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Christians in a Pluralistic Society: Papyrus Evidence from the Roman Empire

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Christian sources allow readers to gain the impression that the Christians were especially sensitive to, or even exaggerated for apologetic purposes, the Roman government's hostility towards them. However, by using the often neglected papyrus documents which are contemporary with the events described, we now can gain direct evidence, from the official side, of the initiative of Decius in AD 250 which, at the time, provoked this sense in our surviving Christian literary tradition of a comprehensive attack. In the light of this evidence, we can perceive the emotional and intellectual realism of the literary accounts of this Christian response.

Introduction

From Christian writings such as the letters of Cyprian, many martyrologies and the fourth-century historical and quasi-historical accounts of Lactantius *(On the Deaths of the Persecutors)* and Eusebius *(History of the Church* and *Life of Constantine)*, we learn that the emergent Christian church of the third century was targeted for persecution by the Roman Emperors. From reading such Christian sources prima facie, it is possible to gain the impression that the Christians were especially sensitive to, or even exaggerated for apologetic purposes, the Roman government's hostility towards them. However, by using the often neglected papyrus documents which are contemporary with the events described, we now can gain direct evidence, from the official side, of the initiative of Decius in AD 250 which, at the time, provoked this sense in our surviving Christian literary tradition of a comprehensive attack. In the light of this evidence, we can perceive the emotional and intellectual realism of the literary accounts of this Christian response.

Before the late second century, there is no first-hand information on Christianity in Egypt, whether in the historical record or in documentary sources, though of course we have later accounts, especially that of Eusebius. Papyri form a valuable and independent source, which can give us first hand accounts of the experiences of Christians in Egypt prior to and including the time of Constantine, when Christianity for the first time began to enjoy state favour. In terms of the existence of Christians up the Nile in the second century, the literary papyrus record may provide some evidence. Various Christian literary texts have been assigned to the second-century *chora*, indicating that there were Christians, if not full Christian communities, in such centres as Oxyrhynchus, Antinoopolis and the Fayum (see Roberts, 1979, pp. 1-25).

The Alexandrian church comes into focus from the late second century, in both a theological and institutional sense. The writings of Clement (c. AD 150-215) and Origen (c. AD 185-254) underscore the increasing importance and influence of the Alexandrian "Catechetical School," which developed from obscure beginnings to a position of importance within the Alexandrian community.

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Beyond Alexandria, the spread of Christianity can be detected from secure evidence by the third century. Christian literary papyri become both more numerous and of better quality, most importantly the codices in the Chester Beatty and Bodmer collections. The range of Christian literature also expands, with non-canonical material increasing over time. In addition, documentary papyri begin to attest the presence of Christians in the countryside. Shortly after this, Christians began appearing in the public records, the first being Dioscorus of Arsinoë dating probably to the second quarter of the third century (Sammelbuch griechischer Urkunden aus Aegypten, 1985-1988), iterating a list of nominees to be appointed to obligatory public service, possibly in preparation for the visit to the Fayum of the Roman governor of Egypt.

In the Fayum, Christian papyri begin to appear in growing numbers in the third century, and it is from this point that we have the valuable evidence from documentary papyri of the way both individual Christians and groups of Christians operated within a pluralistic society.

A major test for the Christian communities took place in AD 249 with the accession of the emperor Decius. Decius had taken power in a senatorial reaction to the policies of his predecessor Philip; these were seen at the time to be favourable towards the Christians (Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 6.14.9). For a year before the change of power, there had been violent public agitation against the Christians in Alexandria. Origen, writing in AD 248 (Origen, *Against Celsus*, 3.15), reports that people attributed the contemporary political discord to the growth in the number of believers and the fact that the government was not combating them as in earlier times. Decius, as a Roman traditionalist, may also have been eager to respond in a traditional manner to the beginnings of Rome's new millennium (one thousand years since the accepted foundation of the city, as recorded for example by Livy).

To show the solidarity of all Romans behind their ancestral gods and sacrifices, every household was obliged to appear on a fixed day, veiled and crowned, and submit a *libellus* (certificate) declaring participation in the sacrifice. The requirement to produce documentary witness to the act of sacrifice was novel. The obligation to retain a personal copy indicated that this proof of religious piety had ongoing significance and implications for the civil identity of those concerned. The wording must have been prescribed in the edict itself, or in an attachment to it, as an analysis of the remarkably fixed form of the forty-six extant *libelli* demonstrates (Clarke, 1984; Keresztes, 1975; Knipfing, 1923; Leadbetter, 1982; McKechnie, 2002; Rives, 1999).

Aspects of the government's process may thus be observed in the surviving libelli (though many are fragmentary or otherwise incomplete). They show us that the intention was to encompass all (males, females and children) and to establish their compliance even if the compliance were to be retrospective.

The sacrifices were required of Roman citizens, whose number at the beginning of the third century had been greatly increased by Caracalla. Roman Jews, however, were surely exempt, since there is no record of difficulty over sacrifice in their case. Special rolls must have been prepared; this showed the government's commitment to the process. It may well be that all the extant libelli were submitted by non-Christians, but this may be an accident of preservation.

The declaration asserts an unvarying past practice of sacrifice, indicating a total identity with the Roman community. To avow this would be doubly difficult for Christians, and moreover, since they were obliged to taste the sacrifice, it would be harder to pretend. The use of multiple witnesses was designed to prevent negligence, or collusion with the applicant. Two copies were made both countersigned by the witnesses; one for the official file and another for the personal record (the personal copies may have been folded).

Below are reproduced very literal translations of two of the surviving libelli (Grenfell & Hunt, 1916, 1904), which enable us to observe the formulaic character, and make it clear that conformity was intended to be absolutely enforceable.

> To those chosen (to be) over the sacrifices of the Oxyrhynchites' city, from Aurelius Gaion, (son) of Ammonius, (his) mother being Taeus. Always of course to sacrifice and pour (the libation) and revere the gods having been my custom, in accordance with what was ordered by the divine judgement now too in front of you (pl.) (am I) sacrificing and pouring (the libation) and (have I) tasted of the offerings, along with Taos (my) wife (?) and Ammonius and Ammonianus (my) sons and daughter Thecla (?) (acting) through me, and I ask (you) to certify (this) for me below. Year 1 of the *Imperator* Caesar Gaius Messius Quintus Traianus Decius Pius Felix Augustus, Epeiph 3. I, Aurelius Gaion, have handed (it) in. I, Aurelius Sarapion who is also (known as) Chaeremon wrote for him, (due to his) not knowing letters.
>
> To those over the offerings and sacrifices of the city (of?) from Aurelius L(?) [...] -thion, son of Theodorus, his mother (being) Pantonymis, from the same city. Always of course in sacrificing and pouring (libations) to the gods did I persist, and since now too in front of you (pl.) in accordance with what was ordered, I poured (libations) and sacrificed and tasted of the offerings, along with my son Aurelius Dioscorus and my daughter Aurelia Lais, I ask you to certify (this) for me below. Year 1 of the Imperator Caesar Gaius Messius Quintus Traianus Decius Pius Felix Augustus, Payni 20.

However, in spite of the pains with which the edict of Decius was applied, as demonstrated by the extant libelli, the effort failed to achieve its goal. Many Christians did conform, and thus created long-term dissension within the churches. Some paid to avoid it (Cyprian, *Epistles*, 55.14.1). The fact that many refused to do so, and willingly sacrificed themselves, did not help the government's case, but rather engendered admiration beyond their own Christian communities. Cyprian makes it clear that many stood their ground, and were not in fact prosecuted. After Decius' (fortunately timely) death in AD 251, nothing suggests the documentation of sacrifice was ever again required, though comprehensive sacrifices based on the calling of a roll were imposed again by Maximinus in AD 306 and 309. This does not mean that Christians were immune from civil and personal difficulties.

Diocletian, half a century later, in January/February AD 304, added to the many legal disabilities imposed upon prominent church leaders in the preceding year (Eusebius, 8.2.4-5). He had altars installed in all courts of law, and required litigants to sacrifice before proceeding (Lactantius, 15.5). The letter of Copres, reproduced below (Barnes, Parsons, Rea, & Turner, 1966), is an example which documents this event. It was a surprise to Copres, yet it clearly presented no great crisis. He simply gave power of attorney to his "brother" (a professional colleague probably and presumably not a Christian) to appear on his behalf:

> Copres to his sister Sarapias, very many greetings. Before all else I pray for the good health of you all before the lord god. I want you to know that we arrived on the 11th. It became known to us that those who present themselves in court are being made to sacrifice. I made a power-of-attorney in favour of my brother. So far we have accomplished nothing. We instructed an advocate on the 12th(?), so that the case about the land could be brought on the 14th. If we accomplish anything, I'll write to you. I've sent you nothing, since I found Theodorus himself setting out. I'll send them to you by another hand soon. Write to us about the health of you all and how Maximina has been and Asena. If it's possible let him (her?) come with your mother so that his (her?) leukoma can be cured – I myself have seen others cured. I pray for your health. My best wishes to all our friends by name.

Conclusion

Such documents offer case studies demonstrating how broad policies and procedures of the Roman government towards Christians were worked out in practice and at the individual level. Along with the recalcitrance of the martyrs, it was this widespread spirit of accommodation that undermined all the official campaigns in the long run (Eusebius, 9.1). What has been called "indestructible elasticity" saved the day, as far as the church was concerned (MacMullen, 1990).

These few sample papyrus documents, contemporary with the events they describe, show something of the impact on the lives of ordinary Christians of the attempts by the Roman government in the later Roman empire to enforce common, traditional practice, in what was clearly a pluralistic environment. These and other documents show that what was at stake was not actually *belief* per se, but the maintenance of those traditions which were believed to have held the Roman state together and ensured its military superiority for over a thousand years: namely the due attention paid to ancestral rites and sacrifices.

The Christians in the Roman world (taken en masse) were, in general, unable to make this compromise, and again (in general) stood out and attracted admirers and support because of their stand. Assisted too by Decius' early death, by the death of the emperor Valerian (AD 260), and by the death-bed reversal (AD 309) of Galerius' fierce persecution, Christian churches were able to survive and to attract the notice, patronage, and ultimate endorsement of Constantine. The establishment of the church at the end of the fourth century under Theodosius I was the culmination of this process.

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