

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES  
ON A  
THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING,  
PERSECUTION, AND MARTYRDOM  
PART I,  
OVERVIEW AND  
FIRST AND SECOND CENTURIES

by

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“If here we suffer something for Christ, there we shall be blessed. For He tests us by the cross and suffering, as gold is tested by fire by the Creator, Who out of nothing created the whole world. Blessed then we shall be if we persevere in the good to the end.”

From a letter Jan Hus wrote to the people of Louny, after March 15, 1411, translated in Matthew Spinka, *The Letters of John Hus*.<sup>1</sup>

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Religious persecution, conflict, and human suffering are major threads in the news these days. Radical believers of a major world religion violently persecute persons of their own faith and other faiths. The fact that Christians are being persecuted is not a new thing but is something that needs to be examined historically to get a renewed perspective and to learn from it. How did Christians in the past deal with violence against their faith? How should they respond to the violence of today? What did the theologians of the past, some of whom died as martyrs, teach about martyrdom and persecution, and are their teachings relevant for our times?

Perhaps the first question we must answer is why do we need a historical view? The eighteenth century historian, Edward Gibbon, described the work of history in relation to persecution in this manner: “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.” Merely recording past persecutions is not as valuable as using the past to teach us how to face religious violence today and any future outpouring of persecution.

The information we receive from historical documents needs to be assessed theologically. The topic of religious persecution is, after all, religious history, and the church’s experiences today and tomorrow will fall into the area of religious history as well. To reflect theologically on the events is to consider them in relation to the essential tenets of the Christian faith, especially as taught by Jesus Christ and his apostles, as well as by subsequent teachers whom the Church considers to represent its teachings. How can we not only make sense of past persecutions but learn from them those lessons that affirm and confirm our faith and provide us with the necessary strength and support to face persecution that may lie ahead? Are we as well-equipped as past Christians to deal with people and systems that may want not only to harm us but to take our lives because of our loyalty to Jesus Christ?

The initial focus of our study will be on the sufferings of the early church (the church immediately after the era of the Apostles). Then we will look at the reflections of theologians through several centuries on the meaning of persecution and suffering. As we look at the events and teachings of the New Testament in regard to persecution and suffering, we see how persecution began and what were some of the issues that precipitated violence against Christians.

We sometimes forget that the holy family began their lives together under the threat of death to the baby Jesus by King Herod the Great (Matthew 2:13-23). Herod had instructed the visiting Wise Men to return and tell him where they found the baby Jesus. Herod pretended he wanted to worship the newborn king. In reality, he wanted to kill him. As we know, after being warned by an angel, Joseph took Mary and Jesus and fled to Egypt. Herod's persecution foreshadowed the conflict that would arise between Jesus and other religious and political authorities of the first century. Initially Christ's mature conflict was with religious authorities but it led to the involvement of the Roman government in Judea. What Christ experienced would become the norm for the church throughout the centuries: it would face persecution from both religious and political foes in each era.

Edward Gibbon began a chapter of his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (chapter XVI), with rhetorical puzzlement: as one wonders how a baby could seem threatening to a powerful king, one wonders why the world acted so violently against a benevolent religion. He wrote:

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;...we are at a loss to discover what new offence the Christians had committed ... and what new motives could urge the Roman princes ... to inflict a severe punishment on ... their subjects, who had chosen for themselves a singular but inoffensive mode of faith and worship.<sup>2</sup>

With Jewish authorities, motives for rejecting Jesus and his teachings are perhaps more understandable. They perceived his teaching as blasphemous and took offence at Christ's words directed against their hypocrisy and power abuses, much as Jewish leaders historically had reacted to prophets sent from God with words they did not want to hear. They were miffed that he accused them of disobeying God and distorting God's revelation. An underlying motive was fear that Jesus was a threat to their position and power. No doubt he did not meet their expectations for the Messiah, whom they expected to be military/political leader who would stand with them against foreign oppression. They expressed fear that he would lead yet another failed rebellion against Rome, putting the Israelite nation in jeopardy.

Jesus anticipated persecution for himself and for the church and sought to prepare his immediate coterie of disciples for the difficult times that were ahead; but his teachings were also meant for subsequent generations of Christians who would face opposition for their faith and for belief in him. At the very beginning of his ministry Jesus articulated the parameters and expectations of his kingdom in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus told a crowd assembled by the sea: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake... You are blessed when people insult you and persecute you because of me.” His followers, he was saying, would experience harassment, prejudice, or more severe persecution for their witness and lifestyle. Jesus reiterated this teaching at the end of his ministry in his last discourses. In the fifteenth chapter of John’s Gospel, Christ told his disciples that the world would hate them as it hated him. If it persecuted him, it would also persecute them because of his name. The world always hates both Christ and the Father. Christ’s teachings on suffering, then, are to be understood in the context of persecution, not in the context of the general suffering that is the common lot of all humanity. Christ was preparing his followers for the suffering that would come as a result of following him and testifying about him.

In his own death, Jesus uniquely exemplified an individual persecuted because of righteousness. We stress his uniqueness, however: what he did as Savior was one-of-a-kind, because his sacrifice and death atoned for the sins of others and set up the conditions for our redemption and transformation. This was a one-time event that can never be repeated. It fulfilled all that was necessary for our redemption. Our role, as followers of Christ, is to suffer and sacrifice, not to atone for the sins of the world, but to apply the benefits of the atonement to the world in conjunction with the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Wherever and whenever Christ’s followers witness and suffer, they become conduits of grace to those who need grace—even those who persecute them.

The Apostle Paul in many ways fulfilled Israel’s call to carry the gospel to the nations and to be a suffering servant. He remains a prototype for the work of Christians in the world and for their sufferings. He epitomized the roles of follower of Christ and witness for Christ. Paul’s call, recorded in Acts 9:16, explicitly foretold that he would suffer for Christ. And suffer he did. In 2 Corinthians 1, Paul related his suffering in the province of Asia where he witnessed about Christ. He told the Philippian church that it, too, had been granted the privilege of suffering for Christ (1:29). In Philippians 3:10 he testified to wanting to know “the fellowship of Christ’s

sufferings, becoming like him in his death,” showing how fully he had embraced his calling. In 2 Timothy 1:8 he invited Timothy to adopt his attitude: “Don’t be ashamed to testify of our Lord or of me his prisoner” and he called on his protege to join him in suffering for the gospel.

Josef Ton, in an insightful book on suffering and martyrdom, asserted that the whole of Acts, where we get the first glimpses of the early church in action, is about witnessing for Jesus by preaching the gospel. In Greek, the word *witness* is the word we often translate *martyr* and it, or its derivatives, appear 39 times in Acts.<sup>3</sup> Those who became actual martyrs (as we think of martyrdom today) were martyred because they were witnesses. Their preaching was perceived as a threat to the belief systems, cultures, and social or political structures of the first century, eliciting violent reactions. This would become the pattern for centuries to come.<sup>4</sup> Jesus knew this would happen and sought to prepare his disciples for the eventuality. When they finally realized what they were up against, their perspective on their ministry changed. They were witnesses and would most likely die for their witness. Ton wrote that the disciples developed a view of their work that included the following elements. *First*, they strongly believed in the sovereignty of God, which meant that God had control of the situation and would only allow what fit his ultimate plan and purpose—which was the eventual triumph of Messiah and his people. *Second*, they saw persecution as a privilege and an honor, and rejoiced that such an honor had been bestowed upon them. *Third*, they perceived martyrdom as glorious, accompanied by visions of heaven. *Finally*, they considered it essential to emulate the protomartyr Stephen’s prayer of forgiveness for his murderers (Acts 7:60). The martyr was not to be a passive victim but an active fighter, witnessing to the very end of earthly life by actions and words.<sup>5</sup>

After the ministry, death, and Resurrection of Jesus the conflict gradually shifted from Jewish religious issues to clashes with pagan assumptions. Whereas the Jewish authorities saw Christ’s teachings as a threat to their theology and status (with some fear that his ideas might destabilize the nation, and cause the disfavor of God), the Romans viewed the teachings of Jesus and of Christianity as a threat to their world order. We will explore the Roman developments in the coming pages.

## General Observations on Persecution and Martyrdom in the Early Church

In volume II of Philip's Schaff's monumental church history (Second Period: Ante-Nicene Christianity), he began a chapter with an assessment of the church's situation for the first three hundred years. He wrote:

The persecution of Christianity during the first three centuries appears like a long tragedy: first, forbidding signs; then a succession of bloody assaults of heathenism upon the religion of the cross; amidst the dark scenes of fiendish hatred and cruelty the bright exhibitions of suffering virtue; now and then a short pause; at last a fearful and desperate struggle of the old pagan empire for life and death, ending in the abiding victory of the Christian religion. Thus this bloody baptism of the church resulted in the birth of a Christian world.<sup>6</sup>

The *New Encyclopedia of Christian Martyrs* quoted Schaff's glowing analysis of Christian survival amid all the persecution. No other religion, he said, could have stood for so long under the opposition and persecution of Jewish bigotry, Greek philosophy, and Roman power and yet triumph purely by being a moral and spiritual force without deferring to the weapons of the world to defend against or defeat its enemies. The comprehensive and long-term persecution and martyrdom experienced by early Christians stands as a peculiar crown of glory for the early church.<sup>7</sup> He considered the first three centuries as the classical period of persecution because, even though the whole church (at that time) had witnesses ready for any sacrifice, it was an era when the church had no legal status and merely to be a Christian was considered a political crime and punished accordingly.<sup>8</sup>

Dr. Sophie Lunn-Rockliffe, Senior Lecturer in Roman History at King's College, London, said that in the first few centuries AD Christians were persecuted and martyred at times but that they also had periods when they were more secure and free from strife. It was not until the middle of the third century that Roman emperors began intensive and deadly persecutions (Lunn-Rockliffe, "Christianity and the Roman Empire."<sup>9</sup>). Whenever and wherever the conflict took place, it was usually elicited because Christians were "turning the world upside down." They were upsetting traditional patterns of religious allegiance and practice. This was true both in its conflict with Judaism and in its prolonged resistance to pagan Roman religion.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to distinguish between *confessors* and *martyrs* as understood by the early church. At first *martyr* meant "witness" but as the church experienced serious opposition, *martyr*

came to mean one who not only proclaimed the Lordship of Christ but also suffered death as a result of that testimony. This meaning of martyr is the one most familiar to us, although there are those who believe a martyr is anyone who suffers in any form for their testimony, whether they die as a result or not. A *confessor* was one who testified to the Lordship of Christ in court but who did not receive the death penalty. Because of the boldness of their testimony and the risk they took, confessors were highly esteemed in the early church.<sup>11</sup>

The early church was driven by a theology of martyrdom that not only shaped its thinking but also its actions. Christ's followers sought to imitate him in their deaths. According to church historian W. H. C. Frend, Christ suffered as a martyr.<sup>12</sup> Some have disputed this status because it makes Christ appear to be a victim rather than the Son of God in control of his own destiny. He was not a martyr but a Savior, they say. Still, there is no doubt that Christ's example inspired subsequent martyrs. The early church believed that a martyr was a true disciple of Christ, who followed the Lamb; as the Lamb had been sacrificed, so might these disciples expect to be sacrificed. Death for them, said Frend, was the beginning of true discipleship. As a historian, Frend was reporting what early church fathers had written, so the issue is not whether Frend was correct but whether the church fathers were correct. To the church fathers, martyrdom was the climax of the Christian life and should be earnestly desired. Nonetheless, it should be accepted in meekness and not provoked.<sup>13</sup>

Christ exemplified non-violence and declared that his followers were not to use the weapons of the world to defend their faith. Given that approach, suffering and death would be the lot of the disciples and many subsequent followers as well. While Christ did not resist his arrest and death with physical violence, he was not a passive participant. He actually engaged in a battle of epic proportions against the very powers of Satan and hell. He would defeat them, as would his disciples, through moral and spiritual power greater than the violence that evil could throw their way. Moreover, Christ identified with those who would suffer as his witnesses. The persecution of his followers was persecution of him and the death of his followers for his sake was a literal replication of his own death and burial. Christ was actually with them as they sought to imitate him.<sup>14</sup>

The martyrdom of Polycarp was the first documented instance after Scripture in what became known as *Acta Martyrum* or *The Acts of the Martyrs*. Polycarp's story, written soon after the event, was appropriately titled *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*. According to Frend, such *acta*

were written by the hundreds to commemorate the martyrs on the anniversaries of their martyrdom, and were used to celebrate their memory in churches. Many *Acta* were incorporated into the *Historia Ecclesiastica* by Eusebius.<sup>15</sup>

From the account of Polycarp, Ton derived three elements of genuine martyrdom. *First*, it originated in the will of God; it was God-ordained. *Second*, the person chosen by God to suffer and die would endure to the end. God, having ordained the event, empowered the martyr to undergo torture and execution victoriously. *Third*, the martyr was not self-absorbed but rather sought how he or she could suffer for the good of both tormenters and onlookers.

Ton went on to discuss the theology of martyrdom the early church believed and practiced. One of its elements was the church's desire to imitate Christ all the way to the end of earthly life, which Frend had also placed at the forefront of the theology of martyrdom held by the early church. As one moves through the account of Polycarp, one realizes that martyrdom is God's sovereign choice—it is God who wills that a person should become a martyr. This is a great honor. Consequently, the church warned its new members about the possibility and instructed them in the principles of martyrdom as soon as they enrolled in baptismal classes.<sup>16</sup>

A survivor of the persecution at Lyon in the summer of A.D. 177 wrote a letter detailing the event and also presenting a step-by-step theological reflection on what happened. This letter made its way into Eusebius's *Historia Ecclesiastica*. The letter related the facts and interpreted them. Its author sought to find the spiritual motivation and causes for the persecution but also reflected on the consequences the persecutions and martyrdoms produced. As a result, a theology of martyrdom emerged that would dominate the church's thinking on the subject in the coming centuries.<sup>17</sup>

The author regarded what took place in Lyon as an attack instigated by Satan against the servants of God. God's response was to fight against the devil through the Christian martyrs. Instead of crushing his enemies, God increased the patience, self-sacrifice, and faithfulness of martyrs to defeat them. The purpose of the devil was to break the faithfulness of the servants of God and therefore defeat God. That is why the devil used such violence, cruelty, and persistent torture—to obtain a victory against God. But the martyrs absorbed the attacks through their steadfast endurance and thus “rendered the instruments of torture impotent.”

A powerful weapon by which martyrs resisted Satan was their assertion “Jesus is Lord, not Caesar!” This testimony defeated the evil one.<sup>18</sup> The battle was Christ's and not the martyrs'.

Therefore it was Christ's strength and power that defeated the persecutors. The extraordinary relationship of martyrs with Christ and the prospect of rewards in heaven were a source of great strength for them in court and arena. The author of the Lyon account saw a balance between the doctrine of rewards and of God's great grace poured out on the believers, enabling those martyrs to conquer the evil one.<sup>19</sup>

## CHAPTER 1: CHRISTIANITY IN CONFLICT WITH ROMAN RELIGION

### The Clash between Christians and Rome

The persecutions at Lyon in AD 177 and the eyewitness descriptions of the horrors that took place there became a launching point for W. H. C. Frend's discussion of martyrdom and persecution in the early church. "For simplicity, sincerity and for the sake of the sheer horror of events it describes it is unmatched in the annals of Christian antiquity."<sup>20</sup> He regarded the letter by one of the Lyon's survivors as of singular importance for posterity. His understanding of it sets the tone for our study of persecution in the early church. He wrote:

The account of martyrdom at Lyon thus provides a starting point for the study of the clash of cultures that divided the ancient world, between the theocracy of the Jews and Christians and the equally universal claims of the Greco-Roman state. In this clash, martyrdoms and persecution are abiding features.<sup>21</sup>

Frend made a strong point, but instead of a clash of cultures, it becomes evident when one studies the content of the conflict in the first three centuries, that the clash was between *religions*, and more specifically between *theologies*.

In the post-Apostolic age persecution was not empire-wide but took place at the local level, depending on regional governors and how they perceived and dealt with the issues surrounding Christians. In some cases, Christians were merely scapegoats. In others they may have faced pockets of opposition and hostility based on false rumors and charges. The essence that defined any local culture in the Roman Empire was drawn from its inhabitant's ancient beliefs and the myths passed down through the generations. The way of ancestors was ingrained into the minds and the actions of its people. Ancient tribes and nations each held a belief system that focused on a god or gods. Maintaining a relationship with those gods was believed to be essential for the well-being of the populace. Traditional rituals seemed to meet a people's religious and social needs, providing cohesion to the culture and unity of minds and hearts.

The Romans differed little from the many primitive and animistic cultures of history. Their polytheism was not distinctive in its forms of worship, but merely distinctive in the gods it served. Like other peoples, they thought the worship of their gods guaranteed security and material blessings. Roman religion was practical in that it helped secure social order and provided the basic needs of its adherents. The fact that Rome had seen generations of success in its endeavors convinced its citizens that they were the most religious of all people and that the

gods had showered particular favor upon them. Roman religion became a national cult which took service to its gods seriously lest the empire fall into disfavor and its successes cease. Imperial officers were impelled to seek continuing sanction from the gods as support for their authority. Anything seen as a challenge or a threat to this system was dealt with accordingly. This was the context of the conflict between the first Christians and both the Roman religion and the imperial cult.

According to Frend, the Roman Republic was well-known for its religiousness and the Roman governing classes were proud of their devotion to this ancestral religion. The gods, they believed, were the guardians of Rome. "Failure to give them their proper due," Frend wrote, "embodied in rites handed down from time immemorial, could bring disaster to Rome and her achievements."<sup>22</sup> Romans felt they had a contract with their gods: if they gave the gods appropriate worship and due respect, the gods would ensure protection for the people. So, Roman public religion was not so much a matter of individual devotion as it was a national cult, connected with support and loyalty to the state.

After the Republic gave way to empire, Augustus Caesar recognized the value of the Roman religious order. Considered the first and probably the greatest of the Roman Emperors, Augustus's renewal of Roman cults would have a powerful effect upon the attitude and treatment of Christians in the future. Roman religion became intimately associated with the imperial mission of bringing peace and order and it became a rallying point for the hatred of Judaism, and later of Christianity, in the Greek-speaking provinces. Augustine brought in a period of resurgent self-assertiveness of Roman paganism, patriotic as well as religious. The expectation was that Rome, in part through its religion, would retain eternal power and bring prosperity to its people indefinitely.<sup>23</sup>

## Aspects of Roman Religion

In order to understand why there was conflict between Christianity and the Roman Empire, it is necessary to delve deeper into the mentality of Roman religion.

The traditional religion of the Greco-Roman world was essentially a social and public affair. What one believed and practiced in private did not matter as long as it did not interfere with, or cause a person to withdraw from, the public ritual which was an affair of community and family. It was centered on the primary objective of the well-being of Roman society, which

Romans believed depended on the will of the gods. Religion was the means of supporting the needs of common life, such as agriculture and business, as well as the engagements of public policy, such as war and diplomacy. Leaders utilized age-old religious rites and traditional practices that seemed to work in bringing the blessing and protection of the gods. The will of the gods was sought by divination and dreams while their allegiance was procured by prayer and sacrifices.<sup>24</sup>

Traditional Roman rites were for public worship and corporate ceremony—not for meeting personal needs or longings. Attempting to meet the need of whole communities or of the entire empire, the rites were impersonal. They were contractual to the extent that the religious rites were seen as a way of winning the favor of the gods who would then reward the community with protection and practical benefits like making the crops grow or giving success in business. Individuals who sought a more personal identification with the gods turned to religious cults to meet their religious needs for security, prosperity, and for a sense of place and destiny.<sup>25</sup>

Roman religion was polytheistic: the worship of many and varied gods. Jupiter, Apollo, Cupid, and Bacchus are just a few names moderns recognize as gods of Rome. Many of the Roman gods had counterparts in the Greek pantheon. The Greeks imparted to the Romans their iconography, mythology, and sometimes their religious practices. Romans imported mystery religions to satisfy their need for salvation in the afterlife. These cults were practiced in addition to public rites and ceremonies. However, many Romans distrusted these mystery religions, suspecting them of subversive activities, because they required secret oaths and were not open to public scrutiny. Some feared these mysteries undermined the national cult.

As the Empire expanded and included new peoples, the Romans absorbed their deities and cults for the sake of public stability. If ethnic groups retained the traditions usually connected to their own nation or tribe without making universal claims, they were less likely to encounter difficulty being incorporated into the Roman Empire. Sometimes temples to these new local deities were erected beside the temples of Roman deities. Monotheistic systems, like Judaism (and later Christianity), posed a problem to Roman religion because of their claims of universality and the exclusive worship of one God. By contrast paganism was never a unified system, a single religion that could be identified as distinct from other religions. Its loose but coherent network of worship to the immortal gods who, in combination, ruled all realms of earth

as well as the heavens, functioned as a protective canopy that would, Romans believed, ensure their continued success.

The Romans had a term for their religious fervor. They called it *pietas* or piety. *Pietas* was not a personal holiness as we think of it in Christianity but of faithfulness to tradition and scrupulous practice of rites to honor the gods. In the Roman imagination, practice of this ritual piety was what guaranteed the well-being of the state. And that is how religious persecution entered the picture. The dark side of paganism surfaced because Roman religion was based on the notion that if the gods were not properly treated or respected bad things would happen to the empire. Much of the motivation for Roman piety, then, was fear that neglect of *pietas* could result in disasters that would be costly to individuals and to the state. When bad things did happen (like crop failure, or defeat in battle) it would be blamed on those who were not participants in Roman piety. Christianity and Judaism were not in the category of *pietas*; thus they were considered *superstitio* or superstition.

In the second century, for example, there was hostility against Christians in certain localities because of a popular perception that Christians were atheists and seditionists, given over to detestable crimes such as incest and cannibalism. Christians were persecuted because of the popular belief that the gods were not pleased with them because they did not pay due respect to the gods, who showed their displeasure by withdrawing their blessings, allowing disasters to overtake the general populace.<sup>26</sup> Christians became scapegoats during such disasters.

## The Expectations of Roman Authorities and People

The general expectation of Roman authorities was that all the people of the Roman Empire should embrace Roman religion, at least in its public aspect. Rome was generally tolerant of a variety of gods and private practices among its people. There were, however, limits to the tolerance of Rome.

Christianity was able to stay below the radar at first because it was brought to Rome by Jewish Christians and therefore was, at the start, largely associated with the Jews. This provided some political cover for them since the Jews, by fierce resistance to polytheism, had achieved a special status within the Roman Empire that allowed them to function outside the pagan religious system. Schaff noted that Christianity had taken root before the Roman authorities realized that it was not a part of Judaism.

Like the Jews, Christians believed in one God and would not participate in emperor worship. Given the Roman mentality about the public cult, it was just a matter of time before Christians would be seen as undermining the whole religious tradition of Rome, and therefore its very stability and survival. The steadfast dedication of Christians to God and their declaration that Christ is Lord soon led to problems.

Once the Romans began to see Christianity as distinct from Judaism, they viewed it as a strange and subversive religion, meeting in catacombs and other places where there was no public traffic. Although Christians did this for privacy and safety the behavior was misinterpreted by the Romans as secretive and therefore the expression of a shameful cult. Rumors of illicit moral activity and barbarian practices placed a stain and stigma on the early Christians. The Romans had a particular fear of secretive societies that could sow discord and insurrection among the populace. Social stability and unity were very high on the priority list of the Roman authorities. Edward Gibbon commented on the issue of “secret societies”:

It is well known, and has been already observed, that Roman policy viewed with utmost jealousy and distrust any association among its subjects; and that the privileges of private corporations, though formed for the most harmless or beneficial purposes, were bestowed with a very sparing hand. 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 the 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. The pious disobedience of the Christians made their conduct, or perhaps their designs, appear in a much more serious criminal light.<sup>27</sup>

Before long, pagan attitudes toward Christianity hardened into harassment and eventual persecution. Even then some pagan statesmen and authors saw Christianity as a ‘vulgar superstition’ not worth their notice.<sup>28</sup> But when Christians were noticed, they were seen as *superstitio* and, therefore, were under suspicion because they were a foreign cult, presumably associated with social and moral deviations. Closely connected with superstition in the Roman mind were atheism and impiety. These labels were applied to anyone who opposed the Roman ancestral custom upheld strongly by Greco-Roman traditionalists<sup>29</sup>. Because Christianity was

seen as a new religion, claiming universal validity, it was categorized as treasonable and unlawful, a *religio illicita*.<sup>30</sup> Heathen idolatry drove the Roman state to withdraw from Christians its professed tolerance of religions, leaving the new faith without the right to exist.

According to the Lyon survivor, there was no issue of dogma at stake in the persecution. The Roman authorities were essentially ignorant of Christian beliefs. At least in Lyon, popular hatred arising from fear the Christians might triumph over the gods was the primary reason for the anti-Christian outbreaks.<sup>31</sup>

The roots of Roman idolatry can be traced back to the piety of Romulus and his successor Numa, who were believed to have laid the foundation of power of Rome. The favor of the gods was credited for the success of the Roman army. Hence the cultic priests and Vestal virgins were paid from the public treasury. After the rise of emperors, each was, *ex officio*, the *pontifex maximus*, and became the object of divine worship.<sup>32</sup> Even so the Romans tended to be tolerant of other religions, but Christianity posed a particular problem. It was not a national religion, claiming instead to be the only universal one, drawing converts from many nations, even Greeks and Romans, in larger numbers than the Jews had. Its adherents refused to compromise with any form of idolatry, would not pay divine honors to the emperor, and were thus perceived as a threat to the existence of Roman state religion. The common people, polytheists that they were, despised those who worshiped one God and called them *atheists*. They were prone to believe the most repulsive rumors about Christians.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps Christians' most conspicuous refusal, and the one that put them in the most jeopardy, was their refusal to acknowledge the emperor as a god. Emperor worship was completely utilitarian and not spiritual. The well-being of the emperor meant that all would be well for the empire. The benefits the imperial order conferred on the Mediterranean world convinced the Romans and many subject peoples that Roman power was the manifestation of the power and blessing of the gods. As Rome experienced numerous triumphs and the empire expanded and grew in power, the idea began to emerge that Rome had a special divine mission.<sup>34</sup> The setting for the growth of emperor worship was Roman traditional religion. As the era of the Roman republic came to an end and collapsed, the state religion supported the rise of the new regimes of the emperors. It helped Augustus to justify the novelty of one-man rule in Rome. Emperor worship gradually expanded the traditional Roman veneration of ancestors and of the *genius* (those rational powers, abilities, or supernatural spirit that are in every individual). The

cult of the imperial genius was a bridge between the concept of the authority and dignity of Augustus and the Hellenistic idea of the divine right of kings. It united two aspects of the Classical world and provided a religious basis of loyalty to the empire. It was presupposed that the emperor had a special relationship with the gods which symbolized the cult of the emperor's genius. Augustus himself believed that he was under the special protection of the god Apollo.<sup>35</sup>

*Pax Augustus* was the final and definitive expression of the spirit of antiquity, said Charles Norris Cochrane. The development of the imperial cult was centered in the power of Caesar and led to his deification. The deification of imperial virtue involved the deification of imperial fortune. Domitian wished to be called *dominus et deus* or 'Lord and God!' The tragedy of the Caesars was that they had to play the role of gods, which caused them to condescend to becoming like beasts.<sup>36</sup> Christians were suspicious of Augustan peace. They excluded themselves from this aspect of religious loyalty to the empire by not endorsing emperor worship. The rejection of the state religion was soon to be considered treasonous.

## Points of Conflict

There have been a number of items mentioned in relation to Rome's attitude toward the Christians. There were a number of points of conflict, some more serious than others, some more important to the minds of Romans than others. Generally they thought of Christianity as a strange, subversive cult that practiced its ritual in secret. Although they were forced "underground" because of the threat against them but going underground seemed to make matters worse. Romans misunderstood, misperceived, and misrepresented Christian practices. At this point these kinds of issues occupied the minds of hostile people; it would not be until later that they would ridicule Christian teachings, especially doctrines about Christ.

Early on the main contention that ignited opposition (and, as Frend has said, "the deepening wave of hatred" toward the Christians) was that they did not believe in the gods. More specifically it would seem, pagans abhorred the fact that Christians did not believe in their cultic or community gods. Believing and serving in the Roman cultic gods was, in their minds, as we have seen, the glue that held civilization together. Because Christ's followers did not believe in the cultic gods, they were called atheists, the same word used against the Jews by the Greek provincials. Atheism, says Frend, was the most damning charge made against the Christians. Their refusal to sacrifice to the Roman gods was considered an insult to the gods, angering the

deities. Along with this was the requirement of each citizen to swear an oath to the emperor and offer incense at his images (see Lunn-Rockliffe). This, the Christians refused to do.

For Christians it was an abomination to offer incense or cupful of wine to the “genius” of the emperor, affirming that “Caesar is Lord.” They had only one Lord, Jesus Christ.

How did Christians respond to the pressure to conform to the wishes of the empire and of the people, especially when they were accused falsely, persecuted, and in some cases martyred? They did not retaliate with insurrection or armed rebellion but submitted to persecution and martyrdom as something they received from God—through which they should bring glory to God. Steadfast devotion and constancy characterized their response. Death was considered a witness, an ultimate witness to be sure, the glorious culmination of a life of witness, both through articulating the word of God verbally and by showing it through a holy lifestyle. Tertullian was so impressed by the way persecuted Christians endured their suffering with gladness that it led him to Christ. Josef Ton described it in this manner: “Intrigued by the fact that so many Christians accepted to die for their faith, marching to their death in the arena of gladiators, he set his mind to discover their secret. In the course of his inquiry, he found Christ and became a Christian.”<sup>37</sup> Later in his discussion of Tertullian and persecution, Ton noted the impact of the martyrs’ endurance and faithfulness in suffering. They would accept going to prison with great joy. They would enter the arena singing and stand fearless before gladiators and wild beasts. They showed incredible endurance under torture and accepted with eagerness the renunciation of wealth, family, and life for their faith.<sup>38</sup>

It should be noted that the Christians did not see the fight as against Rome or its emperors. Rather, they believed the fight was instigated by Satan. Christian response against Satan was to fight with spiritual weapons, such as remaining faithful to Christ until death.<sup>39</sup> They were able to sort out the real cause and the real enemy, which would determine the type of battle and weapons. They fought spiritual warfare with weapons based on Christ’s spiritual victory at the cross. They fought with faith, not force. Christians were called to suffer, not to inflict suffering.

Martyrdom was death imposed upon believers who remained faithful and constant, and who did not deny their faith.<sup>39</sup> It was death imposed on those who refused to take an oath of loyalty or to sacrifice to a false god.<sup>40</sup> Suffering and tribulation belonged to the very nature of the Christian church. Converts expected they would have to confess their faith and suffer in the

name of Jesus.<sup>41</sup> The early church looked at the Suffering Servant passages of Isaiah not only as foretelling what Christ had suffered but also what his followers would suffer. While Christ's redemptive work was fulfilled on the cross, his brethren would experience afflictions until he came again. Christians would suffer these afflictions in his behalf.<sup>42</sup>

Unfortunately not all Christians were so valiant or faithful. Many would relapse and recant their confession of faith in Christ, would sacrifice to the gods, and obtain the necessary proof of their sacrifice in the form of certificate (although some friendly officials issued the "proof" even though the lapsed Christians did not actually make the sacrifice. It was a way, in the thinking of these weak Christians, of keeping themselves from persecution while not actually committing sin. A new group of "apostates" (as Gibbon called them) arose. They were called *traditores* (traitors) because they delivered Scriptures up to the authorities to be burned. "But," as Schaff said, "as the [Diocletian] persecution raged, the zeal and fidelity of the Christians increased, and martyrdom spread as if by contagion."<sup>43</sup>

As soon as the persecution subsided, lapsed Christians realized their mistake and sought re-admission to the church. It was not an easy process and differed in various regions and times. In Tertullian's time the process for allowing lapsed Christians back into the church required that they publicly seek forgiveness, but they were restricted from taking Communion until a point close to their death. It was then that they were considered truly forgiven.<sup>44</sup>

During the times of intense persecution in the early days of the church, it would appear to many, Christians and pagans alike, that Satan had the upper hand and that he would decimate the church. But before the Edict of Toleration of AD 313, it became apparent that paganism had failed. Schaff wrote: "The long and bloody war of heathen Rome against the church, which is built upon a rock, utterly failed."<sup>45</sup> Rome's aim was to exterminate the church but instead purified it.<sup>46</sup> Referring to the Diocletian terror, Schaff commented that "The persecution was the last desperate struggle of Roman heathenism for its life. It was the crisis of utter extinction or absolute supremacy for each of the two religions. At the close of the contest the old Roman state religion was exhausted."<sup>47</sup>

Paganism did not entirely die out, however. Emperor Julian in the 360s tried to reinstate it as the dominant religion of the empire where it continued to pose a challenge to the Christian church (see Lunn-Rockcliffe).

## CHAPTER 2: THE END OF THE FIRST CENTURY AND THE BEGINNING OF THE SECOND

### Ignatius of Antioch

Ignatius was a disciple of the Apostle John, as was Polycarp. His life overlapped the first and second centuries. He was bishop of the Antioch Church while Polycarp was bishop of Smyrna. He is best known for his writings and martyrdom following his arrest by Trajan and transportation to Rome to die in the arena. The Roman idea was to raze the leadership of the church and in so doing terrify the rank and file. However, Ignatius utilized his forced travel as an opportunity to speak to Christians and church representatives along the way. When Ignatius's prison escort reached the west coast of Asia Minor, it halted before taking ships. Delegations from several Asian churches came to visit the suffering bishop and to speak with him at length. It was to these churches and to Polycarp that he wrote letters that give us a picture of his thoughts during those days.<sup>48</sup> He was the first Christian martyr after Paul to record his thoughts about martyrdom while on a trip to Rome.<sup>49</sup> His letters were so famous that they were imitated by others and forgeries abound.

“In the seven genuine letters written to the Churches in Asia Minor, through which he passed on his way to Rome, circa 107–108, and to the Roman community itself,” wrote Frend, “he exhibits the theology of martyrdom of the primitive Church at its most intense.”<sup>50</sup>

### Letter to the Romans

Writing to Rome, Ignatius emphatically stated his desire was not to please men but to please God, and he avowed his belief that martyrdom was God's will for him. He wished to use the opportunity to “attain to God,” that is, to go to God through martyrdom. He asked the Roman Christians to allow him to make this sacrifice to God while the altar was prepared. (Apparently the Roman church could pull some strings to have him freed.) Reflecting on the attitude of the world toward Christians he wrote that when the Christian is hated by the world he or she is loved by God.

Ignatius wanted to impress upon his readers that he would willingly die for God so he begged his friends not to hinder him from his quest by showing undue and unseasonable goodwill toward him. He urged them to allow him to become food for the wild beasts (he was to face killer animals in the arena) and that was the context for the words that have become famous: “I am the wheat of God, and am ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of God.” Later he would write that if the beasts were afraid to pursue him, he would compel them to come and kill him.

He made some statements that seem to contrary to his evident spiritual state. For example, although he was dying because he was a disciple of Christ, he wrote that in martyrdom he would *begin* to be a disciple, and then attain Christ or true life. To him, it appeared that being an untested disciple was inferior to being one who had faced and experienced martyrdom. That point at least was clear: martyrdom was the true test of the whether a disciple was genuine or not.

Ignatius was a man in bonds who had learned not to desire any worldly perk or those things that are valueless for eternity. He would suffer martyrdom as a freedman of Christ and would rise again emancipated in him. The hope of the resurrection was a powerful incentive for Ignatius. For his friends to try to get his release would be, he said, to help the prince of this world. While writing the letter to the Romans, Ignatius was focused on heaven and his desire was to be “heavenly food.”

### Letter to the Church at Smyrna

In his letter to the Church at Smyrna, Ignatius focused on the incarnation of Christ. His Christology provided the reason why he was willing—very willing—to die for Christ. It was not hero worship nor was it loyalty to a human emperor who had the audacity to think he was somehow divine; no, it was worship of the Son of God who, born of the virgin, had obtained salvation for humanity through his death and resurrection. This letter to Smyrna lauded the church there for its immovable faith in the God-man Jesus Christ—man according to the seed of David and the Son of God according to the power and will of God.

Ignatius made a point to say that Jesus truly suffered for our sakes in his flesh. He died and was raised from the dead. He was truly dead. He was truly made alive again. Even after his Resurrection he still possessed flesh. While spiritually united to the Father, he could eat and drink with humans since he had a real body too. For this Jesus, Ignatius was willing to suffer.

And why have I also surrendered myself to death, to fire, to the sword, to the wild beasts? But [in fact], he who is near to the sword is near to God; he that is among the wild beasts is in company with God; provided only he be so in the name of Jesus Christ. I undergo all these things that I may suffer together with him. He who became a perfect man inwardly strengthening me (chapter IV).

Later in the long letter, Ignatius warned his readers against teachers of error, specifically those who taught that Christ did not have a body. His logic was simple—if Christ did not have a body then he did not really die, and therefore could not have atoned for our sins; and if he did not have a real, physical body, there was no Resurrection. If there was no Resurrection then we have no hope of our own resurrection. Ignatius connected this error to the failure of the heretics to take the Eucharist because they did not believe it to be the flesh of Christ. No matter what one's position on the nature of the Eucharist, the core question is whether the bread is the body of Christ or at least represents the fact that Christ had a body. The church's tradition of celebrating Eucharist became a key argument for Ignatius that Christ had a body. To deny that Christ had a body meant that one did not accept the grace of God and therefore was in the state of spiritual death.

### Letter to Polycarp

Ignatius's instruction to Polycarp, disciple of the Apostle John, was to stand firm and endure pounding like an anvil on which metals are beaten. He was sure of the steadfast faith of Polycarp who looked to God, the immovable rock. It was, wrote Ignatius, expected of an athlete when wounded yet to strive to be victorious. Ignatius pointed Polycarp to Christ, for whom he would suffer and die. This Christ was "above all time, eternal and invisible, yet who became visible for our sakes; impalpable and impassible, yet who became passible on our account; and who in every kind of way suffered for our sakes." This Christ, for whom Ignatius and Polycarp suffered, was the pre-existent Son of God, who as God was immaterial and unchangeable. But, he became incarnate and therefore took on flesh and suffered as humans suffer but for our sakes not his own.

## Letter to the Ephesians

In his letter to the Ephesians, Ignatius commented that to be chosen for martyrdom was to be found worthy to show forth the honor of God: “Remember me, as Jesus Christ also remembered you. Pray for the Church which is in Syria, whence I am led bound to Rome, being the last of the faithful who are there, even as I have been thought worthy to be chosen to show forth the honor of God. Farewell in God the Father, and in Jesus Christ, our common hope.” He called his bonds “spiritual jewels.”

## Ignatius’ Thoughts on Martyrdom

Ignatius was fulfilling his duty as a bishop when he wrote to Polycarp and to the churches. The letters were part of his practical spiritual work. Consequently, behind his writings was a theology. We have formed a picture of his theological assumptions from these letters and have summarized them under five points that allow us to see his thought more clearly.

1. Ignatius felt called to be a martyr. This call drove him forward even though he surmised that he would face a gruesome death in the Coliseum. Because he was called, he would allow nothing to stand in his way. Martyrdom was the highest honor and would be the capstone of his life of discipleship.
2. Ignatius saw martyrdom as a way to reach his final goal and destination—being in the presence of God in eternity. He did not challenge the goodness and compassion of God because of his adverse circumstances, but wholly trusted that his calling would serve the purpose of God. Consequently, he regarded as a tool of Satan anyone who tried to hinder his martyrdom. Satan, he believed, was actively trying to circumvent God’s will by causing well-meaning Christians to protect him from martyrdom. Ignatius’s high view of martyrdom also affected his view of the world, which to him no longer held any value.
3. Ignatius considered his martyrdom a sacrifice to God on an altar prepared by God. It was not just a matter of witnessing, although it was that, but was more profoundly spiritual in that he, like Christ, would become a sacrifice to God, pleasing to him. His sacrifice was categorically different than Christ’s in that Christ’s sacrifice was once and for all time, satisfying God’s judgement upon human sin by being perfectly

- efficacious. Ignatius was merely following Christ in his willingness to suffer and die, benefitting his own soul but also strengthening and sustaining the faith of other Christians facing similar adversity.
4. Ignatius was not dying for another human being as one would die for a beloved leader. Because of his belief that the pre-existent Christ was truly incarnated, that he had a real body, that he died a real death, and that he was truly raised from the dead, he found sufficient reason to lay down his life for Christ.
  5. Ignatius's life and actions conformed to his understanding of God's sovereignty. For Ignatius, Christian discipleship meant explicit and profound obedience to Christ. Following God's will was the ultimate manner of expressing obedience to God.

## Clement of Rome

Clement of Rome, a bishop or elder, is generally considered the first apostolic father of the church since he was traditionally listed as the first or second elder in Rome following Peter's ministry there. Legend declared that Clement was martyred during Trajan's reign by being tied to an anchor and drowned in the sea. His only undisputed writing was a letter to the church at Corinth (known as 1 Clement) in which he dealt with a schism that saw certain Corinthian presbyters forced out of office. Clement asserted that the presbyters were the legitimate leaders of the church since they were appointed by the apostles. Only brief sections of the epistle have immediate value to a theology of martyrdom, although the whole epistle affirmed the body of truth for which martyrs would die.

Clement began his exhortation for unity in the body of Christ by identifying the motive of persons who were causing problems: envy among those out of leadership who were seeking to depose those who were in. Those out of power were jealous of the leaders' spiritual authority. Schaff wrote:

Through envy and jealousy, the greatest and most righteous pillars [of the Church] have been persecuted and put to death, Let us set before our eyes the illustrious apostles, Peter, through unrighteous envy, endured not one or two, but numerous labors, and when he had finally suffered martyrdom, departed to the place of glory due to him.<sup>51</sup>

The presbyters at Corinth were persecuted but for the most part had not experienced the martyrdom of death. Clement was writing in their defense and demanding their reinstatement. He asserted further:

To these men who spent their lives in the practice of holiness, there is to be added a great multitude of the elect, who, having through envy endured many indignities and tortures, furnished us with a most excellent example.<sup>52</sup>

Clement then considered repentance, presumably for those who deposed the legitimate leaders of the church. In making his points on repentance, he alluded to Christ's sufferings, relevant to any discussion of suffering and martyrdom.

Let us attend to what is good, pleasing, and acceptable in the sight of him who formed us. Let us look steadfastly to the blood of Christ, and see how precious that blood is to God, which, having been shed for our salvation, has set the grace of repentance before the whole world.<sup>53</sup>

Eventually Clement discussed the manner in which the righteous suffer at the hand of the wicked. "The righteous were indeed persecuted, but only by the wicked," he said. "They were cast in prison, but only by the unholy; they were stoned, but only by transgressors..."<sup>54</sup> In light of this persecution of fellow-believers, Clement urged the Corinthians to brotherly love.

### An Assessment of Clement's Thoughts on Martyrdom

The issue that faced the Corinthian church was intra-church conflict and disunity. According to Clement, it became severe enough that not only were appointed leaders pushed out of office, some were persecuted and killed. Clement wrote to the leaders of the sedition and to their followers, urging repentance. Along the way, he mentioned the Apostle Peter as an example of one who was martyred by persons who exhibited "unrighteous envy." It was unrighteous envy that caused the sedition that led to the mistreatment of the appointed leadership of the church. Peter was rewarded for his faithfulness by departing to a place of glory that was "due to him." Those killed by the schismatics also received the reward of glory. By observing that it is the wicked who persecute the righteous, Clement was implying that those doing the persecution in Corinth were the wicked, and therefore needed to repent and seek forgiveness.

## Aristides Presents His Case

The Greek philosopher and Christian apologist, Aristides, had occasion, according to Eusebius, to present a defense before Emperor Hadrian when Hadrian visited Athens in AD 125. Apologies of this sort were presented either to combat arguments against the Christian faith or to help non-Christians, such as emperors, to form correct opinions regarding the truth of Christianity. The thrust of Aristides's argument was that the Christian God and Christians' ethics were superior to the gods and practices of the Barbarians, Egyptians, the Greeks, and the Jews. The Greeks came the closest to an advanced understanding of knowledge, yet their gods and ethics fell far short of the pristine morality of Christianity. The Greeks became persecutors of Christians.

Aristides contrasted the practices of Christians to those of the Greeks. Christians held to a high level of morality and did not worship idols. They did good to their enemies and they did not bind themselves to anything unclean. "It is enough for us to have shortly informed your Majesty concerning the conduct and the truth of the Christians," wrote Aristides. "For great indeed, and wonderful is their doctrine to him who will search into it and reflect upon it. And verily, this is the new people, and there is something divine...in the midst of them."<sup>55</sup>

While Christians recognized the immorality of the Greeks and how they turned it onto Christians, Christians were "just and good" and long-suffering; though they knew the errors of the Greeks and were persecuted by them, the Christians endured it. Further, they had compassion on them as on men who were unaware of their evil and lacked knowledge. They prayed for those who persecuted them so that they would repent and be forgiven and purified. Christians recalled when they themselves formerly did such evil deeds out of ignorance, speaking blasphemy and speaking evil of the true knowledge of Christians.

"Henceforth let the tongue of those who utter vanity and harass the Christians be silent and hereafter let them speak the truth."<sup>56</sup>

## An Assessment of Aristides' *Apology*

While at first glance Aristides's apology doesn't appear noteworthy or unique, it was actually a bridge from one kind of witnessing (enduring persecution) to another kind—witnessing by defending the faith. He assumed that his defense (witness) should be public and he

addressed it to the highest official in his world. And in making his defense, he inaugurated a tradition among apologists to present the Christian faith as a reasonable alternative to paganism and morally superior to the religious practices of the culture they addressed.

The bottom line for Aristides was that, because of their positive faith in a righteous God and because they lived moral lives, Christians did not deserve to be persecuted. There was no logical or civil reason for persecuting them.

## CHAPTER 3: THE SECOND CENTURY

### Martyrdom and Apologetics

The second century, according to Lutheran historical theologian Otto Heick, was an age of severe conflicts. Christianity was seen as a menace and hated by diverse religions and philosophical entities, including Jews, gnostics, and heathen (those who practiced pagan religions) backed by the Roman Empire.<sup>57</sup> According to the pagans, Christians were regarded as arrogant because they asserted a unique God who heard their prayers and on whose behalf they worked. Their claim that they had a special relationship with this God, and that they should receive special recognition as his true servants, seemed to the pagans both sacrilegious and insane. The fact that Christians appeared to be a new sect convinced the pagans of their subversive intent.

Few would connect martyrdom and apologetics to the same calling but Williston Walker asserted that, in fact, they were two facets of the work of witnessing. Charges brought against the church and its leadership, as well as treatment of the church as an illegal organization, “impelled believers not only to bear witness in suffering but also to explain and defend their faith.”<sup>58</sup> The defenses or apologetics written in response were highly valued in early church circles because they offered to the church the first reasoned explication of the church’s tenets. The authors were generally a special breed of defenders in that they were men who had partaken of the Mediterranean world’s literary and philosophical culture which allowed them to speak the language of the educated classes, placing the apologetic material in the hands of persons of influence within the culture.<sup>59</sup>

Christianity had to deal with a skeptical and sometimes hostile public opinion. One writer explained:

Christianity must justify its existence to a skeptical public opinion. Thus the Apologists, while maintaining the martyrs' struggle in the forefront of the Church's relationship with the world, were also intent on arguing the reasonableness of the Christian faith, its intellectual truths, and its ultimate harmony with its early surroundings...Christianity was divine revelation but it was also the true philosophy acceptable to reason<sup>60</sup>

In reading over the material coming out of that era, it becomes clear that apologists had at least two important tasks. The first was to defend Christianity from misconceptions, half-truths, and rumors that sought to undermine it because pagans perceived Christianity as a threat to their beliefs and practices. In connection with this, their reasoned defenses were a relatively novel approach to culture. Some apologists felt that it was valuable to mine the truths found in heathen religions and Greek philosophy. That is not to say that one could be saved through heathen religion or in Greek philosophy but that through God's grace and general revelation of himself (facilitated by cultural dispersion), truth about God and the nature of the universe became imbedded into some systems of religious thought. Pointing this out and connecting with culture through the truths both systems shared was an avenue for opening the door of understanding to their contemporaries. There were some apologists, noted Heick, who turned to polemics and saw nothing but evil and demonic elements in pagan religion and philosophy, and they sought to point out the folly, immoral character, and intolerance that characterized much of the heathenism they encountered.

The second task was countering the growing intolerance and the growing negative attitude of the empire toward Christianity. So, the apologists wrote and defended the faith with the general public in mind and not exclusively to debate individual representatives of a particular religion or philosophical system as we might think of apologetic debates today.

### Justin Martyr: Where Apologetics and Martyrdom Converge

Justin was a Platonist philosopher who became a Christian believer. He was born of pagan parents in Samaria and received a good education in rhetoric, poetry, and history. Studying at various schools of philosophy, he attached himself first to the Stoics, then to the

Pythagoreans, and lastly to the Platonists. While at Ephesus, he was impressed by the faithfulness and steadfastness of Christian martyrs. He was also strongly impressed by an old Christian man who happened to be walking on the seashore. The old man spoke to Justin about Jesus as the fulfillment of the promises made through the Hebrew prophets. This touched Justin's soul and led him to become a Christian (AD 130). Even so, he continued to wear the philosophical cloak. He came to believe that Platonism had a partial grasp of truth and had served as "schoolmaster" to bring him to Christ.<sup>61</sup> He taught at Ephesus and while there engaged in a dialogue with Trypho a Jew. Later he opened a school of Christian philosophy in Rome and wrote his *First Apology* in c. 155 and the *Second Apology* in c. 166.<sup>62</sup> He was arrested on the charge of practicing an unauthorized religion and when he refused to renounce Christianity was beheaded along with some of his students.

African theologian, Kwame Bediako, made an assessment of Justin that is worthy of attention. Socrates's view, Justin thought, was prompted and motivated by the Divine Word (Logos), Christ, "Justin became the first to seek to validate Graeco-Roman Christian identity in terms of Graeco-Roman tradition itself."<sup>63</sup> Christian writers, astute to the intellectual outlook and spiritual realities of their cultural world, tried to vindicate the Christian faith in ways that were faithful to Christian teaching and also consistent with their participation in the cultural dynamics of Graeco-Roman civilization.<sup>64</sup> Bediako believed that the motivation for this was that Christians were seeking ways to reach their culture and to find ways to relate to them. He wrote:

The missionary (or missiological) agenda which confronted the Christian movement in Graeco-Roman society could not be more fundamental or comprehensive. At the heart of the agenda was the viability of Christian identity itself in terms of the cultural inheritance in which the Christians stood.<sup>65</sup>

In making his case for Justin, Bediako quoted Henry Chadwick who had written that Justin "is the first Christian to make a serious attempt to determine the relations between Christianity and philosophy, between faith and reason."<sup>66</sup> Justin was not writing an apologetic just for the sake of philosophical argument but, Bediako says, *apologia* became above all *witness*, intended to win the hearer to a commitment similar to his own.<sup>67</sup> Justin adopted Christianity not just because it appealed to the educated, philosophical mind but also "because it was able to give satisfaction to the fundamentally unphilosophical mind."<sup>68</sup> The common ground between the Christian and the philosopher was love of truth.

Justin's study of Christian truth and philosophy led him to what was an important tool that facilitated a greater understanding of truth. He believed that Christianity was the "true" philosophy, *theoretically*, and also the "right law of life *practically*." Christianity was the only safe and profitable philosophy. But it is more than that; the whole Christian schema, he came to understand as the result of his conversion, was "an interpretative framework," a "hermeneutical key" for understanding the character of the ways of God with mankind.<sup>69</sup> Justin saw in the content of Christianity and Christian philosophy a framework for assessing Hellenism (and all cultures for that matter). He could look at Hellenistic thought through the lens of Christianity and decide which elements were compatible and which were not.<sup>70</sup>

It was the concept and theory of the Logos/Word that met Justin's need for a tool in the quest for integration (where possible) of his Hellenistic consciousness and his Christian commitment.<sup>71</sup> Williston Walker put this concept into perspective:

The Logos has been active throughout human history as the revealer of God, and all human persons partake of, or participate in, God's Logos/Son insofar as they are rational.<sup>72</sup>

While the Logos concept was a part of his apologetic, it was Justin's writings to Roman leadership that spelled out most clearly his reasoning in behalf of justice for Christians. It needs to be mentioned that Justin's motivation for finding a way to relate to Graeco-Roman culture was not to avoid persecution, although that could have been the byproduct of a successful connection to the culture, but his motive was to find a way of being a better and more adequate witness for Christ. Although he clarified his views and presented his faith as faithfully as he could, his appeals were not accepted with the result that he, too, suffered martyrdom. Many missionaries since Justin have found it so. Clearly no guarantee can be had that if one relates to a culture and articulates the word faithfully it will have a positive result—it may be rejected.

### Justin Martyr's *First Apology*<sup>73</sup>

Justin began his *Apology* to Emperor Titus (*et al.*) on behalf of all those who are unjustly hated and abused because of their faith. He went directly to the point—what he was experiencing was not just, but was the result of prejudice against Christianity.

His first appeal asked those who were truly pious and philosophical to honor and love what was true, even if it meant relinquishing traditional opinions should they prove to be untrue

and worthless. Sound reason, he said, directs the lovers of truth to refuse to follow the guidance of those who teach what is wrong even if death is threatened because of this refusal. The lover of truth should do what is right. This led Justin to request a thorough investigation into the Christian faith, confident that since Christians were not evildoers or wicked, nothing would be found to convict them.

Justin demanded a just investigation, noting that if authorities learned the truth, but did not do what was just, they would have to stand before God without excuse. He was distressed that Christians should be unjustly condemned merely because they were called Christians.

By chapter V of his apology, Justin had undertaken to refute the charge that Christians were atheists. They were called atheists because they did not honor and worship the gods of the empire, which Justin identified as demons in disguise. He declared that evil demons affected people but the people did not know what was affecting them. They inadvertently called demons gods and knew them by names the demons chose for themselves. These demons, wicked and impious, did things that bore no relation or comparison with the acts of men who desired to be virtuous.

Christians were atheists only in the sense that they did not confess or respect the “gods” he had described. In reality Christians were not atheists at all, because they had respect for the “most true God, the Father of righteousness and temperance and other virtues, who is free from impurity.” Refuting the charge of atheism, Justin articulated adoration for the Trinity of God, which included respect and worship for the Son of God and the prophetic Spirit.

Justin advanced a principle on which he believed justice should be meted out: Each person should be tried for his or her own deeds, not because he or she associated with or belonged to a group called Christians. That would be more fair than judging them based on corporate bias. But Justin went on to explain that Christians were motivated by the desire for eternal and pure life, so that they could abide with God, the Father and creator of all, and they hastened to confess their faith that their works might prove they followed God and loved to abide with him where “there is no sin to cause disturbances.”

He went back to the question of gods and idol worship. Christians did not honor pagan gods with sacrifices or garlands of flowers because the gods had been shaped by humans and set in shrines. These are not gods—they may be called gods but they are “soulless and dead.” They did not have the form of God because the real God has no material form. What they were seeing

were “the names and forms of those wicked demons which have appeared.” Such “gods” were insulting to the real God, attaching his name to things that were corruptible and in need of constant care. Consequently, God did not need the material offerings offered to gods since God was the provider of all things. He had all things already.

Since Christians sought a non-material, spiritual kingdom, they were not a threat to human kingdoms such as the Roman Empire. Christians looked for a kingdom that comes from God. Chapter XII of Justin’s *Apology* seems to have been an attempt to assure Caesar that Christians were not wicked people. Since they would not participate in wicked actions, they should be of little concern to Roman authorities. He said that those known as Christians would go to everlasting punishment or salvation based on the value of their actions. It may seem he was basing salvation on works, but it seems he was saying that the actions of Christians reflected their actual spiritual state, so if they were genuinely Christian and acted it, they would receive salvation.

In light of the foregoing, no sober-minded man should accuse Christians of being atheists. They worshiped the maker of the universe who needed no “streams of blood and libations and incense” as did the false gods who were really demons. Christians worshiped Jesus Christ, who was their teacher, said Justin in Chapter XIII; and their worship was reasonable since they had learned Jesus was the Son of the True God himself.

The reference to the Son of God led him into a discussion about following Christ and adhering to what he taught. The topic of Chapter XIV was that “the demons misrepresent Christian doctrine” and this opened the door for Justin to enter into a more thorough discussion of Christ and Christian belief. Justin adamantly affirmed that since demons misrepresented Christian doctrine, his readers should be persuaded by the Word of God and stand aloof from demons, following the “only begotten God through His Son.” He reiterated the point—“we who formerly used magical arts now dedicate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God.” Justin then reflected on how following Christ had changed believers’ attitudes toward those “of different tribes” and toward their enemies.

While Christians worshiped God alone, he wrote, they acknowledged the kings and rulers of men and gladly served them, praying that their kingly power would be accompanied by sound judgment (chapter XVII). However, if rulers paid no regard to Christians’ petitions and explanations, Christians could ultimately suffer no loss. However each person will suffer

punishment according to the merit of their deeds according to the power they had received from God. The last was no doubt a warning aimed at Caesar and all others who might be called upon to adjudicate arguments—a warning to be just.

After elucidating more Christian doctrines, Justin returned with another warning to Caesar about the coming judgment of God, admonishing him that if he persisted in injustice, he would be subject to that judgment.

### Justin Martyr's *Second Apology*

The major thought in Justin's *Second Apology*<sup>74</sup> relating to persecution is found in Chapter III where Justin accused one Crescens, supposedly a philosopher and a learned man, of being prejudiced against Christians because he is ignorant of Christian teaching. Justin wrote:

I, too, therefore expect to be plotted against and fired by the state, by some of those I have named, or perhaps by Crescens, that lover of bravado and boasting; for the man is not worthy of the name of philosopher who publicly bears witness against us in matters which he does not understand, saying that Christians are atheists and impious, and doing so to win the favor of the deluded mob, and to please them. For if he assails us without having read the teachings of Christ, he is thoroughly depraved, and far worse than the illiterate, who often refrain from discussing or bearing false witness about matters they do not understand.

### Assessment of Justin's Thought

Justin was comfortable in the arena of pagan philosophy and, although he was an ardent Christian thinker and philosopher, did not cast aside all pagan philosophical thinking but tried, instead, to find links between it and Christianity. He tried to be a good witness within the Graeco-Roman culture. Clearly he saw no need to cast off his cultural heritage after becoming a Christian.

While several themes in Justin's writings were common to other apologists, his emphasis on witness was his own. And he delved deep into cultural thinking to find ways of connecting his apologetic with it. Like other apologists of the era, he latched onto the philosophic term Logos (Word) as a means of relating to thinkers in his culture and to explain in a plausible way the

nature of God and how things came to be. It was a pagan term that became almost exclusively used by Christians to convey knowledge of the pre-existent Christ (the second Person of the Godhead) with a culture already familiar with the term.

The charge of atheism was not new to Christians; and Justin, like others before him, had to answer the charge with a reasonable explanation. The gods, he explained, were in reality demons, and Christians did not worship demons or gods made of wood or stone. Christians honored and revered a righteous God, the source of morality and purity, who valued and promoted virtue. Pagan gods were notorious for their immoral behavior and outrageously unrighteous acts. Such gods were creations of human craftsmen while the Christian God was the creator of all existence, even the material out of which the other so-called gods are made.

All of Justin's arguments were made in an effort to deflect criticisms that had led his contemporaries to persecute Christians. Consequently, explanations of Christian beliefs and pleas for justice were both significant aspects of Justin's apologetic.

## Tatian of Assyria

When we move on to Tatian, who was a student of Justin, we find a Christian thinker far different than his teacher. Tatian was born in Syria and lived from 120 to 180 AD. After he became a Christian and while living in Rome, he became a student of the Christian philosopher, Justin Martyr. He compiled the *Diatessaron*,<sup>75</sup> a Syriac-language version of the Gospels as a single narrative. It served as the biblical and theological vocabulary of the Syrian churches at least into the fifth century. Tatian adamantly rejected the classical values of Hellenistic culture. Unlike Justin, who searched for links between pagan Greek culture and Christian truths in his effort to be an effective witness, Tatian rejected any link with paganism, with one exception: he utilized the Logos concept as a significantly striking explanation of the principle that created the rational and purposeful cohesion of the universe.

Like Justin, Tatian started a Christian school in Rome. He had a strong abhorrence to pagan religion and cults, and was convinced of the unreasonableness of pagan thinking. Tatian wrote his apology, *Address to the Greeks*,<sup>76</sup> about 155-165 AD. The question he addressed from the top was whether Christianity was rooted in history or was a new religion. Authorities held in high suspicion novel religions and were prone to treat them with social harassment and legal persecution. Many people in the Roman culture thought Christianity was a new religion.

Christians, however, traced their roots to Judaism. Tatian set out to show the relationship. The religion of the Jews, out of which Christianity came, was more ancient than all Greek philosophy and writings.

Little of what Tatian wrote directly concerned persecution and martyrdom. However, his work was an attempt to allay persecution of fellow believers by presenting Christianity in a reasonable light. He taunted pagan philosophy for its ridiculous ideas and acceptance of idolatry, and he held up a great and good creator God as an alternative. Far from being a novel religion, Christianity went back as far as the eternal Being of God.

Although Tatian had little to say about persecution, in the fifteenth chapter of his Address, he posed an important questions to Roman authorities: “Why do you hate those who follow the Word of God, as if they were the vilest of mankind?” And in chapter 27 he observed that Christians were hated just because of their name. He pointed out that this was neither fair nor just.

### An Assessment of Tatian’s Thought

Tatian was not a major apologist, nor was he primarily concerned with persecution or martyrdom. Highly critical of pagan thinking and practice, he rejected any positive link between paganism and Christianity except for the concept of the Logos, which he was willing to connect with Christian theology.

He had a strong aversion to pagan religion, and considered its thinking unreasonable. Perhaps he thought that conversion to Christianity should be of such a radical nature that its converts would be completely cut off from the old religions. He had no spirit of compromise in his bones or in his argument. Such an attitude in Christian converts would, of course, lead many to their death at the hands of irrational pagan persecutors.

### The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus<sup>77</sup>

Mathetes wrote a lengthy letter to a pagan named Diognetus who apparently was not a critic of Christianity but rather an eager learner. Nonetheless Mathetes discussed persecution of the church in the fifth chapter of his letter. Much of the letter was an effort to explain Christian teaching and to have Diognetus reconsider the assumptions of his worldview. Mathetes showed

the folly of heathen gods. Having explained Christian doctrines and attacked idolatry, he moved into discussion of the Christian lifestyle. It was in this context that he spoke about Christians being dishonored, reviled, insulted, and persecuted. Before discussing Christians' high level of ethics and morality (not derived from manmade doctrines), he noted the uniqueness of those who constitute Christianity. Instead of a religion confined to one ethnic group (like the Jews) or to a single tribe or culture (like most pagan religions), Christianity was multi-national, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and lived at home in a variety of cultures. Christians were uniquely diverse as well as universal in outlook. As citizens of particular countries, they shared their regional cultural amenities yet they realized that they were ultimately foreigners even in their homelands, since their allegiance was to an eternal King and heavenly kingdom. Christians lived by high moral standards and sometimes surpassed the requirements of the law by the conduct of their lives. He pointedly wrote:

They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. (2 Corinthians 6:9) They are poor, yet make many rich; (2 Corinthians 6:10) they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; (2 Corinthians 4:12) they are insulted, and repay the insult with honor; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.<sup>78</sup>

Moving on, Mathetes discussed the being of Christ. In his Christology he remarked on the nonviolence of the Christians' creator/king. With his power Christ could have ruled in a tyrannical manner, creating fear and terror. Instead he came (and comes) in meekness, a Son sent by the King, to be our Savior. He did this not by compelling us to obey or believe but by persuading us, "for violence has no place in the character of God." He did not send his Son to judge us but to save us. However, he will in due time send his Son to judge us and then "who shall endure His appearing?"

Mathetes closed his letter with an affirmation of knowledge, realizing that knowledge had been maligned since it became an object of a bad moral choice by Adam and Eve. It was not the tree of knowledge (really only the knowledge of good and evil, not all knowledge) that caused

man's problems but disobedience. Thus knowledge is not important but is necessary for life. Knowledge, properly understood and used, brings forth much fruit.

### Assessment of Mathetes's Thought on Persecution

Mathetes followed the general pattern of apologists in showing what Christians believed and the folly of idolatry. Pagans hated and persecuted Christians because Christ's followers did not revere the gods, but why should they? His strong new argument against idols was that since such gods were malleable, they were changeable, and by implication not trustworthy. If Diognetus persisted in such worship, Mathetes warned, he would become like the gods he worshiped.

In his one definitive pronouncement on persecution, Mathetes spoke against the injustice of Greeks persecuting Christians without being able to give any reason for their hatred—a theme that ran through apologetic writings of that era.

### Minucius Felix

Minucius Felix wrote *The Octavius of Minucius Felix*<sup>79</sup> recounting a debate between two friends. Caecilius Natalis supported the cause of paganism while Octavius advocated for Christianity. Minucius Felix was to judge the debate.

Caecilius Natalis's opening premise was that all human affairs are uncertain and therefore it seemed unreasonable that Christians should speak with certainty concerning God and the universe, especially since Christians were illiterate and untrained. Furthermore, all nations honored and worshiped their gods for the well-being of their nations. The Romans had received the dominion of the known world as a result of their devout worship of their gods. When, on occasion, they had neglected to honor their gods, they had experienced ill consequences. He described those who had rejected the worship of the gods (Theodorus of Cyrene, Diagoras, Protagoras, etc.) as impious atheists.

He then cataloged the offenses of which Christians were allegedly guilty, the kinds of charges levelled against them in persecution. Christians, he said, were foolish because they worshiped a crucified man. He went on to accuse them of immorality and crimes, painting them as total reprobates, who practiced incest, cannibalism, and drunkenness. He also accused them of

practicing secret rites and having no temple, altars, or images of their god. That the Christian God was unnecessary was apparent because the Romans, without any help from the Christian God, governed, reigned, and had the enjoyment of the whole world, and also had dominion over Christians. Christians meanwhile were in suspense and anxiety, and abstained from respectable enjoyments, standing in dread of the very gods they denied.

Octavius replied to Caecilius's arguments and defended Christians against numerous false charges. He asserted that righteous and pious Christians will be rewarded while unrighteous persons will receive eternal punishment. He observed that Christians were unjustly afflicted with torture merely because of being Christians and suggested how that appeared from God's perspective and from the perspective of the believer undergoing the torment.

How beautiful is the spectacle to God when a Christian does battle with pain; when he is drawn up against threats, and punishments, and tortures; when, mocking the noise of death, he treads underfoot the horror of the executioner; when he raises up his liberty against kings and princes, and yields to God alone, whose he is; when, triumphant and victorious, he tramples upon the very man who has pronounced sentence against him! For he has conquered who has obtained that for which he contends. What soldier would not provoke peril with greater boldness under the eyes of his general? For no one receives a reward before his trial, and yet the general does not give what he has not: he cannot preserve life, but he can make the warfare glorious. But God's soldier is neither forsaken in suffering, nor is brought to an end by death. Thus the Christian may seem to be miserable; he cannot be really found to be so.<sup>80</sup>

In the end Caecilius conceded and professed the Christian faith.

### An Assessment of Octavius of Minucius Felix

The *Octavius* fortified and carried on themes advanced by other apologists, giving insight into what early Christians felt was important both in defending and explaining the faith as a part of the faithful witness of the early church. The issue that was most deplored by apologists during that age was the unreasonable and uninformed bias against Christians that caused not only social disdain but became the basis of persecution. The *Octavius* also picked up on this.

Because the Romans did not know what Christians believed, Christians were easily misrepresented. It was easy for Romans to believe malicious rumors about them. What little they understood they ridiculed as had Caecilius Natalis, saying the old gods had served them well and they did not need the Christian God.

In his retort, Octavius argued that truth stands on its own merit. Knowledge of the creator God was necessary for genuine understanding of the organization, coherence, and rational structure of the universe. The Roman gods were inherently inferior to the real God and were, in fact, no-gods. Hiding behind the label of “gods” were demons, who were responsible for entering into the minds of people and causing them to hate Christians, leading to persecution and execution of Christians. Octavius exalted the actions of persecuted Christians and said that their faithfulness under torture was a beautiful spectacle to God, who did not actually forsake suffering Christians.

### Tertullian’s Thoughts on Persecution and Martyrdom

Tertullian was born in Carthage in a Roman province of Africa in c. 160. Carthage was second only to Rome in the empire. Tradition said Tertullian was the son of a Roman centurion and became a lawyer. He was a prolific Christian writer, a notable apologist, and a polemicist against heresy. He has been called the father of Latin or Western theology and was the first to use the term “Trinity” to summarize what Christians thought about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Tertullian became a Christian when he observed how Christians marched to their deaths as martyrs with gladness. He wanted to find out why that was so and his inquiries led to his conversion to Christ around 197.<sup>81</sup> Tertullian believed a Christian could be described as a person who had undergone a radical conversion to faith in Christ and made a conscious breach with his old life.

Before we discuss his writings, it seems wise to begin a discussion of Tertullian with comments and observations from others who can give us perspective and allow us to develop a rubric for both understanding and criticizing Tertullian’s writings.

W. H. C. Frend discussed Tertullian in reference to the Roman Empire. Tertullian rejected the idea that the achievements of Rome were due to the religious observations of the empire’s people.<sup>82</sup> This rejection, common to Christians, was at the heart of the negative view

Romans took of Christians, because Romans believed the Christians' neglect of the Roman gods was detrimental to the welfare of the state. Tertullian's opposition to Roman paganism went deeper than this civil concern. He opposed the values of pagan Rome.<sup>83</sup> His rejection also of civil obligations included Roman literary and philosophical heritage. Philosophy, in his view, was not a means whereby the educated could approach Christianity. On the contrary, Plato, Aristotle, and Zeno were harmful as patriarchs of heresy.<sup>84</sup>

Kwame Bediako, a modern African theologian from Ghana, made an extensive treatment of Tertullian's perspective in his book, *Theology and Identity*. Tertullian, he said, came close to being the most eloquent and most provocative advocate of the distinctive Christian self-understanding in early Graeco-Roman culture.<sup>85</sup> He waged an unrelenting battle to establish the rights of Christian identity. It became the single most important reality of his life.<sup>86</sup> Society, Tertullian observed, insisted on misguided worship that had arisen from error.<sup>87</sup> The gods were actually fallen angels (evil demons in Christian thinking). The whole city of Rome was impregnated with the demonic essence of idolatry.<sup>88</sup> "Tertullian's viewpoint is understandable," wrote Bediako, "in his historical context, which was characterized by the twin dangers of religion and intellectual syncretism and heretical Christianity."<sup>89</sup> Like earlier Christian apologists, Tertullian believed that God's revelation of truth was most fully given in the Christian gospel. He was, however, not interested in trying to discover any "anticipations" of God's revelation in the philosophical traditions of the pre-Christian Graeco-Roman culture. He believed that "the most convincing grounds for the validity of the Christian Gospel outside the Scriptural tradition" were "basic human apprehensions in human experience" and not in the thinking or writings of philosophers.<sup>90</sup> He was not interested in coming to terms with the world.<sup>91</sup>

The topic of persecution was addressed in most of Tertullian's writings.<sup>92</sup> He often described the Christian life as a preparation for martyrdom.<sup>93</sup> A Christian was under obligation to begin training for the day of trials and testing, and renouncing worldly things as a necessary part of that training.<sup>94</sup> Persecution would be the ultimate test of faithfulness and obedience.<sup>95</sup> Obviously then, persecution was willed by God as a means to test his children.<sup>96</sup>

Tertullian called persecution a battle, and the testing was a part of the training for the battle. For the battle to take place, Satan must take the initiative and ignite hostile attitudes against Christians that led to violence against them.<sup>97</sup> Even so, God superintended the conflict. It was the Holy Spirit who trained Christians for battle and the outcome was decided by God.<sup>98</sup>

Tertullian's theology of persecution was practical. It involved extensive training for the believer so that when the battle came, the believer would have developed enough personal power to remain strong and faithful. Submission and obedience were key elements in this preparatory training.

Tertullian believed that the actions of Christians during persecution and in martyrdom had an emphatic impact upon the pagans watching. Ton explained:

Tertullian spoke vividly and emphatically about the impact of the martyrs' endurance and faithfulness in suffering upon the pagan world. Primarily, the curiosity of the pagans is at first stirred by the joy with which the Christians accept to go to prison; then by the fact that they enter the arena singing, fearless before the gladiators or the wild beasts. The Christians' incredible endurance under tortures, as well as their eager renunciation of wealth, family, even life for their faith, also surprise the unbelievers who are watching. Their interest having been aroused, the pagans are motivated to seek out the content of faith that produces such people and behavior.<sup>99</sup>

#### *Tertullian's Defense of the Christians Against the Heathen*<sup>100</sup>

Tertullian wrote a straightforward defense of Christians to the governors of the Roman Empire, those endowed with the authority and power to adjudicate cases where a legal decision needed to be made. In chapter I he took them to task for not allowing a reasonable defense to be made. Tertullian speculated that they were either "afraid or ashamed" to make a public inquiry so that justice could be observed. In fact, it appeared that they had purposefully blocked the way for Christians to be able to make an adequate defense before them. He asked the governors to allow the truth to be presented before them even if only in written form. The church, he said, asked for no special favor or mercy but only that her case be heard and a fair judgment given. One thing the church asked was that in the meantime she not be condemned without really being known.

Tertullian made a case for a fair hearing by saying that if the governors condemned the church before hearing her case, they would be under suspicion of complicity, especially if the church could not be condemned. Hatred toward the name "Christian" was unjust. It was made worse by the fact that it was out of ignorance, which was the same excuse for not hearing the

case. Tertullian asked: “For what could be more unfair than that men should hate that of which they know nothing, even if the fact deserves this hatred?”

There was a genuine difference, Tertullian observed, between evildoers and Christians during interrogation. Evildoers sought to hide their deeds and deny their guilt. Christians, on the other hand, felt no shame because they were not guilty of evil-doing but were anxious to confess their faith.

In chapter II Tertullian continued making his case against the unfairness of Christians’ treatment by Roman authorities. Criminals, he said, have “paid pleaders” to present their case but “Christians alone are not permitted to say anything to clear themselves of the charge, to uphold the truth, to prevent injustice in the judge.” There was no investigation and no procedure was followed. Trajan’s reply to Pliny on how to treat Christians was self-contradictory. He said Christians should not be sought out because they are innocent and yet if they were found they should be punished as criminals. Christians deserved punishment, not because they should be *sought* for crimes, but because they were *found* even when they had committed no crimes.

Tertullian boldly accused the Roman legal system. “To others,” he said, “you apply torture when they deny [their guilt], to make them confess, to Christians alone you apply it to make them deny.” “Why do you torture me to make me give the wrong answer? You reward my confession with torture?” Interesting, Tertullian observed, Christians were guilty if they confessed their faith but were acquitted if they denied it. It was because the Romans wrongly believed that Christians [because of their faith] were guilty of all crimes and were the “enemy of the gods, emperors, laws, morals, and the whole teaching of nature.” With that assumption, Tertullian explained, Christians were always found guilty. Essentially, however, they were punished because the battle was about their name—*Christian*.

In chapter III of this defense, Tertullian exposed the extent of the prejudice that blinded people toward Christians. Even when they witnessed to the person’s excellence they mixed it with taunts of the name Christian. If a person underwent radical personal reform, if it was done in the name of Christian, it was the ground of offence. The hatred of Christians trumped the obvious goodness of a person’s life.

In the middle of his defense Tertullian threw in a little sarcasm about Roman justice. It seemed absurd to him that a god cannot be “official,” even if consecrated by a general, without the approval of the Roman senate! Humans decided who would be gods and who would not.

Chapter VII held to the light a significant failure of the Roman system: it did not attempt to validate the charges against Christians, nor did it have any desire to prove its charges. “It is quite a different duty that you lay upon the executioner against Christians,” wrote Tertullian, “namely, not that they should say of what they are guilty, but that they should deny what they are.”

In refutation of the false assumptions of the Roman system, Tertullian described Christian belief about God, traced the roots of Christianity back to the most ancient times, outlined the life of Christ, and explained why Christians considered heathen gods to be demons.

With all that in mind, Tertullian found irony in the fact that it was lawful to worship anything except the true God. His explanation met the charge that Christians injured the gods by ignoring them since it was not possible to injure something that didn't exist! (chapter XXVII). He also rejected charges of disloyalty to the emperor. Christians did not offend the majesty of the emperors when they did not pray for their safety to the heathen gods since they did not think that images soldered with lead could protect the emperor (chapter XXIX). Instead, “we invoke on behalf of the safety of the emperors a God who is everlasting, a God who is living, when even the emperors themselves prefer should be propitious to them beyond all others” (chapter XXX).

Christians were loyal to the emperor because they believed he had been chosen by God. The emperor actually belonged more to Christians than to pagans because he had been appointed by the Christian God! However, the emperor was not equal to God but must be subject to him. Christians worked for his safety since he was a servant of the real God (XXXIII). Anyone who truly desired God to be propitious toward the emperor should be loyal to God and cease to believe in other gods, or even describe them as gods (chapter XXXIV).

Despite their true understanding, Christians were considered public enemies because they did not offer ill-advised or useless honor. Christians were blamed for every public disaster and yet were not to blame. They were, in fact, a gift from God to the world to moderate the injustices of the world and to encourage people to become intercessors with God (chapter XXXV).

In chapter L, Tertullian clarified the Christian desire for suffering. He posed the rhetorical question: If Christians desire to suffer for God, why do they complain when they are persecuted for Christ's sake? Tertullian's answer was that Christians suffer as a soldier suffers in war. “Nobody indeed willingly suffers.” While a soldier might complain about fighting a battle, yet he would fight with all his strength because that is how he attained both glory and booty. The

battle for Christians was to be summoned to court or to appear before tribunals, “to fight thee for the Truth at the risk of our lives.”

### Tertullian’s *Scorpiace*<sup>101</sup>

In *Scorpiace* Tertullian likened the pestilence of persecution on the church to the torment of a scorpion’s sting. Some Christians were persecuted and died by fire, or by the sword, or by beasts. Others were subjected to clubs and claws in prison. Some (Tertullian included) were being pursued while heretics roamed where they wanted.

It was this situation which prompted him to pick up a pen “in opposition to the little beasts which trouble our sect, our antidote against poison, that I may thereby effect cures” (chapter 1).

Tertullian proceeded to examine the nature and necessity of martyrdom and concluded God allowed martyrdom in his great contest with the enemy in order to keep bruising Satan by Christians’ faithfulness and trampling him by martyrs’ courage. Further, martyrdom might cause faith to grow to new heights. This normally would cost great effort, experiencing “poignant suffering, torture, death. It is God who makes man a martyr” (chapter 7).

God commended martyrdom, wrote Tertullian (chapter 8). From the beginning of human history the righteous had suffered. And the New Testament, nearer his own time, had significant teaching about suffering for righteousness (chapter 9).

The disciple is not above the master, nor the servant above his own Lord; because, seeing the Master and Lord Himself was steadfast in suffering persecution, betrayal and death, much more will be the duty of His servants and disciples to bear the same, that they may not seem superior to Him, or have got an immunity from the assaults of unrighteousness since this itself should be glory enough for them, to be conformed to the sufferings of their Lord and Master, and, preparing them for the endurance of these. He reminds them that they must not fear such persons as kill the body only, but are not able to destroy the soul, but that they must dedicated fear to Him rather who has such power that He can kill both body and soul, and destroy them as well.

Tertullian examined the implications of denying Christ—given that one aim of the persecutors was to force such a denial. He concluded that if a person denied he was in Christ,

then he was not a Christian, because if he was a Christian he would be in Christ. Was it then the will of God that Christians undergo persecution? He concluded it was, observing, “We are both regarded as persons to be hated by all men for the sake of the Name, as it is written; and are delivered up by our nearest kin also, as it is written; and are brought before magistrates, and are examined, and tortured, and make confession, and are ruthlessly killed, as it is written. So the Lord ordained” (chapter 11).

In chapter 13 Tertullian contemplated the lessons that could be derived from the life of Paul—both as persecutor and as persecuted. He concluded that in writing Philippians 2:17, Paul was writing about the bliss of martyrdom (and persecution) as “a festival of mutual joy.” Tertullian highlighted the notion that if we suffer with Christ, we shall also reign with him.

### *Tertullian’s Ad Martyrs*<sup>102</sup>

*Ad Martyrs* was written to encourage and instruct those designated for martyrdom, who were in prison awaiting execution. Tertullian began with an encouraging declaration that the Holy Spirit was with the martyrs in prison, that God led them there and will lead them to the Lord. The prison was also a residence for Satan and the purpose for Christians’ imprisonment was “trampling the wicked one under foot in his chosen abode.” Tertullian urged the martyrs not to let Satan have any success by causing disunity among them but to let him find them well-fortified and armed to do battle with him. In short, he counseled they live at peace with fellow martyrs (chapter 1).

Tertullian asserted that when Christians went to prison they were severed from the world. He observed that the world was actually a prison as well, so the martyrs had gone from one prison to another. Since the world was a place of greater darkness, more grievous fetters, a place breathing out the worst impurities, having a larger number of criminals, the martyrs could say they had been transferred to a place of safety. It was dark, but they were light; it had bonds, but they were free. Tertullian went on to talk about the evil things of the world that Christian prisoners do not have to deal with. He argued that though their flesh was confined, they were open to the spirit, and could roam beyond their confines (chapter 2).

In chapter 3 Tertullian likened a Christian in prison to a soldier at war. Both prison and war were unpleasant, involving “hardness, roughness, and unpleasantness.” He exhorted Christian prisoners to count whatever was hard as a form of discipline for the mind and the body.

They were going through a noble struggle, in which God acted the part of superintendent and the Holy Spirit was their trainer. Then Tertullian switched to the analogy of an athlete in training with prison as the training ground. Whereas some prisoners committed suicide to avoid torture—“the fear of death is not so great as the fear of torture”—others bore torture for the glory of men. Tertullian declared that the worst possibilities were but trifling sufferings to obtain celestial glory and divine reward.

### *Tertullian’s Ad Nationes*

In *Ad Nationes*, Tertullian again dealt with the theology of persecution. He began by accusing those who hate Christians of doing so out of ignorance. Worse yet, persecutors deliberately remained ignorant because if they knew the truth they might want to become Christians themselves. In the opening chapter, he contrasted criminals with Christians and asked in light of the comparison how a Christian could be considered evil.

| CRIMINAL  | CHRISTIAN   |
|---|---|
| Turns from pursuing good to perverse ways, defends evil as good | Seeks virtue  |
| Seeks concealment, shrinks from publicity                       | Unashamed and glories in the faith                        |
| Trembles when caught  |   |
| Denies guilt when accused, even under torture                   | Confesses Christ when accused                             |
| Grieves when condemned  | Rejoices when condemned                                   |
| Reproaches past life  | Sorrows only for former sins, not for belonging to Christ |
| Blames fate for his/her wickedness                              | Makes no defense [i.e. excuses]                           |

In chapter II Tertullian summarized what he had already pointed out: “When culprits are brought up for trial, should they deny the charge, you press them for a confession by torture. When Christians, however, confess without compulsion, you apply torture to induce them to deny.” His reasonable question was “What great perverseness is this?” It was perverse because it tried to compel Christians to deny charges of which the persecutors already had clear evidence.

In chapter III of *Ad Nationes*, Tertullian argued that the charge against Christians had nothing to do with any sinful conduct, but was based wholly and solely on the name “Christian.” He challenged the authorities to explain why they sought to extirpate the name. What crime, what offense, what fault was there in a name? “Surely, surly, names are not things which deserve punishment by the sword, or the cross, or beasts.”

Moving forward with his argument, he accused Roman prosecutors of deliberate ignorance about Christianity and enumerated virtuous character traits that would identify Christians to their persecutors, such as temperance, chastity, compassion, and monotheism. He asked that Christians be tried for actual crimes, not for accepting a mere name.

In subsequent chapters he took to task the persecutors’ demands that Christians swear by the genius of the emperor, a practice that seemed designed to make them appear disloyal when they were not. Christians could not call the emperor God because of their beliefs and indeed would be mocking the emperor to do so. Nor could they propitiate imperial images given their high opinion of the real God and refusal to worship images.

By chapter XIX Tertullian was responding to the accusation that Christians were obstinate. How could they be anything else considering their strong convictions? For example, they believed in the resurrection. Hope of resurrection was in reality contempt of death which gave them strength to face death threats. Finally Tertullian declared that Christians were unjustly judged in the courts of man. “This is injustice,” he said, “that, knowing truth, we are condemned by those who know it not.”

### Assessment of Tertullian’s Thought on Persecution and Martyrdom

Tertullian was a prolific writer. Persecution and martyrdom were often his topics. His apologetic in behalf of Christians was greatly expanded compared to earlier apologists and introduced new themes that he developed as a part of his unique arguments.

Prominent among his themes was a radical view of the Christian faith and life. Christians were those who had experienced a profound conversion, which Tertullian saw as a distinct break from their previous life, a rejection of the old culture and philosophy that embodied paganism.

Tertullian’s theology gave his readers a clear perspective on the phenomenon of persecution. Persecution was the will of God and God superintended the persecution and martyrdom of his followers. The Christian life was preparation for martyrdom, not only rejecting

the world and the enticements of the world, but submitting to and obeying God as a part of that training.

He described persecution as a pestilence that the church must endure. He used the analogy of a scorpion sting to press home his point. Persecution was initiated by Satan and took many forms. However, Tertullian reiterated that it was the Lord who ordained persecution. One outcome of Christian martyrdom was the trampling of Satan. For all intents and purposes, Satan was defeated over and over again when Christians remained faithful unto death.

While Satan was the source of persecution, the Roman legal system became the agency by which persecution was allocated to Christians. Tertullian accused the Roman authorities of injustice, negligence, and deliberate ignorance. They did not allow Christians to mount a defense, there was no public inquiry into charges against Christians, and the authorities did not seem inclined to investigate whether the charges were true or false. Hatred of Christians, Tertullian said, was unjust when based on ignorance. There was no reason, legal or practical, for hating Christians except for their name. The battle Christians were fighting was about the Name, of which the Romans knew nothing.

Christians did not worship the emperors or swear by their genius because those practices actually dishonored the emperors, who neither were gods, nor wished to be. Christians honored Caesar far more than pagans by praying for him to the one real God who, in fact, gave Caesar his position and power and who alone was capable of protecting him.

That Christians really were not criminals was evident by the way they behaved when charged with the “crime” of faith. Christians readily confessed their “crime” while actual criminals sought to deny theirs. He called Roman justice perverse because it tortured Christians to get them to deny their “guilt” but tortured criminals to get them to acknowledge theirs.

In a writing specifically directed toward martyrs (*Ad Martyrs*), Tertullian sought to encourage imprisoned Christians awaiting execution by favorably contrasting prison to the world at large. The Holy Spirit had led believers to prison, was with them in prison, and would finally lead them to God. The world also was a prison that might actually be worse than the prison in which they were incarcerated. Tertullian identified prison as a training ground, with discipline and hardship, much like the training of soldiers for battle or athletes for competition. Christians were put into prison to fight their battles where Satan had made his home.

With Tertullian, then, we see the theology of persecution and martyrdom articulated more fully and clearly than with previous apologists. It was a positive step forward.

### Athenagoras of Athens' Thought on Persecution<sup>103</sup>

Apart from the detail that Athenagoras flourished in the second half of the second century, little is known about him. He designated himself as “Athenagoras, the Athenian, philosopher and Christian.” His work was seldom mentioned in the writings of other apologists although his writings appear to have been well-known and influential. His ability as an apologist, rhetorician, and philosopher becomes apparent as one reads his writings. Athenagoras addressed a plea for justice to Marcus Aurelius and his son, Commodus; a plea that made a clear and compelling case for monotheism.

His apologetic opened with a strong polemic against the injustice occasioned by the Roman bias against the name “Christian” (chapter I). He asked the rhetorical question, why was the mere name so odious to Romans? Names were not deserving of hatred, he argued: there was nothing inherently evil about them that demanded punishment. He pointed out that while others enjoyed justice under the authority of Marcus Aurelius and his son, Christians were harassed, plundered, and persecuted—only because they were called Christian. Athenagoras entreated the emperor to bestow some consideration on them.

He noted that Christians had learned not to retaliate—to return evil for evil—but rather to follow the biblical principle of turning the other cheek.

As he continued his appeal for justice, he asked that the authorities remove despicable treatment by passing a law that would keep Christians from becoming the victims of false accusations. His plea was that they receive what was the common right of all. He wanted justice and asked that Christians be tried on charges of actual crimes when appropriate, but not be punished merely for bearing the name “Christian” (chapter II).

In the third chapter of his plea, Athenagoras discussed allegations against Christians, the foremost being their atheism. This led him to a compelling argument in support of monotheism (chapter IV), showing that the Christians' so-called atheism was actually the highest theism.

Demonstrating that God must be spirit, not matter, he cited numerous Greco-Roman philosophers and poets who had anticipated this Christian position. If Plato was not considered an atheist for conceiving the existence of one uncreated God, then neither should be Christians,

considering they firmly believed that God “has framed all things by his Logos, and holds them in being by His Spirit” (chapter VI).

Athenagoras pushed back against persecution, asking again why others could think and write with impunity about God while discussing first principles of the universe while, when Christians articulated similar ideas, Roman law came down on them? In his effort to refute the common charges of the persecutors that Christians rejected the local gods and were therefore atheists, Athenagoras advanced prophecies of the Old Testament as proof of a God greater than the local deities and said “it would be irrational for us to cease to believe in the Spirit from God, who moved the mouths of the prophets...to give heed to mere human opinions” (chapter VII).

After describing the nature and character of the Christian God (chapter VIII), Athenagoras asked, “Who, then, would not be astonished to hear men who speak of God the Father, and of God the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and who declare both their power in union and their distinction in order, called atheists?”

Another charge against Christians was immorality but Athenagoras showed the high Christian ethic that forgave even its enemies and adopted a benevolent and temperate lifestyle (chapter XII). Romans charged Christians with failure to sacrifice to gods, but considering the Christian doctrine of the one eternal God, it was not surprising believers would not sacrifice to the futile Roman gods (chapter XIII).

Another common accusation of persecutors was that Christians didn’t pray to or believe in the same gods as the city-dwellers. Athenagoras said this was a silly complaint because those who charged Christians with atheism couldn’t even agree which gods to worship. So how could Christians find agreement with them?

After more refutation of the charge of atheism, showing the high nature of the true God and the demonic nature of false gods, Athenagoras again refuted charges of immorality brought against Christians. Christians, he said, were moral because they did not live only for the present life but would ultimately have a heavenly abode with God, or if they did evil, would fall into the fire. He contrasted Christian morality to that of their accusers. Christians did not divorce their wives or commit murder by aborting their children. The fetus in the womb was a created being under God’s care.

So, he concluded by seeking the approval of Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus.

## Assessment of Athenagoras' Thought on Persecution

Athenagoras shared the concern of other Christian thinkers that bias against the name “Christian” resulted in injustice. His treatise was largely an attempt to add content to the name, since the main reason for anti-Christian bias was ignorance of who Christians were.

His doctrine of God (his ‘theology’) took a tack more philosophical than experiential, because he was writing to two men steeped in the Graeco-Roman philosophical tradition. Athenagoras attempted to construct his monotheistic apologetic utilizing sources from within the culture with which Marcus Aurelius would have been familiar (specifically those poets and philosophers who had espoused the view of one God) as well as from the Old Testament biblical tradition of Moses and the prophets. If atheists were persons who did not believe in a god then by definition Christians could not be atheists. Athenagoras argued that God and matter were not two terms for the same thing. The God Christians worshiped was the artful creator of the universe and was responsible for its functionality and beauty. Obviously, God preceded matter, since matter, as something created, needed a creator.

Athenagoras was less concerned about finding a rationale for suffering than about pushing back on the glib reasons given for persecuting Christians.

## Clement of Alexandria's Perspective on Persecution and Martyrdom

Clement of Alexandria was born about AD 150, probably in the eastern Mediterranean region. After he converted to Christianity he traveled from teacher to teacher to receive higher instruction in the faith but just who he studied with is not known for certain. He found “rest” when he met and studied under Pantaenus of Alexandria. Clement then became part of the Catechetical School of Alexandria. His writings show he was well-versed in Greek philosophy and literature; he appears to have been more influenced by Hellenistic philosophy than most other Christian thinkers of his day. Clement did not exert a significant influence on theology through his writings but among his notable students were Origen and Alexander of Jerusalem.

Although Clement wrote of persecution and martyrdom, he did not systemize his thoughts regarding either. One place his writings mentioned martyrdom was in his *Stromata* or *Miscellanies*, in book IV.<sup>104</sup> He sought to distinguish the traits of the Christian gnostic (wise person) and define what a perfect Christian gnostic was. A Christian gnostic differed from the

heretical gnostics of that time, who were syncretistic and esoteric. In the midst of his discussion of Christian gnostics, Clement mentioned martyrdom. To him martyrdom had two meanings: *first*, one who died for his or her faith, and *second*, one who denied the world, rejecting it for Christ. He wrote: “We call martyrdom perfection, not because the man comes to the end of his life as others, but because he has exhibited the perfect work of love” (chapter IV).

He said that gnostic martyrdom was, at least in part, a rejection of the world. It was life conducted by the rule of the gospel, “in love to the Lord...so as to leave his worldly kindred, and wealth, and every possession, in order to lead a life free from passion.”

In a discussion of the Beatitudes (chapter VI), Clement said that being persecuted for righteousness teaches us that we should seek the martyr who, if he is poor because of righteousness’ sake, witnessed to us that the righteousness he loves is a good thing. In reference to those who are blessed because of persecution, he wrote, “Blessed are ye when men hate you, when they shall separate you when they shall cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man’s sake . . . if we do not detest our persecutors, and undergo punishment at their hands, not hating them under the idea that we have been put to trial more tardily than we looked for, but knowing this also, that every instance of trial is an occasion for testifying.” In chapter VII he began a paragraph with the words: “You see that martyrdom for love’s sake is taught.” He dedicated chapter IX to “Christ’s Sayings Respecting Martyrdom.” The gist of his teaching was that gnostics who walked in the footsteps of the apostles should be sinless and, out of love to the Lord, to love their brother also so that, if occasion should come they would “drink the cup” without stumbling. One who “ascends to love,” is really a true martyr and is blessed.

Chapter X addressed the problem of persons eager to offer themselves for martyrdom. He warned that if a person could avoid persecution “but out of daring presents himself for capture” he became an “accomplice in the crime of the persecutor.” In chapter XI he considered the question whether God even cared for Christians since they were persecuted and put to death and he did not prevent it. His response was that God foretold what would happen to the martyrs but he did not wish them to be persecuted. However, he used the situation to prepare martyrs beforehand for their promised inheritance.

Clement made the same complaint against the judicial system we have seen in other apologists. Christians were judged for doing wrong when they had done no wrong and the judges did not care to know anything about them. Judges were influenced by “unwarranted prejudice.”

They persecuted Christians on the supposition that by merely being Christian they sinned against life in their conduct.

But what about the love and forgiveness Christ had taught? Loving one's enemies did not mean loving the wickedness they did. It meant loving them because they were persons, "the work of God" (chapter XIII). In chapter XIV of the *Miscellanies*, under the title "The Love of All, even our Enemies," Clement said that it was inevitable that those who confess Christ would find themselves in the middle of the devil's work and as a result would suffer hostile treatment. The death of the martyrs seemed foolish to some. Yes, in the sight of men they were being punished, but in fact they were "full of immortality." They were chastened a little but they had been proven by God to be worthy of himself, worthy to be called sons, like gold purified in the furnace and accepted as a "whole burned-offering of sacrifice" (chapter XVI).

In chapter XXI Clement described the perfect man or gnostic [i.e. a wise or knowledgeable one]. He wrote:

And now we perceive where, and how, and when the divine apostle mentions the perfect man, and how he shows the differences of the perfect... Such being the case, the prophets are perfect in prophecy, the righteous in righteousness, and martyrs in confession, and others in preaching, not because they are not sharers in the common virtues, but are proficient in those to which they are appointed.

So, the martyr is perfect in his witnessing.

Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako pinpointed Clement's interest in the gospel and what that meant in his culture. He wrote:

For [Clement], the immense attractiveness of the Christian Gospel lies in the belief that it fulfills the aspirations that lay behind the intellectual and moral critique of philosophers of the popular religion and its mythology. The Gospel not only confirmed that rejection of the conception of divinity offered by the myth makers, but also provided converts with the spiritual dynamic and the intellectual integrity to pursue the life of godly piety which was the goal of the quest for the truth.<sup>105</sup>

## An Assessment of Clement of Alexander's Thought on Persecution and Martyrdom

Clement's perspective and underlying theology is found in short statements spread throughout Book IV of his *Stromata*. His premise was that it was inevitable those who confess Christ would suffer hostile treatment because they would find they were in the middle of the devil's work.

Martyrdom had two meanings for Clement. The first type of martyr was a person who died because of witness for Christ. The second was a person who had rejected the world. The latter was poor because of righteousness and loved righteousness above all else in the world. A martyr was perfect in witnessing just as prophets were perfect in prophesying. Each was proficient in what he or she was called to do.

Christians were blessed when they were hated for Christ's sake and the Christian gnostic martyrs did not hate their persecutors. Each instance of trial was an occasion for witnessing. It was inappropriate for Christians to seek martyrdom, especially when they had the opportunity to escape it. To seek persecution was to enter into the crime of the persecutor. God did not desire that Christians be persecuted, but foretold what would happen to his followers.

So, Clement emphasized two things, neither entirely new to the history of the apologetics of persecution and martyrdom but perhaps more clearly stated. He identified a 'living' martyr as one who has rejected the world and lived as though dead to the world, and he admonished against seeking the martyrdom of death.

## Origen's Thought on Persecution and Martyrdom

Origen was raised in the context of persecution. His father was martyred when Origen was seventeen years old and he would have rushed out to join his father as a martyr had his mother not hidden his clothes. He was born c. AD 185 in the city of Alexandria and as a young man became the student of Clement of Alexandria and was appointed the head of the Catechetical School of Alexandria. He was forced from Alexandria and went to Caesarea. Eventually he was imprisoned during a time of persecution and died from his injuries a couple of years after his arrest, torture, and release.

Although prone to heresy (some of his writings were condemned by an early church council) Origen is considered a great theologian because he was the first to develop a truly systematic Christian theology. His goal was to make theology understandable and intelligible to the pagan. By observing the success of systems developed by heretical gnostics, he learned the value of systemized theology and he set out to create one, which was the reason for he wrote his treatise *On First Principles*. Before Origen's day, there was little doctrinal consensus. He sought to change that. The only section of his *First Principles* that relates to martyrdom is found in book IV, where Origen wrote:

And yet there are throughout the whole world— throughout all Greece, and all foreign countries— countless individuals who have abandoned the laws of their country, and those whom they had believed to be gods, and have yielded themselves up to the obedience of the law of Moses, and to the discipleship and worship of Christ; and have done this, not without exciting against themselves the intense hatred of the worshipers of images, so as frequently to be exposed to cruel tortures from the latter, and sometimes even to be put to death. And yet they embrace, and with all affection preserve, the words and teaching of Christ.

And we may see, moreover, how that religion itself grew up in a short time, making progress by the punishment and death of its worshipers, by the plundering of their goods, and by the tortures of every kind which they endured; and this result is the more surprising, that even the teachers of it themselves neither were men of skill, nor very numerous; and yet these words are preached throughout the whole world, so that Greeks and Barbarians, wise and foolish, adopt the doctrines of the Christian religion.<sup>106</sup>

As mentioned earlier, there were two approaches to the defense of the faith in the early church. The first was through witness by way of martyrdom. Origen believed that martyrdom had persuasive power in bringing pagans to the light and truth. The second defense was through apologetics which presented truth to counter the rumors and heresies rampant in the Roman world. Origen participated in both approaches, although the majority of his work was in writing apologetics and doctrinal treatises. His ability to articulate the faith shone when he faced the challenge to create a system of doctrine and again when he set out to to refute Celsus, the first serious critic of Christianity. Origen's *Contra Celsus* is lengthy and well-reasoned.

Origen's *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*<sup>107</sup>

Origen's *Exhortation to Martyrdom* was addressed to Ambrose and Protocletus. No longer babes in Christ, he told them they could now expect that which was prophesied for athletes: "affliction upon affliction." But "affliction upon affliction" opened the door to "hope upon hope." The sufferings Christians encountered were considered "light momentary affliction" (2 Cor. 4:17) when compared to the glory to come. While persecutors sought to focus the attention of persecuted Christians on their own sufferings, martyrs instead turned their minds toward the prizes and rewards they expected to receive if they endured. His counsel to the persecuted, should their soul begin to pull back, was to let the mind of Christ be in them so they could hear the words "hope in God" (Is. 42:11).

Eventually Origen moved to the topic of denial. If "every evil word is an abomination to the Lord," how great an evil would be the "evil word of denial"—proclaiming loyalty to another god which had no existence. Christians would be confronted by an enemy who sought to trick them into bowing down to a false god like the sun or moon; or, they might be approached by an impious prophet who would try to convince them that some teaching was the Word of God when it was not. At that point they should become like deaf men.

In chapter XI of his text on martyrdom, Origen offered ways for his readers to fill up his or her confession, especially in response to the devil placing in their hands "any plausible argument urging us to conduct [that would be] hostile to our martyrdom."

Christians had the covenants of God. Each was therefore to deny himself, to take up their cross, and follow him. So, long ago they should have denied themselves and said, "I no longer live" (Galatians 2:20). "If we wish to save our soul in order to get back better than a soul, let us lose it by our martyrdom." This statement needs some explanation. Origen regarded souls as fallen minds.<sup>108</sup> "For if we lose it for Christ's sake, casting it at His feet in a death for Him, we shall gain possession of true salvation for it." Perhaps "better than a soul" refers to a redeemed mind.

Origen spent much time talking about the rewards of those who gave up kindred, houses, and possessions for Christ—they would receive a "manifold" or "hundred-fold" reward. He hoped to leave much behind if he was a martyr so that he could receive much. Martyrs were to be

given “manifold” spiritual blessings a well. Priority of blessing, he thought, went to those who had rejected the normal attachments that people have in this life. He wrote:

Therefore just as it is right for those who have not been tested with torture and sufferings to yield first to those who have demonstrated their endurance in instruments of torture, in different sorts of racks, and in fire, so also the argument suggests that we poor, even if we become martyrs, should get out of the front seats for you who because of your love for God in Christ trample upon the deceitful fame most people seek, upon such great possession, and upon affliction for your children. (Rowan, *Origen*, ‘Exhortation,’ 52).

In chapter XXVIII Origen wrote that there would be a great theater filled with spectators who would watch the martyrs undergoing their contests and witness their summons to martyrdom. He recounted the story of the many sons martyred in the Book of Maccabees. The mother of the sons bore the news of their sufferings and deaths with good courage. Origen commented: “We can also learn from this what martyrdom is like and how much confidence toward God it produces” (Rowan, *Origen*, ‘Exhortation,’ 59).

After a discussion of “the cup,” referring to Christ’s sufferings at death, Origen quoted Mark 10:38 in which Jesus asked two of his disciples whether they were able to drink the cup he was about to drink or to be baptized with the baptism he would receive. Origen was calling this baptism a baptism of martyrdom (chapter XXXI, or 61 in Rowan). From this he drew an unwarranted conclusion. “Just as the Savior’s [baptism of martyrdom] brought cleansing to the world, may not also [our baptism of martyrdom] serve to cleanse many.” Just as the priests of the Old Testament “thought they were ministering forgiveness of sins to the people by the blood of goats and bulls (Hebrews 9:13, 10:4; Psalm 50:13), so also the souls who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus (Revelation 20:4, 6:9) did not serve the heavenly altar in vain and minister forgiveness to people praying for forgiveness” (62). He was teaching that it was martyrs who dispensed forgiveness to people who prayed for forgiveness. This was not even *implied* in Scripture. Jesus alone dispenses forgiveness for sins through the Holy Spirit. [See John 20:22,23]

In chapter XXXIV of *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*, Origen quoted various verses in which Christ spoke about future persecution of his disciples and how even family members would rise up against others because of rejected witness to Christ, leading to the martyrdoms of

some. No one, he said, would enter into martyrdom except by the providence of God (Matthew 10:29-33).

Chapter XL examined the obverse side of persecution—the potential for denying one’s faith. Origen drew an analogy from 1 Corinthians 10:21 in which Paul said that Christians cannot eat or drink at the table of the Lord and the table of demons at the same time. You had to be on one side or the other. Origen thought that to deny Christ was to sit at the table of demons.

If you had passed from death to life (unbelief to faith), he taught, you shouldn’t be surprised if the world responded with hatred. He quoted 1 John 3:16 which reminded early Christians that Christ had laid down his life for them. Origen urged his readers to lay down their lives for others in the same way, especially for those who would be built up by seeing Christians martyred. Martyrs should take encouragement through the sufferings of Christ, whose encouragement abounded toward them. “Those who share in suffering will also share in the comfort in proportion to the suffering they share with Christ” (Rowan, 72).

Origen alluded to a martyr or group of martyrs being led under guard in a procession before the world. He said it was “celebrating a triumph rather than being led in triumph” (Rowan, 73). “For,” he wrote, “the martyrs in Christ disarm the principalities and powers with Him, and they share His triumph as fellows of His sufferings, becoming in this way also a fellow of the courageous deeds wrought in His suffering” (cf. Colossians 2:15). These deeds include triumphing over the principalities and powers, “which in a short time you will see conquered and put to shame” (Rowan, 73).

Unfortunately, Origen resorted to a teaching unsubstantiated in Scriptures. He said that just as some people were redeemed through the precious blood of Jesus, some would be redeemed by the precious blood of martyrs, since martyrs were exalted above the righteous who did not become martyrs. John 12:52, which he quoted as his authority, had nothing to say about martyrs. It referred to Jesus only (Rowan, 79). However, Origen did make an acceptable comment regarding this: “Let us, then, glorify God, exalting Him by our death, since the martyr will glorify God by his own death” (Rowan, 79).

### Origen’s Response to *The True Doctrine* by Celsus

*The True Doctrine* by Celsus was devoted to countering every aspect of Christian thought, teaching, and life. Most of it was accusatory, without solid substance or documentary

evidence to support its argument. Origen seemed to think that, whether Celsus was serious opponent or just a crank, he needed a response. At the very least Celsus's writings gave Origen an opportunity for articulating Christian faith and belief, which he did in great detail.

Here and there, Origen's reply to Celsus touched upon Christian martyrdom or answered accusations that frequently got Christians martyred. For example, Celsus accused Christians of being a secret society (with the insinuation they were up to no good) when in reality, according to Origen, Christians were discreet in meeting together because of the tremendous prejudice and bias against them. They were merely avoiding unnecessary trouble. Origen later took a different approach, defending secret societies as necessary under certain circumstances.

For this paper's development of a theology of martyrdom, it is not necessary to present Origen's reasoning against Celsus in great detail. He did, however, intersperse some relevant statements among his other arguments.

In chapter LII, for example, he gave an insightful explanation for the difficulty people had of changing their cultural opinions, an explanation that shed light on why the Roman population occasionally turned against Christians, gripped by the standing idea that, because Christians did not honor the gods, they were bringing harm to Rome. In this case, Origen was commenting on Jewish reluctance to hear and understand the prophecies and miracles of Jesus. Although not speaking of the Roman situation, his reasoning can be applied to it. He explained:

Strife and prejudice are powerful instruments in leading men to disregard even those things which are abundantly clear; so that they who have somehow become familiar with certain opinions, which have deeply imbued their minds, and stamped them with a certain character, will not give them up. For a man will abandon his habits in respect to other things, although it may be difficult for him to tear himself from them, more easily than he will surrender his opinions. Nay, even the former are not easily put aside by those who have become accustomed to them; and so neither houses, nor cities, nor villages, nor intimate acquaintances, are willingly forsaken when we are prejudiced in their favor. This, therefore, was a reason why many of the Jews at that time disregarded the clear testimony of the prophecies, and miracles which Jesus wrought, and of the sufferings which He is related to have endured.

In book II of *Contra Celsus*, Origen took up the claims of certain heretics (Docetists and gnostics) that Jesus had only appeared to undergo his sufferings. Origen promptly affirmed that Jesus did indeed suffer and die in the flesh. A physical death was essential to the teaching of a real and genuine resurrection from the dead, a cornerstone of Christian belief (Chapter 16). Death had no more dominion over Christ and he could not suffer death in the future. Origen referred to the sufferings of Christ again in chapters 23 and 25. In Origen's reasoning, having assumed a human body at birth, Jesus had voluntarily assumed the ability to suffer. The implication, of course, was that having endured true suffering he therefore could sympathize with the suffering of his followers and was a true example to them.

The portion of book III of *Contra Celsus* that most directly relates to a theology of persecution and martyrdom is found in Chapters 7 and 8. Celsus had begun with the premise that the Hebrews were originally Egyptians who rebelled against Egypt, and he made the ridiculous statement that Jesus led a group of Jews to rebel against the Jewish state. Origen immediately refuted this by saying that Jesus did not teach that it was appropriate to use violence against anyone, no matter how wicked the person might be. Jesus taught that his disciples would be slain as sheep and that on no occasion were they to resist their persecutors. Since they were not to defend themselves for their faith, many endured death; but God, in his providence, never allowed Christians to be totally eliminated. God restricted the violence and rage against Christians to preserve them.

Aside from the few statements given above, the rest of Origen's eight books in response to Celsus do not provide material for a theology of persecution and martyrdom, except a statement at the end, in book VIII, where Origen wrote:

When God gives to the tempter permission to persecute us, then we suffer persecution; and when God wishes us to be free from suffering, even in the midst of a world that hates us, we enjoy a wonderful peace, trusting in the protection of Him who said, 'Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.' And truly He has overcome the world. Wherefore the world prevails only so long as it is the pleasure of Him who received from the Father power to overcome the world; and from His victory we take courage (Chapter 70).

## An Assessment of Origen's Thought on Persecution and Martyrdom

Origen's theology of persecution and martyrdom was a small part of his large body of work, although he did devote a whole treatise to the subject of martyrdom. He personally experienced martyrdom and also wrote in defense of the faith, both of which were aspects of witness frequently exhibited in the early church.

The cornerstone of Origen's thought was that one could expect persecution and sufferings, as explained in his discussion of "affliction upon affliction." But he also emphasized "hope upon hope" that comes as a result of "affliction upon affliction" and the rewards for those who suffered great losses for their witness.

He believed martyrdom produced confidence in God and that persecution and martyrdom only happened if God allowed them. These came not by the will of man but by the providence of God.

As would other theologians of persecution and martyrdom, he reiterated that Christians were not to take vengeance upon their persecutors, but were, as Jesus said, to be slain as defenseless sheep. Christians were not to defend themselves but to submit to martyrdom.

He drew an unfortunate conclusion regarding the redemptive aspects of martyrdom. He believed that martyrs could cleanse and forgive sins because they were dying for Christ and so he assumed their deaths were as efficacious as Christ's.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://concordiahistoricalinstitute.org/jan-hus-reformer-confessor-martyr-introduction/>

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

<sup>2</sup> Gibbon, *The History and Decline of the Roman Empire*, 1222.

<sup>3</sup> Ton, *Suffering*, 112.

<sup>4</sup> Ton, 113.

<sup>5</sup> Ton, 114-124

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/2\\_ch02.htm](http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/2_ch02.htm)

<sup>7</sup> Water, *New Encyclopedia*, 394.

<sup>8</sup> Water, 395–96.

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/christianityromanempire\\_article\\_01.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/christianityromanempire_article_01.shtml)

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/christianityromanempire\\_article\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/christianityromanempire_article_01.shtml)

<sup>11</sup> Bixler, ‘How the Early Church,’ 1.

<sup>12</sup> W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*.

<sup>13</sup> Frend, *Martyrdom*, 14.

<sup>14</sup> Bixler, 2.

<sup>15</sup> ([http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0265-0339\\_Eusebius\\_Caesariensis\\_Church\\_History\\_EN.pdf](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0265-0339_Eusebius_Caesariensis_Church_History_EN.pdf)).

<sup>16</sup> Ton, 330–333.

<sup>17</sup> Ton, 334.

<sup>18</sup> Ton, 334–36.

<sup>19</sup> Ton, 341–43.

## CHAPTER 1: CHRISTIANITY IN CONFLICT WITH ROMAN RELIGION

<sup>20</sup> Frend, *Martyrdom*, 1

<sup>21</sup> Frend, , 1.

<sup>22</sup> Frend, 78.

<sup>23</sup> Frend, 77-88.

<sup>24</sup> Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Walker, 8.

<sup>26</sup> Walker, 52.

<sup>27</sup> Gibbon, *The Decline*, Part I.

<sup>28</sup> Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 17–27.

<sup>30</sup> Schaff, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Frend, 9, 11.

<sup>32</sup> Schaff, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Schaff, 8-9.

<sup>34</sup> Walker, 8-9.

<sup>35</sup> Frend, 90-91.

<sup>36</sup> Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 17, 113, 129–30.

<sup>37</sup> Ton, 349.

<sup>38</sup> Ton, 354.

<sup>39</sup> Walker 52.

<sup>40</sup> Weinrich, “Death and Martyrdom: An Important Aspect of Early Christian Eschatology,” 327–28.

<sup>41</sup> Frend, 58.

<sup>42</sup> Frend, 59-64.

<sup>43</sup> Schaff, 26.

<sup>44</sup> Ton, 355.

<sup>45</sup> Schaff, 4.

<sup>46</sup> Schaff, 4.

<sup>47</sup> Schaff, 27.

## CHAPTER 2: THE END OF THE FIRST CENTURY AND THE BEGINNING OF THE SECOND

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- <sup>48</sup> Water, *New Encyclopedia*, 89.  
<sup>49</sup> Frend, 151.  
<sup>50</sup> Frend, 151.  
<sup>51</sup> Clement of Rome, Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter V.  
<sup>52</sup> Clement, Corinthians, Chapter VI.  
<sup>53</sup> Clement, Corinthians, Chapter VII.  
<sup>54</sup> Clement, Corinthians, Chapter, XLV.  
<sup>55</sup> Aristides, *The Apology of Aristides*, section 16.  
<sup>56</sup> Aristides, *The Apology of Aristides*, section 17.

### CHAPTER 3: THE SECOND CENTURY

- <sup>57</sup> Walker, 57.  
<sup>58</sup> Walker, 53.  
<sup>59</sup> Walker, 54.  
<sup>60</sup> Frend, 183.  
<sup>61</sup> Walker, 143.  
<sup>62</sup> Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, 395.  
<sup>63</sup> Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 46.  
<sup>64</sup> Bediako, 48.  
<sup>65</sup> Bediako, 45.  
<sup>66</sup> Chadwick, “Justin Martyr’s Defence of Christianity,” 138 in Bediako.  
<sup>67</sup> Bediako, 140.  
<sup>68</sup> Bediako, 140.  
<sup>69</sup> Bediako, 145.  
<sup>70</sup> Bediako, 154–55.  
<sup>71</sup> Bediako, 146.  
<sup>72</sup> Walker, 55.  
<sup>73</sup> ‘First Apology’ <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0126.htm>  
<sup>74</sup> ‘Second Apology’ <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0127.htm>  
<sup>75</sup> Diatessaron <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/diatessaron.html>  
<sup>76</sup> Address To The Greeks <http://www.aina.org/books/tatian.htm>  
<sup>77</sup> Mathetes ‘The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus’ <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0101.htm>  
<sup>78</sup> Mathetes ‘The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus’ <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0101.htm>  
<sup>79</sup> The Octavius of Minucius Felix <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/octavius.html>  
<sup>80</sup> The Octavius of Minucius Felix <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/octavius.html>, XXXVIII.  
<sup>81</sup> Ton, 349.  
<sup>82</sup> Frend, 272.  
<sup>83</sup> Frend, 273.  
<sup>84</sup> Frend, 273.  
<sup>85</sup> Bediako, 106.  
<sup>86</sup> Bediako, 107.  
<sup>87</sup> Bediako, 109.  
<sup>88</sup> Bediako, 109.  
<sup>89</sup> Bediako, 116.  
<sup>90</sup> Bediako, 116.  
<sup>91</sup> Bediako, 125.  
<sup>92</sup> Ton, 350.  
<sup>93</sup> Ton, 350.  
<sup>94</sup> Ton, 350.  
<sup>95</sup> Ton, 350–51.  
<sup>96</sup> Ton, 351.  
<sup>97</sup> Ton, 351.  
<sup>98</sup> Ton, 352.  
<sup>99</sup> Ton, 351.  
<sup>100</sup> Tertullian, “Defence Of The Christians Against The Heathen,”

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[http://www.tertullian.org/articles/mayor\\_apologeticum/mayor\\_apologeticum\\_07translation.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/articles/mayor_apologeticum/mayor_apologeticum_07translation.htm)

<sup>101</sup> “Scorpiace,” <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0318.htm>

<sup>102</sup> “To the Martyrs,” <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0323.htm>

<sup>103</sup> “A PLEA FOR THE CHRISTIANS,” <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/athenagoras-plea.html>

<sup>104</sup> Clement of Alexandria ‘The Stromata, or Miscellanies’ Book IV

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-stromata-book4.html>

<sup>105</sup> *Theology and Identity*, 197.

<sup>106</sup> First Principles, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0412.htm>

<sup>107</sup> Origen’s ‘An Exhortation to Martyrdom’ [Classics of Western Spirituality] Origen, Translation and Introduction by Rowan A. Greer, New York: Paulist Press, pages 41–79.

<sup>108</sup> See note at the bottom of page 49 in Rowan, *Origen*, ‘Exhortation.’