

Primary Sources for Contesting Religions Between the Personal and Political

THE BELOW ARE TEXTS WRITTEN BY CHRISTIANS WHEN THE PRACTICE OF CHRISTIANITY WAS ILLEGAL

The following is an excerpt from the *Apology* by Tertullian, written *circa* 197 CE. An “apology” is a defense against some attack, or a text in support of some position. In this case, Tertullian is defending the Christian community against attacks of heresy and treason by the Roman State. As of yet, Christianity is still illegal in the Roman Empire, and so Christian communities remain persecuted, with some Christians even martyred.

This whole confession of these beings, in which [Christians] declare that [the Roman gods] are not gods, and in which they tell you that there is no God but one, the God whom we adore, is quite sufficient to clear us from the crime of treason, chiefly against the Roman religion. For if it is certain the gods have no existence, there is no religion in the case. If there is no religion, because there are no gods, we are assuredly not guilty of any offense against religion. Instead of that, the charge recoils on your own head: worshipping a lie, you are really guilty of the crime you charge on us, not merely by refusing the true religion of the true God, but by going the further length of persecuting it. But now, granting that these objects of your worship are really gods, is it not generally held that there is one higher and more potent, as it were the world's chief ruler, endowed with absolute power and majesty? For the common way is to apportion deity, giving an imperial and supreme domination to one, while its offices are put into the hands of many, as Plato describes great Jupiter in the heavens, surrounded by an array at once of deities and demons. It behooves us, therefore, to show equal respect to the procurators, prefects, and governors of the divine empire. And yet how great a crime does he commit, who, with the object of gaining higher favour with the Cæsar, transfers his endeavours and his hopes to another, and does not confess that the appellation of God as of Emperor belongs only to the Supreme Head, when it is held a capital offense among us to call, or hear called, by the highest title any other than Cæsar himself! Let one man worship God, another Jupiter; let one lift suppliant hands to the heavens, another to the altar of Fides; let one — if you choose to take this view of it — count in prayer the clouds, and another the ceiling panels; let one consecrate his own life to his God, and another that of a goat. For see that you do not give a further ground for the charge of irreligion, by taking away religious liberty, and forbidding free choice of deity, so that I may no longer worship according to my inclination, but am compelled to worship against it. Not even a human being would care to have unwilling homage rendered him; and so the very Egyptians have been permitted the legal use of their ridiculous superstition, liberty to make gods of birds and beasts, nay, to condemn to death any one who kills a god of their sort. Every province even, and every city, has its god. Syria has Astarte, Arabia has Dusares, the Norici have Belenus, Africa has its Cælestis, Mauritania has its own princes. I have spoken, I think, of Roman provinces, and yet I have not said their gods are Roman; for they are not worshipped at Rome any more than others who are ranked as deities over Italy itself by municipal consecration, such as Delventinus of Casinum, Visidianus of Narnia, Ancharia of Asculum, Nortia of Volsinii, Valentia of Oriculum, Hostia of Satrium, Father Curis of Falisci, in honour of whom, too, Juno got her surname. In fact, we alone are prevented having a religion of our own. We give offense to the Romans, we are excluded from the rights and privileges of Romans, because we do not worship the gods of Rome. It is well that there is a God of all, whose we all are, whether we will or no.

But with you liberty is given to worship any god but the true God, as though He were not rather the God all should worship, to whom all belong.

This is an excerpt of a letter from Tertullian to Scapula, a Proconsul of Carthage; it is conjectured to be dated between **199-217 CE**.

We are worshippers of one God, of whose existence and character Nature teaches all men; at whose lightnings and thunders you tremble, whose benefits minister to your happiness. You think that others, too, are gods, whom we know to be devils. **However, it is a fundamental human right, a privilege of nature, that every man should worship according to his own convictions: one man's religion neither harms nor helps another man. It is assuredly no part of religion to compel religion — to which free-will and not force should lead us — the sacrificial victims even being required of a willing mind.** You will render no real service to your gods by compelling us to sacrifice. For they can have no desire of offerings from the unwilling, unless they are animated by a spirit of contention, which is a thing altogether undivine

This is an excerpt from Chapter 20 of Book V (Of Justice) of the *Divine Institutes* by Lactantius, written around **303-311 CE**.

But, they say, the public rites of religion must be defended. Oh with what an honourable inclination the wretched men go astray! For they are aware that there is nothing among men more excellent than religion, and that this ought to be defended with the whole of our power; but as they are deceived in the matter of religion itself, so also are they in the manner of its defense. **For religion is to be defended, not by putting to death, but by dying; not by cruelty, but by patient endurance; not by guilt, but by good faith: for the former belong to evils, but the latter to goods; and it is necessary for that which is good to have place in religion, and not that which is evil. For if you wish to defend religion by bloodshed, and by tortures, and by guilt, it will no longer be defended, but will be polluted and profaned.** For nothing is so much a matter of free-will as religion; in which, if the mind of the worshipper is disinclined to it, religion is at once taken away, and ceases to exist. The right method therefore is, that you defend religion by patient endurance or by death; in which the preservation of the faith is both pleasing to God Himself, and adds authority to religion.

THE ABOVE ARE TEXTS WRITTEN BY CHRISTIANS WHEN THE PRACTICE OF CHRISTIANITY WAS ILLEGAL

THE BELOW ARE EXCERPTS FROM ROMAN DOCUMENTS FIRST LEGALIZING CHRISTIANITY AND THEN MAKING CHRISTIANITY THE STATE RELIGION OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

This is an excerpt from Roman Emperor Constantine's Edict of Milan, which effectively decriminalized Christian practice around **313 CE**.

As we long since perceived that religious liberty should not be denied, but that it should be granted to the opinion and wishes of **each one to perform divine duties according to his own**

determination, we had given orders, that each one, and the Christians among the rest, have the liberty to observe the religion of his choice, and his peculiar mode of worship. And as there plainly appeared to be many and different sects added in that edict, in which this privilege was granted them, some of them perhaps, after a little while, on this account shrunk from this kind of attention and observance. Wherefore as I, Constantine and Augustus, and I, Licinius Augustus, came under favorable auspices to Milan, and took under consideration all affairs that pertained to the public benefit and welfare, these things among the rest appeared to us to be most advantageous and profitable to all. We have resolved among the first thing to ordain those matters by which reverence and worship to the Deity might be exhibited; that is, how we may grant likewise to the Christians, and to all, the free choice to follow that mode of worship which they may wish, that whatsoever divinity and celestial power may exist, may be propitious to us and to all that live under our government. Therefore, we have decreed the following ordinance, as our will, with a salutary and most correct intention, that no freedom at all shall be refused to Christians, to follow or to keep their observances or worship; but that to each one power be granted to devote his mind to that worship which he may think adapted to himself, that the Deity may in all things exhibit to us his accustomed favour and kindness.

This is an excerpt from the Edict of Thessalonica, issued on **28 February 380 CE** by three reigning Roman Emperors, which made Nicene Christianity the **state religion** of the Roman Empire

I, 2. It is Our will that all the peoples who are ruled by the administration of Our Clemency shall practice that religion which the divine Peter the Apostle transmitted to the Romans, as the religion which he introduced makes clear even unto this day. It is evident that this is the religion that is followed by pontiff Damasus and by Peter, bishop of Alexandria, a man of apostolic sanctity; that is, according to the apostolic discipline and the evangelic doctrine, we shall believe in the single Deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, under the concept of equal majesty and of the Holy Trinity.

We command that those persons who follow this rule shall embrace the name of Catholic Christians. The rest, however, whom We adjudge demented and insane, shall sustain the infamy of heretical dogmas, their meeting places shall not receive the name of churches, and they shall be smitten first by divine vengeance and secondly by the retribution of Our own initiative, which We shall assume in accordance with the divine judgment (28 February 380).

THE ABOVE ARE EXCERPTS FROM ROMAN DOCUMENTS FIRST LEGALIZING CHRISTIANITY AND THEN MAKING CHRISTIANITY THE STATE RELIGION OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

THE BELOW IS A TEXT WRITTEN BY AUGUSTINE (SEE EXPLANATORY INTRO)

This final excerpt is written by Augustine of Hippo. Around **417**, Augustine received a letter from Boniface, a rising military commander. As a newcomer to Africa, he was unfamiliar with the Donatist controversy and asked Augustine for advice. The Donatist Controversy was a heresy in North Africa that led to a schism in the Roman Catholic Church between the fourth and sixth centuries. Generally and briefly, Donatists, named after the Berber Bishop Donatus Magnus, believed that clergy who had

renounced the faith or handed over the scripture to Roman authorities during the Diocletian persecution had to be re-ordained before validly performing sacraments; consequently, those who had been baptized by lapsed priests or who had received any other sacraments, had all received them invalidly and themselves had to be re-baptized. The details are less important. More pertinently for our purposes, just know that the Donatists were a schismatic group of Christians who had their own churches and communities and refused to subject themselves to any other clerical authority except their bishops. Augustine was largely unable to convince Donatists to return, despite his eloquence; in the end, he resorted to the power of the Roman State to re-unite the Church. Augustine sent back a treatise-length letter tracing the history of the schism and a detailed survey of disputed issues. Towards the end, Augustine makes a famous plea to enforce the verdict of unity decreed by Flavius Marcellinus at the Conference of Carthage of 411. Augustine plays on Jesus' parable of the wedding feast to call on Boniface to "compel them to come in" (*coge intrare*). From *Letter 185* (also called *On the Correction of the Donatists*):

Who can love us more than Christ, who laid down His life for His sheep? Nevertheless, although He called Peter and the other Apostles by word alone, in the case of Paul, previously Saul, a dread destroyer of the Church, and afterward its great builder, He not only compelled him by words, but used His power to strike him prostrate, and, in order to force him to leave off the savagery of his dark unbelief and to desire the light of his heart, He afflicted him with corporeal blindness. If it had not been for that punishment, he would not have been healed of it afterward, and since he saw nothing, though his eyes were open, if he had been able to see, Ananias would not have laid his hands upon him that his sight might be restored, when, as Scripture relates, there fell from his eyes, as it were, scales with which they had been closed. What ground is there for the cry generally raised by schismatics: "There is freedom to believe or not to believe"? See, now they have the Apostle Paul. **Let them acknowledge in him Christ first compelling and afterward teaching, first striking and afterward consoling.** It is a wonderful thing how he who came to the Gospel under the compulsion of bodily suffering labored more in the Gospel than all the others who were called by word alone, and that in him whom greater fear drove to love, "perfect charity casts out fear" (1 Jn 4:18). **Why, then, should the Church not compel her lost sons to return if the lost sons have compelled others to be lost? And yet, even in the case of those whom they have not compelled but only enticed, if they are called back to the bosom of the Church by stern but salutary laws,** their loving mother embraces them more kindly and rejoices much more over them than over those whom she has never lost. Is it no part of the shepherd's care, when he has found those sheep, also, which have not been rudely snatched away but have been gently coaxed and led astray from the flock, and have begun to be claimed by others, to call them back to the Lord's sheepfold by threats or pain of blows if they try to resist? And especially if their numbers are increased by fruitful generation in the midst of runaway slaves and bandits, has he not more authority over them because he recognizes on them the brand mark of the Lord which is not tampered with in those whom we receive back without rebaptism?...But we have shown that Paul was forced by Christ; therefore, the Church imitates her Lord in forcing them, although in her early days she did not expect to have to compel anyone in order to fulfill the prophetic utterance. (24) Indeed, this is not an unreasonable deduction from that statement of the Apostle, where blessed Paul says: "Having in readiness to revenge all disobedience when your obedience shall be fulfilled" (2 Cor 10:6). **In the same way, the Lord Himself commands the guest first to be brought in to His great supper, but afterward to be compelled, for, when the servant answered the king:** "Lord, it is done as you have

commanded, and yet there is room,” he said: “Go out into the highways and hedges, and whomsoever you find, **compel them to come in**” (Lk 14:16–23). Thus, the obedience was first fulfilled in those who were first brought in gently, but the disobedience is put under restraint in those who are compelled. That is the purpose of that: “Compel them to come in,” after he had first said: “Bring them in,” and had been answered: “It is done as you have commanded, and yet there is room.” If He meant us to understand that they are to be compelled by the fear engendered by miracles, many more divine miracles were wrought for those who were invited first, especially the Jews of whom it is said: “The Jews require signs” (1 Cor 1:22). Among the Gentiles, too, in the time of the Apostles, such miracles won faith in the Gospel so that, if the command was given to compel them by such means, it is more reasonable to believe that the first guests were compelled to come. **Consequently, if the Church in the era of kings exercises, as she ought, the power which she has received by a divine gift, together with religion and faith, and if those who are found in the highways and hedges, that is, in heresies and schisms, are compelled to come in, she is not to be blamed for compelling them, but they [are to be blamed] for waiting to be compelled.** The banquet of the Lord is the unity of the Body of Christ, not only in the sacrament of the altar, but also in “the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3). But of the Donatists we can say with absolute truth that they compel no one to what is good; whomsoever they compel, they compel only to evil.