

Power and Persecution of Religion

Directions: Religion has played such an important role in societies around the world throughout history. Religions, and those who lead them, can often become extremely powerful forces, competing even with rulers. Rulers can ally themselves with religions, or they can fight against them for the sake of their own authority. Examine the documents below, which represent these various roles of religion in societies from different times and places, and answer the questions that follow.

Document 1

Source: Roman historian Tacitus describing the aftermath of the Great Fire of Rome in 64 CE

[Emperor] Nero [inflicted] the most fearful punishments on those popularly called Christians, a group hated because of their outrageous practices. The founder of this sect, Christus, was executed in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilatus. Thus the [harmful] superstition was suppressed for the while, but it broke out again not only in Judaea, where this evil had its origin, but even in Rome, to which all obnoxious and disgraceful elements from everywhere in the world and receive a large following... A vast multitude (large number) was convicted... Their executions were made into a sport in that they were covered with skins of wild beasts and torn to pieces by dogs, or they were fastened to crosses or wrapped with flammable materials so that... they could be burned to serve as torches in the night...

1. Who is the speaker in this text, when was it from, and where was it from?
2. How did the Roman government respond to the spread of Christianity within the Empire?
3. How did this response differ from the actions of Emperor Constantine? How did he deal with Christianity? Try to give specifics.

Document 2a

Source: Elizabeth Gaynor Ellis, "Kingdoms of West Africa", *World History*

Through his pilgrimage, Mansa Musa showed his devotion to Islam. He also forged new diplomatic and economic ties with other Muslim states. In addition, he brought back scholars, architects, and teachers who helped promote Islamic education in Mali. In fact, an Islamic university was built in Timbuktu, which attracted students from far and wide. This movement of wealth, people, and ideas increased Mali's renown.

Document 2b

Source: Aisha R Masterson, "Mansa Musa: The Hajj that Changed History"

Ibn Battuta recorded that in Mansa Musa's court, the Shariah (Islamic religious teaching) was rather informally practiced in matters of marriage. He records that Ibn Amir Hajib, a member of the Mamluk court, noted how Mansa Musa strictly observed prayer and knew the Qur'an, but had maintained "the custom that if one of his subjects had a beautiful daughter, he brought her to the king's bed without marriage." Ibn Amir Hajib informed Mansa Musa that this was not permitted under Islamic law, to which Mansa Musa replied, "Not even to kings?" Ibn Amir Hajib said, "Not even to kings." Henceforth Mansa Musa refrained from the practice.

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4. What impact did Mansa Musa's adoption of Islam have on his society?

5. How well did Mansa Musa follow the religion? In what way did his religion have authority over him, or limit his power in some way?

6. How did Mansa Musa's response to a new religion differ from Nero's reaction?

Document 3

Source: Anonymous Chinese scholar, "The Disposition of Error," China, circa 500 C.E.

Question: If Buddhism is the greatest and most venerable of ways, why did the great sages of the past and Confucius not practice it? In the Confucian Classics no one mentions it. Why, then, do you love the Way of the Buddha and rejoice in outlandish arts? Can the writings of the Buddha exceed the Classics and commentaries and beautify the accomplishments of the sages?

Answer: All written works need not necessarily be the words of Confucius. To compare the sages to the Buddha would be like comparing a white deer to a unicorn, or a swallow to a phoenix. The records and teachings of the Confucian classics do not contain everything. Even if the Buddha is not mentioned in them, what occasion is there for suspicion?

Question: Now of happiness there is none greater than the continuation of one's line, of unfilial conduct there is none worse than childlessness. The monks forsake wives and children, reject property and wealth. Some do not marry all their lives.

Answer: Wives, children, and property are the luxuries of the world, but simple living and inaction are the wonders of the Way. The monk practices the Way and substitutes that for worldly pleasures. He accumulates goodness and wisdom in exchange for the joys of having a wife and children.

7. The author presents both questions and answers regarding Buddhism in the Chinese cultural context. Keeping in mind that the author is writing both sides of the conversation, what is his perspective about Buddhism? Is he for or against it?

8. What perspective do you think the author is trying to show through the words of the questioner?

Document 4

Source: Tang Emperor Wu, Edict on Buddhism, 845 C.E.

We have heard that the Buddha was never spoken of before the Han dynasty; from then on the religion of idols gradually came to prominence. So in this latter age Buddhism has transmitted its strange ways and has spread like a luxuriant vine until it has poisoned the customs of our nation. Buddhism has spread to all the nine provinces of China; each day finds its monks and followers growing more numerous and its temples more lofty. Buddhism wears out the people's strength, pilfers their wealth, causes people to abandon their lords and parents for the company of teachers, and severs man and wife with its monastic decrees. In destroying law

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and injuring humankind indeed nothing surpasses this doctrine!

Now if even one man fails to work the fields, someone must go hungry; if one woman does not tend her silkworms, someone will go cold. At present there are an inestimable number of monks and nuns in the empire, all of them waiting for the farmers to feed them and the silkworms to clothe them while the Buddhist public temples and private chapels have reached boundless numbers, sufficient to outshine the imperial palace itself. Having thoroughly examined all earlier reports and consulted public opinion on all sides, there no longer remains the slightest doubt in Our mind that this evil should be eradicated.

9. What is the emperor's perspective on Buddhism in China

10. How is the influence of Buddhism on Chinese society described in the document? Give examples.

11. Considering what you know of the historical context from outside knowledge, how does this statement by the emperor represent a change in official imperial policy on Buddhism?

Document 5

Source: Elizabeth Gaynor Ellis, "Church Power Reaches Its Height", *World History*

In the 1200s, the Church reached the height of its political power. In 1198, the powerful Pope Innocent III took office. As head of the church, Innocent III claimed supremacy over all other rulers. The Pope, he said, stands "between God and man, lower than God but higher than men, who judges all and is judged by no one." Innocent III clashed with all the powerful rulers of his day, and usually won. When King John of England dared to appoint an Archbishop of Canterbury without the Popes approval, innocent excommunicated the King and placed his kingdom under interdict (excommunicating the entire country). Innocent ordered the same punishment for friends would Philip II tried unlawfully to annul, or invalidate, his marriage.

In 1209, Innocent, aided by Philip II, launched a brutal crusade, or holy war, against the Albigensians in southern France. The Albigensians were a religious group regarded as heretics by the Church because they rejected central Catholic beliefs and rituals. Knights from all over Western Europe took part. Tens of thousands of people were slaughtered in the Albigensian Crusade.

12. How did Pope Innocent III demonstrate the power he had over even the highest political leaders of Europe? What made him so powerful?

13. How is Pope Innocent III's attitude toward the Albigensians similar to Nero's attitude toward the early Christians or Emperor Wu's attitude toward the Buddhists?