

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

LECTURE IV.

The opinion of Sir James Mackintosh on Gibbon's sixteenth chapter. The statements of the latter to be corrected by a review of the early Fathers. Their testimony, 1°. To the *extent of the persecutions* of the Christians. The classification into ten great persecutions untenable. Inquiry whether the edicts of Nero and Domitian were repealed. Effect of those of Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus. Christianity a capital offence from the time of Nero downwards. Martyrdom of Ignatius. Remarks of Tertullian on Trajan's edict. Subsequent activity of persecution. That at Lyons and Vienne a sample of others. The assertion of Origen respecting the number of martyrs relative, not positive. Motives in various quarters for setting persecution on foot.

I STILL pursue the subject of Evidences, and the manner in which the Fathers minister to this argument: and in doing so I shall now turn to the question of *persecution*.

There is a passage in the life of Sir James Mackintosh—himself, you will remember, a man of very liberal views—quoted by Mr. Milman in his edition of Gibbon, and which I had myself transcribed into my own copy before his edition appeared, for I thought it remarkable, coming from the author it did, to the following effect. “The sixteenth chapter,” (*i. e.* of the history of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,) “I cannot help considering as a very ingenious and specious but very disgraceful extenuation of the cruelties perpetrated by the Roman magistrates against the Christians. It is written in the most contemptibly factious spirit of prejudice against the sufferers; it is unworthy of a philosopher and a man of humanity. Let the narrative of Cyprian's death be examined. He had to relate the murder of an innocent man of advanced age, and in a station deemed venerable by a considerable body of the provincials of Africa, put to death because he refused to sacrifice to Jupiter. Instead of pointing the indignation of posterity against such an atrocious act of tyranny, he dwells with visible art on the small circumstances of decorum and politeness which attended this murder, and which he relates with as much parade as if they

were the most important particulars of the event. Dr. Robertson has been the subject of much blame for his zeal or supposed lenity towards the Spanish murderers and tyrants in America. That the sixteenth chapter of Mr. Gibbon did not excite the same or greater disapprobation is a proof of the unphilosophical and, indeed, fanatical animosity against Christianity, which was so prevalent during the latter part of the seventeenth century."¹

I think, then, that the testimony of the early Fathers will go far to dissipate the impression made by this famous chapter of the historian of the Decline and Fall. I say dissipate the impression, for in dealing with Mr. Gibbon we must not reckon upon convicting him of positive falsehood or of inaccurate references; but, it may be, of so packing his materials as on the whole to leave a fair picture on the mind, a picture which can only be qualified by the substitution for it of another, drawn from materials as authentic as his own, and indeed for the most part from (I do not scruple to say it) a larger survey of the very same. For I am of opinion that a candid review of the writings of the early Fathers will correct many notions we may have derived from Mr. Gibbon, both as to the *extent*, as to the *intensity*, and as to the *nature* of the persecution encountered by the early Christians.

First, with reference to the *extent*, it is not very easy to determine the specific idea which Mr. Gibbon had upon this subject; but, on the whole, that which he seems desirous to leave on the minds of his readers probably is, that though partial persecutions of the Christians there were from time to time, there was none which deserved the name of a general persecution before Diocletian, about the beginning of the fourth century. No doubt the notion to which he studiously draws attention, that there were ten great persecutions, as set forth first by a writer of the fifth century, and afterwards followed by others, in correspondence with the ten plagues of Egypt, is a fanciful classification of them; too many, as Mosheim observes,² if *general* persecutions are meant; much too few, if *particular*. The truth seems to be, that whenever the first edict for an universal and contemporaneous attack upon the Christians throughout the provinces of the

¹ Life of Sir James Mackintosh, vol. i. p. 244.

² Mosheim, De Rebus Christianorum ante Constant. sæc. I. § xxvi. p. 98.

Roman Empire might have been promulgated, a system of persecution sometimes smothered, sometimes breaking out in greater or less severity in various quarters of the world, now in one part, now in another, according to the temper of the Emperor of the day, or much more frequently according to that of the local magistrate, or even of the populace itself, was almost constantly at work or in agitation; the doctrines and the habits of the Christians being such as would readily furnish a plea for an assault upon them under the sanction of the laws; and even such laws as were meant in some measure to protect them, and framed by humane Emperors, so loosely worded as to answer this purpose very inadequately. Laws were made against them by Nero and Domitian, the character of which is bespoken by that of their authors; for Tertullian, in his Apology, speaks of previous laws which were in part frustrated by Trajan.¹ But if such laws there were, they must have been made for the Empire, and accordingly any and every part of it must have been liable to their action. And however the persecution under them might have been, and probably was, most intense at Rome, a door was opened to it everywhere. I do not think that there is any evidence that those edicts of Nero and Domitian had been abrogated. Mosheim says they had; those of Nero by the Senate, those of Domitian by Nerva²; but he quotes no authority. Lardner more cautiously says, I suppose they had been abrogated.³ On the contrary, in Tertullian's first book "Ad Nationes," there is a passage, quoted by Bishop Kaye⁴—whose views, as far as he discovers them, coincide with my own, of which I was not aware when I drew up this Lecture—in Tertullian's first book "Ad Nationes," there is a passage, I say, which expressly affirms, that whilst all the other edicts of Nero had been repealed, that against the Christians alone remained in force—"et tamen permansit, omnibus erasis, hoc solum institutum Neronianum."⁵ Indeed, were it otherwise, how could Tertullian use the expression in the Apology, "quas Trajanus ex parte frustratus est"? Trajan

¹ Quales ergo leges istæ, quas adversus nos exsequuntur impii . . . ? quas Trajanus ex parte frustratus est.—Tertullian, Apol. c. v.

² Neronis nimirum leges Senatus, Domitiani Nerva imperator, abrogaverat.—Mosheim, De Rebus Christian-

orum, sæc. II. § viii. p. 231.

³ Lardner, Credibility, Pt. II. Heathen Testimonies, ch. ix. § 4.

⁴ Bp. Kaye's Tertullian, p. 108 *et seq.* 3rd Ed.

⁵ Tertullian, Ad Nationes, I. § 7.

could not have winked at the evasion of laws which had no existence. Or how could he complain that when the simple statement of the truth met all objections that could be made against the Christians, they were then borne down by the authority of the laws, and the prejudice that when laws had once been established they were not to be altered: this last an idea, be it observed, which he is at much pains to correct¹—a superfluous labour, if these statutes had been already abrogated? And how could he speak of the Romans spending their fury on the Christians partly in obedience to their own inclinations, and partly in obedience to the laws²? Neither is it a safe inference from Pliny's letter to Trajan that there could be no edicts in force against the Christians when Pliny came into his province, because if there had been, he would have known what to do without writing to Trajan for advice, though this inference is drawn both by Mosheim,³ Lardner,⁴ and Gibbon.⁵ On the contrary, I should infer, from a phrase which occurs in that letter, "*Cognitionibus Christianorum interfui nunquam, ideo nescio quid et quatenus aut puniri soleat, aut quæri,*"⁶ "I have never been present at any trials of Christians, so that I know not well what is the subject-matter of punishment or inquiry," a circumstance on which Pliny partly grounds his application to Trajan—I say that I should infer from this phrase not that there were no edicts against Christians then existing; but that there undoubtedly were such, only that Pliny had never happened to see them actually executed. His perplexity seems to have arisen not from the absence of laws, but from his humanity revolting at carrying out severe ones against parties often of tender years ("*teneri,*" "*omnis ætatis,*") and in numbers very great, "*visa est mihi res digna consultatione, maxime propter periclitantium numerum.*" I can have very little doubt, therefore, that the edicts of Nero and Domitian were in force, and had been hanging over the heads of the Christians till then. These laws in their action, it appears from Trajan's answer to Pliny, that Emperor somewhat mitigated, enacting indeed that the Christians upon conviction of being such

¹ Apol. c. iv.

² c. xxxvii.

³ Mosheim, *De Rebus Christianorum*, sæc. II. § viii. p. 231.

⁴ Lardner, *Credibility*, Pt. II. *Heathen Testimonies*, c. ix. § 4.

⁵ Gibbon, vol. ii. p. 418.

⁶ Plin. *Epistolar. lib. X. Ep. xcvi.*

should be punished, but that they should not be sought for; and moreover, that the bill of information should be signed by the party preferring it.¹ Such was the condition of the law with respect to the Christians as Trajan left it. Trajan's law does not seem to have been substantially changed, though it is sometimes represented to have been so, by the rescript of Hadrian; the sole effect of the latter appearing to be to put down mere mob law with regard to the Christians, and to place them more effectually under Trajan's; the gravamen alleged by Serenius Granianus, Proconsul of Asia, which produces this rescript,² being that it was unjust to put the Christians to death merely to gratify the clamours of the people, which, it appears, had been the practice of late; and the corrective administered by Hadrian being that they should be legally tried, and if they were proved to have committed anything contrary to the laws (and it was contrary to the laws to be a Christian under Trajan's edict) they should be dealt with accordingly—at the same time, when the charge turned out to be only a calumny, the author of it was to be punished.³ The purpose of this edict, as I have said, is to rescue the Christians from being made victims of the populace, and to require that they be disposed of by law, but not to alter the law itself. With this additional caution attached to it, Trajan's law now came into the hands of Antoninus Pius, who in his turn, in his edict to the Commune of Asia, (if on the authority of Eusebius we ascribe this edict to him,⁴ and Lardner takes this view,⁵) refers to the edict of Hadrian, and fully confirms it. There are incidents in the account of the martyrdom of Polycarp,⁶ and in the history of the persecution at Lyons,⁷ both of which events took place in the reign of Aurelius, that would lead to the conclusion that under that Emperor it was still against the law to be a Christian, or in other words that Trajan's edict, founded primarily upon Nero's, still held good. Commodus made few martyrs; but the case of Apollonius⁸ seems to show that the law continued as it was, though in this instance the clause of it added by Hadrian, and confirmed by Antoninus Pius, which punished

¹ Plin. Epistolar. lib. X. Ep. xxviii.

² Eusebius, Eccles. Hist. iv. c. 8.

³ c. 9.

⁴ c. 13.

⁵ Lardner, Credibility, Pt. II. Hea-

then Testimonies, c. xiv. § 3.

⁶ Eusebius, Eccles. Hist. iv. c. 14.

⁷ v. c. 1.

⁸ v. c. 21.

the informer, was also acted on, and he put to death as well as his victim.¹ And if we examine the cases of persecution recorded by Eusebius, as occurring under subsequent Emperors, as that of Basilides under Severus²; that of the heads of the Churches under Maximin³; that of Nemesion, under Decius,⁴ though Decius seems to have aggravated matters by some sanguinary edict of his own⁵; that of Dionysius and those in Egypt, under Valerian⁶; that of Marinus at Cæsarea, under Gallienus⁷; down to Diocletian himself; we shall see reason to believe, from expressions let fall in these several histories, that Eusebius considered the law, which constituted the profession of Christianity as a crime, to be constantly in force, and the several parties to be proceeded against from time to time under that law.

On the whole, therefore, my impression is, that Christianity was still a capital offence from Nero's time downwards, or, as Tertullian expressly represents it, "non licet esse eos,"⁸ "it was not legal for Christians to live," that their religion contrasted with that of the Jews, as not being a licita religio,⁹ that Minucius Felix speaks with the accuracy of a lawyer, when he puts in the mouth of Cæcilius a phrase describing the Christians as "homines illicitæ factionis,"¹⁰ and that Mosheim's phrase is more literally true than he himself understood it, "Nero Imperator Christianos Romæ degentes atrocissimis legibus et suppliciiis aggressus erat. Ejus vestigia sequentium Imperatorum plerique per tria sæcula, diversâ licet ratione, presserunt."¹¹ Nero and Domitian might hunt the Christians out; Trajan might only condemn them when they fell in his

¹ Eusebius, Eccles. Hist. v. c. 21. There seems to have been something peculiar in this case. "The charge was made out of season," is the singular expression of Eusebius.

² vi. c. 5.

³ c. 28.

⁴ c. 41.

⁵ Thus in the case of the martyrs of Alexandria, the expression occurs, "The persecution with us did not begin with the imperial edict, but preceded it a whole year."—Ibid. And again, "But soon a change in the Government towards us was announced" (i. e. Philip was dead, and was succeeded by Decius) "and great danger threatened us. The

decree had arrived, very like that foretold by our Lord," &c.—Ibid.

⁶ vii. c. 11.

⁷ c. 15. Gallienus appears to have favoured the Christians personally, and to have even published edicts in their favour, and allowed them their cemeteries (c. 19), but still to have left the standing laws against them unrepealed (c. 15). Gibbon seems to admit this fact, vol. ii. p. 454.

⁸ Tertullian, Apol. c. iv.

⁹ c. xxi.

¹⁰ Minucius Felix, c. viii.

¹¹ Mosheim, De Rebus Christianor. sæc. I. § xxvi. p. 97.

way ; Hadrian and Antoninus might even punish those who accused them falsely ; it was necessary even for the safety of the heathens themselves that some check should be put upon vague charges of Christianity ; but the law still substantially was, that to be a Christian was to be *guilty of a capital crime*, whether that law were executed or not. And this view of the question accords, I think, with the representation we find of it in a passage of the Apology of Tertullian to which I have referred already. “Quales ergo leges istæ, quas adversus nos soli *exsequuntur* impii, injusti, turpes, vani, dementes? Quas Trajanus ex parte *frustratus est* vetando inquiri Christianos, quas nullus Adrianus, quanquam curiositatum omnium explorator, nullus Vespasianus, quanquam Judæorum debellator, nullus Pius, nullus Verus *impressit*.”¹ “What sort of laws are those which none *put in force* (*exsequuntur*) against us, but the impious, the unjust, the vile, the vain, the mad? of which Trajan partly *frustrated the effect* by forbidding inquiry to be made for the Christians, which neither Hadrian, though an explorer of everything curious ; nor Vespasian, though the conqueror of the Jews ; nor Pius, nor Verus *carried into execution*” (*impressit*): the several terms “*exsequuntur*,” “*frustratus est*,” “*impressit*,” all having reference to laws already existing, which these several emperors, with all their humanity, mind, would not *abrogate* according to Tertullian, but only did not enforce. Indeed in a previous sentence relating to M. Aurelius, this is alleged in so many words,—“Qui sicut non palam ab ejusmodi hominibus pœnam dimovit, ita alio modo palam dispersit, adjectâ etiam accusatoribus damnatione, et quidem tetriore”—“which emperor, though he did not publicly *abrogate* the punishments directed against the Christians, did publicly avert them by another method, subjecting the accusers to punishment even yet more severe.” One would have thought that the simple way of relieving the Christians, if the Emperors had been in earnest in their feeling for them, would have been to rescind the laws that were against them. But this step, it should seem, the most merciful of the Emperors hesitated to take ; whether having misgivings themselves about the principles and proceedings of the Christians, which were of necessity involved in a certain degree of mystery, and which might be

¹ Tertullian, Apol. c. v.

brought into bad repute by those of the heretics; whether reluctant to afford a plausible pretext for the suspicion that they were themselves lukewarm towards the gods of their own country; or whether overruled by strong popular opinion, which was utterly hostile to the Christians. Origen appears to me to write with this impression on his mind in his treatise against Celsus. He is detailing one of the many charges against the Christians which Celsus advances, namely, that of their acting and teaching in a clandestine manner, and "no wonder they do so," he continues, still stating Celsus' argument, "it is to avert from themselves *the punishment of death which hangs over their heads.*"¹ The accusation is a general one, against Christians not of one generation, but of every generation, and accordingly the law against which they had to protect themselves by such precaution not a temporary, but a permanent cause of alarm; however it might be more actively enforced at one time than at another. And indeed, whilst Origen was writing the work in which this language is used, there was, he tells us, neither actual persecution,² nor prospect of it; the powers at that time happening to have no passion for blood. We should arrive at the same conclusion from an expression which drops from him in the "De Principiis," when, speaking of the rapid growth of the Christians, he adds, that this occurred in spite of the hatred in which they were held by idolaters, and of "the *risk they ran*, besides such hatred, of being put to death"³—as though, under the circumstances of the law, the profession of Christianity at once involved a capital *hazard*.

Accordingly we find, as we might expect to find under the circumstances I have described, that under all these Emperors, whether humane or otherwise, persecution was in fact going on more or less—why should it not, when they would not plainly declare it to be illegal? If they plausibly encumbered it with indirect checks, those checks were easily evaded; and when a provincial magistrate owed the Christian cause a grudge or wished to please the people (as that class were often disposed to do in order to bribe them not to expose their mis-

¹ Οὐ μάτην τοῦτο ποιῶσιν, ἅτε διωθόμενοι τὴν ἐπρηγμένην αὐτοῖς δίκην τοῦ θανάτου.—Origen, *Contra Celsum*, I. § 3.

² Ὅτι δὲ οὐδὲ τὸ τῶν ἔξωθεν δέος τὸ σύνθημα ἡμῶν διακρατεῖ, δῆλον ἐκ

τοῦ καὶ τοῦτο, βουλευθέντος Θεοῦ, πεπαῦσθαι ἤδη χρόνῳ πλείονι.—Origen, *Contra Celsum*, III. § 15.

³ Ἐπὶ θανάτῳ δὲ πρὸς τῷ μισείσθαι κινδυνεύοντων.—*De Principiis*, IV. § 1.

deeds) by proceeding against them, he could easily find a way to do it without incurring much or any risk himself. For certain it is that under Trajan there was in fact persecution—"a great persecution in most places," is the phrase which Eusebius uses to describe that which caused Pliny's address to that Emperor.¹ In that reign it was that Ignatius suffered; condemned at Antioch, executed at Rome; so far from clandestine was the transaction. It may be said that he was voluntarily brought before Trajan (*ἐκούσιως ἤγεται*),² but it was *ἐκὼν ἀέκοντί γε θυμῶ*, he was constrained by a sense of honour; he had led others to their death by the principles he had taught them³; how could he flinch from avowing them to be his own? The mockery of mercy which the law of Trajan exhibited, is exposed as it deserved to be by Tertullian. "The Christians are not to be searched for, but to be punished when found! What a necessary contradiction is this! He forbids them to be searched for, because they are innocent; he consigns them to punishment, because they are guilty. He spares and he despatches; he dissembles and he denounces! Why do you embarrass yourself with your own decree? If you condemn, why do you not search? If you do not search, why do you not acquit them? Military posts are established throughout the provinces for detecting robbers. Against traitors and public enemies every man takes up arms. The search, in their case, extends even to their companions and accomplices. But for the Christian, and for him only, no search is to be made, and yet he is to be accused; as though the search was good for anything, if it was not for his accusation."⁴ It is evident from this indignant remonstrance, how poor a boon the Christians found themselves to have gained in the edict of Trajan. Again, persecution was active under Hadrian, however he might have personally had no ill-will towards them, persecution so cruel and unjust as to call forth, we have seen, a request from one of his own governors, Serenius Granianus, for his interposition: and it was to this Emperor that Quadratus and Aristides addressed their Apologies, documents always drawn forth by hard times.⁵ Under the Antonines, persecution was still on the alert. The first Apology of Justin

¹ Eccles. Hist. iii. c. 33.² Martyr. Ignat. § 2.³ Ibid.⁴ Tertullian, Apol. c. ii.⁵ Eusebius, Eccles. Hist. iv. c. 3.

Martyr, which was the effect of it, bears testimony to its severity under Antoninus Pius; his very prologue setting forth that Justin made that appeal "in behalf of men unjustly hated and persecuted, he being himself one of them; and the whole tenour of it bespeaking that the persecution against which he was pleading, was to the death—"You can do no more than put us to death."¹ Under Aurelius, matters were yet worse. At this period Justin's second Apology dates; and his argument in it indicates the sufferings of the Christians at Rome to have been then most lively at the hands of Urbicus, a city magistrate, of whose proceedings he gives some details, with the names of several of his victims, and the circumstances of their conviction,² and expresses fears for himself, as it proved, not without reason.³ The same reign drew forth the Apology of Athenagoras; that again bears testimony to the activity of a deadly persecution no less than Justin's. "The loss of goods and credit, the Christians knew how to bear, and to him who had defiled one cheek to turn the other, and to give the cloak when the coat had been taken, but they were attacked in life and limb."⁴ Accordingly, Justin fell at Rome; Polycarp and others at Smyrna; a multitude of persons of either sex with Pothinus, the Bishop of Lyons, at their head at Lyons and Vienne in Gaul. So wide-wasting was the scourge in this reign.⁵ Again under Severus, though he, as had been the case with some of his predecessors, had no vindictive feelings against the Christians himself, the war against the Christians was carried on with even greater fury than ever. The Apology of Tertullian, which was then put forth, bears the most unequivocal testimony to this fact—a document not written in a spirit of exaggeration of the wrongs done them⁶; indeed in a spirit, so far as the imperial authority was concerned,

¹ Justin Martyr, Apol. I. § 45.

² II. §§ 1, 2, 3.

³ § 3.

⁴ *Εἰς τὰ σώματα καὶ τὰς ψυχάς.*—Athenagoras, Legat. pro Christianis, § 1.

⁵ Eusebius, Eccles. Hist. v. c. 1.

⁶ Tertullian, it may be observed, in an age when the martyr was so honourable a title, is chary of it. Thus, writers of a later period have classed Irenæus

among the martyrs; not so Tertullian, though evidently having the most friendly feeling towards him; and though ascribing the title of martyr to Justin, whom he names with him: "Ut Justinus philosophus et martyr, ut Miltiades Ecclesiarum sophista, ut Irenæus omnium doctrinarum curiosissimus explorator."—Adv. Valentin. c. v. See Dodwell, Dissertat. in Irenæum, III. § xxi.

rather disposed to extenuate than inflame; as appears from a passage I have already had occasion to quote¹; and even in relation to the local magistrates, the governors of Proconsular Africa, to whom it is probably addressed, though the proximate movers of the mischief, it speaks in language of moderation, imputing their conduct to their ignorance of the Christian character, at once their condemnation and their excuse,² rather than to any malignant feeling. Yet what scenes of suffering does it open! The Christians, compelled by torture to renounce their confession³; crucified; beheaded; thrown to wild beasts; burned; condemned to the mines; banished to the islands.⁴ The fourth book of the *Stromata* of Clemens⁵ incidentally demonstrates that persecution, during this same period of which Tertullian speaks, had also broken out in the quarters where his lot was cast. It is the property of the true Gnostic (whose character he is teaching and recommending) to be above persecution⁶: even virtuous heathens have attained to this high estate in a degree: "pound the husk of Anaxarchus, if you will, you do not pound Anaxarchus"⁷: "but the Church is full of persons who have meditated all their lives a death which quickens them unto Christ, as well men as discreet women"⁸: "the Lord drank the cup; the Apostles imitate him; the Gnostics them"⁹: "why are not Christians rescued from above? because no harm is done them; they are removed by a quick migration to God"¹⁰; and much more to the same effect. I merely hint it, to show that Clemens writes with persecution about him. Under Caracalla, persecution was still doing its work, as the "*Ad Scapulam*" of Tertullian makes evident, for that address bears internal marks of having been composed after the death of Severus, and probably during the life of Caracalla, whose nurse nevertheless, it should seem from an expression let fall in it, had been a Christian.¹¹ Origen, who lived in this and in several succeeding reigns, still was familiar with persecution, (however there might be a lull when he was writing the work itself, which supplies the authority,) and to an objection of the Jew in

¹ *Apol.* c. v.² c. i.³ c. ii.⁴ c. xii.⁵ *Clem. Alex. Stromat.* IV. § iii. p. 568, *et seq.*⁶ § vii. p. 587.⁷ § viii. p. 589.⁸ p. 590.⁹ § ix. p. 597.¹⁰ § xi. pp. 598, 599.¹¹ Tertullian, *Ad Scapulam*, c. iv.

Celsus against the conduct of Jesus, that any god or demon, or prudent man, on foreseeing that troubles were approaching, would get out of their way, replies by citing instances to the contrary, such as Socrates and Leonidas, and Paul; and then adds, "And many *in our own time*, aware that if they confessed Christianity, they should be put to death, but if they denied it, they should be set free and have their property restored, nevertheless despised life, and willingly *took their deaths for religion's sake*."¹ Whenever and wherever Hippolytus wrote, whether in Italy or Arabia, whether under Maximin or Decius, his pen bears witness to persecution. In his commentary on the History of Susanna, whom he considers a type of Christ, the two elders represent the two adverse parties of Jew and Gentile, yet both are agreed on the subject of destroying the Saints, whom they watch to the house of God, and then seize and drag them before the tribunals, and condemn them to death. Such is its language.² Under Decius, Gallus, Volusianus, Valerian, persecution was not only alive, but rampant; as the writings of Cyprian, who lived under all those Emperors, and was put to death under the last of them, abundantly testify. In him we read of the Christians being driven into exile, and their goods confiscated³; of some, whose names are given, dying in prison of starvation⁴; of the arrival of anti-christ being realised in the times of Gallus and Volusianus⁵; of their consignment to the mines⁶; of virgins and boys being amongst the victims⁷; of Xystus and four Deacons suffering death on the 8th of the Ides of August⁸; of the havock of the brethren, of the multiplied losses of that once numerous people⁹; and much more to the same effect.

So ample is the evidence of the extent of persecution, though I have produced only a small portion of that evidence during the first three centuries; scarcely a Father we possess during that period failing directly or indirectly to give proof of it; and indeed, it is a remark of Eusebius in the Preface to the fifth book of his history, introductory to the Epistle of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne to their brethren in Asia and

¹ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, II. § 17.

² Hippolytus, *In Susannam*, p. 276, Ed. Fabric.

³ Cyprian, *Ep.* xviii.

⁴ *Ep.* xxi.

⁵ *Ep.* iv.

⁶ *Ep.* lxxvii. § 6, lxxxii. § 3; *De Lapsis*, § ii.

⁷ *Ep.* lxxxii.

⁸ *Ep.* lxxvii. lxxx.

⁹ *De Lapsis*, § iv.

Phrygia given in that book, and to which I have had occasion to allude, "that one may infer by conjecture the multitude of martyrs there must have been throughout the world, from the events which occurred in one single community"—as though the persecution in Gaul, which happened thus to be recorded, was only a sample of what was going on elsewhere, but with less notoriety. And to all this Gibbon would oppose a casual expression of Origen, "who from his experience as well as reading, was intimately acquainted with the history of the Christians," and who "declares in the most express terms that the number of martyrs was very inconsiderable¹; his authority alone sufficient to annihilate that formidable army of martyrs," &c.² And yet it is strange, that when it answers his purpose, Gibbon can dwell upon the style of a Father, as on that of Tertullian for instance, with vast parade in order to neutralize the force of testimony, which he dislikes; whilst here, because the phrase suits him, he would have us believe that Origen—Origen of all writers in the world—is the most careful of his terms, and the most exact in his computations. But that is true of Gibbon, which was said by Tertullian of another, and of a class, "*occasione sibi sumpsit quorundam verborum, ut hæreticis fere mos est, simplicia quæque torquere.*"³ And yet what are the circumstances of the case? Celsus had charged the Christians with being a mere seditious confederacy, of which Christ was the head; as he had before charged the Jews with being a mere seditious confederacy, of which Moses was the head. To which Origen replies, "Touching the Christians, they, having been taught that they were not to avenge themselves of their enemies, observe a mild and gentle polity. Accordingly, that which they could not have effected, even had they been permitted to fight, and had they been ever so powerful, they were enabled to accomplish by God who always fights for them, and puts a timely stop to those who rise up against the Christians, and desire to slay them. Yet, for the sake of a memento, and in order that seeing a few contending for their religion, they may be the more approved, and may despise death, a few of them from time to time, in numbers readily reckoned, have died for the Christian faith; God *having taken care that their*

¹ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, III. § 8.

² Gibbon, vol. ii. p. 427.

³ Tertullian, *Adv. Hermogenem*, c. xix.

whole race should not be exterminated. For it was his pleasure that they should continue, and that the whole earth should be filled with their salutary and wholesome doctrine." So that what Origen affirms is this, that the number of those who suffered martyrdom was inconsiderable, compared with the whole Christian body—such a number as would lead to no fears for the extermination of the sect, patient as it was—the assertion relative, not positive¹—a very different thing from Gibbon's representation of it—and an assertion, it may be added, made at the time when the Christian world happened to be blessed with a more than common calm, as appears from several passages in the treatise against Celsus²; a circumstance, which might produce its effect on the pen of the writer at the moment, and which ought to be taken into account in estimating the force of a particular phrase used by him.

The Emperors were by no means the sole or even the chief enemies the Christians had to dread. Several of them were indifferent or even favourably disposed to them. But there were other quarters from which persecution issued, far more fatal than the emperors—the *local magistrates* and the *populace*. Origen points to this plainly enough in the continuation of the passage just cited. "God," says he, "took thought for the faithful, by his own single will dispersing every plot which was formed against them, so that neither emperors (*οἱ βασιλεῖς*) nor local governors (*οἱ κατὰ τόπους ἡγούμενοι*) nor the populace (*οἱ δῆμοι*) could be influenced against them further."³ In another passage of the same treatise, he enlarges still more the catalogue of their assailants—"the Roman Senate, the Emperors for the time being, the army, the populace, and the kindred of the believers."⁴ And again in another, where he is arguing for the Divinity of Jesus from the wonderful manner in which his religion had surmounted all the obstacles presented to its progress, he says, that "he overcame every hindrance which opposed itself to the dis-

¹ Just as on another occasion, in a passage which has, however, escaped Mr. Gibbon's notice, he represents the Christians as "very few," though in numerous other places in the same treatise, as well as elsewhere in his works (see the passages to this effect quoted from Origen in Lect. I. 2nd

Series), he had said the direct contrary—but "very few" he means, as the context proves, when compared with the whole population of the Roman Empire.—*Contra Celsum*, VIII. § 69.

² III. § 15; VIII. §§ 44, 70.

³ III. § 8.

⁴ I. § 3.

persion of his doctrine, emperors, governors, the Roman Senate, magistrates in all parts, and the populace.”¹ It was from some of these latter regions, that the storm principally came. Doubtless, among the local magistrates there were men of humanity, who so far from wishing to persecute the Christians, did their best to shield them from persecution. The Apologists make honourable mention of several such; and it is a feature in the testimony of the Fathers, which stamps it with credit, and disposes us to receive it with confidence when it complains of wrongs done, that it should be thus candid and dispassionate, and not condemn its supposed enemies in the gross. Thus Tertullian² expressly speaks of the subterfuges to which merciful magistrates had recourse in order to avoid shedding Christian blood; of one Cincius Severus, who suggested to the Christians, how they should frame their answers on their trials, with a view to their acquittal; of one Vespronius Candidus, who, when the mob clamoured for the death of a Christian, replied that it would be out of order to yield to such violence, and dismissed him; of one Asper, who let a Christian go, when he began to flinch from the torture, without compelling him to do sacrifice, and expressed his own sorrow for having gone into the case at all; of one Pudens, who discovering that the charge was brought against the prisoner by a conspiracy, tore up the record of accusation, and refused to hear the matter. And in more general terms, he tells of the magistrates exhorting the Christian prisoners brought before them to deny their profession, saying to them, “Save thy life,” “Do not throw thy life away;”³ though here we may observe, we have evidence how strong must have been the law and the popular cry against the Christians, when even compassionate *magistrates* were driven to shifts and evasions to spare them. But if there were some magistrates thus humane, what multitudes must there have been in the Roman provinces without any such touch of pity, only too glad to work the law as it stood, nay, perhaps, with some personal animosity against the Christians to gratify; as in the case of Herminianus, Governor of Cappadocia, who was provoked, Tertullian tells us,⁴ by the conversion of his wife, to wreak his spleen on the

¹ Contra Celsum, II. § 79.

² Tertullian, Ad Scapulam, c. iv.

³ Scorpiace, c. xi.

⁴ Ad Scapulam, c. iii.

Christians; or with some lurking apprehension of the people's displeasure (which they could often ill afford to incur) if they allowed them to escape. "Torment us, good my lords," is Tertullian's exclamation to the magistrates, "rack us, crush us in the dust, you will be all the more acceptable to the mob for immolating the Christians."¹ Look, for instance, at the temper displayed by Urbicus, he too a Prætor of the city, as discovered in the second Apology of Justin. He gets at the fact of one Ptolemy being a Christian, by stealth and the evidence of a person who betrays him. On another party, one Lucius, presuming to put a question to Urbicus on behalf of Ptolemy, the reply of the magistrate is, "Thou too art one of them," and he also is condemned. A third party comes up, and is involved in the same affair, probably by some such incaution as the last, and he also suffers the same fate.² This is at Rome, the very seat of the government; and yet we should gather from Justin's language, that he considered the case to be unknown to the Emperor³ or the Senate,⁴ and that he composed his Apology chiefly for the purpose of exposing so flagrant a proceeding on the part of an officer of justice, and exciting some indignation at the iniquity of it. What then must have been the abuses of the magistrates in their transactions with the Christians in the remote provinces of the empire! We happen to have a case very similar to this of Urbicus, relating to the Prefect of Lyons, recorded in the Fragment of the Epistle of that Church. One Vettius Epagathus, touched by the injustice to which the Christians were exposed by the magistrates, begged to be heard in their defence. But the Prefect would listen to no such proposal, simply contenting himself with asking him whether he was a Christian, and on his confession, adding him to the number of martyrs.⁵ What check, indeed, was there upon these provincial magistrates? We know from other sources how audaciously they were in the habit of running riot at a distance. Look, for instance, at the manner in which Verres administered the province of Sicily—a province almost at the very doors of Rome. At what did he scruple? giving corrupt judgment in causes that came before him; inflicting illegal

¹ Tertullian, Apol. c. 1.

² Justin Martyr, Apol. II. § 2.

³ Σὺν τῷ αὐτοκράτορι.—§ 2.

⁴ Ὁ Ῥωμαῖοι.—§ 1.

⁵ Eusebius, Eccles. Hist. v. c. 3.

and tyrannical punishments; extorting enormous revenues; plundering plate and statues; fleecing the Sicilians in short, to the amount of some £400,000 sterling. It was a mere chance that there was a Cicero to bring his transgressions to light, and that he was willing to undertake the office. But for this nothing would have been known of his dark deeds. Nay, there is an amusing instance in the case of Cicero himself of the little interest the people of Rome seemed to take in the affairs of the provinces. He had been Quæstor of this same island; and indeed, it was probably this circumstance that gave him the concern for its future fortunes, which prompted him to defend it against Verres. He acquitted himself, as he thought, in his office wonderfully well. He landed at Puteoli on his return home, imagining that all Rome was ringing with his praises. A friend accosts him, and asks him, what news from Rome? He came from the provinces. From Africa, perhaps? says another. No, replies he, pettishly, from Sicily. How, said a third, who stood by, and wished to be thought wiser than his neighbours; how, don't you know, he is Quæstor of Syracuse? And what is Cicero's reflection? That this little mortification did him more good than if he had received all the compliments he expected; for it made him consider, that the people of Rome had dull ears, but quick eyes, and that it was his business to keep himself always in their sight, not to be so solicitous how to make them hear of him, as how to make them see him: so that from this moment he resolved to stick close to the forum, and to live perpetually in the view of the city.¹ Was it likely that the wrongs of the Christians in a remote part of the empire, in Africa, *e. g.* would trouble such a people as this; or that the magistrates of that country would feel themselves under any particular awe of their masters at home; whatever excesses they might commit against that defenceless body? Moreover, where the sale of Libelli or certificates of exemption was in their hands, were they to be expected to forbear the active working of all the enginery of persecution, calculated as it was to raise the price of those certificates, and to enable them to fill their pockets to almost any extent?²

But even had all the provincial magistrates been as well

¹ Pro Plancio, § 26; Middleton's Life of Cicero, vol. i. p. 65. 4to.

² Cyprian, Ep. lii. § 14.

disposed towards the Christians, and as dead to the temptations of money, as they were notoriously the contrary, still there was another party to persecution even more difficult to deal with than these, for they were evidently often above the laws,¹ the *populace*. There were various causes which excited them. The sanguinary taste engendered in them by the amphitheatre was gratified. The universal shout from the spectators of "Christianos ad leonem,"² was not prompted simply by a hatred of the Christians, but by an inveterate love for these scenes of butchery. What a picture do the Fathers give us of the details of the arena! Persons rushing to devour the beasts that had been slaughtered, still reeking with the gore of the gladiator they had despatched before their own lives were forfeited—the boar smeared with the blood of the miserable man he had ripped up, thus seized on for a meal—others again hastening to catch the life blood as it issued from the wound of the dying man as a specific for epilepsy.³ In the pause from the games at noon, some miscreant dressed up as Mercury, amidst the laughter of the crowd, testing the bodies of the victims by a red-hot caduceus, to see whether they were really dead,⁴ death being sometimes assumed⁵; and another in the habit of Pluto, dragging out the corpses of the combatants with his mallet in his hand to pound out of them any remains there might be of life, before he conveyed them to the infernal regions.⁶ What an appetite for horrors on the part of the people does all this testify, this mixture of sport and bloodshed, and what food for it were the Christians!

Then the *superstition* of the populace inflamed them further. Whatever calamity the state happened to be suffering under, flood, drought, earthquake, famine, or pestilence, was imputed to the Christians⁷; the heathen priests, whose altars were deserted and their gains reduced, fostering the delusion. Then a natural horror was excited amongst them by interested parties of the secret crimes said to be committed in the assemblies of the Christians; their feasts on human flesh, and indulgence in the grossest incest.⁸ Then, in many

¹ Tertullian, Ad Scapulam, c. iv.

² De Polycarpi Martyrio, § xii.; Tertullian, De Resurrec. Carnis, c. xxii.; Cyprian, Ep. lv. § 6.

³ Tertullian, Apol. c. ix. ⁴ c. xv.

⁵ Ad Nationes, I. § 10.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Apol. c. xl.; Cyprian, Ad Demetrianum, § ii.

⁸ Eusebius, Eccles. Hist. v. c. 1.

instances, the trades of the people suffered by the progress of the Christian cause. Their worldly *interests*, therefore, stimulated them to exterminate the Christians, if they could. The makers of shrines for Diana of Ephesus were the types of future multitudes in their feelings and in their mode of prosecuting them. Indeed, it is curious to see in how many cases the great disturbing forces, which bear on Christianity on a large scale, as represented in the Fathers of the first three centuries, are found in incipient action in the history of the Acts of the Apostles. Thus the makers of idols, a very numerous class of mechanics amongst the heathens, including workers in metals as well as wood, manufacturers of amulets, charms,¹ dealers in incense²; builders employed in the erection and repair of temples, of which the number was enormous; painters, gilders, weavers; all, in short, who found a bread by decorating them when built; the multitude of tradesmen, for whose articles of merchandise the heathen festivals created a demand³; the still larger class, perhaps, connected with theatres and amphitheatres⁴; all these parties, and many more, whom it would be tedious to enumerate, would feel themselves interested in suppressing the Christians who were spoiling their several trades, denouncing the use of idols, emptying the temples, seceding from the processions, abstaining from public shows and spectacles.

Besides all these, the heretics helped to swell the cry against them⁵; and the Jews yet more, scattered as they were throughout all the nations and cities of the world, the bitterest persecutors of them all—another coincidence with the history of the Acts—none so active, we read, in fetching fuel from the manufactories and baths to burn Polycarp as they, *ὁ ἴσθθος ἀνθρώπων*, says the circular epistle of the Church of Smyrna, which records this martyrdom.⁶ So that on the whole, Irenæus, in expounding the 99th Psalm, “the Lord sitteth between the Cherubim, be the earth never so unquiet,” may well speak of “the wrath of the people, vented against those who believed in Christ, and the movement of the whole earth against the Church” (*motum universæ terræ adversus ecclesiam*).⁷

¹ Tertullian, De Idololatriâ, c. vii. c. |
viii.

² c. xi.

³ c. xii.

⁴ Apol. c. xxxviii, c. xlii.

⁵ Cyprian, De Bono Patientiæ, § xxi.

⁶ De Polycarpi Martyrio, § xiii.

⁷ Irenæus, IV. c. xxxiii. § 13.

Taking all these circumstances, then, into account, I think we shall be disposed to consider the *extent* of the persecution of the early Church to have been very wide and wasting, even though it should not appear (which, however, may be doubted, for a great number of Apologies are in one instance nearly coincident in date, those by Justin, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, Melito, Apollinarius,¹ all in the reign of Aurelius) that any *simultaneous* movement against the Church took place throughout the empire so early as some suppose.

¹ Evans, *Biography of the Early Church*, vol. i. p. 153.