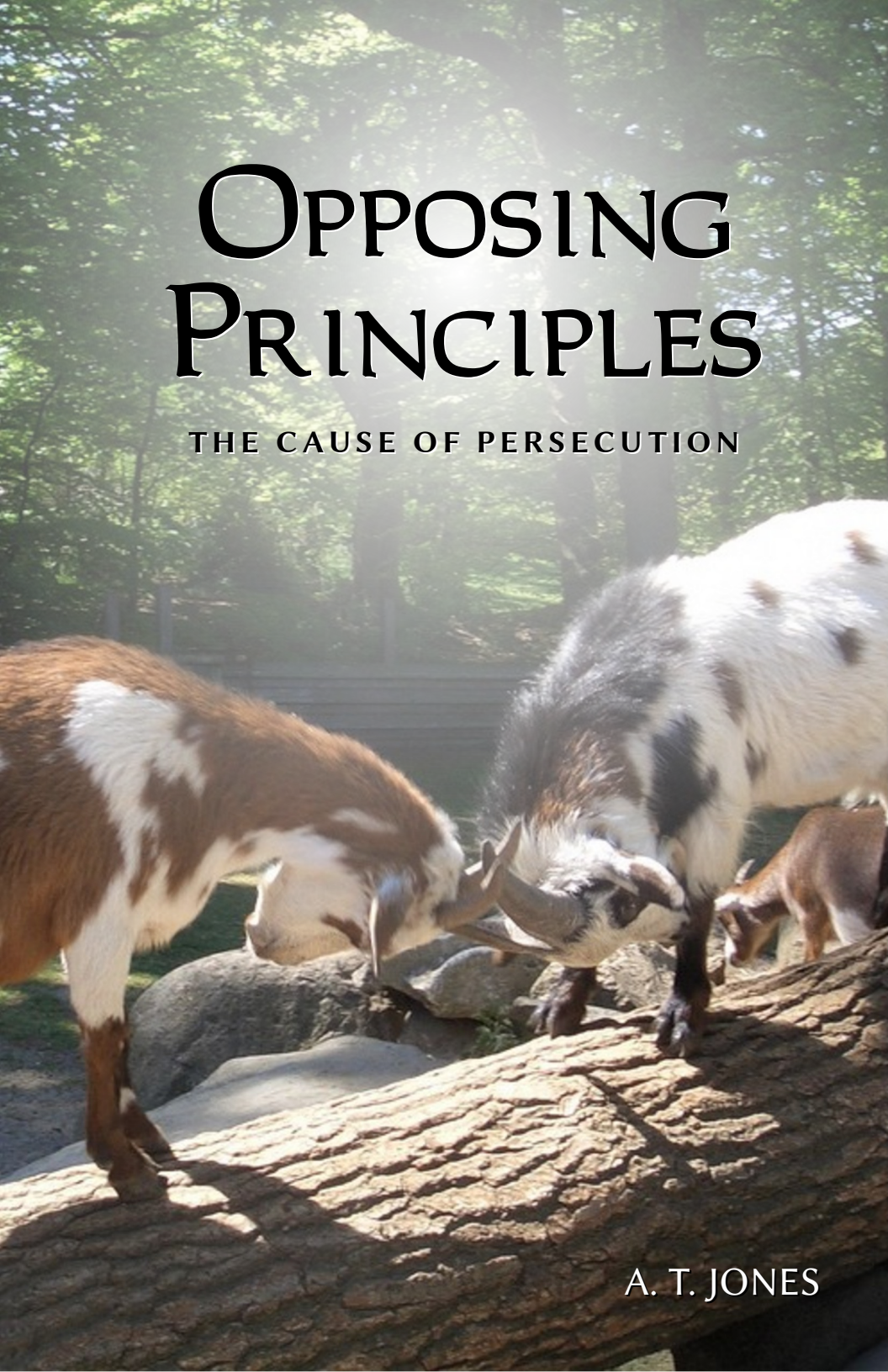
Opposing Principles
THE CAUSE OF PERSECUTION
A. T. JONES

Source:

Great Empires of Prophecy (1898)
Chapter XXV
“Rome — Against Christianity”

Cover:

Goats butting heads (near Bremen, Germany)
wikimedia commons
Tierpark Ostrittrum – Kampfbalken
Marius Kallhardt (fihu)
Flickr.com

Fonts:

Carleton
Linux Biolinum
Linux Libertine
Liberation Sans Narrow

October 2021
www.srac.info
www.practicaprophetica.com

Contents

The thing that has been, is that which shall be;
and that which is done is that which shall be done:
and there is no new thing under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 1:9

I. The Spread of Christianity

THAT which Rome was in its supreme place, the other cities of the empire—Alexandria, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, etc.—were in their narrower spheres; for it was the licentiousness of Greece and the East which had given to the corruption of Rome a deeper dye.

Into that world of iniquity, Jesus Christ sent, as sheep among wolves, a little band of disciples carrying hope to the despairing, joy to the sorrowing, comfort to the afflicted, relief to the distressed, peace to the perplexed, and to all a message of merciful forgiveness of sins, of the gift of the righteousness of God, and of a purity and power which would cleanse the soul from all unrighteousness of heart and life, and plant there instead the perfect purity of the life of the Son of God and the courage of an everlasting joy.

This gospel of peace and of the power of God unto salvation they were commanded to go into all the world and preach to every creature. The disciples went everywhere preaching the word, and before the death of men who were then in the prime of life this good news of the grace of God had actually been preached in all the then known world.

Romans 1
[8] First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.

Romans 10
[18] But I say, Have they not heard? Yes verily, their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world.

Colossians 1
[6] Which is come unto you, as it is in all the world; and brings forth fruit, as it does also in you, since the day you heard of it, and knew the grace of God in truth:
[23] If you continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be

not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which you have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister;

And by it many of all peoples, nations, and languages were brought to the knowledge of the peace and power of God, revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

> In every congregation there were prayers to God that he would listen to the sighing of the prisoner and captive, and have mercy on those who were ready to die. For the slave and his master there was one law and one hope, one baptism, one Saviour, one Judge. In times of domestic bereavement the Christian slave doubtless often consoled his pagan mistress with the suggestion that our present separations are only for a little while, and revealed to her willing ear that there is another world—a land in which we rejoin our dead. How is it possible to arrest the spread of a faith which can make the broken heart leap with joy?[1]

Yet to arrest the spread of that faith there were many long, earnest, and persistent efforts by the Roman Empire. So long as the Christians were confounded with the Jews, no persecution befell them from the Roman State, because the Roman Empire had recognized the Jewish religion as lawful; consequently when the Emperor Claudius commanded all Jews to depart from Rome, Christians were included among them, as, for instance, Aquila and Priscilla.

Acts 18

[1] After these things Paul departed from Athens, and came to Corinth;

[2] And found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla; (because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome:) and came unto them.

And when in Corinth, under Gallio the Roman governor of the province of Achaia, the Jews made insurrection against

[1] Draper, *Intellectual Development of Europe*, chap. ix, par. 8.

Paul upon the charge that...

Acts 18
[13] This fellow persuades men to worship God contrary to the law.

Gallio replied:

[14] If it were a matter of wrong or wicked lewdness, O you Jews, reason would that I should bear with you:
[15] But if it be a question of words and names, and of your law, look you to it; for I will be no judge of such matters.

And with this,

[16] ...he drove them from the judgment seat.

Also when the centurion Lysias had rescued Paul from the murderous Jews in Jerusalem, and would send him for protection to Felix the governor, he wrote to Felix thus:

Acts 23
[28] When I would have known the cause wherefore they accused him, I brought him forth into their council:
[29] Whom I perceived to be accused of questions of their law, but to have nothing laid to his charge worthy of death or of bonds.

To please the Jews, Felix left Paul in prison. When Festus came in and had given him a hearing, and would bring his case before King Agrippa, he spoke thus of the matter:

Acts 25
[14] ...There is a certain man left in bonds by Felix:
[15] About whom, when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews informed me, desiring to have judgment against him.
[16] To whom I answered, It is not the manner of the Romans to deliver any man to die, before that he which is accused have the accusers face to face, and have license to answer for himself concerning the crime laid against him.
[17] Therefore, when they were come hither, without any delay on the morrow I sat on the judgment seat, and commanded

the man to be brought forth.
[18] Against whom when the accusers stood up, they brought none accusation of such things as I supposed:
[19] But had certain questions against him of their own superstition, and of one Jesus, which was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive.
[20] And because I doubted of such manner of questions, I asked him whether he would go to Jerusalem, and there be judged of these matters.
[21] But when Paul had appealed to be reserved unto the hearing of Augustus, I commanded him to be kept till I might send him to Caesar.

And when Agrippa had heard him, the unanimous decision was,

Acts 26
[31] This man does nothing worthy of death or of bonds;

And Agrippa declared,

[32] This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed unto Caesar.

And even when he had been heard twice by Caesar,—Nero, —as it was still but a controversy between Jews concerning questions of their own, the Roman power refused to take cognizance of the case, and Paul, a Christian, was released.

But when Christianity had spread among the Gentiles, and a clear distinction was made and recognized between the Christians and the Jews by all parties, and Christianity appeared as a new religion not recognized by the Roman law, then came the persecution of Christians by the Romans.

The controversy between the Christians and the Romans was not a dispute between individuals, nor a contention between sects or parties. It was a contest between antagonistic principles. It was, therefore, a contest between Christianity and Rome, rather than between Christians and Romans.

II. The Christian Principle

ON the part of Christianity it was the proclamation of the principle of genuine liberty; on the part of Rome it was the assertion of the principle of genuine despotism.

Rights of Conscience

On the part of Christianity it was the assertion of the principle of the rights of conscience and of the individual; on the part of Rome it was the assertion of the principle of the absolute absorption of the individual, and his total enslavement to the State in all things, divine as well as human, religious as well as civil.

Soul Freedom

Jesus Christ came into the world to set men free, and to plant in their souls the genuine principle of liberty:

- liberty actuated by love,
- liberty too honorable to allow itself to be used as an occasion to the flesh or for a cloak of maliciousness,
- liberty led by a conscience enlightened by the Spirit of God,
- liberty in which man may be free from all men, yet made so gentle by love that he would willingly become the servant of all, in order to bring them to the enjoyment of this same liberty.

This is freedom indeed. This is the freedom which Christ gave to man; for:

> **John 8**
> [36] If the Son therefore shall make you free, you shall be free indeed.

In giving to men this freedom, such an infinite gift could have no other result than that which Christ intended; namely, to bind them in everlasting, unquestioning, unswerving alle-

giance to Him as the royal benefactor of the race. He thus reveals himself to men as the highest good, and brings them to himself as the manifestation of that highest good, and to obedience to His will as, the perfection of conduct.

The Knowledge of God in Christ

Jesus Christ was God manifest in the flesh. Thus God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, that they might know Him, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom He sent.

He gathered to himself disciples, instructed them in His heavenly doctrine, endued them with power from on high, sent them forth into all the world to preach this gospel of freedom to every creature, and to teach them to observe all things whatsoever He had commanded them.

III. The Roman Principle

The Roman Empire then filled the world:

> ...the sublimest incarnation of power, and a monument the mightiest of greatness built by human hands, which has upon this planet been suffered to appear.[2]

The State is Supreme

That empire, proud of its conquests, and exceedingly jealous of its claims, asserted its right to rule in all things, human and divine. In the Roman view, the State took precedence of everything.

It was entirely out of respect to the State and wholly to preserve the State, that either the emperors or the laws ever forbade the exercise of the Christian religion. According to Roman principles, the State was the highest idea of good.

> The idea of the State was the highest idea of ethics, and within that was included all actual realization of the highest good; hence the development of all other goods pertaining to humanity, was made dependent on this.[3]

Man with all that he had was subordinated to the State; he must have no higher aim than to be a servant of the State; he must seek no higher good than that which the State could bestow. Thus every Roman citizen was a subject, and every Roman subject was a slave.

> The more distinguished a Roman became, the less was he a free man. The omnipotence of the law, the despotism of the rule, drove him into a narrow circle of thought and action, and his credit and influence depended on the sad austerity of his life. The whole duty of man, with the humblest and greatest of the Romans, was to keep his house in order, and be the

[2] De Quincy, *The Caesars.*
[3] Neander, *History of the Christian Religion and Church*, Vol. i, part i, sec. i, div. iii, par. 1.

obedient servant of the State.[4]

It will be seen at once that for any man to profess the principles and the name of Christ was virtually to set himself against the Roman Empire. For him to recognize God as revealed in Jesus Christ as the highest good, was but treason against the Roman State.

It was not looked upon by Rome as anything else than high treason; because, as the Roman State represented to the Roman the highest idea of good, for any man to assert that there was a higher good, was to make Rome itself subordinate. And this would not be looked upon in any other light by Roman pride than as a direct blow at the dignity of Rome, and subversive of the Roman State.

Christians Accused of Treason

Consequently the Christians were not only called "atheists," because they denied the gods, but the accusation against them before the tribunals was of the crime of "high treason," because they denied the right of the State to interfere with men's relations to God. The common accusation against them was that they were

> ...irreverent to the Caesars, and enemies of the Caesars and of the Roman people.[5]

To the Christian, the word of God asserted with absolute authority:

> **Ecclesiastes 12**
> [13] Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

To him, obedience to this word through faith in Christ was

[4] Mommsen, Quoted by James Freeman Clarke in *Ten Great Religions*, chap. viii, sec. iv, par. 1.
[5] Joseph Torrey, *General History of the Christian Religion and Church*, Chapter 3, "Persecutions of the Christian Church".

eternal life. This to him was the conduct which showed his allegiance to God as the highest good,—a good as much higher than that of the Roman State as the government of God is greater than was the government of Rome.

The State is God

This idea of the State was not merely the State as a civil institution, but as a divine institution, and the highest conception of divinity itself. The genius of Rome was the supreme deity. Thus the idea of the State as the highest good was the religious idea; consequently religion was inseparable from the State. All religious views were to be held subordinate to the State, and all religion was only the servant of the State.

The genius of the Roman State being to the Roman mind the chief deity, since Rome had conquered all nations, it was demonstrated to the Roman mind that Rome was superior to all the gods that were known. And though Rome allowed conquered nations to maintain the worship of their national gods, these as well as the conquered people were considered only as servants of the Roman State. Every religion was held subordinate to the religion of Rome:

> All forms of religion might come to Rome and take their places in its pantheon, they must come as the servants of the State.[6]

The State being the Roman's conception of the highest good, Rome's own gods derived all their dignity from the fact that they were recognized as such by the State. It was counted by the Romans an act of the greatest condescension and an evidence of the greatest possible favor to bestow State recognition upon any foreign gods, or to allow any Roman subject to worship any other gods than those which were recognized as such by the Roman State. A fundamental maxim of Roman

[6] James Freeman Clarke, *Ten Great Religions*, Chapter VIII, "The Religion of Rome".

legislation was,

> No man shall have for himself particular gods of his own; no man shall worship by himself any new or foreign gods, unless they are recognized by the public laws."[7]

Vox Populi, Vox Dei

Again: the Roman State being the supreme deity, "the Senate and people" were but the organs through which its ideas were expressed; hence the maxim:

> *Vox populi, vox dei:* "the voice of the people is the voice of God."

As this voice gave expression to the will of the supreme deity, and consequently of the highest good, and as this will was expressed in the form of laws, hence again the Roman maxim:

> "What the law says is right."

It is very evident that in such a system there was no place for individuality. The State was everything, and the majority was in fact the State. What the majority said should be, that was the voice of the State, that was the voice of God, that was the expression of the highest good, that was the expression of the highest conception of right; and everybody must assent to that or be considered a traitor to the State.

The individual was but a part of the State. There was therefore no such thing as the rights of the people; the right of the State only was to be considered, and that was to be considered absolute.

> The first principle of their law was the paramount right of the State over the citizen. Whether as head of a family, or as proprietor, he had no natural rights of his own; his privileges were created by the law as well as defined by it. The State in

[7] Cicero, quoted in Neander's *History of the Christian Religion and Church*, sec. I, div.iii, par. 2.

> the plenitude of her power delegated a portion of her own irresponsibility to the citizen, who satisfied the conditions she required in order to become the parent of her children; but at the same time she demanded of him the sacrifice of his free agency to her own rude ideas of political expediency.[8]

It is also evident that in such a system there was no such thing as the rights of conscience; because as the State was supreme also in the realm of religion, all things religious were to be subordinated to the will of the State, which was but the will of the majority. And where the majority presumes to decide in matters of religion, there is no such thing as rights of religion or conscience.

[8] Merivale, *Romans under the Empire*, chap. xxii, par. 21.

IV. Why the Conflict?

AGAINST this whole system Christianity was diametrically opposed.

Supremacy of God

First, in its assertion of the supremacy of God; in the idea of God as manifested in Jesus Christ as the highest idea of good; in the will of God as expressed in His law as the highest conception of right; and in the fear of God and the keeping of His commandments as the whole duty of man.

Christ had set himself before His disciples as the one possessing all power in heaven and in earth. He had told them to go into all the world and teach to every creature all things whatsoever He had commanded them. Christ had said that the first of all the commandments, that which inculcates the highest and first of all duties, is,

> **Mark 12**
> [30] You shall love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.

This put Jesus Christ above the State, and put allegiance to Him above allegiance to the State; this denied the supremacy of Rome, and likewise denied either that the Roman gods were gods at all or that the genius of Rome itself was in any sense a god.

Separation of Caesar and God

Secondly, when the republic as represented by the Senate and people of Rome was merged in the imperial power, and the emperor became the embodiment of the State, he represented the dignity, the majesty, and the power of the State, and likewise, in that, represented the divinity of the State. Hence divinity attached to the Caesars.

Christianity was directly opposed to this, as shown by the

word of Christ, who, when asked by the Pharisees and the Herodians whether it was lawful to give tribute to Caesar or not, answered:

Matthew 22
[21] Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.

In this, Christ established a clear distinction between Caesar and God, and between religion and the State. He separated that which pertains to God from that which pertains to the State. Only that which was Caesar's was to be rendered to Caesar, while that which is God's was to be rendered to God, and with no reference whatever to Caesar.

The State being divine, and the Caesar reflecting this divinity, whatever was God's was Caesar's. Therefore when Christ made this distinction between God and Caesar, and separated that which pertains to God from that which pertains to Caesar, and commanded men to render to God that which is God's, and to Caesar only that which is Caesar's, He at once stripped Caesar—the State—of every attribute of divinity. And in doing this He declared the supremacy of the individual conscience; because it rests with the individual to decide what things they are which pertain to God.

A Summary

Thus:

- Christianity proclaimed the right of the individual to worship according to the dictates of his own conscience; Rome asserted the duty of every man to worship according to the dictates of the State.
- Christianity asserted the supremacy of God; Rome asserted the supremacy of the State.
- Christianity set forth God as manifested in Jesus Christ as the chief good; Rome held the State to be the highest good.

- Christianity set forth the law of God as the expression of the highest conception of right; Rome held the law of the State to be the expression of the highest idea of right.
- Christianity taught that the fear of God and the keeping of His commandments is the whole duty of man; Rome taught that to be the obedient servant of the State is the whole duty of man.
- Christianity preached Christ as the sole possessor of power in heaven and in earth; Rome declared the State to be the highest power.
- Christianity separated that which is God's from that which is Caesar's; Rome maintained that what is God's, is Caesar's.

This was the contest, and these were the reasons of it, between Christianity and the Roman Empire.

The Duty Owed to Caesar

Yet in all this, Christianity did not deny to Caesar a place; it did not propose to undo the State. It only taught to the State its proper place, and proposed to have the State take that place and keep it. Christianity did not dispute the right of the Roman State to be; it only denied the right of that State to be in the place of God.

In the very words in which He separated between that which is Caesar's and that which is God's, Christ recognized the rightfulness of Caesar's existence; and that there were things that rightfully belong to Caesar, and which were to be rendered to him by Christians. He said,

Matthew 22

[21] ...Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's...

In these words He certainly recognized that Caesar had jurisdiction in certain things, and that within that jurisdiction he was to be respected. As Caesar represented the State, in

this scripture the phrase represents the State, whether it be the State of Rome or any other State on earth. This is simply the statement of the right of civil government to be; that there are certain things over which civil government has jurisdiction; and that in these things the authority of civil government is to be respected.

This jurisdiction is more clearly defined in Paul's letter to the *Romans*. There it is commanded:

> **Romans 13**
> [1] Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers.

In this is asserted the right of the higher powers—that is, the right of the State—to exercise authority, and that Christians must be subject to that authority. Further it is given as a reason for this, that:

> [1] ...there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.

This asserts not only the right of the State to be and to exercise authority, it also asserts the truth that the State is an ordinance of God, and that the power which it exercises is ordained of God.

Yet in this very assertion Christianity was held to be antagonistic to Rome, because it put the God of the Christians above the Roman State, and made the State to be only an ordinance of the God of the Christians. For the Roman Empire, or for any of the Roman emperors, to have recognized the truth of this statement, would have been at once to revolutionize the whole system of civil and religious economy of the Romans, and to deny at once the value of the accumulated wisdom of all the generations of the Roman ages.

Yet that was the only proper alternative of the Roman State, and that is what ought to have been done. Nebuchadnezzar

acknowledged the right of God to "change the king's word"[9] in behalf of the freedom of the conscience of the individual. Civil government being thus declared to be of God, and its authority ordained of God, the instruction proceeds:

Romans 13

[2] Whoever therefore resists the power, resists the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.

[5] Wherefore you must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience' sake.

Governments being of God, and their authority being ordained of God, Christians in respecting God will necessarily respect, in its place, the exercise of the authority ordained by Him; but this authority, according to the words of Christ, is to be exercised only in those things which are Caesar's, and not in things which pertain to God. Accordingly, the letter to the Romans proceeds:

[6] For this cause pay tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing.

This connects Paul's argument directly with that of Christ above referred to, and shows that this is but a comment on that statement, and an extension of the argument therein contained. The scripture proceeds:

Romans 13

[7] Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

[8] Owe no man anything, but to love one another; for he that loves another has fulfilled the law.

[9] For this, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, You shall not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

---

[9] *Daniel* 3:28.

Let it be borne in mind that the apostle is here writing to Christians concerning the respect and duty which they are to render to the powers that be, that is, to the State in fact. He knew full well, and so did those to whom he wrote, that there are other commandments in the very law of which a part is here quoted.

The Duty Owed to God

But he and they likewise knew that these other commandments do not in any way relate to any man's duty or respect to the powers that be. Those other commandments of the law which is here partly quoted, relate to God and to man's duty to Him. One of them is:

> **Exodus 20**
> [3] You shall have no other gods before me;

–another,

> [4] You shall not make unto yourself any graven image;

–another,

> [7] You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain;

–and another,

> [8] Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy;
> [9] Six days shall you labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God...

And these are briefly comprehended in that saying, namely,

> **Mark 12**
> [30] You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.

According to the words of Christ, all these obligations, pertaining solely to God, are to be rendered to Him only, and with man in this realm, Caesar can never of right have anything to do in any way whatever.

As, therefore, the instruction in *Romans* 13:1-10 is given to Christians concerning their duty and respect to the powers that be, and as this instruction is confined absolutely to man's relationship to his fellow men, it is evident that when Christians have paid their taxes, and have shown proper respect to their fellow men, then their obligation, their duty, and their respect, to the powers that be, have been fully discharged, and those powers never can rightly have any further jurisdiction over their conduct.

This is not to say that the State has jurisdiction of the last six commandments as such. It is only to say that the jurisdiction of the State is confined solely to man's conduct toward man, and never can touch his relationship to God, even under the second table of the law.

This doctrine asserts the right of every man to worship according to the dictates of his own conscience, as he pleases, and when he pleases. Just this, however, was the subject of the whole controversy between Christianity and the Roman Empire.

V. The Battle

Christians Innocent of Moral Wrongs

THERE was never any honest charge made that the Christians did violence to any man, or refused to pay tribute. The direct and positive instruction was not only that they should do no evil, but that they should speak no evil of any man; and that they practiced accordingly is shown by Pliny's letter to Trajan concerning the Christians, in which he says that when they met and partook of that harmless meal, before they separated they pledged one another not to steal, not to commit adultery, not to do violence to any man.

Pliny the Younger was governor of the province of Bithynia. In that province he found Christianity so prevalent that the worship of the gods was almost deserted. He undertook to correct this irregularity; but this being a new sort of business with him, he was soon involved in questions that he could not easily decide to his own satisfaction, and he concluded to address the emperor for the necessary instructions. He therefore wrote to Trajan as follows:

> Sir: It is my constant method to apply myself to you for the resolution of all my doubts; for who can better govern my dilatory way of proceeding or instruct my ignorance? I have never been present at the examination of the Christians [by others], on which account I am unacquainted with what uses to be inquired into, and what and how far they used to be punished; nor are my doubts small, whether there be not a distinction to be made between the ages [of the accused], and whether tender youth ought to have the same punishment with strong men? Whether there be not room for pardon upon repentance? or whether it may not be an advantage to one that had been a Christian, that he has forsaken Christianity? whether the bare name, without any crimes besides, or the crimes adhering to that name, be to be punished?
>
> In the meantime I have taken this course about those who have been brought before me as Christians: I asked them

whether they were Christians or not. If they confessed that they were Christians, I asked them again, and a third time, intermixing threatening with the questions. If they persevered in their confessions, I ordered them to be executed; for I did not doubt but, let their confessions be of any sort whatsoever, this positiveness and inflexible obstinacy deserved to be punished.

There have been some of this mad sect whom I took notice of in particular as Roman citizens, that they might be sent to that city. After some time, as is usual in such examinations, the crime spread itself, and many more cases came before me. A libel was sent to me, though without an author, containing many names [of persons accused]. These denied that they were Christians now, or ever had been. They called upon the gods, and supplicated to your image, which I caused to be brought to me for that purpose, with frankincense and wine; they also cursed Christ; none of which things, it is said, can any of those that are really Christians be compelled to do; so I thought fit to let them go. Others of them that were named in the libel, said they were Christians, but presently denied it again; that indeed they had been Christians, but had ceased to be so, some three years, some many more; and one there was that said he had not been so these twenty years. All these worshiped your image and the images of our gods; these also cursed Christ.

However, they assured me that the main of their fault, or of their mistake, was this: That they were wont, on a stated day, to meet together before it was light, and to sing a hymn to Christ, as to a god, alternately; and to oblige themselves by a sacrament [or oath] not to do anything that was ill; but that they would commit no theft, or pilfering, or adultery; that they would not break their promises, or deny what was deposited with them, when it was required back again; after which it was their custom to depart, and to meet again at a common but innocent meal, which they had left off upon that edict which I published at your command, and wherein I had forbidden any such conventicles.

These examinations made me think it necessary to inquire by torments what the truth was; which I did of two servant-

maids, who were called "deaconesses;" but still I discovered no more than that they were addicted to a bad and to an extravagant superstition.

Hereupon I have put off any further examinations, and have recourse to you; for the affair seems to be well worth consultation, especially on account of the number of those that are in danger; for there are many of every age, of every rank, and of both sexes, who are now and hereafter likely to be called to account, and to be in danger; for this superstition is spread like a contagion, not only into cities and towns, but into country villages also, which yet there is reason to hope may be stopped and corrected.

To be sure, the temples, which were almost forsaken, begin already to be frequented; and the holy solemnities, which were long intermitted, begin to be revived. The sacrifices begin to sell well everywhere, of which very few purchasers had of late appeared; whereby it is easy to suppose how great a multitude of men may be amended, if place for repentance be admitted.

To this letter Trajan replied:

My Pliny: You have taken the method which you ought, in examining the causes of those that had been accused as Christians; for indeed no certain and general form of judging can be ordained in this case.

These people are not to be sought for; but if they be accused and convicted, they are to be punished, but with this caution: that he who denies himself to be a Christian, and makes it plain that he is not so, by supplicating to our gods, although he had been so formerly, may be allowed pardon, upon his repentance.

As for libels sent without an author, they ought to have no place in any accusation whatsoever; for that would be a thing of very ill example, and not agreeable to my reign.[10]

[10] These two letters are found in English in Dissertation iii, at the close of Whiston's *Josephus*.

The Charges of Atheism and Treason

The Roman State never had any just charge to bring against the Christians of doing any wrong to any man. The charge was "atheism," because they denied the gods, and "high treason," because they denied the right of the State to rule in things pertaining to God.

Therefore, as a matter of fact, the whole controversy between Christianity and the Roman Empire was upon the simple question of the rights of conscience,—the question whether it is the right of every man to worship according to the dictates of his own conscience, or whether it is his duty to worship according to the dictates of the State.

This question was then, as it has always been, very far-reaching. When the right was claimed to worship according to the dictates of conscience, in that was claimed the right to disregard all the Roman laws on the subject of religion, and to deny the right of the State to have anything whatever to do with the question of religion.

Roman Religion Intertwined with Daily Life

But this, according to the Roman estimate, was only to bid defiance to the State and to the interests of society altogether. The Roman State, so intimately and intricately connected with religion, was but the reflection of the character of the Roman people, who prided themselves upon being the most religious of all nations, and Cicero commended them for this, because their religion was carried into all the details of life.

> The Roman ceremonial worship was very elaborate and minute, applying to every part of daily life. It consisted in sacrifices, prayers, festivals, and the investigations by auguries and haruspices, of the will of the gods and the course of future events. The Romans accounted themselves an exceedingly religious people, because their religion was so intimately connected with the affairs of home and State....Thus religion everywhere met the public life of the Roman by its

> festivals, and laid an equal yoke on his private life by its requisition of sacrifices, prayers, and auguries. All pursuits must be conducted according to a system carefully laid down by the College Pontiff....If a man went out to walk, there was a form to be recited; if he mounted his chariot, another.[11]

But this whole system of religion was false. The gods which they worshiped were false gods. Their gods, in short, were but reflections of themselves; and the ceremonies of worship were but the exercise of their own passions and lusts. Neither in their gods nor their worship was there a single element of good.

Therefore upon it all Christianity taught the people to turn their backs. The Christian doctrine declared all these gods to be no gods; and all the forms of worship of the gods to be only idolatry and a denial of the only true God—the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The games and all the festival days were affairs of State, and

> ...were an essential part of the cheerful devotion of the pagans, and the gods were supposed to accept, as the most grateful offering, the games that the prince and people celebrated in honor of their peculiar festivals.[12]

The festivities of the wedding and the ceremonies of the funeral were all conducted under the protection of the gods. More than this,

> ...the number of the gods was as great as the number of the incidents in earthly life.[13]

> [The] pagan's domestic hearth was guarded by the penates, or by the ancestral gods of his family or tribe. By land he traveled under the protection of one tutelar divinity, by sea another; the birth, the bridal, the funeral, had each its presid-

[11] James Freeman Clarke, *Ten Great Religions*, chap. vii, sec. iii, pars. 1, 4.
[12] Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, chap. xv, par. 15.
[13] Mommsen, *History of Rome,* book i, chap. xii, par. 22.

> ing deity; the very commonest household utensils were cast in mythological forms; he could scarcely drink without being reminded of making a libation to the gods.[14]

Christians Renounce the Heathen Ceremonies

All this heathen ceremony, Christianity taught the people to renounce. And every one did renounce it who became a Christian. He had to renounce it to become a Christian. But so intricately were idolatrous forms interwoven into all the associations of both public and private life, of both State and social action, that

> ...it seemed impossible to escape the observance of them without at the same time renouncing the commerce of mankind and all the offices and amusements of society.[15]

Yet with any of it true Christianity did not compromise. Every Christian, merely by the profession of Christianity, severed himself from all the gods of Rome and everything that was done in their honor. He could not attend a wedding or a funeral of his nearest relatives, because every ceremony was performed with reference to the gods. He could not attend the public festival, for the same reason.

Nor could be escape by absenting himself on such occasions; because on days of public festivity, the doors of the houses, and the lamps about them, and the heads of the dwellers therein, must all be adorned with laurel and garlands of flowers in honor of the licentious gods and goddesses of Rome.

If the Christian took part in these services, he paid honor to the gods as did the other heathen. If he refused to do so, which he must do if he would obey God and honor Christ, he made himself conspicuous before the eyes of the people, all of whom were intensely jealous of the respect they thought due

---

[14] Milman, *History of Christianity*, book ii, chap. iii, par. 2.
[15] Gibbon, *Decline and Fall.*

to the gods. Also, in so refusing, the Christians disobeyed the Roman law, which commanded these things to be done.

Universal Hatred

All this subjected the Christians to universal hatred, and as the laws positively forbade everything that the Christians taught, both with reference to the gods and to the State, the forms of law furnished a ready channel through which this hatred found vent. This was the open way for the fury of the populace to spend itself upon the deniers of the gods, and enemies of the Caesars and of the Roman people. And this was the source of the persecution of Christianity by pagan Rome.

Before Christ was born into the world, Maecenas, one of the two chief ministers of Augustus, had given to that first of Roman emperors the following counsel, as embodying the principle which should characterize the imperial government:

> Worship the gods in all respects according to the laws of your country, and compel all others to do the same; but hate and punish those who would introduce anything whatever alien to our customs in this particular; not alone for the sake of the gods, because whoever despises them is incapable of reverence for anything else; but because such persons, by introducing new divinities, mislead many to adopt also foreign laws.[16]

The Christians *did* refuse to worship the gods according to the laws, or in any other way; they *did* introduce that which was preeminently alien to all the Roman customs in this particular; they *did* despise the gods. In the presence of the purity, the goodness, and the inherent holiness of Jesus Christ, the Christians could have no other feeling than that of abhorrence for the wicked, cruel, and licentious gods of the heathen.

---

[16] Neander's *History of the Christian Religion and Church,* Vol. I, sec. i, part i, div. iii, par. 2.

Yet when from love for Christ they shrank in abhorrence from this idolatry, it only excited to bitter hatred the lovers of the licentious worship of the insensate gods; and as above stated, there was the law, and there the machinery of the State, ready to be used in giving force to the religious enmity thus excited.

Roman Law: "No New Religions"

One of the ruling principles of law in the Roman State was this:

> Whoever introduces new religions, the tendency and character of which are unknown, whereby the minds of men may be disturbed, shall, if belonging to the higher rank, be banished; if to the lower, punished with death.[17]

Nothing could be more directly condemned by this law than was Christianity:

1. It was wholly a new religion, one never before heard of; it was not in any sense a national religion; but was ever announced as that which should be universal.

Being so entirely new, in the nature of the case its tendency and character were unknown to the Roman laws.

2. Of all religions the world has ever known, Christianity appeals most directly to the minds of men.

The first of all the commandments demanding the obedience of men declares,

> **Matthew 22**
> [37] You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,...and with all your mind.

The law of God was set forth as the highest conception of right, and the letter to all the Christians in Rome said,

[17] Ibid.

Romans 7
[25] With the mind, I myself serve the law of God.

Again that same letter said,

Romans 12
[2] Be not conformed to this world: but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Again and again in the Christian writings this same idea was set forth, and it was all summed up in the saying of Christ to the woman of Samaria,

John 4
[24] God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit,

–thus setting God before the mind to be discerned only by the mind, and worshiped in a mental and spiritual conception only.

3. The Christians were almost wholly from the lower ranks.

The common people heard Christ gladly; so also did they hear His gracious gospel from His disciples.

There was yet a further disadvantage, however, in the position of the Christians. Christianity had sprung from among the Jews. It had been despised by the Jews. The Jews were viewed by the Romans as the most despicable of all people. Therefore, as the Christians were despised by the Jews, who were despised by the Romans, it followed that to the Romans the Christians were the despised of the despised. It was but the record of a literal fact which Paul wrote:

1 Corinthians 4
[13] We are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day.

The law declared that if those who did what the statute forbade belonged to the lower ranks, they were to be punished

with death; and as the Christians were mostly from the lower ranks, death became the most common penalty incurred by the profession of Christianity.

There was yet another consideration: These laws had all been framed, and the system had been established, long before there were any Christians in the world. Therefore the teaching of the Christians, their practice, and their disregard of the Roman laws, appeared to the Romans in no other light than as an open insurrection against the government, and an attempt at the dissolution of society itself.

The persecution of the Christians, having its foundation principle in the system of laws and government of Rome, proceeded from four distinct causes and from four distinct sources.

1. Persecution from the Populace

First, from the populace. The Christians refused to pay any respect or honor whatever to the gods to whom the people were devoted in every act and relationship of life. They were charged at once with being atheists and enemies of the gods, and therefore with being the direct cause of all the calamities and misfortunes that might befall anybody from any source.

Everything in nature, as well as in the life of the individual, was presided over by some particular deity, and therefore whatever, out of the natural order, might happen in the course of the seasons or in the life of the individual, was held to be a token of the anger of the insulted gods, which was only to be appeased by the punishment of the Christians.

- If the fall of rain was long delayed, so that crops and pastures suffered, it was laid to the charge of the Christians.
- If when rain did come, there was too much, so that the rivers overflowed and did damage, they charged this likewise to the Christians.

- If there was an earthquake or a famine, the Christians' disrespect to the gods was held to be the cause of it.
- If an epidemic broke out, if there was an invasion by the barbarians, or if any public calamity occurred, it was all attributed to the anger of the gods, which was visited upon the State and the people on account of the spread of Christianity.

For instance, Æsculapius was the god of healing, and as late as the time of Diocletian, when a plague had spread far through the empire and continued a long time, Porphyry, who made strong pretensions to being a philosopher, actually argued that the reason why the plague could not be checked was that the spread of Christianity had destroyed the influence of Æsculapius. When such things as this were soberly announced as the opinion of the wise, it can readily be understood how strong a hold the same superstition had upon the minds of the common heathen.

The turning away of individuals from the worship of the gods, and their renouncing all respect for them, and holding as idolaters only, those who would show respect to them, excited the most bitter feelings in the great mass of the people. When there was added to the calamities and misfortunes that might befall, which were held to be but a manifestation of the anger of the gods, and their sympathy with the people in their antagonism to Christianity,—all these things tended only to deepen that feeling of bitterness, and to inspire the populace with the idea that they were doing the will of the gods, and performing the most acceptable service, when they executed vengeance upon the offending Christians. And,

> When superstition has once found out victims, to whose guilt or impiety it may ascribe the divine anger, human revenge mingles itself with the relentless determination to propitiate offended heaven, and contributes still more to blind

the judgment and exasperate the passions.[18]

Nor was this resentment always confined to respect for the gods; often private spite and personal animosities were indulged under cover of allegiance to the gods and respect for the laws. This was shown not only by prosecution before the magistrates, but by open riot and mob violence; and there was no lack of individuals to work upon the riotous propensities of the superstitiously enraged people.

For instance, one Alexander of Abonoteichus, a magician, when he found that his tricks failed to excite the wonder that he desired, declared that the Pontus was filled with atheists and Christians; and called on the people to stone them if they did not want to draw down on themselves the anger of the gods. He went so far at last as never to attempt to give an exhibition until he had first proclaimed,

> If any atheist, Christian, or Epicurean has slipped in here as a spy, let him be gone.

2. Persecution from the Priests and Artisans

The second source from which proceeded the persecution of the Christians was the priests and artisans. The priests had charge of the temples and sacrifices, by which they received their living and considerable profit besides. Pliny's testimony plainly says that in his province,

> ...the temples were almost forsaken,

–and of the sacrifices,

> ...very few purchasers had of late appeared.

The influence of Christianity reached much further than to those who openly professed it. Many, seeing the Christians openly forsaking the gods and refusing to offer sacrifices, would likewise, merely upon economical principles, stop mak-

[18] Milman, *History of Christianity*, book ii, chap. iii, par. 27.

ing sacrifices in the temples.

The priests and the traffickers in sacrificial offerings, seeing their gains falling off, were not slow in charging to the Christians the delinquency, were prompt to prosecute them before the tribunals, and were very diligent to secure the most rigid enforcement of the laws commanding sacrifice to the gods.

From the same cause the artisans found their gains vanishing, through the diminished sale of carved and engraved images, amulets, etc. Upon which, like that Demetrius of the Scriptures who made silver shrines for Diana,[19] they became very zealous for the honor of the gods, and raised persecution against the disciples, in order to restore the worship of the gods—and their own accustomed income.

3. Persecution from the Governors of Provinces

A third source from which persecution arose was the governors of provinces. Some of these were of cruel and splenetic disposition, and, holding a personal animosity against the Christians, were glad of the opportunity to be the ministers of such laws as were of force against them.

Others who were totally indifferent to the merits of the question, yet who earnestly desired to be popular, were ready to take part with the people in their fanatical rage, and to lend their power and use their official influence against the Christians.

Yet others who had no particular care for the worship of the gods, could not understand the Christians' refusal to obey the laws. The governors could see nothing in such a refusal to obey the law and perform the ceremonies therein prescribed but what appeared to them to be blind, willful obstinacy and downright stubbornness. They regarded such willful disobedience to the law to be much more worthy of condemnation than even the disrespect to the gods.

[19] *Acts* 19:21-29.

Such a one was Pliny, who said,

> Let their confessions be of any sort whatever, this positiveness and inflexible obstinacy deserved to be punished.

Many of the governors…

> …would sooner pardon in the Christians their defection from the worship of the gods, than their want of reverence for the emperors in declining to take any part in those idolatrous demonstrations of homage which pagan flattery had invented, such as sprinkling their images with incense, and swearing by their genius.[20]

Still others were disposed to be favorable to the Christians, to sympathize with them in their difficult position, and to temper as far as possible the severity of the laws against them. And when the Christians were prosecuted before their tribunals, they would make personal appeals to induce them to make some concession, however slight, that would justify the governor in certifying that they had conformed to the law, so that he might release them,—not only from that particular accusation, but from any other that might be made.

Such governors would plead with the Christians to this effect:

> I do not wish to see you suffer; I know you have done no real harm; but there stands the law. I am here as the representative of the empire to see that the laws are enforced.
>
> I have no personal interest whatever in this matter; therefore I ask you for my own sake that you will do some honor to the gods, however slight, whereby I may be relieved from executing this penalty and causing you to suffer. All that is required is that you shall worship the gods.
>
> Now your God is one of the gods; therefore what harm is there in obeying the law which commands to worship the gods without reference to any particular one? Why not say,

[20] Neander, *Ibid.*, par 5.

'The Emperor our lord,' and sprinkle a bit of incense toward his image? Merely do either of these two simple things, then I can certify that you have conformed to the law, and release you from this and all future prosecutions of the kind."

When the Christian replied that he could not under any form or pretense whatever worship any other god than the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ; nor honor any other by any manner of offering; nor call the emperor lord in the meaning of the statute; then the governor, understanding nothing of what the Christian called conscience, and seeing all of what he considered the kindest possible offers counted not only as of no worth, but even as a reproach, his proffered mercy was often turned into wrath.

He considered such a refusal only an evidence of open ingratitude and obstinacy, and that therefore such a person was unworthy of the slightest consideration. He held it then to be only a proper regard for both the gods and the State to execute to the utmost the penalty which the law prescribed.

Another thing that made the action of the Christians more obnoxious to the Roman magistrates, was not only their persistent disregard for the laws touching religion, but their assertion of the right to disregard them. And this plea seemed the more impertinent from the fact that it was made by the despised of the despised.

4. Persecution from the Emperors

The fourth source from which persecution came to the Christians was the emperors. Yet until Christianity had become so widespread as to attract the attention of the emperor, there was no general persecution from this source.

The first persecution by the direct instigation of the emperors was that inflicted by Nero. With this exception, the persecution of the Christians by the emperors was solely as the representatives of the State, to maintain the authority of the

State and the dignity of her laws, and to preserve the State from the certain ruin which they supposed to be threatened from Christianity. This explains why it was that only the best of the emperors persecuted the Christians, as such.

In the emperor was merged the State. He alone represented the divinity of the Roman State. The Christians' refusal to recognize in him that divinity or to pay respect to it in any way, was held to be open disrespect to the State.

The Christians' denial of the right of the State to make or enforce any laws touching religion or men's relationship to God, was counted as an undermining of the authority of government.

As it was held that religion was essential to the very existence of the State, and that the State for its own sake, for its own self-preservation, must maintain proper respect for religion; when Christianity denied the right of the State to exercise any authority or jurisdiction whatever in religious things, it was held to be but a denial of the right of the State to preserve itself.

The Governmental System at Fault

Therefore when Christianity had become quite generally spread throughout the empire, it seemed to such emperors as Marcus Aurelius, Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian—emperors who most respected Roman institutions—that the very existence of the empire was at stake. Consequently their opposition to Christianity was but an effort to save the State, and was considered by them as the most reasonable and laudable thing in the world.

It was only as a matter of State policy that they issued edicts or emphasized those already issued for the suppression of Christianity. In making or enforcing laws against the Christians it was invariably the purpose of these emperors to restore and to preserve the ancient dignity and glory of the Ro-

man State. In an inscription by Diocletian, it is distinctly charged that by Christianity the State was being overturned. His views on this subject are seen in the following extract from one of his edicts:

> The immortal gods have, by their providence, arranged and established what is right. Many wise and good men are agreed that this should be maintained unaltered. They ought not to be opposed. No new religion must presume to censure the old, since it is the greatest of crimes to overturn what has been once established by our ancestors, and what has supremacy in the State.[21]

This is further shown by the following words from the edict of Galerius putting a stop to the persecution of Christianity:

> Among other matters which we have devised for the benefit and common advantage of our people, we have first determined to restore all things according to the ancient laws and the public institutions of the Romans. And to make provision for this, that also the Christians, who have left the religion of their fathers, should return again to a good purpose and resolution.[22]

With persecution proceeding from these four sources, it is evident that from the day that Christ sent forth his disciples to preach the gospel, the Christians were not certain of a moment's peace. It might be that they could live a considerable length of time unmolested; yet they were at no time sure that it would be so, because they were subject at all times to the spites and caprices of individuals and the populace. At any hour of the day or night any Christian was liable to be arrested and prosecuted before the tribunals, or to be made the butt of the capricious and violent temper of the heathen populace.

---

[21] Neander, *History of the Christian Religion and Church*, sec. i, div. iii, under "Diocletian".
[22] Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, book viii, chap. xvii.

Yet to no one of these sources more than another, could be attributed the guilt or the dishonor of the persecution; because each one was but the inevitable fruit of that system from which persecution is inseparable.

The theory which attaches blame to the emperors as the persecutors of the Christians is a mistaken one; because the emperor was but the representative, the embodiment, of the State itself. The State of Rome was a system built up by the accumulated wisdom of all the Roman ages; and to expect him whose chief pride was that he was a Roman, and who was conscious that it was the highest possible honor to be a Roman emperor,—to expect such a one to defer to the views of a new and despised sect of religionists whose doctrines were entirely antagonistic to the entire system of which he was a representative, would be to expect more than Roman pride would bear.

As the case stood, to have done such a thing would have been to make himself one of the despised sect, or else the originator of another one, worthy only, in the eyes of the populace, of the same contempt as these. Of course we know now that the emperors should have done just that thing, and they were told then that they ought to do it; but the fact is nevertheless that Roman pride would not yield. Nor is this the only case of the kind in the history of Christianity.

The theory that would make the governors responsible, is likewise a mistaken one; because the governors were simply the officers of the State, set over a particular province to conduct the affairs of the government and to maintain the laws. It was not in their power to set aside the laws, although, as we have seen, some of them even went as far as possible in that direction rather than cause the Christians to suffer by enforcing the law.

The only theory that will stand the test at all is that which places upon the priests and the people the guilt of the perse-

cutions. They were the ones who did it from real bitterness of the persecuting spirit. And yet to attach all the blame to these, would be a mistake; because it would have been impossible for them to persecute had it not been for the system of government of which they were a part.

Had the State been totally separated from religion, taking no cognizance of it in any way whatever; had the State confined itself to its proper jurisdiction, and used its power and authority to compel people to be civil and to maintain the public peace, it would have been impossible for either people, priests, governors, or emperors, to be persecutors.

Had there been no laws on the subject of religion, no laws enforcing respect for the gods nor prohibiting the introduction of new religions,—even though religious controversies might have arisen, and having arisen, even had they engendered bitter controversies and stirred up spiteful spirits,—it would have been impossible for any party to do any manner of wrong to another.

Instead of this, however, the Roman government was a system in which religion was inseparable from the State—a system in which the religion recognized was held as essential to the very existence of the State; and the laws which compelled respect to this religion were but the efforts of the State at self-preservation. Therefore there was a system permanently established, and an instrument formed, ready to be wielded by every one of these agencies to persecute the professors of that religion.

Except in cases of the open violence of the mob, all that was done in any instance by any of the agencies mentioned, was to enforce the law. If the Christians had obeyed the laws, they never would have been persecuted. But that was the very point at issue. It was not right to obey the laws. The laws were wrong.

- To obey the laws was to cease to be a Christian.
- To obey the laws was to dishonor God and to deny Christ.
- To obey the laws was to consent that mankind should be deprived of the blessing of both civil and religious liberty, as well as to forfeit for themselves eternal life.

Ground of Governmental Persecution

If religion be properly a matter of State, and rightfully a subject of legislation, then there never was any such thing as persecution of the Christians by the Roman State. And what is more, that being so, there never has been in all history any governmental persecution on account of religion.

If religion be properly a subject of legislation and of law, then it is the right of the State to make any laws it may choose on the subject of religion; and it is its right to attach to these laws whatever penalty will most surely secure proper respect for the religion chosen.

And if the legislation be right, if the law be right, the enforcement of the law, under whatever penalty, cannot be wrong.

Consequently if religion be properly a matter of the State, of legislation, and of law, there never was and there never can be any such thing as persecution by any State or kingdom on account of religion, or for conscience' sake.

From all these evidences it is certain that the real blame and the real guilt of the persecution of the Christians by the Roman Empire lay in the pagan theory of State and government —the union of religion and the State. This was the theory of the State, and the only theory that then held sway, and this necessarily embodied both a civil and a religious despotism.

And as Jesus Christ came into the world to set men free and to plant in their hearts and minds the genuine principles of

liberty, it was proper that He should command that this message of freedom and this principle of liberty should be proclaimed in all the world to every creature, even though it should meet with the open hostility of earth's mightiest power. And proclaim it His disciples did, at the expense of heavy privations and untold sufferings.

> Among the authentic records of pagan persecutions, there are histories which display, perhaps more vividly than any other, both the depth of cruelty to which human nature may sink and the heroism of resistance it may attain….
>
> The most horrible recorded instances torture were usually inflicted either by the populace or in their presence in the arena. We read of Christians bound in chairs of red-hot iron, while the stench of their half-consumed flesh rose in a suffocating cloud to heaven; of others who were torn to the very bone by shells or hooks of iron; of holy virgins given over to the lust of the gladiator, or to the mercies of the pander; of two hundred and twenty-seven converts sent on one occasion to the mines, each with the sinews of one leg severed by a red-hot iron, and with an eye scooped from its socket; of fires so slow that the victims writhed for hours in their agonies; of bodies torn limb from limb, or sprinkled with burning lead; of mingled salt and vinegar poured over the flesh that was bleeding from the rack; of tortures prolonged and varied through entire days.
>
> For the love of their divine Master, for the cause they believed to be true, men, and even weak girls, endured these things without flinching, when one word would have freed them from their sufferings. No opinion we may form of the proceedings of priests in a later age, should impair the reverence with which we bend before the martyr's tomb.[23]

All this was endured by men and women, and even weak girls, that people in future ages might be free—free to worship according to the dictates of their own consciences—free both civilly and religiously.

---

[23] Lecky, *History of European Morals*, end of chap iii.

Two Hundred Fifty Years of Struggle

All this was endured in support of the principle, announced to Israel before they entered Canaan; to Nebuchadnezzar and all his officers and people; to Darius the Mede and all his presidents, princes, and people; and now to all the world for all time;—the divine principle that with religion, civil government can of right have nothing to do. Yet for two hundred and fifty years this contest continued:

- On one side were the poor and despised; on the other the rich and the honored.
- On one side was the apparently weak, yet really strong; on the other the apparently powerful, yet really weak.
- On one side was a new doctrine sustained by no earthly power, and without recognition; on the other side was a system which was the outgrowth of ages, and supported by all the resources of the mightiest empire that the world had ever known.

Yet it was the conflict of truth and right against error and wrong, of the power of God against the power of the Roman State; and it was bound to conquer.

Two hundred and fifty years this contest continued, and then, as the outcome of the longest, the most wide-spread, and the most terrible persecution that ever was inflicted by the Roman State, that empire was forced officially to recognize the right of every man to worship as he pleased.

Christianity Victorious

Thus was Christianity acknowledged to be victorious over all the power of Rome. The rights of conscience were established, and the separation of religion and the State was virtually complete.

Whatever men may hold Christianity to be, however they may view it,—whether as the glorious reality that it is, or only a myth; whether as the manifestation of the truth of God, or

only an invention of men,—it never can be denied that from Christianity alone the world received that inestimable boon, the rights of conscience, and the principle—invaluable alike to religion, the State, and the individual—of the absolute, complete, and total separation between the civil and the religious powers.

It never can be denied that Christianity was in the Roman Empire in the first and second centuries as really as it ever was at any time afterward. Marcus Aurelius, Suetonius, Hadrian, Tacitus, Trajan, and Pliny, all give the most unexceptionable testimony that it was there. And just as certainly as it was there, so certainly did it proclaim the right of men to worship according to the dictates of their own consciences; and that the State has not of right anything to do with religion. And so certainly was there a prolonged and terrible contest upon this issue. Therefore those who object to Christianity, while advocating the rights of conscience and opposing a union of religion and the State, contradict themselves, and undermine the foundation upon which they stand.

Christianity is the glorious original of the rights of conscience and of the individual. Jesus Christ was the first to announce it to the world; and his disciples were the first to proclaim it to all men, and to maintain it in behalf of all men in all future ages. George Bancroft states the literal truth when he says:

> No one thought of vindicating religion for the conscience of the individual, till a voice in Judea, breaking day for the greatest epoch in the life of humanity, by establishing a pure, spiritual, and universal religion for all mankind, enjoined to render to Caesar only that which is Caesar's. The rule was upheld during the infancy of the gospel for all men.[24]

[24] George Bancroft, *Formation of the Constitution of the United States*, book v, chap. i, par. 10,

The Church Becomes Despotic

Yet this victory of Christianity over pagan Rome was no sooner won, and the assured triumph of Christianity was no sooner at hand, than ambitious bishops and political priests perverted it and destroyed the prospect of all its splendid fruit. They seized upon the civil power, and by making the State the servant of the church, established a despotism as much more cruel than the one which had just been conquered, as the truth that was thus perverted was higher, nobler, and more glorious than the evil system which had been established in the blindness and error of paganism.

The system which had been conquered was that in which the State recognizes and makes use of religion only for its political value, and only as the servant of the State. This was paganism, and such a system is pagan wherever found.

The system which was established by the perversion of Christianity and the splendid victory that it had won, was a system in which the State is made the servant of the church, and in which the power of the State is exercised to promote the interests of the church. This was the papacy.