

Outsiders Weigh In: Tacitus and Pliny Condemn a Cult

1. Should you care?

These days the “church and state” debate is alive and well. Did you know that the “separation” idea is an American invention? In Roman times there was no “wall.” State money could sponsor “cultic” events. Good citizens participated in Emperor worship. Those who refused were suspect and dangerous. Which is why Christians & Jews had to walk carefully. What do we have in common with the early Christians?

2. Thoughtful readers wonder . . .

. . . what made Christianity so repugnant to so many Roman citizens, and how this changed over time.
. . . whether pagan worship and the Emperor cult were deeply felt convictions or social behaviors.
. . . to what extent Christians were viewed as a threat to political order in the Empire, and why.

3. Your Quest: To find out what two Roman officials knew, but didn’t like, about Christians. And why.

Cornelius Tacitus, who lived from 56 to 120 CE, wrote his *Annals* around 116 CE. In this sound bite, he describes the aftermath of the Great Fire of Rome (64 CE) when Emperor Nero tried to deflect criticism away from himself by blaming the Christians.

44.2.	Yet no human effort, no princely largess nor offerings to the gods could make that infamous rumor disappear that Nero had somehow ordered the fire. Therefore, in order to abolish that rumor, Nero falsely accused and executed with the most exquisite punishments those people called Christians, who were infamous for their abominations.
44.3.	The originator of the name, Christ, was executed as a criminal by the procurator Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius; and though repressed, this destructive superstition erupted again, not only through Judea, which was the origin of this evil, but also through the city of Rome, to which all that is horrible and shameful floods together and is celebrated.
44.4.	Therefore, first those were seized who admitted their faith, and then, using the information they provided, a vast multitude were convicted, not so much for the crime of burning the city, but for hatred of the human race. And perishing they were additionally made into sports: they were killed by dogs by having the hides of beasts attached to them, or they were nailed to crosses or set aflame, and, when the daylight passed away, they were used as nighttime lamps.
44.5.	Nero gave his own gardens for this spectacle and performed a Circus game, in the habit of a charioteer mixing with the plebs or driving about the race-course. Even though they were clearly guilty and merited being made the most recent example of the consequences of crime, people began to pity these sufferers, because they were consumed not for the public good but on account of the fierceness of one man.

Discussion. Submit your worksheet *stapled* to one (double-sided) typed page reflecting your thoughts on the following questions. You may discuss your work with a partner— if you do, staple and submit work together—but *do not* divide up the tasks among you.

3.1 How does Tacitus’ describe Roman Christians? (Would you want one for a neighbor?)

3.2 For what “abominations” might the Christians have been “infamous”? What might Tacitus mean by “hatred of the human race”?

3.3 What does Tacitus know, or think he knows, about Jesus?

Pliny the Younger, who lived from 61 to 113 CE, was governor of Pontus & Bithynia (in northern Turkey) from 111-113 CE. Pliny wrote Emperor Trajan for advice—in this passage about those annoying Christians.

Pliny-the-Younger Trivia

1. His dad probably died when he was young; at 17 he inherited his uncle Pliny’s full estate.
2. He specialized in law and diplomacy, but also liked to troubleshoot water supplies and sewers. Go figure.
3. In 111, Trajan sent him to solve (esp. money) problems in Bithynia & Pontus (northern Turkey by the Black Sea).
4. We have 121 of his official letters to or from Trajan, plus 247 other personal letters! (This was before e-mail.)
5. He was seen as a model Roman: loyal, honest, pious, devoted to the public good. (Remember this as you read this letter.)

Name: _____

10.96. Pliny to the Emperor Trajan

It is my custom to refer all my difficulties to you, Sir, for no one is better able to resolve my hesitation and to inform my ignorance. I have never been present in an examination of Christians. Consequently, I do not know the nature of the extent of the punishments usually meted out to them, nor the ground for starting an investigation and how far it should be pressed. Nor am I at all sure whether any distinction should be made on the grounds of age, or if young people should be treated alike; whether a pardon ought to be granted to anyone rejecting his beliefs, or if he has once professed Christianity, he shall gain nothing by renouncing it; and whether it is the mere name of Christian which is punishable, even if innocent of crime, or rather the crimes associated with the name.

For the moment this is the line I have taken with all persons brought before me on the charge of being Christians. I have asked them in person if they are Christians, and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second time and a third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution; for, whatever the nature of their admission, I am convinced that their stubbornness and unshakable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished. There have been others similarly fanatical who are Roman citizens. I have entered them on the list of persons to be sent to Rome for trial.

Now that I have begun to deal with this problem, as so often happens, the charges are becoming more widespread and increasing in variety. An anonymous pamphlet has been circulated which contains the names of a number of accused persons. Amongst these I considered that I should dismiss any who denied that they were or ever had been Christians when they had repeated after me a formula of invocation to the gods and had made offerings of wine and incense to your statue (which I had ordered to be brought into court for this purpose along with the images of the gods), and furthermore had reviled the name of Christ: none of which things, I understand, any genuine Christian can be induced to do.

Others whose names were given to me by an informer, first admitted the charge and then denied it; they said that they had ceased to be Christians two or more years previously, and some of them even 20 years ago. They all did reverence to your statue and the images of the gods in the same way as the others, and reviled the name of Christ.

They also declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately amongst themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by an oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery, and adultery, to commit no breach of trust, and not to deny a deposit when called upon to restore it. After this ceremony, it had been their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of an ordinary, harmless kind; but they had in fact given up this practice since my edict, given on your instructions, which banned all political societies. This made me decide it was all the more necessary to extract the truth by torture from two slave women, whom they call deaconesses. I found nothing but a degenerate sort of cult, carried to extravagant lengths.

I have therefore postponed any further examination and hastened to consult you. The question seems to me to be worthy of your consideration, especially in view of the number of persons endangered; for a great many individuals of every age and class, both men and women, are being brought to trial, and this is likely to continue. It is not only the towns, but villages and rural districts too which are infected through contact with this wretched cult. I think though that it is still possible for it to be checked and directed to better ends, for there is no doubt that people have begun to throng the temples which had been entirely deserted for a long time; the sacred rites which had been allowed to lapse are being performed again, and flesh of sacrificial victims is on sale everywhere, though up till recently scarcely anyone could be found to buy it. It is easy to infer from this that a great many people could be reformed if they were given an opportunity to repent.

10.97 Trajan to Pliny

You have followed the right course of procedure, my dear Pliny, in your examination of the cases of persons charged with being Christians, for it is impossible to lay down a general rule to a fixed formula. These people must not be hunted out; if they are brought before you and the charge against them is proved, they must be punished, but in the case of anyone who denies that he is a Christian, and makes it clear that he is not by offering prayers to our gods, he is to be pardoned as a result of his repentance however suspect his past conduct may be. But pamphlets circulated anonymously must play no part in any accusation. They create the worst sort of precedent and are quite out of keeping with the spirit of our age.

Reflection. . . . continued.

3.4 Why was Pliny so hostile to Christians? What was their crime? Why were they dangerous? What does Pliny mean by “degenerate sort of cult”?

3.5 Do you find anything commendable about Pliny? About Trajan?

3.6 Does there appear to be an *empire-wide* policy against Christianity in the early 2nd century?

3.7 What test did Pliny apply to determine whether or not Christians had recanted?

3.8 Does Pliny's description of early Christian *worship* sound familiar? Any surprises?