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Assessing Religious Tolerance of the Late Roman Empire

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Abstract

The topic of religious tolerance is one that spans the scope of human history. In the following essay, this subject will be examined within the context of the late Roman Empire (180-395 CE.). This ancient period represents a chapter of Roman history almost exclusively recounted by ancient Christian historians, the result of which has led to the establishment of the famous narrative depicting late Romans as severely intolerant of non-Roman religions—most notably, Christianity. Through the analysis of extensive documentation, leading to the uncovering of inherent Christian bias, this established history will be challenged in an effort to present a narrative which characterizes the Roman society as exhibiting substantially more religious tolerance than previously believed.

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The late Roman Empire, defined as the period between 180-395 CE, was a period characterized by significant changes within the empire. One main change that took place was the ultimate movement away from traditional Roman religious practices and towards a new religion—Christianity. While “traditional religious practices” refer to the Roman polytheistic worship of pagan gods such as Jupiter and Neptune, Christianity, on the other hand, was inherently different due to its scripture and monotheistic nature. But, counter-intuitively, the late empire is often characterized by Roman societies being intolerant of any non-traditional Roman religions. Through close analysis of primary sources, historians can study the ways and circumstances by which these other religions (particularly Christianity) experienced more tolerance from the Romans than previously believed. Ancient Christian historians such as Orosius (375-418 CE), Eusebius (260-340 CE), and Lactantius (250-325 CE) strongly contributed to the now-famous narrative of horrific persecutions endlessly carried out by Roman Emperors against Christianity. Due to the fact that many of the surviving accounts from this period were recorded by such Christian authors, it becomes paramount that these accounts be examined through the lens of each author’s likely bias. In doing so, some evidence even suggests, ironically, that Christians were, in fact, less tolerant of other religions than the traditional Romans.

Before examining the extent of Roman religious tolerance, parameters must be set by defining “tolerance” to gauge Roman attitudes and actions as either tolerant or intolerant. Within this paper, “tolerance” will be defined as actions by Romans to accept the beliefs and behaviors of non-Roman religions and to coexist in society with these religions (namely Christianity). Additionally, parameters can be established according to this definition wherein tolerance would also entail not targeting a specific religion for the purpose of eradication—hence, allowing the disliked religion (Christianity) to exist within the empire. Even with a clearly defined definition for tolerance, no assertion can be made which categorizes the late Roman Empire as either decisively tolerant or intolerant. In fact, the extent to which Romans tolerated other non-Roman religions was constantly changing based upon additional factors and circumstances within the empire. While there can be no blanket statement regarding the late Roman Empire’s tolerance or intolerance towards non-Roman religions, the empire displayed more instances of religious tolerance than intolerance. More often than not, acts of “persecution” against Christians were responses by the Roman Emperors to factors unrelated to Christianity itself, such as crises faced by the emperors throughout the period. In fact, this essay will attempt to prove how the majority of “Christian persecutions” were centered around the desire to expand traditional Roman paganism rather

than eradicate Christianity. Ironically, the intolerance of Christians towards Roman religious practices served as a catalyst for their own persecution from Roman Emperors.

Prior to delving into the topic of Roman tolerance for Christianity, it is important to understand how the Romans treated other non-traditional religions that emerged within the empire. For example, the 3rd century Roman Emperor Elagabalus (218-222 CE) demanded the worship of a Phoenician sun god within the Roman Imperium when he obtained power. The sun god was distinctly different from the traditionally dominant Roman god (Jupiter) as this new deity hailed from the territory of Phoenicia—a region controlled by the Roman Empire, yet not included within traditional Roman culture. The emperor, who adopted for himself the actual name of the sun god—Elagabalus—was described by the ancient Roman historian, Herodian, to have “directed all Roman officials who perform public sacrifices to call upon the new god Elagabalus before all other gods.” The decree was met with no resistance from Roman senators, as no accounts have been found regarding any opposition pertaining to this new religion. It was not until the outlandish eccentricities of this emperor, accompanied by his outrageous personality, finally outraged the Roman army enough to cause the demise of the emperor and his religion. Nearly fifty years later, during the reign of Emperor Aurelian (270-275 CE), an additional instance of tolerance for a non-Roman religion occurred when this emperor adopted the worship of another sun god, Sol Invictus Mithras. This deity, already very popular with the Roman army, initially emerged within Persia prior to winning favor amongst the Romans. The sheer abundance of late 2nd century stone inscriptions, many of which depict the glory of this god, serve as evidence of the widespread influence this sun god held throughout Rome. As shown by the lack of opposition regarding the worship of the Phoenician god, Elagabalus, and the budding popularity of Sol Invictus Mithras, it becomes clear that the late Roman society exhibited tolerance for other non-traditional religions that appeared within the empire.

By establishing Roman tolerance for some of these other non-traditional religions, Roman tolerance of the Christian faith can now be examined. At the conclusion of the Severan dynasty (193-235 CE), Christianity infiltrated the Roman Imperium as Julia Maesa (grandmother to Emperor Severus Alexander) became educated in the faith by prominent Christian theologian, Origen. For contextual purposes, it is important to note that the Christian theologian, Origen, was not just any philosopher. A byproduct of the philosophical movement occurring within Alexandria at the time—and student of renowned philosopher, Ammonius—Origen elevated Christianity's appeal from an intellectual standpoint, thus sparking an expansion of the faith amongst educated philosophers. Christian historian,

Eusebius, described how Origen was summoned to Rome by a military escort so he could instruct the excellence of the Lord's divine teaching within the Imperial Palace. This period during the late Roman Empire clearly constitutes tolerance of Christianity because the religion was accepted by the imperial leaders of Rome without backlash. Origen's influence within the Roman Imperium demonstrates how Christianity was beginning to spread among the more elite social class of Rome at this time.

As a result of the Roman Empire's political instability during the 3rd century, Emperor Severus Alexander and his family were removed from power by the Roman army. After the very quick succession of multiple emperors, the Roman army eventually acclaimed the military commander, Maximinus, as the new leader. After assuming the throne, Maximinus issued a “persecution” edict against Christian priests and clergy chiefly due to the fact that the family of his predecessor—Severus Alexander—had been Christians. The word “persecution” was later used by Christian historian Orosius; however, it is important to note that the term fails to appear within any first-hand historical accounts of Maximinus. Such absence of this word lends credence to the notion that Christian historians constructed tales of endless persecutions initiated by Roman emperors. Additionally, according to Orosius' own words, the action taken by Maximinus against Christians was not a result of intolerance for Christianity itself but was rather born out of a hatred towards Severus Alexander—who simply happened to be a Christian. This example would also support the former viewpoint that Christian “persecutions” occurred as a result of other outside factors which influenced the actions of Roman emperors.

Evidence that “persecutions” were instituted as a result of factors beyond the scope of Christianity becomes even more prominent during the reigns of Decius and Valerian—two Roman emperors who are infamous for Christian persecution. By the time Decius assumed the title of Augustus in 249 CE, many aspects of the Roman Empire were in a state of crisis. Roman historian and politician, Aurelius Victor, described the empire as entering “into a state of steep decline.” Another ancient historian of Rome, Zosimus, claimed that the previous emperor, Phillip, had left the empire “in utter disarray.” Specifically, Persians of the rival Sassanian Empire were attacking the Eastern borders of the empire, Germanic tribes threatened Rome's northern province of Gaul, smallpox ravaged the empire's agrarian society, and the previously stable climate of the 2nd century began to severely dissipate throughout the 3rd century. While each specific crisis represents a fascinating topic within its own right, the important thing to understand is that the Roman Empire was confronted with a multitude of crises during the 3rd century. Such calamities, which quickly emerged after a stable 2nd century,

impacted how Decius viewed his empire as he began to conclude that his realm was being punished by dissatisfied Roman gods. Despite the apparent folly of this reasoning, it is important to remember that such a viewpoint would have been perfectly reasonable within a 3rd century society in which religion essentially dominated all aspects of life.

When searching for a way to save his empire from its apparent state of crisis, Decius (and many others) decided the only way to overcome their situation was to appease the Roman gods. To achieve this objective, Decius issued an empire-wide supplicatio calling for a universal sacrifice to the gods in order to ensure the safety of the empire. The edict demanded all Roman inhabitants to obtain a certificate of loyalty (*libelli*), which proved they had sacrificed to the Roman gods; however, by no means did the decree single out Christianity in an attempt to destroy the religion. Although surviving evidence indicates that mass cruelty was inflicted upon Christians who refused to perform this Roman sacrifice, such punishments may be explained by previous efforts to standardize the Roman law by legal authority, Ulpian (170-228 CE). By establishing uniformity within Roman law, the resulting legal system now emphasized that decisions be based on precedent, meaning that local decisions could take on empire-wide significance. For example, during the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius (161-180 CE), the decision by the Governor of Lyon to execute lawbreaking Christians likely found its way to Ulpian and became a precedent response for any disorderly Christians throughout the entire empire...including those who refused to obey Decius' edict of Roman sacrifice. Therefore, the killing of such Christians who refused to sacrifice would not have been conducted out of hatred or intolerance of Christianity itself, but rather as a standard reaction to a pre-existing precedent within Roman law.

Two years later, the new emperor—Valerian—issued a “persecution” edict against Christians, which serves as evidence that the emperor's primary objective was to implement universal Roman sacrifice, and not eradicate Christianity. Valerian proclaimed that senators, Roman knights, and other important men shall only lose their dignity, and not their heads, as long as they participate in this traditional Roman sacrifice. Not only was the Roman Imperium lenient towards high ranking Roman Christians, but also towards bishops as well. The trial of bishop Dionysius of Alexandria evidences this leniency while also exemplifying Roman tolerance of Christianity. According to a preserved transcription of the trial, Roman official Aemilianus asked Dionysius, “But who forbids you to worship Him, if he is a god, together with those who are gods by nature.” The question posed by Aemilianus displays how the focus of Valerian's regime was clearly centered around the empire becoming unified

under traditional Roman paganism—not the extermination of Christianity. Aemilianus's question proves how the Romans were willing to tolerate Christians worshipping God, so long as Christians conducted sacrifices to the Roman gods as well.

After the death of Valerian in 260 CE, the Roman Imperial attitude towards Christians shifted as his son, Gallienus, gained sole authority over the empire and repealed the edicts of “persecution.” In common fashion with other ancient Roman Christian historians, Orosius claimed that Gallienus acted out of fear for God's wrath and did not desire the same fate as Valerian—whose demise was supposedly orchestrated by The Lord himself. The edict issued by Gallienus, a rescript from Christian bishops, ordered the removal of the Roman army from Christian places of worship and the reinstatement of those places to Christians. By issuing the edict, Gallienus effectively allowed Christians within the empire to worship God in peace. Through legal recourse, which returned to Christians their property, the emperor recognized Christians as full, property-owning, Roman citizens. This example of allowing Christians full citizenship in Rome clearly falls within the parameters of Roman tolerance for Christianity.

As a result of Gallienus' edict, Roman Christians enjoyed legal status for roughly 40 years before Diocletian's “Great Persecution” revoked it. This persecution did, in fact, specifically emphasize the eradication of Christianity. Clearly, this edict cannot be considered an act of religious tolerance. However, it is important to note that Diocletian allowed Christians to retain legal status for the first 20 years of his reign before enacting the Great Persecution. It also appears that a surprisingly different factor, beyond Diocletian's own reasoning, may very well have influenced his decision: Within the city of Antioch in 299 CE, Christians reportedly interfered in a traditional Roman religious sacrifice by disrupting the taking of the auspices. Requiring a Roman priest to remove the entrails of an animal through sacrifice, Christians reportedly disrupted the ritual by impeding the priest's ability to view (and decipher) these entrails. As Christians believed animal sacrifice to be a polluting ritual, their actions taken against the traditional Romans distinctly displays Christian intolerance for Roman religious practices. Deeply affected by the event in Antioch, Co-Emperor Galerius persuaded Diocletian into persecuting the Christians by holding imperial conferences, which included meticulous lobbying efforts from prominent Platonist philosopher, Porphyry, and judge, Sossianus. As a result of this Christian intolerance towards Roman practices, Diocletian was clearly subjected to immense pressure from Roman Imperial elites and prominent Platonists to attack Christianity after 20 years of indifference towards the religion.

Prior to Diocletian's edicts against Christians, a ruling of the Imperial Court displayed intolerance by deciding that Manichaeans (people following a dualistic Persian/Christian religion) were not Roman enough and consequently outlawed Manichaeism in 302 CE. Therefore, when Diocletian began issuing edicts of persecution against Christians in 303 CE, it would appear that the late Roman Empire was completely intolerant of any non-Roman religions at that time. The first edict against Christianity sanctioned the burning of churches and scripture while depriving Christians "of all honours and dignities." The second edict "ordered all the presidents of the churches...be put in prison." The third edict granted mercy to incarcerated clergy who sacrificed. Finally, the last edict ordered universal sacrifice throughout the Roman Empire. While these edicts clearly attempted to destroy Christianity, they were not universally enforced throughout the entire empire. Lactantius (Christian historian) described how, within the western half of the empire, Constantius only enforced the first edict of persecution. This is a powerful recognition by Lactantius, proving that even during the most religiously intolerant period of Roman history, there is evidence of tolerance by means of unenforced edicts.

After 10 years of persecution against Christians, Emperor Galerius (who originally drove Diocletian to ordain the persecution) issued an edict of religious tolerance in 311 CE. Galerius described how, against their best efforts, the Imperial Romans failed to establish traditional religious uniformity throughout the empire and now had to acknowledge "that there once again be Christians and that they meet in the buildings in which they used to gather." However, this tolerance of Christianity did not come free: Galerius stated that, "Hence, according to this clemency of ours, [Christians] must supplicate their own god for our well-being, that of the Republic, and their own, in order that in every way the Republic will be made sound." Through the issuance of this edict, Christians were permitted legal status again. However, Galerius also changed the terms of citizenship by no longer requiring Christians to practice Roman sacrifice, and instead claimed that internal prayer, on behalf of the empire, would be sufficient. Galerius' edict of 311 CE is the ultimate example of Roman religious tolerance. Galerius was undoubtedly not fond of Christians, yet he relented to tolerate their religion in order to create a peaceful society.

Not long after this act of tolerance, Galerius died. A number of civil wars were fought, the outcomes of which ultimately led to the establishment of Constantine and Licinius as Co-Emperors of Rome. For Christianity, this became a monumental victory as the co-emperors expanded on the policy of religious tolerance by ordaining restoration, and liberty, for Christians. Through the Edict of Milan, Constantine and Licinius returned and restored previously confiscat-

ed churches and property to the Roman Christians. The emperors also declared the removal of all previous impositions against Christians while granting them "free and unrestricted ability to attend their own worship." The Edict of Milan represents a turning point in the religious history of Rome by marking the first instance of religious liberty across the entire empire. While Galerius' edict exemplifies religious tolerance by still requiring Christians to recognize imperial authority, the Edict of Milan, on the other hand, advocated (rather than tolerated) true freedom of worship.

After obtaining their freedom to worship throughout the empire, Christians experienced one of the final affronts against their religion at the hands of Roman emperor, Julian. Converting from Christianity to the conventional Roman religion early in his life, Julian ascended to the throne in 361 CE and reigned for a brief two years. His pro-Roman position can be juxtaposed against his anti-Christian policies, such as his order that "no Christian should be a professor for the teaching of liberal studies." Julian believed that Christian scholars distorted long-established Roman literature, exemplified by their preaching of the impiety of ancient writers such as Homer or Hesiod. While Julian was clearly not fond of Christianity, he did not go so far as to enact an empire-wide persecution of Christians and attempt to destroy the religion. Once again, similar to the "persecutions" of Decius and Valerian, the main objective behind Julian's policies was to enhance the spread of the Roman religion, which can be seen in his efforts to imitate Christianity's high level of organization within the Roman churches. During Julian's short reign, his actions embody a form of tolerance held by Romans towards religions not of their liking.

Through the utilization of a variety of sources, and the acknowledgment of accompanying bias for each source, it becomes clear that the religious attitude of the late Roman Empire was not as definitively intolerant as the traditional Christian narrative claims. The extent to which Romans displayed tolerance towards non-Roman religions was in constant variance and often dependent upon outside or extenuating factors. By defining tolerance as being able to coexist with a religion, and not attempting to eradicate it, the Romans of the late empire more often than not exhibited such tolerance. The Romans' emphasis on spreading their religion, rather than destroying Christianity, unveils how Roman societies displayed considerably more religious tolerance than previously believed. This recognition of Roman tolerance becomes significant within the context of historiography as it embraces the notion of analyzing how history is written. By recognizing that many of the primary documents recovered from the late Roman Empire were recorded by Christian authors, it becomes crucial for modern historians to account for the particular historical bias within each surviving work from the period. Studying

the full scope of data surrounding the religious tolerance of the late Roman Empire allows for a history of the period to be assembled, on evidence, that challenges the traditional narrative of endless persecutions against Christianity at the hands of the "intolerant" Romans.

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About the Author

Joey Riherd is currently a third-year undergraduate history major at UCSB. As a former Division 1 baseball player at the University of the Pacific, he transferred to UCSB excited to conduct historical research in a multitude of subject areas within his major. Some of his favorite hobbies include surfing, reading, and following his favorite MLB team—the Oakland Athletics. He is a member of UCSB's Zeta Beta Tau fraternity and plans to graduate after Spring Quarter 2021 with aspirations to enter the financial services industry."