

In the first decade of the 2nd century AD the Emperor Trajan sent Pliny, an experienced senator, as governor to the province of Bithynia (modern northwest Turkey) where several cities had been suffering from mismanagement. The senator, Pliny the Younger (nephew of the encyclopaedist Pliny the Elder), was also a man of letters, and the tenth and final book of his collected correspondence is devoted to the letters he exchanged with the emperor - on topics as various as grants of Roman citizenship, sewers and fire precautions. Christians were brought before him by the provincials and, having never had to deal with them before, Pliny outlined what he had done and sought the counsel of the emperor. Trajan's reply confirmed Pliny's decisions.

To Trajan from Pliny

It is my custom, Sir, to refer to you in all cases where I do not feel sure. For who can better direct my doubts or inform my ignorance? I have never been involved in any legal examination concerning Christians, and I do not know, therefore, in respect of what and to what extent it is proper for them to be examined or punished. (2) I have hesitated not a little whether any distinctions should be drawn in respect of the ages; whether the weak should be punished as severely as the more robust; whether pardon should be given for recantation; or whether there should be an advantage for one who once was a Christian but has stopped being one; and whether the name itself, even if innocent of other crimes, should be punished, or only the crimes associated with it.

In the meantime, this is the plan which I have adopted in the case of those Christians who have been delated to me. (3) I have asked them whether they are Christians; to those who say yes, I have repeated the question a second and a third time, warning them of the punishment, and if they still persist, I order them to be taken away. For I was in no doubt that, whatever the character of the crime may be which they were confessing, their pertinacity and inflexible obstinacy certainly ought to be punished. (4) There were others who showed similar mad folly whom, as they were Roman citizens, I reserved to be sent to Rome. Subsequently, as is usually the way, the very fact of my taking up this question led to a great increase of accusations, and a variety of cases were

brought before me. (5) A pamphlet was issued anonymously, containing the names of a number of people. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians when they had called upon the gods, reciting the words after me, those who offered incense and wine before your image, which I had given orders to be brought forward for this purpose, together with the statues of the deities - all such I considered should be discharged, especially as they cursed the name of Christ, which, it is said, those who are really Christians cannot be induced to do. (6) Others, whose names were given me by an informer, said that they were Christians and then denied it, declaring that they had been but were so no longer, some of them having recanted many years before, and more than one so long as twenty years back. They all worshipped your image and the statues of the deities, and cursed the name of Christ. (7) And they declared that the sum of their guilt or their error only amounted to this, that on a stated day they had been accustomed to meet before daybreak and to recite a hymn among themselves to Christ as a god, and that so far from binding themselves by oath to commit any crime, their oath was to abstain from theft, robbery, adultery, and from breach of faith, and not to deny trust money placed in their keeping when called upon to deliver it. When this ceremony was concluded, it had been their custom to depart and meet again to take food, but it was of no special character and quite harmless, and they had ceased this practice after the edict in which, in accordance with your orders, I had forbidden all secret societies. (8) I thought it the more necessary, therefore, to find out what there was of truth by questioning two maids, who were called *ministrae* (? deaconesses), under torture, but I found nothing but a debased and extreme *superstitio*. So I postponed my examination, and immediately consulted you. (9) The matter seemed to me worth consultation, especially because of the number of those endangered. Many persons of all ages, of every rank and also of both sexes, are being summonsed and will be summonsed to their peril. For the contagion of this *superstitio* has spread not only through the cities, but into the

villages and country districts, and yet it seems to me that it can be checked and set right. (10) It is indeed agreed that the temples, which up to now have been almost deserted, are beginning to be frequented, and that the sacred rites which have for a long time been allowed to lapse are now being sought once more, and that everywhere the meat of victims is finding a sale, whereas, up to recently, a buyer was hardly to be found. From this it is easy to infer what vast numbers of people might be corrected, if only they were given an opportunity of changing their minds.

Pliny Letter X, 96

Trajan to Pliny

You did what you ought, my dear Pliny, to investigate the cases of those who have been denounced to you as Christians, for it is not possible for any provision which has a clear form to be laid down for all eventualities. (2) The Christians are not to be sought out; if they are delated and the offence is proved, they are to be punished, but with this reservation - that if any one denies that he is a Christian and makes it clear that he is not, by offering prayers to our gods, then he is to be pardoned because of his recantation, however suspicious his past conduct may have been. But pamphlets published anonymously should have no place in any accusation whatever. For they set a very bad example, and they are not in the spirit of our age.

Pliny Letter X, 97