**FOCUS: After reading 6.3 what do you know about how Christians were treated under the Roman Empire?**

**Now, read the textbook excerpt below. According to the textbook what was the relationship between the Roman Empire and Christianity?**

**Document A: Textbook**

**Roman Christianity.** Through the work of Paul and others, Christianity spread through the Roman world. There were many reasons for this growth. The Christian message of love and eternal life after death, regardless of social position, appealed to many. Roman religious toleration also contributed to its spread. Historians estimate that by about 300, some 10 percent of the Roman people were Christian.

**Persecution.** As Christianity spread through the Roman world, some local officials feared that the Christians were conspiring against them. As a result, they arrested and killed many Christians. However, those killed were seen by the early Christians as martyrs, people who die for their faith and thus inspire others to believe. Even many nonbelievers were impressed by the martyrs’ faith. Although Christians often were persecuted at the local level, large-scale persecution by the Romans was rare during the first two centuries after Jesus’s life. As it grew, however, some rulers came to see Christianity as a threat and began persecuting those who practiced it.

**Imperial Approval.** The spread of Christianity through Rome was hastened by the conversion of the emperor Constantine to the religion in the early 300s. His conversion was apparently triggered by a vision that he claimed to have experienced just before a battle in 312. Before the battle, tradition says that the emperor saw a cross of light in the sky inscribed with the words “In this sign, conquer.” After winning the battle, Constantine became a patron of Christianity. In 313 he issued the Edict of Milan, which made Christianity legal within the empire. Although Constantine did not actually ban the practice of other religions, his support for Christianity helped it to spread more rapidly through the Roman Empire.

Thus, from a tiny religious minority, Christians eventually grew to constitute a majority of the population. In 391 Emperor Theodosius outlawed public non-Christian sacrifices and religious ceremonies. As a result, polytheism gradually disappeared from the empire.

**Source: World History: Human Legacy, written by Ramirez, Stearns, & Wineburg in**

**2008 and published in Texas.**

**Document B: Tacitus**

Of Rome meanwhile, so much as was left unoccupied by his mansion, was not built up, as it had been after its burning by the Gauls, without any regularity or in any fashion, but with rows of streets according to measurement, with broad thoroughfares, with a restriction on the height of houses, with open spaces, and the further addition of colonnades, as a protection to the frontage of the blocks of tenements. These colonnades Nero promised to erect at his own expense, and to hand over the open spaces, when cleared of the debris, to the ground landlords. He also offered rewards proportioned to each person's position and property, and prescribed a period within which they were to obtain them on the completion of so many houses or blocks of building. He fixed on the marshes of Ostia for the reception of the rubbish, and arranged that the ships which had brought up corn by the Tiber, should sail down the river with cargoes of this rubbish. The buildings themselves, to a certain height, were to be solidly constructed, without wooden beams, of stone from Gabii or Alba, that material being impervious to fire. And to provide that the water which individual license had illegally appropriated, might flow in greater abundance in several places for the public use, officers were appointed, and everyone was to have in the open court the means of stopping a fire. Every building, too, was to be enclosed by its own proper wall, not by one common to others. These changes which were liked for their utility, also added beauty to the new city. Some, however, thought that its old arrangement had been more conducive to health, inasmuch as the narrow streets with the elevation of the roofs were not equally penetrated by the sun's heat, while now the open space, unsheltered by any shade, was scorched by a fiercer glow.

Such indeed were the precautions of human wisdom. The next thing was to seek means of propitiating the gods, and recourse was had to the Sibylline books, by the direction of which prayers were offered to Vulcanus, Ceres, and Proserpina. Juno, too, was entreated by the matrons, first, in the Capitol, then on the nearest part of the coast, whence water was procured to sprinkle the fane and image of the goddess. And there were sacred banquets and nightly vigils celebrated by married women. But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths.

Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination,nwhen daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car.

Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed.

**Source: The Annals, written by Tacitus in 116 CE**

**Document C: Professor Cassel’s Article**

**Defending the Cannibals: How Christians Responded to the Sometimes Strange**

**Accusations of Their Critics**

The seeming lack of respect toward Roman authority seems to have angered Pliny more than anything. He likened this Christian attitude to a kind of contagious insanity or mental disorder that would inevitably result in crimes against the Roman state. As he closed his letter, he warned, "This contagious superstition is not confined to the cities alone but has spread its infection among the country villages." Trajan, incidentally, commended Pliny for his actions.

But what did the Romans mean by superstition? According to several prominent Roman authors, including Cicero and Plutarch, it was any offensive religious belief or practice that deviated from Roman norms. Certain groups were given to such "irrational" religions, in which they acted unpredictably—without regard for the rites, rituals, and traditions of Rome.

Plutarch, the famous biographer, suggested that superstition was even worse than atheism: "The atheist is unmoved regarding the Divinity, whereas the superstitious people are moved as they ought not to be, and their minds are perverted."

To Pliny the Younger, Christians were akin to heraeria, subversive political societies that lobbied for the interests of their group over the interests of the state: "If the people assemble for the common purpose," he wrote, "whatever name we give them and for whatever reasons, they soon turn into a political club."

Indeed, it was political suspicions, not necessarily religious ones, that concerned Roman elites. Romans incorporated many religions into their empire. As long as devotees continued to observe Roman religious rites, they were free to worship any god they wished.

Christians, however, refused to acknowledge any god but their own. For the Romans, that was bad enough, but Christians also refused to participate in any non-Christian religious rites, to serve in the army, or to accept public office. Their refusal to eat meat during Roman religious rites, for example, prompted the trial before Pliny in Bithynia.

A stranger complaint of critics was this: Christians were cannibals and practiced incest. They were thought to be involved in bizarre and abhorrent religious rituals such as Thyestian feasts and Oedipean sex—the most heinous acts in Greco-Roman myth and literature. In these two myths, Thyestes eats his own children, and Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother.

How could pagans associate these myths with Christianity? Most likely the critics misread the Christian Scriptures. New Testament writers referred to their fellow Christians as brothers and sisters (James 2:15) and encouraged them to greet one another with a "holy kiss" (Rom. 16:16). This could have been misunderstood as incestuous, especially if a married couple were referred to as a brother and sister in Christ. This perspective may have been intensified by the secrecy of early Eucharistic services, which were open only to baptized Christians.

The charge of cannibalism could also have arisen from a false understanding of the Christian Scripture and liturgy. The very words of the Eucharist, "Take and eat, this is my body broken for you," could be misread in a literal, cannibalistic sense by a reader ignorant of the metaphor.

**Source: “Defending Cannibals,” written by David Cassel in 1998**

**NAME: DATE: PD:**

**Next, read Document B - Tacitus**

**1.) Who is Tacitus (may use device)? Why did Tacitus write this piece?**

**2.) According to Tacitus, why did the Roman Empire persecute Christians?**

**3.) Do you think Tacitus' account of Roman persecution of Christians is a trustworthy? Why or why not?**

**4.) How does Tacitus' text compare to the textbook? How are they similar? Different?**

**Then, read Document C - Journal Article**

**1.) Who wrote this document (may use device)? Why was it written?**

**2.) According to Cassel, what are the "strange complaints" Roman critics had of Christians?**

**3.) According to Cassel, what are some of the reasons why the Romans thought these things about Christians? List two to three.**

**4.) How does Cassel's description of what Romans thought of Christians compare to Tacitus' account? To the textbook? How are they similar? How are they different?**

**5.) Do you think this is a trustworthy source for trying to figure out why the Roman Empire persecuted Christians? Why or why not?**

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**Finally, after reading Tacitus and Cassel, do you think the textbook account should be rewritten? Why or why not? If the textbook account should be rewritten, how should it be changed?**

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