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Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted, on: 2011/5/19 9:09

Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?
by Stephen Walton

"Now as for Sanctus, he nobly endured with surpassing and superhuman courage all the torments that human hands could inflict...he would not state even his own name, or the people or the city and race whence he came, or whether he was slave or free. But to every question he replied in Latin: 'I am a Christian.'"

Sanctus' confession at Lyons in 177 AD symbolises of the collision between the Christians and the Roman Empire. The Roman authorities were faced with something that they could not comprehend; Romans adopting a new identity, which relativised the claims of *patrias* and *pietas*. But for the earliest Christians, recorded in Acts, things were very different. The Roman authorities were indifferent, or even friendly, to what appeared to them as a Jewish sect.

At this stage persecution came the Judaism which Christianity had emerged from. The reasons are not hard to find. The Church was a threat to Jewish identity, already threatened by the Hellenistic world. Christians dispensed with the distinctive signs of circumcision, kosher food, and the temple (the issue in Acts 7: 44-50, and Acts 21:27-29). Their worst offence in Jewish eyes was the worship of a man as God. This hostility was increased by the refusal of Christians to join in successive revolts; and later Simeon Bar-Kochba could not tolerate the followers of a rival Messiah. The defeat of the Jews by the Romans ended any serious danger for the Church from this quarter; tragically, the Christians became the persecutors instead. When opportunity offered itself, as it did in Smyrna in 156, and in Asia in the late second century, Jews might still join Gentiles in attacking the Church.

Ironically, when the Christians faced hostility from the Gentile world, it was for the same reason that the Jews were also despised: their allegedly anti-social nature. For Tacitus the martyrs under Nero were convicted "not so much of the crime of arson, as of hatred of the human race." The Christians formed a group with distinct customs, who were severely critical of the mores of Roman society. What is more, they claimed that loyalty to the Church superseded all other loyalties. Between 150 and 200 many denunciations of Christians were made because one member of a family had been converted, and so threatened the unity of the family.

For the first two centuries AD, the infant Church had to face deep popular hostility. This was based not only on their "hatred of the human race", but on widespread misunderstanding of their practices, especially the Lord's Supper. The martyrs of Lyons were accused of "Thyestean banquets and Oedipean intercourse", and in AD 200, the lawyer Minucius Felix made the same charges of cannibalism and incest. Minucius also believed that Christians worshiped an asses head, a charge reflected in the graffito from Ostia which shows one Alexamenos worshipping a crucified figure with the head of an ass. This curious misconception was probably a reflection of anti-Semitism.

As Christians became more numerous, and their beliefs more well known, the charges of immorality became harder to sustain. But one accusation is repeated time and time again- "Atheism"; rejection of the tutelary deities of their communities. This was a very serious matter; deities were believed to bring good fortune to a town, and slighting them might bring down their wrath. According to Tertullian: "If the Tiber reaches the walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if the sky does not move or the earth does, if there is famine, if there is, plague, the cry is at once: 'The Christians to the lion!'"

Outbreaks of persecution often coincided with natural disasters. Earthquakes in Asia in 152, and an outbreak of plague in Alexandria at the time of Origen, were blamed on the Christians. Around 270, Porphyry blamed the plague in Rome on the fact that the temple of Aesculapius had been abandoned for the Christian churches. This sort of accusation was persistent; as late 419, Augustine wrote "The City of God" to prove that Christians hadn't caused the fall of Rome by slighting the old gods. The charges of atheism and immorality help explain the hatred of the mob for Christians, evidenced in the pogroms in places such as Smyrna and Lyons.

If we turn to the ruling classes of the Empire, we find that they shared many of the beliefs of the populace, concerning the dangers of offending the gods. In addition they were imbued with the values of stoicism, and later of Neo-Platonism. For a stoic, Christians were superstitious and dangerously quietist, and the courage of the martyrs theatrically, when compared to the dignified suicide of a philosopher. For a Neo-Platonist the incarnation was grotesque, and the belief that on

e belonged to a chosen race outrageous. These were the attitudes common among the patrician and equestrian orders which governed the empire; in the first two centuries, it was local Roman officials who were largely responsible for persecutions. Another great objection to Christianity for was simply that it was new; it offended the innate conservatism of the Roman ruling classes. This objection became harder to sustain with time; yet in 311, the emperor Galerius could write that "instead of following those constitutions of the ancients which peradventure their own ancestors had established, they were making themselves laws for their own observance, merely according to their own judgement and pleasure".

The Roman authorities were deeply suspicious of anything that looked like a secret society, especially if it was linked to an Asiatic religion, which they associated with immorality. In 186 BC the Bacchanalia had been suppressed, as had a collegium, (private club), for Isis worship in 58BC. In the reign of Trajan, collegia had been responsible for political unrest in Bithynia, and this was one of the reasons for Pliny's suppression of the Christians. He reports to Trajan that "in accordance with your commands I had forbidden the existence of clubs (collegia)." The Bacchanalia were suspect not only due to rumours of their immorality, but also because of their plebeian origins; they were rumoured to have revolutionary intentions. Many of the early Christian converts were also of low social status, such as the "two maid-servants who were called deaconesses" that Pliny tortured. Celsus sneered at Christians as "the most illiterate and bucolic yokels" but he also warned of how "the more reckless urge the children to rebel."

The suspicions of local Roman governors account for most of the persecutions up to the third century. In the accounts of trials the same crime keeps appearing time and time again: Atheism, refusal to acknowledge the gods of Rome. There has been much dispute, based on a reference by Tertullian, as to whether or not Christianity had been made formally illegal under Nero. The existence of the Institutum Neronianum seems unlikely. Pliny was uncertain as to the legal status of Christians, and there is no mention of any such law in Trajan's reply. However, Pliny does seem to have been aware of some precedent for persecuting Christians; possibly Nero had set a precedent, and this was what Tertullian was referring to. Pliny wanted to know if being a Christian was in itself a crime, or if it was just the immoralities associated with the Christians that were liable to punishment.

For later governors this was not a problem; it was a crime simply to be a Christian. A simple confession of Christian faith was enough to condemn someone, irrespective of any other crimes that they had committed; whilst sacrifice to Jupiter, or burning incense to the genius of the emperor could save them. So Polycarp was urged to say "Caesar is Lord", and save himself. Justin Martyr records the case of Ptolemy, who was asked one question by his judge: "whether he was a Christian?", and was not "convicted of any crime at all, but who has only confessed that he is called by the name of Christian". Justin himself and his companions were repeatedly asked at their trial "Are you a Christian?" The martyrs of Scilli in Africa Proconsularis were condemned on the basis of their words "I am a Christian", after the governor had warned them against speaking "evil of our sacred rites", and ordered them to swear by the genius of the emperor.

Clearly for Roman governors in the first and second centuries, to be a Christian was in itself a subversive act, because it entailed a refusal to sacrifice to the gods of Rome, including the deified emperor. However, until the reign of Septimus Severus (193-211) persecution was local and sporadic. Christianity does not seem to have been a serious enough problem to warrant the attention of the emperors. Nero's persecution appears to have been limited to the city of Rome itself; Tacitus' claim that it was an act of opportunism, and the Christians a convenient scapegoat for the fire of Rome is plausible. Further persecution seems to have taken place under Domitian (80-96), although its extent is doubtful. If the book of Revelation is to be dated from this time, then Christians in Asia were certainly suffering, and Revelation does not just see it as a local problem, but lays the blame on Rome itself (Revelation 17:1-9). Domitian was one of the first emperors to take to heart his claim to be "Dominus et Deus", Lord and God, and this would certainly have put him on a collision course with the Church.

In the second century, the Caesars were largely content to treat Christianity as a local problem, and leave it to their subordinates to deal with. Trajan and Hadrian (117-138) counselled moderation in pursuing Christians, and tried to ensure that their officials remained within the law. Marcus Aurelius (161-180) personally disliked Christians, and was permitted the horrific tortures at Lyons. His attitude may have given local officials more license, and this would account for the upsurge in incidents of local persecution in his reign. But he did not instigate anti-Christian action, and his son Commodus (180-192) was notably friendly towards the Church, (possibly because of a Christian concubine), although there was still some local persecution.

Things changed in the third century under the soldier emperors, several of whom, including Decius and Diocletian, were from Illyria, one of the least Christianised provinces of the empire. Under Septimus Severus, conversion to Christianity or Judaism came under an imperial ban for the first time, and there was severe persecution in North Africa. But apart from the reign of Maximinus the Thracian (235-8), the early years of the third century were a time of peace for the Christians,

with only a small number of local incidents. But even the benevolent Philip the Arabian (244-49) could not prevent a Pogrom at Alexandria in 248. More ominously, these years saw the growth in importance of the emperor cult, which had begun under Augustus, and may have been the cause of the sufferings of the churches in Revelation. Worshipping a man was as peculiarly abhorrent to the Christians, although its importance should not be exaggerated; the emperor was just one of the Roman deities whom the Christians were coerced into worshipping.

The importance of the state cult increased during the years 235-270, as Rome went through the great crisis of the Germanic invasions. In these years the soldier emperors were desperately trying to unite the empire against the external threat. One way of doing this was through the worship of the Roman gods, including Caesar. The Christians were not simply sacrificed to the vanity and hubris of the emperors. Refusal to honour the gods was seen as an act of treachery, weakening the empire at the hour of its greatest need. Few listened to their argument that they could do more good by praying for the emperor. The soldier emperors were understandably unhappy at having a large minority of dubious loyalty in the threatened provinces of the east. Not without good reason; Christians held important positions at the court of Zenobia of Palmyra, and some helped the Goths during the invasion of Pontus in 255. The first major attack on the Church took place under the military strongman Decius (249-51), who decreed that all Roman citizens should sacrifice to the Roman gods. Decius was essentially a conservative, who wished to rejuvenate the empire by returning to the old ways, which included the old religion. The Roman state religion was cold and formal, compared with Christianity or the mystery religions from the east. But it could inspire genuine devotion as a focus for patriotism and a nostalgia for the past- the example of Julian the Apostate proves this.

Decius's attack devastated the Church. After a brief respite, it was continued in the later years of Valerian (253-60), but discontinued under Gallienus (260-68). The fact that the attitude of the emperor could make such a difference suggests that persecution was becoming more a matter of official policy, and less a matter of popular hatred. Christianity was becoming more widespread, and losing the character of a secret sect. The courage of the martyrs seems to have invoked sympathy, and may have persuaded people that the allegations of immorality were not true; under Decius some pagans helped the Christians to hide. The change of mood was obvious during the Great Persecution.

Like Decius, Diocletian was a military strongman, a religious conservative who wished to use religion to unite the empire. The Great Persecution did not start until the last three years of his reign, but it was zealously pursued by his Caesar and successor Galerius (305-11). This strongly supports Lactantius's claim that it was Galerius who was the driving force behind the attempt to wipe out the Christians. The Augustii genuinely believed in the old religion, as well as finding it politically useful; there is evidence of their devotion to Apollo, and the story that they were provoked when the failure of an augury was blamed on Christians is plausible. But by 313, it was clear that persecution had failed. It was left to Constantine to take the next step, and instead of regarding Christianity as a threat, enlist to uphold the empire. Within a century pagans would be persecuted because they would not conform to the state religion that ensured the safety of the empire.

The clash between the Christians and Rome was caused not only by the nature of the Roman state, but by certain key beliefs of the Christians, that made it impossible for them to conform when asked to sacrifice to false God. Unlike the priests of Paganism, they could not sacrifice to the Roman gods and remain faithful to their own God. This attitude was revolutionary, and the Romans looked on it with incomprehension and frustration. Unlike Christians in the modern west, they did not live with a post-Kantian distinction between fact and value. They believed that their faith was "public truth", not just a private religious experience. Jesus and not Caesar was lord of the whole world and every aspect of their lives. Their faith was uniquely eschatological; it was this that relativised the empire. Like the Maccabean martyrs, they were not afraid to die because of the hope of the resurrection; and HELL WAS MORE FRIGHTENING THAN THEIR TORMENTS. The final attitude can be summed up in one word: love. It can be seen in Polycarp's devotion to his Lord who had never failed him, and the desire of the martyrs at Lyons to be as closely identified with Christ as possible. Whilst this led some to actively seek martyrdom, seeing it as a good work that would save them, for many Christians suffering was accepted as an expression of love to the Lord who had saved them.

It is these attitudes that finally explain why the early Christians were persecuted; THEY MAY ALSO EXPLAIN why Christians in the west today are not.

A777

Re: Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted - posted by Areadymind (), on: 2011/5/19 12:21

I am not sure if the last sentence was yours or his, but I am curious if you could draw the line to connect that historical idea to the present a bit better. It kind of leaves his implication up to interpretation.

Re: Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted - posted by Oracio (), on: 2011/5/19 15:45

Thanks for the article A777. Great read. One thing that stuck out as a reason for persecution was their bold stand for Christ in face of opposition.

Obviously, the dark and barbarous nature of the times and environment also played a big role. That is not to say we have not seen such darkness in our times. Hitler and current persecution in other countries prove we are still susceptible to severe persecution in modern times.

I would also like to submit another reason for persecution during the time of the early church. And that is, they were very bold in preaching the Word of God, and in preaching it in its fullness without compromise or sugarcoating. They were not afraid to call a spade a spade. They were not afraid to warn those around them of righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come (Acts 24:25).

We see this pattern of bold preaching throughout the Scriptures, beginning with the OT prophets, as they continuously warned and reasoned with Israel concerning their abominable idols in the sight of God. We then see it in the NT beginning with John the Baptist warning his hearers to flee from the wrath to come (Luke 3:7). Then we see our Lord Jesus Christ declaring the righteous standard of God's Law in the sermon on the mount, and warning time and again of the judgment to come. And finally we see the apostles and disciples boldly preaching the same message in Acts and the epistles.

Ray Comfort has said something to the effect of, "If our Lord and the apostles had preached the modern gospel of "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life", they would have never gotten so persecuted. John Wesley stated that when we preach the gospel sinners should either be angry with us or converted. His preaching often got him physically persecuted and one time almost killed by a mob. Ravenhill said, "If Jesus had preached the same message that ministers preach today, He would never have been crucified."

We see clearly in Acts that the message they preached confronted the listeners with their sins against a holy God. In the very first sermon we see Peter basically telling his hearers that they were guilty of murdering the Son of God. Then we see them time and again warning the pagans concerning their idols which were detestable to the Lord, calling them to repent and turn to the Lord. Is it any wonder that they were so hated and persecuted by those around them who refused to let go of their sinful lifestyles?

Re: , on: 2011/5/19 15:52

Hi Areadymind,

Quote:
-----I am not sure if the last sentence was yours or his, but I am curious if you could draw the line to connect that historical idea to the present a bit better. It kind of leaves his implication up to interpretation.

The entire article is his, so I cannot draw that connection for you. He may have ended that way on purpose and left it up to our interpretation so that we would look around (wherever we are in this world) and try to draw the connection ourselves. I have and I think we all will probably draw our own connection and if we put all of our thoughts together, would come up with a more accurate picture of our day and times.

A777

Re: - posted by Areadymind (), on: 2011/5/19 15:55

Oracio is hitting on exactly why I asked the question I did. Was it the Babylonian political/religious system that is to blame for the persecution or is it the bold witness? The article seems to point out a great deal about the barbarity of the epoch of Rome.

Re: - posted by Areadymind (), on: 2011/5/19 15:58

It is hard for me to conceive of persecution the likes of what took place in Rome happening in America at this point in time, no matter how bold the witness, without a major paradigm shift. But just like Oracio pointed out, World War II is a prime example of how such a paradigm shift can occur in at a rapid clip. I thought the exact same thing as he did.

Re: - posted by ccchhrrriiss (), on: 2011/5/19 16:39

If you want a little taste of "early Church" persecution, go walk through the streets of Mecca, Tehran, Jakarta, Karachi, or other Islamic cities and declare the truth of Jesus Christ.

With fiery apostolic unction, loudly proclaim that Allah is NOT the God of the Bible and that Muhammad was a false prophet. Proclaim that Jesus -- and Jesus alone -- is the Way, the Truth and the Life (and the ONLY way to God).

Chances are pretty good that you will be persecuted and experience just a taste of what life was like for believers in the early Church.

Nowadays, I tend to think that some believers are actually praying for persecution as some means to solidify the Church. However, we already have an "opportunity" to experience such persecution. People are dying DAILY for their faith in Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, most modern missionaries are content with living "comfortable" existences with their families, and few make the effort to proclaim the Gospel behind the Islamic or Communist curtains. I am thrilled that there are missionaries in western (and less-closed) nations. Those nations need missionaries too.

However, a modern comparison with the level of persecution in the Early Church would probably be more readily understood in that the pagan societies of the Roman Empire circa 30 A.D. were almost as viciously zealous as militant Islamic extremism found throughout the Muslim world.

Re: , on: 2011/5/19 17:11

Hi Areadymind,

I think it would have to be a state mandated law that Christians would not obey. Something that would result in persecution on a mass scale like you see in other countries today where the actual State is against the community of Believers.

It is hard to conceive of it in America, but things could always change, fast.

On the other hand, most churches are already pretty much compliant with 501c3 regulations and the prohibition of preaching against the State for fear that they lose their tax exempt status. Since they have already complied there (long ago), it may be easy for them to comply with future governmental regulations until one day they look just like the Three-Self Church of China (Official State Church).

Maybe, Christendom in America will just continue down the path they are on. The Great Falling Away may not come because of persecution, it may already be here because of SIN (the most subtle form of persecution).

A777

Re: , on: 2011/5/19 17:16

Quote:
-----Oracio is hitting on exactly why I asked the question I did. Was it the Babylonian political/religious system that is to blame for the persecution or is it the bold witness? The article seems to point out a great deal about the barbarity of the epoch of Rome.

There is a DVD from Voice of the Martyrs about Vietnam and the Believers there.

One of them says, "Please do not pray for an end of persecution, but just pray that we remain faithful".

In one of their monthly magazines this was mentioned again and they said that the Church in Vietnam was being purified through persecution (no fence sitters or sin in the camp).

To me, it is the persecution.

When all around you is hunky-dory and the church just seems to "fit" into society. We see this with the Children of Israel when they were taken captive to Babylon. They co-existed very nicely.

The early church could not co-exist because the State was on the offensive against them.

So, it was either "put up" or "shut up", I guess you could say.

JMHO

A777

Re: , on: 2011/5/20 1:13

The greatest persecution of the true church of Christ has always come at the hands of that which pretends to be such. At this time the pretenders are too lukewarm for physical persecution, but they are gradually being prepared again for the required militancy to accomplish their task.

OJ

Re: , on: 2011/5/20 1:36

So true Joe,

And thinking they are "fighting for truth," it is possible for a believer to fight for, defend, and protect evil spirits, and their works, believing he is thereby "defending" God, and His works;

If we think a thing is from God, we will protect and stand for it. It is also possible that we, through ignorance will stand against God and attack the very truth of God, while defending the devil, and opposing God, unless we have knowledge.

True believers will be attacked by those who think they are "true" believers and this was first told to us by the Lord.

John 16:2 They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.

A777

Re: , on: 2011/5/21 3:12

The persecution of believers from the past to the present can be summed up in Rev.12:17. Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring--those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus. This is reflected in Rev. 13:10. If anyone is to go into captivity into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword with the sword he will be killed. This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints. Satan persecuted the saints through any means available because he hates Christ.