

Chapter 6 Viewpoint Activity



The Roman Empire was generally tolerant of minority religions but, as you read on textbook pages 144–146, this did not extend to the new religion of Christianity. As governor of the Roman province of Bithynia (modern Turkey), the writer Pliny the Younger (Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus) had to deal with the problem of punishing Christians. Pliny, well-known for his letter-writing, asked advice from his boss—the emperor Trajan. ♦ *As you read their letters, written about A.D. 110, consider what they show about official Roman policy at the time. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

What To Do About the Christians?

Pliny to Trajan the Emperor. . . I have never been present when Christians have been put on trial. So I do not know how they are usually punished. I am also not sure what efforts I have to make to go out and find them. . . .

This is what I have done with those who were named to me as Christians. I had them brought in and asked them face-to-face if they were Christians. If they said “Yes,” I asked them a second time. If they still said “Yes,” I asked them a third time. And this time I threatened them with punishment. If they still said “Yes,” I ordered them to be beheaded. . . .

. . . There are some people who say that they are not Christians. They also say they have never been Christians. When I get these in court they repeat after me Roman prayers to Roman gods and to your statue. I have your statue brought in with the statues of the gods. They then burn incense and offer wine to the gods. . . . There are some people who say they were once Christian.

I have put off any more trials and I have run to you for help. I must have your advice because there are so many people who are at risk. . . .

Trajan to Pliny You did the right thing, my Secundus, in “shaking out” the cases of those who were named to you as Christians. There is no one rule which will cover everything. The matter is so complex. But the Christians must not be hunted out. If they are named and proved Christians, they must be punished. If someone says he is not a Christian and shows it by praying to our Roman gods, then grant him a pardon. He has repented and that will do. Do this even to those who may be suspected of having been Christians in the past.

Do not take any notice of lists of names that have no significance. They must not be used as evidence in a court of law. That sort of thing is a very poor example to others. It is not the sort of thing I want to be remembered for as Emperor.

Source: Both letters from *Pliny, A selection of his letters*, translated by Clarence Greig (Cambridge University Press, 1978).

“ . . . I ordered them beheaded . . . ”

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Questions to Discuss

1. What punishment did Pliny impose on those who insisted they were Christians? Was he thinking about being more or less severe toward them?
2. What test did Trajan approve for giving accused Christians a pardon?
3. **Identifying Assumptions** (a) What can you tell from these two letters about the attitudes of Roman officials toward Christianity? Do you think they opposed its beliefs or simply found it a threat to the unity of the empire? (b) Why was Trajan opposed to actively “hunting out” Christians?

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