

Roman Empire and its Humanitarian Progress:  
from persecution to religious toleration

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History 302: The Roman Empire

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When one thinks of slavery, even that of the Roman Empire, it is simple to adduce there is a violation of human dignity. However, when one is executed simply for what one *believes*, there is, without doubt, a greater offense to human life. Thus, due to its prominence and significant outcome in the Roman Empire history, it is important to study the persecutions of Christians. The background lies in the oppressive, repressive and suppressive early Roman Empire and Emperors like Diocletian. Rome emulated the barbarism internally that had dominated much of Europe. The dissension, hostilities, humanitarian maltreatment, and executions of Christians were sourced on what a person can *believe*; moreover, it dehumanized the individual's very existence. However, it was the antipodal result that impelled Rome's greatest achievement to humanity. Among the *five good emperors*, like Trajan, were those who began to recognize inhumanity and maltreatment of Christians. While yet limited, the Roman Empire expressed humanitarianism by way of religious tolerance. Trajan writes in a letter to Pliny the Younger, "Christians are not to be hunted out."<sup>1</sup> Under the more civil leadership, this was subsequently echoed and advanced through Constantine, and Theodosius in the forms of religious tolerance and human dignity. Its long-term significance was that of liberties, for if humanity can *believe* freely, humanity can think freely; And if humanity can think freely, humanity can live freely. Thus, by embarking on a concept of toleration, the Roman Empire not only paved roads, it paved the way to freedom. Consequently, despite initially being the greatest violator through Christian persecution, the most significant humanitarian progress that the

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<sup>1</sup> Nerva Trajan, and Pliny the Younger, "Pliny the Younger's Letter to Emperor Trajan Regarding the Christians, and Trajan's Response," from W. S. Davis, *Readings in Ancient History*, (San Jose, CA: San Jose State University, 1912-3), retrieved from [http://www.sjsu.edu/people/andrew.fleck/courses/Hum1bSpr15/Lecture\\_02%20Pliny\\_Trajan\\_Galerius.pdf](http://www.sjsu.edu/people/andrew.fleck/courses/Hum1bSpr15/Lecture_02%20Pliny_Trajan_Galerius.pdf)

Roman Empire achieved was securing humanity's ability to *believe* without the threat of execution for their thought by religious tolerance.

To understand the persecution, it is important to examine why this occurred. Thus, it is most significant to view it from the perspectives of both the persecutors and persecuted. First, from the persecutors perspective, one can cite several reasons for the infliction of persecution, although unworthy of execution, nonetheless reasons. At best, from the perspective of the persecutors, it is theorized, that at first there was initially the disagreements between the Jews and Christians over the new Judaic sect of Christianity concerning the Messiah that caused social turmoil in the eastern empire.<sup>2</sup> Yet it was Jewish accusations of blasphemy that spurred this conflict. Incidentally, Roman mythology articulates that Romulus ascended to heaven, thus conceivably, Christ's ascension could have been a contention for some Romans as well.<sup>3</sup> Christ depicted as the *Son of God* may also have offended not only the Jews but those devoted to Roman mythology.<sup>4</sup> The Senate at one point considered whether Jesus was to be made a Roman God, but a decision was never made. The Emperors would eventually take on the title Son of God.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the Roman culture imbued sexually loose behaviors derived from Venus (Aphrodite, Gk.) and Bacchanalia (Dionysian, Gk.) cults that were promulgated by Tiberius and

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<sup>2</sup> William E. Dunstan, *Ancient Rome*, (Blue Ridge Summit: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 161, 358, 411, accessed July 14, 2018, ProQuest eBook Central, retrieved from <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy1.apus.edu/lib/apus/detail.action?docID=634226#>

<sup>3</sup> "Romulus' Disappearance," (Rome, IT: John Cabot University, 2018), retrieved from <https://computerscience.johncabot.edu/kduong/F2014CS130-3/msalinardi/assignment1/romulus.htm>

<sup>4</sup> William E. Dunstan, *Ancient Rome*, (Blue Ridge Summit: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 358, accessed July 14, 2018, ProQuest eBook Central, retrieved from <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy1.apus.edu/lib/apus/detail.action?docID=634226#>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 649.

Caligula as described by Suetonius in his book *The Twelve Caesars*.<sup>6&7</sup> Accordingly, any Christian exposé to licentiousness may have caused dissension as a result as well. Moreover, it was the Christian refusal to give homage to the Roman Pantheon and Roman Imperial Cult that spurred hostilities, premised on unsubstantiated fears of rebellion. Christians would neither bow to an idol nor worship an emperor. There were also vacillating Emperors who spitefully persecuted in opposition to their ruling counterpart who supported Christians. Others like Trajan had made some humanitarian contributions, just as he discounted anonymous charges against Christians.<sup>8</sup> He was followed by Antoninus Pius who required the burden of proof be on accusers of Christians for charges of failing to worship according to the Imperial cult. However, ultimately it was the false accusation by the criminally violent Nero that initiated and set in motion a wave of persecutions for several hundred years.<sup>9</sup>

From the perspective of the persecuted Christians, there developed an observation for the motive of said treatment as being the rejection of Christ's *resurrection*. In a 2007 lecture by Dr. R. L. Hymers, Jr., he cites John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, and the *Bible*, in ascribing the ultimate

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<sup>6</sup> Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, *The Twelve Caesars*, from "What kind of sexual pleasures did Roman emperors Tiberius and Caligula engage in that made them so notorious?," reddit: AskHistorians, retrieved from reddit user: Perilla  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians/comments/30o1co/what\\_kind\\_of\\_sexual\\_pleasures\\_did\\_roman\\_emperors/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians/comments/30o1co/what_kind_of_sexual_pleasures_did_roman_emperors/)

<sup>7</sup> Titus Livius (Livy) Patavinus, "Roman Religious Toleration: The Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus, 186 BCE," From *History of Rome*, Book XXXIX. Ancient History Sourcebook of Fordham University, from Oliver J. Thatcher, *The Library of Original Sources*, Vol. III: The Roman World, (Milwaukee: University Research Extension Co., 1907), 65-77, retrieved from <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/livy39.asp>

<sup>8</sup> William E. Dunstan, *Ancient Rome*, (Blue Ridge Summit: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 90, accessed August 13, 2018. ProQuest eBook Central, retrieved from <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy1.apus.edu/lib/apus/detail.action?docID=634226#>

<sup>9</sup> Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals*, Book 15.44, Perseus Digital Library by Alfred John Church, and William Jackson Brodribb, retrieved from <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0078%3Abook%3D15%3Achapter%3D44>

and primary cause as being a denial of the resurrection.<sup>10</sup> He explains that according to contemporary Christians of the early Church, and authors of the Bible, they were convinced their *belief* in the resurrection was at the root of the cause.<sup>11</sup> He elaborates, as Fox writes, “curse, for bearing witness of the *resurrection* of Christ.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Hymers demonstrates that the issue of resurrection was recorded by the Biblical authors as a cause for martyrdom. The Apostle St. Luke writes in *Acts* 4:2-3, "Being grieved that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the *resurrection* from the dead: And they laid hands upon them and put them in hold [arrest]."<sup>13</sup> While Dr. Hymers neglects to substantiate exaggerated inferences at academia, he argues a point that the Apostles witnessed the resurrection and subsequently died for the testimony of something they were convinced they saw, and subsequently, Christians died for preaching their belief that Christ had resurrected. Additionally, in the natural, it can be difficult to find such a claim of resurrection believable and accordingly requires faith, so his ridicule or cynicism is not called for. However, from these observations one may postulate that this resurrection message was a vengeful and spiteful challenge by the Roman persecutors, concerning the Christian's faith, that inspired a motive for murderous inhumanities and rampage by putting their faith of resurrecting to a test. Accordingly, Christians were being attacked for a *belief*, or for something they believed to be true.

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<sup>10</sup> R. L. Hymers, “The Emperor Caligula and the Early Christian Martyrs,” Baptist Tabernacle of Los Angeles, (Lecture, Los Angeles, CA, April 15, 2007), retrieved from [https://www.rlhymersjr.com/Online\\_Sermons/2007/041507PM\\_FirstChristianMartyrs.html](https://www.rlhymersjr.com/Online_Sermons/2007/041507PM_FirstChristianMartyrs.html)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> John Foxe, *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, (Salt Lake City, UT: Gutenberg, 2007), 263-264, retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/22400/22400-h/22400-h.htm>

<sup>13</sup> Eusebius Sophronius Hieronymus (Jerome), “The Latin Vulgate New Testament Bible,” Vulgate and Douay-Rheims parallel, Acts 4, [vulgate.org](http://vulgate.org/), retrieved from <http://vulgate.org/> (Novum Testamentum).

A look at how Christians were persecuted further reveals the motive. The backdrop for Nero, Domitian, and Diocletian and most of the other persecutors was that they ruled as dictators. “Nero fastened the guilt [of a fire as an “immense multitude was convicted”] and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated... [who were] called Christians.”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, by Nero, it was with cruel hatred and “mockery of every sort [that] was added to their deaths,” being “nailed to crosses.”<sup>15</sup> Christians were burned at the stake to illuminate his garden while other Christians were fed to wild beasts in the Flavian Amphitheatre (Colosseum) as a public spectacle.<sup>16</sup> According to Eusebius in *Ecclesiastical History* and Lactantius in *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, explicit edicts under Diocletian depict how persecutions were implemented: Churches were leveled, scriptures were burned, positions of Christians in society were degraded, they were deprived of liberties, and Church leaders were imprisoned.<sup>17</sup> Torture and executions for refusing to sacrifice to Roman religions, Imperial Cult, and their idols.<sup>18</sup> Bathing often was a Judeo-Christian religious ceremonial practice, and it was made to be an abomination and mockery at the erection of idols in public bathhouses.<sup>19</sup> These were systematic persecutions too numerous to record here, including that of property seizure. While other atrocities occurred, there was none on the scale among the Roman Empire than with that of

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<sup>14</sup> Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals*, Book 15.44. Perseus Digital Library, by Alfred John Church, and William Jackson Brodribb.  
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0078%3Abook%3D15%3Achapter%3D44>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Eusebius and Lactantius, "Diocletian: Edicts Against the Christians," from Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* and Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, A Source Book for Medieval History of Fordham University, retrieved from  
<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/persec1.asp>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Christianity, particularly under the Emperors Decius and Valerian, today it may be likened to genocide.<sup>20</sup>

Preceding Constantine, there was some humanitarian reprieve off and on from a few emperors that would limit the persecutions. There began with Philip the Arab (seemingly a nominal Christian) who raised some concern, to some degree, for this maltreatment, and recognition of the value of their lives in Roman society. Likewise, this saving grace continued, to some degree, with the five good emperors. Moreover, some of the persecuting emperors like Licinius even vacillated with this issue. Despite his persecution of Christians, by 311 A.D. Galerius had issued an edict in support, declaring, “we ought to grant our most prompt indulgence also to these... Christians and may hold their conventicles... wherefore, for this our indulgence, they ought to pray to their God... they may be able to live securely in their homes.”<sup>21</sup> But, there was no real relief until Constantine rose to power. This came in the form of religious tolerance, that consequentially imbued a concept of religious rights further ahead.

Constantine the Great, in “wholesome counsel,” with Licinius crafted the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D.<sup>22</sup> While it included all religions, it explicitly emphasizes the Christian religion, granting freedom to worship and orders the returning of property taken from them as recorded by Eusebius and Lactantius,

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<sup>20</sup> Ryan Reeves, “Rome and the Third Century Crisis,” Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary of Boston Theological Institute, retrieved from YouTube user: Ryan Reeves, <https://youtu.be/AQhTqHOKBs4>

<sup>21</sup> Galerius, Constantine, and Licinius, “Galerius and Constantine [and Licinius]: Edicts of Toleration 311/313,” Eusebius and Lactantius, *Original Sources of European History*, Vol 4:, 1, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1897-1907), 28-30. A Source Book for Medieval History of Fordham University, retrieved from <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/edict-milan.asp>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

“no one whatsoever should be denied the opportunity to give his heart to the observance of the Christian religion... concerning the Christians and now any one of these who wishes to observe Christian religion may do so freely and openly, without molestation... we have given to those Christians free and unrestricted opportunity of religious worship.”<sup>23</sup>

Several historical documents reveal the favoring of Christianity by Constantine furthering religious rights and freedoms. In a letter by Constantine, he addresses the keeping of Easter.<sup>24</sup> To this report, the Easter date issue is not of significance, and there are many rabbit holes of that not explored here.<sup>25</sup> However, it is significant that he made Easter (celebration of the resurrection) important enough to concern himself with it, the very issue that was a cause of persecution according to Christians.<sup>26</sup> Why was this so significant? Because in it, is the essence and uniqueness of the Gospel message, or message of the cross. The Apostle St. Paul explains in his letter to the Corinthian Christians,

“For if the dead rise not again, neither is Christ risen again. And if Christ be not risen again, your faith is vain: for you are yet in your sins. Then they also that are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most

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<sup>23</sup> Galerius, Constantine, and Licinius, “Galerius and Constantine [and Licinius]: Edicts of Toleration 311/313,” Eusebius and Lactantius, *Original Sources of European History*, Vol 4:, 1, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1897-1907), 28-30. A Source Book for Medieval History of Fordham University, retrieved from <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/edict-milan.asp>

<sup>24</sup> “Constantine I: On the Keeping of Easter.” A Source Book for Medieval History of Fordham University, retrieved from <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/const1-easter.asp>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



miserable. But now Christ is risen from the dead, the firstfruits of them that sleep: For by a man came death: and by a man the resurrection of the dead.”<sup>27</sup>

Essentially, he is saying by Christ’s death the sin of humanity is recompensed and by his resurrection, eternal life is realized and given. This solicited the worship of a divinity other than the Imperial cult or Roman gods. Moreover, all be it specific to Christianity, Constantine enacted laws that ensured religious rights and freedoms.<sup>28</sup> He ordered a synod of bishops to develop unity and another to remove dissensions.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, Constantine granted money to churches and exempted Clergy from civic duties.<sup>30</sup> Having convened the Council of Nicaea to settle the Arian debate, he implemented a shift by integrating the Imperial government with that of the Ecclesia.<sup>31</sup> Professor Drake of University of California addresses Constantine’s self-identity as “man of God” and contrasts it with Eusebius’s reference of “friend of God” in his insightful journal, “The Emperor as a ‘Man of God’.”<sup>32</sup> He asserts that Constantine had a view of supremacy to that of the Bishops and Eusebius was minimizing the self-identity.<sup>33</sup> However, might Eusebius simply have been clarifying the proper relationship or connotation from a biblical standpoint? Eusebius, a Bishop and *man of God*, appears to simply inject the more appropriate terminology, being keener to the scriptures than was Constantine. Finally, although

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<sup>27</sup> Eusebius Sophronius Hieronymus (Jerome), “The Latin Vulgate New Testament Bible,” Vulgate and Douay-Rheims parallel, 1 Corinthians 15, [vulgate.org](http://vulgate.org/), retrieved from <http://vulgate.org/> (Novum Testamentum).

<sup>28</sup> “Constantine I: Laws for Christians,” A Source Book for Medieval History of Fordham University, retrieved from <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/const1-laws2.asp>

<sup>29</sup> “Constantine I: Laws for Christians,” A Source Book for Medieval History of Fordham University, retrieved from <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/const1-laws2.asp>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Drake, Harold. "The Emperor as a ‘Man of God’: The Impact of Constantine the Great’s Conversion on Roman Ideas of Kingship.” *História (São Paulo)* 35, (2016).

<http://ref.scielo.org/6dtngn>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

discord occurred in the Constantinian succession, his sons who subsequently reigned also supported Christianity, except for their cousin Julian the Apostate, who took a few steps backward.

Theodosius the Great was Roman Emperor from 379 to 395 A.D. and known for being the last emperor to rule both east and west. He affirmed Constantine's outlawing of the bloody gladiatorial spectacles.<sup>34</sup> By his time the concept of religious rights and freedoms was certainly bias for Christianity; nonetheless, marked a solidification of religious freedom for Nicene Roman Catholicism in the Edict of Thessalonica, 380 A.D.<sup>35</sup> This edict was a Nicene mandate for "Catholic Christians," not a mandate to be Christian; it was not directed at non-Christians but against Arian Christians.<sup>36</sup> The historical emphasis to grasp from this is that a religion had grown to such prominence to be respected socially, politically, and intellectually. It was now finally okay to *believe*, without the threat of life, in the trinity which espoused the deity of Christ, that upheld the resurrection. Preferential treatment, idealistically, goes beyond our modern idea of freedom; nonetheless, it ensured the ability to believe of the then mainstream religion.

Today, rights and freedoms for certain people groups sometimes are exaggerated from entitlement to even mandate, who are said to have *special rights*. While this compensates the people group for past suffrages, it also is an exaggeration, or overemphasis, with regards to the present equality crossing into preferential treatment; consequently, offsets egalitarianism and that

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<sup>34</sup> "The Codex Theodosianus: On Religion, 4th Century CE," A Medieval Sourcebook of Fordham University. From Oliver J. Thatcher, *The Library of Original Sources*, Vol. IV: The Early Medieval World, (Milwaukee: University Research Extension Co., 1907), 69-71. retrieved from <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/codex-theod1.asp>

<sup>35</sup> Flavius Theodosius, "Theodosian Code XVI.i.2," from Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1943), 31, a Source Book for Medieval History of Fordham University. Retrieved from <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/theodcodeXVI.asp>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

disenfranchises those not of the special group. This happened then for Christians, and it happens today to others, begging the question, can there ever be a balance of rights, freedoms, and equality? An even deeper question, should there be a balance, and that, of what or whose principles? Is it to be localized? For example, nationalism, minus the superiority complexes, does suffuse a high level of unity, stability, and peace but resists change of the establishment. The aristocratic senators thought it should be their decision, while the tyrannical emperors thought it to be theirs. What is a basis and who is right? If it is whoever wins the day, then there is no finite. If there are absolutes, what are they? The Jews and Romans both promoted law as a solution. Further, the Romans tried Emperors as their solution. Maybe, after all, it was neither in the Church institution itself, but rather, in the words of Jesus Christ: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments dependeth the whole law and the prophets."<sup>37</sup> One thing for sure, because of Roman religious tolerance, humanity has advanced from the days of barbaric persecution and has been on a continual progression of rights, freedoms, and equality. Religious toleration brought about a social movement of the mind. While limited, it was a struggle of thought. Dared the Christians to believe something the establishment (Jews and some Roman Emperors) rejected?

To control a belief is to control a thought, and to control a thought, diminishes if not destroys, the knowledge of that intelligence or truth. By religious toleration, the Roman Empire effectively denoted a value to human life regardless of a belief. Tolerance is something given that requires responsibility. Humanity today does not tolerate theft or murder, nor should it, thus one cannot give tolerance to anything or everyone. If humanity can believe freely, humanity can

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<sup>37</sup> Eusebius Sophronius Hieronymus (Jerome), "The Latin Vulgate New Testament Bible," Vulgate and Douay-Rheims parallel, Matthew 22, vulgate.org, retrieved from <http://vulgate.org/> (Novum Testamentum).

think freely; And if humanity can think freely, humanity can live freely. So, it is for these reasons the Christian persecution and religious toleration of the Roman Empire are significant historical precedents to learn. Through toleration came the vanquishing of barbaric persecution, and this procured subsequent middle age or westernized rights and freedoms that would later be initially reflected in Justinian Codices.

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