Responses to the Christians

Tacitus, *Annals* xv.44

Therefore, to end the rumour <that he had started the fire>, Nero substituted as the guilty and punished with the choicest penalties those hated for their vices and popularly called Christians. The originator of their name, one Christus, was executed in the Principate of Tiberius by the governor Pontius Pilate; the deadly *superstitio* was checked for a time, but broke out again, not only in Judaea, the origin of the evil, but even in the capital, where all hideous and shameful practices collect from every quarter and are extremely popular. So first the confessed members were arrested; then, on their evidence a huge number were found guilty, not so much on the charge of arson, as for their hatred of the human race.) And those dying were made an object of mockery: covered with animal skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs; or nailed to crosses, when daylight failed, they were set alight as torches to lighten the darkness.²

1. In fact the punishment (execution by fire) is what the law laid down as the penalty for arson.
2. The text of the last clause (from 'Or nailed…') is uncertain

Correspondence between Pliny and Trajan (c. A.D. 110)

Pliny, the governor of Pontus-Bithynia, wrote to the emperor from Pontus about the Christians. Despite his professed inexperience, he knew to release those who denied that they were or ever had been Christians, to punish those who admitted that they were Christians (executing those not Roman citizens, and sending Roman citizens to Rome for trial); but he needed guidance on a third category, lapsed Christians, whom he hoped to release. The letters are among our best evidence for Roman expectations of Christian criminal actions, for official procedures, and (along with 12.7d(ii)) for second-century Christian practices. Compare the response to the cult of Bacchus (12.1a–b).


Pliny, *Letters* x.96–7

Pliny to the Emperor Trajan

It is my practice, lord, to refer to you on all points where I am doubtful, for who can better resolve my uncertainty or enlighten my ignorance? As I have never taken part in a trial of Christians, I do not know what it is customary to investigate nor how far the penalty should be applied. I hesitated not a little as to whether there should be any distinction drawn between them on grounds of age, or whether rather the young and their elders should be treated alike; whether repentance should lead to a pardon, or whether rather it should not avail those who had once been Christians to renounce it; and whether the name itself should be punished even if there were no criminal acts, or whether rather the criminal acts associated with the name should be punished.
to themselves <i.e. the Christians>; fathers and teachers, they tell them, talk nonsense, have no understanding, are incapable of saying or doing anything good and are wholly preoccupied with trivialities; they themselves, by contrast, are the only ones to know how to live, so that the children, if they will only believe them, would be happy and make their homes happy too. Should they while imparting this lesson, happen to see a schoolteacher coming, or an intelligent person, or even the father himself, then the faint-hearted ones vanish, though the bolder ones incite the children to rebel. These whisper to them that they cannot explain anything in the presence of fathers and teachers, because they will have nothing to do with the elders' stupidity and grossness, since they are quite corrupt, set on the path of vice and even liable to punish them. But if the children wish to obtain instruction, they should leave their fathers and their teachers, and come with the women and with their playmates to the wooldresser's shop <or to the women's quarters> or the leather shop or the fullery to attain perfection. With these words, they persuade them.

1. On the mendicant priests see Nock (1933) 82–3.

11.11d Allegations of Christian immorality

According to Christian writers of the middle of the second to early third centuries A.D., Christians were believed by outsiders to be a secretive rabble that committed ritual incest and cannibalism. Here the Christian Minucius Felix puts such allegations in the mouth of a non-Christian. Christians sometimes also made these allegations against other Christians (12.7a (i)).


Minucius Felix, <i>Octavius</i> 8–9 (extracts)

(8.4) "They have collected from the absolute dregs of society the ill-educated and the women, who tend because of their sex to be more credulous and unstable, and have created a rabble of blasphemous conspirators, which is bound together by nocturnal gatherings, ritual fasts and unnatural feasts, not for any rite but for profanation. They form a secretive people that shuns the light, silent in public, talkative in corners, they despise temples as being only tombs, they spit on the gods, they mock our rites, these pitiful people pity (incredible though it is) our priests, they despise public offices and their purple robes, while they themselves go half-naked . . ."

(9.2) "They recognize each other by secret marks and signs, and fall in love almost before they are introduced: everywhere they actually join together in a sort of <i rel="tooltip">religio</i> of lusts, and call each other indiscriminately brother and sister, so that under the cover of a sacred name, ordinary sex is converted to incest. And thus their pointless and stupid <i rel="tooltip">superstitio</i> boasts of crimes. For, unless there were some basis of truth, shrewd rumour would not allege gross, varied and unmentionable forms of vice. I am told that they
worship the head of an ass,' the lowest of beasts, which has been consecrated under some absurd impulse — a *religio* that is suited to and derived from this sort of morals!

(9.5) 'Reports of the initiation of new recruits are as revolting as they are notorious. An infant, covered in flour to deceive the unsuspecting, is put in front of the person to be admitted to the rites. The recruit is called upon to make seemingly harmless blows to the flour, and kills the infant with wounds that remain secret and hidden. I can hardly mention this, but they thirstily lap up the infant's blood, eagerly tear his body apart, make a covenant over this sacrificial victim, and by complicity in the crime they bind themselves to mutual silence. These rites are more foul than any form of sacrilege.

(9.6) 'And their feasting is well known. People talk about it everywhere, as is shown by a speech of our compatriot from Cirta. On the appointed day they gather for a banquet, with all their children, sisters and mothers, people of every sex and every age. There, after many courses, when the dinner has warmed them and drink has lighted the flames of incestuous lust, a dog which has been tied to the candlestick is tempted to jump and leap forward by a scrap thrown out of reach of the leach tying him up. In so doing the tell-tale light is turned over and extinguished, and in the darkness that ends shame they copulate indiscriminately with unutterable desires; and all alike, though not in practice at least in complicity, commit incest, since whatever happens through the actions of individuals results from their common intention.'

1. For this allegation, first made against the Jews (11.8a), see also 2.10b. The alleged sexual powers of the ass may explain the train of thought.
2. I.e. Fronto, who like the speaker came from Cirta in North Africa. Though many scholars have inferred from this passage and 31.2 that Fronto wrote a major speech 'Against the Christians', the reference may simply be to a speech which made a passing allusion to Christian incest (Champlin (1980) 64–6).
3. Cf, 12.7a (i).

11.12 Ruling against the Manichees (A.D. 297 or 302)

Mani (A.D. 216–76), the 'Apostle of Jesus Christ', founded in the Sassanian (Persian) kingdom a new religion proclaiming a cosmic conflict between Light and Darkness. This faith was propagated by active missionary activity, both east from Persia and (from the middle of the third century A.D.) west into the Roman empire. There were adherents in Egypt by the end of the third century, and those in North Africa were felt to be a sufficient problem for the governor to write a detailed report on them to the Emperor Diocletian. Diocletian's letter in reply (preserved in a later legal treatise) argued in traditional terms that the newfangled faith should be repressed, partly as it was (allegedly) Persian (Persia being Rome's ancient eastern enemy, with whom there had been recent conflict).