

Surprisingly, there were considerable similarities between their lives and those of Christians today, which is one of the reasons the letters of the New Testament have so much to say to us, despite the fact that we are separated from the original readers by so many centuries.

Cities such as Rome, Ephesus and Corinth were places of huge contrast, in which rich and poor, slaves and free citizens, rubbed shoulders in the streets. They were melting pots of humanity, in which many cultures mingled, as men and women from throughout the known world flocked into and travelled across the Empire, seeking security, fame or fortune. The prevailing ethos of Roman society was remarkably similar to that of today's Western world. Materialism was rampant, as trade flourished under the 'Pax Romana', and merchants travelled ever further in their quest for luxury goods, setting fashions for the latest 'must-have' commodities. In many senses, then, Roman society was secular and humanistic, in that men and women were very much at the centre of their own attention. Their lives were spent in much the same way as those of countless millions in the West today – striving for greater security and status through greater affluence. Yet (and not surprisingly, given that every human being, whether they acknowledge it or not, is made in the image of the one, true God) there was also a deep yearning for spiritual reality, which found expression in a bewildering variety of philosophies, ways of life, and religions. Ancestor worship was common, as was family attachment to one or more of the almost countless Greco-Roman gods and goddesses. Rival shrines and temples vied for business on almost every street corner. Paganism and occult practices thrived. The Greco-Roman world was also the age of the great philosophers, the most successful of whom attracted followers by the thousand.

Historical records make it clear that for many ordinary citizens, the preferred way through this maze of options was what we today call 'pick and mix' – a little bit of this, a little bit of that ... Many Roman houses contained shrines to more than one god. Luke gives a fascinating insight into this 'spiritual smorgasbord' in his account of St Paul's visit to Athens, in Acts 17.

Beyond all these various 'spiritual' options was the overarching Emperor cult, which had waxed and waned from the time of Julius Caesar, but which was fully embraced by Domitian (AD81 – 96), during whose reign most scholars believe that John wrote the book of Revelation. It is worth noting that belief in the Emperor's deity originated not with the Emperors themselves (Tiberius and Claudias actively discouraged the practice) but among the ordinary people of Rome's provinces, grateful for her gift of peace and order. Christians would therefore have found themselves seriously out of step with, and regarded with suspicion by, their fellow citizens. The Emperor's supremacy was proclaimed everywhere, and his power was absolute. His image was

on every coin, his statue in every city, town and village. All other gods were welcome, provided they took their place alongside him. As a citizen of Rome, you were welcome to hold whatever faith you chose, provided that your first loyalty was clearly to the state.

As is often the case in an era of totalitarian government, Roman society in the first century can appear fairly stable as we look back upon it. Travel was relatively safe, living standards generally high. However, the first century was also a time of political upheaval across the Roman Empire and violent uprisings were becoming increasingly common. Writers of the time talk of foundations being shaken, and a series of severe earthquakes (some affecting the seven churches of Revelation) were seized upon as portents of trouble ahead. Beneath the veneer of affluence and sophistication, people were tense and anxious about the future.

Being a faithful Christian was far from easy in these turbulent times. Just like today, believers were daily assailed by the all-pervading atmosphere of paganism, syncretism and materialism which characterised the surrounding culture. In the same way that the senses of modern Christians in the West are bombarded by the godless images projected by every media, so those of the first century were assaulted by the prevalence of obscene graffiti and the visual imagery of the old fertility cults which continued to play a part in the folk-religion of the day. Christians then, as now, faced the constant temptation to give in to the powerfully seductive forces of sex, alcohol and money. That most Christians had converted from the explicitly false gods of their surrounding culture did not make them immune to the subtler invitations to worship at the altars of these more secular idols.

First century Christians also faced the first stirrings of persecution. Many people were suspicious of this 'new' faith, and its followers were often branded 'atheists'. There was the constant threat of being reported to the authorities, accused of failure to be a loyal citizen. Political and social instability made national and local rulers alike insecure, and this in turn made them increasingly insistent upon unquestioning loyalty to the state. Any Christian brought before a Roman tribunal on suspicion of disloyalty would be required to demonstrate loyalty by offering worship to Rome and its Emperor. Heaven's chorus to God, 'You are worthy', as recorded by John in Revelation 4, is taken directly from the 'liturgy' of Emperor worship. A fascinating insight into the way the early Christians were treated is given in a famous exchange of correspondence between Pliny the Younger, Governor of Bithynia in the early 2nd Century AD, and the Emperor Trajan, arising from Pliny's first encounter with Christians

Pliny to the Emperor Trajan

It is my practice, my lord, to refer to you all matters concerning which I am in doubt. For who can better give guidance to my hesitation or inform my ignorance? I have never participated in trials of Christians. I therefore do not

know what offences it is the practice to punish or investigate, and to what extent. And I have been not a little hesitant as to whether there should be any distinction on account of age or no difference between the very young and the more mature; whether pardon is to be granted for repentance, or, if a man has once been a Christian, it does him no good to have ceased to be one; whether the name itself, even without offences, or only the offences associated with the name are to be punished.

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished. There were others possessed of the same folly; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome.

Soon accusations spread, as usually happens, because of the proceedings going on, and several incidents occurred. An anonymous document was published containing the names of many persons. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ – none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do – these I thought should be discharged. Others named by the informer declared that they were Christians, but then denied it, asserting that they had been but had ceased to be, some three years before, others many years, some as much as twenty-five years. They all worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.

They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food – but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition.

I therefore postponed the investigation and hastened to consult you. For the matter seemed to me to warrant consulting you, especially because of the

number involved. For many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms. But it seems possible to check and cure it. It is certainly quite clear that the temples, which had been almost deserted, have begun to be frequented, that the established religious rites, long neglected, are being resumed, and that from everywhere sacrificial animals are coming, for which until now very few purchasers could be found. Hence it is easy to imagine what a multitude of people can be reformed if an opportunity for repentance is afforded.

Trajan to Pliny

You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it – that is, by worshiping our gods – even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance. But anonymously posted accusations ought to have no place in any prosecution. For this is both a dangerous kind of precedent and out of keeping with the spirit of our age.

(Pliny, Letters 10.96-97)

(It is interesting to note Pliny's honest acknowledgement of the number of converts to Christianity, and the consequent turning away from former religious practices. His hopes that this new faith could be snuffed out have been disproved by history!)

This climate of fear was further exacerbated by growing tension between Jewish and Christian faith communities. For many years, the Romans had allowed the Jews to pursue their faith wherever in the Empire they lived – a unique privilege. However, this all changed with the destruction of Jerusalem's Temple in AD70. The Romans decided that, as there was no longer any temple, they would demand the temple tax traditionally paid by all Jews for its upkeep. The continuation of the Jews' special dispensation to worship freely was made conditional upon this payment. Apart from bitterly dividing the Jewish communities, this decision had the unexpected effect of encouraging Christians to associate closely with their local synagogue, as a means of avoiding 'bowing the knee' to Rome. At first, the Roman authorities did not distinguish Christians from Jews. The Jews, however, resented what they saw as Christians 'using' them, not least because the Christians taught that the destruction of the temple was God's judgement for the execution of Jesus Christ! Fuelling the Jews' resentment was the fact that the new churches were winning significant numbers of what the New Testament refers to as 'God-fearers'; Gentile converts who could

previously have been expected to support the synagogues. This led many Jews to denounce the Christians in their midst to the authorities. Christians were caught between a rock and a hard place. If they tried to 'hide' within their local synagogue community, Jewish members could expose them. If they did not pay the new tax, they ran the risk of being accused of belonging to what was increasingly regarded as a dangerous new cult. Towards the end of the first century, the 'curse of the Minim' was introduced into the 18 benedictions which formed part of the daily worship of every synagogue. 'Minim' was a word used collectively to describe those Jews regarded as heretics – in later refinements of this prayer, Christians were specifically singled out. This was one of the main reasons for the complete separation of Christian communities from their Jewish past.

We know from historical records – such as the correspondence between Pliny & Trajan quoted above – that, not surprisingly, some Christians found living under this sort of pressure intolerable, and recanted their profession of faith. According to Pliny, this was sometimes due to social pressure and sometimes to the threat of official censure. It is certain that many others will simply have succumbed to the almost irresistible temptation to keep quiet about their beliefs in exchange for a quiet life.

One final reality we need to remember is that the Christian communities in the first century were small. We have become accustomed to the number and diversity of churches, particularly in our cities, but often even in smaller communities as well – and to church communities numbering several hundred members. Yet if you were a follower of Jesus in a first century city, you would most likely belong to one, small gathering of fellow believers, which numerically might be no larger than what in many churches today would be considered a home group or pastorate. Your next nearest church would be miles away – perhaps a day's journey or more by horse.

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