians, a sect of men who had embraced a new and criminal superstition.² The latter may be proved by the consent of the most ancient manuscripts, by the inimitable character of the style of Tacitus, by his reputation, which guarded his text from the interpolations of pious fraud, and by the purport of his narration, which accused the first Christians of the most atrocious crimes, without insinuating that they possessed any miraculous or even magical powers above the rest of mankind.³

Notwithstanding it is probable that Tacitus was born some years before the fire of Rome,⁴ he could derive only from reading and conversation the knowledge of an event which happened during his infancy. Before he gave himself to the public, he calmly waited till his genius had attained its full maturity. He was more than 40 years old when a grateful regard for the memory of the virtuous Agricola extorted from him the most early of those historical compositions which will delight and instruct the most distant posterity. After making a trial of his strength in the Life of Agricola and the description of Germany, he conceived, and at length executed, a more arduous work: the History of Rome, in 30 books, from the fall of Nero to the accession of Nerva. The administration of Nerva introduced an age of justice and prosperity which Tacitus had destined for the occupation of his old age.⁵ But when he took a nearer view of his subject, judging, perhaps, that it was a more honorable or a less detestable office to record the vices of past tyrants than to celebrate the virtues of a reigning monarch, he chose rather to relate, under the form of annals, the actions of the four immediate successors of Augustus. To collect, dispose, and adorn a series of 80 years in an immortal work, every sentence of which is pregnant with the deepest observations and the most lively images, was an undertaking sufficient to exercise the genius of Tacitus himself during the greater part of his life. In the last years of the reign of Trajan, while the victorious monarch extended the power of Rome beyond its ancient limits, the historian was describing, in the second and fourth books of his annals, the tyranny of Tiberius (see Tacit. Annal. ii. 61, iv. 4). The emperor Hadrian must have succeeded to the throne before Tacitus, in the regular prosecution of his work, could relate the fire of the capital and the cruelty of Nero toward the unfortunate Christians. At a distance of 60 years, it was the duty of the annalist to adopt the narratives of contemporaries. However, it was natural for the philosopher to indulge himself in the description of the origin, progress, and character of the new sect, not so much according to the knowledge or prejudices of the age of Nero, as according to those of the time of Hadrian.

Tacitus very frequently trusts to the curiosity or reflection of his readers to supply those intermediate circumstances and ideas which, in his extreme conciseness, he has thought proper to suppress. We may therefore presume to imagine some probable cause which could direct the

² Sueton. in Nerone, c. 16. The epithet of *malefica*, which some wise commentators have translated *magical*, is considered by the more rational Mosheim as only synonymous to the excitability of Tacitus.

³ The passage concerning Jesus Christ, which was inserted into the text of Josephus, between the time of Origen and Eusebius, may furnish an example of no common forgery. The accomplishment of the prophecies, the virtues, miracles, and resurrection of Jesus are distinctly related. Josephus acknowledges that he was the Messiah, and hesitates whether he should call him a man. If any doubt can still remain concerning this celebrated passage, the reader may examine the pointed objections of La Fevre (Havercamp. Joseph. ii. pp. 267—273), the labored answers of Daubuz (pp. 187—232), and the masterly reply (Biblioth. Anc. et Mod. vii. pp. 237—288) of an anonymous critic, whom I believe to have been the learned Abbé de Longuerue.

⁴ *Lives of Tacitus* by Lipsius and the Abbé de la Bleterie, Dict. de Bayle an article titled, *Tacite*, and Fabricius, Biblioth. Latin. ii. p. 386. Edit. Ernest.

⁵ Latin text omitted.

cruelty of Nero against the Christians of Rome, whose obscurity, as well as innocence, should have shielded them from his indignation and even from his notice. The Jews, who were numerous in the capital and oppressed in their own country, were a much fitter object for the suspicions of the emperor and the people. Nor did it seem unlikely that a vanquished nation, who already discovered their abhorrence of the Roman yoke, might have recourse to the most atrocious means of gratifying their implacable revenge. But the Jews possessed very powerful advocates in the palace, and even in the heart of the tyrant. Nero's wife and mistress, the beautiful Poppaea, and a favorite player of the race of Abraham, had already employed their intercession in behalf of the obnoxious people.⁶ In their room it was necessary to offer some other victims, and it might easily be suggested that, although the genuine followers of Moses were innocent of the fire of Rome, there had arisen among them a new and pernicious sect of GALILEANS, which was capable of the most horrid crimes. Under the name GALILEANS two distinctions of men were confused, most opposite to each other in their manners and principles. These were the disciples who had embraced the faith of Jesus of Nazareth,⁷ and the zealots who had followed the standard of Judas the Gaulonite.⁸ The former were the friends, the latter were the enemies, of humankind. The only resemblance between them consisted in the same inflexible constancy which, in the defense of their cause, rendered them insensible of death and torture. The followers of Judas, who drove their countrymen into rebellion, were soon buried under the ruins of Jerusalem. Those of Jesus, known by the more celebrated name of Christians, diffused themselves over the Roman empire. How natural was it for Tacitus, in the time of Hadrian, to appropriate to the Christians the guilt and the suffering which he might, with far greater truth and justice, have attributed to a sect whose odious memory was almost extinguished!

Whatever opinion may be entertained of this conjecture (for it is no more than a conjecture), it is evident that the effect as well as the cause of Nero's persecution were confined to Rome.⁹ The religious beliefs of the Galileans, or Christians, were never made a subject of punishment, or even of inquiry. As the idea of their sufferings was, for a long time, connected with the idea of cruelty and injustice, the moderation of succeeding princes inclined them to spare a sect oppressed by a tyrant whose rage had been usually directed against virtue and innocence.

It is somewhat remarkable that the flames of war the temple of Jerusalem and the Capitol of Rome consumed almost at the same time.¹⁰ It is also somewhat strange that the money devoted to Jerusalem should have been moved to restore and adorn the splendor of Rome by Titus.¹¹ The

⁶ The player's name was Aliturus. Through the same channel, Josephus (*de Vitâ suâ*, c. 3), about 2 years before, had obtained the pardon and release of some Jewish priests who were prisoners at Rome.

⁷ The learned Dr. Lardner (*Jewish and Heathen Testimonies*, ii. pp. 102, 103) has proved that the name *Galileans* was a very ancient, amid perhaps the primitive, title of the Christians.

⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities* xviii. 1, 2. Tillemont, *Ruine des Juifs*, p. 742. The sons of Judas were crucified in the time of Claudius. His grandson Eleazar, after Jerusalem was taken, defended a strong fortress with 960 of his most desperate followers. When the battering-ram had made a breach, they slaughtered their own wives and children. At length, they committed mutual suicide, dying to the last man.

⁹ Dodwell, *Pancitat. Mart.* 1. xiii. The Spanish Inscription in Gruter, p. 328, No. 9, is a manifest and acknowledged forgery, contrived by that noted impostor Cyriacus of Ancona, to flatter the pride and prejudices of the Spaniards. Ferrerat. *History of Spain*, i. p. 192.

¹⁰ The Capitol was burned during the civil war between Vitellius and Vespasian, the 19th of December, AD 69. On August 10th, AD. 70, the temple of Jerusalem was destroyed by the hands of the Jews themselves, rather than by those of the Romans.

¹¹ The new Capitol was dedicated by Domitian. Sueton. in *Domitian*, c. 5. Plutarch in *Poplicola*, i. p. 230. Edit. Bryan. The gold gilding alone cost 12,000 talents (more than £2,500,000). It was the opinion of Martial (1. ix. Epigram 3) that if the emperor had called in his debts, Jupiter himself, even though he would not have been able to pay them even if he had sold Mount Olympus.

emperors levied a general tax on the Jewish people. Although the sum assessed on the head of each individual was small, the use for which it was designed, and the severity with which it was exacted, were considered as an intolerable grievance.¹² Since the officers of the revenue extended their unjust claim to many persons who were strangers to the blood or religion of the Jews, it was impossible that the Christians, who had so often sheltered themselves under the shade of the synagogue, should now escape this rapacious persecution. Anxious as they were to avoid the slightest infection of idolatry, their conscience forbade them to contribute to the honor of that demon who had assumed the character of the god Jupiter. As a very numerous though declining party among the Christians still adhered to the law of Moses, their efforts to hide their Jewish origin were detected by the decisive test of circumcision.¹³ Nor were the Roman magistrates at leisure to inquire into the difference of their religious tenets. Among the Christians who were brought before the tribunal of the emperor, as it seems more probable, before that of Judea's governor, two persons are said to have appeared, distinguished by their extraction, which was more truly noble than that of the greatest monarchs. These were the grandsons of the apostle Jude, who himself was the (half) brother of Jesus Christ.¹⁴ Their natural pretensions to the throne of David might perhaps attract the locals' respect and stir up the governor's jealousy. However, their poor clothing and the simplicity of their answers soon convinced him that they were neither desirous nor capable of disturbing the peace of the Roman empire. They frankly confessed their royal origin, and their near relation to the Messiah. Yet they disclaimed any temporal views, and professed that his kingdom, which they devoutly expected, was purely of a spiritual and angelic nature. When they were examined concerning their fortune and occupation, they showed their hands hardened with daily labor, and declared that they derived their whole subsistence from a 24-acre farm, near the village of Cocaba.¹⁵ The grandsons of Jude were dismissed with compassion and contempt. —Euseb. iii. 20. The story is taken from Hegesippus.

Oppression of the Jews and Christians By Domitian; Execution of Clemens the Consul

Although the obscurity of the house of David might protect them from the suspicions of a tyrant, the present greatness of his own family alarmed the cowardly temper of Domitian, which could only be appeased by the blood of those Romans whom he either feared, hated, or esteemed. Of the two sons of his uncle Flavius Sabinus,¹ the elder was soon convicted of treasonable intentions. The younger, Flavius Clemens, owed his safety to his own lack of courage and ability.² For a long time, the emperor distinguished so harmless a kinsman by his

¹² With regard to the tribute, see Dion Cassius, l. lxvi. p. 1082, with Reimarus's notes. Spanheim. de Usû Numismatum, ii. p. 571, and Basnage, Histoire des Juifs, l. vii. c. 2.

¹³ Suetonius (in Domitian, c. 12) had seen a 90-year-old old man publicly examined before the procurator's tribunal. This is what Martial calls *Mentula tributis damnata*. (abuse of a tribal criminal).

¹⁴ This title was at first understood in the most obvious sense, and it was supposed that the brothers of Jesus were the sons of Joseph and Mary. A devout respect for Mary's virginity forced the Gnostics (and later on the orthodox Greeks) the need of inventing a second wife for Joseph. The Latins (from the time of Jerome) improved on that lie, asserted Joseph's perpetual celibacy, and justified by many similar examples this new interpretation. Tillemont, Mem. Eccles. i. part iii. and Beausobre, Blat. Crit. du Manicheisme, l. ii. c. 2.

¹⁵ Thirty-nine *plethra*, (squares of a hundred feet each), which, if strictly computed, would scarcely amount to nine acres. But the probability of circumstances, the practice of other Greek writers, and the authority of M. de Valois, inclined me to believe that the *plethoon* is used to express the Roman *jugerum*. (5/8 of an acre, or 240 Roman feet)

¹ Death and character of Sabinus in Tacitus (Histt. iii. 74, 75). Sabinus was the elder brother, and, till the succession of Vespasian, had been considered as the principal support of the Flavian family.

² Latin text omitted.

favor and protection, bestowed on him his own niece Domitilla, adopted the children of that marriage to the hope of the succession, and invested their father with the honors of the consulship. But he had scarcely finished the term of his annual magistracy, when on a slight pretence, he was condemned and executed. Domitilla was banished to a desolate island on the coast of Campania.³ Sentences either of death or of confiscation were pronounced against a great number of persons who were involved in the same accusation. The guilt imputed to their charge was that of Atheism and Jewish manners.⁴ A singular association of ideas, which cannot with any propriety be applied except to the Christians, as they were obscurely and imperfectly viewed by the magistrates and by the writers of that period. On the strength of so probable an interpretation, and too eagerly admitting the suspicions of a tyrant as an evidence of their honorable crime, the church has placed both Clemens and Domitilla among its first martyrs, and has branded the cruelty of Domitian with the name of the second persecution. But this persecution (if it deserves that epithet) was short. A few months after the death of Clemens and the banishment of Domitilla, Stephen assassinated the emperor in his palace.⁵ He was a freedman belonging to Domitilla, who had enjoyed the favor of his mistress, but who had not surely embraced her faith. The memory of Domitian was condemned by the senate. His acts were rescinded and his exiles recalled. Under the gentle administration of Nerva, while the innocent were restored to their rank and fortunes, even the most guilty either obtained pardon or escaped punishment.—Dion, 1. lxxviii. p. 1118; Plin. Epist. iv. 22.

Pliny's Ignorance of Christians

About ten years afterward, under the reign of Trajan, the younger Pliny was entrusted by his friend and master with the government of Bithynia and Pontus. He soon found himself at a loss to determine by what rule of justice or of law he should direct his conduct in the execution of an office most repugnant to his humanity. Pliny had never assisted at any judicial proceedings against the Christians, with whose name alone he seems to be acquainted. He was totally uninformed with regard to the nature of their guilt, the method of their conviction, and the degree of their punishment. In this perplexity he did what he was used to doing: submitting to the wisdom of Trajan an impartial, and in some respects, a favorable account of the new superstition. He would request that the emperor help resolve his doubts and instruct his ignorance.¹ Pliny's life had been employed in the acquisition of learning, and in worldly business. Since the age of nineteen he had pleaded with distinction in the tribunals of Rome,² filled a place in the senate, had been invested with the honors of the consulship, and had formed very numerous connections with every order of men, both in Italy and in the provinces. From his ignorance, therefore, we may derive some useful information. We may assure ourselves that, when he accepted the

³ The isle of Pandataria, according to Dion. Bruttius Praesens (Euseb. iii. 18) banishes her to that of Pontia, which was not far distant from the other. That difference, and a mistake, either of Eusebius, or of his transcribers, have given occasion to suppose that two Domitillas existed, the wife and the niece of Clemens. Tillemont, Mem. Eccles. ii. p. 224.

⁴ Dion, 1. lxxvii. p. 1112. If the Bruttius Pimsens, from whom it is probable that he collected this account, was the correspondent of Pliny (Epistol. vii. 3), we may consider him as a contemporary writer.

⁵ Suet, in Domit. c. 11. Philostratus in Vit. Apollon. I. viii.

¹ Plin. Epistol. x. 97. The learned Mosheim expresses himself (pp. 147, 232) with the highest favor of Pliny's moderate and candid temper. Notwithstanding Dr. Lardner's suspicions (*Jewish and Heathen Testimonies*, ii. p. 46), I am unable to discover any bigotry in his language or proceedings.

² Pun. Epist. v. 8. He pleaded his first cause AD 81, a year after the famous eruptions of Mount Vesuvius, in which his uncle lost his life.

government of Bithynia, there were no general laws or decrees of the senate in force against the Christians. Neither Trajan nor any of his virtuous predecessors, whose edicts were received into the civil and criminal jurisprudence, had publicly declared their intentions concerning the new sect. Whatever proceedings had been carried on against the Christians there were none of sufficient weight and authority to establish a precedent for the conduct of a Roman magistrate.

Trajan and His Successors Establish A Legal Way To Halt the Christians

Trajan's answer, to which the Christians of the succeeding age have frequently appealed, discovers as much regard for justice and humanity as could be reconciled with his mistaken notions of religious policy.¹ Instead of displaying the implacable zeal of an inquisitor, anxious to discover the most minute particles of heresy and exulting in the number of his victims, the emperor expresses much more solicitude to protect the security of the innocent than to prevent the escape of the guilty. He acknowledges the difficulty of fixing any general plan, but lays down two salutary rules, which often afforded relief and support to the distressed Christians. Though he directs the magistrates to punish such persons as are legally convicted, he prohibits them, with a very humane inconsistency, from making any inquiries concerning the supposed criminals. Nor was the magistrate allowed to proceed on any and every bit of information. Anonymous charges the emperor rejects as too repugnant to the equity of his government. For those convicted of the crime of Christianity, he strictly required the positive evidence of a fair and open accuser. It is likewise probable that the persons who assumed so odious an office were obliged to declare the grounds of their suspicions, to specify (both in respect to time and place) the secret assemblies which their Christian adversary had frequented, and to disclose a great number of circumstances which were concealed with the most vigilant jealousy from the eye of the profane. If they succeeded in their persecution they were exposed to the resentment of a considerable and active party, to the censure of the more liberal portion of mankind, and to the ignominy which in every age and country has attended the character of an informer. If, on the contrary, they failed in their proofs, they incurred the severe and perhaps capital penalty which, according to a law published by the emperor Hadrian, was inflicted on those who falsely attributed to their fellow-citizens the crime of Christianity. The violence of personal or superstitious animosity might sometimes prevail over the most natural apprehensions of disgrace and danger. However, it cannot surely be imagined that accusations of so unpromising an appearance were either lightly or frequently undertaken by the Pagan subjects of the Roman empire.²

Popular Clamors; Trials of the Christians

The expedient which was employed to elude the prudence of the laws affords a sufficient proof how effectively they disappointed the mischievous designs of private malice or superstitious zeal. In a large and tumultuous assembly the restraints of fear and shame, so forcible on the minds of individuals, are deprived of the greatest part of their influence. The pious Christian, as he was desirous to obtain or to escape the glory of martyrdom, expected,

¹ Plin. Epistol. x. 98. Tertullian (Apolog. c. 5) considers this rescript as a relaxation of the ancient penal laws. And yet Tertullian, in another part of his Apologists, exposes the inconsistency of prohibiting inquiries, and enjoining punishments.

² Eusebius (Hist. Eccles.). iv. c. 9) has preserved the edict of Hadrian. He has likewise (c. 13) given us one still more favorable under the name of Antoninus, the authenticity of which is not so universally allowed. The second Apology of Justin contains some curious particulars relative to the accusations of Christians.

either with impatience or terror, the stated returns of the public games and festivals. On those occasions the inhabitants of the great cities of the empire were collected in the circus of the theatre, where every circumstance of the place, as well as of the ceremony, contributed to kindle their demise, and extinguish their humanity. The numerous spectators were crowned with garlands, perfumed with incense, purified with the blood of victims, and surrounded with the altars and statues of their false gods. They gave themselves to the enjoyment of pleasures, which they considered as an essential part of their religious worship. They remembered that only the Christians abhorred mankind's gods. By their absence and melancholy on these solemn festivals, Christians seemed to insult or lament any public joy. If the empire had been afflicted by any recent calamity, by a plague, a famine, or an unsuccessful war; if the Tiber had, or if the Nile had not, risen beyond its banks; if the earth had shaken, or if the temperate order of the seasons had been interrupted, the superstitious Pagans were convinced that the crimes and the impiety of the Christians, who were spared by the excessive lenity of the government, had at length provoked the Divine Justice. It was not among a licentious and exasperated populace that the forms of legal proceedings could be observed. It was not in an amphitheater, stained with the blood of wild beasts and gladiators, that the voice of compassion could be heard. The impatient clamors of the multitude denounced the Christians as the enemies of gods and men, dooming them to the severest tortures. They ventured to accuse by name some of the most distinguished of the new sectaries, required with irresistible vehemence that they should be instantly apprehended and cast to the lions.³ The provincial governors and magistrates who presided in the public spectacles were usually inclined to gratify the inclinations, and to appease the rage of the people, by the sacrifice of a few obnoxious victims. But the wisdom of the emperors protected the church from the danger of these tumultuous clamors and irregular accusations, which they justly censured as repugnant both to the firmness and to the equity of their administration. The edicts of Hadrian and of Antoninus Pius expressly declared that the voice of the multitude should never be admitted as legal evidence to convict or to punish those unfortunate persons who had embraced the enthusiasm of the Christians.⁴

Punishment was not the inevitable consequence of conviction, and the Christians whose guilt was the most clearly proved by the testimony of witnesses, or even by their voluntary confession, still retained in their own power the alternative of life or death. It was not so much the past offense as the actual resistance which excited the indignation of the magistrate. He was persuaded that he offered them an easy pardon, since, if they consented to cast a few grains of incense upon the altar, they were dismissed from the tribunal in safety and with applause. It was esteemed the duty of a humane judge to endeavor to reclaim rather than to punish those deluded enthusiasts. Varying his tone according to the age, sex, or situation of the prisoners, he frequently condescended to set before their eyes every circumstance which could render life more pleasing, or death more terrible. He would try to solicit, even beg them, so that they would show some compassion to themselves, to their families, and to their friends.⁵ If threats and persuasions proved ineffectual, he had often recourse to violence. The whip and the rack were called in to supply the deficiency of argument, and every art of cruelty was employed to subdue such inflexible, and, as it appeared to the Pagans, such criminal obstinacy. The ancient apologists

³ Tertullian (Apolog. c. 40). The acts of the martyrdom of Polycarp exhibit a lively picture of these tumults, which were usually fomented by the malice of the Jews.

⁴ These regulations are inserted in the above-mentioned edicts of Hadrian and Pius. Apology of Melito (Euseb. I. iv. c. 26).

⁵ See the rescript of Trajan, and the conduct of Pliny. The most authentic acts of the martyrs abound in these exhortations.

of Christianity have censured with equal truth and severity the irregular conduct of their persecutors, who, contrary to every principle of judicial proceeding, admitted the use of torture in order to obtain not a confession but a denial of the crime which was the object of their inquiry.⁶ The monks of succeeding ages, who, in their peaceful solitude, entertained themselves with diversifying the deaths and sufferings of the primitive martyrs, have frequently invented torments of a much more refined and ingenious nature. In particular, it has pleased them to suppose that the zeal of the Roman magistrates, disdaining every consideration of moral virtue or public decency, endeavored to seduce those whom they were unable to vanquish, and that by their orders the most brutal violence was offered to those whom they found it impossible to seduce. It is related that pious females, who were prepared to despise death, were sometimes condemned to a more severe trial, and called upon to determine whether they set a higher value on their religion or on their chastity.

Humanity of the Roman Magistrates

The total disregard of truth and probability in the representation of this primitive martyrdom was occasioned by a very natural mistake. The ecclesiastical writers of the 4th or 5th centuries ascribed to the magistrates of Rome the same degree of implacable and unrelenting zeal which filled their own breasts against the heretics or the idolaters of their own times. It is not improbable that some of those persons who were raised to the dignities of the empire might have absorbed the prejudices of the populace, and that the cruel disposition of others might occasionally be stimulated by motives of avarice or of personal resentment.¹ But it is certain, and we may appeal to the grateful confessions of the first Christians, that the greater part of those magistrates who exercised, in the provinces, the authority of the emperor or of the senate, and to whose hands alone the jurisdiction of life and death was entrusted, behaved like men of polished manners and liberal education. They respected the rules of justice, and were conversant with the precepts of philosophy. They frequently declined the odious task of persecution, dismissed the charge with contempt, or suggested to the accused Christian some legal evasion by which he might elude the severity of the laws.² Whenever they were invested with a discretionary power,³ they used it much less for the oppression than for the relief and benefit of the afflicted church. They were far from condemning all the Christians who were accused before their tribunal, and very far from punishing with death all those who were convicted of an obstinate adherence to the new superstition. Contenting themselves for the most part with the milder chastisements of imprisonment, exile, or slavery in the mines,⁴ they left the unhappy victims of their justice some reason to hope that a prosperous event, the accession, marriage, or triumph of an emperor, might speedily restore them by a general pardon to their former state. The martyrs chosen for immediate execution by the Roman magistrates seem to have been selected from the most opposite extremes. They were preachers and elders, the persons most distinguished among the

⁶ In particular Tertullian (*Apolog.* a 2, 3) and Lactantius (*Institut. Divin.* v. 9). Their reasoning is almost the same; but we may discover that one of these apologists had been a lawyer and the other a rhetorician.

¹ The conversion of his wife provoked Claudius Herminianus, governor of Cappadocia, to treat the Christians with uncommon severity. Tertullian *ad Scapulam*, c. 3.

² Tertullian, in his epistle to the governor of Africa, mentions several remarkable instances of lenity and forbearance which had happened within his knowledge.

³ (Latin text omitted) An expression of Trajan which gave great latitude to the governors of provinces.

⁴ (Latin text omitted) The mines of Numidia contained nine bishops, with a portion of their clergy and people, to whom Cyprian addressed a pious epistle of praise and comfort. Cyprian. *Epistol.* 15, 11.

Christians by their rank and influence, and whose example might strike terror into the whole sect.⁵ Others taken were the poorest and most abject among them, particularly those of the servile condition whose lives were esteemed of little value, and whose sufferings were viewed by the ancients with too careless an indifference.⁶ The learned Origen, who, from his experience as well as reading, was intimately acquainted with the history of the Christians, declares in the most express terms that the number of martyrs was very small.⁷ His authority would alone be sufficient to annihilate that formidable army of martyrs, whose relics, drawn for the most part from the catacombs of Rome, have decorated so many church buildings,⁸ and whose marvelous achievements have been the subject of so many volumes of Holy Romance.⁹ But the general assertion of Origen may be explained and confirmed by the particular testimony of his friend Dionysius, who, in the immense city of Alexandria, and under the rigorous persecution of Decius, reckons only 10 men and 7 women who suffered for professing Christ.¹⁰

Example of Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage; His Danger and Flight

During the same period of persecution, the zealous, eloquent, and ambitious Cyprian governed the church, not only of Carthage, but even of Africa. He possessed every quality which could engage the reverence of the faithful or provoke the suspicions and resentment of the Pagan magistrates. His character as well as his station seemed to mark out the holy prelate as the most distinguished object of envy and of danger.¹ The experience, however, of Cyprian's life is sufficient to prove that our fancy has exaggerated the perilous situation of a Christian pastor; and that the dangers to which he was exposed were less imminent than those which temporal ambition is always prepared to encounter in the pursuit of honors. Four Roman emperors, along with families, friends, and followers, perished by the sword in the space of ten years, during which the bishop of Carthage guided by his authority and eloquence the counsels of the African

⁵ Though we cannot receive with entire confidence either the epistles or the acts of Ignatius (they may be found in the second volume of the Apostolic Fathers), yet we may quote that bishop of Antioch as one of these exemplary martyrs. He was sent in chains to Rome as a public spectacle. When he arrived at Troas, he received the pleasing intelligence that the persecution of Antioch was already at an end.

⁶ Among the martyrs of Lyons (Euseb. I. v. c. 1), the slave Biandina was distinguished by more exquisite tortures. Of the five martyrs so much celebrated in the acts of Felicitas and Perpetua, two were servants, and two others who were poverty stricken.

⁷ Greek text omitted.

⁸ Not all Roman commoners Rome were Christians, nor were all Christians saints and martyrs. As such, we may safely determine religious honors being credited to bones or urns indiscriminately taken from the public burial place. After 10 centuries of very free and open trade, some suspicions have arisen among the more learned Catholics. They now require, as a proof of sanctity and martyrdom, the letters "BM," a vial full of red liquor, supposed to be blood, or the figure of a palm-tree. But the two former signs are of little weight, and with regard to the last it is observed by the critics: 1. That the figure, as it is called, of a palm, is perhaps a cypress, and perhaps only a stop, the flourish of a comma, used in the monumental inscriptions. 2. That the palm was the symbol of victory among the Pagans. 3. That among the Christians it served as an emblem, not only of martyrdom, but in general of a joyful resurrection. P. Mabillon, on the worship of unknown saints, and Muratori sopra le Antichità Italiane, Dissertat. lviii.

⁹ As an example of these legends, we may be satisfied with 10,000 Christian soldiers crucified in one day on Mount Ararat, either by Trajan or Hadrian. *Baronius ad Martyrologium Romanum*. Tillemont, Mem. Eccles. ii. part ii. p. 438, and Geddes's *Miscellanies*, vol. ii. p. 203. The abbreviation MIL, which means either *soldiers* or *thousands* is said to have occasioned some extraordinary mistakes!

¹⁰ Dionysius ap. Euseb. 1. vi. ci. 41. One of the 17 was also accused of robbery.

¹ The letters of Cyprian exhibit a very curious and original picture, both of the man and the times in which he lived. See likewise the two *Lives of Cyprian*, composed with equal accuracy, though with very different views. One is by Le Clerc (Biblioth. Univ. xii. pp. 208—318), the other by Tillemont, Mem. Eccles. iv. part pp. 76—459.

church. It was only in the third year of his administration that he had reason during a few months to recognize the severe edicts of Decius, the vigilance of the magistrate, and the clamors of the multitude. They all loudly demanded that Cyprian, the leader of the Christians, should be thrown to the lions. Prudence suggested the necessity of a temporary retreat, and the voice of prudence was obeyed. He withdrew himself into an obscure solitude, from where he could maintain a constant correspondence with the clergy and people of Carthage. He stayed in hiding until the storm was past, preserving his life without relinquishing either his power or his reputation. His extreme caution did not however escape the censure of the more rigid Christians. Nor did it escape the reproach of his personal enemies. Both groups lamented his conduct as a cowardly and criminal desertion of the most sacred duty.² The propriety of reserving himself for the future exigencies of the church, the example of several holy bishops,³ and the divine admonitions which, as he declares himself, he frequently received in visions and ecstasies, were the reasons alleged in his justification.—Cyprian, Epist. 16, and his Life by Pontius. But his best apology may be found in the cheerful resolution with which, about eight years afterward, he suffered death in the cause of religion. The authentic history of his martyrdom has been recorded with unusual candor and impartiality, A short abstract therefore of its most important circumstances will convey the clearest information of the spirit, and of the forms, of the Roman persecutions.⁴

AD 257: Cyprian's Banishment

When Valerian was consul for the third time, and Gallienus for the fourth, Paternus, proconsul of Africa (AD 257), summoned Cyprian to appear in his private council-chamber. He there acquainted him with the Imperial mandate which he had just received,¹ that those who had abandoned the Roman religion should immediately return to the practice of the ceremonies of their ancestors. Cyprian replied without hesitation that he was a Christian and a bishop, devoted to the worship of the true and only God, to whom he offered up his daily prayers for the safety and prosperity of the two emperors, his lawful sovereigns. With modest confidence he pleaded the privilege of a citizen, in refusing to give any answer to some evil and indeed illegal questions which the proconsul had proposed. A sentence of banishment was pronounced as the penalty of Cyprian's disobedience. He was immediately taken to Curubis, a free and maritime city of Zeugitania. It was a pleasant location, in fertile farmland, about 40 miles from Carthage.² The exiled bishop enjoyed the conveniences of life and the consciousness of virtue. His reputation spread over Africa and Italy. An account of his behavior was published for the edification of the Christian world (Cyprian. Epistol. 77, Edit. Fell), and his solitude was frequently interrupted by letters, visits, and congratulations of the faithful. On the arrival of a new proconsul in the

² See the polite but severe epistle of the clergy of Rome to the bishop of Carthage (Cyprian, Epist. 8, 9). Pontius labors with the greatest care and diligence to justify his master against the general censure.

³ In particular those of Dionysius of Alexandria and Gregory Thaumaturgus of Neo Caesarea. Euseb. Hist. Eccles. I. vi. ci. 40, and Mem. de Tillemont, iv. part ii. p. 685.

⁴ We have an original *Life of Cyprian* by the deacon Pontius, the companion of his exile, and the witness of his death. We also possess the ancient proconsular acts of his martyrdom. These two relations are consistent with each other, and with probability. What is remarkable, is they are both unsullied by any miraculous circumstances.

¹ It should seem that these were circular orders, sent at the same time to all the governors. Dionysius (Euseb. 1. vii. ci. ii) relates the history of his own banishment from Alexandria almost in the same manner. But as he escaped and survived the persecution, we must account him either more or less fortunate than Cyprian.

² Pliny, Hist. Natur. v. 3. Cellarias, Geograph. Antiq. part iii. p. 96. Shaw's Travels. p. 90, and for the adjacent country (which is terminated by Cape Bona, or the promontory of Mercury), l'Afrique de Marmol. ii. p. 494. There are the remains of an aqueduct near Curubis, or Curbis, at present changed to *Gurbes*.

province, the Cyprian's luck appeared for some time to wear a still more favorable aspect. He was recalled from banishment. Although not yet permitted to return to Carthage, his own gardens in the neighborhood of the capital were assigned for the place of his residence.³

His Condemnation

At length, exactly one year¹ after Cyprian was first apprehended, Galerius Maximus, proconsul of Africa, received the Imperial warrant for the execution of Christian teachers. The bishop of Carthage knew he would be singled out as one of the first victims. The frailty of his human nature tempted him to withdraw himself, by secret flight, from the danger and the honor of martyrdom. But soon recovering that courage which his character required, he returned to his gardens, and patiently expected the ministers of death. Two officers of rank, who were entrusted with that commission, placed Cyprian between them in a chariot. As the proconsul was not then at leisure, they took him, not to a prison, but to a private house in Carthage, which belonged to one of them. An elegant supper was provided for the pastor's entertainment, and his Christian friends were permitted for the last time to enjoy his society. All the while, the streets were filled with a multitude of the faithful, anxious and alarmed at the approaching fate of their spiritual father.² In the morning he appeared before the tribunal of the proconsul, who, after informing himself of Cyprian's name and situation, commanded him to offer sacrifice, and pressed him to reflect on the consequences of his disobedience. Cyprian's refusal was firm and decisive. The magistrate, when he had taken the opinion of his council, pronounced with some reluctance the sentence of death. It was conceived in the following terms: "That Thascius Cyprianus should be immediately beheaded, as the enemy of the gods of Rome, and as the chief and ringleader of a criminal association, which he had seduced into an impious resistance against the laws of the most holy emperors, Valerian and Gallienus."³ The manner of his execution was the mildest and least painful that could be inflicted on a person convicted of any capital offence. Nor was torture used to obtain Cyprian's recantation of his principles or who his accomplices were.

His Martyrdom

As soon as the sentence was proclaimed, a general cry of "We will die with him," arose at once among the listening multitude of Christians who waited before the palace gates. The generous effusions of their zeal and affection neither helped Cyprian nor endangered themselves. He was led away under a guard of tribunes and centurions, without resistance or insult, to the place of his execution, a spacious and level plain near the city, which was already filled with great numbers of spectators. His faithful presbyters and deacons were permitted to accompany their holy bishop. They assisted him in laying aside his upper garment, spread linen on the ground to catch the precious relics of his blood, and received his orders to give 25 pieces of gold to the executioner. The martyr then covered his face with his hands, and at one blow his head

³ Upon his conversion, he had sold those gardens for the benefit of the poor. The indulgence of God (most probably the liberality of some Christian friend) restored them to Cyprian. Pontius, ci. 15.

¹ A year prior, when Cyprian was sent into exile, he dreamed that he should be put to death the next day. The event made it necessary to explain that word as signifying a year. Pontius, ci. 12.

² Pontius (c. 15) acknowledges that Cyprian, with whom he ate, spent the night quietly. The bishop exercised a last and very proper act of jurisdiction, by directing that the younger females, who watched in the street, should be removed from the dangers and temptations of a nocturnal crowd, Act. Proconsularia. ci. 2.

³ See the original sentence in the Acts, c. 4, and in Pontius, c. 17. The later expresses it in a more rhetorical manner.

was separated from his body. His corpse remained during some hours exposed to the curiosity of the Gentiles. That night it was removed and transported in a triumphal procession and with a splendid illumination to the burial-place of the Christians. Cyprian's funeral was publicly celebrated without any interruption from the Roman magistrates. Those among the faithful who had performed the last offices to his person and his memory were secure from the danger of inquiry or of punishment. It is remarkable that of so great a multitude of bishops in the province of Africa, Cyprian was the first who was esteemed worthy to obtain the crown of martyrdom.⁴

It was in Cyprian's choice to either die a martyr or to live as an apostate, but those choices depended on the alternative of honor or infamy. Could we suppose that the bishop of Carthage had employed the profession of the Christian faith only as the instrument of his avarice or ambition, it was still incumbent on him to support the character which he had assumed.⁵ If he did indeed possess the smallest degree of manly fortitude, he chose rather to expose himself to the most cruel tortures than, by a single act, exchange the reputation of a whole life for the abhorrence of his Christian brethren and the contempt of the Gentile world. But if the zeal of Cyprian was supported by the sincere conviction of the truth of those doctrines which he preached, the crown of martyrdom must have appeared to him as an object of desire rather than of terror. It is not easy to extract any distinct ideas from the vague though eloquent declamations of the Fathers, or to ascertain the degree of immortal glory and happiness which they confidently promised to those who were so fortunate as to shed their blood in the cause of religion.⁶ They instilled with tasteful diligence that the fire of martyrdom supplied every defect and expiated every sin. While the souls of ordinary Christians were obliged to pass through a slow and painful purification, martyrs entered into the immediate fruition of eternal bliss, where, in the society of the patriarchs, apostles, and prophets, they reigned with Christ, and acted as his assessors in the universal judgment of mankind. The assurance of a lasting reputation upon earth, a motive so congenial to the vanity of human nature, often served to animate the courage of the martyrs. The honors which Rome or Athens bestowed on those citizens who had fallen in the cause of their country, were cold and unmeaning demonstrations of respect, when compared with the ardent gratitude and devotion which the primitive church expressed toward the victorious champions of the faith. The annual commemoration of their virtues and sufferings was observed as a sacred ceremony, and at length terminated in religious worship. Among the Christians who had publicly confessed their religious principles, those who (as it very frequently happened) had been dismissed from the tribunal or the prisons of the Pagan magistrates obtained such honors as were justly due to their imperfect martyrdom and their generous resolution. The most pious females courted the permission of imprinting kisses on the shackles they had worn, and on the wounds which they had received. Their persons were esteemed holy, their decisions were admitted with deference, and they too often abused, by their spiritual pride and licentious manners, the pre-eminence which their zeal and intrepidity had acquired.⁷ Distinctions like these, while they display the exalted merit, betray the small number of those who suffered and died for professing

⁴ Pontius, ci. 19. M. de Tillemont (Mem. iv. part i. p. 450, note 50) is not pleased with too positive an exclusion of any former martyrs from the ranks of elders.

⁵ Whatever opinion we may entertain of the character or principles of Thomas Becket, we must acknowledge that he suffered death with a constancy worthy of the primitive martyrs. Lord Lyttelton's, *History of Henry II*, vol. ii. p. 592, etc.

⁶ Cyprian de Lapsis, pp. 87—98. Edit. Fell. The learning of Dodwell (Dissertat. Cyprianic. xii. xiii.), and the ingenuity of Middleton (Free Inquiry, p. 162, etc.), have left scarcely anything to add concerning the merit, honors, and motives of the martyrs.

⁷ Cyprian. Epistol. 5, 6, 7. 22, 24, and de Unitat. Ecclesiae. The number of pretended martyrs has been very much multiplied by the custom which was introduced of bestowing that honorable name on confessors.

Christianity.

Ardor of the First Christians

The sober discretion of the present age will more readily disapprove than admire the fervor of the first Christians. Today's culture can more easily admire them than imitate them. According to the lively expression of Sulpicius Severus, they desired martyrdom more eagerly than his own people desired a pope.¹ The epistles which Ignatius composed as he was carried in chains through the cities of Asia, breathe sentiments the most repugnant to the ordinary feelings of human nature. He earnestly beseeches the Romans that, when he should be exposed in the amphitheater, they would not, by their kind but unseasonable intercession, deprive him of the crown of glory. He declares his resolution to provoke and irritate the wild beasts which might be employed as the instruments of his death.² Some stories are related of the courage of martyrs who actually performed what Ignatius had intended. He exasperated the fury of the lions, pressed the executioner to hasten his office, cheerfully leaped into the fires which were kindled to consume them, and discovered a sensation of joy and pleasure in the midst of the most exquisite tortures. Several examples have been preserved of a zeal impatient of those restraints which the emperors had provided for the security of the church. The Christians sometimes supplied by their voluntary declaration the want of an accuser, rudely disturbed the public service of Paganism,³ and rushing in crowds round the tribunal of the magistrates, called upon them to pronounce and to inflict the sentence of the law. The behavior of the Christians was too remarkable to escape the notice of the ancient philosophers; but they viewed it more with astonishment rather than admiration. Incapable of conceiving the motives which sometimes transported the fortitude of believers beyond the bounds of prudence or reason, they treated such an eagerness to die as the strange result of obstinate despair, stupid insensibility, or superstitious frenzy.⁴ "Unhappy men," exclaimed the proconsul Antoninus to the Christians of Asia, "unhappy men, if you are thus weary of your lives, is it so difficult for you to find ropes and precipices?"⁵ He was extremely cautious (as it is observed by a learned and pious historian) of punishing men who had found no accusers but themselves. The Imperial laws had no provision for so unexpected a case. Condemning a few as a warning to their brethren, therefore, he dismissed the multitude with indignation and contempt.—Mosheim, *de Rebus Christ. ante Constantin.* p. 235. Notwithstanding this real or affected disdain, the bold determination of the faithful was productive of more salutary effects on those minds which nature or grace had disposed for the reception of religious truth. On these sad occasions, there were many among the Gentiles who pitied, admired, and were converted. The generous enthusiasm was communicated from the sufferer to the spectators. The blood of martyrs, according to a well-known observation, became

¹ Latin text omitted.

² *Epist. ad Roman.* c. 4, 5, ap. *Patres Apostol.* ii. p. 27. Bishop Pearson (*Vindiciae Ignatiante.* part ii. c. 9) justifies the sentiments of Ignatius by a profusion of examples and authorities.

³ The story of Polyuctes, on which Corneille has founded a very beautiful tragedy, is one of the most celebrated, though not perhaps the most authentic, instances of this excessive zeal. We should observe that the 60th canon of the Council of Illiberis refuses the title of martyrs to those who exposed themselves to death by publicly destroying the idols.

⁴ Epictetus, 1. iv. c. I (though there is some doubt whether he alludes to the Christians) Marcus Antoninus *de Rebus suis*, 1. xi. c. 3. Lucian in *Peregrin.*

⁵ Tertullian *ad Scapul.* c. 5. The learned are divided between three persons of the same name who were all proconsuls of Asia. I am inclined to ascribe this story to Antoninus Pius, who was afterward emperor; and who may have governed Asia, under the reign of Trajan.

the seed of the church.

But although devotion had raised, and eloquence continued to inflame, this fever of the mind, it slowly gave way to the more natural hopes and fears of the human heart: the love of life, the apprehension of pain, the horror of destruction. The more prudent rulers of the church found themselves obliged to restrain the indiscrete ardor of their followers, and to distrust a resolution which too often abandoned them in the hour of trial.—The Church of Smyrna, ap. Euseb. Hist. Eccles. 1. iv. c. 15. As the faithful became less repentant and more worldly, becoming a martyr became more undesirable. There were three ways of escaping the flames of persecution, which were not attended with an equal degree of guilt. The first and foremost was that you were innocent—you weren't a Christian to begin with. The second way of avoiding persecution was that the charges were of a doubtful, or at least excusable nature. The third implied a direct and criminal apostasy from the Christian faith.

1. A modern inquisitor would hear with surprise that whenever information was given to a Roman magistrate of any person within his jurisdiction who had embraced the sect of the Christians, the accused party was informed of the charge. A convenient time was allowed him to settle his domestic concerns, and to prepare an answer to the crime which was imputed to him.⁶ If he entertained any doubt of his faith, this delay afforded him the opportunity of preserving his life and honor by flight, of withdrawing himself into some obscure retirement or some distant province, and of patiently expecting the return of peace and security. A measure so agreeable to reason was soon authorized by the advice and example of church leaders. It seems to have been censured by few, except by the Montanists, who deviated into heresy by their strict and obstinate adherence to the rigor of ancient discipline.⁷
2. The provincial governors, whose zeal was less prevalent than their avarice, had countenanced the practice of selling certificates (or libels as they were called), which attested that the persons therein mentioned had complied with the laws, and sacrificed to the Roman deities. By producing these false declarations, wealthy Christians who were and afraid could silence the malice of an informer, and reconcile in some measure their safety with their religion. A slight penance atoned for this blasphemous hypocrisy.⁸
3. In every persecution there were great numbers of unworthy Christians, who publicly disowned or renounced the faith they had professed. They confirmed the sincerity of their denial by burning incense or offering sacrifices as proof. Some of these apostates yielded at the first sign or warning of the magistrate, while the patience of others had been subdued by the length and repetition of tortures. The frightened looks of some betrayed their inward remorse, while others advanced with confidence and willingness to the

⁶ In the second apology of Justin, there is a particular and very curious instance of this legal delay. The same indulgence was granted to accused Christians in the persecution of Decius.

⁷ Tertullian considers flight from persecution as an imperfect, but very criminal, apostasy, as an impious attempt to elude the will of God, etc., etc. He has written a treatise on this subject (pp. 536—544, Edit. Rigalt), which is filled with the wildest fanaticism and most incoherent declamation. It is, however, somewhat remarkable that Tertullian did not suffer martyrdom himself.

⁸ The *Libellatici*, who are chiefly known by Cyprian's writings, are described with the utmost precision, in the copious commentary of Mosheim, pp. 483—489.

pagan altars.⁹ But the disguise, which fear had brought, lasted no longer than the present danger. As soon as the severity of the persecution was over, church doors were assailed by the returning multitude of penitents, who detested their idolatrous submission. They begged with equal ardor, but unequal success, to be readmitted into fellowship with other Christians.¹⁰

Alternatives of Severity and Toleration; The Ten Persecutions

Notwithstanding the general rules established for the conviction and punishment of the Christians, their fate, in an extensive and arbitrary government, must still, in a great measure, have depended on their own behavior, the circumstances of the times, and the temper of their supreme as well as subordinate rulers. Zeal might sometimes provoke, and prudence might sometimes avert or assuage, the superstitious fury of the Pagans. A variety of motives might dispose the provincial governors either to enforce or to relax the execution of the laws. Of these motives, the most forcible was their regard not only for the public edicts, but for the secret intentions of the emperor, a glance from whose eye was sufficient to kindle or to extinguish the flames of persecution. As often as any occasional severity was exercised in the different parts of the empire, the primitive Christians lamented and perhaps magnified their own sufferings. But the celebrated number of ten persecutions has been determined by the ecclesiastical writers of the 5th Century, who possessed a more distinct view of the prosperous or adverse fortunes of the church, from the age of Nero to that of Diocletian. The ingenious parallels of the ten plagues of Egypt, and the ten horns of the Apocalypse, first suggested this calculation to their minds; and in their application of the faith of prophecy to the truth of history they were careful to select those reigns which were indeed the most hostile to the Christian cause.¹ But these transient persecutions served only to revive the zeal and restore the discipline of the faithful. The moments of extraordinary rigor were compensated by much longer intervals of peace and security. The indifference of some princes, and the indulgence of others, permitted the Christians to enjoy, though not perhaps a legal, yet an actual and public toleration of their religion.

Supposed Edicts of Tiberius and Marcus Antoninus

Tertullian's apology contains two very ancient, very singular, but at the same time very suspicious instances of Imperial clemency. The edicts published by Tiberius and Marcus Antoninus, were designed to not only protect the innocence of the Christians, but even proclaim those stupendous miracles which had attested the truth of their doctrine. The first of these examples is attended with some difficulties which might perplex the skeptical mind.¹ We are required to believe several things:

⁹ Among these deserters were many priests and elders.

¹⁰ It was on this occasion that Cyprian wrote his treatise *De Lapsis*, and many of his epistles. The controversy concerning the treatment of penitent does not occur among the Christians of the preceding century. Shall we ascribe this to the superiority of their faith and courage, or to our less intimate knowledge of their history?

¹ Mosheim, p. 97. Sulpicius Severus was the first author of this computation; though he seemed desirous of reserving the tenth and greatest persecution for the coming of the Antichrist.

¹ The testimony given by Pontius Pilate is first mentioned by Justin. The successive improvements which the story has acquired (as it passed through the hands of Tertullian, Eusebius, Epiphanius, Chrysostom, Orosimius, Gregory of Tours, and the authors of the several editions of the acts of Pilate) are very fairly stated by Dom. Calmet, *Dissertat. sur l'Écriture*, iii. p. 651, etc.

- Pontius Pilate informed the emperor of the unjust sentence of death which he had pronounced against an innocent, and, as it appeared, a divine person.
- Without acquiring the merit, he (Pilate) exposed himself to the danger of martyrdom.
- Tiberius, who avowed his contempt for all religion, immediately conceived the design of placing the Jewish Messiah among the gods of Rome.
- His servile senate ventured to disobey the commands of their master.
- Tiberius, instead of resenting their refusal, contented himself with protecting the Christians from the severity of the laws, many years before such laws were enacted, or before the church had assumed any distinct name or existence.
- The memory of this extraordinary transaction was preserved in the most public and authentic records, which escaped the knowledge of the historians of Greece and Rome, and were only visible to the eyes of an African Christian, who composed his apology 160 years after the death of Tiberius.

The edict of Marcus Antoninus is supposed to have been the effect of his devotion and gratitude for the miraculous deliverance which he had obtained in the Marcomannic war. The distress of the legions, the seasonable tempest of rain and hail, thunder and lightning, and the dismay and defeat of the barbarians, have been celebrated by the eloquence of several Pagan writers. If there were any Christians in that army, it was natural that they should ascribe some merit to the fervent prayers, which, in the moment of danger, they had offered up for their own and the public safety. But we are still assured by monuments of brass and marble, by the Imperial medals, and by the Antonine column, that neither the prince nor the people entertained any sense of this signal obligation, since they unanimously attribute their deliverance to the providence of Jupiter, and to the interposition of Mercury. During the whole course of his reign, Marcus despised the Christians as a philosopher and punished them as a sovereign.²

State of the Christians In The Reigns of Commodus and Severus

By a singular fatality, the hardships which they had endured under the government of a virtuous prince immediately ceased on the accession of a tyrant, and as none except themselves had experienced the injustice of Marcus, so they alone were protected by the lenity of Commodus (AD 180). The celebrated Marcia, the most favored of his concubines, and who at length contrived the murder of her Imperial lover, entertained a singular affection for the oppressed church. Although it was impossible that she could reconcile the practice of vice with the precepts of the Gospel, she might hope to atone for the frailties of her sex and profession by declaring herself the patroness of the Christians.³ Under the gracious protection of Marcia, they passed 13 years of a cruel tyranny in safety; and when the empire was established in the house of Severus, they formed a domestic but more honorable connection with the new court. The emperor was persuaded that, in a dangerous sickness, he had derived some benefit, either spiritual or physical, from the holy oil with which one of his slaves had anointed him. He always treated with peculiar distinction several persons of both sexes who had embraced the new religion. The nurse as well as the preceptor of Caracalla were Christians; and if that young prince

² On this miracle of the thundering legion, as it is commonly called, see the admirable criticism of Mr. Moyle, in his Works, ii. pp. 81—390.

³ Dion Cassius, or rather his abbreviator Xiphilin, l. lxxii. p. 1206. Mr. Moyle (p. 2G6) has explained the condition of the church under the reign of Commodus.

ever betrayed a sentiment of humanity, it was occasioned by an incident which, however trifling, bore some relation to the cause of Christianity.⁴ Under the reign of Severus, the fury of the populace was checked, the rigor of ancient laws was for some time suspended, and the provincial governors were satisfied with receiving an annual present from the churches within their jurisdiction, as the price or as the reward of their moderation.⁵ The controversy concerning the precise time of the celebration of Easter armed the bishops of Asia and Italy against each other, and was considered as the most important business of this period of leisure and tranquillity.—Euseb. 1. v. c. 23, 24; Mosheim, pp. 435—447. Nor was the peace of the church interrupted until (AD 198) the increasing numbers of proselytes seem at length to have attracted the attention and alienated the mind of Severus. With the design of restraining the progress of Christianity, he published an edict which, though it was designed to affect only the new converts, could not be carried into strict execution without exposing to danger and punishment the most zealous of their teachers and missionaries. In this mitigated persecution we may still discover the indulgent spirit of Rome and of Polytheism, which so readily admitted every excuse in favor of those who practiced the religious ceremonies of their fathers.⁶

AD 211-249: Successors of Severus

But the laws which Severus had enacted soon expired with his authority. After this accidental tempest, the Christians enjoyed a calm of 38 years (AD 211—249).⁷ Up until that time, they had usually held their assemblies in private houses and sequestered places. They were now permitted to erect and consecrate convenient edifices for the purpose of religious worship.⁸ They could now purchase lands, even in Rome itself, for the use of the community. They were able to elect their ecclesiastical ministers in public, and at the same time in so exemplary a manner as to deserve the respectful attention of the Gentiles.⁹ This long repose of the church was accompanied with dignity. The reigns of those princes who derived their extraction from the Asiatic provinces proved the most favorable to the Christians. The eminent persons of the sect, instead of being reduced to implore the protection of a slave or concubine, were admitted into the palace in the honorable characters of priests and philosophers. Their mysterious doctrines, which were already diffused among the people, slowly attracted the curiosity of their ruler. When the empress Mamaea passed through Antioch, she expressed a desire of conversing with the celebrated Origen, the fame of whose piety and learning was spread over the East. Origen obeyed so flattering an invitation, and though he could not expect to succeed in the conversion of an artful and ambitious woman, she listened with pleasure to his eloquent exhortations, and honorably

⁴ Compare the Life of Caracalla, in the Augustan History, with the epistle of Tertullian to Scapula. Dr. Jortin (Remarks on Eccles. Hist. ii. p. 5, etc.) considers the cure of Severus, by the means of holy oil, with a strong desire to convert it into a miracle.

⁵ Tertullian de Fugâ, c. 13. The present was made during the feast of the Saturnalia; and it is a matter of serious concern to Tertullian that the faithful should be confused with the most infamous professions which purchased the connivance of the government.

⁶ Latin text omitted.

⁷ Sulpicius Severus, 1. ii. p. 384. This computation (allowing for a single exception) is confirmed by the history of Eusebius, and by the writings of Cyprian.

⁸ The antiquity of Christian places of worship is discussed by Tillemont (Mem. Eccles. iii. part ii. pp. 68—72), and by Mr. Moyle (i. pp. 378—398). The former refers the first construction of them to the peace of Alexander Severus; the latter, to the peace of Gallienus.

⁹ Aug. Hist. p. 130. The emperor Alexander adopted their method of publicly proposing the names of those persons who were candidates for ordination. It is true that the honor of this practice is likewise attributed to the Jews.

dismissed him to his retirement in Palestine.¹⁰ The sentiments of Mamaea were adopted by her son Alexander, whose philosophic devotion was marked by a singular but injudicious regard for the Christian religion. In his domestic chapel he placed statues of Abraham, Orpheus, Apollonius, and Christ, as an honor justly due to those respectable sages who had instructed mankind in the various modes of addressing their homage to the supreme and universal Deity.¹¹ A purer faith, as well as worship, was openly professed and practiced among his household. Bishops, perhaps for the first time, were seen at court. After Alexander's death (AD 235), when the inhuman Maximin discharged his fury on the favorites and servants of his unfortunate benefactor, a great number of Christians of every rank and gender, were involved in the promiscuous massacre which, on their account, has improperly received the name of Persecution.¹²

AD 244: Maximin, Philip and Decius

In spite of Maximin's cruel disposition, the effects of his resentment against the Christians were of a very local and temporary nature. The pious Origen, who had been marked for death, was still reserved to convey the truths of the Gospel to the ear of monarchs.¹ He addressed several edifying letters to the emperor Philip, his wife, and his mother. As soon as that prince, who was born in the neighborhood of Palestine, had usurped the Imperial scepter, the Christians acquired a friend and a protector. The public and even partial favor of Philip toward the sectaries of the new religion, and his constant reverence for the ministers of the church, gave some color to the suspicion, which prevailed in his own times, that the emperor himself had converted to the faith² (AD 244). It also afforded some grounds for a fable which was afterward invented, that he had been purified by confession and penance from the guilt contracted by the murder of his innocent predecessor.³ The fall of Philip (AD 249) introduced, with the change of masters, a new system of government so oppressive to the Christians that their former condition, ever since the time of Domitian, was represented as a state of perfect freedom and security, if compared with the rigorous treatment which they experienced under the short reign of Decius.⁴ The virtues of

¹⁰ Euseb. Hist. Eccles. 1. vi. c. 21. Hieronym. de Script. Eceles. c. 54. Mamaea was styled a holy and pious woman, both by the Christians and the Pagans. From the former, therefore, it was impossible that she should deserve that honorable epithet.

¹¹ Aug. Hist. p. 123. Mosheim (p. 465) seems to refine too much on Alexander's domestic religion. His design of building a public temple to Christ (Hist. Aug. p. 129), and the object which was suggested either to him, or in similar circumstances to Hadrian, appear to have no other foundation than an improbable report, invented by the Christians and credulously adopted by a historian during the time of Constantine.

¹² Euseb. 1. vi. c. 28. It may be presumed that the success of the Christians had exasperated the increasing bigotry of the Pagans. Dion Cassius, who composed his history under the former reign, had most probably intended for the use of his master those counsels of persecution, which he ascribes to a better age and to the favorite of Augustus. Concerning this oration of Maecenas, or rather of Dion, I may refer to my own unbiased opinion (p. 55, note 19 of this volume), and to the Abbé de la Bletterie (Mem. de l'Acad. xxiv. p. 303, xxv. p. 432).

¹ Orosius, 1. vii. c. 19, mentions Origen as the object of Maximin's resentment; and Firmilianus, a Cappadocian bishop of that age, gives a just and confined idea of this persecution (Cyprian. Epist. 75).

² The mention of those princes who were publicly supposed to be Christians, as we find it in an epistle of Dionysius of Alexandria (Euseb. I. vii. c. 10), evidently alludes to Philip and his family; and forms a contemporary evidence that such a report had prevailed; but the Egyptian bishop, who lived near the court of Rome, expresses himself with a becoming diffidence concerning the truth of the fact. Origen's epistles (which were extant in the time of Eusebius, 1. vi. c. 36) would most probably decide this curious, rather than important, question.

³ Euseb. 1. vi. c. 34. The story, as is usual, has been embellished by succeeding writers, and is confuted, with much superfluous learning, by Frederick Spanheim (Opera Varia, ii. p. 120, etc.).

⁴ Latin text omitted.

that prince will scarcely allow us to suspect that he was actuated by a mean resentment against the favorites of his predecessor. Additionally, it is more reasonable to believe that, in the prosecution of his general design to restore the purity of Roman manners, he was desirous of delivering the empire from what he condemned as a recent and criminal superstition. The bishops of the most considerable cities were removed by exile or death. The vigilance of the magistrates prevented the clergy of Rome during 16 months from proceeding to a new election. It was of the Christians' opinion that the emperor would more patiently endure a competitor for the purple than a bishop in the capital.⁵ Were it possible to suppose that the penetration of Decius had discovered pride under the disguise of humility, or that he could foresee the temporal dominion which might rise from the claims of spiritual authority, we might be less surprised that he should consider the successors of St. Peter as the most formidable rivals to those of Augustus.

AD 253-260: Valerian, Gallienus, and His Successors

Valerian's administration was distinguished by a flippancy and inconstancy ill-suited to the gravity of the Roman Censor. In the first part of his reign (AD 253—260) he surpassed in clemency those princes who had been suspected of an attachment to the Christian faith. In the last 3½ years, listening to the insinuations of a minister addicted to the superstitions of Egypt, he adopted the maxims and imitated the severity of his predecessor Decius.¹ The accession of Gallienus, which increased the calamities of the empire, restored peace to the church. The Christians obtained the free exercise of their religion by an edict addressed to the bishops, and conceived in such terms as seemed to acknowledge their office and public character.² The ancient laws, without being formally repealed, sank into oblivion. Except for some hostile intentions which are attributed to the emperor Aurelian³ the disciples of Christ lived more than 40 years in a state of prosperity far more dangerous to their virtue than the severest trials of persecution.

AD 260: Paul of Samosata; His Manners

The story of Paul of Samosata, who was the metropolitan bishop of Antioch (AD 260) while the East was in the hands of Odenathus and Zenobia, may serve to illustrate the condition and character of the times. His wealth was sufficient evidence of his guilt, since it came neither from the inheritance of his fathers nor acquired by the arts of honest industry. Paul considered the service of the church as a very lucrative profession.¹ His ecclesiastical jurisdiction was venal and

⁵ Euseb. 1. vi. c. 39. Cyprian. Epistol. 55. The Rome bishop remained vacant from the martyrdom of Fabianus, Jan. 20, AD 250, until the election of Cornelius, June 4, AD 251. Decius had probably left Rome, since he was killed before the end of that year.

¹ Euseb. 1. vii. c. 10. Mosheim (p. 548) has very clearly shown that the Prefect Macrianus and the Egyptian *Magus* are one and the same person.

² Euseb. (1. vii. c. 13) gives us a Greek version of this Latin edict, which seems to have been very concise. By another edict he directed that the Caemeteria (cemetary) be restored to the Christians.

³ Euseb. 1. vii. c. 30. Lactantius de M. P. c. 6. Hieronym. in Chron. p. 177. Orosius, L vii. c. 23. Their language is in general so ambiguous and incorrect that we are at a loss to determine how far Aurelian had carried his intentions before he was assassinated. Most of the moderns (except Dodwell, Dissertat. Cyprian. xi. 64) have seized the occasion of gaining a few extraordinary martyrs.

¹ Paul preferred the title of *Ducenarius* rather than bishop. The *Ducenarius* was an Imperial representative, so called from his salary of 200 *Sestertia*, or £1,600 a year. (Salmasius ad Hist. Aug. p. 124). Some critics suppose that the bishop of Antioch had actually obtained such an office from Zenobia, while others consider it only as a figurative

rapacious. He extorted frequent contributions from the wealthiest Christians, and converted to his own use a considerable part of the public revenue. By his pride and luxury, the Christian religion was seen as despicable in the eyes of the Gentiles. His council-chamber and his throne, the splendor with which he appeared in public, the suppliant crowd who solicited his attention, the multitude of letters and petitions to which he dictated his answers, and the perpetual hurry of business in which he was involved, were circumstances much better suited to the state of a civil magistrate than to the humility of a primitive pastor.² When he harangued his people from the pulpit, Paul affected the figurative style and the theatrical gestures of an Asiatic know-it-all, while the cathedral resounded with the loudest and most extravagant acclamations in the praise of his divine eloquence. Against those who resisted his power, or refused to flatter his vanity, Paul was arrogant, rigid, and inexorable. However, he relaxed the discipline and lavished the treasures of the church on his dependent clergy. Paul indulged himself very freely in the pleasures of the table, and he retained two young and beautiful women as constant companions of his leisure moments.³

AD 270: Paul Is Relieved of Duty As Bishop of Antioch

Notwithstanding these scandalous vices, if Paul of Samosata had preserved the purity of the orthodox faith his reign over Syria's capital would have ended at his death. Had a seasonable persecution intervened, an effort of courage might perhaps have placed him in the rank of saints and martyrs. Some nice and subtle errors concerning the doctrine of the Trinity, which he imprudently adopted and obstinately maintained, excited the zeal and indignation of the Eastern churches.¹ From Egypt to the Euxine Sea, the elders were in arms and in motion. Several councils were held, apologetics were published, excommunications were pronounced, ambiguous explanations were by turns accepted and refused, and treaties were made and violated. At length (AD 270) Paul of Samosata was ousted from his office by the sentence of 70 or 80 elders, who assembled for that purpose at Antioch, and who, without consulting the rights of the clergy or people, appointed a successor by their own authority. The distinct irregularity of this proceeding increased the numbers of the discontented faction. As Paul, who was no stranger to the arts of courts, had insinuated himself into the favor of Zenobia, he stayed more than 4 years the possession of his house and office. Aurelian's victory changed the face of the East, and the two contending parties, who applied to each other the epithets of schism and heresy, were either commanded or permitted to plead their cause before the tribunal of the conqueror. This public and very singular trial affords a convincing proof that the existence, property, privileges, and internal policy of the Christians were acknowledged, if not by the laws, at least by the magistrates of the empire. As a Pagan and soldier, it could scarcely be expected that Aurelian should enter into the discussion whether Paul's sentiments or those of his adversaries were most agreeable to the true standard of the orthodox faith. His determination, however, was founded on

expression of his pomp and insolence.

² Profiting from ecclesiastic preferment's did exist in those times, and the clergy sometimes bought what they intended to sell. It appears that the elder's office in Carthage was purchased by a wealthy matron named Lucilla for her servant Majorinus. The price was 400 *Folles*. (Monument. Antiq. ad calcem Optati, p. 263). Every *Follis* contained 125 pieces of silver, and the whole sum may be computed at about £2,400.

³ If we want to forgive this man's vices, we have to suspect that the other bishops of the East may have circulated the most malicious lies in published epistles addressed to all the churches of the empire (ap. Euseb. 1. vii. c. 30).

¹ His heresy (like those of Noetus and Sabellius, in the same century) tended to confound the mysterious distinction of the Divine persons. Mosheim, p. 702, etc.

the general principles of equity and reason. He considered the bishops of Italy as the most impartial and respectable judges among the Christians, and as soon as he was informed that they had unanimously approved the sentence of the council, he agreed to their opinion. In AD 274, he immediately gave orders that Paul relinquish the temporal possessions belonging to an office of which, in the judgment of his brethren, he had been regularly deprived. But while we applaud the justice we should not overlook the policy of Aurelian, who was desirous of restoring and cementing the dependence of the provinces on the capital by every means which could bind the interest or prejudices of any part of his subjects.²

AD 284-303: Peace and Prosperity of the Church Under Diocletian

Amid the frequent revolutions of the empire, the Christians still flourished in peace and prosperity. Nonetheless, a celebrated era of martyrs has been deduced from the accession of Diocletian (AD 284—303).¹ The new system of policy, introduced and maintained by the wisdom of that prince, continued, during more than 18 years, to breathe the mildest and most liberal spirit of religious toleration. The mind of Diocletian himself was less adapted indeed to speculative inquiries than to the active labors of war and government. His prudence rendered him averse to any great innovation, and though his temper was not very susceptible of zeal or enthusiasm, he always maintained a habitual regard for the ancient deities of the empire. But the leisure of the two empresses, his wife Prisca, and Valeria his daughter, permitted them to listen with more attention and respect to the truths of Christianity, which in every age has acknowledged its important obligations to female devotion.² The principal eunuchs, Lucian³ and Dorotheus, Gorgonius and Andrew, who attended Diocletian, possessed his favor, and governed the household, protected the faith they had embraced by their powerful influence. Their example was imitated by many of the most considerable officers of the palace, who, in their respective stations, had the care of the Imperial ornaments, the robes, furniture, jewels, and even private treasury. Although it might sometimes be incumbent on them to accompany the emperor when he sacrificed in the temple (Lactantius de M. P. c. 10), they enjoyed the free exercise of the Christian religion with their wives, children and slaves. Diocletian and his colleagues frequently conferred the most important offices on those persons who avowed their abhorrence for the worship of the gods, but who had displayed abilities proper for the service of the state. The bishops held an honorable rank in their respective provinces, and were treated with distinction and respect, not only by the people, but by the magistrates themselves. In almost every city the ancient churches were found insufficient to contain the increasing multitude of proselytes. In their place more stately and capacious edifices were erected for the public worship of the faithful. The corruption of manners and principles, so forcibly lamented by Eusebius,⁴ may be considered, not only as a consequence, but as a proof, of the liberty which the Christians enjoyed and abused under the reign of Diocletian. Prosperity had relaxed the nerves of discipline. Fraud,

² Euseb. Hist. Ecclesiast. l. vii. c. 30. We are entirely indebted to him for the curious story of Paul of Samosata.

¹ The Era of Martyrs, which is still in use among the Copts and the Abyssinians, must be reckoned from Aug. 29, 284. The beginning of the Egyptian year was 19 days earlier than the real accession of Diocletian. Dissertation préliminaire à l'Art de vérifier les Dates.

² Lactantius (de M. P. c. 15), implies their previous conversion to the faith, but it does not seem to justify Mosheim's assertion (p. 912) that they had been privately baptized.

³ M. de Tileniont (Memoires Ecclesiastiques, v. part i. pp. 11, 12) has quoted from the *Spicilegium* of Dom. Luc. d'Aelieri, a very curious instruction which bishop Theonas composed for Lucian's use.

⁴ Euseb. Hist. Eccles. l. viii. c. 1. The reader who consults the original will not accuse me of heightening the picture. Eusebius was about 16 years of age at the accession of the emperor Diocletian.

envy, and malice prevailed in every congregation. The elders aspired to the pastoral office, which every day became an object more worthy of their ambition. The bishops, who contended with each other for ecclesiastical pre-eminence, appeared by their conduct to claim a secular and tyrannical power in the church. The lively faith which still distinguished the Christians from the Gentiles reflected much less in their lives than in their controversial writings.

Progress of Zeal and Superstition Among the Pagans

Notwithstanding this seeming security, an attentive observer might discern some symptoms that threatened the church with a more violent persecution than any which she had yet endured. The zeal and rapid progress of the Christians awakened the Polytheists from their supine indifference in the cause of those deities whom custom and education had taught them to revere. The mutual provocations of a religious war, which had already gone on more than 200 years, wore out the animosity of the contending parties. The Pagans were incensed at the rashness of a recent and obscure sect, which presumed to accuse their countrymen of doctrinal error, and thus condemn their ancestors to eternal hell. The habits of justifying the popular mythology against the invectives of an implacable enemy produced in their minds some sentiments of faith and reverence for a system which they had been accustomed to consider with the most careless flippancy. The supernatural powers assumed by the church inspired at the same time terror and emulation. The followers of the established religion entrenched themselves behind a similar fortification of marvels. They invented new modes of sacrifice, expiation, and initiation.¹ They attempted to revive the credit of their expiring prophecies.² They also listened with eager credulity to every impostor who flattered their prejudices by a tale of wonders.³ Both parties seemed to acknowledge the truth of those miracles which were claimed by their adversaries. While they were contented with ascribing them to the arts of magic, and to the power of demons, they mutually concurred in restoring and establishing the reign of superstition.⁴ Philosophy, her most dangerous enemy, was now converted into her most useful ally. The groves of the Academy, the gardens of Epicurus, and even the portico of the Stoics, were almost deserted, as were many schools of skepticism or impiety.⁵ Many among the Romans desired that Cicero's writings be condemned and suppressed by the senate's authority.⁶ The prevailing sect of the new Platonicians judged it prudent to connect themselves with the priests, whom perhaps they

¹ We might quote, among a great number of instances, the mysterious worship of Mythras and the Taurobolla; the latter of which became fashionable in the time of the Antonines (*Dissertations of M. de Boze*, in the Mem. de l'Acad. des Inscip. ii. p. 443). The Romance of Apuleius is as full of devotion as of satire.

² The impostor Alexander very strongly recommended the oracle of Trophonius at Mallos, and those of Apollo at Claros and Miletus (Lucian, ii. p. 236. Edit. Reitz). The last of these, whose singular history would furnish a very curious episode, was consulted by Diocletian before he published his edicts of persecution (Lactantius de M. P. c. 11).

³ Besides the ancient stories of Pythagoras and Aristeas, the cures performed at the shrine of Aesculapius, and the fables related of Apollonius of Tyana, were frequently opposed to the miracles of Christ; though I agree with Dr. Larder (see *Testimonies*, iii. pp. 253, 352), that when Philostratus composed the Life of Apollonius he had no such intention.

⁴ Sadly, the Christian fathers acknowledged the supernatural, or, *infernal* parts of Paganism. As a result, they destroyed with their own hands the great advantage which we might have derived from the liberal concessions of our adversaries.

⁵ Julian (p. 301, edit. Spanheim) expresses a pious joy that the providence of the gods had extinguished the impious sects, and for the most part destroyed the books of the Pyrrhonians and Epicureans, which had been very numerous, since Epicurus himself composed no less than 300 volumes. Diogenes Laertius, 1. x. c. 26.

⁶ Latin text omitted.

despised, against the Christians, whom they had reason to fear. These fashionable philosophers prosecuted the design of extracting allegorical wisdom from the fictions of the Greek poets. They instituted mysterious rites of devotion for the use of their chosen disciples. They recommended the worship of the ancient gods as the emblems or ministers of the Supreme Deity, and composed against the faith of the Gospel many elaborate treatises,⁷ which have since been committed to the flames by the prudence of orthodox emperors.—Socrates, Hist. Eccles. L. i. c. . 9, and Cod. Justinian, 1. i. tit. 1. 1. 3.

Maximin and Galerius Punish A Few Christian Soldiers

Although Diocletian's policy and Constantius's humanity inclined them to keep the maxims of tolerance pure, it was soon discovered that their two associates, Maximian and Galerius, entertained the most implacable aversion for the name and religion of the Christians. The minds of those princes had never been enlightened by science. Education had never softened their temper. They owed their greatness to their swords, and in their most elevated fortune they still retained the superstitious prejudices of soldiers and peasants. In the general administration of the provinces they obeyed the laws which their benefactor had established. However, they frequently found occasions of exercising within their camp and palaces a secret persecution,¹ for which the careless zeal of the Christians sometimes offered the most ostensible pretences. A sentence of death was executed upon Maximilianus, an African youth, who had been produced by his own father before the magistrate as a sufficient and legal recruit, but who obstinately persisted in declaring that his conscience would not permit him to embrace the profession of a soldier.² It could scarcely be expected that any government should allow the action of Marcellus the Centurion to pass with permission. On the day of a public festival that officer threw away his belt, weapons, and the ensigns of his office, exclaiming in a loud voice that he would obey none but Jesus Christ the eternal King, and that he renounced forever the use of carnal weapons and the service of an idolatrous master. As soon as they recovered from their astonishment, the soldiers grabbed Marcellus. He was examined in the city of Tingi by the president of that part of Mauritania. Since he was convicted by his own confession, he was condemned and beheaded for the crime of desertion.—Acta Sincera, p. 302. Examples of such a nature savor much less of religious persecution than of martial or even civil law. However, they served to alienate the mind of the emperors, and justify the severity of Galerius, who dismissed a great number of Christian officers from their assignments. It authorized an opinion that a sect of enthusiasts which avowed principles so repugnant to the public safety must either remain useless, or would soon become dangerous subjects of the empire.

⁷ Lactantius (Divin. Institut. 1. v. c. 2, 3) gives a very clear and spirited account of two of these philosophic adversaries of the faith. The large treatise of Porphyry against the Christians consisted of thirty books, and was composed in Sicily about the year 270.

¹ Euseb. 1. viii. c. 4, c. 17. He limits the number of military martyrs, by a remarkable expression (Greek omitted), of which neither his Latin nor French translator have rendered the energy. Notwithstanding the authority of Eusebius, and the silence of Lactantius, Ambrose, Sulpicius, Orosius, etc., it has been long believed that the Thebaean legion, consisting of 6,000 Christians, suffered martyrdom by the order of Maximian, in the valley of the Pennine Alps. The story was first published about the middle of the 5th century, by Eucherius, bishop of Lyons, who received it from certain persons, who received it from Isaac, bishop of Geneva, who is said to have received it from Theodore, bishop of Octodurum. The Abbey of St. Maurice still subsists, a rich monument of the credulity of Sigismond, king of Burgundy. See an excellent Dissertation in the 36th volume of the *Biblioth. Raisonnée*, pp. 427—454.

² See the Acta Sincera, p. 299. The accounts of his martyrdom, and of that of Marcellus, bear every mark of truth and authenticity.

After the success of the Persian war had raised the hopes and the reputation of Galerius, he passed a winter with Diocletian in the palace of Nicomedia. The fate of Christianity became the object of their secret consultations.³ The experienced emperor was still inclined to pursue measures of lenity. Although he readily consented to exclude the Christians from holding any jobs in the household or army, he urged in the strongest terms the danger as well as cruelty of shedding the blood of those deluded fanatics. Galerius at length extorted from him the permission of summoning a council, composed of a few persons the most distinguished in the civil and military departments of the state. The important question was agitated in their presence, and those ambitious champions easily discerned that it was incumbent on them to second, by their eloquence, the importunate violence of the Caesar. It may be presumed that they insisted on every topic which might interest the pride, piety, or fears of their king in the destruction of Christianity. Perhaps they represented that the glorious work of the deliverance of the empire was left imperfect, as long as an independent people was permitted to subsist and multiply in the heart of the provinces. The Christians (it might falsely be alleged), renouncing the gods and the institutions of Rome, had constituted a distinct republic, which might yet be suppressed before it had acquired any military force; but which was already governed by its own laws and magistrates, was possessed of a public treasure, and was intimately connected in all its parts by the frequent assemblies of the bishops, to whose decrees their numerous and opulent congregations yielded an implicit obedience. Arguments like these may seem to have determined the reluctant mind of Diocletian to embrace a new system of persecution. Although we may suspect, it is not in our power to relate the secret intrigues of the palace, the private views and resentments, the jealousy of women or eunuchs, and all those trifling but decisive causes which so often influence the fate of empires and the counsels of the wisest monarchs.⁴

The pleasure of the emperors was at length signified to the Christians, who, during the course of this melancholy winter, had expected, with anxiety, the result of so many secret consultations. The February, 23rd AD 303, which coincided with the Roman festival of the Terminalia,⁵ was appointed (whether from accident or design) to set bounds to Christianity's progress. At the earliest dawn of day the Pretorian prefect,⁶ accompanied by several generals, tribunes, and officers of the revenue, went to the principal church of Nicomedia, which was situated on a hill in the most populous and beautiful part of the city. The doors were instantly broke open, and they rushed into the sanctuary. As they searched in vain for some visible object of worship, they were obliged to content themselves with setting fire to the volumes of Holy Scripture. The ministers of Diocletian were followed by a numerous body of guards and pioneers, who marched in order of battle, and were provided with all the instruments used in the destruction of fortified cities. By their incessant labor, a sacred edifice which towered above the Imperial palace, and had long excited the indignation and envy of the Gentiles, was leveled to the ground in a few hours.⁷

³ De M. P. c. 11. Lactantius (or whoever was the author of this little treatise) was at that time an inhabitant of Nicomedia; but it seems difficult to conceive how he could acquire so accurate a knowledge of what passed in the imperial cabinet.

⁴ The only circumstance which we can discover is the devotion and jealousy of the mother of Galerius. She had a great influence over her son, and was offended by the disregard of some of her Christian servants.

⁵ The worship and festival of the God Terminus are elegantly illustrated by M. de Boze. Mem. de l'Acad. des Inscriptions, i. p. 50.

⁶ Latin text omitted.

⁷ Lactantius de M. P. c. 12, gives a very lively picture of the destruction of the church.

AD 303: Demolition of the Church of Nicomedia

The next day the general edict of persecution was published.¹ Although still not wanting to spill blood, Diocletian had softened the fury of Galerius, who proposed that every one refusing to offer sacrifice should immediately be burned alive. The penalties inflicted on the obstinacy of the Christians might be deemed sufficiently rigorous and effectual. It was enacted that their churches in all the provinces of the empire should be demolished to their foundations. The punishment of death was denounced against all who should presume to hold any secret assemblies for the purpose of religious worship. The philosophers, who now assumed the unworthy office of directing the blind zeal of persecution, had diligently studied the nature and genius of the Christian religion. Since they were not ignorant that the speculative doctrines of the faith were supposed to be contained in the writings of the prophets, evangelists, and apostles, they most probably suggested the order that the elders and pastors deliver all their sacred books into the hands of the magistrates. These were commanded, under the severest penalties, to burn them in a public and solemn manner. By the same edict, all church property was at once confiscated. The several parts of which it might consist were either sold to the highest bidder, united to the Imperial domain, bestowed on the cities and corporations, or granted to the solicitations of rapacious court officials. After taking such effectual measures to abolish the worship, and to dissolve the government of the Christians, it was thought necessary to subject to the most intolerable hardships the condition of those perverse individuals who should still reject the religion of Nature, Rome, and their ancestors. Persons of a liberal birth were declared incapable of holding any honors or employment. Slaves were forever deprived of the hopes of freedom, and the whole body of the people were without the protection of the law. The judges were authorized to hear and to determine every action that was brought against a Christian. However, Christians were not permitted to complain of any injury which they themselves had suffered. Thus, those unfortunate “heretics” were exposed to the severity of public justice, while being excluded from its benefits. This new species of martyrdom, so painful and lingering, so obscure and ignominious, was, perhaps, the most proper to weary the constancy of the faithful. Nor can it be doubted that the passions and interest of mankind were disposed on this occasion to second the designs of the emperors. But the policy of a well-ordered government must sometimes have interposed in behalf of the oppressed Christians. Nor was it possible for the Roman princes entirely to remove the fear of punishment, or to connive at every act of fraud and violence, without exposing their own authority and the rest of their subjects to the most alarming dangers.²

Subsequent Edicts

This edict was barely shown to the public, in the most conspicuous place of Nicomedia, before it was torn down by the hands of a Christian, who expressed, at the same time, by the bitterest invectives, his as well as abhorrence for such impious and tyrannical governors. His offence, according to the mildest laws, amounted to treason and deserved death. And if it be true that he was a person of rank and education, those circumstances could serve only to aggravate his guilt. He was burned—or rather roasted—by a slow fire. His executioners, zealous to revenge the personal insult which had been offered to the emperors, exhausted every refinement of

¹ Mosheim (pp. 922—926), from many scattered passages of Lactantius and Eusebius, has collected a very just and accurate notion of this edict; though he sometimes deviates into conjecture and refinement.

² Many ages afterward, Edward I. practiced, with great success, the same mode of persecution against the clergy of England. Hume’s *History of England*, vol. ii. p. 300, 4to ed.

cruelty. They were unable, however, to subdue the victim's patience, or remove the steady and insulting smile which in his dying agonies he still maintained. The Christians, though they confessed that his conduct had not been strictly conformable to the laws of prudence, admired the divine fervor of his zeal. The excessive commendations which they lavished on the memory of their hero and martyr contributed to fix a deep impression of terror and hatred in the mind of Diocletian.¹

AD 303-311: General Idea of the Persecution

His fears were soon alarmed by the view of a danger from which he very narrowly escaped. Within 15 days the palace of Nicomedia, and even the bedchamber of Diocletian, was twice in flames. Although both times they were extinguished without any material damage, the singular repetition of the fire was justly considered as an evident proof that it had not been the effect of chance or negligence. The suspicion naturally fell on the Christians. It was also suggested, with some degree of probability, that those desperate fanatics, provoked by their present sufferings, and apprehensive of impending calamities, had entered into a conspiracy with their faithful brethren, the eunuchs of the palace, against the lives of two emperors, whom they detested as the irreconcilable enemies of the church of God. Jealousy and resentment prevailed in every heart, but especially in that of Diocletian's. A great number of persons, distinguished either by the offices which they had filled, or by the favor which they had enjoyed, were thrown into prison. Every mode of torture was put in practice, and the court, as well as city, was polluted with many bloody executions.¹ But as it was found impossible to extort any discovery of this mysterious transaction, it seems incumbent on us either to presume the innocence, or to admire the resolution, of the sufferers. A few days afterward Galerius hastily withdrew himself from Nicomedia, declaring that if he delayed his departure from that devoted palace he might become a sacrifice because of rage of the Christians. The ecclesiastical historians, from whom alone we derive a partial and imperfect knowledge of this persecution, are at a loss how to account for the fears and dangers of the emperors. Two of these writers, a Prince and a Rhetorician, were eye-witnesses of the fire of Nicomedia. The one ascribes it to lightning and the divine wrath; the other affirms that it was kindled by the malice of Galerius himself.²

As the edict against the Christians was designed for a general law of the whole empire, and as Diocletian and Galerius, though they might not wait for the consent, were assured of the concurrence of the western princes, it would appear more agreeable to our ideas of policy that the governors of all the provinces should have received secret instructions to publish, on one and the same day, this declaration of war within their respective departments. It was at least to be expected that the convenience of the public highways and established posts would have enabled the emperors to transmit their orders with the utmost dispatch from the palace of Nicomedia to the extremities of the Roman world. That they would not have allowed 50 days to elapse before the edict was published in Syria, and nearly 4 months before it hosed up in the cities of Africa.—

¹ Lactantius only calls him *quidam etsi non recte, magno tamen animo*, etc., (able, though without rule, bold yet inspired, etc.) c. 12. Euseb. (I. vii. c. 5) adorns him with secular honors. Neither have condescended to mention his name; but the Greeks celebrate his memory under that of John. See Tillemont, Mem. Eccles. v. part ii. p. 320.

¹ Lactantius de M. P. c. 13, 14. mentions the cruel tortures of the eunuchs, Gorgonius and Dorotheus, and Anthimius, bishop of Nicomedia. Both of those writers describe, in a vague but tragic manner, the horrid scenes which were acted even in the Imperial presence.

² Lactantius, Eusebius, and Constantine, ad Coetum Sanctorum, c. 25 Eusebius confesses his ignorance of the cause of the fire.

Tillemont, Mem. Eccles. v. pt. 1. p. 43. This delay may perhaps be imputed to the cautious temper of Diocletian, who had yielded a reluctant consent to the measures of persecution, and who was desirous of trying the experiment under his more immediate eye, before he gave way to the disorders and discontent which it must inevitably occasion in the distant provinces. At first, indeed, the magistrates were restrained from shedding blood. But the use of every other severity was permitted, and even recommended to their zeal. Nor could the Christians, though they cheerfully gave up the ornaments of their church buildings, resolve to interrupt their religious assemblies, or to deliver their sacred books to the flames. The pious obstinacy of Felix, an African bishop, appears to have embarrassed the subordinate ministers of the government. The curator of his city sent him in chains to the proconsul. The proconsul transmitted him to the Pretorian prefect of Italy. Felix, who disdained even to give an evasive answer, was at length beheaded at Venusia, in Lucania, a place on which the birth of Horace has conferred fame.³ This precedent, and perhaps some Imperial amendment, which was issued as a result, appeared to authorize the governors of provinces in punishing with death the refusal of the Christians to deliver up their sacred books. There were undoubtedly many persons who embraced this opportunity of obtaining the crown of martyrdom. However, there were also too many who shamefully betrayed the Holy Scriptures into the hands of infidels. A great number even of elders and preachers acquired, by this criminal compliance, the contemptuous title of *Traditors*. Their offence was productive of much present scandal and of much future discord in the African church.⁴

The copies, as well as the versions of Scripture, were already so multiplied in the empire that the most severe inquisition could no longer be attended with any fatal consequences. Even the sacrifice of those volumes, which, in every congregation, were preserved for public use, required the consent of some treacherous and unworthy Christians. But the ruin of church buildings was easily effected by the authority of the government and by the labor of the Pagans. In some provinces, however, the magistrates contented themselves with shutting up the places of religious worship. In others, they more literally complied with the terms of the edict. After taking away the doors, benches, and pulpit, which they burned, as it were in a funeral pile, they completely demolished the remainder of the edifice.⁵ It is perhaps to this sad occasion that we should apply a very remarkable story, which is related with so many circumstances of variety and improbability that it serves rather to excite than to satisfy our curiosity. In a small town in Phrygia, of whose name as well as situation we are left ignorant, it should seem that the magistrates and the body of the people had embraced the Christian faith. As some resistance might be apprehended to the execution of the edict, the governor of the province was supported by a numerous detachment of legionaries. On their approach the citizens threw themselves into the church, with the resolution either of defending by arms that sacred edifice or of perishing in its ruins. They indignantly rejected the notice and permission which was given them to retire, till the soldiers, provoked by their obstinate refusal, set fire to the building on all sides, and consumed, by this extraordinary

³ See the Acta Sincera of Ruinart, p. 353; those of Foelix of Thibara, or Tibiur, appear much less corrupted than in the other editions, which afford a lively specimen of legendary license.

⁴ See the first book of Optatus of Milevis against the Donatists at Paris, 1700. Edit. Dupin. He lived under the reign of Valens.

⁵ The ancient monuments, published at the end of Optatus, p. 261, etc., describe, in a very circumstantial manner, the proceedings of the governors in the destruction of churches. They made a minute inventory of the plate, etc., which they found in them. That of the church of Cirta, in Numidia, is still extant. It consisted of two chalices of gold, and six of silver, six urns, one kettle, seven lamps, all likewise of silver, besides a large quantity of brass utensils, and wearing apparel.

kind of martyrdom, a great number of Phrygians with their wives and children.⁶

Some slight disturbances in Syria and the frontiers of Armenia—though they were suppressed almost as soon as started—afforded the enemies of the church a very plausible occasion to insinuate that those troubles had been secretly fomented by the intrigues of the bishops, who had already forgotten their ostentatious professions of passive and unlimited obedience.⁷ The resentment or the fears of Diocletian at length transported him beyond the bounds of moderation, which he had hitherto preserved, and he declared in a series of cruel edicts his intention of abolishing the Christian name. By the first of these edicts the governors of the provinces were directed to apprehend all persons of the ecclesiastical order. The prisons, destined for the vilest criminals, were soon filled with a multitude of elders, pastors, deacons, readers, and exorcists. By a second edict the magistrates were commanded to employ every method of severity which might reclaim them from their odious superstition, and oblige them to return to the established worship of the gods. This rigorous order was extended by a subsequent edict to the whole body of Christians, who were exposed to a violent and general persecution.⁸ Instead of those salutary restraints which had required the direct and solemn testimony of an accuser it became the duty as well as the interest of the Imperial officers to discover, pursue, and torment the most obnoxious among the faithful. Heavy penalties were denounced against all who should presume to save an unbeliever from the just indignation of the gods, and of the emperors. Yet, notwithstanding the severity of this law, the virtuous courage of many of the Pagans, in concealing their friends or relations, affords an honorable proof that the rage of superstition had not extinguished in their minds the sentiments of nature and humanity.—Athanasius, p. 833, ap. Tilemont, Mem. Eccies. v. part i. p. 90.

Diocletian had no sooner published his edicts against the Christians than, as if he had been desirous of committing to other hands the work of persecution, he stepped down as emperor. The character and situation of his colleagues and successors sometimes urged them to enforce, and sometimes inclined them to suspend, the execution of these rigorous laws. Nor can we acquire a just and distinct idea of this important period of ecclesiastical history, unless we separately consider the state of Christianity, in the different parts of the empire, during the space of 10 years, which elapsed between the first edicts of Diocletian and the final peace of the church.

The mild and humane temper of Constantius was averse to the oppression of any part of his subjects. The principal offices of his palace were exercised by Christians. He loved them, esteemed their fidelity, and entertained their religious principles. But as long as Constantius remained in the subordinate station of Caesar, it was not in his power to openly reject the edicts of Diocletian, or to disobey the commands of Maximian. His authority contributed, however, to alleviate the sufferings which he pitied and abhorred. He consented, with reluctance, to the ruin of the church buildings. However, he ventured to protect the Christians themselves from the fury

⁶ Lactantius (Institut. Divin. v. ii) confines the calamity to the *conventiculum* (an unauthorized place of worship), with its congregation. Eusebius (viii. 11) extends it to a whole city, and introduces something very like a regular siege. His ancient Latin translator, Rufinus, adds the important circumstance of the permission given to the inhabitants of retiring from thence. As Phrygia reached to the confines of Isauria, it is possible that the restless temper of those independent Barbarians may have contributed to this misfortune.

⁷ Euseb. 1. viii. c. 6. M. de Valois (with some probability) thinks that he has discovered the Syrian rebellion in an oration of Libanius; and that it was a rash attempt of the tribune Eugeuius, who with only 500 men seized Antioch, and might perhaps allure the Christians by the promise of religious toleration. From Euseb. (1. ix. C. 8) as well as from Moses of Chorene (Rust. Armen. 1. ii. c. 77, etc.) it may be inferred that Christianity was already introduced into Armenia.

⁸ Mosheim, n. 938; the text of Eusebius very plainly shows that the governors, whose powers were enlarged, not restrained, by the new laws, could punish with death the most obstinate Christians, as an example to their brethren.

of the populace and from the rigor of the laws. The provinces of Gaul (under which we may probably include those of Britain) were indebted for the singular tranquillity which they enjoyed to the gentle interposition of their king.⁹ But Datianus, the president or governor of Spain, actuated either by zeal or policy, chose rather to execute the public edicts of the emperors than to understand the secret intentions of Constantius. It can scarcely be doubted that his provincial administration was stained with the blood of a few martyrs.¹⁰ The elevation of Constantius to the supreme and independent dignity of Augustus gave a free scope to the exercise of his virtues, and the shortness of his reign did not prevent him from establishing a system of toleration, of which he left the precept and the example to his son Constantine. His fortunate son, from the first moment of his accession, declaring himself the protector of the church, at length deserved the label of the first emperor who publicly professed and established the Christian religion. The motives of his conversion, as they may variously be deduced from benevolence, policy, conviction, or remorse, and the progress of the revolution which, under his powerful influence, and that of his sons, rendered Christianity the reigning religion of the Roman empire, will form a very interesting and important chapter in the third volume of this history. At present it may be sufficient to observe that every victory of Constantine was productive of some relief or benefit to the church.

The provinces of Italy and Africa experienced a short but violent persecution. The rigorous edicts of Diocletian were strictly and cheerfully executed by his associate Maximian, who had long hated the Christians, and who delighted in acts of blood and violence. In the autumn of the first year of the persecution, the two emperors met at Rome to celebrate their triumph. Several oppressive laws appear to have issued from their secret consultations, and the diligence of the magistrates was animated by the presence of their sovereigns. After Diocletian had divested himself of the purple, Italy and Africa were administered under the name of Severus, and were exposed without defense to the implacable resentment of his master Galerius. Among the martyrs of Rome, Aductus deserves the notice of posterity. He was of a noble family in Italy, and had raised himself, through the successive honors of the palace, to the important office of treasurer of the private estate of the emperor. Aductus is the more remarkable for being the only person of rank and distinction who appears to have suffered death during the whole course of this general persecution.¹¹

The revolt of Maxentius immediately restored peace to the churches of Italy and Africa. The same tyrant who oppressed every other class of his subjects showed himself just, humane, and even partial, toward the afflicted Christians. He depended on their gratitude and affection, and very naturally presumed that the injuries which they had suffered, and the dangers which they still feared from his most inveterate enemy, would secure the fidelity of a party already considerable by their numbers and opulence.¹² Even the conduct of Maxentius toward the

⁹ Euseb. l. viii. c. 13. Lactantius de H. P. c. 15. Dodwell (Dissertat. Cyprian. xi. 75) represents them as inconsistent with each other. But the former evidently speaks of Constantius in the station of Caesar, and the latter of the same prince in the rank of Augustus.

¹⁰ Datianus is mentioned in Gruter's Inscriptions as having determined the limits between the territories of Pax Julia and those of Ebora, both cities in the southern part of Lusitania. If we recollect the neighborhood of those places to cape St. Vincent, we may suspect that the celebrated deacon and martyr of that name has been inaccurately assigned by Prudentius, etc., to Saragossa, or Valentia. See the pompous history of his sufferings, in the Mem. de Tillemont, v. part ii. pp. 58—85. Some critics are of opinion that the department of Constantius, as Caesar, did not include Spain, which still continued under the immediate jurisdiction of Maximian.

¹¹ Eusebius, l. viii. c. 11. Gruter, Inscript. P. 1471, No. 18. Rufinus has mistaken the office of Aductus, as well as the place of his martyrdom.

¹² Eusebius, l. viii. C. 14. But as Maxentius was vanquished by Constantine, it suited the purpose of Lactantius to

bishops of Rome and Carthage may be considered as the proof of his toleration, since it is probable that the most orthodox princes would adopt the same measures with regard to their established clergy. Marcellus, the former of those bishops, had thrown the capital into confusion, by the severe penance which he imposed on a great number of Christians, who, during the late persecution, had renounced or concealed their religion. The rage of faction broke out in frequent and violent uprisings. The blood of the faithful was shed by each other's hands, and the exile of Marcellus, whose prudence seems to have been less eminent than his zeal, was found to be the only measure capable of restoring peace to the distracted church of Rome.¹³ The behavior of Mensurius, bishop of Carthage, appears to have been still more reprehensible. A deacon of that city had published a libel against the emperor. The offender took refuge in the church palace; and though it was somewhat early to advance any claims of ecclesiastical immunities, the bishop refused to deliver him up to the officers of justice. For this treasonable resistance, Mensurius was summoned to court. Instead of receiving a legal sentence of death or banishment, he was permitted, after a short examination, to return to his diocese.—Optatus *contr. Donatist.* 1. i. c. 17, 18. Such was the happy condition of the Christian subjects of Maxentius. Whenever they desired to procure any martyrs for their own use, they had to look the most distant provinces of the East. A story is related of Aglae, a Roman lady, descended from a consular family, and possessed of so ample an estate that it required the management of 73 stewards. Among these, Boniface was the favorite of his mistress. As Aglae mixed love with devotion, it is reported that he was admitted to share her bed. Her fortune enabled her to gratify the pious desire of obtaining some sacred relics of the East. She entrusted Boniface with a considerable sum of gold and a large quantity of aromatics. Her lover, attended by 12 horsemen and 3 covered chariots, undertook a remote pilgrimage, as far as Tarsus in Cilicia.¹⁴

The bloodthirsty temper of Galerius, the first and principal author of the persecution, was formidable to those Christians whom their misfortunes had placed within the limits of his dominions. It may fairly be presumed that many middle-class, who were not confined by the chains of wealth or poverty, very frequently deserted their native country and sought a refuge in the milder climate of the West. As long as he commanded only the armies and provinces of Illyricum, he could with difficulty either find or make a considerable number of martyrs, in a warlike country which had entertained the missionaries of the Gospel with more coldness and reluctance than any other part of the empire.¹⁵ But when Galerius had obtained the supreme power and the government of the East, he indulged in their fullest extent his zeal and cruelty, not only in the provinces of Thrace and Asia, which acknowledged his immediate jurisdiction, but in those of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, where Maximin gratified his own inclination by yielding a rigorous obedience to the stern commands of his benefactor.¹⁶ The frequent disappointments of

place his death among those of the persecutors.

¹³ The epitaph of Marcellus is to be found in Gruter, *Inscrip.* p. 1172, No. 3, and it contains all that we know of his history. Marcellinus and Marcellus, whose names follow in the list of popes, are supposed by many critics to be different persons. But the learned Abbé de Louguerre was convinced that they were one and the same. We may observe that Damasus was made bishop of Rome, AD 306.

¹⁴ The Acts of the Passion of St. Boniface, which abound in miracles and declamations, are published by Ruinart (p. 283—291), both in Greek and Latin, from the authority of very ancient manuscripts.

¹⁵ During the first four centuries, there exist few traces of either bishops or archbishops in the western Illyricum. It has been thought probable that the primate of Milan extended his jurisdiction over Sirmium, the capital of that great province. *Geograph. Sacra* of Charles de St. Paul, pp. 68—76, with the observations of Lucas Hoistenius.

¹⁶ The eighth book of Eusebius, as well as the supplement concerning the martyrs of Palestine, principally relate to the persecution of Galerius and Maximin. The general lamentations with which Lactantius opens the fifth book of his *Divine Institutions* allude to their cruelty.

his ambitious views, the experience of six years of persecution, and the salutary reflections which a lingering and painful distemper suggested to the mind of Galerius, at length convinced him that the most violent efforts of despotism are insufficient to exterminate a whole people, or to subdue their religious prejudices. Desirous of repairing the mischief that he had occasioned, he published in his own name, and in those of Licinius and Constantine, a general edict, which, after a pompous recital of the Imperial titles, proceeded in the following manner:

“Among the important cares which have occupied our mind for the utility and preservation of the empire, it was our intention to correct and re-establish all things according to the ancient laws and public discipline of the Romans. We were particularly desirous of reclaiming, into the way of reason and nature, the deluded Christians, who had renounced the religion and ceremonies instituted by their fathers; and, presumptuously despising the practice of antiquity, had invented extravagant laws and opinions according to the dictates of their fancy, and had collected a various society from the different provinces of our empire. The edicts which we have published to enforce the worship of the gods having exposed many of the Christians to danger and distress, many having suffered death, and many more who still persist in their impious folly being left destitute of any public exercise of religion, we are disposed to extend to those unhappy men the effects of our accustomed clemency. We permit them therefore freely to profess their private opinions, and to assemble in their churches without fear or molestation, provided always that they preserve a due respect to the established laws and government. By another legal amendment we shall signify our intentions to the judges and magistrates; and we hope that our indulgence will engage the Christians to offer up their prayers to the deity whom they adore, for our safety and prosperity, for their own, and for that of the republic.”¹⁷

It is not usually in the language of edicts and manifestoes that we should search for the real character or the secret motives of princes. However, as these were the words of a dying emperor, his situation perhaps may be admitted as a pledge of his sincerity.

AD 311: Peace of the Church

When Galerius subscribed this edict of toleration, he was well assured that Licinius would readily comply with the inclinations of his friend and benefactor, and that any measures in favor of the Christians would obtain the approbation of Constantine. But the emperor would not venture to insert in the preamble the name of Maximin, whose consent was of the greatest importance, and who succeeded a few days afterward to the provinces of Asia. In the first six months of his new reign, however, Maximin affected to adopt the prudent counsels of his predecessor. Although he never condescended to secure the tranquillity of the church by a public edict, Sabinus, his Pretorian prefect, addressed a circular letter to all the governors and magistrates of the provinces, explaining the Imperial clemency, acknowledging the invincible obstinacy of the Christians, and directing the officers of justice to cease their ineffectual prosecutions, and to connive at the secret assemblies of those enthusiasts. In consequence of these orders, great numbers of Christians were released from prison, or delivered from the mines. The confessors, singing hymns of triumph, returned into their own countries. Those who had yielded to the violence of the tempest solicited with tears of repentance their readmission into the

¹⁷ Eusebius (1. viii. c. 17) has given us a Greek version, and Lactantius (de M. P. c. 34) the Latin original, of this memorable edict. Neither of these writers seems to recollect how directly it contradicts whatever they have just affirmed of the remorse and repentance of Galerius.

bosom of the church.—Euseb. 1. ix. c. 1. He inserts the epistle of the prefect.

AD 313: End of the Persecutions

But this treacherous calm was of short duration. Nor could the Christians of the East place any confidence in the character of their emperor. Cruelty and superstition were the ruling passions of Maximin's soul. The former suggested the means of persecution, the latter pointed out the objects. The emperor was devoted to the worship of the gods, to the study of magic, and to the belief in prophecies. The prophets or philosophers, whom he revered as the favorites of heaven, were frequently raised to the government of provinces and admitted into his most secret counsels. They easily convinced him that the Christians had been indebted for their victories to their regular discipline, and that the weakness of Polytheism had principally flowed from a lack of union and submission among the ministers of religion. A system of government was therefore instituted which was evidently copied from the policy of the church. In all the great cities of the empire, the temples were repaired and beautified by Maximin's order. The officiating priests of the various deities were subjected to the authority of a superior pontiff, destined to oppose the bishop, and to promote the cause of Paganism. These pontiffs acknowledged, in their turn, the supreme jurisdiction of the metropolitans or high-priests of the province, who acted as the immediate vicegerents of the emperor himself. A white robe was the ensign of their dignity; and these new prelates were carefully selected from the most noble and opulent families. By the influence of the magistrates, and of the sacerdotal order, a great number of dutiful addresses were obtained, particularly from the cities of Nicomedia, Antioch, and Tyre, which artfully represented the well-known intentions of the court as the general sense of the people. They solicited the emperor to consult the laws of justice rather than the dictates of his clemency. They expressed their abhorrence of the Christians, and humbly prayed that those who professed Christ might at least be excluded from the limits of their respective territories. The answer of Maximin to the address which he obtained from the citizens of Tyre is still extant. He praises their zeal and devotion in terms of the highest satisfaction, and discusses the obstinate impiety of the Christians. By the readiness with which he consents to their banishment, he admitted that he considered himself as *receiving*, rather than *conferring* an obligation. The priests as well as the magistrates were empowered to enforce the execution of his edicts, which were engraved on tables of brass. Although it was recommended to avoid bloodshed, the most cruel and disgraceful punishments were inflicted on the stubborn Christians.¹⁸

The Asiatic Christians had everything to dread from the severity of a bigoted monarch who prepared his measures of violence with such deliberate policy. But a few months had scarcely elapsed before the edicts published by the two western emperors obliged Maximin to suspend the prosecution of his designs. The first was the civil war which he so rashly undertook against Licinius it employed all his attention. The other was his own defeat and death. These two events quickly delivered the church from the last and most implacable of her enemies.¹⁹

¹⁸ Euseb. I. viii. c. 14, 1. ix. c. 2—8. Lactantius de M. P. c. 36. These writers agree in representing the arts of Maximin; but the former relates the execution of several martyrs, while the latter expressly affirms, *occidi servos Dei vetuit* (slaves of the Christian God were murdered).

¹⁹ A few days before his death he published a very ample edict of toleration, in which he blames all the severity which the Christians suffered to the judges and governors, who had misunderstood his intentions. Edict in Euseb. I. ix. C. 10.

Sufferings of the Martyrs and Confessors

In this general view of the persecution, which was first authorized by the edicts of Diocletian, I have purposely refrained from describing the particular sufferings and deaths of the Christian martyrs. It would have been an easy task, from the history of Eusebius, from the declamations of Lactantius, and from the most ancient acts, to collect a long series of horrid and disgusting pictures, and to fill many pages with racks and scourges, with iron hooks, and red-hot beds, and with all the variety of tortures which fire and steel, savage beasts and more savage executioners could inflict on the human body. These sad scenes might be enlivened by a crowd of visions and miracles destined either to delay the death, celebrate the triumph, or discover the relics of those canonized saints who suffered for the name of Christ. But I cannot determine what I ought to transcribe till I am satisfied how much I ought to believe. The gravest of the ecclesiastical historians, Eusebius himself, indirectly confesses that he has related whatever might result in Christ's glory, and that he suppressed all that would disgrace it.²⁰ Such an acknowledgment will naturally excite a suspicion that a writer who has so openly violated one of the fundamental laws of history has not paid a very strict regard to the observance of the other. The suspicion will derive additional credit from the character of Eusebius, whose credulity was somewhat stained. He was more practiced in the arts of the courts than that of almost any of his contemporaries. On certain occasions, when the magistrates were exasperated by some personal motives of interest or resentment, when the zeal of the martyrs urged them to forget the rules of prudence and perhaps decency, to overturn the altars, to pour out imprecations against the emperors, or to strike the judge as he sat on his tribunal, it may be presumed that every mode of torture which cruelty could invent or constancy could endure was exhausted on those devoted victims.²¹ Two circumstances, however, have been unwarily mentioned which insinuate that the general treatment of the Christians, who had been apprehended by the officers of justice, was not as bad as it is usually imagined to have been.

1. Christians who were condemned to work in the mines were permitted, by the humanity or negligence of their keepers, to build chapels and freely profess their religion in the midst of those dreary habitations. — Euseb. de Martyr. Palestin. c. 13.
2. The bishops were obliged to check and to censure the forward zeal of the Christians, who voluntarily threw themselves into the hands of the magistrates.

Some of these were persons overwhelmed by poverty and debts, who blindly sought to terminate a miserable existence by a glorious death. Others were allured by the hope that a short confinement would pay for the sins of a whole life. Others were motivated by the less honorable motive of living off the generous donations which the charity of the faithful bestowed on the

²⁰ Such is the fair deduction from two remarkable passages in Eusebius, I viii. c. 2, and de Martyr. Palestin. c. 12. The prudence of the historian has exposed his own character to censure and suspicion. It is well known that he himself had been thrown into prison; and it was suggested that he had purchased his deliverance by some dishonorable compliance. The reproach was urged in his lifetime, and even in his presence, at the Council of Tyre. Tillemont, Mem. Eccles. viii. part i. p. 67.

²¹ The ancient, and perhaps authentic, account of the sufferings of Tarachus, and his companions (Acta Sincera, Ruinart, pp. 419—448), is filled with strong expressions of resentment and contempt, which could not help but irritate the magistrate. The behavior of Aedesius to Heirocles, prefect of Egypt, was still more extraordinary, (Greek text omitted). Euseb. de Martyr. Palestin. c. 5.

prisoners.²² After the church had triumphed over all her enemies, the interest as well as vanity of the captives prompted them to magnify the merit of their respective sufferings. A convenient distance of time or place gave an ample scope to the progress of fiction. The frequent instances which might be alleged of holy martyrs whose wounds had been instantly healed, whose strength had been renewed, and whose lost members had miraculously been restored, were extremely convenient for the purpose of removing every difficulty and of silencing every objection. The most extravagant legends, as they led to the honor of the church, were applauded by the credulous multitude, countenanced by the power of the clergy, and attested by the suspicious evidence of ecclesiastical history.

Number of Martyrs

The vague descriptions of exile and imprisonment, of pain and torture, are so easily exaggerated or softened by the pencil of an artful orator, that we are naturally induced to inquire into a fact of a more distinct and stubborn kind. Namely, the number who died as a consequence of the edicts published by Diocletian, his associates, and his successors. The more modern historians record whole armies and cities which were at once swept away by the undistinguishing rage of persecution. The more ancient writers content themselves with pouring out a liberal effusion of loose and tragic invectives, without condescending to ascertain the precise number of those who were permitted to seal with their blood their belief of the Gospel. From the history of Eusebius, it may, however, be collected that only nine bishops were punished with death. We are assured, by his particular enumeration of the martyrs of Palestine, that no more than 92 Christians were entitled to that honorable title.²³ As we are unacquainted with the degree of religious zeal and courage which prevailed at that time, it is not in our power to draw any useful inferences from the former of these facts. But the latter may serve to justify a very important and probable conclusion. According to the distribution of Roman provinces, Palestine may be considered as the sixteenth part of the Eastern empire.²⁴ Since there were some governors who, from a real or affected clemency, kept their hands from the blood of the faithful,²⁵ it is reasonable to believe that the country which had given birth to Christianity produced at least the sixteenth part of the martyrs who suffered death within the dominions of Galerius and Maximin. As a

²² Augustin. Collat. Carthagin. Dei, iii. c. 13, ap. Tillemont, Mem. Eccles. v. part i. p. 46. The controversy with the Donatists has reflected some, though perhaps a partial, light on the history of the African church.

²³ Euseb. de Martyr. Palestin. c. 13. He closes his narration by assuring us that these martyrs suffered in Palestine during the whole course of the persecution. The fifth chapter of his eighth book, which relates to the province of Thebais in Egypt, may seem to contradict our moderate computation. However, it will only lead us to admire the artful management of the historian. Choosing for the scene of the most exquisite cruelty the most remote and sequestered country of the Roman empire, he relates that in Thebais between 10 and 100 persons had frequently suffered martyrdom in the same day. But when he proceeds to mention his own journey into Egypt, his language quietly becomes more cautious and moderate. Instead of a large, but definite number, he speaks of many Christians. He most artfully selects two ambiguous Greek words, which may signify either what he had seen or what he had heard. They concern either the expectation, or the execution, of the punishment. Having thus provided a secure evasion, he commits the uncertain passage to his readers and translators, justly conceiving that their piety would induce them to prefer the most favorable sense. There was perhaps some malice in the remark of Theodorus Metochita, that all who, like Eusebius, had been conversant with the Egyptians, delighted in an obscure and intricate style. (Valesius ad loc)

²⁴ When Palestine was divided into 3 parts, the prefecture of the East contained 48 provinces. As the ancient distinctions of nations were long since abolished, the Romans distributed the provinces according to a general proportion of their extent and wealth.

²⁵ Latin text omitted.

result, the entire number might amount to about 1,500, a number which, if it is equally divided between the 10 years of the persecution, will allow an annual consumption of one hundred and fifty martyrs. Allotting the same proportion to the provinces of Italy, Africa, and perhaps Spain, where, at the end of two or three years, the rigor of the penal laws was either suspended or abolished, the multitude of Christians in the Roman empire, on whom a capital punishment was inflicted by a judicial sentence, will be reduced to somewhat less than 2,000 persons. Since it cannot be doubted that the Christians were more numerous, and their enemies more exasperated, in the time of Diocletian, than they had ever been in any former persecution, this probable and moderate computation may teach us to estimate the number of primitive saints and martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the important purpose of introducing Christianity into the world.

We shall conclude this chapter with a sad truth, which intrudes itself on the reluctant mind. When one admits, without hesitation or inquiry, all that history has recorded, or devotion has feigned, on the subject of martyrdom, it must still be acknowledged that the Christians, in the course of their in-fighting, have inflicted far greater damage on each other than they experienced from the zeal of infidels. During the ages of ignorance which followed the subversion of the Roman empire in the West, the bishops of the Imperial city extended their dominion over the laity as well as clergy of the Latin church. The fabric of superstition which they had erected, and which might long have defied the feeble efforts of reason, was at length assaulted by a crowd of daring fanatics, who, from the 12th to the 16th century, assumed the popular character of reformers. The church of Rome violently defended the empire which she had acquired by fraud. A system of peace and benevolence was soon disgraced by prohibitions, wars, massacres, and the institution of the Pope's office. And as the reformers were animated by the love of civil as well as of religious freedom, the Catholic princes connected their own interest with that of the clergy, and enforced by fire and the sword the terrors of spiritual censures. In the Netherlands alone, more than 100,000 subjects of Charles V are said to have suffered by the hand of the executioner. This extraordinary number is attested by Grotius (*Grot. Annal. de Rebus Belgicis*, 1. i. p. 12, Edit. fol.), a man of genius and learning, who preserved his moderation amid the fury of contending sects, and who composed the annals of his own age and country, at a time when the invention of printing had facilitated the means of intelligence and increased the danger of detection. If we are obliged to submit our belief to the authority of Grotius, it must be allowed that the number of Protestants who were executed in a single province and a single reign far exceeded that of the primitive martyrs in the space of three centuries, and of the Roman empire. But if the improbability of the fact itself should prevail over the weight of evidence; if Grotius should be convicted of exaggerating the merit and sufferings of the Reformers;²⁶ we shall be naturally led to inquire what confidence can be placed in the doubtful and imperfect monuments of ancient credulity; what degree of credit can be assigned to a courtly bishop, and a passionate declaimer who, under the protection of Constantine, enjoyed the exclusive privilege of recording the persecutions inflicted on the Christians by the vanquished rivals or disregarded predecessors of their gracious sovereign.

END OF VOLUME ONE

[Back](#)

[Home](#)

²⁶ Fra Paolo (*Istoria del Concilio Tridentino*, I. iii.) reduces the number of Belgic martyrs to 50,000. In learning and moderation, Fra Paolo was not inferior to Grotius. The priority of time gives some advantage to the evidence of the former, which he loses on the other hand by the distance of Venice from the Netherlands.