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**Early Christians were responsible for the ‘largest desecration of art’
up to that point of history.**

By the time Christianity had taken control of the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century AD, there had been the “largest desecration of art that human history had ever seen” up to that point, according to the writer and academic Catherine Nixey. The former Classics teacher was talking with the former Moderator of the Church of Scotland, Dr Derek Browning, today at the Edinburgh International Book Festival.

In her 2017 book, *The Darkening Age*, Nixey explores the early years of Christianity, suggesting that while it preached peace, the beginnings of the faith were especially violent and ruthless.

“It wasn’t just art. Philosophers in Alexandria were tortured and, in one case, killed. Books that were suspected of containing magic - although that could also stretch at certain times to philosophy - were burnt in pyres in town squares. In this period people not only disdained classical literature, they feared it. The copying of classical texts collapsed; it is thought that, in this period, we lose 90% of all classical literature; 99% of Latin literature.”

This is not the story familiar to those of us whose knowledge of the clash between Romans and the Christians is based on Hollywood films starring Peter Ustinov. Nixey explained she knew that story better than most, being “the daughter of a monk and a nun”.

This is largely because, as Nixey explained, the story of “has been told almost entirely through Christian sources”, and - beyond Byzantium academics, the emphasis has long been on the Christians as the good guys: type “Roman prosecutions of Christianity” into Google, and the system will suggest you actually meant ‘persecutions’.

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Even the name of the so-called “Triumph of Christianity” contained hidden meaning, Nixey suggested. “The Roman word ‘triumph’ wasn’t just a synonym for ‘victory’ or ‘great thing’, it was about the total and utter subjugation of the loser—an enemy whose soldiers had been beaten, whose possessions had been despoiled, and whose leaders had been humiliated. A ‘Triumph’ wasn’t merely a victory; it was an annihilation.

In the course of their conversation, Dr Browning highlighted some of the hostile academic feedback Nixey’s book has received, not least from self-identified Christians. So, why the “pushback”?

“There are definitely periods of Christianity when I think we can agree it was on the side of the rotters,” Nixey said. “Nobody is leaping up in the name of the Inquisition. But I think it’s because, for so long, the ‘Triumph’ has been seen as the perfect moment; it’s the secondary foundation myth. Also, I think it’s because, if Christianity isn’t ‘better’, then it’s hard to justify it taking over in the way which it did.

“If we still believe in the story that the Christians were the persecuted and the Romans were the persecutors, it’s worth considering one final figure,” Nixey said at the end of her initial presentation. “There are now two billion Christians in the world. There is not one single true Pagan.”

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