

Chapter XVI: Conduct Towards The Christians, From Nero To
Constantine.--Part III.

The answer of Trajan, to which the Christians of the succeeding age have frequently appealed, discovers as much regard for justice and humanity as could be reconciled with his mistaken notions of religious policy.

[59] Instead of displaying the implacable zeal of an inquisitor, anxious to discover the most minute particles of heresy, and exulting in the number of his victims, the emperor expresses much more solicitude to protect the security of the innocent, than to prevent the escape of the guilty. He acknowledged the difficulty of fixing any general plan; but he lays down two salutary rules, which often afforded relief and support to the distressed Christians. Though he directs the magistrates to punish such persons as are legally convicted, he prohibits them, with a very humane inconsistency, from making any inquiries concerning the supposed criminals. Nor was the magistrate allowed to proceed on every kind of information. Anonymous charges the emperor rejects, as too repugnant to the equity of his government; and he strictly requires, for the conviction of those to whom the guilt of Christianity is imputed, the positive evidence of a fair and open accuser. It is likewise probable, that the persons who assumed so invidious an office, were obliged to declare the grounds of their suspicions, to specify (both in respect to time and place) the secret assemblies, which their Christian adversary had frequented, and to disclose a great number of circumstances, which were concealed with the most vigilant jealousy from the eye of the profane. If they succeeded in their prosecution, they

were exposed to the resentment of a considerable and active party, to the censure of the more liberal portion of mankind, and to the ignominy which, in every age and country, has attended the character of an informer. If, on the contrary, they failed in their proofs, they incurred the severe and perhaps capital penalty, which, according to a law published by the emperor Hadrian, was inflicted on those who falsely attributed to their fellow-citizens the crime of Christianity. The violence of personal or superstitious animosity might sometimes prevail over the most natural apprehensions of disgrace and danger but it cannot surely be imagined, that accusations of so unpromising an appearance were either lightly or frequently undertaken by the Pagan subjects of the Roman empire. [60] [60a]

[Footnote 59: Plin. Epist. x. 98. Tertullian (Apolog. c. 5) considers this rescript as a relaxation of the ancient penal laws, "quas Trajanus ex parte frustratus est:" and yet Tertullian, in another part of his Apology, exposes the inconsistency of prohibiting inquiries, and enjoining punishments.]

[Footnote 60: Eusebius (Hist. Ecclesiast. l. iv. c. 9) has preserved the edict of Hadrian. He has likewise (c. 13) given us one still more favorable, under the name of Antoninus; the authenticity of which is not so universally allowed. The second Apology of Justin contains some curious particulars relative to the accusations of Christians. *

Note: Professor Hegelmayer has proved the authenticity of the edict of Antoninus, in his Comm. Hist. Theol. in Edict. Imp. Antonini. Tubing.

1777, in 4to.--G. ----Neander doubts its authenticity, (vol. i. p. 152.)

In my opinion, the internal evidence is decisive against it.--M]

[Footnote 60a: The enactment of this law affords strong presumption, that accusations of the "crime of Christianity," were by no means so uncommon, nor received with so much mistrust and caution by the ruling authorities, as Gibbon would insinuate. --M.]

The expedient which was employed to elude the prudence of the laws, affords a sufficient proof how effectually they disappointed the mischievous designs of private malice or superstitious zeal. In a large and tumultuous assembly, the restraints of fear and shame, so forcible on the minds of individuals, are deprived of the greatest part of their influence. The pious Christian, as he was desirous to obtain, or to escape, the glory of martyrdom, expected, either with impatience or with terror, the stated returns of the public games and festivals. On those occasions the inhabitants of the great cities of the empire were collected in the circus or the theatre, where every circumstance of the place, as well as of the ceremony, contributed to kindle their devotion, and to extinguish their humanity. Whilst the numerous spectators, crowned with garlands, perfumed with incense, purified with the blood of victims, and surrounded with the altars and statues of their tutelary deities, resigned themselves to the enjoyment of pleasures, which they considered as an essential part of their religious worship, they recollected, that the Christians alone abhorred the gods of mankind, and by their absence and melancholy on these solemn festivals, seemed

to insult or to lament the public felicity. If the empire had been afflicted by any recent calamity, by a plague, a famine, or an unsuccessful war; if the Tyber had, or if the Nile had not, risen beyond its banks; if the earth had shaken, or if the temperate order of the seasons had been interrupted, the superstitious Pagans were convinced that the crimes and the impiety of the Christians, who were spared by the excessive lenity of the government, had at length provoked the divine justice. It was not among a licentious and exasperated populace, that the forms of legal proceedings could be observed; it was not in an amphitheatre, stained with the blood of wild beasts and gladiators, that the voice of compassion could be heard. The impatient clamors of the multitude denounced the Christians as the enemies of gods and men, doomed them to the severest tortures, and venturing to accuse by name some of the most distinguished of the new sectaries, required with irresistible vehemence that they should be instantly apprehended and cast to the lions. [61] The provincial governors and magistrates who presided in the public spectacles were usually inclined to gratify the inclinations, and to appease the rage, of the people, by the sacrifice of a few obnoxious victims. But the wisdom of the emperors protected the church from the danger of these tumultuous clamors and irregular accusations, which they justly censured as repugnant both to the firmness and to the equity of their administration. The edicts of Hadrian and of Antoninus Pius expressly declared, that the voice of the multitude should never be admitted as legal evidence to convict or to punish those unfortunate persons who had embraced the enthusiasm of the Christians. [62]

[Footnote 61: See Tertullian, (Apolog. c. 40.) The acts of the martyrdom of Polycarp exhibit a lively picture of these tumults, which were usually fomented by the malice of the Jews.]

[Footnote 62: These regulations are inserted in the above mentioned document of Hadrian and Pius. See the apology of Melito, (apud Euseb. 1 iv 26)]

III. Punishment was not the inevitable consequence of conviction, and the Christians, whose guilt was the most clearly proved by the testimony of witnesses, or even by their voluntary confession, still retained in their own power the alternative of life or death. It was not so much the past offence, as the actual resistance, which excited the indignation of the magistrate. He was persuaded that he offered them an easy pardon, since, if they consented to cast a few grains of incense upon the altar, they were dismissed from the tribunal in safety and with applause. It was esteemed the duty of a humane judge to endeavor to reclaim, rather than to punish, those deluded enthusiasts. Varying his tone according to the age, the sex, or the situation of the prisoners, he frequently condescended to set before their eyes every circumstance which could render life more pleasing, or death more terrible; and to solicit, nay, to entreat, them, that they would show some compassion to themselves, to their families, and to their friends. [63] If threats and persuasions proved ineffectual, he had often recourse to violence; the scourge and the rack were called in to supply the deficiency of argument, and

every art of cruelty was employed to subdue such inflexible, and, as it appeared to the Pagans, such criminal, obstinacy. The ancient apologists of Christianity have censured, with equal truth and severity, the irregular conduct of their persecutors who, contrary to every principle of judicial proceeding, admitted the use of torture, in order to obtain, not a confession, but a denial, of the crime which was the object of their inquiry. [64] The monks of succeeding ages, who, in their peaceful solitudes, entertained themselves with diversifying the deaths and sufferings of the primitive martyrs, have frequently invented torments of a much more refined and ingenious nature. In particular, it has pleased them to suppose, that the zeal of the Roman magistrates, disdainng every consideration of moral virtue or public decency, endeavored to seduce those whom they were unable to vanquish, and that by their orders the most brutal violence was offered to those whom they found it impossible to seduce. It is related, that females, who were prepared to despise death, were sometimes condemned to a more severe trial, [64a] and called upon to determine whether they set a higher value on their religion or on their chastity. The youths to whose licentious embraces they were abandoned, received a solemn exhortation from the judge, to exert their most strenuous efforts to maintain the honor of Venus against the impious virgin who refused to burn incense on her altars. Their violence, however, was commonly disappointed, and the seasonable interposition of some miraculous power preserved the chaste spouses of Christ from the dishonor even of an involuntary defeat. We should not indeed neglect to remark, that the more ancient as well as authentic memorials of the church are seldom polluted with these

extravagant and indecent fictions. [65]

[Footnote 63: See the rescript of Trajan, and the conduct of Pliny. The most authentic acts of the martyrs abound in these exhortations. Note: Pliny's test was the worship of the gods, offerings to the statue of the emperor, and blaspheming Christ--*praeterea maledicerent Christo.--M.*]

[Footnote 64: In particular, see Tertullian, (*Apolog. c. 2, 3,*) and Lactantius, (*Institut. Divin. v. 9.*) Their reasonings are almost the same; but we may discover, that one of these apologists had been a lawyer, and the other a rhetorician.]

[Footnote 64a: The more ancient as well as authentic memorials of the church, relate many examples of the fact, (of these severe trials,) which there is nothing to contradict. Tertullian, among others, says, *Nam proxime ad lenonem damnando Christianam, potius quam ad leonem, confessi estis labem pudicitiae apud nos atrociolem omni poena et omni morte reputari, Apol. cap. ult.* Eusebius likewise says, "Other virgins, dragged to brothels, have lost their life rather than defile their virtue." *Euseb. Hist. Ecc. viii. 14.--G.* The miraculous interpositions were the offspring of the coarse imaginations of the monks.--M.]

[Footnote 65: See two instances of this kind of torture in the *Acta Sincere Martyrum*, published by Ruinart, p. 160, 399. Jerome, in his *Legend of Paul the Hermit*, tells a strange story of a young man, who was chained naked on a bed of flowers, and assaulted by a beautiful and

wanton courtesan. He quelled the rising temptation by biting off his tongue.]

The total disregard of truth and probability in the representation of these primitive martyrdoms was occasioned by a very natural mistake. The ecclesiastical writers of the fourth or fifth centuries ascribed to the magistrates of Rome the same degree of implacable and unrelenting zeal which filled their own breasts against the heretics or the idolaters of their own times.

It is not improbable that some of those persons who were raised to the dignities of the empire, might have imbibed the prejudices of the populace, and that the cruel disposition of others might occasionally be stimulated by motives of avarice or of personal resentment. [66] But it is certain, and we may appeal to the grateful confessions of the first Christians, that the greatest part of those magistrates who exercised in the provinces the authority of the emperor, or of the senate, and to whose hands alone the jurisdiction of life and death was intrusted, behaved like men of polished manners and liberal education, who respected the rules of justice, and who were conversant with the precepts of philosophy. They frequently declined the odious task of persecution, dismissed the charge with contempt, or suggested to the accused Christian some legal evasion, by which he might elude the severity of the laws. [67] Whenever they were invested with a discretionary power, [68] they used it much less for the oppression, than for the relief and benefit of the afflicted church. They were

far from condemning all the Christians who were accused before their tribunal, and very far from punishing with death all those who were convicted of an obstinate adherence to the new superstition. Contenting themselves, for the most part, with the milder chastisements of imprisonment, exile, or slavery in the mines, [69] they left the unhappy victims of their justice some reason to hope, that a prosperous event, the accession, the marriage, or the triumph of an emperor, might speedily restore them, by a general pardon, to their former state. The martyrs, devoted to immediate execution by the Roman magistrates, appear to have been selected from the most opposite extremes. They were either bishops and presbyters, the persons the most distinguished among the Christians by their rank and influence, and whose example might strike terror into the whole sect; [70] or else they were the meanest and most abject among them, particularly those of the servile condition, whose lives were esteemed of little value, and whose sufferings were viewed by the ancients with too careless an indifference. [71] The learned Origen, who, from his experience as well as reading, was intimately acquainted with the history of the Christians, declares, in the most express terms, that the number of martyrs was very inconsiderable. [72] His authority would alone be sufficient to annihilate that formidable army of martyrs, whose relics, drawn for the most part from the catacombs of Rome, have replenished so many churches, [73] and whose marvellous achievements have been the subject of so many volumes of Holy Romance. [74] But the general assertion of Origen may be explained and confirmed by the particular testimony of his friend Dionysius, who, in the immense city of Alexandria, and under the rigorous persecution of Decius, reckons

only ten men and seven women who suffered for the profession of the Christian name. [75]

[Footnote 66: The conversion of his wife provoked Claudius Herminianus, governor of Cappadocia, to treat the Christians with uncommon severity. Tertullian ad Scapulam, c. 3.]

[Footnote 67: Tertullian, in his epistle to the governor of Africa, mentions several remarkable instances of lenity and forbearance, which had happened within his knowledge.]

[Footnote 68: Neque enim in universum aliquid quod quasi certam formam habeat, constitui potest; an expression of Trajan, which gave a very great latitude to the governors of provinces. * Note: Gibbon altogether forgets that Trajan fully approved of the course pursued by Pliny. That course was, to order all who persevered in their faith to be led to execution: perseverantes duci jussi.--M.]

[Footnote 69: In Metalla damnatur, in insulas relegatur. Tertullian, Apolog. c. 12. The mines of Numidia contained nine bishops, with a proportionable number of their clergy and people, to whom Cyprian addressed a pious epistle of praise and comfort. See Cyprian. Epistol. 76, 77.]

[Footnote 70: Though we cannot receive with entire confidence either the epistles, or the acts, of Ignatius, (they may be found in the 2d volume

of the Apostolic Fathers,) yet we may quote that bishop of Antioch as one of these exemplary martyrs. He was sent in chains to Rome as a public spectacle, and when he arrived at Troas, he received the pleasing intelligence, that the persecution of Antioch was already at an end. *

Note: The acts of Ignatius are generally received as authentic, as are seven of his letters. Eusebius and St. Jerome mention them: there are two editions; in one, the letters are longer, and many passages appear to have been interpolated; the other edition is that which contains the real letters of St. Ignatius; such at least is the opinion of the wisest and most enlightened critics. (See Lardner. Cred. of Gospel Hist.) Less, uber dis Religion, v. i. p. 529. Usser. Diss. de Ign. Epist. Pearson, Vindic, Ignatianae. It should be remarked, that it was under the reign of Trajan that the bishop Ignatius was carried from Antioch to Rome, to be exposed to the lions in the amphitheatre, the year of J. C. 107, according to some; of 116, according to others.--G.]

[Footnote 71: Among the martyrs of Lyons, (Euseb. l. v. c. 1,) the slave Blandina was distinguished by more exquisite tortures. Of the five martyrs so much celebrated in the acts of Felicitas and Perpetua, two were of a servile, and two others of a very mean, condition.]

[Footnote 72: Origen. advers. Celsum, l. iii. p. 116. His words deserve to be transcribed. * Note: The words that follow should be quoted. "God not permitting that all his class of men should be exterminated:" which appears to indicate that Origen thought the number put to death inconsiderable only when compared to the numbers who had survived.

Besides this, he is speaking of the state of the religion under Caracalla, Elagabalus, Alexander Severus, and Philip, who had not persecuted the Christians. It was during the reign of the latter that Origen wrote his books against Celsus.--G.]

[Footnote 73: If we recollect that all the Plebeians of Rome were not Christians, and that all the Christians were not saints and martyrs, we may judge with how much safety religious honors can be ascribed to bones or urns, indiscriminately taken from the public burial-place. After ten centuries of a very free and open trade, some suspicions have arisen among the more learned Catholics. They now require as a proof of sanctity and martyrdom, the letters B.M., a vial full of red liquor supposed to be blood, or the figure of a palm-tree. But the two former signs are of little weight, and with regard to the last, it is observed by the critics, 1. That the figure, as it is called, of a palm, is perhaps a cypress, and perhaps only a stop, the flourish of a comma used in the monumental inscriptions. 2. That the palm was the symbol of victory among the Pagans. 3. That among the Christians it served as the emblem, not only of martyrdom, but in general of a joyful resurrection. See the epistle of P. Mabillon, on the worship of unknown saints, and Muratori sopra le Antichita Italiane, Dissertat. lviii.]

[Footnote 74: As a specimen of these legends, we may be satisfied with 10,000 Christian soldiers crucified in one day, either by Trajan or Hadrian on Mount Ararat. See Baronius ad Martyrologium Romanum; Tille mont, Mem. Ecclesiast. tom. ii. part ii. p. 438; and Geddes's

Miscellanies, vol. ii. p. 203. The abbreviation of Mil., which may signify either soldiers or thousands, is said to have occasioned some extraordinary mistakes.]

[Footnote 75: Dionysius ap. Euseb l. vi. c. 41 One of the seventeen was likewise accused of robbery. * Note: Gibbon ought to have said, was falsely accused of robbery, for so it is in the Greek text. This Christian, named Nemesion, falsely accused of robbery before the centurion, was acquitted of a crime altogether foreign to his character, but he was led before the governor as guilty of being a Christian, and the governor inflicted upon him a double torture. (Euseb. loc. cit.) It must be added, that Saint Dionysius only makes particular mention of the principal martyrs, [this is very doubtful.--M.] and that he says, in general, that the fury of the Pagans against the Christians gave to Alexandria the appearance of a city taken by storm. [This refers to plunder and ill usage, not to actual slaughter.--M.] Finally it should be observed that Origen wrote before the persecution of the emperor Decius.--G.]

During the same period of persecution, the zealous, the eloquent, the ambitious Cyprian governed the church, not only of Carthage, but even of Africa. He possessed every quality which could engage the reverence of the faithful, or provoke the suspicions and resentment of the Pagan magistrates. His character as well as his station seemed to mark out that holy prelate as the most distinguished object of envy and danger.

[76] The experience, however, of the life of Cyprian, is sufficient

to prove that our fancy has exaggerated the perilous situation of a Christian bishop; and the dangers to which he was exposed were less imminent than those which temporal ambition is always prepared to encounter in the pursuit of honors. Four Roman emperors, with their families, their favorites, and their adherents, perished by the sword in the space of ten years, during which the bishop of Carthage guided by his authority and eloquence the councils of the African church. It was only in the third year of his administration, that he had reason, during a few months, to apprehend the severe edicts of Decius, the vigilance of the magistrate and the clamors of the multitude, who loudly demanded, that Cyprian, the leader of the Christians, should be thrown to the lions. Prudence suggested the necessity of a temporary retreat, and the voice of prudence was obeyed. He withdrew himself into an obscure solitude, from whence he could maintain a constant correspondence with the clergy and people of Carthage; and, concealing himself till the tempest was past, he preserved his life, without relinquishing either his power or his reputation. His extreme caution did not, however, escape the censure of the more rigid Christians, who lamented, or the reproaches of his personal enemies, who insulted, a conduct which they considered as a pusillanimous and criminal desertion of the most sacred duty. [77] The propriety of reserving himself for the future exigencies of the church, the example of several holy bishops, [78] and the divine admonitions, which, as he declares himself, he frequently received in visions and ecstasies, were the reasons alleged in his justification. [79] But his best apology may be found in the cheerful resolution, with which, about eight years afterwards, he suffered death in the cause of

religion. The authentic history of his martyrdom has been recorded with unusual candor and impartiality. A short abstract, therefore, of its most important circumstances, will convey the clearest information of the spirit, and of the forms, of the Roman persecutions. [80]

[Footnote 76: The letters of Cyprian exhibit a very curious and original picture both of the man and of the times. See likewise the two lives of Cyprian, composed with equal accuracy, though with very different views; the one by Le Clerc (*Bibliothèque Universelle*, tom. xii. p. 208-378,) the other by Tillemont, *Memoires Ecclesiastiques*, tom. iv part i. p. 76-459.]

[Footnote 77: See the polite but severe epistle of the clergy of Rome to the bishop of Carthage. (Cyprian. *Epist.* 8, 9.) Pontius labors with the greatest care and diligence to justify his master against the general censure.]

[Footnote 78: In particular those of Dionysius of Alexandria, and Gregory Thaumaturgus, of Neo-Caesarea. See Euseb. *Hist. Ecclesiast.* 1. vi. c. 40; and *Memoires de Tillemont*, tom. iv. part ii. p. 685.]

[Footnote 79: See Cyprian. *Epist.* 16, and his life by Pontius.]

[Footnote 80: We have an original life of Cyprian by the deacon Pontius, the companion of his exile, and the spectator of his death; and we likewise possess the ancient proconsular acts of his martyrdom. These

two relations are consistent with each other, and with probability; and what is somewhat remarkable, they are both unsullied by any miraculous circumstances.]