

Even for a modern society it is difficult to differentiate between valid and invalid religious expression. After the recent mass suicide in Jonestown, Guyana, many came to question just how far religious toleration should go and whether the law should prohibit noxious cults of the so-called 'lunatic fringe'. The answer to this dilemma will probably never be quite clear to us, but to the Romans the solution was obvious: stamp them out. In 186 B.C. the Romans were successful in crushing the ecstatic cult of Bacchus (Dionysus), and this success may have encouraged them to try the same approach later with the cult of Isis and Christianity. They failed to suppress either. The worship of Isis won through to official toleration and eventually faded away in its own good time, while Christianity prevailed and replaced the pagan worship of the Empire.

The cult of Bacchus had at first been quite sedate and respectable in the city of Rome, being conducted in daytime by honest matrons. However, as the historian Livy noted, a Greek of low birth, "a mere sacrificer and fortune teller ... a hierophant of secret nocturnal rites", began in Etruria a more orgiastic version of worship, adding "the pleasures of wine and feasting, to attract a greater number." In other words the cult had fallen into the hands of charlatans greedy for money, power and pleasure. Livy wrote that, "when the worshippers were heated with wine, and all sense of modesty had been extinguished by darkness of night and the commingling of males with females, tender youths with elders, then debaucheries of every kind commenced." Such sex and drunkenness alone would have alarmed the puritanical Roman authorities, but when cult members began to bring up fraudulent law suits, forge wills, poison and murder their relatives for gain amid "the howling and crash of drums and cymbals", the Bacchics ceased to be a distasteful cult and became a regular conspiratio (conspiracy), a situation wherein a religio legitima (legitimate religion) became an illicita religio (illegal religion).

A young man named Aebutius, whom his step-father wished to join the cult so that the young man might be conveniently murdered, and Aebutius' girl-friend, a freed-woman called Faecenia, finally alerted the consul Postumius to the hidden danger. A dreadful persecution resulted with the city of Rome stirred up and on full guard. Some 7,000 men and women were arrested. Many of the most involved were tortured and executed, even women, who were put to death by their families. Cult members who had as yet committed no heinous crimes were merely imprisoned. The Senate then proceeded by a decree known as the Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus to regulate but not obliterate the cult in Rome and in allied towns. Bacchus was still a recognized divinity whose worship was to continue in restricted and decorous fashion. The repression was a success and indeed no further incidents of such psychopathic cultism arose again in such a guise to trouble the Roman state.

The Romans eventually came to believe that Christianity, in some measure, was as great an evil as the early Bacchic cult, but in this they were prejudiced and seriously mistaken. True, Christianity was an illicita religio which engendered paranoid suspicions of secret conspiracies, but the Romans had misjudged this sect badly. A final irony of history has the 4th century A.D. Christian polemicist Firmicus Maternus urging the Roman Christian government to root out "fake gods" and their adherents as the Pagan Roman government had so nobly done half a millenium earlier.