

Religious Tolerance and Persecution in the Roman Empire

The challenge of forging a society from diverse peoples is not unique to modern America. Almost 2,000 years ago, the Roman Empire spread onto three continents and held more than one-fifth of the Earth's population. Rome allowed its diverse peoples to practice their own religions as long as they also made offerings to Roman gods. People of most religions agreed to this arrangement. Jews and Christians couldn't.

Today, the area of the ancient Roman empire holds more than 25 separate nations. At its peak, the Roman empire reached north to Britain and south halfway up the Nile River. Rome controlled all the land surrounding the Mediterranean, making the large sea, in effect, a "Roman lake." Its conquered peoples represented many different cultures and spoke a multitude of languages, such as Greek, Celtic, Aramaic, Egyptian, Numidian, Berber, and Phoenician. Each had its own religion, which it held sacred. Rome won its empire by force. But to control such a vast empire, it needed to win the cooperation of its subject peoples. It did this in various ways. Instead of punishing conquered nations, Rome often treated them as allies, encouraging them to take part in the glory and wealth of building the empire. To the more primitive peoples in Gaul (France), Britain, and Spain, Rome offered an advanced civilization with a written language (Latin), a legal system, and well-run cities. The people in the eastern part of the empire—Greece, Asia Minor, Middle East, and Egypt—had already been deeply influenced by Greek civilization. Rome recognized and honored this civilization, allowing Greek to continue as the language of educated people in this part of the empire. To all its subject peoples, Rome granted religious toleration as long as they also honored Roman gods. The Roman religion included many major and minor gods headed by the sky god, Jupiter. In Roman belief, a sort of contract existed between the people and their gods. In exchange for the Romans practicing the required religious rituals, the gods would ensure prosperity, health, and military success. Like the Romans, almost all the conquered peoples were polytheistic. They worshiped their own gods, who they thought protected them. Since they believed other peoples had their own gods, they found it relatively easy to take part in festivals celebrating Roman gods. It was simply a matter of paying respect to the Romans. In return, the Romans built temples and made animal sacrifices for the conquered peoples' gods. In fact, at various times other peoples' gods became wildly popular among Romans. The Romans actually identified the Greek gods with their own. Jupiter and Zeus, for example, were viewed as the same god. When Greco-Roman gods didn't meet their needs, many Romans joined mystery cults from the east. The cult of Isis, an Egyptian goddess, swept the empire at the beginning of the first century. The cult of Mithras, the Persian sun god, proved particularly popular to soldiers (and useful to the empire because it idealized courage). The Romans generally tolerated these cults, but there were exceptions. Crowds celebrating Dionysus, a Greek god associated with wine and drunkenness, grew so frenzied that Rome suppressed the cult for a while. But within a few years, Rome relented and allowed it as long as no more than five worshiped at any one time. When a priest from the cult of Isis seduced an innocent Roman woman, Roman Emperor Tiberius ordered the temple destroyed and its priests executed. But the next emperor once again permitted the cult. The religions that Rome had the most problems with were monotheistic—Judaism and Christianity. Because these religions believed there was just one god, they prohibited worshiping other gods. Their members refused to make offerings to Roman gods or take part in Roman religious festivals, which Rome considered a matter of showing loyalty. These religions tested Roman tolerance.

Rome's Treatment of the Jews

In 63 B.C., the Romans conquered Judea, the land of the Jews. Rome immediately recognized it had a problem because the Jews refused to pay homage to Roman gods. Rome gave in and exempted Jews from this requirement. Rome did this in part because the Jews had helped Roman general Julius Caesar win an important battle several years earlier. Soon Rome recognized Judaism as a legal religion, allowing Jews to worship freely. But Rome viewed the Jews with suspicion and persecuted them on several occasions. One of the most serious conflicts between Rome and the Jews began in Judea in A.D. 66 when Nero was emperor. The Roman governor of Judea unwisely decided to confiscate a large sum of money from the treasury of the Great Temple in Jerusalem. He claimed he was collecting taxes owed the emperor. Rioting broke out, which Roman soldiers

ruthlessly suppressed. This, in turn, enraged a nationalistic group of Jewish revolutionaries, called Zealots, who massacred the Romans in Jerusalem and attacked Roman troops elsewhere in the Roman province. Nero sent three legions to put down the rebellion. By summer of the year 68, Rome had restored its control over most of the province. Two years later, the Romans retook Jerusalem and destroyed the Great Temple, the center of the Jewish religion. Fighting continued for a few more years until the Zealot fortress at Masada fell. Following this revolt, Rome tried to prevent further uprisings by expelling Jews to different parts of the empire. But Jews rose in two more unsuccessful rebellions. The first took place in 115–116 in several Mideast cities. The second took place in Jerusalem in 131 when Emperor Hadrian announced he would build a shrine to Jupiter on the site of the destroyed Great Temple. After crushing these challenges to their authority, the Romans dispersed Jews throughout the empire. But Judaism remained a legal religion and Jews continued to enjoy religious privileges.

Initial Attitude Toward Christianity

Rome had good reasons to tolerate the Jewish religion. First, it was a well-established religion with a long history. Most important, Rome wanted to keep the people of Judea from revolting. Neither of these reasons applied to Christianity. This new offshoot of the Jewish religion had little support at first among the people of Judea. In fact, many Jews would have been pleased if Rome had suppressed it. Yet when Rome first became aware of Christianity around A.D. 30, it did nothing to stop it. Thinking this sect might weaken the always bothersome Jewish religion, Emperor Tiberius asked the Senate to legalize the Christian faith and declare Christ a Roman god. But the Senate refused. Instead, it pronounced Christianity to be an "illegal superstition," a crime under Roman law. Although Christianity was now officially illegal, Tiberius still hoped this new religious sect would further his goal of pacifying the empire. As a result, he ordered Roman officials not to interfere with the new religion, a policy that lasted about 30 years until the time of Nero.

Nero's Persecution

On the night of July 18, A.D. 64, a fire began in the area of the Circus Maximus, the great arena in Rome for chariot races and games. The fire spread quickly and for six days consumed much of the city, including Emperor Nero's palace. Immediately, the rumor spread that Nero himself had caused the great fire to clear space for a new palace. He was also accused of playing the lyre (a stringed instrument like a small harp) while watching the spectacular conflagration. Although he probably did play the lyre at some point while watching the fire, he was almost certainly not responsible for it. Nevertheless, the suffering people of Rome believed him guilty. Fearful that Roman mobs would turn on him, Nero cast about for a scapegoat to blame for the fire. He pointed to an unpopular small religious minority, the Christians. Christians made an easy target for scapegoating. The common people of Rome believed rumors about Christians. Some thought Christians practiced cannibalism because the sacrament of the Eucharist called for believers to symbolically eat the flesh and blood of Christ. Others believed that Christians practiced incest because they preached loving their brothers and sisters. Many believed Christians hated humanity because they kept secrets and withdrew from normal social life. Many pagans feared that the gods would become angry and punish the Roman people since Christians refused to participate in the old religious rituals. These fears and rumors helped Nero shift public opinion to blaming the Christians rather than him for the great fire. Since the Christian religion was still illegal, it was easy to order mass arrests, trials, and executions. The Christian martyrs suffered horrible deaths. Roman historian Tacitus described Nero's methods of execution: Dressed in wild animal skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight. Nero provided his Gardens for the spectacle, and exhibited displays in the Circus, at which he mingled with the crowd—or stood in a chariot dressed as a charioteer. For many years, Christians lived with the uncertainty that another persecution could erupt at any time. In 110, Emperor Trajan attempted to reach a compromise between the growing Christian minority and Roman pagans who demanded that the illegal religious sect be destroyed. Although Trajan authorized arresting Christians, he prohibited general searches to seek them out and ordered Roman officials not to actively interfere with Christian gatherings. For more than 100 years, Christians preached and practiced their faith openly with little obstruction from Roman officials anywhere in the empire. Rome's excellent system of roads helped Christians spread the gospel throughout the empire. And the Christians' openness to people from all groups and classes helped them gain many converts. But in 250, Emperor Decius attempted to revive the

Roman pagan religion and persecute Christians. Many Christians perished, but when Gallienus became emperor, he halted the persecution. Gallienus then went one step further by recognizing Christianity as a legal religion for the first time. By stopping the oppression of this minority religion, Gallienus hoped to bring religious peace to the empire.

Christian Bloodbath

For almost 40 years, the legalized Christian Church flourished in the Roman empire. Then, in 297, Emperor Diocletian initiated one last terrible Christian persecution. Diocletian had come to power at a time of crisis. Prices of goods were climbing rapidly, German tribes threatened the western part of the empire, and the Persian empire was attacking in the east. Diocletian moved boldly. He set price controls. He doubled the size of the army. To govern the empire more easily, he broke it into two parts—the Greek-speaking east and the Latin-speaking west. Suspicious of the loyalty of Christians to the Roman state, Diocletian started persecuting them. He demanded that all Christian soldiers resign from the Roman army. He forbade gatherings for Christian worship and ordered the destruction of churches and sacred writings. Christian members of the government were tortured and executed. Other edicts followed when Christian uprisings took place in the eastern parts of the empire where Christianity was strongest. Bishops and priests were arrested, tortured, and martyred. In 304, Rome decreed that all Christians sacrifice to the pagan gods or face death. Following Diocletian's retirement in 305, a civil war broke out to determine his successor. It raged on for almost a decade. Even so, the persecution of Christians continued. Galerius, Diocletian's handpicked successor, hated Christians and organized a war of extermination against them in the eastern empire. Christians were mutilated, burned alive, and crucified. Hundreds of Christian men, women, and children were forced to labor in government mines. Crowds in Roman arenas shouted, "Let there be no Christians!" Galerius grew disheartened when he saw that his efforts had failed to stamp out the Christian religion. Dying of cancer that was literally rotting his body, Galerius suspended the persecution in 311. He then pleaded for Christians to pray for his health. But he died, and the oppression resumed. Constantine, who was fighting for control of the western empire, had a vision that he would win an important battle if he fought under the sign of the cross. He quickly had artisans mark his soldiers' shields with crosses and sent them into battle. When they won, Constantine became a strong supporter of Christianity. Constantine emerged from the civil war as the new emperor. In 313, he proclaimed that every person was free "to follow the religion which he chooses." Under Constantine, Christianity rapidly became the dominant religion. In 395, Emperor Theodosius made Christianity Rome's new state religion. Christians, who had so long been on the defensive, turned to attacking the pagan religion. They closed temples and banned sacrifices to pagan gods. They even transformed some pagan celebrations into Christian ones. For example, the church changed the birthday of the sun god on the 25th of December into the celebration of the birth of Christ.