ON CHRISTIAN ATHEISM

BY

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Why were the Christians so unpopular in the first and second centuries? The effects of their unpopularity reveal the significance of the question. With the exception of the Neronian persecution, for the first 100 years private persons, not the Roman government, initiated prosecutions of Christians. Without this popular hostility, prosecutions would not have taken place. Nor would the authorities have acted on these accusations had they not shared to some extent the prejudices and suspicions of the accusors. It was hostility at the popular and official levels which accounted for the afflictions of the Christians of that period.

The question of Christian unpopularity is pertinent to the interpretation of several aspects of early Christianity and ancient culture: how much pagans knew of the new cult; to what extent the pagan impression and opinion of Christianity evolved; what the limits of Greek and Roman tolerance were at the time; and what sort of characteristics were likely to irritate pagans of the empire. Modern scholars most often attribute Christian unpopularity to Christian atheism. This is understandable. Christian "atheism" was certainly the central issue between Christianity and paganism in the 3rd century. Yet this does not necessarily mean that atheism provoked pagan antipathy during Christianity's first hundred years.

In this paper a survey of the evidence of pagan hostility to Christianity up to c. 150 AD will show that atheism played only a small part. Even after 150, other traits contributed to Christian unpopularity as atheism became the principal charge only gradually. Whereas an initial general unfamiliarity with Christianity accounts for pagan ignorance of Christian "atheism," growing awareness (suddenly expanded by historical events of Marcus Aurelius' reign) revealed to pagans the weightier and, from their point of view, wholly valid charge of atheism. This charge was to dominate the religious controversy thereafter. Thus
hatred which had already been engaged found a potent justification. In fact, several characteristics disagreeable to the pagan community—atheism, separateness, aggressive proselytizing and polemic, secrecy, Jewish origins, apocalyptic expectations, disruption of families—account for hatred of the Christians in the earliest period. The precise chemistry of these characteristics eludes analysis. Still, it is better to acknowledge the frustrating complexity of religious prejudice than to rely on a satisfying but oversimplified explanation for pagan hostility towards the new faith.

1. The Ancient Evidence

It must have come to the attention of some pagans very early that Christians did not honor gods other than their own. Christian proselytizing and pagan curiosity would have seen to it that some pagans found out the reason for this, namely, monotheism. The snub to their beliefs and practices might irritate pagans. Some may even have thought that the Christian refusal to honor the gods could disturb the pax deorum and hence endanger the general well-being. Most would not have cared as long as conditions were generally peaceful. Historians have maintained that from the very beginning atheism was the principal reason the Christians were hated, and there is apparent support for this assertion. Tertullian, for example, declares in his Apology, "sequitur ut eadem ratione pro aliis non sacrificemus, qua nec pro nobis ipsis, semel deos non colendo. itaque sacrilegii et maiestatis rei conuenimur. summa haec causa, immo tota est" (10.1). Yet Tertullian's testimony and the other evidence for this assertion appear considerably later than our period. It remains to be established 1) when atheism is first attested as a cause of pagan hatred of Christians, and 2) whether other reasons for hatred were given before atheism became predominant.

First let us review the Christian evidence. In the first (or beginning of the second) century the author of 1Peter wrote in oppressive and hostile times (4.12-6), yet criticism of Christianity seems to have been moral and political in the narrowest sense (2.11-7). Clement of Rome in his 1st Epistle to the Corinthians writes in harsh times as well (5.1-5, 6.1-4, 7.1). Here ζηλος (5.2,4,5, 6.1,2,3,4), φθόνος (5.2), and ἐρως (5.5, 6.4), not atheism, are deemed responsible for the problems. The Ascension of Isaiah, in what is probably an allusion to Peter's martyrdom, contains