

*Japan Academy Prize to:*

Takaya HOSAKA

Professor, Department of Letters,  
Chiba Universityfor *The Persecution of Jews and Christians  
in the Early Roman Principate**Outline of the work:*

The study, published by Kyobunkwan in 2003, of Christian persecution has long been preoccupied by the following two premises: (1) the Roman imperial government dealt with the Christians judicially, not administratively; (2) what was regarded as the object of guilt by the government was merely the “Name” (*nomen Christianum*), i.e. being Christian. Based on the two premises, scholars have never cast doubt on the ecclesiastical evidence, but tried continuously to determine the antisocial characteristics attributed to the Christian community, those characteristics which were thought contravening the criminal code or the *Staatsraison* of the Romans.

Professor Hosaka starts by examining the above two premises. He goes back to the Mommsen’s much misunderstood article “*Religionsfrevel nach römischem Recht*” and evaluates what Mommsen wanted to suggest. Based on the grounds provided by Mommsen, Prof. Hosaka reassesses thousands of clues obtained from various fields including archeology, history of law, history of Judeo-Christianity, biblical studies, and classics etc. One of the remarkable features of his study is the range of his scope as well as how it crosses boundaries between those disciplines. He reveals the Christian bias inherent in them and analyses each case of Christian persecution focusing in particular on Roman evidence. The main arguments can be summed up in six points.

1) As for the grounds of persecution, one must distinguish between the legal and the historical. The legal basis was the magisterial *coercitio* which authorized provincial governors to enforce public order at their own discretion, without reference to specific legislation. Thus the Christians were punished in terms of administrative measures, not on the grounds of a crime in the legal sense.

2) We should, therefore, deal with historical grounds: they should be mainly sought in the Roman disregard of *superstitio* (foreign religion), which had pervaded the Empire since the Late Republic. The contempt for foreign religious practices of the Romans who had been originally tolerant towards them was one of the expressions of their sense of cultural and national identity, which had grown gradually and reached a high stage of development in the Early Principate.

3) Recent scholars unanimously assume that during the Principate, Christianity was considered a *religio illicita* while Judaism could enjoy the legal status as a *religio licita*, a distinction, however, which the Roman government had never known. Besides, until the beginning of the second century Christians had not had any distinctive features which would mark visually their non-Jewishness.

4) In a letter of Pliny the Younger, governor of the province Bithynia-Pontus, to the Emperor Trajan (*Ep* 10.96), we read a noteworthy passage: *nomen ipsum, si flagitiis careat, an flagitia cohaerentia nomini puniantur*. Directing this question to the Emperor the governor did not intend to ask for a jurisprudential opinion on the legal ground for punishment, but rather to get imperial allowance for acquittal of rene-

gades: “*nomen ipsum punitur*” does not mean “Christians are to be sanctioned only on the grounds of their ‘Name’”, but “it is enough only (*ipsum*) to sanction the obstinate, i.e. the Christians who adhere to their confession and stubbornly refuse to recant it, so that the renegades might be set free”. Thus the procedure Pliny had in mind was coercive, not judicial.

5) Trajan’s successors, Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, also gave their governors a *rescriptum* concerning the Christians who had been accused and brought before tribunal. By the rescript they gave an order, in contrast to Trajan’s policy, demanding the pagan prosecutors to give evidence of what they claimed. Marcus Aurelius, on the contrary, followed the line endorsed by Trajan. In his reply to the governor Marcus asserted that a *venia* (forgiveness) should be given to the renegades, on the other hand those who, in spite of the order to desist from their Christianity, obstinately clung to the confession deserved capital punishment. This indicates clearly that during the second century the magisterial proceeding against the Christians still held its original administrative and coercive character: it was practiced fully at the governor’s discretion.

6) Though at the end of the third century the Emperor Diocletian had acknowledged that the Church was a dangerous and seditious organization acting contrarily to the Roman *Staatsraison* — an acknowledgment that triggered the Great Persecution — he did not even then proclaim it as *collegium illicitum*, but offered the opportunity to the Christians to exculpate themselves. Indeed they were acquitted when they had performed the sacrificial ritual prescribed by the governor. Therefore, even in the Great Persecution, the “Name” was not a matter of imperial concern.

Prof. Hosaka thus examines very precisely the neglected Roman evidence and comes to the conclusion that the government did not have any particular policy towards Christians but rather treated them, even in the fourth century, in terms of the administrative control over public order, and that there did not exist any of what the Church viewed as persecution. This suggestion is striking and consequential, for it requires a fundamental reconsideration of what has been asserted by the majority of scholars in the recent study of persecution. The Christian bias inherent both in modern European scholarship and ancient ecclesiastical evidence sometimes becomes a crucial obstacle to determining the circumstances of historical events; more attention should be paid to pagan evidence.

Prof. Hosaka’s study thus provides a new perspective on Christian persecution and will allow remarkable scholarly advances in Roman and ecclesiastical studies. It will enable the analysis of imperial religious policy from a purely secular point of view, so that, for example, the drastic change in the dealing with the Church early in the fourth century can be explained, not in terms of “conversion” or any other religious motivations of the Emperor, but primarily as a politically motivated attempt to integrate the Church into the Empire.