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## The Effect of Pagan Persecution on the Christian Church

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## CHAPTER II.

### THE EFFECT OF PAGAN PERSECUTION ON THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH.

A variety of causes have operated to produce the result stated in my second Thesis, among which I shall first consider those terrible persecutions with which the saints were afflicted in the first centuries of our era.

Let it not be a matter of surprise that I class those persecutions as among the means through which the church was destroyed. The force of heathen rage was aimed at the leaders and strong men of the body religious; and being long-continued and relentlessly cruel, those most steadfast in their adherence to the church invariably became its victims. These being stricken down, it left none but weaklings to contend for the faith, and made possible those subsequent innovations in the religion of Jesus which a pagan public sentiment demanded, and which so completely changed both the spirit and form of the Christian religion as an institution, as to subvert it utterly.

Let me further ask that no one be surprised that violence is permitted to operate in such a case. The idea that the right is always victorious in this world; that truth is always triumphant and innocence always divinely protected, are old, fond fables with which well-meaning men have amused credulous multitudes; but the stern facts of history and actual experience in life correct the pleasing delusion. Do not misunderstand me. I believe in the ultimate victory of the right, the ultimate triumph of truth, the final immunity of innocence from violence. These—innocence, truth and the right

—will be at the last more than conquerors ; they will be successful in the war, but that does not prevent them from losing some battles. It should be remembered always that God has given to man his agency ; and that fact implies that one man is as free to act wickedly as another is to act righteously. Cain was as free to murder his brother as that brother was to worship God ; and so the pagans and Jews were as free to persecute and murder the Christians as the Christians were to live virtuously and worship Christ as God. The agency of man would not be worth the name if it did not grant liberty to the wicked to fill the cup of their iniquity, as well as liberty to the virtuous to round out the measure of their righteousness. Such perfect liberty or agency God has given man ; and it is only so variously modified as not to thwart his general purposes. Hence it comes that even when stealthy Murder, in sight of his helpless victim, meditates the crime, no voice to prevent the act “speaks through the blanket of the dark” crying, “Hold ! hold !” Of course it follows that running parallel with this fact of man’s liberty is the solemn truth of his full responsibility for the use he makes of it.

In the light of these reflections, then, I say that after Christ, as before his day, the kingdom of heaven suffered violence and the violent took it by force.<sup>a</sup> How far that violence, as manifested in the persecutions of the first three Christian centuries, was effectual as a factor in causing the destruction of the church is now to engage our attention.

At the outset, however, there is a difficulty I cannot pass without comment—the disagreement of eminent writers on the extent and severity of the persecutions endured by the Christians up to the accession of Constantine to the imperial throne of Rome. On the one hand infidel writers, such as Gibbon and Dodwell, have sought to minimize the suffering

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<sup>a</sup> Matt. xi: 12.



of the Christians under the persecutions, and on the other, Christian writers, such as Milner, Paley and Fox, have sought to magnify it. The motive on the part of both infidels and Christians is obvious. The more violent and extensive the persecutions, the more the martyrs, the more glorious the triumph for the church. While on the other hand, if the persecutions can be proven to be limited, the suffering made to appear trifling and the martyrs few in number, the church is robbed of so much of her glory. Doubtless both parties have gone to extremes in the contention. Unfortunately for the Christian side of the controversy, there is much reason for believing that the account of Christian suffering within the period named has been much exaggerated. Their chief authority—Eusebius—has thrown more or less suspicion upon the trustworthiness of all that he has written, by declaring in the opening chapter of his “Ecclesiastical History” and elsewhere that “Whatsoever, therefore, *we deem likely to be advantageous to the proposed subject*, we shall endeavor to reduce to a compact body by historical narration. For this purpose we have collected the materials that have been scattered by our predecessors, and culled, as from some intellectual meadows, the appropriate extracts from ancient authors.”<sup>b</sup>

On these passages Gibbon remarks: “The gravest of the ecclesiastical historians, Eusebius himself, indirectly confesses that he has related whatever might redound to the glory, and that he has suppressed all that could tend to the disgrace of religion. Such an acknowledgment will naturally excite a suspicion that a writer who has so openly violated one of the fundamental laws of history, has not paid a very strict regard to the observance of the other.”<sup>c</sup> Draper also

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<sup>b</sup> Euseb. “Eccl. Hist.,” Book VIII., ch. ii and ch. xii.

<sup>c</sup> “Decline and Fall,” Vol. I., p. 486, Ed. of 1880.



refers to the same when commenting upon the inaccuracies of early Christian writers, he says: "In historical compositions there was a want of fair dealing and truthfulness almost incredible to us; thus, Eusebius naively avows that in his history he shall omit whatever might tend to the discredit of the church, and magnify whatever might conduce to her glory."<sup>d</sup>

But while it must be conceded that there is much reason for believing that the Christian fathers exaggerated both the extent and severity of those early persecutions, it remains clear that both the extent and severity of them were greater and more baneful to the church than infidel writers allow; and the truth of it may be proven independent of the testimonies of the Christian fathers. The proofs I refer to are the edicts themselves, considered in the light of the well-known cruelty of the Roman people, intensified by the malice of religious zeal aroused to suppress an obnoxious society whose doctrines were held to be destructive of the ancient religion of Rome, and a menace to the existence of the state itself.

Passing by the persecutions inflicted upon the Christians by the Jews, an account of which is to be found in the New Testament, I call attention to the first great pagan persecution under the edict of the Emperor Nero. For our information in respect to this persecution we are indebted not to any Christian writer, but to the judicious Tacitus, whom even "the most sceptical criticism is obliged to respect."<sup>e</sup>

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<sup>d</sup> "Intellectual Development of Europe," Vol. I., p. 360.

<sup>e</sup> Of the burning of Rome, the punishment of the Christians and this celebrated passage in the writings of the famous Roman annalist, Gibbon, from whom I quote the phrase above, says: "The most sceptical criticism is obliged to respect the truth of this extraordinary fact and the integrity of this celebrated passage of Tacitus. The former [the burning of Rome and the punishment of the Christians] is confirmed by the diligent and ac-

Nero having set on fire the city of Rome, in order that he might witness a great conflagration, and wishing to divert suspicion from himself, first accused and then tried to compel the Christians to confess the great crime—and now Tacitus:

“With this view he inflicted the most exquisite tortures on those men who, under the vulgar appellation of Christians, were already branded with deserved infamy. They derived their name and origin from Christ, who, in the reign of Tiberius had suffered death by the sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate. For awhile this dire superstition was checked; and it again burst forth; and not only spread itself over Judea, the first seat of this mischievous sect, but was even introduced into Rome, the common asylum which receives and protects whatever is impure, whatever is atrocious. The confessions of those that were seized discovered a great multitude of their accomplices, and they were all convicted, not so much for the crime of setting fire to the city, as for their hatred of human kind. They died in torments, and their torments were embittered by insults and derision. Some were nailed on crosses; others sewn up in the skins of wild beasts, and exposed to the fury of dogs; others, again, smeared over with combustible materials, were used as torches to illuminate the darkness of the night. The gardens of Nero were destined for the melancholy spectacle, which was accompanied with a horse-race, and honored with the presence of the emperor, who mingled with the populace in the dress and attitude of a charioteer. The guilt of the Christians deserved indeed the most exemplary punishments, but the public abhorrence was changed into commiseration, from the opinion that those unhappy wretches were sacrificed, not so much to the public welfare as to the cruelty of a jealous tyrant.<sup>f</sup>

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curate Suetonius, who mentions the punishment which Nero inflicted on the Christians, a sect of men who had embraced a new and criminal superstition. The latter may be proved by the consent of the most ancient manuscripts, by the inimitable character of the style of Tacitus, by his reputation, which guarded his text from the interpolation of pious fraud.”—“Decline and Fall,” Vol. I., p. 448.

<sup>f</sup> “Tacitus Annl.,” lib., XV., ch. 44.



Eminent scholars are divided in opinion as to whether this persecution under Nero extended to the provinces or was confined to the city of Rome. Gibbon assumes that it was both brief and confined to the city. According to Milman, "M. Guizot, on the authority of Suplicious Severus and of Orosius inclines to the opinion of those who extend the persecution to the provinces. Mosheim rather leans to that side on this much disputed question. Neander takes the view of Gibbon, which is, in general, that of the most learned writers."<sup>g</sup>

This controversy need not detain us a moment. It matters not to my purpose whether the edicts of Nero extended to the provinces or were limited in their operations to the Christians within the capital. The testimony of Tacitus is sufficient to prove, first, that the persecution was general within the city; second its terrible cruelty; and third, the great abhorrence in which the Christians were held by the Romans.

I submit to the consideration of the reader that a people so greatly detested as the Christians, were not likely to meet with gentle treatment from the Romans; and when, as subsequently it came to pass, the people clamored for the sacrifice of the saints whom they abhorred as the enemies of mankind, instead of looking upon them with commiseration as the citizens of Rome did in their persecution under Nero—when the Roman people, I say, clamored for the sacrifice of the Christians and the emperors were cruel enough, and unjust enough to issue edicts for their destruction, the persecutions of those times were neither so limited nor so free from severity as Gibbon and others would have us believe. Even in this persecution under Nero, if no edicts were sent into the provinces commanding the execution of Christians, it is

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<sup>g</sup> See Milman's Note in "Decline and Fall," Vol. I., p. 450.

not unreasonable to believe that the despisers of the followers of Christ, finding warrant for their conduct by what was taking place at Rome, under the supervision of the emperor himself, would not hesitate to inflict hardships upon the saints without the formality of his proclamation.

It was this unofficial persecution which, without doubt, arose in the provinces as an indirect result of the persecution in the capital, that has led a number of prominent writers to believe that Nero's persecution extended throughout the empire. However that may be, a "great multitude" suffered in the city of Rome, and were subject to such tortures and cruel modes of death—described, mark you, by the unfriendly Tacitus—that little is left to be added even by the fervid imaginations of the Christian fathers. It is reasonable to believe that the subsequent persecutions were not freer from cruelty than this one under Nero; and therefore, though some allowance must be made for exaggeration in the writings of the Christian fathers, it may be safely concluded that those persecutions which preceded the reign of Constantine were both widespread and horribly cruel.

What is usually denominated the third persecution of the Christian Church occurred in the reign of Trajan, 98-117 A. D. Here, as in the persecution under Nero, we may determine something of the severity and manner of it from a Roman writer. Trajan intrusted the government of Bithynia and Pontius to his personal friend, the younger Pliny. The new governor, in his administration of the affairs of his provinces, found himself perplexed as to what course he should pursue in regard to the Christians brought before him for trial. He accordingly wrote to his master for instruction; and I deem his letter of such importance as showing the severity to which Christians were subject, the character of the Christians, and the number of unfaithful members who



had evidently entered the church by that time, that I give it *in extenso*:

PLINY'S LETTER.

"Health.—It is my usual custom, sir, to refer all things, of which I harbor any doubts, to you. For who can better direct my judgment in its hesitation, or instruct my understanding in its ignorance? I never had the fortune to be present at any examination of Christians, before I came into this province. I am, therefore, at a loss, to determine what is the usual object either of inquiry or of punishment, and to what length either of them is to be carried. It has also been with me a question very problematical, whether any distinction should be made between the young and the old, the tender and the robust; whether any room should be given for repentance, or the guilt of Christianity, once incurred is not to be expiated by the most unequivocal retraction; whether the name itself, abstracted from any flagitiousness of conduct, or the crimes connected with the name, be the object of punishment. In the meantime, this has been my method, with respect to those who were brought before me as Christians. If they pleaded guilty, I interrogated them twice afresh, with a menace of capital punishment. In case of obstinate perseverance, I ordered them to be executed. For of this I had no doubt, whatever was the nature of their religion, that a sullen and obstinate inflexibility called for the vengeance of the magistrate. Some who were infected with the same madness whom, on account of their privilege of citizenship, I reserve to be sent to Rome, to be referred to your tribunal. In the course of this business, information pouring in, as is usual when they are encouraged, more cases occurred. An anonymous libel was exhibited, with a catalogue of names of persons, who yet declared they were not Christians then or ever had been; and they repeated after me an invocation of the gods and of your image, which for this purpose I had ordered to be brought with the images of the deities. They performed sacred rites with wine and frankincense, and execrated Christ, none of which things I am told a real Christian can ever be compelled to do. On this account I dismissed them. Others named by an informer, first affirmed and then denied the charge of Christianity, declaring that they had been Christians, but had ceased to be so, some three years ago,

others still longer, some even twenty years ago. All of whom worshiped your image, and the statues of the gods, and also execrated Christ. And this was the account which they gave of the nature of their religion they once professed, whether it deserves the name of crime or error, namely, that they were accustomed on a stated day to meet before daylight, and repeat among themselves a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by an oath with an obligation of not committing any wickedness; but on the contrary, of abstaining from thefts, robberies, and adulteries; also, of not violating their promise, or denying a pledge; after which it was their custom to separate, and to meet again at a promiscuous, harmless meal, from which last practice they however desisted, after the publication of my edict, in which, agreeably to your order, I forbade any societies of that sort. On which account I judged it the more necessary, to inquire, by torture, from two females, who were said to be deaconesses, what is the real truth. But nothing could I collect, except a depraved and excessive superstition. Deferring, therefore, any further investigation, I determined to consult you. For the number of the culprits is so great, as to call for serious consultation. Many persons are informed against of every age, and of both sexes; and more still will be in the same situation. The contagion of the superstition had spread not only through cities, but even villages and the country. Not that I think it impossible to check and correct it. The success of my efforts hitherto forbids such desponding thoughts; for the temples, once almost desolate, begin to be frequented, and the sacred solemnities which had long been intermitted, are now attended afresh, and the sacrificed victims are now sold everywhere, which once could scarcely find a purchaser. Whence, I conclude, that many might be reclaimed, were the hope of impunity, on repentance, absolutely confirmed.”<sup>h</sup>

To this Trajan sent the following answer:

“You have done perfectly right, my dear Pliny, in the inquiry which you have made concerning Christians. For truly no

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<sup>h</sup> I have taken Milner’s translation of the Epistle. See “Ch. Hist.,” Vol. I., p. 145.



one general rule can be laid down which will apply itself to all cases. These people must not be sought after. If they are brought before you and convicted, let them be capitally punished, yet with this restriction, that if anyone renounce Christianity, and evidence his sincerity by supplicating our gods, however suspected he may be for the past, he shall obtain pardon for the future, on his repentance. But anonymouse libels in no case ought to be attended to; for the precedent would be of the worst sort, and perfectly incongruous to the maxims of my government.”<sup>i</sup>

Gibbon makes much of the perplexity of Pliny as to how to proceed against the Christians. For since the life of that Roman had been employed in the acquisition of learning and the business of the world; since from the age of nineteen he had pleaded with distinction in the tribunals of Rome; therefore, from the ignorance of this Roman governor, the great historian of the Decline and Fall concludes that there were no general laws or decrees of the senate in force against the Christians previous to Pliny accepting the governorship of Bithynia.<sup>j</sup> There is nothing, however, in the circumstance of Pliny’s ignorance to justify such a conclusion.

It is not difficult to conceive how laws and decrees against the Christians could exist and yet a man employed as Pliny was have no technical knowledge of the *modus operandi* of procedure against them. His very letter, quoted above, seems to recognize the existence of such laws before he went into Bithynia; for he pleads as an excuse for his ignorance of how to proceed in the business neither the non-existence, nor the newness of the laws, but merely the fact that he had never been present at the examination of Christians brought to trial previous to accepting the governorship of his provinces.

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<sup>i</sup> Milner’s “Ch. Hist., Vol. I., n. 148.

<sup>j</sup> “Decline and Fall,” Vol. I., p. 453.

In like spirit Gibbon points to the mildness of both the emperor and the governor as being against the idea that this persecution was very severe. Giving full credit for that mildness, what was the status of the Christians as to liability to persecution in Bithynia and Pontus after Pliny received the instruction of his master? (1) They were not to be sought after, that is, hunted down for the mere sake of destroying them; (2) anonymous complaints or libels were not to be entertained against them; (3) if brought before the judge and they would renounce their religion by supplanting the gods of Rome, they were to receive pardon. So far the tender mercies of Trajan extended. They could still be accused by any one bold enough to affix his name to the charge; and if the accused Christians refused to deny the faith, they were punished by sentence of death. When it is considered how bitter was the malice of their enemies, and how widespread the detestation of Christianity, it will be conceded that even in Bithynia and Pontus, notwithstanding the mildness of the emperor and the humanity of the governor, there was still left plenty of opportunity to vex the church and make persecution contribute to its destruction. I say even in Bithynia and Pontus this was the case; how much more was it so in those provinces where less humane magistrates than Pliny administered the laws, and who proceeded without asking for instruction from the emperor! In such provinces the saints were liable to be accused anonymously, put to the torture, not with a view to force from them a confession, but a denial of the charge, failing in which they were executed without mercy.

The limits of this inquiry forbids anything like an exhaustive examination of the several persecutions endured by the Christians. I shall therefore content myself with a brief reference to those most disastrous to the church.



Passing by, then, the persecutions under Aurelius and Verus, in which the sufferings of the Christians in Gaul were most severe—especially in the cities of Lyons and Vienne,<sup>k</sup> where churches were well nigh destroyed by its violence; and also passing by the persecutions which arose under the edicts of Severus, which were issued more especially to prevent the propagation of Christianity than to punish those already converts to it, I come to that general and terrible persecution under Decius Trajan, in the middle of the third century. The incentive which prompted the action of Decius against the Christians is variously ascribed to hatred of his predecessor, Philip, whom he had murdered, and who was friendly to the church; to his zeal for paganism; and lastly to his fear, feigned or real, that the Christians would usurp the empire. Perhaps all these motives combined impelled him to make war upon the church. According to the representations of one Dionysius, quoted by Eusebius, the persecution, at least in Africa, began before the edicts of Decius were issued:

“The persecution with us did not begin with the imperial edict but precede it by a whole year. And a certain prophet and poet, inauspicious to the city [Alexandria], whoever he was, excited the mass of the heathens against us, stirring them up to their native superstition. Stimulated by him, and taking full liberty to exercise any kind of wickedness, they considered this the only piety, and the worship of their demons, *viz*, to slay us.  
\* \* \* But as the sedition and civil war overtook the wretches, their cruelty was diverted from us to one another. We then drew a little breath, while their rage against us was a little abated. But, presently, that change from a milder reign was announced to us, and much terror was now threatening us. The decree [of Decius] had arrived, very much like that which was

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<sup>k</sup> An account of these persecutions at great length will be found in the letters of the survivors sent to the churches of Asia and Phrygia. “Eusebius,” Book V., ch. i.

foretold by our Lord, exhibiting the most dreadful aspects so that, if it were possible, the very elect would stumble. All indeed were greatly alarmed, and many of the more eminent immediately gave way to them; others, who were in public offices, were led forth by their very acts; others were brought by their acquaintances and when called by name, they approached the impure and unholy sacrifices. But pale and trembling, as if they were not to sacrifice but themselves to be the victims and the sacrifices to the idols. They were jeered by many of the surrounding multitude, and were obviously equally afraid to die and to offer the sacrifice. But some advanced with greater readiness to the altar and boldly asserted that they had never before been Christians, concerning whom the declaration of our Lord is most true, that they will scarcely be saved. Of the rest, some followed the one or the other of the preceding; some fled, others were taken, and of these some held out as far as the prison and bonds, and some after a few days' imprisonment abjured Christianity before they entered the tribunal. And some, also, after enduring the torture for a time, at last renounced. Others, however, firm and blessed pillars of the Lord, confirmed by the Lord himself, and receiving in themselves strength and power, suited and proportioned to their faith, became admirable witnesses of his kingdom."<sup>l</sup>

Eusebius at great length recounts the suffering of individuals both in the east and west divisions of the empire, but it is not necessary to follow him through all those details. It will be sufficient to say that this persecution was more terrible than any which preceded it. It extended over the whole empire, and had for its avowed object the enforced apostasy of the Christians.<sup>m</sup>

How unrelenting the efforts must have been to encompass either the destruction or the apostasy of the Christians will appear when it is known that the governors of the prov-

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<sup>l</sup>That is, they were executed. Eusebius, Bb. vi., ch. xli.

<sup>m</sup>See Murdock's note in Mosheim's "Eccl. Hist.," Bk. i., Cent. iii., ch. ii.



inces were "commanded, on pain of forfeiting their own lives, either to exterminate all Christians utterly, or bring them back by pain and tortures to the religion of their fathers." "During two years," continues Mosheim, "a great multitude of Christians in all the Roman provinces were cut off by various species of punishment and suffering. This persecution was more cruel and terrific than any that preceded it; and immense numbers dismayed, not so much by the fear of death, as by the dread of the long-continued tortures by which the magistrates endeavored to overcome the constancy of the Christians, professed to renounce Christ; and procured for themselves safety, either by sacrificing, i. e., offering incense before the idols, or by certificates purchased with money."<sup>n</sup>

Gibbon, who never admits the severity of the persecutions under the emperors, except when compelled by undeniable facts, says, of this one under Decius:

"The fall of Philip (the predecessor of Decius) introduced with a change of masters, a new system of government so oppressive to the Christians that their former condition, ever since the time of Domitian, was represented as a state of perfect freedom and security, if compared with the rigorous treatment which they experienced under the short reign of Decius. \* \* \* The bishops of the most considerable cities were removed by exile or death; the vigilance of the magistrates prevented the clergy of Rome during sixteen months from proceeding to the new election; and it was the opinion of the Christians that the emperor would more patiently endure a competitor for the purple than a bishop for the capital."<sup>o</sup>

Milner, quoting Cyprian, says concerning the effect of this persecution:

"Vast numbers lapsed into idolatry immediately. Even be-

<sup>n</sup> Mosheim (Murdoch), Bk. i., Cent. iii., ch. ii.

<sup>o</sup> "Decline and Fall," Vol. I., ch. xvi.

fore men were accused as Christians, many ran to the forum and sacrificed to the gods as they were ordered; and the crowds of apostates were so great that the magistrates wished to delay numbers of them till the next day, but they were importuned by wretched suppliants to be allowed to prove themselves heathens that very night."<sup>p</sup>

The reign of Decius was brief, lasting only two years, and toward the close of it, as if surfeited with slaughter, the violent persecution against the saints relaxed somewhat of its severity; but his successors, Gallus and his son Volusian, renewed it. A pestilential disease broke out about this time and spread through a number of the provinces, and this the pagan priests persuaded the populace was a curse sent upon the people on account of the toleration shown to the Christians. This was sufficient to re-kindle the flames of hatred and for two years more the Church of Christ suffered violence as it had done under Decius.

There remains but one more persecution to notice, that which is commonly known as the Diocletian. It could be called more properly the Galerian persecution; for Galerius, son-in-law to the emperor, and one with two others—Constantius Chlorus and Maximian—who shared with him the responsibility of governing the empire,<sup>q</sup> had most to do with it. It is said that Galerius was urged to secure the edicts of Diocletian against the Christians by his mother, Romlia, a

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<sup>p</sup> Milner's "Church Hist.," Vol. I., Cent. iii, ch. viii.

<sup>q</sup> The situation was this: A year after his elevation to the imperial throne, Diocletian, believing the government of the vast empire of Rome a task too great for a single mind, chose Maximianus Herculeus, commonly called Maximian, to be his colleague and to share with him the title of Augustus. After a few years each of the emperors chose a colleague in order to still further divide the labor of administration. These were Constantius Chlorus and Galerius Maximianus, usually called by his first name. Constantius and Galerius occupied an inferior position to that of Diocletian and Maximian, and were honored only with the title of "Caesar."



very haughty woman, who had taken offense because the saints had excluded her from their sacrament meetings. Be that as it may, it is generally conceded that this severest of all persecutions against the Church of Christ was inaugurated and carried on through the hatred and influence of Galerius.

According to Eusebius<sup>r</sup> the persecution began in the nineteenth year of the reign of Diocletian—303 A. D. The emperor in issuing his first edict could not be brought to the infamy of aiming at the lives of the saints; it appears he could only be brought to that by degrees. His first edict ordered the destruction of the Christian churches, and the surrender of the Holy Scriptures and the degradation of Christians from office. Shortly after this the royal palace at Nicomedia was twice set on fire, and from it Galerius fled, giving out that he feared Christian malice had attempted his life. The Christians being charged with the crime the incident was made the excuse for issuing a second edict, “in consequence of which whole families of the pious were slain at the imperial command, some with the sword, some also with fire. But the populace, binding another number upon planks, threw them into the depths of the sea.”<sup>s</sup>

A rebellion which occurred in Syria about this time was also charged to Christian intrigue, and a third edict was issued commanding that the heads of the church everywhere should be thrust into prison. “The spectacle of affairs after these events exceeds all description. Innumerable multitudes were imprisoned in every place, and the dungeons formerly destined for murderers and the vilest criminals were then filled with bishops, and presbyters, and deacons, readers and exorcists, so that there was no room left for those con-

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<sup>r</sup> Eusebius, “Eccl. Hist.,” Bk. viii, ch. ii.

<sup>s</sup> Eusebius, “Eccl. Hist.,” Bk. viii, ch. vi.

demned for crimes.”<sup>t</sup> It was ordered after a time that the prisoners should be granted their liberty on condition that they offer sacrifice at the shrine of the heathen gods. To effect that purpose the judges were commanded to employ the most excruciating tortures.

Diocletian thought to destroy the Christian “superstition” by overcoming the constancy of the leaders; but meeting with more resistance than he anticipated, he at last issued a fourth edict, directing the magistrates to compel all Christians, irrespective of age, sex, or official position, to offer sacrifice to the gods; and to employ tortures to compel that apostasy. The magistrates yielded strict obedience to the edict of the emperor, and the Christian church was reduced to the last extremity.<sup>u</sup> The scenes of suffering from tortures and bloodsheds throughout the empire, except in Gaul, where Constantine reigned, defy description. “Thousands, both men, and women, and children,” says Eusebius, speaking of those who suffered in Egypt, “despising the present life for the sake of our Savior’s doctrine, submitted to death in various shapes. Some, after being tortured with scrappings<sup>v</sup> and the rack, and the most dreadful scourgings, and other innumerable agonies which one might shudder to hear, were finally committed to the flames; and some plunged and drowned in the sea, others voluntarily offering their own heads to their executioners, others dying in the midst of their torments, some wasted away by famine, and others again fixed to the cross. Some, indeed, were executed as malefactors usually were; others, more cruelly, were nailed with the head downwards, and kept alive until they were destroyed by starving on the cross itself.”<sup>w</sup>

<sup>t</sup> Eusebius Eccl. Hist., Bk. viii, ch. vi.

<sup>u</sup> Mosheim’s “Eccl. Hist,” Cent. iv, Part i., ch. i.

<sup>v</sup> This torture was raking the flesh from the body by means of an iron-toothed instrument.

<sup>w</sup> Eusebius, “Eccl. Hist.,” Bk. viii, ch. viii.



After describing similar but still more cruel tortures endured by the Christians of Thebais, Eusebius continues: "And all these things were doing not only for a few days or some time but for a series of whole years. At one time ten or more, at another more than twenty, at another time not less than thirty, and even sixty, and again at another time, a hundred men with their wives and little children were slain in one day, whilst they were condemned to various and varied punishments. We ourselves have observed when on the spot, many crowded together in one day suffering decapitation, some the torments of the flames; so that the murderous weapon was completely blunted, and having lost its edge, broke to pieces; and the executioners themselves wearied with the slaughter, were obliged to relieve one another."<sup>x</sup>

Gibbon, whose very reluctance to concede the severity of these persecutions induces me to quote him as often as admissions are forced from his unwilling lips, says of this persecution:

"The magistrates were commanded to employ every method of severity which might reclaim them from their odious superstition, and obliged them to return to the established worship of the gods. This rigorous order was extended, by a subsequent edict, to the whole body of Christians, who were exposed to a violent and general persecution. Instead of those salutary restraints which had required the direct and solemn testimony of an accuser, it became the duty as well as the interest of the imperial officer to discover, to pursue, and to torment the most obnoxious among the faithful. Heavy penalties were denounced against all who should presume to save a prescribed sectary from the just indignation of the gods and the emperors."<sup>y</sup>

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<sup>x</sup> Eusebius, "Eccl. Hist.," Bk. viii, ch. ix.

<sup>y</sup> "Decline and Fall." Vol. I, p. 481. Gibbon claims, however, that 'notwithstanding the severity of this law, the virtuous courage of many of the pagans in concealing their friends or relatives

This persecution lasted for ten years; and at the end of that time the church presented a melancholy spectacle. Everywhere, even in Gaul, the Christian houses of worship were laid in ruins. Streams of Christian blood had flowed in every province of the empire, excepting in Gaul, where Constantine governed; and there, it will be remembered, a previous persecution under Aurelius and Verus had well-nigh destroyed the churches. Public worship was suspended. The saints were either driven to apostasy by tortures, had fled from the provinces to the barbarians, or kept themselves concealed. Meantime the magistrates, incited as much by avarice as by hatred of Christianity, confiscated not only the church property, but also the private possessions of the ministers. In other cases the church leaders were either slain, or mutilated and sent to the mines or banished from the country. "Many through dread of undergoing torture had made way with their own lives, and many apostatized from the faith; and what remained of the Christian community, consisted of weak, poor and timorous persons."<sup>z</sup>

After adopting these measures for the destruction of the church, severities of another character were put in operation. "It was thought necessary to subject to the most intolerable hardships the condition of those perverse individuals who should still reject the religion of nature, of Rome, and of their ancestors. Persons of liberal birth were declared incapable of holding any honors or employments; slaves were forever deprived of the hopes of freedom, and the whole body of the people were put out of the protection of the law. The judges were authorized to hear and determine

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affords an honorable proof that the rage of superstition had not extinguished in their minds the sentiments of nature and humanity."—*Ibid.*

<sup>z</sup> Schlegel, quoted by Murdock; see note Mosheim's "Eccl. Hist.," Cent. iv, Bk. ii, ch. i.



every action that was brought against a Christian. But the Christians were not permitted to complain of any injury which they themselves had suffered; and thus those unfortunate sectaries were exposed to the severity, while they were excluded from the benefits of public justice. This new species of martyrdom, so painful and lingering, so obscure and ignominious was, perhaps, the most proper to weary the constancy of the faithful; nor can it be doubted that the passions and interest of mankind were disposed on this occasion to second the designs of the emperors."<sup>a</sup> That the Romans considered the destruction of the Christian church completed by the Diocletian persecution is witnessed by the inscriptions upon monuments and medals. Two pillars in Spain, erected to commemorate the reign of Diocletian bore the following: On the first—

“DIOCLETIAN, JOVIAN, MAXIMIAN HERCULIUS, CAESARS AUGUSTI, FOR HAVING EXTENDED THE ROMAN EMPIRE IN THE EAST AND WEST, AND FOR HAVING EXTINGUISHED THE NAME OF CHRISTIANS, WHO BROUGHT THE REPUBLIC TO RUIN.”

On the second—

“DIOCLETIAN, ETC., FOR HAVING ADOPTED GALERIUS IN THE EAST, FOR HAVING EVERYWHERE ABOLISHED THE SUPERSTITION OF CHRIST, FOR HAVING EXTENDED THE WORSHIP OF THE GODS.”

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<sup>a</sup> “Decline and Fall,” Vol. I, ch. xvi, p. 477. Gibbon undertakes to modify what he has here written by saying that the policy of a well-ordered government must sometimes have interposed in behalf of the oppressed Christians. “This wants proof,” says Milman, in a footnote on the remark. “The edict of Diocletian was executed in all its rigor during the rest of the reign;” and gives reference to Eusebius, “Eccl. Hist.,” Bk. viii, ch. xiii.

And on the medal of Diocletian this :

“THE NAME OF CHRISTIAN BEING EXTINGUISHED.”<sup>b</sup>

When it is remembered that these persecutions, to which I have briefly referred, ran through more than three centuries ; that the emperors whose edicts inaugurated them possessed unlimited power to execute their decrees ; that the age in which they occurred was cruel beyond modern comprehension ; that Roman, that is to say, pagan hatred of Christians was venomously bitter, because they were made to believe that the existence of the ancient religion of Rome and latterly the existence of the empire itself depended upon the destruction of Christianity—when all this is remembered, it is not to be wondered at that the saints were worn out, or so nearly so that only “weak and timorous” men were left to ineffectually resist the paganization of Christianity—the destruction of the Church of Christ.

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<sup>b</sup> See Milner's “Church History,” Vol. ii, Cent. iv, ch. ii. I also give the following in evidence of the severity of the persecution of the Christians in the early centuries of our era ; and since it is taken from the funeral oration pronounced by Libanius over the body of his friend, the Emperor Julian, commonly called the apostate—because in manhood he renounced that Christianity which had been forced upon him in childhood, and attempted to restore the ancient religion of Rome—it is of the same character of evidence as that already found in the statements of Tacitus and Pliny—it is the testimony of one unfriendly to Christianity, of one who could have no motive for exaggerating the sufferings of the Christians. Referring to the mildness of the methods of persecution adopted by Julian against the Christians, Libanius says: “They who adhered to corrupt religion [he means the Christians] were in great terrors [on Julian's accession to the throne] and expected that their eyes would be plucked out, that their heads would be cut off, and that rivers of their blood would flow from the multitude of slaughters. They apprehended their new master would invent new kinds of torment, in comparison of which mutilation, sword, fire, drowning, being buried alive, would appear slight pains. For the preceding emperors had employed against them all these kinds of punishments.”