

Chapter II: The Internal Prosperity In The Age Of The Antonines.--Part I.

Of The Union And Internal Prosperity Of The Roman Empire, In The Age Of The Antonines.

It is not alone by the rapidity, or extent of conquest, that we should estimate the greatness of Rome. The sovereign of the Russian deserts commands a larger portion of the globe. In the seventh summer after his passage of the Hellespont, Alexander erected the Macedonian trophies on the banks of the Hyphasis. [1] Within less than a century, the irresistible Zingis, and the Mogul princes of his race, spread their cruel devastations and transient empire from the Sea of China, to the confines of Egypt and Germany. [2] But the firm edifice of Roman power was raised and preserved by the wisdom of ages. The obedient provinces of Trajan and the Antonines were united by laws, and adorned by arts. They might occasionally suffer from the partial abuse of delegated authority; but the general principle of government was wise, simple, and beneficent. They enjoyed the religion of their ancestors, whilst in civil honors and advantages they were exalted, by just degrees, to an equality with their conquerors.

[Footnote 1: They were erected about the midway between Lahor and Delhi. The conquests of Alexander in Hindostan were confined to the Punjab, a country watered by the five great streams of the Indus. * Note: The Hyphasis is one of the five rivers which join the Indus or the Sind, after having traversed the province of the Pendj-ab--a name which in

Persian, signifies five rivers. * * * G. The five rivers were, 1. The Hydaspes, now the Chelum, Behni, or Bedusta, (Sanskrit, Vitastha, Arrow-swift.) 2. The Acesines, the Chenab, (Sanskrit, Chandrabhaga, Moon-gift.) 3. Hydraotes, the Ravey, or Iraoty, (Sanskrit, Iravati.) 4. Hyphasis, the Beyah, (Sanskrit, Vepasa, Fetterless.) 5. The Satadru, (Sanskrit, the Hundred Streamed,) the Sutledj, known first to the Greeks in the time of Ptolemy. Rennel. Vincent, Commerce of Anc. book 2. Lassen, Pentapotam. Ind. Wilson's Sanscrit Dict., and the valuable memoir of Lieut. Burnes, Journal of London Geogr. Society, vol. iii. p. 2, with the travels of that very able writer. Compare Gibbon's own note, c. lxxv. note 25.--M substit. for G.]

[Footnote 2: See M. de Guignes, Histoire des Huns, l. xv. xvi. and xvii.]

I. The policy of the emperors and the senate, as far as it concerned religion, was happily seconded by the reflections of the enlightened, and by the habits of the superstitious, part of their subjects. The various modes of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people, as equally true; by the philosopher, as equally false; and by the magistrate, as equally useful. And thus toleration produced not only mutual indulgence, but even religious concord.

The superstition of the people was not embittered by any mixture of theological rancor; nor was it confined by the chains of any speculative

system. The devout polytheist, though fondly attached to his national rites, admitted with implicit faith the different religions of the earth. [3] Fear, gratitude, and curiosity, a dream or an omen, a singular disorder, or a distant journey, perpetually disposed him to multiply the articles of his belief, and to enlarge the list of his protectors. The thin texture of the Pagan mythology was interwoven with various but not discordant materials. As soon as it was allowed that sages and heroes, who had lived or who had died for the benefit of their country, were exalted to a state of power and immortality, it was universally confessed, that they deserved, if not the adoration, at least the reverence, of all mankind. The deities of a thousand groves and a thousand streams possessed, in peace, their local and respective influence; nor could the Romans who deprecated the wrath of the Tiber, deride the Egyptian who presented his offering to the beneficent genius of the Nile. The visible powers of nature, the planets, and the elements were the same throughout the universe. The invisible governors of the moral world were inevitably cast in a similar mould of fiction and allegory. Every virtue, and even vice, acquired its divine representative; every art and profession its patron, whose attributes, in the most distant ages and countries, were uniformly derived from the character of their peculiar votaries. A republic of gods of such opposite tempers and interests required, in every system, the moderating hand of a supreme magistrate, who, by the progress of knowledge and flattery, was gradually invested with the sublime perfections of an Eternal Parent, and an Omnipotent Monarch. [4] Such was the mild spirit of antiquity, that the nations were less attentive to the difference,

than to the resemblance, of their religious worship. The Greek, the Roman, and the Barbarian, as they met before their respective altars, easily persuaded themselves, that under various names, and with various ceremonies, they adored the same deities. [5] The elegant mythology of Homer gave a beautiful, and almost a regular form, to the polytheism of the ancient world.

[Footnote 3: There is not any writer who describes in so lively a manner as Herodotus the true genius of polytheism. The best commentary may be found in Mr. Hume's Natural History of Religion; and the best contrast in Bossuet's Universal History. Some obscure traces of an intolerant spirit appear in the conduct of the Egyptians, (see Juvenal, Sat. xv.;) and the Christians, as well as Jews, who lived under the Roman empire, formed a very important exception; so important indeed, that the discussion will require a distinct chapter of this work. * Note: M. Constant, in his very learned and eloquent work, "Sur la Religion," with the two additional volumes, "Du Polytheisme Romain," has considered the whole history of polytheism in a tone of philosophy, which, without subscribing to all his opinions, we may be permitted to admire. "The boasted tolerance of polytheism did not rest upon the respect due from society to the freedom of individual opinion. The polytheistic nations, tolerant as they were towards each other, as separate states, were not the less ignorant of the eternal principle, the only basis of enlightened toleration, that every one has a right to worship God in the manner which seems to him the best. Citizens, on the contrary, were bound to conform to the religion of the state; they had not the liberty

to adopt a foreign religion, though that religion might be legally recognized in their own city, for the strangers who were its votaries." --Sur la Religion, v. 184. Du. Polyth. Rom. ii. 308. At this time, the growing religious indifference, and the general administration of the empire by Romans, who, being strangers, would do no more than protect, not enlist themselves in the cause of the local superstitions, had introduced great laxity. But intolerance was clearly the theory both of the Greek and Roman law. The subject is more fully considered in another place.--M.]

[Footnote 4: The rights, powers, and pretensions of the sovereign of Olympus are very clearly described in the xvth book of the Iliad; in the Greek original, I mean; for Mr. Pope, without perceiving it, has improved the theology of Homer. * Note: There is a curious coincidence between Gibbon's expressions and those of the newly-recovered "De Republica" of Cicero, though the argument is rather the converse, lib. i. c. 36. "Sive haec ad utilitatem vitae constitute sint a principibus rerum publicarum, ut rex putaretur unus esse in coelo, qui nutu, ut ait Homerus, totum Olympum converteret, idemque et rex et patos haberetur omnium."--M.]

[Footnote 5: See, for instance, Caesar de Bell. Gall. vi. 17. Within a century or two, the Gauls themselves applied to their gods the names of Mercury, Mars, Apollo, &c.]

The philosophers of Greece deduced their morals from the nature of man,

rather than from that of God. They meditated, however, on the Divine Nature, as a very curious and important speculation; and in the profound inquiry, they displayed the strength and weakness of the human understanding. [6] Of the four most celebrated schools, the Stoics and the Platonists endeavored to reconcile the jarring interests of reason and piety. They have left us the most sublime proofs of the existence and perfections of the first cause; but, as it was impossible for them to conceive the creation of matter, the workman in the Stoic philosophy was not sufficiently distinguished from the work; whilst, on the contrary, the spiritual God of Plato and his disciples resembled an idea, rather than a substance. The opinions of the Academics and Epicureans were of a less religious cast; but whilst the modest science of the former induced them to doubt, the positive ignorance of the latter urged them to deny, the providence of a Supreme Ruler. The spirit of inquiry, prompted by emulation, and supported by freedom, had divided the public teachers of philosophy into a variety of contending sects; but the ingenious youth, who, from every part, resorted to Athens, and the other seats of learning in the Roman empire, were alike instructed in every school to reject and to despise the religion of the multitude. How, indeed, was it possible that a philosopher should accept, as divine truths, the idle tales of the poets, and the incoherent traditions of antiquity; or that he should adore, as gods, those imperfect beings whom he must have despised, as men? Against such unworthy adversaries, Cicero condescended to employ the arms of reason and eloquence; but the satire of Lucian was a much more adequate, as well as more efficacious, weapon. We may be well assured, that a writer, conversant with the world,

would never have ventured to expose the gods of his country to public ridicule, had they not already been the objects of secret contempt among the polished and enlightened orders of society. [7]

[Footnote 6: The admirable work of Cicero de Natura Deorum is the best clew we have to guide us through the dark and profound abyss. He represents with candor, and confutes with subtlety, the opinions of the philosophers.]

[Footnote 7: I do not pretend to assert, that, in this irreligious age, the natural terrors of superstition, dreams, omens, apparitions, &c., had lost their efficacy.]

Notwithstanding the fashionable irreligion which prevailed in the age of the Antonines, both the interest of the priests and the credulity of the people were sufficiently respected. In their writings and conversation, the philosophers of antiquity asserted the independent dignity of reason; but they resigned their actions to the commands of law and of custom. Viewing, with a smile of pity and indulgence, the various errors of the vulgar, they diligently practised the ceremonies of their fathers, devoutly frequented the temples of the gods; and sometimes condescending to act a part on the theatre of superstition, they concealed the sentiments of an atheist under the sacerdotal robes. Reasoners of such a temper were scarcely inclined to wrangle about their respective modes of faith, or of worship. It was indifferent to them what shape the folly of the multitude might choose to assume; and

they approached with the same inward contempt, and the same external reverence, the altars of the Libyan, the Olympian, or the Capitoline Jupiter. [8]

[Footnote 8: Socrates, Epicurus, Cicero, and Plutarch always inculcated a decent reverence for the religion of their own country, and of mankind. The devotion of Epicurus was assiduous and exemplary. Diogen. Laert. x. 10.]

It is not easy to conceive from what motives a spirit of persecution could introduce itself into the Roman councils. The magistrates could not be actuated by a blind, though honest bigotry, since the magistrates were themselves philosophers; and the schools of Athens had given laws to the senate. They could not be impelled by ambition or avarice, as the temporal and ecclesiastical powers were united in the same hands. The pontiffs were chosen among the most illustrious of the senators; and the office of Supreme Pontiff was constantly exercised by the emperors themselves. They knew and valued the advantages of religion, as it is connected with civil government. They encouraged the public festivals which humanize the manners of the people. They managed the arts of divination as a convenient instrument of policy; and they respected, as the firmest bond of society, the useful persuasion, that, either in this or in a future life, the crime of perjury is most assuredly punished by the avenging gods. [9] But whilst they acknowledged the general advantages of religion, they were convinced that the various modes of worship contributed alike to the same salutary purposes; and that, in

every country, the form of superstition, which had received the sanction of time and experience, was the best adapted to the climate, and to its inhabitants. Avarice and taste very frequently despoiled the vanquished nations of the elegant statues of their gods, and the rich ornaments of their temples; [10] but, in the exercise of the religion which they derived from their ancestors, they uniformly experienced the indulgence, and even protection, of the Roman conquerors. The province of Gaul seems, and indeed only seems, an exception to this universal toleration. Under the specious pretext of abolishing human sacrifices, the emperors Tiberius and Claudius suppressed the dangerous power of the Druids: [11] but the priests themselves, their gods and their altars, subsisted in peaceful obscurity till the final destruction of Paganism. [12]

[Footnote 9: Polybius, l. vi. c. 53, 54. Juvenal, Sat. xiii. laments that in his time this apprehension had lost much of its effect.]

[Footnote 10: See the fate of Syracuse, Tarentum, Ambracia, Corinth, &c., the conduct of Verres, in Cicero, (Actio ii. Orat. 4,) and the usual practice of governors, in the viiiith Satire of Juvenal.]

[Footnote 11: Seuton. in Claud.--Plin. Hist. Nat. xxx. 1.]

[Footnote 12: Pelloutier, Histoire des Celtes, tom. vi. p. 230--252.]

Rome, the capital of a great monarchy, was incessantly filled with subjects and strangers from every part of the world, [13] who all

introduced and enjoyed the favorite superstitions of their native country. [14] Every city in the empire was justified in maintaining the purity of its ancient ceremonies; and the Roman senate, using the common privilege, sometimes interposed, to check this inundation of foreign rites. [141] The Egyptian superstition, of all the most contemptible and abject, was frequently prohibited: the temples of Serapis and Isis demolished, and their worshippers banished from Rome and Italy. [15] But the zeal of fanaticism prevailed over the cold and feeble efforts of policy. The exiles returned, the proselytes multiplied, the temples were restored with increasing splendor, and Isis and Serapis at length assumed their place among the Roman Deities. [151] [16] Nor was this indulgence a departure from the old maxims of government. In the purest ages of the commonwealth, Cybele and Aesculapius had been invited by solemn embassies; [17] and it was customary to tempt the protectors of besieged cities, by the promise of more distinguished honors than they possessed in their native country. [18] Rome gradually became the common temple of her subjects; and the freedom of the city was bestowed on all the gods of mankind. [19]

[Footnote 13: Seneca, *Consolat. ad Helviam*, p. 74. Edit., Lips.]

[Footnote 14: Dionysius Halicarn. *Antiquitat. Roman.* l. ii. (vol. i. p. 275, edit. Reiske.)]

[Footnote 141: Yet the worship of foreign gods at Rome was only guaranteed

to the natives of those countries from whence they came. The Romans administered the priestly offices only to the gods of their fathers.

Gibbon, throughout the whole preceding sketch of the opinions of the Romans and their subjects, has shown through what causes they were free from religious hatred and its consequences. But, on the other hand the internal state of these religions, the infidelity and hypocrisy of the upper orders, the indifference towards all religion, in even the better part of the common people, during the last days of the republic, and under the Caesars, and the corrupting principles of the philosophers, had exercised a very pernicious influence on the manners, and even on the constitution.--W.]

[Footnote 15: In the year of Rome 701, the temple of Isis and Serapis was demolished by the order of the Senate, (Dion Cassius, l. xl. p. 252,) and even by the hands of the consul, (Valerius Maximus, l. 3.) After the death of Caesar it was restored at the public expense, (Dion. l. xlvii. p. 501.) When Augustus was in Egypt, he revered the majesty of Serapis, (Dion, l. li. p. 647;) but in the Pomaerium of Rome, and a mile round it, he prohibited the worship of the Egyptian gods, (Dion, l. liii. p. 679; l. liv. p. 735.) They remained, however, very fashionable under his reign (Ovid. de Art. Amand. l. i.) and that of his successor, till the justice of Tiberius was provoked to some acts of severity. (See Tacit. Annal. ii. 85. Joseph. Antiquit. l. xviii. c. 3.) * Note: See, in the pictures from the walls of Pompeii, the representation of an Isiac temple and worship. Vestiges of Egyptian worship have been traced in Gaul, and, I am informed, recently in Britain, in excavations at York.--

M.]

[Footnote 151: Gibbon here blends into one, two events, distant a hundred and sixty-six years from each other. It was in the year of Rome 535, that the senate having ordered the destruction of the temples of Isis and Serapis, the workman would lend his hand; and the consul, L. Paulus himself (Valer. Max. 1, 3) seized the axe, to give the first blow.

Gibbon attribute this circumstance to the second demolition, which took place in the year 701 and which he considers as the first.--W.]

[Footnote 16: Tertullian in Apologetic. c. 6, p. 74. Edit. Havercamp. I am inclined to attribute their establishment to the devotion of the Flavian family.]

[Footnote 17: See Livy, l. xi. [Suppl.] and xxix.]

[Footnote 18: Macrob. Saturnalia, l. iii. c. 9. He gives us a form of evocation.]

[Footnote 19: Minutius Faelix in Octavio, p. 54. Arnobius, l. vi. p. 115.]

II. The narrow policy of preserving, without any foreign mixture, the pure blood of the ancient citizens, had checked the fortune, and hastened the ruin, of Athens and Sparta. The aspiring genius of Rome

sacrificed vanity to ambition, and deemed it more prudent, as well as honorable, to adopt virtue and merit for her own wheresoever they were found, among slaves or strangers, enemies or barbarians. [20] During the most flourishing aera of the Athenian commonwealth, the number of citizens gradually decreased from about thirty [21] to twenty-one thousand. [22] If, on the contrary, we study the growth of the Roman republic, we may discover, that, notwithstanding the incessant demands of wars and colonies, the citizens, who, in the first census of Servius Tullius, amounted to no more than eighty-three thousand, were multiplied, before the commencement of the social war, to the number of four hundred and sixty-three thousand men, able to bear arms in the service of their country. [23] When the allies of Rome claimed an equal share of honors and privileges, the senate indeed preferred the chance of arms to an ignominious concession. The Samnites and the Lucanians paid the severe penalty of their rashness; but the rest of the Italian states, as they successively returned to their duty, were admitted into the bosom of the republic, [24] and soon contributed to the ruin of public freedom. Under a democratical government, the citizens exercise the powers of sovereignty; and those powers will be first abused, and afterwards lost, if they are committed to an unwieldy multitude. But when the popular assemblies had been suppressed by the administration of the emperors, the conquerors were distinguished from the vanquished nations, only as the first and most honorable order of subjects; and their increase, however rapid, was no longer exposed to the same dangers. Yet the wisest princes, who adopted the maxims of Augustus, guarded with the strictest care the dignity of the Roman name, and

diffused the freedom of the city with a prudent liberality. [25]

[Footnote 20: Tacit. Annal. xi. 24. The Orbis Romanus of the learned Spanheim is a complete history of the progressive admission of Latium, Italy, and the provinces, to the freedom of Rome. * Note: Democratic states, observes Denina, (delle Revoluz. d' Italia, l. ii. c. 1.), are most jealous of communication the privileges of citizenship; monarchies or oligarchies willingly multiply the numbers of their free subjects. The most remarkable accessions to the strength of Rome, by the aggregation of conquered and foreign nations, took place under the regal and patrician--we may add, the Imperial government.--M.]

[Footnote 21: Herodotus, v. 97. It should seem, however, that he followed a large and popular estimation.]

[Footnote 22: Athenaeus, Deipnosophist. l. vi. p. 272. Edit. Casaubon. Meursius de Fortuna Attica, c. 4. * Note: On the number of citizens in Athens, compare Boeckh, Public Economy of Athens, (English Tr.,) p. 45, et seq. Fynes Clinton, Essay in Fasti Hel lenici, vol. i. 381.--M.]

[Footnote 23: See a very accurate collection of the numbers of each Lustrum in M. de Beaufort, Republique Romaine, l. iv. c. 4. Note: All these questions are placed in an entirely new point of view by Nicbuhr, (Romische Geschichte, vol. i. p. 464.) He rejects the census of Servius fullius as unhistoric, (vol. ii. p. 78, et seq.,) and he establishes the principle that the census comprehended all the confederate cities which

had the right of Isopolity.--M.]

[Footnote 24: Appian. de Bell. Civil. 1. i. Velleius Paterculus, 1. ii.

c. 15, 16, 17.]

[Footnote 25: Maecenas had advised him to declare, by one edict, all his subjects citizens. But we may justly suspect that the historian Dion was the author of a counsel so much adapted to the practice of his own age, and so little to that of Augustus.]