

БЪЛГАРСКА



ВЕЧНОСТ

SERDICA EDICT (311 AD) CONCEPTS AND REALIZATIONS OF THE IDEA OF RELIGIOUS TOLERATION



ТАНГРА ТанНакРа ИК

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(681 AD) by Kan Asparuh.
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eighteen centuries, and preserved by the Bulgarian nation
to this day.**

**SERDICA EDICT (311 AD): CONCEPTS AND REALIZATIONS
OF THE IDEA OF RELIGIOUS TOLERATION**
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RELIGIOUS POLICY AND POLICIZING RELIGION DURING THE TETRARCHY

Hrvoje Gračanin

Abstract

The proposed paper endeavours to survey and analyze the main features of the imperial intervention into religious affairs during the Tetrarchy. Principal discussion will be centred around what motivated the tetrarchic rulers to initiate an openly intolerant and strongly coercive policy against Christianity after several decades of relative calm, how this policy was implemented in different parts of the Empire, and what finally precipitated the profound change in which Christians and their religion were to be treated by official authorities, that is to say, in what manner, to what end and with what consequences the transition from hostility to tolerance, to favouritism, was effected. Special attention will be paid to the question to what extent the religion was viewed by the tetrarchic imperial governments as a mere tool for specific policy goals, and, on the other hand, how much emperors' personal religious persuasions or affinities might have influenced their respective policy-making. With regard to the attitude of the imperial authorities towards religious issues, it will be contended that there was no real change between their perceived tolerance before and intolerance after Christianity became a *religio licita* and the Christian values were adopted and imposed by the emperors as exclusively valid. In other words, the shift that occurred from polytheistic "tolerance" – notwithstanding the fact that Christianity was not among religions enjoying such forbearance – to monotheistic "intolerance" was rather a matter of implementing the same political notions and governmental mechanisms to a newly created situation. Several other issues will also be addressed: how contemporary and later sources perceived the Diocletianic Persecution; what degree of participation in the persecution of non-Christian ordinary people can be determined from the sources; and why there is no mention of the persecution in the works of non-Christian late antique writers.

Introduction

In general, the Romans have usually been perceived as rather forbearing towards the various religious customs and practices of the peoples with whom they came into contact or whom they eventually conquered, and their system of rule as fairly permissive towards foreign cults.¹ The Romans themselves established very early boundaries to their perceived openness, although some still argue that the restrictions imposed did not reverse the Roman ‘open attitude’ approach to foreign cults.² However, it has recently been pointed out that ‘Rome was never a religious “free for all”’,³ and that the Romans did not have coherent, consistent or even deliberate policy towards acceptance and maintenance of religious diversity.⁴ That is to say, their religious policy was more often than not made up as they went along, it changed over time shifting between restrictiveness, caution and flexibility, and depended upon various factors, primarily current political and ideological situation. To these, a crucial factor was added with the institution of the Principate, since the religious inclinations or preferences of a *princeps*, often in connection with his background, decisively influenced the official stance towards certain cults and religious practices. The emperor became a leading force both in promotion of new cults and in maintenance of the traditional cults.⁵ In imperial times, the same as it had been in republican times, the main issue concerning the introduction of new cults and religious practices revolved around the preservation of what was deemed by the Roman élite to be in conformity with the Roman identity, which in itself underwent transformation in the course of time, but it remained firmly grounded in the characteristic sense of Roman-ness.⁶ It had always been about the maintenance of Roman social, economic and political supremacy, and cultural and ideological superiority. Anything that was seen as a potential threat to the existing order of things came to be labelled as

¹ Indicative of this notion is, for example, S. Fletcher’s opening line in his paper ‘Temples, Coins, and Persecution: Why the Pagans Persecuted the Early Christians’, *Studia Antiqua* 6.1 (2008), 115: ‘It is common knowledge that the Romans were tolerant of most religions, as long as they posed no threat to the political or social structure.’

² E. Orlin, *Foreign Cults in Rome. Creating a Roman Empire* (Oxford, 2010), 162-163.

³ M. Beard, J. North, and S. Price, *Religions of Rome I: A History* (Cambridge, 1998), 212.

⁴ M. Kahlos, *Forbearance and Compulsion: The Rhetoric of Religious Tolerance and Intolerance in Late Antiquity* (London, 2009), 11.

⁵ Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome I*, 251-252.

⁶ Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome I*, 212-214, Kahlos, *Forbearance and Compulsion*, 25-27, Orlin, *Foreign Cults in Rome*, 215-220.

subversive and undesirable, and met with disapproval, restriction, condemnation, or even open hostility. The graver the social, economic and political circumstances in the Empire or the more needed the emphasis on the unity of the state, the more severe reaction followed of the authorities towards what was perceived as obstreperous and contrary to the current Roman ways. If religious affiliation was made into an issue of loyalty, then non-conformity to the prevalent practices meant that this could be interpreted as an act of treason and dealt with accordingly.

The old and new in Diocletianic Persecution

Thus, when Diocletian assumed an openly intolerant and strongly coercive stance towards Christianity issuing, in the February of 303, the first of four edicts against Christians this did not represent a novelty in the overall Roman policy towards religious cults and practices which had never been given, or deprived of, official sanction. The stage for such an action had already been set by the mid-third century AD when, under Emperors Decius (249-251) and Valerian (253-260), Christianity came to be criminalized and systematic oppression was initiated. The methods of interrogation and forms of punishment used in the Diocletianic Persecution had also been defined long before, by the second century AD.⁷ Not even the proclaimed motivation of the tetrarchic rulers for re-initiating the persecution was new. In asserting that they aimed at restoring the ancient Roman traditions, especially with regard to religious practice, ritual observance and morality, which became a way of communicating the symbolism of imperial power and a practical means of verifying and affirming one's loyalty to the regime – i.e., the Empire – the tetrarchic rulers followed in the footsteps of Decius who had also seen himself as the *restitutor sacrorum*.⁸ Finally, the direct use of imperial legislation in the form of edicts against Christians also had its precursor, since Emperor Valerian had already issued two strictly anti-Christian edicts in 257 and 258 respectively, by which he had degraded Christianity to criminal status.

Yet, there were some new elements. First of all, the sheer magnitude of the persecution and the persistency of the imperial authorities, at least in the eastern parts of the Empire, to carry out the persecution. Secondly, the number of anti-Christian edicts might also testify to the desire of the tetrarchic rul-

⁷ O. F. Robinson, *Penal Practice and Penal Policy in Ancient Rome* (London, New York, 2007), 102-108.

⁸ Kahlos, *Forbearance and Compulsion*, 29, 31-32.

ers for thoroughness and their determination to reduce Christianity and force the Christians to comply once and for all. To this effect, already the first edict prescribed that anyone who persisted in adhering to the Christian cult was to be exempt from juridical privileges, which meant that even the *honestiores* were now subject to torture that was previously reserved only for the *humiliores* and slaves, and that any legal action could be brought against them.⁹ To be sure, already Valerian had threatened the members of senatorial and equestrian rank with losing their status and forfeiting their property,¹⁰ but their legal rights were not explicitly jeopardized. And thirdly, the obvious failure of the persecution led to the first full legal recognition for Christians that was consented to, although grudgingly and disdainfully, by Emperor Galerius.

Reasons and motives for the Persecution

Diocletian's administration put comprehensive efforts in reorganizing almost all walks of life in the Roman Empire, with the main purpose of creating a system that would infuse a new strength in the state and ensure its stability and functionality, although this meant, in practice, introducing rigidity on all levels. Since religion was inseparable from practical policy and imperial ideology, it is no wonder that Christianity was once again viewed as a real danger to the order of things that the tetrarchic rulers tried to establish. Its teaching overemphasized the importance of afterlife and viewed the temporal world as a mere preparatory stage for the eternal hereafter, and it rejected all other cults, especially the imperial cult which played a key role in the tetrarchic system. This could serve as a primary motivation for re-initiating persecution.¹¹ Even before the first edict was issued there were instances of anti-Christian action with regard to the military. The Roman army, along with the imperial administration, had always been the backbone of the Roman Empire, the more so in the so-called Diocletian system after the grave crises the Roman state had experienced since the mid-third century. Some *Passiones*, which can be taken with high degree of reliability to describe events from the late third century (*Acta Maximiliani*, *Passio Marcelli centurionis*), give

⁹ Robinson, *Penal Practice and Penal Policy in Ancient Rome*, 121.

¹⁰ Robinson, *Penal Practice and Penal Policy in Ancient Rome*, 118.

¹¹ J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (Oxford, 1996), 247 also says that the motives for the persecution were doctrinal and ideological. For a discussion on the motives see also P. S. Davies, 'The Origin and Purpose of the Persecution of A.D. 303', *Journal of Theological Studies* 40.1 (1989), 66-94.

evidence of Christians military recruits and a professional soldier refusing to fulfil their military duties on account of their Christian beliefs.¹² Such acts of open disobedience and insubordination could only aggravate the position of Christianity in the eyes of the imperial government because the Christian cult could be construed as rebellious against the state and anti-Roman, the more so since the tetrarchic rulers themselves rose from the military ranks.

Furthermore, their own religious predilections made the emperors even more hostile to the Christian cult. As building inscriptions and numismatic material show, Diocletian carefully chose as divine patrons of himself and his administration the Roman Olympian gods of old, especially Jupiter, Hercules, Mars and Victoria, who not only set him as a *veterrimae Romanae religionis curator*, much in the manner of the first Emperor Augustus, but also emphasized the masculine warrior aspect of the Tetrarchy. Particular weight was also given to the *Genius populi Romani*. The relatively new additions to officially recognized deities, such as Isis and Serapis, and Mithras were also represented.¹³ It might be contended that Mithras, or Sol Invictus – both identifiable with Apollo-Helios – was also a preferred divinity of the tetrarchic emperors. There are several instances to support this notion: the dedicatory inscription from Aquileia in the name of Diocletian and Maximian linking the two Augusti with the cult of the Sun;¹⁴ the inscription from Carnuntum testifying to a collegial dedication in 308 of a renovated shrine to Sol Invictus Mithras on the occasion of the famous Carnuntum Conference attended by Diocletian, Maximian, Galerius, and Licinius. In the inscription, Mithras is styled *fautor imperii sui*, protector of their (i.e. of the Augusti and Caesars) imperial rule;¹⁵ and the sculptured base of the so-called *Decennalia* memorial column in the Forum Romanum depicting Diocletian, along with his imperial colleague and probably the two Caesars, making a sacrifice to Mars, Roma and the sun deity that appears to be Mithras.¹⁶ A figure of the Sun God (Helios) can also be

¹² Cf. W. Kuhoff, *Diokletian und die Epoche der Tetrarchie: Das römische Reich zwischen Krisenbewältigung und Neuaufbau (284 - 313 n. Chr.)* (Frankfurt am Main, 2001), 262-264.

¹³ Kuhoff, *Diocletian und die Epoche der Tetrarchie*, 254-255, 274-275. Diocletian obviously saw himself as a vigorous defender of the faith and a sincere believer in the traditional cults. Cf. W. L. Leadbetter, *Galerius and the will of Diocletian* (London, New York, 2009), 120-121, 126.

¹⁴ Kuhoff, *Diocletian und die Epoche der Tetrarchie*, 232.

¹⁵ Kuhoff, *Diocletian und die Epoche der Tetrarchie*, 480.

¹⁶ A. L. Frothingham, 'Diocletian and Mithra in the Roman Forum', *American Journal of Archaeology* 18 (1914), 146-155. The Caesars' partaking in the sacrificial ceremony was only symbolic, because they were both absent from Rome at that time. Galerius and Constantius I were both campaigning, the former on the Lower Danube against the Carpi, and the latter on the Upper Rhine against the Germans. Cf. T. D. Barnes, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine* (Cambridge, London, 1982), 61, 64.

found on the northern side of the temple presumably dedicated to Aesculapius in Diocletian's palace at Aspalathos.¹⁷ There are opinions that a figure of the Sun God was carved on the now lost central frieze slab from the Temple of Jupiter (i.e. Diocletian's mausoleum) and even that the entire palace of Diocletian was actually one giant monument dedicated to Sol Invictus.¹⁸ Equally telling is the story of how Diocletian (at that time still Diocles), before he was acclaimed Augustus by the soldiers, first held up his sword to the visible god of Sun and swore that he was completely innocent of the death of his immediate predecessor Numerian.¹⁹ Two oracles of the sun god Apollo, one at Antiochian Daphne, the other at Didyma, are explicitly designated in sources as instrumental in changing Diocletian's attitude towards Christianity from previously forbearing into firmly and openly hostile.²⁰ Moreover, Emperor Maximian was often closely attached to the Sun God, even conducting some of the god's functions,²¹ whereas Maximian Daia, Licinius, and Constantine I also showed their attachment to the solar religion by minting coins with the Sun God's image.²² A figural representation of the Sun God, with inscriptions *Soli Invicto* or *Oriens Augustorum*, appears also on many of the coins issued by Galerius.²³ This association of the tetrarchs with the Sun God (being

¹⁷ T. Marasović, *Dioklecijanova palača. Svjetska kulturna baština. Split-Hrvatska* (Zagreb, Split, 1994), 110 (German translation: *Der Diokletianspalast. Ein Weltkulturerbe. Split-Kroatien*, Zagreb, 1995).

¹⁸ Cf. S. Živkov, 'Varia Diocletianea', in N. Cambi, J. Belamarić, T. Marasović, eds., *Dioklecijan, tetrarhija i Dioklecijanova palača o 1700. obljetnici postojanja / Diocletian, Tetrarchy and Diocletian's Palace on the 1700th Anniversary of Existence* (Split, 2009), 515-516, 518-519.

¹⁹ Cf. S. Williams, *Diocletian and the Roman Recovery* (London, 2000), 37.

²⁰ Cf. E. DePalma Digeser, 'An Oracle of Apollo at Daphne and the Great Persecution', *Classical Philology* 99.1 (2004), 57-62. John Malalas (*Chronographia* 12.307) even states that Diocletian restored the Temple of Apollo at Dafne. Cf. Leadbetter, *Galerius and the will of Diocletian*, 121.

²¹ M. D. Smith, 'The Religion of Constantius I', *The Greek, Roman & Byzantine Studies* 38 (1997), 193.

²² Smith, 'The Religion of Constantius I', 203-204.

²³ G. H. Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, [Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'Empire romain 23] (Leiden, 1972), 166. Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* 9.9 says that Galerius wished to be called "the offspring of Mars", which would point to a conclusion that Galerius, same as Diocletian, was more inclined to the traditional Roman Olympian gods. He seems to have been especially fond of Hercules, Dionysus, and possibly Aesculapius as well. Cf. D. Srejšović, 'Diva Romula, Divus Galerius', in D. Srejšović, ed., *The Age of Tetrarchs. A Symposium Held from the 4th to the 9th October 1993*, [Scientific Meetings 75, The Section for Historical Sciences 24] (Belgrade 1995), 303. However, it is usually taken with a high degree of certainty that Galerius was not only a worshipper of Helios/Sol but also the solar god was his patron divinity. Cf., for example, Ch. R. Long, *The Twelve Gods of Greece and Rome*, [Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'Empire romain 107] (Leiden, New York, 1987), 313, 315. The evidence for such an assumption is, at best, scarce and inconclusive. There is no firm proof

Mithras, Sol Invictus, or Apollo-Helios) is not surprising since the solar cult was very popular among the military. It is worth emphasizing that the cult of the Sun also had a marked significance for the Augustan principate.²⁴ To add to the point, Christianity and the Mithraic cult were fierce rivals,²⁵ and this might account for an additional personal motivation, along with the military background, of the tetrarchic rulers' decision to persecute Christianity.

All in all, Christianity seemed incompatible in great many ways and on many levels with the policy of the tetrarchic rulers. This notion is strikingly evident in a statement ascribed to Diocletian in the tenth-century Byzantine encyclopaedia, the so-called Suda-Lexicon, that the Roman state and Christianity cannot be brought together.²⁶ Any cult that rejected or even scorned Roman religious traditions was automatically deemed hostile to the *status Romanus* and was liable for persecution. Thus the Manichaean sect met with severe suppression even before Christianity, following the edict that the tetrarchs issued against Manicheans, probably in 302. To commence the intense struggle

to substantiate the hypothesis that the Arch of Galerius in Thessalonika contains Mithraic elements as is believed - cf. M. S. Pond Rothman, 'The Panel of the Emperors Enthroned on the Arch of Galerius', *Byzantine Studies/Études Byzantine* 2.1 (1975), 26-27, idem, 'The Thematic Organization of the Panel Reliefs on the Arch of Galerius', *American Journal of Archaeology* 81.4 (1977), 444 - especially since the relief panel with the enthroned emperors lacks the representation of any specifically solar deity (shown are Isis, Virtus, Dioscori, Serapis, Jupiter, Honos, and Fortuna). The same goes for the so-called Octagon within the palace complex of Thessalonika, where, along with four pilaster capitals depicting Jupiter, a Dioscorus, a Cabirus, and Hygiea, a peculiar motif with an equilateral cross surrounded by which seem to be rays of sunlight, standing between two stylized plant ornaments, has been discovered. Cf. M. Vickers, 'Observation on the Octagon at Thessaloniki', *The Journal of Roman Studies* 63 (1973), 111 (with plate XIV), 114. Some scholars have believed it to be a Christian symbol, others to symbolize the sun god Mithras (see Vickers, 'Observation on the Octagon at Thessaloniki', 114-116). None of these suppositions are compelling, although it may be conceded that the motif is a solar one. In any case, one has to wonder why Galerius, if he was that interested in Mithraic/solar elements and the sun god was really his patron deity, would conceal them and not display them openly since the solar cult was without a doubt very appealing to the tetrarchic rulers? Not even the *fossa sanguinis* in the temple within Galerius' palace at Romuliana is attributed to the Mithraic but Cybelian taurobolium, even if the cults of Cybele and Mithras were closely related. Cf. D. Srejšević, 'Gamzigrad u praistoriji, rimsko poljsko imanje, carski dvorac, in S. Čelić, ed., *Gamzigrad, kasnoantički carski dvorac* (Beograd, 1983), 55. This does not mean that Galerius could not be likened to the sun god as is shown in a papyrus fragment from Strasbourg, where he figures as "fair-haired Apollo". Cf. S. Dušanić, 'Imitator Alexandri and Redditor Libertatis. Two Controversial Themes of Galerius' Political Propaganda', in D. Srejšević, ed., *The Age of Tetrarchs. A Symposium Held from the 4th to the 9th October 1993*, [Scientific Meetings 75, The Section for Historical Sciences 24] (Belgrade 1995), 80. For the fragment see also Barnes, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine*, 54, n. 35. To conclude, there is no sufficient evidence to prove that Galerius was in any way particularly attached to the sun god. He may even be called less enthusiastic when compared to some of the other tetrarchic rulers.

²⁴ Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome* I, 259.

²⁵ Kuhoff, *Diocletian und die Epoche der Tetrarchie*, 255.

²⁶ Suda, *Lexicon* D 1156, with Kuhoff, *Diocletian und die Epoche der Tetrarchie*, 247.

against Christianity was only the next logical step. Another matter still needs to be touched upon: Why did Diocletian wait so long before initiating an active anti-Christian policy? It is obvious that he had been quite lenient towards Christians, since he appointed them to important positions in his court, and even his wife, Prisca, and daughter, Valeria, were, if we are to believe the tradition, Christians.²⁷ This leniency, however, must have been only temporary from the very beginning. For the best part of his reign Diocletian was preoccupied with attempts to reorganize the Empire, suppress internal disturbances and check external threats. But after the successful completion of the war against Persia in 299 the road was open to action.²⁸ Even now Diocletian proceeded gradually, starting with a purge of Christians from the army and court at Antioch, and only issuing the first anti-Christian edict a little more than three years later.²⁹ Notwithstanding that sources (over)emphasize Galerius' role in these events or point to other interested groups that may have exercised a great influence over Diocletian,³⁰ ultimately it was the aged Emperor with whom the final decision lay, and the persecution began when he estimated that the time was ripe, after the Empire had been made secure enough, which had been universally announced in the Empire by 302. The preamble to the Edict on Maximum Prices in 301 already testifies to the notion of a world at peace after hard won battles, while the closing phrase in two inscriptions from Lower Moesia dating from 301/302 proclaims the establishment of eternal peace throughout the Roman world after vanquishing the enemy tribes.³¹

²⁷ The Christianity of Prisca and Valeria is usually concluded on the strength of Lactantius, 15.1.2, and Eusebius, *HE* 8.1.3. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion*, 247 errs in making Diocletian's mother a Christian. For Christians in Diocletian's court see Eusebius, *HE* 8.1.3, 4, 6.1-5, with Leadbetter, *Galerius and the will of Diocletian*, 129.

²⁸ B. Green, *Christianity in Ancient Rome: The First Three Centuries* (London, New York, 2010), 211 talks of Diocletian's "coherent strategy" in moving against Christians.

²⁹ Leadbetter, *Galerius and the will of Diocletian*, 133 also holds Diocletian solely responsible for the formulation of imperial policy towards Christians. For the purge see DePalma Digeser, 'An Oracle of Apollo at Daphne and the Great Persecution', 64. The date of 299 has gain more general acceptance. See T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 18-19, Davies, 'The Origin and Purpose of the Persecution of A.D. 303', 91-93, R. W. Burgess, 'The Date of the Persecution of Christians in the Army', *Journal of Theological Studies* 47.1 (1996), 157-158. D. Woods, 'Two Notes on the Great Persecution', *Journal of Theological Studies* 43.1 (1992), 128-134, and Leadbetter, *Galerius and the will of Diocletian*, 129 argue for 297, while D. S. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay, AD 180-395* (London, New York, 2004), 661, n. 17 opts for 302.

³⁰ Cf. E. DePalma Digeser, *Lactantius and Rome: The Making of a Christian Empire* (Ithaca, London, 2000), 2-9. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion*, 248-249 says that the impulse for the persecution came from military considerations.

³¹ The preamble to the Edict on Maximum Prices: *Fortunam rei publicae nostrae, cui iuxta immortales deos bellorum memoria, quae feliciter gessimus, gratulari licet tranquillo orbis statu et in gremio al-*

Implementation and failure of the persecution edicts

It has usually been assumed that the persecution was much more intense in Diocletian's and Galerius' portion of the Empire than in Maximian's and Constantius I's one, and that the West – Gallia and Britannia which were controlled by Constantius – were more or less spared. This view depends on the accounts of Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea who both create the impression that the brunt of the persecution was suffered by the Christians in the East. Furthermore, both depict Constantius as quite different in manners and personality from his imperial colleagues and very lenient, even sympathetic, towards the Christians. However, it seems that the explanation lies in that Christianity was much more embedded in the Near East, so there were less Christians in the western parts than in the eastern areas, and even less in Constantius' regions.³² Lactantius and Eusebius agree, more or less, about Constantius' role in the persecution: Eusebius says that the Emperor did not take part in the campaign against the Christians and that he even saved them from injury and maltreatment, while Lactantius states that Constantius left untouched the true God's temple in men, although he allowed the buildings to be torn down as not to be seen differing from his colleagues.³³ Yet, there is no real reason to believe that Constantius did not act upon the anti-Christian edicts or that he suspended them, especially so, since recently it has been convincingly demonstrated that he was not inclined to monotheism because of his alleged veneration of the Sun God.³⁴ Although he may have really been less enthusiastic about the persecution and preferred to view the Christian God as a potential patron of the Empire,³⁵ his firm pro-Christian attitude is most probably an invention necessitated by ideological and propagandistic needs of his son Constantine I.

Be that as it may, it is fairly obvious that the edicts did not succeed in their primary goal: to force the Christians to comply. Even the fact that there were four separate edicts issued seems to point to a conclusion that the per-

tissimae quietatis locato, etiam pacis bonis, propter quam sudore largo laboratum est... The Moesian inscriptions: *...post debellatos hostium gentes confirmata orbi suo tranquillitate pro futurum in aeternum rei publice.* Cf. Kuhoff, *Diokletian und die Epoche der Tetrarchie*, 226-227.

³² Kuhoff, *Diocletian und die Epoche der Tetrarchie*, 289-290, R. Rees, *Diocletian and the Tetrarchy* (Edinburgh, 2004), 66.

³³ Eusebius, *HE* 8.13.15; Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* 15.7.

³⁴ Cf. Smith, 'The Religion of Constantius I'.

³⁵ Smith, 'The Religion of Constantius I', 207-208.

secution was not conducted successfully from the very start.³⁶ It may be that the primary reason for this lies in the unwillingness of the general pagan population to give an active, constant and consistent support to the efforts of imperial administration. The Martyr Acts, although notoriously unreliable as a historical source, do not emphasize the role of common people in the Diocletianic Persecution.³⁷ Only rarely is it observable that pagans arrested and handed over Christians to the authorities. Such instances are noted in the Acts of Maximus, Dadas and Cynthianus who were *denuntiati*, *comprehensi*, and *adducti* to the praeses of Moesia Secunda.³⁸ In the Acts of Hermylus and Stratonicus, who suffered martyrdom in Singidunum, it is described how Stratonicus was betrayed as a Christian by his fellow soldier.³⁹ Sometimes the martyrs themselves provoked the violent response from the population. In the Act of Marciana, who suffered martyrdom in Caesarea, in Mauritania, she was attacked by the populace after she publicly violated a statue of the goddess Diana, thus declaring openly her religious affinities that should have been kept in the private sphere.⁴⁰ Equally provocative were the acts of St. Gordius of Caesarea, in Cappadocia, who, according to St. Basil the Great, entered the arena during the games and announced his faith, which, understandably, angered the crowd.⁴¹ Most often the pagans are represented as more or less passive participants in the persecution, spectators and witnesses to the martyrs' glory. It would seem that the first breaches in this far united front of the persecuting tetrarchs came with the death of Constantius I in 306. If we might be inclined to question the veracity of Lactantius' report that Constantine restored legal status to Christianity as soon as he was proclaimed Emperor,⁴² the suspicion fades away considering the fact that Eusebius records that Maxentius revoked the persecution edict in Rome stressing that Maxentius only did this to improve his popu-

³⁶ Rees, *Diocletian and the Tetrarchy*, 65.

³⁷ That the main reason for the failure of persecution lies in the inability of the government to secure the support of the pagan population and local municipal authorities has commonly been stressed in modern historiography. Cf., for example, G. Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society* (Cambridge 2004), 53, G. Mousourakis, *A Legal History of Rome* (London, New York, 2007), 140, Leadbetter, *Galerius and the will of Diocletian*, 223.

³⁸ *Acta Sanctorum* Aprilis II, 127.

³⁹ *Acta Sanctorum* Ianuarius II, 51-53.

⁴⁰ *Acta Sanctorum* Ianuarius I, 569-570.

⁴¹ *Acta Sanctorum* Ianuarius I, 130-133.

⁴² Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* 24.9.

larity.⁴³ This peace of information could also be interpreted as an indication that showing leniency towards the Christians might have been used as a political and propagandistic tool. At the same time, Maxentius' action points to the strength, numerousness and influence of the Christian community in Rome. This appreciation was possibly one of the principal reasons for Constantine's openly siding with the Christians by invoking the help of their God in the eve of his decisive clash with Maxentius near Rome in 312. The same consideration was shown by Licinius just before his crucial confrontation with Maximinus Daia near Adrianople in 313.

In the East the anti-Christian resolve among the tetrarchs was much stronger since, as testified by Eusebius, Maximinus Daia issued new edicts against the Christians in 306 and in 309 respectively.⁴⁴ Neither of his actions, probably confined to the diocese of Oriens, improved the prospects of the persecution's efficiency. Finally, the senior Augustus Galerius conceded, in the so-called Edict of Serdica, issued on 30th April 311, just before his death, the official toleration of Christianity, first and foremost as an act of imperial clemency to the benefit of the state.⁴⁵ Notwithstanding Galerius' worsening illness, which is given by both Lactantius and Eusebius as a main reason for the edict, Galerius' motivation may have actually been political, an attempt to consolidate the tetrarchic system after the incessant crisis and civil war since 306.⁴⁶ Shortly afterwards, Maximinus Daia resumed the persecution, but by early 313 he had lessened his anti-Christian determination, and in a letter to the praetorian prefect of the East, Sabinus, preserved in Eusebius, argued for the freedom of choice and permitted Christian worship.⁴⁷ As a main reason for this reversal of policy Maximinus Daia declared his care for the public welfare.⁴⁸ Maximinus Daia granted even more explicitly the freedom of Christian worship in an edict issued in May 313, preserved also by Eusebius.⁴⁹ This two-step *salto mortale* was surely brought about

⁴³ Eusebius, *HE* 8.14.1. On Maxentius' acceptance of Christianity cf. O. Hekster, 'The City of Rome in late imperial ideology: The Tetrarchs, Maxentius, and Constantine', *Mediterraneo Antico* 2 (1999), 28-30.

⁴⁴ Eusebius, *De Martyribus Palaestinae* 4.8, 9.2.

⁴⁵ Reese, *Diocletian and the Tetrarchy*, 67.

⁴⁶ Reese, *Diocletian and the Tetrarchy*, 68.

⁴⁷ Eusebius, *HE* 9a.8. On Maximinus' attitude towards Christians see also S. Mitchell, 'Maximinus and the Christians in A.D. 312', *The Journal of Roman Studies* 78 (1988), 105-124.

⁴⁸ Kahlos, *Forbearance and Compulsion*, 36-37.

⁴⁹ Eusebius, *HE* 10.7-11.

by the changed political situation after the elimination of Maxentius, the alliance between Constantine and Licinius against Maximinus Daia, and Maximinus Daia's crushing defeat by Licinius in April 313. The final act of the full recognition of Christianity occurred in June 313 with the issuing of a letter by Licinius in Nicomedia, which came to be known as the "Edict of Milan" and was proclaimed in the names of both Licinius and Constantine. The tone of the letter is not triumphant but rather impartial and appealing to all. Guided by the principles set out in Galerius' edict, the emperors saw it as appropriate to enlist the aid of the Christian God for the well-being of the Empire, and defined the Christian prayer, next to the traditional public sacrifice to the gods, as a legitimate means of soliciting divine favour for the benefit of the state. Thus, Christianity was added as an equal component to the Roman sense of identity.⁵⁰ Before long Christianity would become the religion favoured by Constantine I and his immediate successors, which might be partly explained by their personal religious preferences, but to a greater extent by their ideological and political needs. Constantine used Christianity and the Christian Church as an ally and an instrument to eliminate Licinius and then to underpin the unity of the Empire. As once the traditional cults, so now the profession of Christianity was gradually becoming a method of confirming one's loyalty to the existing regime and the state. In a sense, Constantine's Letter to the Eastern Provincials of 324 may be seen as an intellectual twin brother of Galerius' Edict of Serdica in so far as it guaranteed the freedom of religious choice, but now it was the traditional Roman worship that was to be tolerated.⁵¹

Diocletianic Persecution in Medieval Greek and Latin authors

This might explain the fact that the pagan authors of Late Antiquity, regardless of the fact that some of their works, such as Zosimus' or Ammianus Marcellinus', are not fully preserved, do not mention the persecution under the Tetrarchy. On the one hand, it made no sense for a pagan author

⁵⁰ Kahlos, *Forbearance and Compulsion*, 57-58.

⁵¹ For the Letter to the Eastern Provincials see Eusebius, *VC* 2.47-60. On the conflicting views on the character and meaning of the Letter cf. J. M. Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia, 2008), 123-125. I am inclined to side with Harold Drake who has interpreted the Letter as supporting the religious tolerance. See also I. Sandwell, 'Outlawing 'Magic' our Outlawing 'Religion'? Libanius and the Theodosian Code as Evidence for Legislation against 'Pagan', in W. V. Harris, ed., *The Spread of Christianity in the First Four Centuries: Essays in Explanation*, [Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition 27] (Leiden, 2005), 100-102.

to describe the fight between Christianity and traditional religion in a world where the emperors were Christians. On the other hand, he would only have to concede that Christianity had won the fight, and that traditional religion was increasingly becoming marginalized and obsolete. At the same time, in the eyes of the Christians, the persecution became a glorious memory of the long-gone ordeals to be cherished with a reverent pride, an everlasting proof of the preordination of Christianity to overcome all obstacles, no matter how horrid, on its rightful path to undisputed domination. So, the persecution found its place in the works of later, late antique and medieval, Christian chroniclers, both in the West and in the East. More or less imbued with stereotype remarks about its duration and bloodthirstiness, the persecution, to mention only a few Byzantine authors, is recorded by John Malalas (6th c.), Theophanes the Confessor (8/9th c.), George Kedrenos (11th c.), and John Zonaras (12th c.). Much the same sentiment is present in the medieval Latin chronographic tradition as is shown in the historical works by Gregory of Tours (6th c.), Isidor of Seville (7th c.), Bede the Venerable (7/8th c.), Hermann of Reichenau (11th c.), and Otto of Freising (12th c.). Interestingly enough, Paul the Deacon (8th c.) does not mention the Diocletianic Persecution in his *Historia Romana*, although he records the persecution under Decius.⁵² This may be explained by the fact that he used the *Epitome de Caesaribus* to describe Diocletian's rule, a work of an anonymous pagan author from the late 4th century.⁵³

It is evident that both Greek and Latin medieval authors shared common tradition to the point that their accounts sometimes show great similarity (compare Bede the Venerable i.e. Otto of Freising with John Zonaras). And in their minds there was no doubt about who the main culprits for the persecution were: the Emperors Diocletian and Maximian. The emphasis on the savageness and viciousness of the Diocletianic Persecution with its numerous martyr deaths still served in the medieval times as a vivid reminder of the bloody but splendid Christian past. Thus, the persecution not only failed historically in its goal, but, in Late Antiquity as well as in the Middle Ages, was a focus of Christian identity and self-esteem, and was used as a shining exemplum to reinforce one's faith.

⁵² Paul the Deacon, *Historia Romana* 9.4.

⁵³ On the *Epitome de Caesaribus* see J. Schlumberger, *Die Epitome de Caesaribus. Untersuchungen zur heidnischen Geschichtsschreibung des 4. Jahrhunderts n. Chr.*, [Vestigia 18] (München, 1974), and M. Festy, 'Introduction', in *Pseudo-Aurélius Victor. Abrégé des Césars, texte établi, traduit et commenté par Michel Festy*, [Collection des Universités de France] (Paris, 1999), vii-xciii.

GREEK AUTHORS		LATIN AUTHORS	
John Malalas	The Emperor Diocletian carried out a persecution of Christians. Many were punished and suffered martyrdom (<i>Chronographia</i> 12.43) He [Maximian] too carried out a persecution against Christians and punished many holy men (<i>Chronographia</i> 12.45)	Gregory of Tours	Under Diocletian, who ruled the Roman Empire as the thirty-third in succession, a savage persecution of Christians lasted for four years, so that, on one occasion, at the holy feast of Easter, great multitudes of Christians were slaughtered because of their worship of the true God (<i>Historiae</i> I.34)
Theophanes Confessor	This was the most terrifying persecution of all, producing countless martyrs (<i>Chronographia</i> AM 5795).	Isidor of Seville	After burning down the Holy Scriptures, Diocletian persecuted Christians in the whole world (<i>Chronica maiora</i> 325)
George Kedrenos	In the eleventh year they [Diocletian and Maximian] instigated a terrible persecution of Christians, and there were many thousands of martyrs (<i>Historiarum compendium</i> I, 470, 6-7)	Bede the Venerable	In the nineteenth year, Diocletian in the East and Maximian Herculus in the West ordered the churches to be destroyed, and Christians to be hunted out and killed (<i>Chronica maiora</i> 402)* Meanwhile, Diocletian in the East and Maximian Herculus in the West ordered all churches to be destroyed, and all Christians to be hunted out and killed. This was the tenth persecution since Nero, and it was more protracted and horrible than all that had preceded it (<i>Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum</i> 1.6)
John Zonaras	So they both [Diocletian and Maximian] conspired and roused against Christians a persecution which was more violent and horrible than all that had preceded it (<i>Epitome historiarum</i> XII, 31 B) When the persecution intensified and countless men and women were dying for the confession of Christ... (<i>Epitome historiarum</i> XII 32 B)	Hermann of Reichenau	Diocletian and Maximian destroyed the churches, burnt the Holy Scriptures, and tortured Christians (<i>Chronicon</i> 303)
		Otto of Freising	The emperors [Diocletian and Maximian] started the tenth persecution of the God's church since Nero, and it was found to be as much vicious as it was unheard of than all that had preceded it, due to the ingenuity of the old enemy who now had little time and hence was flared up the more. It lasted for ten years, and it saw the proscriptions of the faithful, the murder of martyrs, and the burning of churches (<i>Chronica</i> 3.43)

* This is borrowed from Paulus Orosius' *Historia contra paganos* 7.25.13.

Concluding Remarks

In Roman society, just like in any other pre-modern society, religion was not a mere way of satisfying one's personal metaphysical needs, but rather a means of strengthening the fabric of society as a whole. The participation in religious performances served to promote feelings of belonging and decisively influenced the formation of a communal identity. To be sure, the Romans were compelled to allow new religious practices as their Empire spread across the Mediterranean, but as their state grew it became increasingly important that these cults should be incorporated in the existing Roman system and adjusted to the characteristic sense of Romanness. Roman religious policy was never static, it changed over time, but its willingness to adapt to religious diversity had its limits that were rooted in the maintenance of Roman social, economic and political supremacy, and cultural and ideological superiority. In that sense, the religious policy of the tetrarchic emperors followed the established patterns. Viewed from the perspective of the historical experience, it may seem unreasonable, useless and unnecessary that after several decades of calm the emperors should decide to persecute Christians again, and at a time when the gravest crisis which could traditionally be blamed on the Christians, appeared to have finally been overcome. However, such a notion would constitute a misconception of the principal role that the emperor had in Roman society as a guarantee of the state's well-being and security. Since the *mos maiorum* was the governing system of values and its preservation resided with the emperor, anything that was perceived as contrary to that set of values was of necessity intrinsically incompatible with the Roman ways, and therefore it was the duty of the emperor to act against it. Diocletian, who saw himself as the *Restitutor orbis* and *Conservator orbis*, was called upon by virtue of his high office to suppress beliefs and practices deemed subversive and undesirable. As long as they were *religiones illicitae*, it was possible to tolerate Christianity or Manichaeism, for that matter, but they could never be accepted because of their illegal status which rendered them a constant potential threat to the order of things, and, as soon as the circumstances would allow it, they were bound to face resolute attempts at their eradication. Diocletian's mistake was that he overestimated the animosity of the still prevalent pagan population towards their Christian neighbours. The result was not only the failure of the persecution, but also the first recognition of Christianity that made possible its official inclusion in the current system of values and the sense of Romanness to which it had already been fully adapted through adjusting it to its religious conceptions. Eventually, Christianity, with its own set of values, prevailed en-

tirely over the *mos maiorum*, which meant that it was the traditional cults that became intrinsically incompatible with the Roman ways. Since the emperors adopted Christianity the same “tolerance“ or “intolerance“ once accorded to the Christian cult was now accorded to the traditional cults. The exclusivity of a monotheistic faith as opposed to the religious diversity of polytheism may appear in itself as a main cause for the “intolerance“ towards the traditional religious practices, but it was the Christian emperors who enacted such a religious policy with the same purpose as the pagan emperors before.

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