



## King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1093/pastj/gtac041](https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtac041)

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Corke-Webster, J. (2023). By Whom Were Early Christians Persecuted? *Past and Present*, 261(1), 3-46. [gtac041]. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtac041>

### **Citing this paper**

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [librarypure@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:librarypure@kcl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

# BY WHOM WERE EARLY CHRISTIANS PERSECUTED?\*

## I

### INTRODUCTION

The persecution of the early Christians in the first three centuries CE has proved an enduring historical topic. Sixty years ago, in this journal, the famed historian Geoffrey de Ste Croix published his seminal, ‘Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?’, which remains even now the go-to reference for students and scholars alike.<sup>1</sup> De Ste Croix’s paper has not simply been influential in its

\* This paper was first drafted during a stay as a Fellow of the Institute of Advanced Studies and the Forrest Foundation at the University of Western Australia, Perth in March 2020, a halcyon period for which I remain hugely grateful. It benefited from audiences at the annual meetings of the North American Patristics Society in May 2021 and the Classical Association in April 2022. And it was honed by the astute queries, comments and criticisms of Stephanie Cobb, David Eastman, Ben Kolbeck, Alice Rio and Markus Vinzent, who nevertheless bear no responsibility for its final form.

<sup>1</sup> All subsequent work, though it might disagree on details, has followed de Ste Croix’s fundamental model. I offer as exemplary here, first, in the English-language tradition the *status quaestionis* article of J. B. Rives, ‘The Persecution of Christians and Ideas of Community in the Roman Empire’, in Giovanni A. Cecconi and Chantal Gabrielli (eds.), *Politiche religiose nel mondo antico e tardoantico: poteri e indirizzi, forme del controllo, idee e prassi di tolleranza. Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi Firenze, 24–26 settembre 2009* (Bari, 2011), at, for example, 208: ‘the best solution to the problem was provided by de Ste Croix...’; and in the German-language tradition the most recent monograph on the topic, Wolfram Kinzig, *Christenverfolgung in der Antike* (Munich, 2019), where the debt to de Ste Croix, though not explicit — unsurprising given the paucity of footnotes — is nevertheless evident in both its structure and approach.

*Past & Present*, no. XX (2023) © The Author(s) 2023. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The Past and Present Society, Oxford.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtac041> Advance Access published on 10 January 2023

substantive arguments; its very framing has defined the parameters of the debate. De Ste Croix asked why Christians were persecuted. But the more fundamental question is at whose hands this persecution took place. De Ste Croix does not ignore the latter entirely. But in establishing his lines of enquiry he reveals a series of assumptions that ultimately problematize the entire project:

The question I have taken as a title needs to be broken down in two quite different ways. One is to distinguish between the general population of the Graeco-Roman world and what I am going to call for convenience ‘the government’: I mean of course the emperor, the senate, the central officials and the provincial governors, the key figures for our purpose being the emperor and even more the provincial governors. In this case we ask first, ‘For what reasons did ordinary pagans demand persecution?’, and secondly, ‘Why did the government persecute?’. The second way of dividing up our general question is to distinguish the reasons which brought about persecution from the purely legal basis of persecution — the juridical principles and institutions invoked by those who had already made up their minds to take action.<sup>2</sup>

I here lay aside the second part of each binary, namely government and law.<sup>3</sup> For the latter, it will suffice to quote the conclusion of an article of equal importance to that of de Ste Croix, often referenced alongside it: ‘It is in the minds of men, not in the demands of Roman law, that the roots of the persecution of the Christians in the Roman Empire are to be sought’,<sup>4</sup> a suggestion as important as it has been unpursued. For the former, I observe that the reactive nature of Roman government — the inevitable result of a small bureaucracy and a large territory — meant that the judicial role of officials was almost always secondary — that is, they responded to cases brought before them.<sup>5</sup>

Since Rome had no public prosecution service, accusations had to be made by individuals, so-called *delatores* — ‘denouncers’

<sup>2</sup> G. E. M. de Ste Croix, ‘Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?’, *Past and Present*, no. 26 (Nov. 1963), 6.

<sup>3</sup> I will treat these in a monograph to which this article is intended as a prolegomenon.

<sup>4</sup> T. D. Barnes, ‘Legislation against the Christians’, *Journal of Roman Studies*, lviii (1968), 50.

<sup>5</sup> See, especially, Fergus Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World* (London, 1977), building on Fergus Millar, ‘Emperors at Work’, *Journal of Roman Studies*, lvii (1967) — repr. in Hannah M. Cotton and Guy M. Rogers (eds.), *Rome, the Greek World, and the East: Government, Society and Culture in the Roman Empire* (Chapel Hill, 2004). On the continuing value of Millar’s model, with rebuttal of criticisms, see Peter Eich, ‘Centre

— or *accusatores* — ‘accusers’ — who could gain their information from *indices* — ‘informers’.<sup>6</sup> Motives for this process — known as delation — varied. *Inimicitia* — ‘personal enmity’ — looms large in our extant sources.<sup>7</sup> Financial rewards were not insubstantial too. Accusers in successful prosecutions usually received a share either of the fine of the condemned, or in more serious cases, their confiscated property (see, for example, Tac. *Ann.* 4.30.2). *Indices* were often themselves implicated in the crime, so immunity from prosecution was another incentive.<sup>8</sup> Despite the negative brush with which imperial elite sources painted this practice, this culture of habitual delation was neither a symptom of tyrannical government,<sup>9</sup> nor unique to society’s upper echelons.<sup>10</sup> Papyri in particular reveal a landscape of ubiquitous claim and counterclaim arising from local communities’ everyday competitions for resources and status.<sup>11</sup>

(n. 5 cont.)

and Periphery. Administrative Communication in Roman Imperial Times’, in Stéphane Benoist (ed.), *Rome, a City and Its Empire in Perspective: The Impact of the Roman World through Fergus Millar’s Research / Rome, une cité impériale en jeu: l’impact du monde romain selon Fergus Millar* (Impact of Empire, xvi, Leiden, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> On the complexities, see Franca De Marini Avonzo, *La funzione giurisdizionale del senato romano* (Milan, 1957), 72–3; Lucia Fanizza, *Delatori e accusatori: l’iniziativa nei processi di età imperiale* (Rome, 1988), 20; Kathleen M. Coleman, ‘Informers on Parade’, in Bettina Bergmann and Christine Kondoleon (eds.), *The Art of Ancient Spectacle* (Studies in the History of Art, lvi, New Haven, 1999), 231–2 (introducing too the *mandatores*, perhaps denoting those of lower status not eligible to make formal accusations, but supplying names to those who could); Steven H. Rutledge, *Imperial Inquisitions: Prosecutors and Informants from Tiberius to Domitian* (London, 2001), 9–10. I stress that I am not dismissing the role of government, merely setting it on one side to consider the initial agency of individuals that almost always preceded its involvement.

<sup>7</sup> Rutledge, *Imperial Inquisitions*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 9; see also Jean-Michel David, ‘La faute de l’abandon: théories et pratiques judiciaires à Rome à la fin de la République’, in *L’aveu: Antiquité et Moyen Âge. Actes de la table ronde, Rome, 28–30 mars 1984*. (Collection de l’École française de Rome, lxxxviii, Rome, 1986), 77–84.

<sup>9</sup> Rutledge, *Imperial Inquisitions*, *passim*; see, in particular, 10–19.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Kelly, *Petitions, Litigation, and Social Control in Roman Egypt* (Oxford, 2011), at 123–67.

<sup>11</sup> *Contra*, for example, Deborah W. Hobson, ‘The Impact of Law on Village Life in Roman Egypt’, in Baruch Halpern and Deborah W. Hobson (eds.), *Law, Politics and Society in the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Sheffield, 1993), arguing that provincials appealed to Roman governors only as a last resort.

That delation underlay the persecution of Christians is best illustrated by an early second-century correspondence between a provincial governor, Pliny the Younger, and the emperor Trajan, discussing the recent and ongoing arraignments of Christians in Pliny's province (Plin. *Ep.* 10.96–97).<sup>12</sup> These trials did not arise from Pliny's initiative;<sup>13</sup> he found the cases waiting for him at this stop on his assize tour (a governor's series of city-by-city judicial hearings).<sup>14</sup> The letters repeatedly stress that this episode had been initiated by delation: for example 'in the cases of those denounced (*deferebantur*) to me as Christians' (Plin. *Ep.* 10.96.2; see also 10.96.5–6 and 10.97.1–2).<sup>15</sup>

The general population are thus indeed, as de Ste Croix indicated, key to the Christian persecutions. But even here in this opening gambit, de Ste Croix moves in a single sentence from talking about 'the general population of the Graeco-Roman world' to 'ordinary pagans'. The latter proves his focus, and he clarifies his task as follows: 'we shall have to consider the other side of our problem: the reasons for the hatred felt towards Christianity by the mass of pagans'.<sup>16</sup> The slippage is significant. It follows from de Ste Croix's attempt to separate three centuries of persecution into discrete periods.

It is convenient to divide the persecutions into three distinct phases. The first ends just before the great fire at Rome in 64; the second begins with the persecution which followed the fire and continues until 250; and the third opens with the persecution under Decius in 250–1 and lasts until 313 — or, if we take account of the anti-Christian activities of Licinius in his later years, until the defeat of Licinius

<sup>12</sup> For a full reading, see James Corke-Webster, 'Trouble in Pontus: The Pliny-Trajan Correspondence on the Christians Reconsidered', *TAPA*, cxlvii (2017).

<sup>13</sup> Noted by the flawed but important article of A. N. Sherwin-White, 'The Early Persecutions and Roman Law Again', *Journal of Theological Studies*, iii (1952), and by de Ste Croix, 'Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?', 15 (though 19 suggests some confusion on this point).

<sup>14</sup> Which city is unclear; Plin. *Ep.* 10.92 is from Amisus; 10.98 is from Amastris. A. N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary* (Oxford, 1966), 693–4 claims that 10.96 was also written from Amastris, but there is no way to know for certain. On the Roman assize tour, see G. P. Burton, 'Proconsuls, Assizes and the Administration of Justice under the Empire', *Journal of Roman Studies*, lxx (1975).

<sup>15</sup> Translations my own throughout. Latin text from R. A. B. Mynors (ed.), *C. Plini Caecili Secundi: Epistularum libri decem* (Oxford Classical Texts, Oxford, 1963).

<sup>16</sup> De Ste Croix, 'Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?', 8.

by Constantine in 324... I cannot afford to spend time on the first phase of persecution (before 64), during which, in so far as it took place at all, persecution was on a small scale and came about mainly as a result of Jewish hostility, which tended to lead to disturbances...

Though this division is supposedly merely practical, it has substantive implications.<sup>17</sup> De Ste Croix makes the first period coterminous with the agency of the Jews, the second of the pagan masses, and the third of the government. In setting aside the first, he can thus ignore Jewish agency entirely, and focus only on that of the pagans, both populace and government. But such strict periodization is patently false. Jesus was crucified by a Roman official; Tertullian still blamed the Jews in the early third century. Both demarcating Jewish and pagan agency and then ignoring the former, and separating the post-Decian period from what precedes it, skew the entire enterprise.

No one could accuse William Frend, this topic's other twentieth-century titan — and the author of its last English-language monograph — of ignoring the Jews. Frend was inspired by de Ste Croix to consider the question's less formal elements.<sup>18</sup> But where de Ste Croix set aside Jewish agency, Frend made it his key focus: 'In the study of the persecutions the Jews, Christians and authorities have an equal part in the drama'.<sup>19</sup> For him, persecution stemmed from not just the antagonism between pagans and Christians but also 'the ceaseless nagging of Old Israel'.<sup>20</sup> Specially, Jewish delation was to blame: 'Added to this, there was the continuous, bitter hostility of the Jews towards the Christians, which ensured that there would lack neither accusers nor mobs to shout "down with the atheists" at the appropriate moment'.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> This threefold division has become a structural feature of virtually all scholarship on this topic; see, for example, Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (San Francisco, 2013), 129–30.

<sup>18</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford, 1965), xiii. On their mutual influence, see, for example, W. H. C. Frend, 'The Persecutions: Some Links between Judaism and the Early Church', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, ix (1958), 141 n. 1; Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, vii; de Ste Croix, 'Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?', 31 n. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 168.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 304 (and *passim*).

<sup>21</sup> Frend, 'Persecutions', 152–3.

Frend's position has been the more easily critiqued because it takes at face value the anti-Jewish tendencies of our early Christian sources.<sup>22</sup> An equally problematic flaw is its assumption of a clearly delineated Judaism throughout this period and across the empire, ignoring the difficulty of establishing clear distinctions between Jews and Christians.<sup>23</sup> Scholars have now argued that the Jewish and Christian communities were thoroughly intertwined, certainly in the first century, and perhaps in the second, third, and even beyond.<sup>24</sup> More fundamentally, it is now well established that identity cannot be treated so simplistically. People are not one thing, homogeneously and universally; they 'wear' multiple, often competing, identities which they foreground in different times and circumstances.<sup>25</sup> This critique thus applies equally to de Ste Croix and his concept of pagan agency. To speak in unqualified terms of a threefold binary between Christians, Jews and pagans ignores the overlap both of these communities in reality, and of these identities within individuals. That in turn reifies these religious groups as self-contained entities, privileges the 'religious' aspect of individuals' identities, and encourages the resort to religion as a presumptive, and unproblematic, explanatory factor in explaining historical change.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> There is an extensive bibliography here; see Paula Frederiksen and Oded Irshai, 'Christian Anti-Judaism: Polemics and Policies', in Steven T. Katz (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, iv, *The Late-Roman Rabbinic Period* (Cambridge, 2006), 993–8. For such critique, see Fergus Millar, 'Review: *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* by W. H. C. Frend', *Journal of Roman Studies*, lvi (1966), 233.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 334.

<sup>24</sup> The bibliography is vast; see especially Judith Lieu, '“The Parting of the Ways”: Theological Construct or Historical Reality', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, xvii (1994); Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (eds.), *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Medieval Ages* (Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum, xcv, Tübingen, 2003); Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion, Philadelphia, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Demonstrated most effectively for early Christianity by Éric Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE* (Ithaca, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> To be clear, I am not denying the existence of individuals with these religious affiliations, just the legitimacy of the unnuanced use of the traditional tripartite division to suggest clear boundaries between apparently homogenized groups, and the simplistic assumption this allows that phenomena can be easily explained as the actions of these groups acting with monolithic religious motivations.

So it proves here. These uncritical assumptions about the agency behind persecution ultimately predetermine the answers given to the ‘why’ question too. De Ste Croix concludes his study as follows:

‘Why did the mass of pagans often demand and initiate persecution?’... The answer is clear: it is given to us over and over again in the sources. It was not so much the positive beliefs and practices of the Christians which aroused pagan hostility, but above all the negative element in their religion: their total refusal to worship any god but their own... The essential point I want to make is that this superstitious feeling on the part of the pagans was due above all to the Christians’ ‘atheism’, their refusal to acknowledge the gods and give them their due by paying them cult.<sup>27</sup>

What is telling is not so much the reason for persecution de Ste Croix accepts here — the negative aspects of Christianity — but the one he rejects — the positive elements of Christianity. This makes clear that de Ste Croix assumed that persecution was prompted by *something* about Christianity. Frend too traced pagan hostility to a ‘background of long-standing and endemic religious hatred... If one understands the nature of these hatreds, one may be well on the way to understanding the relations of the Church and the pagan world’;<sup>28</sup> again, ‘Atheism was the real, damning charge against the Christians’.<sup>29</sup> But he added Jewish–Christian rivalry: ‘In the last resort, the troubles of the early Church were due as much to the virulence of the Christian–Jewish controversy as to any other cause’.<sup>30</sup> For both scholars, the conclusion that persecution was due to inter-religious antagonism was an inevitable corollary of their starting position that it was catalysed by adherents of other religions, whether pagans or Jews, for whom religious sentiment was the key motivation. This echoes almost all studies of this topic since the eighteenth century.<sup>31</sup> The ‘who’ of persecution has always predetermined the ‘why’.

<sup>27</sup> De Ste Croix, ‘Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?’, 24–6.

<sup>28</sup> Frend, ‘Persecutions’, 142.

<sup>29</sup> Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, x.

<sup>30</sup> Frend, ‘Persecutions’, 156.

<sup>31</sup> Unsurprisingly, those who have followed de Ste Croix’s model have reached similar conclusions; again, we can take as representative Rives, ‘Persecution of Christians and Ideas of Community in the Roman Empire’, 210 — ‘What were the reasons for this popular hostility? I would agree with de Ste Croix that this



## II

## A FRESH HYPOTHESIS

Where to start an alternative investigation? De Ste Croix's climactic quote above declares that his conclusion is that revealed by our sources. It would be fairer to say by our *Christian* sources. Frend, despite early judicious comments on the difficulties of these,<sup>32</sup> also usually follows their lead. But it is not surprising that Christian texts — that is, texts written by those foregrounding, or even in fact trying to establish, Christian identity — should present Christianity as the key issue. Put another way, many of these sources were written to explore the place of Christianity under empire, for which one established model was antagonism. Indeed, it was the late antique heirs of that mentality who created the label 'paganism' in the first place. If one approaches such texts moulded by the binary mindset they helped create, one will unsurprisingly find further support for it.<sup>33</sup>

How else might we try to answer our question? Non-Christian material can be a great help to much early Christian history but is of limited assistance here.<sup>34</sup> I propose instead that we begin

(n. 31 cont.)

perception of Christian atheism was an important issue, and perhaps even the core of the popular hostility' — and Kinzig, *Christenverfolgung in der Antike*, 20–1, who in a subsection on 'Heidnische Vorurteile gegen die Christen' in his chapter on 'Die Anstößigkeit des Christentums: Die ideologischen Rahmenbedingungen der antiken Konflikte' says 'Deshalb gerieten Gruppen, die sich an dieser Verehrung nicht beteiligten, schnell ins Visier der Behörden... Die Christen waren somit erheblichem Konformitätsdruck ausgesetzt. Wenn sie ihm nicht nachgaben, konnte dies zu Misstrauen, Verleumdungen und verbalen Attacken bis hin zu physischen Obergriffen führen'. Heidi Wendt, 'Ea Superstitione: Christian Martyrdom and the Religion of Freelance Experts', *Journal of Roman Studies*, cv (2015) deserves mention amidst recent scholarship for proposing a more sophisticated model — that Christians suffered as, and alongside, contemporary self-authorizing religious experts — but remains focused on delation by representatives of competing religious groups; for example, at 195–6.

<sup>32</sup> Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, xii.

<sup>33</sup> This is not to dismiss the relevance of Christian martyr literature for our question. But since almost all work on the topic has privileged this material, and in doing so has come to similar conclusions, it represents at the very least an interesting thought experiment to set this material aside in order to see how matters look different when not viewed through its lens.

<sup>34</sup> A consequence in part of Pliny's problematic decision to allow anonymous accusations (Plin. *Ep.* 10.96.5; 10.97.2).

from comparative historiography — that is, from how persecution worked in other times and places. Not because persecution will necessarily have worked that way for Christians under Rome too, but because this allows us to approach our evidence with fresh eyes and new questions.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the most famous historical study of persecution is R. I. Moore's *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*. In this seminal work of 1987, Moore argued that in the early medieval period, 'deliberate and socially sanctioned violence began to be directed, through established governmental, judicial and social institutions, against groups of people defined by general characteristics such as race, religion or way of life; and that membership of such groups in itself came to be regarded as justifying these attacks'.<sup>36</sup> But he demurred from what he saw as the consensus of his peers that each persecuted medieval minority — heretics, Jews, lepers, homosexuals, etc. — suffered because they were hated by the masses on account of their increase in number and their ideological separation from society and its values.<sup>37</sup> Instead, he insisted that attention be paid to persecutors rather than persecuted, and attributed

<sup>35</sup> In particular, I am aware that the contexts for medieval persecution were different from those in antiquity, not least in the clearer boundaries between religious groups and the more active role of the state. Apart from reiterating that the comparison is meant as inspiration rather than systemic parallel, I would make two additional points. First, that Nirenberg's argument was that explaining phenomena on the basis of nebulous group psychologies was inadequate; which remains true whether the groups in question exist in firm distinction from each other or not. And second, that for Nirenberg the identity of delators was crucial to understanding the dynamics of persecution despite the fact that they did so against a backdrop of state hostility; indeed, this was one of the key points at issue between him and Moore, for whom the actions of state agents were of most interest (see Moore, *Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 158). Moreover, it is worth remembering that the motivations of delators need not chime with those of the state even when the latter plays an initiatory role.

<sup>36</sup> R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Authority and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250*, 2nd edn (1987; Oxford, 2007), 4.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, 1–5 and 100, singling out Bernard Hamilton, *The Medieval Inquisition* (London, 1981), who expresses such a view at, for example, 20–1: 'The limits of medieval western toleration were reached when radical attacks of this kind were made on the Church to which everybody belonged and in whose values they all to some extent shared. The heretics no doubt thought that they were simply attacking the Church, but they were, in fact, attacking the entire social order of which the Church formed an indivisible part'.

these collective persecutions to the emergence of evolving prejudicial structures of thought that demonized increasingly classified, stereotyped ‘others’,<sup>38</sup> driven by the disdain of the emerging ‘clerical’ class for the peasantry,<sup>39</sup> and in service of court suppression of popular resistance and the maintenance of power.<sup>40</sup> Moore’s book was part of a wider body of contemporary work striving to produce genealogies of intolerance by pinning down its origins in irrational stereotypes rooted in the past. But such work was fundamentally shaken by the alternative model proposed almost a decade later by David Nirenberg in his *Communities of Violence*.<sup>41</sup> Nirenberg rejected both the theoretical, top-down approach of such work, and its overarching thesis, in part because of its limited ability to explain episodic, routine violence.<sup>42</sup> Instead, he argued via a fine-grained analysis of the judicial experience of Jews, Muslims and lepers in fourteenth-century southern France and the Crown of Aragon (for which unusually extensive archival material survives) for a much more contingent picture rooted in individual behaviour, action and motivation — ‘the sublunary world of context, contingency, and functionality so resolutely ignored by the sorts of models described above’.<sup>43</sup>

Seen in this light, the consensus position delineated above that Christians suffered because of the irrational hatred of non-Christians for stereotyped conceptions of Christians’ supposed shared beliefs or behaviours echoes elements — *mutatis mutandis* — of both Moore’s position and that to which he was reacting — in other words, of historiographical trends long superseded.<sup>44</sup> Nirenberg’s riposte thus offers an intriguing foundation

<sup>38</sup> Moore, *Formation of a Persecuting Society*, at, for example, 93.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, at, for example, 130–2.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, at, for example, 135–8.

<sup>41</sup> David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (1996; Princeton, 2015).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 242–3; though see now the response in the second edition at Moore, *Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 145. In fact the two positions are not, taken *in toto*, irreconcilable, but the distinction between their respective focuses is for our topic of agency important.

<sup>43</sup> Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, summarized at 3–7; quote from 243, coming immediately after a discussion of Moore’s earlier work.

<sup>44</sup> As do the assumptions of that same consensus both that mere membership of the Christian community was sufficient for suffering, and that the non-Christian mob’s antipathy was funnelled through and to a certain extent shared by sympathetic state organs, though neither point can be considered here.

of an alternative approach to the study of early Christian persecution. What is most important for our purposes is the question of agency. Crucial to Nirenberg's thesis was the identification of an obsession with 'informers' in Jewish and Muslim accounts of this period.<sup>45</sup> Here too, delation was the main catalyst by which victims came to suffer at the hands of governments. Moore had recognized this mechanism in passing, but paid no attention to it, focusing instead on the courtly *litterati's* assimilation of these scattered accusations into systematic and sustained stereotypes with which to consolidate their influence. Nirenberg, however, recognized that these accusations, and those who made them, were the heart of the matter. Most intriguingly, his survey of them revealed that the majority were not inter-group but intra-group.<sup>46</sup> Victims usually suffered not at the hands of outsiders but of those close to them. That fed his conclusion that these persecutions cannot be dismissed as motivated by irrational hatred of stereotyped outsiders, but in fact were fed by rational, competitive urges within communities. In particular, Nirenberg drew attention to how often the archive speaks to the everyday financial tensions of these communities, and the financial gains (in confiscated property, for example) to be made by opportunistic accusations.<sup>47</sup>

This comparative example prompts an alternative hypothesis for our investigation, that the persecution of early 'Christians' arose from insiders — that is, those within their own communities — whose actions were motivated by commonplace rational concerns, rather than fear or suspicion of a religion other than their own.<sup>48</sup> These delators might have been business associates, neighbours, friends or even family, and thus might indeed have been those who subscribed to traditional Graeco-Roman religion or to Judaism. But they were incidentally rather than necessarily so. Put another way, it was the routine concerns they shared,

<sup>45</sup> Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, 37 and 161.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 32, 37, 61 and 117.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 53, 106–7, 118, 138 and 173.

<sup>48</sup> I use 'Christians', here and below, in scare quotes to indicate those self-identifying as Christian, and who are in some sense part of a community of others self-identifying in the same way, in the particular circumstances in question (but not necessarily at all times and places, nor to the exclusion of other identities, including religious).

rather than the religious sensibilities they did not, which motivated their actions. Most controversially, this hypothesis allows for the possibility that these persecuting insiders could have been other ‘Christians’. I trust that it will not be considered reductionist to say that social intimacy was more important in catalysing persecution than religion, since, as will become clear, religious issues — just not necessarily different religious identities — were precisely one such matter of shared routine concern.

This final aspect may seem on the face of it controversial. But in fact, two straightforward examples of ‘Christians’ accusing other ‘Christians’ to the Roman authorities hide in plain sight in our extant sources from antiquity. The first comes from Justin Martyr, a private teacher of philosophy in mid-second-century Rome.<sup>49</sup> His *First Apology* is framed as an ‘address and petition (*τὴν προσφώνησιν καὶ ἔντευξιν*)’ (Just. *1 Apol.* 1.1) to the emperors Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus.<sup>50</sup> One recurring theme is the presence of those Justin considers unworthy to be called ‘Christians’ — who think differently about certain Christian matters, and are thus dubbed ‘heretics’ — in the Christian community: ‘And whoever may be found not living as he taught — do not acknowledge them as being Christians, even though they may have the teachings of Christ on the tips of their tongues’ (Just. *1 Apol.* 16.8). Justin explores this via a series of biblical quotations, which culminate in the assertion that ‘every tree not producing good fruit is chopped down and tossed into the fire’ (Just. *1 Apol.* 16.13; referencing *Matt.* 3.10; 7.19; *Luke* 3.9).<sup>51</sup> That in turn leads to a direct appeal to the emperors: ‘we request (*ἄξιόυμεν*) that those not living in accordance with his teachings, and only called Christians, be punished by you (*κολάζεσθαι... ὑφ’ ὑμῶν*)’ (Just. *1 Apol.* 16.14).<sup>52</sup> Here, then,

<sup>49</sup> I am grateful to Markus Vinzent for pointing this out.

<sup>50</sup> Greek text from Denis Minns and Paul Parvis (eds.), *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies* (Oxford, 2009). The disagreement over which emperors were originally included, treated at 34–41, is not important for our purposes.

<sup>51</sup> *Matt.* 3.10 refers to Pharisees and Sadducees, *Luke* 3.9 to Jewish crowds, and *Matt.* 7.19 to false prophets.

<sup>52</sup> Matthijs den Dulk, *Between Jews and Heretics: Refiguring Justin Martyr’s Dialogue with Trypho* (Routledge Studies in the Early Christian World, London, 2018), 13–37; affirming this interpretation of the Greek at 17–18, one of the only commentators to note its significance. See too Wendt, ‘Ea Superstitione’, 196, without further discussion.

we have someone self-identifying as Christian explicitly requesting that the Roman authorities punish others who self-identify the same way.<sup>53</sup>

Later, talking again of heretics, Justin strives to prove that some ‘Christians’ do not merit the name: ‘And all those sent forth by these, as we asserted, are called Christians, in the same way that among the philosophers those not sharing teachings have the common name of philosophy predicated of them’ (Just. *1 Apol.* 26.6; see also 4.7–8; 7.3). He then implies that these may be guilty of precisely those crimes about which we know rumours circulated in relation to Christianity: ‘But whether they also do those shameful deeds told like myths (*τὰ δὺσφημα ἐκεῖνα μυθολογούμενα ἔργα*) — the toppling of the lampstand, the unrestrained sexual acts and feasts of human flesh — we are not sure (*οὐ γινώσκομεν*)’ (Just. *1 Apol.* 26.7; cf. 4.7). In other words, Justin not only urges the Roman government to violence against ‘Christians’; he also propagates precisely those rumours about which he and the other apologists complain (Just. *Dial.* 1.199; Athen. *Leg.* 3.1; Tert. *Apol.* 8.1–7, 9.8–20; *Ad Nat.* 1.7.24, 1.16.1; Minuc. *Oct.* 9.6; Clem. *Strom.* 3.1.3; Orig. *Contr. Cels.* 6.27; Eus. *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.14).

This should not surprise us. Justin was one private teacher among many, catering to a small number of pupils in urban Rome.<sup>54</sup> In this competitive pedagogical environment, those

<sup>53</sup> To the objection that we do not have more such explicit examples of intra-Christian delation in the mouths of ‘Christians’ themselves, one might point out both that we would not really expect such to have survived in our sources, given that they are almost exclusively written either by disinterested outsiders or highly interested insiders, and that the same is true for delation in the Roman world more generally; see, for example, Rutledge, *Imperial Inquisitions*, 8: ‘For the Principate our situation becomes still more complicated. We have no direct sources from those who are noted as delators in the historical and literary record — no memoirs, no rhetorical treatises, and no speeches survive directly from the hand of the *delator*, even though they did circulate’.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, trans. Michael Steinhauser (Edinburgh, 2003), 272–9; Harlow G. Snyder, ‘“Above the Bath of Myrtinus”: Justin Martyr’s “School” in the City of Rome’, *Harvard Theological Review*, c (2007); Laura Salah Nasrallah, *Christian Responses to Roman Art and Architecture: The Second-Century Church Amid the Spaces of Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), 119–68; Kendra Eshleman, *The Social World of Intellectuals in the Roman Empire: Sophists, Philosophers, and Christians* (Cambridge, 2012), at for example 122 n. 120; Jared Secord, *Christian Intellectuals and the Roman Empire: From Justin Martyr to Origen* (University Park, PA, 2020), 46–76.

with whom he disagreed doctrinally challenged his teaching, his status and his livelihood. Justin tells us how he expected one such intellectual spat, with the Cynic Crescens, to prompt his own arrest: ‘And I too expect to be targeted and impaled on wood (ἐπιβουλευθῆναι καὶ ξύλῳ ἐμπαγῆναι) by one of those mentioned, or at least by Crescens, that lover of bluster and boast in equal measure (τοῦ φιλοψόφου καὶ φιλοκόμπου)’ (Just. *2 Apol.* 8(3).1; see also 2–7).<sup>55</sup> Pedagogical disagreements, feuds and tensions — like most — could end up in court. Only a misguided assumption that ‘Christians’ were immune from such tensions — to which almost all early Christian literature tells the lie! — prevents the conclusion that their infighting could do likewise.<sup>56</sup>

The second piece of evidence is a mid-third-century document, preserved in Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History*, concerning Paul of Samosata, bishop of Antioch. Paul, labelled a heretic, was at the centre of a major church controversy that catalysed two synods. After the second, he was excommunicated and replaced as bishop by one Domnus, a decision Paul refused to accept. The sequel is instructive:

But since Paul by no means wanted to give up possession of the meeting house of the church (τοῦ τῆς ἐκκλησίας οἴκου), the emperor Aurelian was petitioned (ἐντευχθεῖς) and took care of the matter most justly, ordering them to allot the meeting house (νεῖμαι προστάτων τὸν οἶκον) to those whom the bishops of Italy and the city of Rome might adjudge it. In this way the aforementioned man was driven out of the church by the ruler of the world (ὑπὸ τῆς κοσμικῆς ἀρχῆς ἐξελαύνεται τῆς ἐκκλησίας) with the uttermost shame. Such a man was Aurelian towards us at this time, but further on in his reign he

<sup>55</sup> See, especially, Runar M. Thorsteinsson, ‘Justin’s Debate with Crescens the Stoic’, *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum*, xvii (2013); responding to Abraham J. Malherbe, ‘Justin and Crescens’, in Everett Ferguson (ed.), *Christian Teaching: Studies in Honor of LeMoine G. Lewis* (Abilene, 1981) — republished in Carl R. Holladay et al. (eds.), *Light from the Gentiles: Hellenistic Philosophy and Early Christianity* (Supplements to Novum Testamentum, cl, Leiden, 2013) — who considers the debate a literary fiction. Eus. *Hist. eccl.* 4.16.1–9 records Justin’s concerns as being realized.

<sup>56</sup> It is not inconceivable that Crescens himself was a ‘Christian’; certainly Justin suggests that he might be acting as he did ‘in order not to be suspected of being such a person’ (Just. *2 Apol.* 8.3). If we need further evidence that Justin was employing a tactic that he knew could as easily be used against him, we need only look to his own account of the delation of a Christian woman and her Christian teacher by the former’s husband (Just. *2 Apol.* 2.1–20).

was minded differently towards us, and at that time, he was swayed by the counsel of certain people (τισὶν βουλαῖς... ἀνεκινεῖτο) to raise a persecution (διωγμὸν) against us. (*Hist. eccl.* 7.30.19–20)

This neglected episode has traditionally been explained as the exceptional result of a turbulent political situation, streaked with nationalism, whereby Aurelian was galvanized by Paul's appointment as *ducenarius* of Zenobia's Palmyrene regime.<sup>57</sup> But Fergus Millar has refuted this.<sup>58</sup> As he notes, this episode is not exceptional, but simply demonstrates 'Christians' participating in the ubiquitous phenomenon of imperial judicial appeal.<sup>59</sup> That Paul was branded a heretic, and thus an outsider, has obscured the fact that again here, during an internal dispute, one group self-identifying as Christian has successfully appealed to the Roman government for violent intervention against another that self-identifies the same way. It is also intriguing that, at least in Eusebius' sequence of events, this seems to have been followed ultimately by a wider persecution.

These two initial case studies thus demonstrate the fundamental plausibility of the hypothesis. In what follows, I aim to demonstrate the efficacy of this most radical consequence of the hypothesis — namely that 'Christians' may have accused other 'Christians' — across the chronological and geographical extent of the persecutions, via three case studies taken from the mid first, second and third centuries, and from Italy, Syria and North Africa. That does not, of course, prove its ubiquitous applicability.<sup>60</sup> My point is that the fact that some 'Christians' suffered at the hands of those who also saw themselves as 'Christians' proves the severe limitations of the 'clash of religions' model that has dominated scholarship to date. It instead offers a new model for discussion, one based on intimate, local agency, and thus rooted in the realities of daily existence.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup> As in, for example, Gustave Bardy, *Paul de Samosate: étude historique* (Louvain, 1929). Glanville Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria from Seleucus to the Arab Conquest* (Princeton, 1961), 310–15, echoes Bardy, but, at 315 n. 174, discounts Eusebius' report entirely, deeming it unlikely and unnecessary.

<sup>58</sup> Fergus Millar, 'Paul of Samosata, Zenobia and Aurelian: The Church, Local Culture and Political Allegiance in Third-Century Syria', *Journal of Roman Studies*, lxi (1971).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>60</sup> Though it does, I hope, provide an antidote to the continuing influence of de Ste Croix's misleading tripartite periodization; see n. 17 above.

<sup>61</sup> Offered in the spirit of Frend, 'Persecutions', 141: 'Every generation of historiographers has had its own interpretation of the persecutions'.



The implications of this model are wide-ranging. First, reading the persecution of the ‘Christians’ in terms of changing, local tensions rather than static, universal ideologies allows for a different understanding of both what motivated it, and what it was like to experience it. In other words, it transforms our capacity to empathize with both those who perpetrated and those who suffered persecution, putting individual experience at the centre of study. Second, it has consequences for scholarship on early Christianity more widely, which remains shackled to twin models of binary contrast — between Rome and Christianity, on the one hand, and pre- and post-Constantinian Christianity, on the other. Third, there are broader lessons beyond this case study and its antique bounds. I hope this article can not only problematize some of our assumptions about how minority groups engage with the state, but also serve more generally as a prompt that religious identity should not be assumed to be the dominant facet of identity even for religious actors, and thus that religion need not — and arguably should not — be our focus when writing religious history. Perhaps most important, this study represents a challenge to the assumption — as rife today as ever — that inter-religious tensions were and are the key driver of community violence.

### III

#### FIRST-CENTURY ITALY

We begin, as do most treatments of Christian persecution, with events in Rome under Nero.<sup>62</sup> The story is well known. After the fire of 64 CE, so the second-century historian Tacitus recounts, the emperor, to distract from a persistent rumour that he was responsible, ‘supplied as culprits (*subdidit reos*), and punished with the most artificial penalties, those detested for their shameful acts whom the people called Christians (*vulgus Christianos*)

<sup>62</sup> I leave aside the so-called Neronian persecution as a whole. Suffice to say that it ultimately boils down to this episode; all other aspects stand under strong suspicion. See Brent D. Shaw, ‘The Myth of the Neronian Persecution’, *Journal of Roman Studies*, cv (2015), though I would not commit to his conclusion that the entire episode is ahistorical; see further Christopher P. Jones, ‘The Historicity of the Neronian Persecution: A Response to Brent Shaw’, *New Testament Studies*, lxiii (2017), and Brent D. Shaw, ‘Response to Christopher Jones: The Historicity of the Neronian Persecution’, *New Testament Studies*, lxiv (2018).

*appellabat*)' (Tac. *Ann.* 15.44.3).<sup>63</sup> Much ink has been spilled on this; I focus here only on the agency behind the arraignment. Tacitus tells us only that 'once arrested, some confessed (*correpti qui<dam> fatebantur*)' (Tac. *Ann.* 15.44.5).<sup>64</sup> Normal Roman judicial process, as outlined above, and the selection of these individuals as scapegoats out of all possible victims, suggests that they were victims of delation. Tacitus certainly identifies them by reference to others' views of them. The second-century apologist Melito of Sardis also remembers Christian suffering under Nero stemming from delation:

Nero and Domitian alone out of all of them, persuaded by certain slanderous (*βασκάνων*) men, wanted to bring (*καταστήσαι*) our teaching into ill-repute (*ἐν διαβολῇ*), after which time, via an unreasonable custom, the falsehood of vexatious prosecution (*τὸ τῆς συκοφαντίας... ψεῦδος*) about people like us erupted. (Eus. *Hist. eccl.* 4.26.9)<sup>65</sup>

Who lies behind these accusations? De Ste Croix's treatment of the Neronian episode is brief and dismissive.<sup>66</sup> Tacitus' mention of the 'people' maps easily onto his model of mass pagan antagonism based on stereotypes: 'The Christians were picked on as scapegoats, then, because they were already believed by the populace to be capable of horrid crimes, *flagitia*.'<sup>67</sup> The repeated use here of the definitive article — *the* populace; *the* Christians — demonstrates de Ste Croix's application of a model of binary antagonism.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Latin text from Rhiannon Ash (ed.), *Tacitus: Annals Book XV* (Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics, Cambridge, 2018).

<sup>64</sup> On the correction of *qui* to *quidam* (thus putting arrest before confession), see Ash (ed.), *Tacitus*, 206; the amendment was originally that of Robert J. Getty, 'Nero's Indictment of the Christians in AD 64: Tacitus' *Annals* 15.44.2–4', in Luitpold Wallach (ed.), *The Classical Tradition: Literary and Historical Studies in Honor of Harry Caplan* (Ithaca, 1966), 287–8.

<sup>65</sup> Greek text from Gustave Bardy, *Eusèbe de Césarée: Histoire Ecclésiastique*, 4 vols. (Sources chrétiennes, xxxi, xli, lv, lxxiii, Paris, 1952–8; repr. 3 1967).

<sup>66</sup> De Ste Croix, 'Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?', 7–8.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 8. E. Mary Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule: From Pompey to Diocletian* (Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity, xx, Leiden, 1976), 217–18, suggested that these *flagitia* might be traced to a misunderstanding of Christians' incendiary language about the Second Coming. That perhaps finds some support in Tacitus' oft-noted and seemingly deliberate echoing of Livy's account of the Bacchanalia, since both authors use the language of *flagitia*, and the latter account confirms that this could encompass incendiariam (Liv. *De urb. cond.* 39.14.10).

<sup>68</sup> Hence the absence of the definite article in the title of my own article.

Frend followed this reading,<sup>69</sup> but thought that the episode also owed something to Jewish machinations. Starting from the observation that the language Tacitus used to describe the basis of conviction — ‘hatred of the human race (*odium generis humani*)’ (Tac. *Ann.* 15.44.4) — echoes that he and others used of the Jews, Frend suggests that the entire Judaeo-Christian community stood under suspicion in mid-first-century Rome.<sup>70</sup> That the fire was blamed on ‘Christians’ indicates that ‘the orthodox Jews... were able, through influence at Court, to shift the odium of the outbreak on to the hated schismatics, the Christian synagogue. This they hoped to destroy at a single tremendous blow’.<sup>71</sup> This ‘influence at Court’ was the presumed agency of

<sup>69</sup> Both were influenced by Jean Beaujeu: *L’Incendie de Rome en 64 et les chrétiens* (Collection Latomus, xlix, Brussels, 1960); see de Ste Croix, ‘Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?’, 8, and Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 162.

<sup>70</sup> On the translation of *odium humani generis*, see, for example, Harald Fuchs, ‘Tacitus über die Christen’, *Vigiliae Christianae*, iv (1950), 82–8; and Getty, ‘Nero’s Indictment of the Christians in AD 64’, 290–1.

<sup>71</sup> Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 164–5; see also Frend, ‘Persecutions’, 152–3 and 157; and W. H. C. Frend, ‘A Note on Tertullian and the Jews’, *Studia Patristica*, x (1970), 295. Frend cites Leon Hardy Canfield, *The Early Persecutions of the Christians* (Studies in History, Economics, and Public Law, xl, New York, 1913), 48–9; who built in turn on Francis J. Bacchus, ‘The Roman Church down to the Neronian Persecution’, *Dublin Review* (1908), and Paul Allard, *Histoire des persécutions pendant les deux premiers siècles: d’après les documents archéologiques*, 3rd edn (Paris, 1903), 42–7. Marcel Simon, *Vetus Israel: A Study of the Relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire*, trans. H. McKeating (Oxford, 1986), 117, echoes Frend, as does Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 47 n. 75, speculating missionary motivations. Smallwood, *Jews under Roman Rule*, 218–19, supports Jewish agency, but argues not that it was designed to divert attention, but that the Jews simply aimed to counter a threat to their own existence (necessitating an early break between Judaism and Christianity, at 217 n. 47). James C. Walters, ‘Romans, Jews, and Christians: The Impact of the Romans on Jewish/Christian Relations in First-Century Rome’, in Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson (eds.), *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome* (Grand Rapids, 1998), 181–3, suggests that aggressive Christian proselytizing risked drawing attention to Jewish proselytes, and thus that the Jews resorted to lobbying Roman officials. James S. McLaren, ‘Early Christian Polemic against Jews and the Persecution of Christians in Rome by Nero’, in Wendy Mayer and Bronwen Neil (eds.), *Religious Conflict from Early Christianity to the Rise of Islam* (Berlin, 2013), has suggested that the Roman Jews acted out of urgent self-protection, since they had already come onto Nero’s radar as a disruptive influence (*contra*, Smallwood, *Jews under Roman Rule*, 217–9, and Walters, ‘Romans, Jews, and Christians’, 180–2). McLaren critiques Frend and Simon, at 44–8, on the basis that the Jews could only have expected a short-term response from Rome,

(cont. on p. 19)

Poppaea Sabina (and one Tigellinus), considered sympathetic to the Jewish cause on the basis of Josephus' testimony that 'she was a god-fearer (*θεοσεβῆς γὰρ ἦν*)' (Jos. *Ant. Jud.* 20.11.195; see also *Vit.* 13–16).<sup>72</sup>

Frend's thesis was fatally flawed. He gave no evidence for Tigellinus' supposed Jewish sympathies; nor could he have, since none exists.<sup>73</sup> And Poppaea's proclivity for Judaism is now widely accepted to have been overestimated. Josephus' wider linguistic usage proves that his reference to her as '*θεοσεβεία*' at most suggests some sympathy towards Judaism, rather than that Poppaea was a proselyte or Judaizer.<sup>74</sup> But it may well only have meant that she was devout.<sup>75</sup> The two interventions Josephus describes — advocating for priests who refused to demolish a wall of the Temple complex, and assisting Josephus — need not have been motivated by affiliation for Judaism, but simply broader religious scruples or the principles of patronage.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, Frend's hypothesis that she here favoured certain Jews in an internal dispute — that is, against others under the umbrella of

(n. 71 cont.)

inadequate for their purposes, but is unconvincing since expulsion from Rome would still have been a victory. See also John Pollini, 'Burning Rome, Burning Christians', in Shadi Bartsch, Kirk Freudenburg and Cedric Littlewood (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Nero* (Cambridge, 2017), 234.

<sup>72</sup> Greek text from Benedict Niese (ed.), *Flavii Iosephi opera*, 4 vols. (Berlin, 1887–90; repr. 1955). This idea goes back to Philippe Fabia, 'Comment Poppée devint impératrice', *Revue de Philologie*, xxi (1897), 227, and Rudolf Hanslik, 'Poppaea Sabina', *Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Band xxii, Halbband 43 (1953).

<sup>73</sup> Millar, 'Review', 233 suggests he must have meant Aliturus, the thespian go-between of *Vita* 13–16.

<sup>74</sup> See Margaret H. Williams, '“Θεοσεβῆς γὰρ ἦν” — The Jewish Tendencies of Poppaea Sabina', *Journal of Theological Studies*, xxxix (1988), 107–8.

<sup>75</sup> See already E. Mary Smallwood, 'The Alleged Jewish Tendencies of Poppaea Sabina', *Journal of Theological Studies*, x (1959), reiterated in Smallwood, *Jews under Roman Rule*, 206 nn. 15–16, and 278–9 n. 79; followed by Miriam T. Griffin, *Nero: The End of a Dynasty* (Roman Imperial Biographies, London, 1984), 101. Williams, '“Θεοσεβῆς γὰρ ἦν”', at 101–3, correctly dismisses Smallwood's credence to tales of Poppaea's immorality and her assumption that this makes Jewish sympathy less likely, and at 103–6, the idea that sympathy to both traditional religious piety and monotheism was impossible. But the linguistic point remains.

<sup>76</sup> Fabia, 'Comment Poppée devint impératrice' and Hanslik, 'Poppaea Sabina' had in fact originally hypothesized such a wider eclectic religious interest. This is favoured by Williams, '“Θεοσεβῆς γὰρ ἦν”', 110–11.

those to whom Poppaea was supposedly sympathetic — would represent something far beyond Josephus' other examples, and much less probable.<sup>77</sup> Finally, we must be cautious about claims of sympathy among Rome elites from a staunch Jewish apologist such as Josephus.<sup>78</sup>

A further difficulty with Frend's thesis concerns his supplementary evidence for it, namely *1 Clement*, a letter written from one Christian community in Rome to another in Corinth. This text clearly links persecution to community fragmentation. Its author looks back on Christian suffering under Nero and observes that 'Through jealousy and envy (*Διὰ ζήλον και φθόνον*) the greatest and most righteous pillars were persecuted and driven to their deaths' (*1 Clem.* 5.2).<sup>79</sup> Similar warnings about *ζήλος*, *φθόνος* and *ἔρις* and the need for 'concord' recur throughout the letter. As has long been observed, this is language familiar from the New Testament for describing internal community conflict rather than outsider hostility.<sup>80</sup> Frend argued that the disagreement in question was specifically that between Old Israel and New, a thesis built on the fact that *1 Clement* gives a series of examples of such disputes from the Hebrew Bible (noting too that some contemporary 'Christians' still called themselves a synagogue; for example, *James* 2.2; *Herm. Mand.* 11.9).<sup>81</sup>

<sup>77</sup> *Contra*, Pollini, 'Burning Rome, Burning Christians', 234.

<sup>78</sup> For examples of exaggeration, see Tessa Rajak, 'Was There a Roman Charter for the Jews?', *Journal of Roman Studies*, lxxiv (1984) (neglected by Williams, "'Θεοσεβῆς γὰρ ἦν"', 107).

<sup>79</sup> Greek text from Annie Jaubert (ed.), *Clément de Rome: Épître aux Corinthiens* (Sources chrétiennes, clxvii, Paris, 1971). The examples that follow — to Peter (*1 Clem.* 5.4), Paul (*1 Clem.* 5.5), the 'vast mass of the chosen' gathered to them (*1 Clem.* 6.1), and 'women persecuted who had suffered terrible and unholy outrages as Danaids and Dircae' (*1 Clem.* 6.2) — were associated in Christian memory with Neronian events. They all make heavy use of the language of envy (see also *1 Clem.* 6.3–4).

<sup>80</sup> William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (eds.), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, 1957), at 338, 865, and 309, respectively.

<sup>81</sup> Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 164. It is certainly true that *1 Clement* seems to have emerged from a highly Jewish oeuvre; see, for example, Ehud Nestle 'War der Verfasser des I. Clemensbriefes semitischer Abstammung?', *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, i (1900); Karlmann Beyschlag, *Clemens Romanus und der Frühkatholizismus: Untersuchungen zu I Clemens 1–7* (Beiträge zur historischen Theologie, xxxv, Tübingen, 1966); Donald Alfred Hagner, *The Use of the Old and New Testaments in Clement of Rome* (Leiden, 1973).

Frend was quite right to note the connection between outside persecution and internal conflict in *1 Clement*. But his attempt to isolate that disagreement as one between Jews and Christians is unsustainable. Though he recognizes that ‘Christians’ were part of the Jewish community at this time, he nevertheless assumes that they were clearly delineated within it. But the Judaeo-Christian community in Rome was a broiling melting pot of overlapping identities and simmering tensions in which affinity to Jewish principles and affiliation with Jesus did not split along clean lines.<sup>82</sup> Even more problematically for his thesis, *1 Clement*, when read as a whole, simply does not say what Frend wants it to. The examples from the Hebrew Bible he privileged in fact sit side by side with those of apostolic suffering.<sup>83</sup> More striking, the letter betrays no antagonism towards the Jewish faith.<sup>84</sup> And unless we think that Clement wrote the letter to the entire Corinthian Jewish community (rather than to certain individuals or groups within it with some affinity for Jesus) it is hard not to read ‘For what reason are there rifts and rages, dissensions and divisions, and even war (ἔρεις καὶ θυμοὶ καὶ διχοστασίαι καὶ σχίσματα πόλεμός τε) among you?’ (*1 Clem.* 46.5; see too 46.4; 46.7–47.6; 63.1 — all beyond the usually cited chapters 5–6) as referencing antagonism between members of Clement’s direct audience (rather than the wider group of which Clement’s recipients were part). *1 Clement*, then, must concern persecution stemming from division within that subset

<sup>82</sup> This also tells against McLaren’s theory (see n. 71 above) since if one needed a collective scapegoat to deflect attention, one would likely choose a more obviously distinct group. McLaren, ‘Early Christian Polemic against Jews and the Persecution of Christians in Rome by Nero’, 48 n. 30, in tacit acknowledgment of this difficulty, hypothesizes that Jewish delation of Christians included an attempt to distinguish Christians from Jews. I note too that McLaren’s other suggestion, at 48–50 — that New Testament texts dated to before 64 CE demonstrate less negativity towards the Jews than those dated after it — is only briefly stated, and requires extensive special pleading.

<sup>83</sup> Noted by Michael D. Goulder, ‘Did Peter ever go to Rome?’, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, lvii (2004), 389, who suggests that *1 Clement* could refer to delation by and of either Jews or Christians, and by Walters, ‘Romans, Jews, and Christians’, 192–3 n. 67.

<sup>84</sup> Walters, ‘Romans, Jews, and Christians’, 192–4 (though he uses it as evidence of clear separation between the Jewish and Christian communities by the mid 90s, about which I am less convinced).

of the Jewish community self-identifying as Christian (whether or not they also self-identified as Jewish), and one that thus cannot be characterized simplistically as a conflict between different religions.<sup>85</sup>

This impression is supported by close attention to the cause of division: ‘when jealousy descended concerning the priesthood (ζήλου ἐμπεσόντος περι τῆς ἱερωσύνης) and factionalization among the tribes (στασιάζουσῶν τῶν φυλῶν)’ (1 Clem. 43.2) and contemporary ‘discord over the name of the episcopate (ἔρις... περι τοῦ ὀνόματος τῆς ἐπισκοπῆς)’ (1 Clem. 44.1; more widely 42.2–46.9). Specifically, Clement’s anger is directed at those who remove clerics from their positions unjustly: ‘for we see that you yourselves have transferred some of those ministering well out of their blameless and revered roles’ (1 Clem. 44.6). Again, he compares such betrayal to persecution (1 Clem. 45.4–46.1), asking, for example, ‘Was Daniel thrown into the den of lions by those that feared God?’ (1 Clem. 45.6). The problem plaguing the Corinthians, one tied to persecution, and which Clement claims as long-standing and as having caused the Neronian persecution, is an internal division over leadership.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, Clement suggests that this insider misbehaviour directly impacts their treatment by outsiders:

It is shameful, my beloved, very shameful, and unworthy of conduct in Christ, that it be bandied about (ἀκούεσθαι) that the most steadfast and ancient church of the Corinthians is, because of one or two persons, torn by division (στασιάζειν) towards its presbyters. And tidings of this have reached not just us but also those beyond us (τοὺς ἑτεροκλινεῖς ὑπάρχοντας ἀφ’ ἡμῶν), with the result that through your foolishness the name of the lord is slandered (βλασφημίας), and you bring danger on yourselves (ἐαυτοῖς δὲ κίνδυνον ἐπεξεργάεσθαι). (1 Clem. 47.6–7)

<sup>85</sup> Noted by David Eastman, ‘Jealousy, Internal Strife, and the Deaths of Peter and Paul: A Reassessment of 1 Clement’, *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum*, xviii (2013), 34–53; rehabilitating the earlier suggestion of Oscar Cullmann, ‘Les causes de la mort de Pierre et de Paul d’après le témoignage de Clément Romain’, *Revue d’Histoire et de Philosophie religieuses*, 10<sup>e</sup> Année, iii (1930), and Oscar Cullmann, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr. A Historical and Theological Study*, trans. Floyd V. Filson (Philadelphia, 1953), 91–100.

<sup>86</sup> Eastman, ‘Jealousy, Internal Strife, and the Deaths of Peter and Paul’, 43–7, notes that the Hebrew Bible examples used in 1 Clement concern jealousy directed at special favour or authority, which accords with ancient philosophical thought on ζήλος, φθόνος and ἔρις.

We thus have internal division among ‘Christians’ catalysing their slander before outsiders, putting them at risk. The argument is strengthened when we consider Clement’s preceding words: ‘Take up the letter of the blessed apostle Paul. What did he write to you in the first place at the beginning of the gospel? Truly, he corresponded with you by the spirit about himself and Cephas and Apollos, because even then preferences (*προσκλίσεις*) were being formed among you’ (*1 Clem.* 47.1–3). Clement links his contemporary situation to that which motivated Paul’s earlier correspondence with the Corinthians.<sup>87</sup> And in that earlier canonical text we find the following:

Does one of you dare, having something against another (*τις ὑμῶν πρᾶγμα ἔχων*), to take it for judgement before the unjust (*κρίνεσθαι ἐπὶ τῶν ἀδίκων*) and not before the saints?... I speak to your humiliation. Is there no one among you wise who is able to judge between one brother and another (*διακρίναι ἀνά μέσον τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ*)? But a brother goes to trial against a brother (*ἀδελφὸς μετὰ ἀδελφοῦ κρίνεται*), and this before the unfaithful?! Already it is a total failing that you even have lawsuits among yourselves (*κρίματα ἔχετε μεθ’ ἑαυτῶν*). Why not rather be dealt with unjustly (*ἀδικεῖσθε*)? Why not rather be defrauded (*ἀποστερεῖσθε*)? But you yourselves wrong and defraud, and your brothers to boot (*ἀδικεῖτε καὶ ἀποστερεῖτε, καὶ τοῦτο ἀδελφούς*)! (*1 Cor.* 6: 1–8)<sup>88</sup>

This intertextual parallel suggests that Clement, like Paul, is concerned about an internal disagreement among ‘Christians’ that has resulted in them arraigning each other before the Roman authorities.

A nuanced reading of *1 Clement* thus suggests that the antagonism that brought ‘Christians’ before Roman magistrates in mid-first-century Italy arose from other members of their own broad community. Two further points stand in its support.<sup>89</sup> First, it is suggestive that almost all our evidence of Roman Christianity speaks from its earliest days of what Peter Lampe called ‘fractionation’. Lampe has demonstrated that ‘Christians’

<sup>87</sup> See Beyschlag, *Clemens Romanus und der Frühkatholizismus*, 175.

<sup>88</sup> Greek text from Kurt Aland *et al.* (eds.), *The Greek New Testament*, 2nd edn (Stuttgart, 1968).

<sup>89</sup> I note too the speculation of Eastman, ‘Jealousy, Internal Strife, and the Deaths of Peter and Paul’, 49, that *2 Tim.* 4.14–15 may preserve a memory of Paul suffering such betrayal to the Roman authorities at the hands of a fellow Christian leader, Alexander the Coppersmith.



were geographically spread across the city in its Jewish areas — in Trastevere, the Appian Way outside the Porta Capena, and likely parts of the Aventine Hill and the Campus Martius.<sup>90</sup> Within those areas, the nature of Christian house churches also meant that the community was split into multiple small cells. Our earliest evidence testifies to at least eight groups meeting separately (*Rom.* 16), and this fragmentation only increased as Christianity grew in size (with, for example, probably between fifteen and twenty titular churches in the third century).<sup>91</sup> The independence of these communities facilitated theological difference, often correlating to national, socio-educational, and thus economic, stratification.<sup>92</sup> And that in turn, I suggest, could breed conflict with similarly complex motivations.<sup>93</sup>

Second, though the details of the first arraignment under Nero are opaque, Tacitus is clear on what happened next: ‘then, by their information (*indicio eorum*), a huge crowd was convicted’ (*Tac. Ann.* 15.44.4).<sup>94</sup> The majority of those that suffered thus did so because they had been identified by others also suffering.<sup>95</sup> All commentators have assumed that this was done unwillingly.<sup>96</sup> But Tacitus does not say so, and the alternative is

<sup>90</sup> Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 19–47, on the basis of later local traditions, the earliest archaeologically known Christian graves, the Jewish quarters, concentrations in the topographical distributions of the late antique titular churches, and contemporary literary information on Christian activities.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 359–65; on the house church phenomenon, 366–80.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 381–4.

<sup>93</sup> Pace, *ibid.*, 385–96; against whose argument for theological tolerance I suggest speak the examples here discussed, as well as the extensive exceptions whose existence he himself acknowledges. Further, Lampe repeatedly uses as evidence of unity Eusebius, whose clear efforts to create such a picture tell against its veracity; see James Corke-Webster, *Eusebius and Empire: Constructing Church and Rome in the Ecclesiastical History* (Cambridge, 2019), 215–48. Moreover, Lampe looks only for evidence of collective ‘excommunication’, rather than the kind of interpersonal tensions more characteristic of conflict in this period.

<sup>94</sup> Reading *convicti not coniuncti*, as most commentators; pace, Getty, ‘Nero’s Indictment of the Christians in AD 64’, 289–90.

<sup>95</sup> Noted already by Cullmann, *Peter*, 107–8.

<sup>96</sup> By those that posit — following the traditional binary — both pagan and Jewish agency; see, for example, de Ste Croix, ‘Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?’, 8, and McLaren, ‘Early Christian Polemic against Jews and the Persecution of Christians in Rome by Nero’, 45. See too the imaginative supposition conjured in order to deny the possibility of ‘Christians’ betraying their brothers in Allard, *Histoire des persécutions pendant les deux premiers siècles*, 47.

equally possible. Indeed, as discussed earlier, becoming an *index* was a well-established route to immunity (see, for example, Tac. *Ann.* 6.7).<sup>97</sup> We may even be glimpsing — in the initial delation, and then the subsequent identification by those named of other ‘Christians’ — an example of the claim and counterclaim culture that characterized judicial life under the Roman empire.<sup>98</sup>

#### IV

##### SECOND-CENTURY SYRIA

This account of events in Neronian Rome finds an intriguing parallel a century later in the east of the empire. Ignatius is known for the letters he sent in the mid second century to Christian communities across Asia Minor. These were occasioned by a journey from Antioch in Syria, of which he was a bishop, to Rome, where he expected to be martyred. We have even less concrete information about Ignatius’ arrest than about that of the Roman ‘Christians’, but a careful reading not only suggests that our hypothesis best explains the available data, but also sheds additional light on the question of motivation.

<sup>97</sup> Discussed in Rutledge, *Imperial Inquisitions*, 322 n. 13.

<sup>98</sup> This reading is also perhaps supported by Suetonius’ reference to an earlier incident in the 40s CE under Claudius, where the Jews were expelled from Rome ‘for constantly causing disturbance, sparked by Chrestus (*impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis*)’ (Suet. *Vit. Div. Claud.* 25.4). If that is a reference to Christianity, it supports a picture of an ongoing internal disagreement of sufficient force to have already prompted imperial intervention. But the link between Chrestus and Christ is by no means established; amidst the literature, see affirming it, for example, E. A. Judge and G. S. R. Thomas, ‘The Origin of the Church at Rome: A New Solution’, *Reformed Theological Review*, xxv (1966), 84–9, reprinted in E. A. Judge, *The First Christians in the Roman World: Augustan and New Testament Essays*, ed. James R. Harrison (Tübingen, 2008), 445–50; Smallwood, *Jews under Roman Rule*, 211–12; Leonard Victor Rutgers, ‘Roman Policy towards the Jews: Expulsions from the City of Rome during the First Century CE’, *Classical Antiquity*, xiii (1994), 65–6, reprinted in Donfried and Richardson, *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome*, 105–6; Walters, ‘Romans, Jews, and Christians’, 177; Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 11–16; and questioning it, for example Stephen Benko, ‘The Edict of Claudius of AD 49 and the Instigator Chrestus’, *Theologische Zeitschrift*, xxv (1969), 408–12; H. Dixon Slingerland, ‘Chrestus: Christus?’, in A. J. Avery-Peck (ed.), *New Perspectives on Ancient Judaism*, iv, *The Literature of Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Lanham, 1989); McLaren, ‘Early Christian Polemic against Jews and the Persecution of Christians in Rome by Nero’, 44 n. 16.

Ignatius describes himself as ‘one bound (δεδεμένος)’ (Ign. Rom. 1.1; and throughout his letters).<sup>99</sup> That his arrest has come at the hands of the Roman authorities is clear from his assertion that ‘From Syria as far as Rome I am fighting with wild beasts (θηριομαχῶ), through land and sea, by night and by day, bound (δεδεμένος) to ten leopards — which is a company of soldiers (στρατιωτικὸν τάγμα)’ (Ign. Rom. 5.1).<sup>100</sup> His expectation that he will die in the arena via *damnatio ad bestias* follows: ‘May I benefit from the wild beasts (τῶν θηρίων) prepared for me’ (Ign. Rom. 5.2; see also 4.1–2). It has often been suggested that Ignatius made this judicial journey on the basis of an appeal to Roman citizenship, like Paul.<sup>101</sup> But it would be odd for a citizen to anticipate death in the arena.<sup>102</sup> Another explanation is that Ignatius was sent as fodder for the capital’s arenas, as provincial criminals habitually were.<sup>103</sup> But as Allen Brent has pointed out, a more likely explanation is that he was a source of civil disruption.<sup>104</sup> That provides an intriguing basis for reconstructing Ignatius’ arrest.

<sup>99</sup> Greek text from Pierre-Thomas Camelot (ed.), *Ignace d’Antioche: Polycarpe de Smyrne. Lettres. Martyre de Polycarpe*, 4th edn (Sources chrétiennes, x, Paris, 1969). The dating of the letters has been long discussed, and is tied to the question of their authenticity. See Jonathon Lookadoo, ‘The Date and Authenticity of the Ignatian Letters: An Outline of Recent Discussions’, *Currents in Biblical Research*, xix (2020), demonstrating that there is a better case to be made for a later second-century date than for forgery. Since authenticity is more important than dating for our purposes, such historical use of the letters is supported.

<sup>100</sup> See Callie Callon, ‘A Re-Examination of Ignatius’ Use of the Term “Leopards”’, *Journal of Theological Studies*, lxvi (2015).

<sup>101</sup> See, for example, Friend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 197. Peter Garnsey, ‘The *Lex Iulia* and Appeal under the Empire’, *Journal of Roman Studies*, lvi (1966), 182–5, has shown that Paul’s appeal was simply a pre-trial request. But this too was made on the basis of citizenship.

<sup>102</sup> Stevan L. Davies, ‘The Predicament of Ignatius of Antioch’, *Vigiliae Christianae*, xxx (1976), 177–8. Davies argues that Ignatius was sent by a legate without power of execution, explaining Ignatius’ fear that the Roman community might save him from death, since legates’ judgements were more easily overturned than those of governors.

<sup>103</sup> For example, William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch (Hermeneia)* (Philadelphia, 1985), 179; a position already critiqued by Davies, ‘Predicament of Ignatius of Antioch’, 177–8, and Robert Joly, *Le dossier d’Ignace d’Antioche* (Université Libre de Bruxelles: Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres, lxxix, Brussels, 1979), 50–2. Allen Brent, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Martyr Bishop and the Origin of Episcopacy* (London, 2007), at 14–19, however, provides further supporting evidence.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

As early as 1934, Percy Harrison argued that the turmoil in Ignatius' Antiochene community was not external persecution but internal conflict focused on Ignatius.<sup>105</sup> Brent has gone further, suggesting that Ignatius' arrest resulted from that factional aggravation escalating and prompting the intervention of the Roman authorities.<sup>106</sup> This is persuasive, not least because internal unrest and his martyrdom are the intertwined key themes of Ignatius' correspondence. Brent suggested that since Ignatius was a prominent figurehead in the community, and a central player in its dispute, he would be the obvious person — as the apparent, if not the actual, key troublemaker — to suffer arrest. Ignatius even admits that he has been the more truculent party and thus the catalyst for conflict (for example, *Ign. Smyrn.* 5.2).<sup>107</sup>

Brent's theory assumes that the authorities intervened once the escalating disturbance came onto their radar. But the alternative is that it was brought to their attention directly, by delation. Such a reading is supported by an important passage in Ignatius' letter to the Ephesians:

Pray incessantly for other men. For there is hope of a change of heart in them that they may come to God. Allow them to be instructed by your deeds. In the face of their anger, you be gentle; in the face of their boastfulness, you be humble; in the face of their slanders (*τὰς βλασφημίας*), you offer prayers; in the face of their deceit (*τὴν πλάνην*), you be rooted in faith (*ἐδραῖοι τῇ πίστει*); in the face of their savagery, you be civilized, not being eager to follow their example. Let us be found their brothers (*Ἀδελφοί*) in fairness; let us be eager to be imitators (*μιμηταί... εἶναι*) of the lord. For who has been treated less justly (*ἀδικηθεῖς*)? Who more cheated (*ἀποστερηθεῖς*)? Who more betrayed (*ἀθετηθεῖς*)? So that no weed of the devil (*τοῦ*

<sup>105</sup> P. N. Harrison, *Polycarp's Two Epistles to the Philippians* (Cambridge, 1936), 79–106, building on Burnett Hillman Streeter, *The Primitive Church: Studied with Special Reference to the Origins of the Christian Ministry* (London, 1929), and widely affirmed since. William R. Schoedel, 'Theological Norms and Social Perspectives in Ignatius of Antioch', in E. P. Sanders (ed.), *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, i, *The Shaping of Christianity in the Second and Third Centuries* (London, 1980), 36–44, furthers the thesis, building on the statistical analyses of Willard M. Swartley, 'The Imitatio Christi in the Ignatian Letters', *Vigiliae Christianae*, xxvii (1973).

<sup>106</sup> Brent, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 20–1 (in fact credited to Harrison, but Harrison did not go so far). Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 11, had suggested that 'the secular authorities of Antioch chose to try to frighten Christians into conformity or maintenance of a lower profile (cf. *Ign. Eph.* 10) by removing their leader'.

<sup>107</sup> Schoedel, 'Theological Norms and Social Perspectives in Ignatius of Antioch', 32; see also 35.

διαβόλου βοτάνη τις) be found among you, but instead you remain in all purity and self-control (*ἀγνεία καὶ σωφροσύνη*) in Jesus Christ, in the flesh and in the spirit. (Ign. *Eph.* 10.1–2)

Here Ignatius speaks of the importance of treating one's enemies well. It has traditionally been read as referring to the conversion of non-Christian outsiders.<sup>108</sup> But this will not do. First, it must refer to persecution rather than conversion. Ignatius' language is simultaneously judicial (*ἀδικηθείς*) and focused on betrayal (*ἀποστερηθείς; ἄθετηθείς*). The particular reference is clearly to Jesus' Passion, wherein Jesus was identified to the Roman authorities both by those in his innermost circle — Judas — and by his wider community — the Jewish authorities. And the use of 'slandering' (*βλασφημίας*) and 'deceit (*τὴν πλάνην*)' also suggests that judicial mistreatment is in view.<sup>109</sup> Ignatius uses the language of being 'rooted (*ἑδραῖοι*)' elsewhere in a similar context, but concerning *4 Maccabees*, a Jewish text important for Ignatius' concept of his own suffering (Ign. *Pol.* 3.1).<sup>110</sup> The most natural reading of this passage is thus that the enemies here envisaged have betrayed 'Christians' to the Roman authorities.

Second, these betrayers must themselves be insiders.<sup>111</sup> The reference to Jesus' experience already suggests this, and it is

<sup>108</sup> Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 69–70.

<sup>109</sup> Technically *το διάβολος* also refers to a slanderer or accuser.

<sup>110</sup> Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 266.

<sup>111</sup> Again, what is important for our purposes is establishing that these individuals were part of the Christian community. That does not negate the possibility that they may also have self-identified as Jewish. Some scholars have argued that Ignatius saw his opponents as Jewish; predictably, Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 188 and 199, citing Einar Molland, 'The Heretics Combated by Ignatius of Antioch', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, v (1954) (though Molland in fact argues that the opponents' 'Judaism' consisted only in their use of the Hebrew Bible). At 201 we also read, 'In Ignatius' letters there is more concern about Jewish heretics than the attitude of the provincial authorities'. This comes in the context of a wider consideration of the validity of his theory between 70 and 135 CE, for example at 184: 'The one continuing theme throughout this period is Jewish-Christian hostility, the *contrarias sibi* aspect of their relationship. Occasionally, this involved intervention by the Roman authorities... The Jewish tactics did not vary from those employed in the previous generation, namely the denunciation of Christians as dangers to the State, accompanied by a constant harrying of their daily lives'. Frend, 'Persecutions', 149 is more moderate. While Ignatius' letters do evidence some such animosity (for example, Ign. *Magn.* 8.1 and 10.3; *Phil.* 6.1), such comments are rare, and refer not to Judaism itself, but to Judaising elements in the Christian community (which

(cont. on p.29)

confirmed by both context and language. The immediately preceding passages all concern internal problems, namely heresy (Ign. *Eph.* 6.2–8.2) and false teachers (Ign. *Eph.* 9.1–2).<sup>112</sup> The parallel passage in the letter to Polycarp mentioned above also concerns false teachers (Ign. *Pol.* 3.1–2). The image of the ‘weed of the devil’ is one Ignatius uses elsewhere explicitly for internal division: ‘keep away from any strange plant (ἀλλοτρίας δὲ βοτάνης), which is heresy (ἥτις ἐστὶν αἵρεσις)’ (Ign. *Trall.* 6.1; see also *Phil.* 3.1, ‘division (μερισμὸν)’).<sup>113</sup> The antagonists here are described as Ἀδελφοί, language not commonly used of non-Christians; similarly it would be strange if outsiders were seen as a threat to Ignatius’ addressees’ ἀγνεία and σωφροσύνη.<sup>114</sup> Most persuasive, Ignatius’ threefold exhortations echo precisely that passage in Paul’s Corinthian correspondence that we considered in the first case study, which speaks of members of the Corinthian Christian community taking each other to court (1 *Cor.* 6:1–8).<sup>115</sup> Like the author of 1 *Clement*, Ignatius directly equates his contemporary situation with that precedent.

That Ignatius’ arrest stemmed from this same agency is suggested by multiple linguistic parallels between this passage and Ignatius’ plea to the Roman Christian community that they should not try to intervene in his judicial process: ‘Allow me to be an imitator (Ἐπιτρέψατέ μοι μιμητὴν εἶναι) of the suffering of my god’ (Ign. *Rom.* 6.3). This is why he can say to the Ephesian church, which is not yet subject to such internal division (for example, Ign. *Eph.* 4.1–6.2): ‘I am condemned (κατάκριτος); you have been shown mercy (ἐλεημένοι). I am in danger (κίνδυνον); you are secure

(n. 111 cont.)

were not as clearly demarcated as Ignatius suggests; see Schoedel, ‘Theological Norms and Social Perspectives in Ignatius of Antioch’, 34–5). C. K. Barrett, ‘Jews and Judaizers in the Epistles of Ignatius’, in Robert Hamerton-Kelly and Robin Scroggs (eds.), *Jews, Greeks and Christians: Religious Cultures in Late Antiquity. Essays in Honour of William David Davies* (Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity, xxi, Leiden, 1976), sees Ignatius’ opponents in Asia as unorthodox Jewish Christians, but not those back in Antioch.

<sup>112</sup> Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 12, notes that ‘Ignatius is more harshly disposed to Christians of whom he disapproves than he is to pagans’.

<sup>113</sup> Admitted by Schoedel, *ibid.*, 70.

<sup>114</sup> Again, admitted by Schoedel, *ibid.*, 69.

<sup>115</sup> On Ignatius’ particular affinity with 1 *Corinthians*, see Heinrich Rathke, *Ignatius von Antiochen und die Paulusbriefe* (Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur, xcix, Berlin, 1967), 27–40.

(ἐσθηριγμένοι) (Ign. *Eph.* 12.1).<sup>116</sup> His own arrest resulted from the lack of unity in his church; where no such division existed, there was no parallel risk. It is interesting in this regard that as Christine Trevett has observed, Ignatius' corpus evidences a definite coolness towards his own Antiochene community (and they certainly receive no letter of their own).<sup>117</sup> It also gives limited detail about what exactly has taken place there.<sup>118</sup> That might be because divides in his own community were embarrassing to Ignatius, who saw achieving unity as his special purpose.<sup>119</sup> But the attention he later draws to the eventual achievement of Antiochene harmony tells against it. Nor does that explain the similar lack of information about his own arrest. Both silences are better explained if Ignatius has suffered, like Jesus, a betrayal from within his own community (and for which he feels somewhat culpable).

As in the first case study, the specifics of the dispute are definitive for proving that the agency behind Ignatius' betrayal was others within his Christian community. Here, as there, it was clearly a disagreement over leadership. This is clear from Ignatius' incessant focus on the threefold clerical hierarchy. Allen Brent has fleshed out the details of this conflict.<sup>120</sup> Using *Matthew* — seen as reflecting Antiochene debates immediately before Ignatius' tenure — together with the contemporary *Shepherd of Hermas* and *Didache*, he exposes deep rifts between those insisting on retaining the charismatic leadership of the new faith's earliest days, and those advocating a more formal hierarchy and, ultimately, the priority of a single figure.<sup>121</sup> Ignatius' constant advocacy of harmonious governance by bishops, presbyters and deacons fits this maelstrom between 'egalitarians' and 'elitists'.<sup>122</sup> Such a dispute is unlikely to have exercised

<sup>116</sup> For the difficulties of explaining this passage on the traditional view, see Schoedel, 'Theological Norms and Social Perspectives in Ignatius of Antioch', 39.

<sup>117</sup> Christine Trevett, 'Ignatius "To the Romans" and 1 Clement LIV–LVP', *Vigiliae Christianae*, xliii (1989), 42.

<sup>118</sup> See also Harrison, *Polycarp's Two Epistles to the Philippians*, 95–6.

<sup>119</sup> Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 213.

<sup>120</sup> Brent, *Ignatius of Antioch*; building on Christine Trevett, 'Prophecy and Anti-Episcopal Activity: A Third Error Combated by Ignatius?', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, xxxiv (1983).

<sup>121</sup> Brent, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 23–30, and at 34–7 on the parallel picture garnered from the Pastoral Epistles.

<sup>122</sup> On the nuance of Ignatius' position — inspired by contemporary Hellenic thinking on *homonioia* and not, as traditionally maintained, monarchical episcopacy, see Brent, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 30–4 and 38–43.

outsiders, but it is obvious how important, and divisive, it would have been to insiders. And that the opposing faction resisted institutional leadership also explains why Ignatius, as bishop, would have been their primary target and main victim.

The detail afforded by Ignatius' letters provides deeper insight into his opponents' motivation. The debate over the validity of a settled clergy clearly revolved in part around their material support (for example, *Matt.* 10.8–14).<sup>123</sup> Ignatius is keen to emphasize that he has imposed no burden on his addressees: 'I give thanks to my god that I have a clear conscience (*εὐσυνείδητός εἰμι*) in regard to you, and no one can shout either secretly or openly that I have been a burden (*ἐβάρησά*) to anyone in either a small matter or a large one' (*Ign. Phil.* 6.3; see also *Rom.* 4.2).<sup>124</sup> That he makes this defence tells us much about the criticism he had received or anticipated. Elsewhere in his letters, he works to defend a bishop's entitlement to such support (*Ign. Eph.* 6.1).<sup>125</sup> Interestingly, the clearest Pauline referent for this passage suggests that the apostle avoided burdening one community by asking more of another (*2 Cor.* 11:8–9). It thus seems likely that resource allocation underlay Ignatius' problems in Antioch.

Such a disagreement over leaders' roles and access to material support echoes much delation in the Roman world. And of course individuals' motives during conflicts need not align either inwardly or outwardly with the ostensible reasons for dispute. Harrison appositely speaks of the Antiochene issue as 'some fundamental disagreement, whether in doctrine... or in Church polity... With some again, it may have been sheer bad temper and personal animosity masquerading under some pious pretext of "principle" or "conviction"'.<sup>126</sup> Read thus, our Antiochene case study echoes the Roman one — participants in an internal Christian dispute have sought to mobilize the apparatus of the Roman judicial system against their opponents.

<sup>123</sup> Trevett, 'Ignatius' "To the Romans"', 42.

<sup>124</sup> Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 204, notes the Pauline parallels for such material support (*1 Thess.* 2.7–9; *2 Cor.* 11:8–9, 12:16) but suggests that despite these 'that can hardly be the thought here (particularly in light of *Ign. Phil.* 7, which is presented as an explanation of 6.3), and it seems best to understand Ignatius as having put Pauline language to new use'. But I see nothing in chapter 7 that negates this reading, which is by far the most natural.

<sup>125</sup> Discussed by Trevett, 'Prophecy and Anti-Episcopal Activity', 6 and 9.

<sup>126</sup> Harrison, *Polycarp's Two Epistles to the Philippians*, 87.



This finds additional support in Ignatius' letter to the Trallians, which urges bishops to be wary of those in their communities that insufficiently honour them.<sup>127</sup> One passage is key:

Not that I know of any such thing [‘heresy (*αἵρεσις*)’; see Ign. *Trall.* 6.1] among you, but I am protective of you, as beloved to me, foreseeing the traps of the devil (*τὰς ἐνέδρας τοῦ διαβόλου*)... Let none of you hold something against your neighbour (*κατὰ τοῦ πλησίον ἐχέτω*). Give no launching point (*ἀφορμὰς*) to the nations (*τοῖς ἔθνεσιν*), so that the majority in god may not be slandered (*βλασφημῆται*) via the foolish few. For woe betide him through whom my name is foolishly slandered (*βλασφημεῖται*) among men. (*Trall.* 8.1–2)

Here, having discussed the dangers of community division, Ignatius provides more detail on the dangers he foresees. Again, slander is his main focus. Most interesting, he anticipates that individual Christian grudges could catalyse mistreatment of the wider Christian community by Gentiles. The language of holding something against a neighbour echoes Jesus' words in *Matthew* 5:23: ‘if you remember that your brother has something against you (*ὁ ἀδελφός σου ἔχει τι κατὰ σοῦ*)’, where a fellow member of the addressees' community is clearly in view. That advice is followed by an obviously judicial injunction: ‘Come to terms with your opponent (*τῷ ἀντιδίκῳ σου*) quickly while you are still on the way to court with him, lest your opponent hand you over to the judge (*σε παραδῶ ὁ ἀντίδικος τῷ κριτῇ*), and the judge to the attendant (*ὁ κριτῆς τῷ ὑπηρέτῃ*), and you be thrown into prison (*εἰς φυλακὴν βληθήσῃ*)’ (*Matt.* 5:25). Finally, the combination of slander and foolishness recalls *1 Clement* 47.7, discussed in the Roman case study.<sup>128</sup> This episode, like that, then, exactly fits our hypothesis of persecution via internal delation, and thus represents a local flare up of a phenomenon familiar not just to early ‘Christians’ but to all denizens of the Roman empire.<sup>129</sup>

<sup>127</sup> Trevett, ‘Ignatius’ “To the Romans”’, 42.

<sup>128</sup> Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 150.

<sup>129</sup> Further support perhaps comes from Ignatius' revelation that after his arrest ‘the church in Antioch of Syria is at peace (*εἰρηνεύειν*)’ (Ign. *Phil.* 10.1; see also *Smyrn.* 11.2; *Pol.* 7.1), again referring to the cessation of internal not external violence (see Harrison, *Polycarp's Two Epistles to the Philippians*, 83–4). Streeter, *Primitive Church*, 175–6, and Fredric W. Schlatter, ‘The Restoration of Peace in Ignatius' Antioch’, *Journal of Theological Studies*, xxxv (1984), argue that this meant the appointment of Ignatius' successor; Trevett, ‘Ignatius’ “To the Romans”’, 40–1 disagrees. Ignatius' opponents' change of heart seems to have been catalysed by his arrest; see, for example, Harrison, *Polycarp's Two Epistles to the Philippians*, 103. If they had mobilized state mechanisms against him, they may have forfeited any moral authority, rendering their initial victory pyrrhic.

## V

## THIRD-CENTURY NORTH AFRICA

Our third case study takes us a century on, to the ill-fated reign of the Emperor Decius (249–251 CE). One of the few initiatives Decius had time to implement was a public requirement to sacrifice. This resulted in the deaths of ‘Christians’ who refused, and was reported by later Christian authors as a persecution (for example, Eus. *Hist. eccl.* 6.39.1; Lact. *De mort. pers.* 4.1–2). The actual edict issued has not survived, but its paper trail has, via forty-seven *libelli*, formulaic petitions in which individuals request that the addressed Roman magistrates confirm that they have witnessed the requisite act of sacrifice.<sup>130</sup> Analysis of these has demonstrated that Decius’ edict did not — certainly not explicitly, but perhaps not even implicitly — target ‘Christians’, but was rather universal (at least for Roman citizens).<sup>131</sup>

Universal in theory, however, did not mean universal in practice. No mechanism existed by which that could be achieved.<sup>132</sup>

<sup>130</sup> The *libelli* were collected in John R. Knipfing, ‘The Libelli of the Decian Persecution’, *Harvard Theological Review*, xvi (1923), with forty-one included. Reinhard Selinger, *The Mid-Third Century Persecutions of Decius and Valerian*, 2nd edn (Frankfurt, 2004), contains an updated catalogue of forty-five. AnneMarie Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord: Early Christians and the Oxyrhynchus Papyri* (Harvard Theological Studies, lx, Cambridge, MA, 2008), 191–215, knows forty-six, as does Paul Schubert, ‘On the Form and Content of the Certificates of Pagan Sacrifice’, *Journal of Roman Studies*, cvi (2016), and see now also W. Graham Claytor, ‘A Decian Libellus at Luther College (Iowa)’, *Tyche*, xxx (2015).

<sup>131</sup> Knipfing, ‘Libelli of the Decian Persecution’, 362; though he ultimately thought the goal was to root out Christians. J. B. Rives, ‘The Decree of Decius and the Religion of Empire’, *Journal of Roman Studies*, lxxxix (1999), 151, allows that this was an anti-Christian measure, but prefers a general desire to reassert traditional piety (to which neglect Christianity may have been a known contributing factor). The traditional view persists, however; see, for example, P. Keresztes, ‘The Decian Libelli and Contemporary Literature’, *Latomus*, xxxiv (1975); and most recently, Ruth Sutcliffe, ‘To Flee or Not to Flee? Matthew 10:23 and Third Century Flight in Persecution’, *Scrinium*, xiv (2018). It is important to emphasize both that the fact that it was probably only ‘Christians’ who refused to sacrifice does not necessarily tell us anything about the goals of the edict, and that assumptions to the contrary fall into the trap of assuming that subscribing to Christianity meant refusing to sacrifice, to which — to give just one example — Cyprrian’s bitter complaints about rife Christian acquiescence to the edict tell the lie.

<sup>132</sup> In brief, the only mechanisms in the Roman world for attempting universal participation were census data and tax registers, which most scholars have assumed were used here (for example, Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*,

Neither did the manpower.<sup>133</sup> Nor, in all probability, did the will.<sup>134</sup> This meant that in practice it would have been relatively easy to avoid, and in fact Cyprian delineates a substantial category — the so-called *stantes* — who were never called to sacrifice (for example, Cyp. *De Laps.* 3; 28).<sup>135</sup> It follows that the primary agents of Christian suffering would be those close to them who could draw attention to their avoidance. A contemporary bishop in Alexandria, Dionysius, confirms this when he glosses the victims: ‘many of the more conspicuous came forward immediately out of fear, others in the public eye were prompted by their duties, still others were dragged forward by those around them (οἱ δὲ ὑπὸ τῶν ἁμφ’ αὐτοῖς ἐφείλκοντο)’ (Eus. *Hist. eccl.* 6.41.11). Even at this late stage, then, locating the root agency

(n. 132 cont.)

408; Clifford Ando, *Imperial Rome AD 193 to 284: The Critical Century* (Edinburgh History of Ancient Rome, Edinburgh, 2012), 135–7; Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 282 n. 29). G. W. Clarke, ‘Some Observations on the Persecution of Decius’, *Antichthon*, iii (1969), 69–71, however, points out, on both geographical and demographic grounds, that neither would have been of use in this case.

<sup>133</sup> See, for example, Christopher J. Fuhrmann, *Policing the Roman Empire: Soldiers, Administration, and Public Order* (Oxford, 2012); Benjamin Kelly, ‘Policing and Security’, in Paul Erdkamp (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Rome* (Cambridge, 2013), 410–24.

<sup>134</sup> Theories on Decius’ motivation abound. A supplication seeking divine support at a time of crisis, as in Eugen Liesering, ‘Untersuchungen zur Christenverfolgung des Kaisers Decius’ (Univ. of Würzburg Ph.D. thesis, 1933), 37–43? A route to higher income, as in George Thomas Oborn, ‘Why Did Decius and Valerian Proscribe Christianity’, *Church History*, ii (1933)? To strengthen his authority, as in Andreas Alföldi, ‘Zu den Christenverfolgungen in der Mitte des 3. Jahrhunderts’, *Klio*, xxxi (1938)? An innate conservatism, as in Hans A. Pohlsander, ‘The Religious Policy of Decius’, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt II.16.3* (Berlin, 1986)? A typical accession celebration, as in Selinger, *Mid-Third Century Persecutions of Decius and Valerian?* In all these hypotheses, to achieve the suggested goal only a mass, not a universal, gesture would be required.

<sup>135</sup> *Contra*, for example, Schubert, ‘On the Form and Content of the Certificates of Pagan Sacrifice’, 189–91 (I note, for example, that in the case of the death certificates Schubert raises as comparanda for the *libelli*, submission relied entirely on the agency of the applicant), and Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 146. Clark, ‘Some Observations on the Persecution of Decius’, suggests that individuals self-registered on the day and were then called from that list (based on *Hist. eccl.* 6.41.11). Note that the *libelli* make it clear that in some locations fathers could sacrifice on behalf of their whole family (for example, *SB I* 4455), providing another mechanism of avoidance. My thanks to Dominic Rathbone for discussion of this point.

of persecution means identifying those locally who could put ‘Christians’ in a position where they would need to refuse to sacrifice.

No such effort, however, has been made. For de Ste Croix, Decius marks the start of his ‘third period’ of persecution where he turns his attention exclusively to the role of the government, positing a declining interest among the pagan populace.<sup>136</sup> Frend does the same,<sup>137</sup> but unsurprisingly asserts that Jewish antagonism remained important.<sup>138</sup> Even if we accept that by this period — and in North Africa — the Jewish and Christian communities were fully separated, Frend can point to just one letter of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage as supporting evidence, which complains that ‘both Jews and Gentiles are a threat (*et gentiles et Iudaei minantur*)’ (Cyp. *Ep.* 59.2.3; see also 59.2.4).<sup>139</sup> But this is slim pickings, and in fact close attention reveals that Cyprian means the biblical, not contemporary, Jewish community, since he is comparing his and his correspondent Cornelius’ experience to that of Paul and Barnabas in *Acts* 14.5.<sup>140</sup>

Again, the extant evidence suggests we look closer to home. Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, describing the violence that ‘Christians’ there suffered, confirms that we should again be paying attention to those in their close environs. In a description of the mob violence that preceded judicial proceedings, he says, ‘Then with one accord they all rushed to the houses of those that fear god, each pointing out those they had as neighbours (*οὗς ἐγνώριζον ἕκαστοι γειτνιῶντας*)’ (Eus. *Hist. eccl.* 6.41.5). He then gives select examples of ‘Christians’ — Metras (Eus.

<sup>136</sup> De Ste Croix, ‘Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?’, 26.

<sup>137</sup> Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 404–9.

<sup>138</sup> W. H. C. Frend, ‘A Note on Jews and Christians in Third Century North Africa’, *Journal of Theological Studies*, xxi (1970), 95–6; Frend, ‘Note on Tertullian and the Jews’, 296.

<sup>139</sup> Latin text from Gerard F. Diercks (ed.), *Sancti Cypriani Episcopi Opera Pars III.2* (Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, IIIC, Turnhout, 1996). Cyp. *Ep.* 13.3.2 (a reference to *Rom.* 2.24) similarly has the biblical rather than the contemporary context in mind. See G. W. Clarke, *The Letters of St. Cyprian*, 4 vols. (Ancient Christian Writers, xliii, xliv, xlvi, xvii, New York, 1984–89), i, 256.

<sup>140</sup> Charles A. Bobertz, ‘“For the Vineyard of the Lord of Hosts Was the House of Israel”: Cyprian of Carthage and the Jews’, *Jewish Quarterly Review*, lxxxii (1991), 13–14, critiquing Frend (and noting that ‘Christians’ are in view here, as we shall discuss below). See also Clarke, *Letters of St. Cyprian*, iii, 241–3.

*Hist. eccl.* 6.41.3), Quinta (Eus. *Hist. eccl.* 6.41.4), Apollonia (Eus. *Hist. eccl.* 6.41.7), and Serapion (Eus. *Hist. eccl.* 6.41.8) — forced to sacrifice and treated ill when they refused, ‘with everyone clamouring, constantly and everywhere, that if someone did not declaim the shameful words, this person must immediately be dragged away and burnt’. This passage certainly seems to affirm the traditional view that those committed to traditional Graeco-Roman religion resented Christian religious apostasy, as does Dionysius’ introduction to the episode:

The prophet and author of evils for this city, whoever he was, was preemptively stirring up and inciting the majority of the heathen (τὰ πλῆθη τῶν ἐθνῶν) against us, rekindling local religious feeling (τὴν ἐπιχώριον αὐτοῦ δεισιδαιμονίαν). Roused by him and grasping at every authority for their wickedness, they interpreted this worship of demons — being out for our blood — as the only form of piety (μόνην εὐσέβειαν). (Eus. *Hist. eccl.* 6.41.1–2; see also 6.42.1)

Two points, however, complicate matters. First, another of Dionysius’ descriptions ascribes them more mundane motivations: ‘bursting in [to their houses], robbing and plundering them (ἔσύλων τε καὶ διήρπαζον), they dragged them off, purloining the more valuable of their treasures (τὰ μὲν τιμιώτερα τῶν κειμηλίων νοσφιζόμενοι)’ (Eus. *Hist. eccl.* 6.41.5). Second, he tacitly implies that this antagonism might also have arisen within the Christian community. When introducing the Decian edict, he says that ‘what is more, the command arrived (παρῆν τὸ πρόσταγμα), and it was almost like that which was predicted by our lord, in a short time so terrible as, if possible, to cause even the chosen to stumble (ὡς, εἰ δυνατόν, σκανδαλίσαι καὶ τοὺς ἐκλεκτούς)’ (Eus. *Hist. eccl.* 6.41.10). This language is telling, since it paraphrases *Matthew* 24.24 — ‘For false messiahs and false prophets will be roused, and they will offer great signs and wonders to lead astray, if possible, even the elect (ὥστε πλανῆσαι, εἰ δυνατόν, καὶ τοὺς ἐκλεκτούς)’. As with Clement and Ignatius, then, Dionysius describes contemporary events via a scriptural proof-text where members of the community suffer at each other’s hands.<sup>141</sup>

<sup>141</sup> David S. Potter, *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire: A Historical Commentary on the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle* (Oxford, 1990), 264. The apparent discrepancy is solved once we countenance either that it was not just ‘the heathen’ to blame; or, better, that those described as such might include those who saw themselves differently, and even as ‘Christians’ (see n. 17 above).

This finds corroboration when we turn our attentions west, to Dionysius' contemporary, Cyprian, in Carthage. In his extensive letter collection Cyprian gives us numerous glimpses of those responsible for Christian suffering in his day. In one letter of late 251/early 252, to the Numidian bishop Antonianus, for example, he speaks of 'Christians' 'who having resisted and fought for a long time, after a long interlude came to this destructive work under compulsion (*necessitate*)' (Cyp. *Ep.* 55.13.2).<sup>142</sup> He then identifies who was responsible, speaking of 'the man who gave up (*prodidit*) both himself and all his family members (*omnes suos*)' and 'the man who impelled (*compulit*) his own tenants and friends to the deed'.<sup>143</sup> Cyprian therefore both thinks of persecution in terms of denouncement, and implies that its victims were exposed by those closest to them, be that family, friends or landlords.

The wider context of this passage reveals that these are to be found within the Christian community. Cyprian is urging his correspondent not to judge all 'Christians' equally — some have behaved worse than others. Each sentence offers a comparison of two types of 'Christian'. So the man forcing others to sacrifice represents a type of Christian behaviour during the persecution (implying that many 'Christians' behaved so).<sup>144</sup> Elsewhere Cyprian is more explicit. The reference to Jewish agency discussed above, which comes in a letter of summer 252 to Cornelius, bishop of Rome, reads: 'both Jews and Gentiles are a threat, and heretics too' (Cyp. *Ep.* 59.2.3).<sup>145</sup> He then expands:

And in fact it is not only the threats of gentiles or Jews (*gentilium vel Iudaeorum minas*) we ought to anticipate and watch for, since we see that the lord himself was held by his brothers (*a fratribus esse detentum*) and betrayed (*proditum*) by him whom he had himself chosen among

<sup>142</sup> On the dating, see Clarke, *Letters of St. Cyprian*, iii, 159–60, and on Antonianus, at 164–5.

<sup>143</sup> Note the connotations of betrayal in *prodidit*. See also Caldonius, one of Cyprian's correspondents, mentioning 'a woman by the name of Bona who was dragged to sacrifice by her husband' (Cyp. *Ep.* 24.1.1), and Cyprian in *On the Lapsed*: 'To many their own destruction was not enough: with mutual incitement a multitude was driven to ruin' (Cyp. *De Laps.* 9).

<sup>144</sup> This theoretical Christian landlord is discussed in Clarke, *Letters of St. Cyprian*, iii, 186, who notes that Cyprian himself likely held such a role.

<sup>145</sup> On the dating, see Clarke, *Letters of St. Cyprian*, iii, 235–6; on whether a persecution under Gallus is here anticipated, 4–17. What matters for our purposes is that Cyprian's expectations were shaped by what had already occurred under Decius.

the apostles. So too at the beginning of the world none other than his brother (*non nisi frater*) murdered the just Abel, his hostile brother (*frater infestus*) pursued the fleeing Jacob, and Joseph was sold as a boy with his brothers as the sellers (*vendentibus fratribus*). We even read it foretold in the gospel that our enemies will be predominantly from our own households (*magis domesticos inimicos futuros*), and that those who were formerly bound by an oath of unity (*prius copulate sacramento unanimittatis*) will become one another's betrayers (*ipsos invicem tradituros*). It is of no concern who hands us over or who is our aggressor, since god allows us to be handed over and thus to be crowned. Nor is it any disgrace for us to suffer from our brothers (*a fratribus*) what Christ suffered, nor is it any glory for them to do what Judas did. (Cyp. Ep. 59.2.4)

Here we have an explicit statement that delators are to be found within the Christian community. The references to Hebrew Bible precedents echo those of *1 Clement*. But here there can be no doubt that others self-identifying as Christian are in view, since the author distinguishes them from gentiles and Jews in the first sentence. In clearly linking this betrayal to the winning of crowns, Cyprian makes concrete the causal link between internal Christian division and death during persecution.

This letter has more to tell. Cyprian's missive is motivated by an ongoing dispute over leadership. Cyprian had only become bishop in 248 CE. The period since had not been calm. In particular, Decius' edict of sacrifice had crystallized a disagreement over the treatment of apostates. Schisms emerged between Cyprian and other presbyters and confessors, some more forgiving, some less.<sup>146</sup> Cyprian's letters repeatedly paint a picture of claim and counterclaim between these factions, as for example, his rebuke to Florentius that 'you willingly listen — and you gladly believe! — unholy and impious and wicked things against your brother, against a priest (*contra fratrem, contra sacerdotum*)' (Cyp. Ep. 66.7.1). Some of these seem again to have spilled out of the community, with certain factions trying to mobilize state mechanisms to their advantage. This, I suggest, is what Cyprian means when he repeatedly condemns the link between his opponents' words and actions: 'they are killing us every day with hate, both by words and by crimes (*odio et verbis et delictis*)' (Cyp. Ep. 59.2.6; see also 59.18.3); 'whatever recklessness (*audacia*) may be being planned among the heretics and

<sup>146</sup> For a brief sketch, see J. Patout Burns, 'Cyprian of Carthage', *Expository Times*, cxx (2010), 470.

schismatics (*haereticorum et schismaticorum*)' (Cyp. *Ep.* 59.9.2; see also 59.12.2); and 'those parricidal treacheries and threats of theirs (*insidiis ac minis suis parricidalibus*)' (Cyp. *Ep.* 59.18.3; see also 59.17.1; 59.18.1–2; 59.20.2).<sup>147</sup>

It is telling that the above passage from *Epistle* 59 is preceded: 'It is of no concern from whence either the fear or danger to the bishop (*episcopo aut terror aut periculum*) comes, he who lives exposed to fears and dangers (*terroribus et periculis*) and is nevertheless made glorious by those same fears and dangers (*ipsis terroribus ac periculis*)' (Cyp. *Ep.* 59.2.4). We know that this letter to Cornelius was prompted by one of Cyprian's excommunicated opponents, Felicissimus, seeking support from the Roman church (Cyp. *Ep.* 59.1.1–2). Though Cornelius had rejected Felicissimus' entreaties, some of his bile and threats against Cyprian had clearly landed (Cyp. *Ep.* 59.2.1–2). It is this threat to his authority that lies behind Cyprian's picture of 'Christians' betrayed by 'Christians'. The language of parricide pervades this letter (Cyp. *Ep.* 59.2.6; 59.13.1; 59.18.3). Later, we see a clear segue from Cyprian's proscription and treatment by the Roman authorities (Cyp. *Ep.* 59.6.1–2) to the betrayal of a bishop by his flock, again referencing Jesus' experience (Cyp. *Ep.* 59.7.1–2). A final passage makes the link explicit:

But if there are those who think that they can return to the church not via prayers but via threats (*minis*), or consider fashioning an entrance for themselves not via lamentations and penance but via terrors (*terroribus*), let them be clear in no uncertain terms that the church of the lord stands resolutely closed to such things, nor does the unconquerable and steadfast camp of Christ, protected by the lord's vigil, cede to threats (*minis*). The priest of god holding to the gospel and guarding the teachings of Christ can be killed but cannot be conquered. The high priest of god Zacharias furnishes and supplies for us an example of virtue and faith; he who, when it was not possible for him to be frightened with threats (*minis*) of stoning, was killed in the temple of god crying out and saying again and again what we too cry out and say against the heretics (*contra haereticos*): 'The lord says these things: you have abandoned the ways of the lord, and the lord will abandon you'. (Cyp. *Ep.* 59.17.1)

Here we see the clear connection in Cyprian's mind between those who challenge his authority, and the personal dangers he has faced as bishop before the Roman authorities. This is

<sup>147</sup> Pace, Clarke, *Letters of St. Cyprian*, iii, 263, who suggests that the threat here is only rhetorical.



compared directly with the Jewish prophets' treatments by their own communities; the reference is in fact to *Matthew 23:35*, which speaks of Zechariah as the end point of a tradition it traces back to Abel, the prototypical victim of fratricide who as we saw was referenced at the letter's start.<sup>148</sup> Here then, as in the first two case studies, 'Christians' risk violence at the hands of the Roman authorities because of internal division originating in ongoing disagreements over leadership.

Cyprian's treatise *On the Lapsed* fleshes out this picture. He sketches the Christian community as rife with internal divisions: 'with swollen arrogance they hold those put in charge in contempt (*praepositos... contemnere*), they slander one another (*sibi... maledicere*) with poisonous mouths, they fight with each other (*invicem dissidere*) with enduring hatreds' (Cyp. *De Laps.* 6). Moreover, he ascribes this to greed concerning material goods. This section starts: 'Each of them was eager to augment his estate (*studebant augendo patrimonio*)... with the insatiable flame of greed they kept a keen eye out for opportunities for increasing it (*insatiabili cupiditatis ardore ampliandis facultatibus incubabant*)'. Bishops are castigated not just because 'they wanted to have money in abundance', but also 'to snatch estates by insidious tricks (*fundos insidiosis fraudibus rapere*)'. We thus find, again as earlier, a connection between persecution, Christian infighting, and competition over resources.

## VI

### CONCLUSION

In all three episodes here considered, persecution originated from those closest to the victims. In fact, our best reconstruction in these three case studies points to delation by those who shared the victims' self-identification as Christian. Nor are these isolated cases. When our diverse evidence for early

<sup>148</sup> For discussion of Zechariah in particular, see Clarke, *Letters of St. Cyprian*, iii, 262, building on Michael Andrew Fahey, *Cyprian and the Bible: A Study in Third-Century Exegesis* (Beiträge zur Geschichte der Biblischen Hermeneutik, ix, Tübingen, 1971), 321 (who also discusses Zechariah at 588), and noting that there was confusion in early Christian texts between the prophet and the father of John the Baptist, supposedly martyred by the Jewish community. For our purposes both have the same implication. On Abel in Cyprian, see Fahey, *Cyprian and the Bible*, 560–1.

Christian persecution is read with this in mind, numerous other odd incidents and comments take on fresh meaning.<sup>149</sup> It is perhaps telling that the most sustained non-Christian account of Christianity, that of Celsus in the second century, highlights its internal disagreements: ‘a colony of bats coming forth from a lair, or frogs sitting in council (*συνεδρεύουσιν*) around a swamp, or worms holding an assembly (*ἐκκλησιάζουσι*) in a corner of filth, arguing with one another (*πρὸς ἀλλήλους διαφερομένοις*) about which of them are of worse character (*ἀμαρτωλότεροι*)’ (Orig. *Contr. Cels.* 4.23). That characterization becomes more understandable if non-Christians’ main exposure to Christianity came when ‘Christians’ faced each other in court.

What does this mean? Its most immediate consequences are naturally for the study of the early Christian persecutions. Again, to be clear, I am not here claiming that ‘Christians’ were its only, or even the main, agents. My point is that the fact that it could have been — and sometimes was — ‘Christians’ is the most effective way to demonstrate the fundamental problem with explanations built on the assumption that differing religious commitment was the key characteristic of the perpetrators. The evidence from antiquity in fact fits that from other periods, that persecution could arise from any of the communities of which a victim was part. That could be a husband committed to traditional Graeco-Roman religion, a neighbour affiliated with Judaism, or a landlord who also thought of himself as ‘Christian’; the point is that proximity, not religion, was the common factor.

Moreover, once we accept that the root antagonism did not necessarily come from outside, we must in turn abandon the idea that Christianity itself was necessarily the reason for persecution. That in turn lets us read this persecution alongside the judicial violence suffered within face-to-face communities throughout history — as the result of contingent tensions and disputes, and motivated above all by competition, whether

<sup>149</sup> See, for example, *Acta Pauli* 1–14; *Mart. Pol.* 1.2, 4.1, and 6.2; *Tert. Scorp.* 10.9–11; *Tert. Apol.* 7.3–7; *Mart. Pion.* 12.2–10; *Hipp. Comm. Dan.* 1.20–21; *Pet. Ep. can.* 6.1 and 7.1; *Eus. Hist. eccl.* 3.19.1–20.1, 3.32.2–6, 5.1.14–15 and 48, 8.1.7, 8.2.2.

for money, resources, status or position. It is interesting that in all three of our case studies, traces of some such tension emerge.<sup>150</sup> That these span the first three centuries also proves the lie of the long-repeated tripartite division of early Christian persecution. Moreover, that ‘Christians’ could be the accusers has consequences for the long-standing debate on whether ‘Christianity’ was itself always, simply, and sufficiently the charge in these trials. Perhaps most important, this alternative model necessitates a fresh study of victims’ experience. Our empathy should be directed not just at the trials, tortures and executions that have dominated past scholarship, but the no-less-pernicious micro-aggressions, domestic abuse, ostracism and displacement that characterized such ‘local’ persecution.

More broadly, this radically different approach to Christian persecution demands changes to our approach to the study of early Christianity in general. The ‘clash of religions’ model here dismantled is one facet of a wider approach that has ever characterized early Christian history, namely an over-arching interest in its ‘rise’ as a discrete entity over and against Rome and its empire. The breakdown of the model of Christian persecution built on inter-religious conflict thus has more wide-ranging consequences for a whole raft of topics in early Christian and Roman history. In addition, it is worth pointing out at this point that the model whose applicability for the pre-Constantinian imperial centuries I have here worked to prove is in fact

<sup>150</sup> It is worth recalling the informers in the Pliny–Trajan correspondence with which we began. Gary J. Johnson, ‘De “conspiratioe delatorum”’: Pliny and the Christians Revisited’, *Latomus*, xlvii (1988), characterizes this province’s *delatores* as being particularly malicious and prone to opportunistic accusation on the basis of Pliny’s other letters (in Plin. *Ep.* 81, for example, a charge of religious impropriety seems to be tagged on to other charges; see too 10.56–8, and 110). We perhaps find a clue to their motives at the end of Pliny’s letter: ‘Certainly it is quite evident that temples that had been almost deserted have begun to be frequented, and that the established rites, neglected for a long time, are being resumed and everywhere the meat of victims is sold, very few buyers for which could up till now be found’ (*Ep.* 10.96.10). Comparison with *Acts* 19:23–7 might suggest that a financial concern underlay the initial accusations (that is, a worry that failure to frequent temples was a threat to various livelihoods; Philostratus’ anecdote in *VA* 5.20 about Apollonius’ altercation with the owner of a ship carrying images of the gods for sale is a reminder that those with vested financial interests extended beyond vendors).

happily accepted by all scholars for the post-Constantinian period.<sup>151</sup> Put another way, no one disputes that ‘orthodox’ ‘Christians’ sought to mobilize the mechanisms of the state against ‘heretical’ ‘Christians’ once they had imperial patronage. Indeed, such persecution of ‘Christians’ by ‘Christians’ is (unfortunately) one of the defining features of the fourth century and beyond. But in fact such attempts to mobilize the state to one’s own ends were no special privilege gained post-Constantine but merely one of the base principles of Roman imperial governance to which ‘Christians’ had equal recourse in the earlier period.<sup>152</sup> The assumption that they did not is a hang-over of an outdated view of Christianity as an ‘underground’ religion in the first three centuries, itself built on now long-discredited views of Christianity as both illegal and subject to state persecution throughout this period. That the same model of intra-group violence characterizes both the earlier and later periods should contribute towards the breakdown of any strict Constantinian watershed.

Finally, this re-reading has consequences for the history of religions more generally. The continuity in Christian engagement with the Roman state when the Christian collective was a small provincial minority group on the one hand and a favoured imperial stakeholder on the other raises questions for our treatment of other religious groups at different stages — and scale levels — of their history. And beyond this, we can return in closing to the wider historiography of persecution. David Nirenberg sought to use fourteenth-century violence against religious minorities to problematize a history of violence explained via a narrative of evolving irrational antagonism towards outsiders. That narrative was typically traced — as by Moore — from the twentieth century back to the early medieval period. But in fact the spectre of the ancient world recurs throughout Moore’s monograph, and as we saw above, the same misleading assumptions drive the

<sup>151</sup> A topic with its own vast bibliography; see most recently the sophisticated rhetorical approach of Éric Fournier and Wendy Mayer (eds.), *Heirs of Roman Persecution: Studies on a Christian and Para-Christian Discourse in Late Antiquity* (London, 2020).

<sup>152</sup> As noted by Fergus Millar (see n. 58 above), the scholar responsible for establishing the centrality of ‘petition and response’ in Roman imperial governance (see n. 5 above).

traditional explanatory models for the earlier period too.<sup>153</sup> Our conclusions here suggest that those assumptions are equally dissatisfying for antiquity. Moreover, that an explanatory model privileging the complexities of local communities and the wider cultural contexts in which such violence took place works better in the antique setting as well as the medieval is suggestive for our approach to religious history more generally. Religion does not act in a vacuum; nor need it dominate other facets of identity. In the early Christian persecutions, inter-religious competition proves much more important to later (Christian) writings that sought to make the everyday more providential than it ever was on the ground. That is a lesson for the other historical and political episodes to which it is so often automatically assumed to be central.

*James Corke-Webster*  
*King's College London, UK*

<sup>153</sup> See, for example, Moore, *Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 4, 11–13, 26–7, 34, 44–7, 83, 115, 124–5, 131, 148, 153–4 and 160, though Moore himself was clear that he considered antique persecutions different in kind from those medieval manifestations that concerned him.

## ABSTRACT

This article offers a new approach to the study of the persecution of the early Christians. Past scholarship on this topic has offered explanations built around inter-religious animosity, which are here exposed as the inevitable result of unquestioned assumptions about those responsible. It offers instead a hypothesis that the driving agency for the violence Christians suffered came from their immediate communities, and even from their fellow Christians. It tests this via three case studies spanning the first three centuries CE and the extent of the Roman empire. In closing, it explores the wide-ranging consequences of a new model — based on local, social tensions rather than homogenized, antagonistic religious ideologies — for early Christian persecution (both its rationale and its reality), early Christianity more widely (scholars' continuing commitment to binary distinctions between both 'Rome' and 'Christianity', and the pre- and post-Constantinian periods), and the history of religions as a whole (our assumptions about the dynamics between minority groups and the state, and our privileging of religion in explaining historic violence).