

ABSTRACT

The topic of this thesis is the persecution of Christians in Ancient Rome. The paper describes historical circumstances that led to the persecution, explains the reasons and social background that made the persecution viable and provides a list of legal instruments that were used by the Roman institutions during the course of the persecution.

The early Christian history was marked by the persecutions striving to suppress or even eliminate this newborn religion. Oppression during the times of Roman emperors first occurred in the course of Nero's reign and peaked after Diocletian came to power. It was directed not only to the opposition of Christians to recognize the official cult of the gods, but was also politically motivated because the Roman emperors were not to succumb to the idea of nonconforming citizens.

The thesis consists of 8 chapters. The first chapters contains the introduction of the thesis, the second chapter consists of a short digression into the traditional Roman religion describing its characteristic features and the relationship between Roman people and their gods. This chapter also presents some cases of state intervention against different religions and cults. The end of the second chapter deals with the Christianity itself and the way it is different from the traditional Roman religion.

The third chapter describes the beginnings of the persecutions against Christians, a short introduction to the history of Judaism and the relationship between the Jews and first Christians. Initially, the Christianity was viewed by the Roman Empire only as a Jewish sect, but by the Jews they were viewed as heretics. This situation meant certain advantages to Christian religion because as a religion recognized by the state it was entitled to enjoy the same privileges as the Judaism.

The fourth chapter addresses the first actual persecutions carried out by the Roman Empire even though there was no consistent legal background for those actions. The famous set of letters exchanged between the emperor Trajan and Pliny the Younger originates in this era. In this period (from the beginning of the 2nd century to the mid-3rd century) a more tolerant approach was taken in the treatment of Christians. The Roman Empire in this period was economically and militarily sound and emperors were not in favour of persecuting Christians. If a Christian was persecuted, it wasn't a large organized event, but individual cases usually started due to civilian denunciations and they were tried and executed for believing in superstitions.

The fifth chapter describes the following period of persecutions that were based on a sound legal background. During the course of the reign of emperor Decius began a first systematical persecution of Christians. The common means designed to break the Christian belief system were death at the border, execution at the circus games, decapitation or exile. Despite the failure of many

Christians during this time of persecution there were also a large number of martyrs, which strengthened the religion. After a long period of peace came a wave of the cruellest of all the persecution in the 2nd Mid 3rd century under Emperor Diocletian. The emperor decided to completely wipe out Christianity and issued several decrees; first Diocletian got rid of all Christian civil employees, and then ordered to destroy all Christian buildings, religious articles and writings. Church leaders were imprisoned and forced to sacrifice to pagan gods. Refusal meant torture, death or straight. The most brutal persecution took place primarily in the eastern part of the Roman Empire.

Overall, however, the persecution of Christians missed its objective and Emperor Galerius (311 A.D.) then gave tolerance yield, which was confirmed by Constantine in 313 A.D. and guaranteed Christians free practice of their religion. This period and the subsequent period of spreading Christianity to the foreign lands of the Empire is examined in the sixth chapter. The seventh chapter describes the final period of the early Christian history in which the persecuted religion became the state religion by the decision of the Emperor Theodosia (380 A.D.). The eighth chapter, the conclusion, summarizes the thesis and deals with the possible reasons for the persecutions and the following victory of Christianity.

Keywords: The persecution of Christians. Roman Empire. Constantine.