Rome and America – Comparing to the Ancient Roman Empire

Kerby Anderson looks at the comparisons between modern America and ancient Rome, i.e. the Roman Empire. Do Americans have a worldview more like ancient Romans than the biblical worldview spelled out in the Bible? In some ways, yes, and in other ways, not so much.

Similarities

The philosopher George Santayana once said: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." To which I might add that those who remember Santayana's maxim also seem condemned to repeat the phrase.

Ask anyone if they see similarities between Rome and America, and they are likely to respond with a resounding, "Yes!" But I have also found that people who see similarities between Rome and America see different similarities. Some see similarities in our moral decay. Others see similarities in pride, arrogance, and hubris. But all seem to agree that we are repeating the mistakes of the past and need to change our ways.

In his book *Are We Rome?*, Cullen Murphy argues that there are many similarities between the Roman Empire and America.{1} But he also believes that the American national character couldn't be more different from Rome. He believes those differences can help us avoid Rome's fate.

Let's begin by looking at some of the political, geographical, and demographic similarities.{2}

1. Dominant powers: "Rome and America are the most powerful actors in their world, by many orders of magnitude. Their power includes both military might and the 'soft power' of

language, culture, commerce, technology, and ideas."

2. Approximately equal in size: "Rome and America are comparable in physical size—the Roman Empire and its Mediterranean lake would fit inside the three million square miles of the Lower Forty-eight states, though without a lot to spare."

3. Global influence: "Both Rome and America created global structures—administrative, economic, military, cultural—that the rest of the world and their own citizens came to take for granted, as gravity and photosynthesis are taken for granted."

4. Open society: "Both are societies made up of many peoples—open to newcomers, willing to absorb the genes and lifestyles and gods of everyone else, and to grant citizenship to incoming tribes from all corners of the earth."

5. Culturally similar: "Romans and Americans can't get enough of laws and lawyers and lawsuits. . . . They relish the ritual humiliation of public figures: Americans through comedy and satire, talk radio and Court TV; the Romans through vicious satire, to be sure, but also, during the republic, by means of the *censorial nota*, the public airing, name by name, of everything great men of the time should be ashamed of."

6. Chosen people: "Both see themselves as chosen people, and both see their national character as exceptional."

While there are many similarities, there are also profound differences between Rome and America. Before we look at the six major parallels that Murphy talks about, we need to remind ourselves that there are many distinct differences between Rome and America.

Differences

It is no real surprise that people from different political

and religious perspectives see similarities between Rome and America. While some see similarities in moral decay, others see it in military might or political corruption. Although there are many similarities between Rome and America, there are some notable differences.

Cullen Murphy points out these significant differences.{3}

1. Technological advancement: “Rome in all its long history never left the Iron Age, whereas America in its short history has already leapt through the Industrial Age to the Information Age and the Biotech Age.”

2. Abundance: “Wealthy as it was, Rome lived close to the edge; many regions were one dry spell away from famine. America enjoys an economy of abundance, ever surfeit; it must beware the diseases of overindulgence.”

3. Slavery: “Rome was always a slaveholding polity with the profound moral and social retardation that this implies; America started out as a slaveholding polity and decisively cast slavery aside.”

4. Government: “Rome emerged out of a city-state and took centuries to let go of a city-state’s method of governance; America from early on began to administer itself as a continental power.”

5. Social classes: “Rome had no middle class as we understand the term, whereas for America the middle class is the core social fact.”

6. Democracy: “Rome had a powerful but tiny aristocracy and entrenched ideas about the social pecking order; even at its most democratic, Rome was not remotely as democratic as America at its least democratic, under a British monarch.”

7. Entrepreneurship: “Romans looked down upon entrepreneurship, which Americans hold in the highest esteem.”

8. Economic dynamism: “Rome was economically static; America is economically transformative.”

9. Technological development: “For all it engineering skills, Rome generated few original ideas in science and technology; America is a hothouse of innovation and creativity.”

10. Social equality: “On basic matters such as gender roles and the equality of all people, Romans and Americans would behold one another with disbelief and distaste.”

While it is true that Rome and America have a vast number of similarities, we can also see there are significant differences between the two. We therefore need a nuanced view of the parallels between the two civilizations and recognize that these differences may be an important key in understanding the future of the United States.

Six Parallels

Murphy sees many parallels between the Roman Empire and America in addition to the above.{4} The following are larger, more extensive, parallels.

The first parallel is perspective. It actually involves “the way Americans see America; and more to the point, the way the tiny, elite subset of Americans who live in the nation’s capital see America—and see Washington itself.”

Like the Romans, Americans tend to see themselves as more important than they are. They tend to have an exaggerated sense of their own presence in the world and its ability to act alone.

A second parallel involves military power. Although there are differences, some similarities stand out. Both Rome and America start to run short of people to sustain their militaries and began to find recruits through outside sources.

This is not a good long-run solution.

A third parallel can be lumped under the term privatization. “Rome had trouble maintaining a distinction between public and private responsibilities.” America is currently in the midst of privatizing functions that used to be public tasks.

A fourth parallel concerns the way Rome and America view the outside world. In a sense, this is merely the flip side of the first parallel. If you believe your country is exceptional, you tend to devalue others. And more importantly, you tend to underestimate another nation’s capabilities. Rome learned this in A.D. 9 when three legions were ambushed by a smaller German force and annihilated.{5} The repercussions were significant.

The question of borders is a fifth parallel. The boundary of Rome “was less a fence and more a threshold—not so much a firm line fortified with ‘Keep Out’ signs as a permeable zone of continual interaction.” Compare that description to our border with Mexico, and so can see many similarities.

A final parallel has to do with size and complexity. The Roman Empire got too big physically and too complex to manage effectively. The larger a country or civilization, the more “it touches, and the more susceptible it is to forces beyond its control.” To use a phrase by Murphy: “Bureaucracy is the new geography.”{6}

Cullen Murphy concludes his book by calling for greater citizen engagement and for us to promote a sense of community and mutual obligation. The Roman historian Livy wrote, “An empire remains powerful so long as its subjects rejoice in it.” America is not beyond repair, but it needs to learn the lessons from the Roman Empire.

Decline of the Family

What about the moral decline of Rome? Do we see parallels in

America? I have addressed this in previous articles such as "The Decline of a Nation" and "When Nations Die."{7} Let's focus on the area of sexuality, marriage, and family.

In his 1934 book, *Sex and Culture*, British anthropologist Joseph Daniel Unwin chronicled the historical decline of numerous cultures, including the Roman Empire. He found that cultures that held to a strong sexual ethic thrived and were more productive than cultures that were "sexually free."{8}

In his book *Our Dance Has Turned to Death*, Carl Wilson identifies the common pattern of family decline in civilizations like the Roman Empire.{9} It is significant how these seven stages parallel what is happening in America.

In the first stage, men ceased to lead their families in worship. Spiritual and moral development became secondary. Their view of God became naturalistic, mathematical, and mechanical.

In the second stage, men selfishly neglected care of their wives and children to pursue material wealth, political and military power, and cultural development. Material values began to dominate thought.

The third stage involved a change in men's sexual values. Men who were preoccupied with business or war either neglected their wives sexually or became involved with lower-class women or with homosexuality. Ultimately, a double standard of morality developed.

The fourth stage affected women. The role of women at home and with children lost value and status. Women were neglected and their roles devalued. Soon they revolted to gain access to material wealth and also freedom for sex outside marriage. Women also began to minimize having sex relations to conceive children, and the emphasis became sex for pleasure.

In the fifth stage, husbands and wives competed against each

other for money, home leadership, and the affection of their children. This resulted in hostility and frustration and possible homosexuality in the children. Many marriages ended in separation and divorce.

In the sixth stage, selfish individualism grew and carried over into society, fragmenting it into smaller and smaller group loyalties. The nation was thus weakened by internal conflict. The decrease in the birthrate produced an older population that had less ability to defend itself and less will to do so, making the nation more vulnerable to its enemies.

Finally, unbelief in God became more complete, parental authority diminished, and ethical and moral principles disappeared, affecting the economy and government. Because of internal weakness and fragmentation, the society came apart.

We can see these stages play out in the decline of the Roman Empire. But we can also see them happening before our eyes in America.

Spiritual Decline

What about the spiritual decline in Rome and America? We can actually read about the spiritual decline in Rome in Paul's letter to the church in Rome. In the opening chapter he traces a progression of spiritual decline that was evident in the Hellenistic world of his time.

The first stage is when people turn from God to idolatry. Although God has revealed Himself in nature to all men so that they are without excuse, they nevertheless worship the creation instead of the Creator. This is idolatry. In the past, this took the form of actual idol worship. In our day, it takes the form of the worship of money or the worship of self. In either case, it is idolatry. A further example of this is a general lack of thankfulness. Although they were

prospered by God, they were ungrateful. And when they are no longer looking to God for wisdom and guidance, they become vain and futile and empty in their imaginations. They no longer honor God, so their foolish hearts become darkened. In professing to be wise, they have become fools.

The second stage is when men and women exchange their natural use of sex for unnatural uses. Here Paul says those four sobering words, "God gave them over." In a society where lust-driven sensuality and sexual perversion dominate, God gives them over to their degrading passions and unnatural desires.

The third stage is anarchy. Once a society has rejected God's revelation, it is on its own. Moral and social anarchy is the natural result. At this point God has given the sinners over to a depraved mind and so they do things which are not proper. This results in a society which is without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, and unmerciful.

The final stage is judgment. God's judgment rightly falls upon those who practice idolatry and immorality. Certainly an eternal judgment awaits those who are guilty, but a social judgment occurs when God gives a nation over to its sinful practices.

Notice that this progression is not unique to the Hellenistic world the apostle Paul was living in. The progression from idolatry to sexual perversion to anarchy to judgment is found throughout history.

In the times of Noah and Lot, there was the idolatry of greed, there was sexual perversion and promiscuity, there was anarchy and violence, and finally there was judgment. Throughout the history of the nation of Israel there was idolatry, sexual perversion, anarchy (in which each person did what was right in his own eyes), and finally judgment.

Are there parallels between Rome and America? I have quoted from secular authors, Christian authors, and a writer of much

of the New Testament. All seem to point to parallels between Rome and America.

Notes

1. Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).
2. Ibid., 14-15.
3. Ibid., 16-17.
4. Ibid., 18-20.
5. Ibid., 122.
6. Ibid., 135.
7. Kerby Anderson, "The Decline of a Nation," Probe Ministries, 1991, and "When Nations Die," 2002; both available on Probe's Web site, www.probe.org.
8. J.D. Unwin, *Sex and Culture* (London: Oxford University, 1934).
9. Carl Wilson, *Our Dance Has Turned to Death* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1981), 84-85.

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Tale of Two Republics

It's hard to read an historical account of the ancient Roman Republic without being tempted to compare its successes and failures with America. For some, it follows that if the mighty Roman Empire fell because of moral, economic, and military blunders, the U.S. shall relinquish its greatness by committing similar errors. The problem with this argument is that it's a form of political reductionism that leaves out the providence of God. He alone determines the destiny of nations and peoples. He alone brings revival, causing people to repent and nations to turn from sin.

Although we can find similarities between different historical settings, every historical event is unique. And even though similar patterns of behavior might be found in both eras, modern America is very different from ancient Rome. With all of that said, there are certainly trends within cultures that prove to be deleterious to the social fabric that binds together a nation.

In this article we will compare social trends and attitudes found among the ruling class of ancient Rome with those of modern America. In one sense the empire built by the Roman Republic was itself surprisingly modern. Its success was powered by large scale business enterprises, cutting edge technology, and economic opportunity for the upper class. It also had a highly structured and disciplined army that made it the dominant military force on the planet much like America is today. Although only a small percentage of the total population was involved, the Roman Republic engaged a significant number of people in the political process which was rare for any nation until modern times.

Another similarity between the ancient Romans and modern Americans is that both tend to see themselves as the "most morally upright people in the world." This dangerous human tendency is amplified by military success and goes hand-in-hand with the unspoken assumption of "How could an immoral people prosper as we do?"

In the recent book, *Rubicon,* by Tom Holland, the story is told of how changes in the Roman culture and leadership eventually brought an end to 460 years of the Republic, ushering in a period of absolute rule by Augustus in 27 B.C. Using material from this book, we will look at how big business and materialism corrupted politics and foreign relations, how power distorted justice and reduced individuals to a commodity, and how nationalism was twisted into a tool for building political power and personal gain. Finally, we will explore how individuals were able to overthrow the Republic

and impose tyrannical rule on Rome in the name of tradition and conservative principles.

America is not ancient Rome. However, without the constraints of a biblical worldview it is not hard to see how a future leader or political movement might steal the republic from the American people all in the name of patriotism and tradition.

Big Business, Materialism, and the Military

Back in the sixties, protestors against the war in Vietnam focused on the danger inherent in what was called the military-industrial complex, the partnership between the American companies producing weapons and military supplies, and those who used them. The charge was that America was using its military to both protect and feed America's big business concerns, and in return, big business was providing the military with what it needed to be dominant on the battlefield. In a speech in 1961, President Eisenhower warned that

> *In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.{1}*

He went on to explain that

> *This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The*

> *total influence—economic, political, even spiritual—is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government.{2}*

Rome had its own military-industrial complex. As proconsul of the East (in 64 B.C.), Pompey occupied Antioch, the capital of Syria, and shortly afterwards Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judea. His justification was to protect Roman interests in the region which turned out to be mostly business interests. Pompey was willing to intervene in or impose direct rule on any territory in the interest of maintaining peace and a good business environment. This *Pax Romana* protected unbridled exploitation by Roman entrepreneurs.

The Roman Republic was fueled by big business and its military victories were often turned into a license to make money. Cities were ransacked for treasure, mining was conducted on a scale not to be witnessed again until the Industrial Revolution, and in one city, smelting furnaces caused pollution so bad that naked skin burned and turned white upon exposure.{3}

A culture that encourages limitless greed and personal glory opens itself up to unbridled corruption and bloodshed. The Romans soon found that the republic they so cherished could not survive with leadership that would go to any lengths, and tell any lie, that might keep them in power. The American republic is also fragile. When a "profit at any cost mentality" becomes too embedded, it corrupts both accounting practices and governmental policy.

God did not spare even his people when it became evident that they were corrupted by greed. The prophet Amos warned Judah that God was bringing on judgment because "They [the people of God] trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed."{4} God is still

concerned about justice. It will always be in every nation's interest to seek justice for all people and to act upon ethical principles beyond the profit motive or personal glory.

The Politics of Power

One common trait of both the ancient Roman Republic and the early United States is that they shared a dependence on slave labor. The Romans believed that if a man allowed himself to be enslaved, then he thoroughly deserved his fate. As they conquered much of the known world, the Romans plundered the wealth of each new territory, and human beings were a major part of this booty. The empire established a single market that moved slaves around the Mediterranean Sea in vast numbers. Millions of slaves owned by wealthy and not so wealthy Roman citizens performed most of the tasks that made Rome rich and powerful.

Even though slavery had virtually vanished in Christian Europe, it was reestablished when the Portuguese began to trade with Africa in the mid-fourteenth century. There had always been slavery in Africa, and it was further developed by Arab traders after the emergence of Islam which regulated its use. Eventually, the Portuguese took over the slave trade and made it more impersonal and horrible than ever. As the Portuguese and Spanish traveled westward, they brought slavery with them. This slave trade became an early component of life in the New World and, eventually, in America.

The result of this dependency was living in constant fear of slaves and a slave revolt. In the Roman Republic, Spartacus led a group of slaves in such a revolt in 73 B.C. that grew to be an army of over 100,000. The rebellion was eventually crushed by politically ambitious leaders Crassus and Pompey. Crassus sent a violent message against future revolts by having the defeated army of Spartacus crucified every forty yards along a one hundred mile stretch of road outside of

Rome. America experienced its bloodiest conflict in the Civil War, primarily over the slavery issue. Both cultures endured a degradation of society as a result of slavery. Thomas Jefferson thought that slavery was an evil institution that corrupted the slave owner more than the slave, yet he owned and traded slaves most of his life.

The Roman Republic continued to live with the tension of slave ownership and labor until its demise. The U. S. ended slavery, but has continued to suffer the effects of enslaving an entire people for centuries. Distrust and anger still exist between races in America, and the gospel message is often tainted because the Bible was used as a justification by some for enslaving millions.

When a society recognizes the uniqueness and significance of each citizen, it is acknowledging the biblical teaching that all individuals are made in God’s image. How the current conflicts over other moral issues such as abortion and euthanasia are settled will determine whether we continue to move closer to or further from this biblical principle.

Conservatism Abused

The word *conservative* can mean different things to different people. However, as the name implies, it usually points to someone who is trying to conserve or protect traditional values, values that are often seen as fundamental to both the creation of and the continuance of a nation or political entity. Conservatives argue in defense of what are often called the “permanent things” relating to spiritual, political, and familial ideals. Conservatives in the Roman Republic and the current United States have both referred often to these “permanent things.” In some cases, the “permanent things” have been used as a screen to support other agendas or to simply gain power and prestige.

The “permanent things” of the Roman Republic were quite different from today’s America. The myth of Romulus and Remus, whose simple childhood home was preserved on a hillside in Rome, is one example. Their legend includes a violent struggle against one another, ending in the death of Remus, which over time came to depict the enduring struggle between the aristocracy of Rome and the plebian class. Another permanent ideal was the freedom from economic or political slavery that was felt by many Romans to be the key to the Republic’s success. A corollary to this freedom was the severe meritocracy supported by the unwritten constitution that guided the nation. Each man was to seek glory and wealth in the name of Rome, and his success or failure would determine his destiny. Strong leaders such as Sulla would sometimes violate the ancient rules of Rome and its unwritten constitution in order to “save it” from perceived or real threats to the Republic. For example, in 88 B.C. Sulla led an army on Rome, violating an ancient tradition. Generals commissioned to serve Rome swore never to enter the city with their soldiers, a tradition that had existed intact for hundreds of years. Sulla claimed that he violated this tradition in order to save the Republic from his political enemy Marius, but he was acting mostly out of desire for personal power and glory.

Ancient Rome also had its traditional religious beliefs and institutions. The temple of Jupiter was at the center of the city as were temples to other Roman gods. Political careers could be ruined if one ignored the traditional role of religion in Roman culture.

America has obvious traditions regarding the role of government, family, and religion. It is unlikely that an outspoken atheist or someone who denied the authority of the U.S. Constitution could be elected president. However, the Roman Republic was lost when men, in the name of conserving the traditions of the Roman people, began to ignore the very

rules established by those traditions in their pursuit of personal power and glory.

The Fall of the Republic

Another group which grew increasingly more influential in the Empire and its provinces were the *publicani.* These were businessmen who ran large business cartels that benefited from the unquestioned dominance of Rome's military power. These business ventures sold shares, had shareholder meetings, elected directors to a governing board, and were as profit motivated as any present day multinational corporation. Although they held no official government title, the *publicani* wielded considerable authority in Rome's provinces and were held in contempt for their merciless extraction of wealth by any means necessary.

This military-fiscal complex corrupted what had been a traditional policy of isolationism in Rome. One provincial administrator, Rutilius Rufus, attempted to restrain the abuse caused by the *publicani* and tax collectors but was himself brought to court, convicted, and exiled in 92 B.C.

Eventually, the provincials fought back. Finding the provinces of Asia poorly defended, Mithridates, the King of Pontus, quickly defeated the Roman forces and encouraged the locals to take their revenge. In the summer of 88 B.C. he ordered the massacre of every Roman and Italian left in Asia. Eighty thousand men, women, and children were killed during one bloody night. Mithridates was seen by the Greeks as a divine source of retribution against the hated superpower of the day. The execution of the Roman commissioner Manius Aquillius provides a vivid picture of the animosity held by many towards Rome. Mithridates order some of the gold treasure held by the Romans to be melted down. Then, Aquillius's head was held back, his mouth forced open, and the molten metal poured down his throat.

I am not equating Rome's experience with modern America. It would be too easy and false to match Osama bin Laden's motives and actions with those of Mithridates. But unfortunately, any nation that rises to the level of wealth and power that the U.S. has will attract resentment and jealous hatred. At the same time, we have to be wise stewards of all that God has blessed us with. We should be known for our justice and mercy, not just our military power.

Even if we do everything right, some will resent our actions. That is why Christians in business and government must avoid even the appearance of evil and work to make America a source of healing and freedom for oppressed people everywhere. We cannot allow those who mislabel our deeds cause us to grow weary of doing good. We should never fall victim to donor fatigue when it comes to hunger or natural disaster; God has blessed us with too much to not get involved. The difference between the Roman Empire and the U. S. is our awareness that God requires much from those who have been given much.

Notes

1. Public Papers of the Presidents, Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1960, p. 1035-1040 Found at http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst306/documents/indust.html
2. Ibid.
3. Holland, Tom, *Rubicon* (Doubleday, 2003) p. 41.
4. Amos 2:7

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Persecution in the Early Church – How Persecution Strengthens the Church

Rick Wade provides a succinct summary of the persecution suffered by the early church in the first three centuries and how the church grew stronger as a result of this attention. He suggests that we should be prepared to face similar trials as our culture becomes less tolerant of true Christian faith.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

Background

Things are a bit tougher for Christians in our society today than a few decades ago, aren't they? At times like this, it's probably good to get some perspective. I think any of us, once we knew what the early church experienced—and, indeed, what Christians in other parts of the world are experiencing now—would find ourselves looking a bit sheepish if caught complaining about our lot.

In this article we'll look at the persecution our brothers and sisters faced in the fledgling church in the first few centuries after Christ. We'll talk about some of the reasons for persecution, and identify some of the emperors under whom Christians suffered.

Reasons for Persecution

There are several important and interrelated reasons for the persecution of the early church.

First was the problem of identity. Christianity was identified at first with Judaism, but people quickly came to see it as a different religion. Jews were left alone for the most part; it seemed best to Rome to just confine them and leave them alone. Christianity, however, was a strange, new cult, and it began to spread across people groups and geographical boundaries.{1} People felt threatened by this oddball new religion.

The next problem was with the religious activities of the Christians, with what they *did* do and *didn't* do.

In the days of the Roman empire, the worship of pagan gods and the emperor was a part of everyone's life. Two problems arose because of this. First, because they didn't participate in pagan rituals but tended to keep to themselves, Christians were considered anti-social. When the imperial police took an interest in them, they became more secretive which added fuel to the fire. They became associated with the *collegia*—clubs or secret societies—and leaders were suspicious of these groups because of the threat of sedition.{2} Second, since Christians wouldn't join in with the religious activities which were believed to placate the gods, they became a threat to the very well-being of the community. Writing in about A.D. 196, Tertullian said, "The Christians are to blame for every public disaster and every misfortune that befalls the people. If the Tiber rises to the walls, if the Nile fails to rise and flood the fields, if the sky withholds its rain, if there is earthquake or famine or plague, straightway the cry arises: 'The Christians to the lions!'"{3}

With respect to what they *did* do in their own religious practices, talk of eating the body and blood of Jesus, and the customary greeting with a kiss, brought charges of cannibalism and incest.{4}

The third problem was the nature or content of Christians' beliefs. The historian Tacitus spoke of Christians as a "class hated for their abominations" who held to a "deadly

superstition."{5} A drawing found in Rome of a man with a donkey's head hanging on a cross gives an idea of what pagans thought of Christian beliefs.{6}

Finally, Christians' reluctance to offer worship to the emperor and the gods was considered madness, considering what would happen to them if they didn't. Why not just offer a pinch of incense to the image of the emperor? In a pluralistic society, the narrowness of Christian beliefs seemed absurd, especially considering what would happen to Christians who *wouldn't* go along. In the opinion of the general populace, says F. F. Bruce, "such a crowd of wretches were plainly worthy of extermination, and any repressive measures that were taken against them by authority could be sure of popular approval."{7}

Emperors

Let's turn now to a brief survey of some of the emperors under whom the church suffered persecution.*Nero*

Claudius Nero was named emperor at age 16 and reigned from A.D. 54-68. He had about five good years under the guidance of such men as Seneca, the Roman poet and philosopher.{8} But that all changed when he had his mother killed in A.D. 59. She was too powerful. Her "insanity and her fury at seeing her son slip out of her control" led Nero to believe she was a threat to his power.{9} In A.D. 62 his had his wife killed so he could marry another woman. He later killed a brother and his teacher, Seneca.

Christians became the object of his ire following the Great Fire of Rome in A.D. 64. Some people suspected that Nero started the fire himself, so he pointed the accusing finger at Christians. The fact that he felt confident in doing this indicates the low regard in which people held Christians already.{10} Historian Philip Schaff says that "Their Jewish origin, their indifference to politics and public affairs,

their abhorrence of heathen customs, were construed into an '*odium generis humani*' (hatred of the human race), and this made an attempt on their part to destroy the city sufficiently plausible to justify a verdict of guilty."{11} Schaff says that "there began a carnival of blood such as even heathen Rome never saw before or since….A 'vast multitude' of Christians was put to death in the most shocking manner."{12} Some were crucified, some sewn up in animal skins and thrown to the dogs, some were covered in pitch, nailed to wooden posts, and burned as torches.{13} It was in the fallout of this that Peter and Paul gave their lives for their Savior, probably within a year of each other.{14}

Nero apparently took his own life in A.D. 68 when the Senate and the patricians turned against him.{15}

Trajan

Emperor Trajan ruled from A.D. 98-117. One of his governors, a man called Pliny the Younger, wrote to Trajan seeking advice on what to do with the Christians. They were becoming very numerous, and Pliny thought the pagan religions were being neglected. He began sentencing Christians who refused to honor the gods and the emperor to death. Pliny believed that, even if the Christians' practices weren't too bad, just their obstinacy was enough to be rid of them.{16}Should he sentence them for carrying the name *Christian* only, or did they have to commit specific criminal acts?{17}

Trajan responded with a kind of "don't ask, don't tell" policy. "They must not be ferreted out," he said. But if someone made a credible charge against a Christian, the Christian should be sentenced unless he or she recanted and gave proof by invoking pagan gods.{18}

Persecution was especially bad in Syria and Palestine during Trajan's reign. In 107 he went to Antioch and demanded that everyone sacrifice to the gods. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch

and pupil of the apostle John, refused and was martyred by being thrown to wild animals.{19} Ignatius wrote this to Polycarp, another disciple of John, on his way to Rome: "Let the fire, the gallows, the wild beasts, the breaking of bones, the pulling asunder of members, the bruising of my whole body, and the torments of the devil and hell itself come upon me, so that I may win Christ Jesus."{20}

Hadrian

Trajan's ruling was carried on by the next few emperors. Emperor Hadrian, "the most brilliant of the Roman emperors," says Will Durant,{21} required specific charges against Christians as well. He didn't allow governors "to use mere clamorous demands and outcries" as a basis for judgment. Furthermore, if anyone brings a charge against Christians "merely for the sake of libelling [*sic*] them," the governor was to "proceed against that man with heavier penalties, in accordance with his heinous guilt."{22} There were to be no frivolous lawsuits.

However, Christians still needed to prove loyalty to the state and the pagan religions. Hadrian hated Jews, and was somewhat "indifferent to Christianity from ignorance of it."{23} Philip Schaff tells us that "he insulted the Jews and the Christians alike by erecting temples of Jupiter and Venus over the site of the temple and the supposed spot of the crucifixion."{24} Not all officials required Christians to denounce Christ. All they wanted was homage to the divine character of the emperor ("the personal embodiment of the sovereign state"{25}). "It was beside the point for Christians to argue that the malicious tales circulated about them were false,…Deeds, not words, were required by the state; and if they were in fact loyal citizens, as they protested, there was a simple way of demonstrating their loyalty; let them offer a pinch of incense in honour of the Emperor, let them swear by his divinity, let them invoke him as 'Lord.'"{26}

Antonius Pius

The policy of not actively pursuing Christians was continued under Antonius Pius who ruled from A.D. 138-161. During the reigns of emperors such as Hadrian and Antonius, however, Christians sometimes suffered persecution at the hands of the local townspeople without any direct encouragement from government officials. During Antonius' reign, Polycarp, a pupil of the apostle John, was martyred in Asia during one such outburst of violence.{27} After this persecution settled down somewhat. The execution of this 86 year old man seemed to turn the tide against persecution for a time.{28}

Marcus Aurelius

In A.D. 161 Marcus Aurelius took power and reigned until 180. It was during his reign that Justin Martyr met his death.{29}

Although he didn't directly lead persecutions against Christians, he had no sympathy for them because he saw them as being disgustingly superstitious. We're told that "a law was passed under his reign, punishing every one with exile who should endeavor to influence people's mind by fear of the Divinity, and this law was, no doubt, aimed at the Christians."{30} F. F. Bruce says that the Christians' "very resoluteness in the face of suffering and death, which might in itself have won respect from a Stoic, was explained not as commendable fortitude but as perverse obstinacy….Marcus despised what seemed to him the crass superstition of the Christian beliefs, which disqualified them from the respect due to others who maintained their principles at the cost of life itself."{31} For Aurelius, it was good to die for something significant, but not for something as silly as what the Christians believed. Furthermore, Christians went to their executions with a show of willingness that he considered theatrical display which was anathema to the calm spirit appreciated by the Stoics.

During Aurelius' reign Christians were blamed for a number of natural disasters because they wouldn't sacrifice to the gods.{32} In A.D. 177, in Gaul, horrible persecution broke out in a wave of mob violence. Slaves were tortured to give testimony against their masters.{33} "The corpses of the martyrs, which covered the streets," says Philip Schaff, "were shamefully mutilated, then burned, and the ashes cast into the Rhone, lest any remnants of the enemies of the gods might desecrate the soil."{34} It is said that the courage of a slave girl named Blandina "strengthened all the others; her tormentors exhausted themselves in their attempts to make her renounce Christ."{35} "At last," Schaff tells us, "the people grew weary of slaughter," and the persecutions died down.{36}

Septimius Severus

Another emperor under whom Christians suffered terribly was Septimius Severus who ruled from 193-211. Writing during his reign, Clement of Alexandria said, "Many martyrs are daily burned, confined, or beheaded, before our eyes."{37}

In 202 Septimius enacted a law prohibiting the spread of Christianity and Judaism. This was the first universal decree forbidding conversion to Christianity.{38} Violent persecutions broke out in Egypt and North Africa.{39} Leonides, the father of Origen, a Christian apologist, was beheaded. Origen himself was spared because his mother hid his clothes.{40} A young girl was cruelly tortured, then burned in a kettle of burning pitch with her mother.{41} A poignant story of the breaking down of class distinctions in the suffering church comes out of the persecution in Carthage. It is reported that Perpetua, a young noblewoman, and Felicitas, a slave girl, held hands and exchanged a kiss before being thrown to wild animals at a public festival.{42}

Persecutions abated somewhat soon after Septimius died, but resumed with a vengeance under Decius Trajan.

Decius Trajan

In his few shorts years on the throne, Emperor Decius Trajan undertook to restore the old Roman spirit. In A.D. 250 he published an edict calling for a return to the pagan state religion. Local commissioners were appointed to enforce the ruling. According to Philip Schaff, "This was the signal for a persecution which, in extent, consistency, and cruelty, exceeded all before it." It was the first to extend over the whole empire, so it produced more martyrs than any other persecution.{43}

When people were suspected of being Christians, they were given the opportunity of offering sacrifice to the gods before the commissioners. Certificates were issued to prove a person's loyalty to the pagan religions.{44} Many Christians gave in to the pressure. Those who didn't were put in prison and repeatedly questioned. Rulers weren't looking for martyrs; they wanted to see the Christians conform.{45} Christians who stood their ground were subject to confiscation, exile, torture, imprisonment, and death.{46} Some rushed forward "to obtain the confessor's or martyr's crown."{47} Some, however, obtained certificates through bribery or forgery. Those who offered sacrifices were excommunicated.

In 251 Decius died, but persecution continued as Christians were blamed for invasions by the Goths and for natural disasters.

Diocletian

During the years 303-311, the church endured persecutions so terrible that all before were forgotten.{48} Historian Philip Schaff saw this as the final struggle between the pagan Roman Empire and the rule of Christ in the West. The primary sources of persecution were Diocletian and Galerius.

Diocletian came to power in 284, and for twenty years upheld edicts of toleration made by a previous emperor. His wife and

daughter were Christians, as were most of his court officers and eunuchs.{49}

But Diocletian allowed himself to be persuaded by two of his co- regents to turn on the Christians. Four edicts were issued in A.D. 303 and 304. “Christian churches were to be burned,” Schaff tells us, “all copies of the Bible were to be burned; all Christians were to be deprived of public office and civil rights; and last, all, without exception, were to sacrifice to the gods upon pain of death.”{50} A fifth edict was issued by co-regent Galerius in 308 ordering that all men, with wives, children, and servants, were to offer sacrifice to the gods, “and that all provisions in the markets should be sprinkled with sacrificial wine.”{51} As a result, Christians either had to commit apostasy or starve. Says Schaff: “All the pains, which iron and steel, fire and sword, rack and cross, wild beasts and beastly men could inflict, were employed”{52} against the church. Executioners grew tired with all the work they had to do.

The tide finally turned in the terrible struggle between paganism and Christianity in 311 when Galerius admitted defeat in trying to bring Christians back to the pagan religions. He gave Christians permission to meet as long as they didn’t disturb the order of the state. He even requested that they pray to their God for the welfare of the state.

Some persecution followed under a few other emperors, but the fire was almost out on the old Roman Empire. In 313 Constantine, the emperor in the west, issued the Edict of Milan which moved from hostile neutrality to friendly neutrality toward Christians.{53} He declared himself a follower of the God of Christianity. In 324 he became emperor of the whole Roman world, and published a new edict of toleration which was to cover the entire empire.

Reflections

In his work called *Apology*, the Latin apologist Tertullian made this now-famous comment: "The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed."{54} Somehow, the suffering of some Christians spurred others to more faithful living. The apostle Paul noted that "most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear" (Phil. 1:14). Through all the terrible persecutions of the early centuries the church continued to grow.

This hasn't been as significant a principle for Christians in America because Christianity was for most of our history the religion of the land. Of course, that doesn't mean that even most Americans have been Christians at any given time. Nonetheless, our worldview was grounded in Christian beliefs, and Christianity had a prominent place in our cultural life.

But that's changed now. Far from holding a privileged place in our cultural life, Christianity now is often portrayed as an oppressive bully out to make people's lives miserable. No matter what issue is raised, any view which has its roots in Christian theology arouses suspicion.

In the first century A.D. it was easy for the general populace to believe Nero when he accused Christians of causing the Great Fire in Rome because Christians were thought of as haters of the human race (*odium generis humani*). Theologian Harold O. J. Brown sees similarities between that attitude and the attitude of people toward Christians today in America.{55} So, for example, objections to homosexuality draw charges of hate mongering. When a homosexual is murdered, the finger of blame is pointed at Christians for creating a "climate of hate." Attempts at saving the lives of the unborn are portrayed as attempts to make life difficult for women in crisis. Of course, over-zealous Christians don't help any when

they blow up an abortion clinic or shoot an abortionist.

The general secular attitude today seems to be that it's okay for Christians to have their beliefs, as long as they at least give lip service to certain trendy ideals: gay rights, abortion rights, and religious pluralism, to name a few. Not much different than the attitude in the early church, is it? "Believe in your God if you want, but be sure to worship ours, too." By God's grace we don't endure serious suffering, at least not yet. But Christians in other nations are experiencing it. In Sudan, people are forced to become Muslims or pay for their resistance with low paying jobs, slavery, rape, and even death. This is not the only country where Christians suffer severely for their faith.{56}

In my opinion, the negative attitude in our country is likely to get worse before it gets better. But history has shown that persecution ultimately strengthens the church. It removes the nominal Christians, and it emboldens others to both stand firm when persecuted and become more aggressive in proclamation. If persecution comes to us, the church will remain, although church membership rolls will probably become shorter.

Are we prepared to truly suffer for our faith? Do we *really* believe what we say we believe? If persecution ever comes, God grant us the faithfulness to stand firm. And let's not forget to pray and work to help our brothers and sisters who are suffering for the name of Jesus Christ.

Notes

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame: The Rise and Progress of Christianity from its First Beginnings to the Conversion of the English* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973),165.
2. Ibid., 169.
3. Ibid., 180.
4. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 2nd ed.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 559
5. Ibid., 556. See also Bruce, 165.

6. Ibid., 559-61.
7. Bruce, 165.
8. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. 1, Apostolic Christianity: A.D. 1-100* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 378.
9. *Encyclopedia Britannica,* "Nero," by Jean-Charles Pichon.
10. Bruce, 165.
11. Schaff, 381. Harold O. J. Brown sees a similar attitude developing today. See his "Odium Humani Generis," *The Religion and Society Report*, 16, no. 3 (March, 1999):1-4.
12. Ibid., 381.
13. Ibid., 381-82.
14. Ibid., 252, 329-330.
15. *EB*, "Nero."
16. Bruce, 171.
17. Oxford Dictionary, "Pliny."
18. Bruce, 171.
19. John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs,* trans. Marie Gentert King (Old Tappan, NJ: Spire Books, 1968), 16.
20. Foxe, 17.
21. Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization: Pt. III, Caesar and Christ: A history of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from their beginnings to A.D. 325* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), 413.
22. Ferguson, 569.
23. Schaff, Vol. II, 49-50.
24. Ibid., II:50.
25. Bruce, 173.
26. Ibid., 173.
27. Ibid., 174.
28. Ibid., 174.
29. Schaff, 56.
30. Ibid., II:54.
31. Bruce, 178.
32. Schaff, 55.
33. Ibid., 55.
34. Ibid., 56.

35. Bruce, 178-79.
36. Schaff, 56.
37. Ibid., 57.
38. Bruce, 179.
39. Schaff, 57.
40. Bruce, 179.
41. Schaff, 58.
42. Ibid., 58; Bruce, 180.
43. Ibid., 60.
44. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Vol.1, Beginnings to 1500*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 87-88.
45. Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 455-56. 46. Schaff, II:60; Fox, 457; Latourette, 88.
47. Ibid., II:60-61.
48. Ibid., II:64-65.
49. Ibid., II:65.
50. Ibid., II:66.
51. Ibid., II:68.
52. Ibid., II:68.
53. Ibid., II:72.
54. Tertullian, *Apology,* in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers,* Vol. 3, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., (Albany, Ore.: AGES Software, 1997), 102.
55. Harold O. J. Brown, "Odium Humani Generis," *The Religion and Society Report*, 16, no. 3 (March, 1999): 1-4.
56. If you'd like to know more you can contact Voice of the Martyrs at 1-800-747-0085, or find their web site at www.persecution.com.

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