

AN AGE-OLD QUESTION



Sometime within the first 100 years after the death of Christ, a Roman official posed a question that begs to be answered today. First, let's look at the questioner, then the question.

Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, better known as Pliny the Younger (61 AD – 112 AD) was a lawyer, author and magistrate of Ancient Rome. Pliny's uncle, Pliny the Elder, helped raise and educate him, and they were both witnesses to the eruption of Vesuvius on August 24, 79 AD.

Pliny is known for his hundreds of surviving letters, which are an invaluable historical source for the period. Many are addressed to reigning emperors or to notables such as the historian, Tacitus. Pliny himself was a notable figure, serving as an Imperial magistrate under the Roman Emperor Trajan. Pliny was considered an honest and moderate man and rose through a series of Imperial civil and military offices. Pliny also came in contact with many other well-known men of the period, including the philosophers Artemidorus and Euphrates during his time in Syria.

Now for the question.

When Pliny was governor of Bithynia, he wrote a most interesting letter to Trajan. He wanted to know why Christians were being persecuted and exterminated. Then his letter said:

"I have been trying to get all the information I could regarding them. I have even hired spies to profess to be Christians and become baptized in order that they might get into the Christian services without suspicion.

"Contrary to what I had supposed, I find that the Christians meet at dead of night or at early morn, that they sing a hymn to Christ as God, that they read from their own sacred writings and partake of a very simple meal consisting of bread and wine and water (the water added to the wine to dilute it in order that there might be enough for all).

"This is all I can find out, except that they exhort each other to be subject to the government and to pray for all men."

So the question rings true today: Why are Christians today being persecuted and exterminated in many parts of the world, particularly as targets of terrorists waging a "holy war?"

No doubt, as long as the world stands, the question may still be appropriate. But as Pliny suggests, the beliefs and practices of Christians do not call for such treatment.