Christians were persecuted from the time of Nero in the first century AD by the Roman government. They were persecuted for several reasons including: failing to pay reverence to the Pagan gods of the Empire; refusing to recognize the Emperor as a god; and their deliberate program of inciting riots. In this paper, we will discuss the reasons why Christians were persecuted in the 3rd c. AD (250 – 324). Failing to follow the Pagan rituals and failing to pay cult to the Emperor have, at their root motive, sedition.

In the 3rd century, Christians were persecuted because they had been committing acts of sedition against Rome as a matter of policy since the time of Jesus. Their total refusal to worship any god but their own along with their active attempts to prevent others from worshiping other gods was viewed as sedition by the Roman government. These increasingly regular acts of sedition threatened the (*pacta at-quay kwee-ay-tah)* *pacta atque quieta* - settled and orderly provinces and Empire as a whole.

We should define a few concepts before we proceed. Most important is that the 3rd century AD was a time of extreme crisis for the Empire. Rome was fighting wars on multiple fronts. In the West, the Alamanni, a collection of Germanic barbarians, threatened the Rhine and the upper Danube rivers. At the same time, the Goths threatened the lower Danube. In the East, Persians were harassing Syria and other adjacent provinces. In 260 AD, the Emperor Valerian was captured and later died in captivity. The Empire was fracturing and Christians were viewed as just another foreign invader bringing chaos to the Empire.

For the purposes of this paper Roman “government” refers to the Emperor, Senate, central administrative officials and the provincial governors.. However, it is important to note that generally we will be talking about the Emperors and provincial governors. Imperial instructions \_(*man-day-tah) mandata* came down to provincial governors which ordered them to remove all “bad men” (mali -ominez) (*mali homines*). According to Ulpian, governors should keep their provinces “settled and orderly” *pacta at-quay kwee-ay-tah* (*pacta atque quieta).* In order to keep the peace, provincial governors would have actively sought out (*mali ominez) mali homines* and removed them accordingly.[[1]](#footnote-1)

As we review the source material, we will see concerns about the Christians grow into hatred. We will see the Roman government wrestle with determining an appropriate response to this rising religious and political threat.

Tacitus provides insight into the early dislike of the Christians. He writes about Nero’s persecutions in 64 AD. Nero was falling under suspicion for starting the Great Fire. He needed to shift the focus of blame so he turned to the Christians. Tacitus gives us a brief glimpse into the feelings about the Christians in the 1st century when he writes that they were “*notoriously depraved*.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Tacitus also tells us the Christians were perceived as anti-social. They were arrested during Nero’s persecutions “*not so much for incendiarism as for their anti-social tendencies*.”[[3]](#footnote-3) No matter how you look at it, the Christians were disliked and provided an easy target. As my mentor, Denise Kawasaki said, “*This is a key aspect of the persecutions. They actively avoided many civic activities; went to night time meetings and generally appeared ‘dodgy’ to their pagan neighbors.”*

Trajan sent Pliny to govern the province of Bithynia between 109 and 111 AD. In *Letter 96*, Pliny writes to Trajan asking for counsel regarding a situation that is brewing in his territory. A group of people had been accused of the crime of being “Christian.” Pliny,

In order to escape punishment, all the accused have to do is perform pagan rituals. The Christians refuse. Pliny *tortures* them to make them plead *NOT GUILTY.* He tortures them to get them to *deny* being Christian. He finds their fanaticism violates an edict from Trajan that bans “all political societies.”[[4]](#footnote-4) He recognizes that *something* is going on with these people and concludes they are zealots. He writes that he is “*convinced that their stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished.*” He punishes them for being difficult. He punishes them because they are acting as *mali ominez mali homines* not because they are Christian. At the end of his letter he refers to the Christians as a “*wretched cult*” that is beginning to spread its influence to “*not only the towns, but villages and rural districts too*.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Pliny and Trajan seek to maintain order – they want to maintain *pacta at-quay kwee-ay-tah pacta atque quieta*. Pliny and the Emperor want a province where citizens only worship the Imperial cult, invoke the authorized gods at the appropriate times and maintain the status quo.

Tertullian wrote his *Apologeticus* in 197 AD. He is noteworthy as a source because he was a pagan who converted to Christianity. Apologetics were a Christian form of writing which attempt to present the Christian view of its place within the Empire. Tertullian argues against the rulings of Pliny. He feels that Pliny condemned Christians to punishment because they refused to comply with the pagan customs. He paints Christians as a peaceful sect that did not bother anyone. He writes about Pliny:

“He asserted that, apart from an obstinacy that refused to sacrifice, he [Pliny] had learnt nothing about the Christian mysteries – nothing beyond meetings before dawn to sing to Christ and to God, and to band themselves together in discipline, forbidding murder, adultery, dishonesty, treachery, and the other crimes.” [[6]](#footnote-6)

He argues that Christians were innocent. He rails at the duplicity of the crime they are charged with:

“If the other criminals plead Not guilty, you torture them to make them confess; the Christians alone you torture to make them deny.” [[7]](#footnote-7)

It is important to remember that he is arguing about a time when Christians were still meeting in secret to celebrate among themselves. By the time of his writing Christianity was already spreading throughout the Empire. It was a problem that the provincial governors were having to deal with in order to keep the peace and preserve the *pacta at-quay kwee-ay-tah pacta atque quieta.*

The *Acts of the Apostles* in The *New Testament* highlights the spread of Christianity as well as growing animosity towards the Christians. *Acts* details the emergence and growth of Christianity from a small Jewish community based in and around Jerusalem to its place as a belief system spreading throughout the Empire.

Part of *Acts* describesPaul’s travels as he spreads the ideas of the Christian faith and tries to gain converts. In doing so, Paul is a *disturber of the peace.* Paul is politically provocative. He travels from town to town inviting trouble and inciting riots. In Phillipi, Paul and his party are accused of “*disturbing our city and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us Romans to adopt or practice.*”[[8]](#footnote-8) In Thessalonica, Paul caught the ire of the established Jewish leaders who accused him and his followers of acting “*in opposition to the decrees of Caesar and claim instead that there is another king, Jesus*.”[[9]](#footnote-9) **This is the fundamental issue. This is treason in the view of the Empire. This is sedition**.

Paul deliberately made his way across Asia Minor and Europe preaching that people should abandon their pagan rituals and worship Jesus as their king. He knew what he was doing. After being arrested in Jerusalem, Paul was transferred to Caesarea to stand trial before the governor, Felix. Paul was accused by the high priest, *Anon-e-as* Ananias:

“We found this man to be a pest, he creates dissension among Jews all over the world and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazoreans.” [[10]](#footnote-10)

The ancient sources clearly show a repetitive pattern of Christians deliberately disturbing the peace or the *pacta at-quay kwee-ay-tah pacta atque quieta.* At the same time, we see a consistent response from the Roman government. The Empire is chiefly concerned with keeping the peace. Despite Tertullian arguments that Pliny persecuted for religious reasons, the root of the matter is that the Christians were causing a ruckus. And they were gaining momentum.

Christianity is founded on a platform of sedition. Author, Reza Aslan, describes Jesus of Nazareth as a “zealous revolutionary swept up, as all Jews of the era were, in the religious and political turmoil of first-century Palestine.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Jesus’ crime, in the eyes of Rome, was striving for kingly rule. His was a radical messianic message of treason and sedition. Jesus taught about the coming of the Kingdom of God. Jews of 1st century Palestine would have understood this as a call to revolt against their Roman oppressors.

Jesus, knew what he was doing. He knew what message he was preaching. Aslan writes:

“Jesus recognized that the new world order he envisioned was so radical, so dangerous, so revolutionary, that Rome’s only conceivable response to it would be to arrest and execute them all for sedition.” [[12]](#footnote-12)

In the teachings of Jesus, we see a tried and true methodology of resistance to Roman power. **This is sedition in its purest form**. It is a program that will be used again and again by future Christian zealots in their efforts to spread their message and gain converts.

William M. Ramsay wrote *The Church in The Roman Empire Before 170 A.D*. in 1892. Like our ancient sources, we see an interpretation of the persecutions happening for political reasons. Ramsay states that the Christians were persecuted because they “*maintained an extra-Imperial unity, and were proscribed on political, not religious, grounds*.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Rome maintained order (*pacta at-quay kwee-ay-tah pacta atque quieta)* by enforcing a strict Rome-first rule. Ramsay states:

“Rome had throughout its career made it a fixed principle to rule by dividing; all subjects must look to Rome alone; none might look towards their neighbors, or enter into any agreement or connection with them.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Christians would not abide by this rule. They were Christians first and Romans second. T**his is sedition**. Rome could not and did not accept this attitude and it forced the government to make a decision. They could either force the Christians to accept the Rome First rule of order or it would have to “*acknowledge that Christian unity was stronger than the Empire*.”[[15]](#footnote-15) The Christians had managed, for a while at least, to maintain their unity in secret. Once it started spreading, it reached a point where the Emperors and provincial governors could not ignore it. Ramsay refers to Pliny’s suspicions about the Christians. Pliny knew, and Ramsay concurs that whatever the Christians were up to seemed, “*politically dangerous to the authority of the Empire, … more than religious intolerance*.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Jules Lebreton and Jacques Zeiller, in *The History of the Primitive Church*, make the argument that the Christians were persecuted because they refused “to take part in the cult of the Emperor’s divinity.”[[17]](#footnote-17) The authors make a case that the Roman government did not start accusing Christians of sacrilege towards the Emperor until the 3rd century. The authors’ state,

“…it is only in the third that the magistrates tried regularly to force Christians to sacrifice to the divinity of the emperor in consequence of new edicts of persecution, and condemned them if they refused to do so.” [[18]](#footnote-18)

This accusation is different than prior accusations “*of failing to reverence the gods of the empire in general.*”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Christians “*refused to recognize the Emperor as a god*”[[20]](#footnote-20) and this disrupted the Empire’s ability to rule and maintain order. Christians were viewed as “public disturbers” who directly disobeyed an order to “abandon a profession of faith” which was by itself a “public disorder.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Christianity is a strictly monotheistic religion, whose God “*would not divide his honour with other divinities or with the world, could not be reconciled with the fundamental conceptions upon which the Roman state rested*.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Whichever way we look at it, whether *sacrilege* against the emperor or failure to recognize and worship the approved Roman gods, the Christians caused disturbances among the pagan population by their refusal to comply with policies mandated by the state. **This is sedition**.

Edward Gibbon, in *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* provides insight into my argument for sedition. He writes about the attitude and approach of the Christians and how both the Pagan population of the Empire reacted. Gibbon provides further insight into the idea that Christians intentionally and deliberately set themselves apart from everyone else. Gibbon writes:

“Every Christian rejected with contempt the superstitions of his family, his city, and his province. The whole body of Christians unanimously refused to hold any communion with the gods of Rome, of the empire, and of mankind.” [[23]](#footnote-23)

Romans just did not understand the point of the Christian religion. Where were the idols? Where were the festivals? Why was it just ONE god? They could not understand why the Christians would abandon the ancient (and popular) mythology – “the legends of Bacchus, of Hercules, and of *I-skool-a-pisu* Æsculapisu” to worship some “obscure teacher” from a backwater place like Nazareth.[[24]](#footnote-24) Gibbons refers to the Christian approach as a “*spiritual conspiracy*” that was spreading throughout all the provinces and cities via the Christian’s “*active and successful zeal*.”[[25]](#footnote-25) They were very much aware of what they were doing. They were demanding a change from the old ways of polytheism and superstition.

G.E.M. De Ste. Croix provides a modern viewpoint in *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom and Orthodoxy,* written in 2006. For De Ste. Croix the reasons for the persecutions are directly tied to the superstitions of the Pagan population. Pagans were alarmed by the Christians’ “*total refusal to worship any god but their own.*” [[26]](#footnote-26) De Ste. Croix’s states:

“The monotheistic exclusiveness of the Christians was believed to alienate the goodwill of the gods, to endanger what the Romans called the pax deorum (the right harmonious relationship between gods and men), and to be responsible for disasters which overtook the community.” [[27]](#footnote-27)

The Greeks called this “atheism.” In Latin it is referred to as *deos non colere* - which means not paying cult to the gods. The majority of the population of the Empire, were a “*deeply superstitious culture*.”[[28]](#footnote-28) The refusal to pay cult to the gods, worried the pagan majority.

There were no mandates requiring worship of the Roman gods at this time. Romans were not required to worship in or perform any specific acts of cult. Up until this point, there had been no need for such laws. De Ste. Croix states:

“No compulsion was necessary, because until the advent of Christianity no one ever had any reason for refusing to take part in the ceremonies which others observed.” [[29]](#footnote-29)

Christians claimed, vigorously, that the Pagan gods did not exist. At times, Christians claimed the Pagan gods were “*malevolent demons.*”[[30]](#footnote-30) At the most extreme “*not only did they themselves refuse to take part in pagan religious rites; they would not even recognize that others ought to do so*.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Pagans felt this would anger the gods to the point where the gods would take action. They feared the gods would act not only against the Christians but upon everyone.

De Ste. Croix concludes that the persecution is based on religion and the Christians’ refusal to worship the Roman gods. I think we need to ask the next question – why did it bother the government so much? The Romans had a generally inclusive policy towards other gods. Why did this change? De Ste. Croix calls the *mali ominez mali homines* theorya “*minor factor*.”[[32]](#footnote-32) The bad men were disturbing an Empire facing turmoil from all sides. **I feel this is *the* central issue**. The Roman government took a more active role in the persecutions because Christian zealotry was out of control and was disrupting the peace. The Christians were causing major disturbances across the Empire. This is **SEDITION**. The provinces were far from settled and orderly. Denise Kawasaki concludes that “*it also fits with the context of the times. The 3rd c. was very unsettled and Christianity was another component of the political, social, and economic uncertainty of the period.”*

In closing, we should note that the Romans never strictly forbid the Christians from worshipping in private. De Ste. Croix cites a passage from Eusebius. *I-me-lian Aemilian*, the acting governor of Egypt said to Dionysus, the Bishop of Alexandria in 257 AD:

“Who prevents you from worshipping him too, if he is a god, as well as the natural gods? You were ordered to worship gods, and gods known to all.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

The Christians were free to worship as they wished. **They CHOSE persecution**. The Romans did not persecute any of the many non-Orthodox Christian sects. The Romans did not persecute the Gnostics, because the Gnostics allowed for the worship of other gods. There was room for Jesus and the Roman gods in their belief system. The Gnostics participated in the pagan religious rites and festivals of every Roman. They were not causing a disturbance.

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2. Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. Michael Grant (New York: Penguin Classics, 1977), 365. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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5. Ibid., 294–95. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., Acts 16.20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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10. Ibid., Acts 24.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Random House, 2013), xxviii. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 124–25. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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19. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
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22. Ibid., I:378. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
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27. Ibid., 133–34. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
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