

## Dialogue on Christianity and the Roman Empire

1. . . .since the expansion of Roman rule certainly did not involve pressures on subjugated peoples to convert to the religion of their conquerors. This was not because Roman rulers had a positive respect for diversity and a commitment to religious freedom, but simply because there was no "religion" to which people could convert. As I have argued, the Graeco-Roman tradition was not a cohesive system of integrated practices and beliefs, but instead involved overlapping sets of cult practices, myths, iconographic conventions, and philosophical propositions. (James B. Rives. Religion in the Roman Empire (Kindle Locations 2651-2653). Kindle Edition)
2. **It was certainly not the case, for example, as is often assumed, that Roman officials required people to worship the emperor. Although governors and other officials issued decrees mandating the celebration of imperial accessions and victories, local authorities were the ones who implemented them; in many cases it was the local elites themselves who took the initiative in establishing honors for the emperors. But neither local authorities nor Roman officials monitored and enforced individual participation in these ceremonies, any more than in other public cults. (James B. Rives. Religion in the Roman Empire (Kindle Locations 2659-2662). Kindle Edition.)**
3. *Emperor Theodosius removed the ancient altar dedicated to the goddess of Victory from the Senate chamber in 382 to encourage the dominance of Christianity as the religion of the empire. Senator Quintus Aurelius Symachus (c.345-402) made the statement against the removal of the altar. He is addressing the young western emperor, Valentinian. (Source: Coffin, Judith, et. al. Western Civilizations, 17<sup>th</sup> Edition, Vol. 1, p. 195)*

To what is it more suitable that we defend the institutions of our ancestors, and the rights and destiny of our country...than to the glory of these times, which is all the greater when you understand that you may not do anything contrary to the custom of your ancestors? We demand then the restoration of that condition of religious affairs which was so long advantageous to the state...Who is so friendly with the barbarians as not to require an Altar of Victory? ...But even if the avoidance of such an omen were not sufficient, it would at last have been seemly to abstain from injuring the ornaments of the Senate house. Allow us, we beseech you, as old men to leave to posterity what we received as boys. The love of custom is great...Where shall we swear to obey your laws and commands? By what religious sanction shall the false mind be terrified, so as not to lie in bearing witness? All things are indeed filled with God, and no place is safe for the perjured, but to be urged in the very presence of religious forms has great power in producing a fear of sinning. That altar preserves the concord of all, that altar appeals to the good faith of each, and nothing gives more authority to our decrees than that the whole of our order issues every decree as it were under the sanction of an oath...

... We ask, then, for peace for the gods of our father and of our country. It is just that all worship should be considered as one. We look on the same stars, the sky is common, the same world surrounds us. What difference does it make by what pains each seeks the truth? We cannot attain to so great a secret by one road; but this discussion is rather for persons at ease, we offer now prayers, not conflict.

Source: Excerpted from *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, Vol. X, (New York: 1896), pp.411-14

4) St. Augustine's *City of God*, Book V, Chapter 1: The cause, then, of the greatness of the Roman empire is neither fortuitous nor fatal, ... In a word, human kingdoms are established by divine providence. And if any one attributes their existence to fate, because he calls the will or the power of God itself by the name of fate, let him keep his opinion, but correct his language.

5) *City of God*, Book I, Chapter 33: Oh infatuated men, what is this blindness, or rather madness, which possesses you? How is it that while, as we hear, even the eastern nations are bewailing your ruin, and while powerful states in the most remote parts of the earth are mourning your fall as a public calamity, ye yourselves should be crowding to the theatres, should be pouring into them and filling them; and, in short, be playing a madder part now than ever before? This was the foul plague-spot, this the wreck of virtue and honor that Scipio sought to preserve you from when he prohibited the construction of theatres; this was his reason for desiring that you might still have an enemy to fear, seeing as he did how easily prosperity would corrupt and destroy you. He did not consider that republic flourishing whose walls stand, but whose morals are in ruins. But the seductions of evil-minded devils had more influence with you than the precautions of prudent men. Hence the injuries you do, you will not permit to be imputed to you: but the injuries you suffer, you impute to Christianity. Depraved by good fortune, and not chastened by adversity, what you desire in the restoration of a peaceful and secure state, is not the tranquillity of the commonwealth, but the impunity of your own vicious luxury. Scipio wished you to be hard pressed by an enemy, that you might not abandon yourselves to luxurious manners; but so abandoned are you, that not even when crushed by the enemy is your luxury repressed. You have missed the profit of your calamity; you have been made most wretched, and have remained most profligate.