

The Era of Persecution: A.D. 64-313.

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THE pious fancy of the fourth century which counted ten persecutions, corresponding in number to the Ten Plagues of Egypt, was sufficiently exploded by St. Augustine in the eighteenth book of his "De Civitate Dei" (cap. 52). Yet the idea has constantly persisted, though the names of the persecutors have varied a little sometimes from the list which he enumerated as current in his own day. These were Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Antonianus, Severus, Maximin, Decius, Valerian, Aurelian, Diocletian. It will be the aim of this paper to shew that only five Emperors were personally responsible for persecutions of the Christians—namely, Nero, Domitian, Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian; and to inquire into the causes which led the Roman Government to proscribe a religion which it had at first ignored or despised as being a mere sect of Judaism. For there was a time when St. Paul could, as a Roman citizen, appeal with confidence from the turbulent injustice of both Jew and pagan to the well-known equity of the Roman law to defend him. The starting-point is the acquittal of St. Paul in A.D. 60-63, and the proscription of Christianity as a criminal offence in July, 64.

It is well to point out at once that, as Mommsen reminded us, the attitude of the Roman Government towards Christianity was determined by its attitude towards all other foreign religions. It was only part of the general Roman policy towards questions where religious, social, moral, and political interests were inter-involved. The early Roman religion was essentially national, and this character was only modified by polytheism in process of conquest and annexation and consequent enlargement of popular sway. *Dii novensiles* existed alongside *dii indigetes*, but were not allowed within the *pomerium*. The general policy

has been well described as one of watchful toleration. The magistrates held a powerful weapon in their hands in their *coercitio* (summary jurisdiction), under ordinary police regulations, which could be put into force without any specific legislation ; and this was not infrequently exercised to exclude foreign cults which endangered public safety or morality.

Judaism was to a certain extent an exception to this general policy. Though their religion was regarded by men like Cicero as a "barbarous superstition," it had to be reckoned with ; and accordingly the Jews were granted by Julius Cæsar a number of privileges, under which they could worship freely, and claim exemption from various harassing services. They were always, however, aggressive and proselytizing, and consequently objects of dislike, contempt, and hatred.

Rightly to appreciate the development of the causes of persecution, it is necessary to review the first instances of the attack upon Christianity as they are presented in the Acts of the Apostles. For although the cases there recorded are, with two exceptions, Jewish charges, yet the treatment of these accusations by the Roman magistrates gives the key to the problem in its earliest stages, inasmuch as Christianity was regarded at first simply as a sect of Judaism ; and when the Christians were distinguished in the heathen mind from Jews, it was not with any discriminating knowledge of the unique, universal, and absolute claims of the new religion. Throughout St. Paul's career he claimed to be a Jew, and an exponent of the true consummation of Judaism ; and it was as a Jewish renegade that he was persecuted by his own kinsmen (Acts xxiv. 5). No doubt, as in Christ's case, disloyalty also formed part of the indictment before the Roman magistrates (Acts xvii. 7 ; xxv. 8), but the magistrates saw clearly enough that there was no real ground for such accusations. In fact, the chief cases of persecution, which came from the Jews, were dismissed by the Roman governors, partly because of the supreme contempt felt by all officials for the turbulent Jews and their religious disputes, and partly because any open, or even

indirect, denunciations of the Christians on the ground of disloyalty were too palpably fabricated to deserve serious notice. Thus it came about that, from the circumstances of the case, the action of the Roman Government tended to shield the Christians from Jewish malice. This, however, was a stage soon passed through, though it certainly lasted until after St. Paul's liberation in 60. This comes out very clearly in the Acts; and at the risk of being tedious, we must examine the narratives there given at some little length. There are six cases which throw light upon the subject:

1. The first is a pagan charge brought against St. Paul at Philippi (Acts xvi. 19 *et seq.*):

"These men, being out-and-out Jews, exceedingly harass our city, and lay down customs which it is not lawful for us to receive or do, inasmuch as we are Romans."

This charge arose out of the cure of the possessed damsel, which had resulted in a pecuniary loss to her owners. Popular and magisterial prejudice is appealed to on the ground that the Apostle and his companions were Jews; but the real charge preferred is that of an anti-Roman factiousness, dangerous to the peace of the city—a very safe charge on which to insure summary conviction, for Jewish unrest was proverbial and always promptly suppressed in Rome and the provinces.

2. The next case is a Jewish charge at Thessalonica, arising from jealousy at St. Paul's influence (Acts xvii. 5 *et seq.*):

"These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also . . . and these all contrary to the decrees of Cæsar, saying that there is another Emperor—Jesus."

Here is the same charge of sedition, which Jews and Greeks equally found an efficacious weapon to use against their enemy; but there is added in this case, as in our Lord's, an accusation of direct treason. The "decrees of Cæsar" probably would be those which involved some recognition of the worship of the emperor, for which Paul and Silas were alleged to have substituted that of Jesus. But the charges were evidently either not

substantiated or discredited by the magistrates, as the accused were admitted to bail and released.

3. The third case is another Jewish charge, at Corinth, before Gallio (Acts xviii. 13):

“This man persuadeth men to worship God contrary to the law.”

This was purely a Jewish question, as Gallio saw. The law was the Jewish law, not the Roman law, as in the two previous cases; consequently its alleged contravention came under the head of neither legal injustice nor moral delinquency, and the case was dismissed.

4. The fourth case arose at Ephesus. It is a pagan charge due, as at Philippi, to pecuniary loss, real or feared (Acts xix. 26 *et seq.*):

“This Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people, saying that they be no gods which are made with hands; and not only is there danger that this our trade come into disrepute, but also that disrespect be shewn to the great Artemis.”

The opening and closing words of Demetrius' speech were merely rhetorical. The charge of “atheism,” or sacrilege, or blasphemy towards the goddess, was contradicted by the recorder, and the real *motif* underlying the accusation—that of injury to the silver shrine-makers' trade—was ignored. Nor was the Apostle taken before the magistrates; the Asiarchs befriended him, and he was not even apprehended.

5. The next case is of more importance than any of the preceding, as being the first instance of a formal trial of St. Paul before a Roman procurator with Jewish counsel against him (Acts xxiv. 5). Tertullus formulated three charges: St. Paul was (*a*) a pest, and a creator of seditions amongst the Jews throughout the empire; (*b*) a ringleader of the Nazarene sect; (*c*) a profaner of the sacred Temple.

St. Paul's defence followed the lines of his indictment. He defended himself as a Jew, not specifically as a Christian. He was a peaceful citizen, no creator of strife in any form or place, but a sincere Jew believing in the fulfilment of the Jewish Scriptures. He challenged his accusers to prove against him

any wrong-doing. The case was remanded until the arrival of the chiliarch Lysias, and St. Paul was treated as a prisoner in the first class. The venality of some Roman procurators, as exemplified in Felix' subsequent conduct (verse 26), is to be noted, for it was eventually the reason of St. Paul's appeal to Cæsar.

6. The sixth and last case is still more interesting, as being the final trial in Palestine on a number of Jewish charges before Festus (Acts xxv. 7 *et seq.*). The "many and grievous charges which his accusers could not prove" may be detected in the lines of St. Paul's defence: "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the Temple, nor against Cæsar have I committed any offence."

We notice that in the resuscitation of the case before a new governor the previous Jewish charges, which Tertullus had relied upon, are strengthened with an additional imputation of disloyalty to the emperor. In the result, the Jews objected to their enemy being released (Acts xxviii. 19), and St. Paul appealed to Cæsar. Confident in his innocence of political disaffection, he felt obliged to appeal from the possible partiality and cupidity of the procurator to the emperor himself, despairing of justice from any other tribunal. From a subsequent conversation between Festus and Agrippa, it appears that Festus regarded the case as purely a question of Jewish "superstition," involving no criminal charge for investigation; certainly there was nothing to justify the Jews' demand for his death. But a further informal inquiry was held in the presence of Agrippa and Berenice as well as Festus, in order to find something to put upon the charge-sheet (Acts xxv. 25-27). The final decision arrived at was St. Paul's complete innocence of any breach of the law: "This man hath done nothing worthy of death or of bonds, and might have been released but for his appeal to Cæsar" (Acts xxvi. 31). This decision St. Paul himself correctly represented to the Jewish leaders in Rome on his arrival: "Although I did nothing against the people or the customs of our fathers, I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into

the hands of the Romans. And they, after examination, were desirous to release me, because there was no cause of death in me. But when the Jews spake against it, I was compelled to appeal to Cæsar" (Acts xxviii. 17-19). What caused the appellant's long detention at Rome—whether his case was ever heard, on what grounds he was released—we cannot say. But if his appeal did come before Nero, the verdict could only have repeated the decision of Festus and Agrippa, and his release would naturally follow.¹

The Jewish leaders at Rome pretended that all they knew of the Christian body was that it was held in universal disrepute (Acts xxviii. 22). It is therefore necessary for us to go back behind St. Paul's case in order to find reasons for the general odium in which the Christians were held, so that it was possible, and even easy, for Nero to divert the popular fury from himself to them, and to explain what grounds Tacitus could have had for his statement that the Christians were hated *per flagitia*, on account of their abominations ("Ann.," xv. 44). Such a character could not have been gained in a day.

The causes of its acquisition must doubtless be sought in the first instance in the unreasoning prejudices of the populace, and not in the reasonably formed judicial opinions of the magistrates or officials. The various grounds for this unpopularity may be summarized under five heads :

1. In so far as the Christians were looked upon as a religious body connected with or sprung out of Judaism, they inherited the general ridicule and dislike which pursued the Jews in every quarter of the world.

2. We have already seen that in the case of St. Paul himself, both at Philippi and at Ephesus, a second ground for odium was presented. Christianity interfered with the success of certain trades, and entailed pecuniary loss on certain tradesmen. That masters of divining girls and shrine-making silversmiths represented types of a number of other tradesmen who suffered, or

¹ On this point see the present writer's paper in the *Interpreter* for January, 1913, on "The Pastoral Epistles."

claimed to suffer, from the progress of Christianity, is clear from the defence, at a later period, of the Christians made by Minucius Felix and by Tertullian against the charge of their being commercially profitless, *infructuosi in negotiis*. They took no part, for instance, in pagan religious festivals and gifts to the gods, nor did they countenance by their presence the popular amusements of the theatre, the arena, or the circus. Still less could they patronize those trades which pandered to the lax morality and superstitions of the age—"lenones, perductores, aquarioli, sicarii, venenarii, magi, harioli, haruspices, mathematici" (Tert., "Apol.," 43). Thus the pockets of a number of the lower class of citizens would be affected, and their resentment incurred.

3. The general behaviour of the Christians in the world would also have no small share in their unpopularity. Their aversion from participating in the usually frivolous mode of passing time would brand them as unsociable and misanthropical; and when their reasons for their preternatural seriousness were investigated and known, it would be found that many of their tenets and beliefs were apparently dangerous and revolutionary. Their social theories would be alarming. Their boundless charity and hospitality towards one another was only exercised in default of a desiderated communism. Slaves were treated as equals in the sight of God, and admitted to the same privileges as the free-born in this new and secret brotherhood. Their fanatical expectation of a speedy dissolution of the universe by fire led them to neglect the affairs or ignore the claims of family life, and even imparted a distaste for entering upon its duties at all. A fierce preference for virginity as the most fitting state of readiness in which to meet the Lord, and a disembarassment from all secular matters, coupled with mysterious theories of another citizenship *in cælis*, would all combine to justify Tacitus' view that they followed a "detestable superstition," and were possessed with an intense dislike for the claims of civilization (*odium generis humani*). The terms in which Pomponia Græcina is described, so early as A.D. 57, added to the fact of

her arraignment before a domestic tribunal, can leave but little doubt that the "foreign superstition," which was held to have created in her a misanthropic and dangerous gloom, and which was also suspected of encouraging impurity and abominable crime, was in reality Christianity. And her case, again, may be taken as typical of the general impression which Christianity would make upon the popular mind.¹

4. By their neglect of the prescribed worship of the State gods the Christians, as distinguished from the Jews, incurred the charge of "sacrilege." The word is not used technically, but in the general sense of impiety; and so it appears at a later time in the phrasing of Cyprian's sentence: "Diu sacrilege mente vixisti . . . et inimicum to diis Romanis et sacris legibus constituisti." The refusal to sacrifice was evidence to the magisterial mind of an *obstinatio dementia*, or stubborn resistance to the requirements of the laws in religious matters; while the possession of no temples or altars (in the pagan sense of these words) prove conclusively to the popular mind the "atheism" of the Christians. This was, indeed, the specific indictment brought against Flavius Clemens and his wife in A.D. 95, and it had to be met by all the Apologists from Justin Martyr to Lactantius. It was the favourite weapon snatched up by the populace in times of unreasoning panic and superstition, when public disasters and calamities woke up the slumbering paganism of the Empire and frightened its professed devotees into a retaliation on those whom they regarded as the godless insulters of the ancient deities. Hence the popular outcry: "Away with the atheists. *Tolle sacrilegos.*"

5. It was not an unnatural conclusion for the pagan mind to draw from the absence of any visible objects of worship amongst the Christians, that they met in secret to indulge in religious rites of an abominable kind which would not bear the light of day. Consequently they were generally credited with magical practices and impure orgies which involved infanticide, cannibalism, and incest. The charges were based, no doubt, in great

¹ See Lightfoot, "Clement of Rome," i. 30.

measure upon ignorant and distorted rumours of the Christian Love-feast and Eucharist, which were circulated probably by the Jews in the first instance, and which easily won credence amongst a people not themselves distinguished for purity of life and conduct. We can thus explain Tacitus' classification of Christianity amongst *cuncta atrocita et pudenda* which skulked to Rome for concealment. Once convinced of the Christians' practice of these enormities, it would be easy to extort evidence under the rack from domestic slaves, as was done in the trials of the Gallican Christians in A.D. 155 or 177, whose heathen slaves, out of mere fear of torture, made false statements of this nature at the instigation of the soldiers. Christians thus came under the ban of unlawful associations (*collegia illicita*), all clubs and societies unrecognized by the law being viewed with the gravest suspicion and forbidden by severe legislation. Under this same head of secret meetings we may group the charges of magic and sorcery which found place in connexion with the Neronian persecution ; for the term " malefica " used by Suetonius of the new religion implies this ; and the methods of execution described by Tacitus—burning, crucifixion, and exposure to wild beasts—were the proper punishments for witchcraft. It is worthy of notice that the Justinian Code speaks of magians as *humani generis inimici*—a phrase almost identical with Tacitus' description of the Christians cited above.

There is sufficient body of evidence in the five grounds of unpopularity just considered to assure us that Nero would have no difficulty in stirring up an attack upon the Christians in the manner which Tacitus ascribes to him.

The order of the Neronian trials seems to have been somewhat as follows : Some well-known Christians were arrested as authors of the conflagration. These confessed their Christianity, and were compelled to indicate other of their co-religionists. Tried for incendiarism before the *Præfectus urbi*, they were found to hold views which seemed to be not incompatible with the wilful destruction of the city by fire ; but, although the evidence broke down which was required to connect them

directly with it, sufficient was gathered to brand Christianity as a capital offence, since it was hostile to the ordinary good discipline and law of the Empire. The mere profession of it, *nomen ipsum*, became punishable with death. Henceforward, Christianity was a standing offence, not because it was a *religio nova*, or *illicita*, but because it was inherently dangerous to the social stability of the State. But the exact method of procedure in any given case was still in the discretion of the magistrate. He might condemn on the simple ground of "Christianity," or on a charge of "atheism," or "sacrilege," or on account of the *flagitia* connected with Christianity. To the pagan mind Christianity and crime were synonymous. Thus, in the First Epistle of St. Peter (iv. 15) and in the Second Epistle to Timothy (i. 11 *et. seq.*, ii. 9)—both documents of this Neronian period—we find reference made to condemnation for the "Name," while St. Paul says he was suffering for the "Gospel" and as "a malefactor." Even in Tertullian's time specific charges continued to be brought against the Christians, although the *confessio nominis* was quite sufficient for conviction.

It is no doubt true that when once Christian tenets and practices were believed to be inimical to the existing order and peace of the State, no special law or enactment would be necessary for their repression, and Suetonius ("Nero," 16) mentions Nero's regulations for the punishment of the Christians side by side with other police measures of a permanent nature; but the question has by no means been settled whether Nero did or did not promulgate a law explicitly proscribing Christianity. Mommson and others believe that no direct legislation against the Christians existed until the edict of Decius. Ramsay would place it in the Flavian period, while Duchesne, Batiffol, Callewært, with a goodly following, maintain that Nero did specifically decree the outlawry and extermination of the Christians. Sulpicius Severus ("Chron.," ii. 11, 29), probably relying on Tacitus, mentions edicts and laws forbidding Christianity, and uses a phrase which recurs verbatim in later writers so conspicuously as to lead to the belief that he is quoting the exact words of a

terse law — “Non licet esse Christianos” (cp. Tertullian, “Apol.,” 4, “Non licet esse vos”; the Acta Apollonii, as translated from the Armenian by Conybeare, § 23, “No one shall be named a Christian anywhere at all”; Origen, “Hom. in Jos.,” 9, “Decreverunt legibus suis ut non sint Christiani”). It is consonant with this view that Lampridius, writing of the toleration shewn to the Christians by Alexander Severus, says, “Christianos esse passus est” (Sev., 22); and that the decree of toleration issued by Galerius begins, “*Denuo sint Christiani*” (Lactantius, “De Mort. Pers.,” 34). This use of precise terms can scarcely be a coincidence; it rather shews that all these writers were acquainted with an original law which was expressed as above. Tertullian distinctly charges Nero with being the first to attack the Christians savagely with the imperial sword, and complains that the Neronian policy in regard to the Christians was the only relic of his policy which remained unaltered at the time he was writing (“Apol.,” 5; “Ad Nat.,” i. 7).

We may now pass on from the general position laid down in Nero’s reign to a review of the evidence of persecutions in the succeeding years.

The Emperors Vespasian and Titus (A.D. 69-81) took no fresh steps in connexion with the Christians. Domitian (A.D. 81-96) probably brought about their more frequent identification by his rigorous insistence on the worship of the Emperor. Some such test as sacrificing to the image of Cæsar seems to be clearly alluded to in the Apocalypse (see xiii. 8, 15; xx. 4; cp. xiv. 9, xvi. 2, xix. 20). The refusal to conform to this requirement would be an overt offence under the law of *majestas*; and from this time onwards “disloyalty” became a further charge, in addition to that of gross criminalities, to which the Christians were liable. But Domitian was further responsible for a direct attack upon a class of persons in Rome who are described as drifting into Jewish customs; and amongst these were Flavius Clemens and his wife (whose Christianity has been sufficiently established), who were accused of “atheism.” The sufferers were numerous, some being executed and some

banished (Dion Cass., lxxvii. 14; Sueton., "Dom.," 15; Melito *apud* Euseb., "H. E.," iv. 26-29; Euseb., iii. 17 *et seq.*; Lightfoot, "Clem. of Rome," i. 34). Hegesippus connected this persecution in A.D. 95 with Domitian's jealous examination of the survivors of the Davidic royal line, and its cessation with their dismissal. Tertullian probably followed the same authority as Hegesippus (Euseb., iii. 20; Tert., "Apol.," 4).

Our next evidence is found in the correspondence of Pliny and Trajan in the year A.D. 112. It discloses the fact that, as under Nero, Christianity was a capital offence. The accused who denied or recanted were subjected to test—would they invoke the gods, sacrifice to the Emperor's statue, and revile Christ? If so, they were released. Evidently Pliny was here following the ordinary procedure. But there were certain special features attaching to the problem in his province of Bithynia which caused him to feel some hesitancy. The number of the Christians was very large. Crimes were in the universal belief connected with the Christian "name." Should this point be investigated? Did age or youth make any difference in the severity of the punishment to be inflicted? Trajan ruled that Pliny's action had been correct. Christianity was a capital offence; but its professors need not be hunted out, and sincere recanters might be pardoned, the alleged *flagitia* not being deemed proven. On the other points common sense, and no hard and fast rule of universal application, must guide him. This decision was not a logical one, as Tertullian derisively pointed out, but it was eminently politic. Christianity was not yet recognized as a dangerous organization, and yet its individual members merited punishment by way of example for their disobedience to the imperial cult and laws.

Our next document is the rescript of Hadrian to Fundanus, proconsul of Asia, A.D. 124. The Emperor had been consulted by Fundanus' predecessor, Granianus, much as Trajan had been consulted by Pliny; and Hadrian's reply was intended to prevent mob-violence, vexatious indictments, and false accusations for purposes of extortion. He forbids the Christians to be con-

demned by mere popular clamour; they must be proved to have acted contrary to the law; and their false accusers are to be punished (Euseb., iv. 9; Just. Mart., "Apol.," i. 9). The effect of this rescript, which, of course, only applied to Asia—where the Christians were especially numerous and the problem acute—while leaving undisturbed the existing status of Christianity as a capital offence, would be to insure a formal trial of the accused. According to Melito, similar instructions were sent to other provincial governors. A similar policy was pursued by Antoninus Pius (A.D. 138-161). Persecutions naturally followed their usual spasmodic course, as the martyrdoms of Polycarp, Ptolemæus, Lucius, and Publius in different parts of the Empire shew; but no fresh impetus was given to them by the Emperor. Hence Tertullian, Sulpicius, and Melito quite correctly disclaim him as a personal persecutor.

Marcus Aurelius followed in the same course, though the persecutions in his reign were severe and intense. In Asia, Melito complained of new ordinances issued by the proconsul under which the Christians were sought out, and informers were rewarded with the property of the accused. In Rome, Justin was put to death, and many Italian Christians condemned to the mines. In Gaul a number of Christians fell victims to the popular fury which was abetted by the cruel governor. This remarkable increase in persecutions is adequately accounted for by the general panic of the populace in the face of the fearful ravages of the pestilence and unprecedented calamities in the form of earthquakes, famine, inundations, and foreign and civil wars. There is no evidence to connect the persecutions in this reign with any fresh legislation on the part of Aurelius, though no doubt the Emperor's well-known contempt for the Christians would instigate provincial officials to put the existing law in force more rigorously. This comes out clearly from the Epistle of the Gallican Churches. The persecution arose in the first instance from the mob. Those who confessed their Christianity were imprisoned by the chiliarch to await the arrival of the governor. When he came they were treated with great harsh-

ness, although they protested their innocence of either "atheism" or "impiety." Their slaves, under torture, accused them of cannibalism and incest, which increased the popular rage against them, and all kinds of torture were resorted to in order to expiate the supposed insults to the pagan deities. Those who denied their faith were imprisoned along with the rest, but were branded now, not as Christians, but as guilty of murder and abominable impurity. The Emperor was consulted only with respect to the case of Roman citizens, and he replied that the usual penalty of death must be paid, but he reaffirmed Trajan's ruling that recantation purchased pardon. It is obvious that Aurelius was not personally responsible for the Gallican persecution, and that his ruling was in mitigation of the extreme cruelty of the governor.

Aurelius died March 17, 180. At the commencement of Commodus' reign the Madaurian and Scillitan martyrs suffered in Africa, and Apollonius was beheaded in Rome; but with neither case had the Emperor any personal connexion. Indeed, throughout this reign the Christians, at any rate in Rome, were treated more favourably, probably through the influence of Marcia.

From Commodus we pass to Severus (A.D. 193-211), who protected the Christians from mob-law in Italy (Tertullian, "ad Scap.," 4), but by a local rescript, in Syria in 202, forbade fresh converts to be made. The martyrdoms of Perpetua and her companions at Karthage in the next year may possibly be connected with this or a similar rescript, but were more likely due to some popular outbreak, such as Tertullian describes and couples with the very vice-proconsul, Hilarian, who condemned them.

Passing over the reigns of Caracalla, Macrinus, and Elegabalus, we find that, under Alexander Severus (A.D. 222-235), Christianity was undoubtedly tolerated, though not formally recognized. This was due to his own eclectic opinions, and not least to the influence of his mother, Mammæa, who, during a visit to Antioch, had conversed with and been instructed by

Origen (Euseb., vi. 21). His successor Maximin (A.D. 235-238), out of rancorous spite towards the members of the late imperial household, which contained many Christians, rudely interrupted the peace which Alexander Severus had given to the Church, and, in order quickly to destroy its power, directed his attack against the rulers of the Church. A local persecution in Capadocia, which called forth Origen's "Exhortatio ad Martyrium," was due to popular clamour against the Christians, provoked by a panic at the occurrence of earthquakes and other disasters. This appears in a letter of Firmilian (*apud* Cyprian "Epp.," lxxv. 10), where the area of the persecution is limited to his own district, and while complaint is made of the cruelty of Serenianus the governor, nothing is said of the Emperor's hand in it. Maximin's policy was still unrealized at his death, and peace was again enjoyed by the Church during the following reigns of the Gordians and Philip the Arabian.

But with the accession of Decius (A.D. 249-251) the first really systematic method of persecution began, and by far the severest trial which the Christians had yet undergone befel the Church. In his zeal for the restoration of the old Roman virtue, discipline, and religion, Decius could not fail to collide with the Christian body, which had now long been fully and extensively organized. The edict of A.D. 250 ordered the magistrates throughout the Empire to bring back the Christians to the old religion, or, failing this, to inflict the usual punishment. Such, at least, we gather to have been its import, for its text has not been preserved. The course of the persecution may be traced in Eusebius, Dionysius, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyprian's letters and his treatise "De Lapsis," and in the Western Kalendar of Martyrs. Decius' object was undoubtedly to exterminate a body which obstinately refused to fall in with his desire to maintain in renewed integrity the worship of the ancient deities. The same attitude was taken up by Valerian (A.D. 254-260), who, although at first favourably disposed towards the Christians, was driven, under the influence of his Chancellor of the Exchequer, Macrianus, to become their perse-

cutor. The immediate occasion was an outbreak of fanatical superstition induced by the stress of the times—pestilence, fresh inroads of the barbarians, and Persian invasion on the eastern frontier. In June, 257, when in the East, he placed in the hands of his minister an edict which bade all who were not worshippers of the Roman gods to conform outwardly, under pain of exile; while in Egypt, under Æmilianus the prefect, Christians were forbidden to assemble for worship or enter their cemeteries under pain of death. In the following year a much severer edict was published, since the former one had failed in its purpose. This second edict condemned all clerics to death; laics of high rank to degradation and loss of their property, or death if obstinacy were shown; “matronæ” (*i.e.*, wives not in the power of their husbands) to confiscation of goods, and exile; and “Cæsariani” (*i.e.*, *not* “members of the imperial household,” *but* revenue officers employed under the Chancellor of the Exchequer in matters of distraint and escheat) to confiscation of goods and labour as chained conscripts on the imperial farms. These orders were made known by letters to the provincial governors. The object of Valerian was evidently to remove the officials and leading members of the Church in the hope that the rest would be thereby terrified into submission. The persecution raged in all parts of the Empire—Spain, Italy, Palestine, Africa, and Egypt.

Valerian’s son and successor, Gallienus (A.D. 260-268), put a stop to the persecution by public proclamations in 261, and by rescripts to the Bishops restored to the Christians their cemeteries and freedom of worship. This edict for the first time granted to the Christians the full and free exercise of their religion. But it did more. It restored to them their cemeteries and property which had been confiscated under Valerian’s laws; it recognized the Bishops officially as heads of the Church organization, and it empowered them to use the secular arm to uphold them in their newly granted rights. No apologist had ever asked for more, not did the edict of Milan in 313 go further than this.

The same toleration continued through the reigns of Claudius and Aurelian, though the latter Emperor made elaborate preparations for repressing Christianity, which were only prevented from being put into execution by his sudden assassination. The Church rejoiced in this rest and tranquillity until the nineteenth year of Diocletian, A.D. 303. The causes of this last and severest persecution are involved in some obscurity, but it seems that the prime mover and instigator was not Diocletian himself, but his Cæsar Galerius, whose hatred of the Christians was well known and fully reciprocated by them. Diocletian, by Galerius' machinations, was somehow tricked into believing that political danger was to be apprehended from the Christians, and it was against those of them who held official positions that the attack was chiefly directed. The first edict, issued on February 24, 303, was based on Valerian's edict of 258, but it differed from it in some important particulars. It ordered no bloodshed, but contented itself with degradation from civil status; in fact, it put Christianity back into the position of a *religio illicita* which it had occupied before the edict of Valerian. It bade the churches to be demolished, the sacred books to be burnt (this was an entirely novel provision as a measure of repression), persons of rank to be degraded, and minor officials¹ to be deprived of liberty.

It is important to note that in this first edict there is no mention of the clergy, as in Valerian's edict, shewing that Diocletian was not as yet committed to a religious persecution pure and simple. He hoped to deter future converts by depriving existing Christians of all their civil honours, rights, and privileges. This, however, was not sufficient to satisfy the hatred of Galerius. Fires in the palace, perhaps contrived by Galerius himself, treasonable rebellions in Cappadocia and Syria, were attributed to Christian discontent; and Diocletian

¹ Eusebius' phrase is obscure; but it so evidently corresponds to "Cæsariani" in Valerian's edict that I have not hesitated so to understand it. Eusebius might easily have mistaken the Latin word to denote "members of the imperial household," and in this mistake he has been followed by a multitude of modern writers.

was induced to issue a second edict, which attacked the clergy and ordered the immediate imprisonment of every one of them throughout the Empire. But even now Diocletian stopped short of inflicting the death penalty. A third edict, issued in December at Diocletian's *vicennalia*, permitted recanters to be released, and fearful methods of torture were employed to compel the prisoners to sacrifice. But it was not until the publication of the fourth edict that the general persecution of all Christians began. This was issued in April, 304, and was due to Maximian alone, Diocletian being too ill to take any part in the government until January, 305. This monstrous document ordered every Christian in the Empire, laic as well as cleric, to offer sacrifice and libations to the gods on pain of death.

Something of the awfulness of the sufferings and of their widespread area has been preserved in the pages of Eusebius. The persecution raged from Syria and Egypt to Britain; but after the abdication of Diocletian and Maximian in 305, Constantius Chlorus in Britain, and, after July, 306, his son Constantine in the Gauls, gradually put a stop to the persecution in their provinces. In the East it was kept up by Galerius until 311, and by Maximinus Daza still later. The Church was not, indeed, really free from anxiety until Constantine and Licinius issued the Great Edict of Milan late in 312 or early in 313, which placed all religions on an equal footing of toleration by the State.

With this date ends what is known as the Era of Persecutions. Other phases of persecution did, indeed, follow, such as befel the Homoousions from the Arians, and the Christians generally from the apostate Emperor Julian; but these do not fall within the scope of this paper.

