

Chapter XV: Progress Of The Christian Religion.--Part I.

The Progress Of The Christian Religion, And The Sentiments,
Manners, Numbers, And Condition Of The Primitive Christians.

[101]

[Footnote 101: In spite of my resolution, Lardner led me to look through the famous fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of Gibbon. I could not lay them down without finishing them. The causes assigned, in the fifteenth chapter, for the diffusion of Christianity, must, no doubt, have contributed to it materially; but I doubt whether he saw them all. Perhaps those which he enumerates are among the most obvious. They might all be safely adopted by a Christian writer, with some change in the language and manner. Mackintosh see Life, i. p. 244.--M.]

A candid but rational inquiry into the progress and establishment of Christianity may be considered as a very essential part of the history of the Roman empire. While that great body was invaded by open violence, or undermined by slow decay, a pure and humble religion gently insinuated itself into the minds of men, grew up in silence and obscurity, derived new vigor from opposition, and finally erected the triumphant banner of the Cross on the ruins of the Capitol. Nor was the influence of Christianity confined to the period or to the limits of the Roman empire. After a revolution of thirteen or fourteen centuries, that religion is still professed by the nations of Europe, the most distinguished portion of human kind in arts and learning as well as

in arms. By the industry and zeal of the Europeans, it has been widely diffused to the most distant shores of Asia and Africa; and by the means of their colonies has been firmly established from Canada to Chili, in a world unknown to the ancients.

But this inquiry, however useful or entertaining, is attended with two peculiar difficulties. The scanty and suspicious materials of ecclesiastical history seldom enable us to dispel the dark cloud that hangs over the first age of the church. The great law of impartiality too often obliges us to reveal the imperfections of the uninspired teachers and believers of the gospel; and, to a careless observer, their faults may seem to cast a shade on the faith which they professed. But the scandal of the pious Christian, and the fallacious triumph of the Infidel, should cease as soon as they recollect not only by whom, but likewise to whom, the Divine Revelation was given. The theologian may indulge the pleasing task of describing Religion as she descended from Heaven, arrayed in her native purity. A more melancholy duty is imposed on the historian. He must discover the inevitable mixture of error and corruption, which she contracted in a long residence upon earth, among a weak and degenerate race of beings. [102]

[Footnote 102: The art of Gibbon, or at least the unfair impression produced by these two memorable chapters, consists in confounding together, in one undistinguishable mass, the origin and apostolic propagation of the Christian religion with its later progress. The main question, the divine origin of the religion, is dexterously eluded or

speciously conceded; his plan enables him to commence his account, in most parts, below the apostolic times; and it is only by the strength of the dark coloring with which he has brought out the failings and the follies of succeeding ages, that a shadow of doubt and suspicion is thrown back on the primitive period of Christianity. Divest this whole passage of the latent sarcasm betrayed by the subsequent one of the whole disquisition, and it might commence a Christian history, written in the most Christian spirit of candor.--M.]

Our curiosity is naturally prompted to inquire by what means the Christian faith obtained so remarkable a victory over the established religions of the earth. To this inquiry, an obvious but satisfactory answer may be returned; that it was owing to the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself, and to the ruling providence of its great Author. But as truth and reason seldom find so favorable a reception in the world, and as the wisdom of Providence frequently condescends to use the passions of the human heart, and the general circumstances of mankind, as instruments to execute its purpose, we may still be permitted, though with becoming submission, to ask, not indeed what were the first, but what were the secondary causes of the rapid growth of the Christian church. It will, perhaps, appear, that it was most effectually favored and assisted by the five following causes: I. The inflexible, and if we may use the expression, the intolerant zeal of the Christians, derived, it is true, from the Jewish religion, but purified from the narrow and unsocial spirit, which, instead of inviting, had deterred the Gentiles from embracing the law of Moses.

II. The doctrine of a future life, improved by every additional circumstance which could give weight and efficacy to that important truth. III. The miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive church. IV. The pure and austere morals of the Christians.

V. The union and discipline of the Christian republic, which gradually formed an independent and increasing state in the heart of the Roman empire.

[Footnote!: Though we are thus far agreed with respect to the inflexibility and intolerance of Christian zeal, yet as to the principle from which it was derived, we are, *toto coelo*, divided in opinion. You deduce it from the Jewish religion; I would refer it to a more adequate and a more obvious source, a full persuasion of the truth of Christianity. Watson. Letters Gibbon, i. 9.--M.]

I. We have already described the religious harmony of the ancient world, and the facility [104] with which the most different and even hostile nations embraced, or at least respected, each other's superstitions. A single people refused to join in the common intercourse of mankind. The Jews, who, under the Assyrian and Persian monarchies, had languished for many ages the most despised portion of their slaves, [1] emerged from obscurity under the successors of Alexander; and as they multiplied to a surprising degree in the East, and afterwards in the West, they soon excited the curiosity and wonder of other nations. [2] The sullen

obstinacy with which they maintained their peculiar rites and unsocial manners, seemed to mark them out as a distinct species of men, who boldly professed, or who faintly disguised, their implacable habits to the rest of human kind. [3] Neither the violence of Antiochus, nor the arts of Herod, nor the example of the circumjacent nations, could ever persuade the Jews to associate with the institutions of Moses the elegant mythology of the Greeks. [4] According to the maxims of universal toleration, the Romans protected a superstition which they despised. [5] The polite Augustus condescended to give orders, that sacrifices should be offered for his prosperity in the temple of Jerusalem; [6] whilst the meanest of the posterity of Abraham, who should have paid the same homage to the Jupiter of the Capitol, would have been an object of abhorrence to himself and to his brethren.

But the moderation of the conquerors was insufficient to appease the jealous prejudices of their subjects, who were alarmed and scandalized at the ensigns of paganism, which necessarily introduced themselves into a Roman province. [7] The mad attempt of Caligula to place his own statue in the temple of Jerusalem was defeated by the unanimous resolution of a people who dreaded death much less than such an idolatrous profanation. [8] Their attachment to the law of Moses was equal to their detestation of foreign religions. The current of zeal and devotion, as it was contracted into a narrow channel, ran with the strength, and sometimes with the fury, of a torrent.

[Footnote 102: This facility has not always prevented intolerance, which

seems inherent in the religious spirit, when armed with authority. The separation of the ecclesiastical and civil power, appears to be the only means of at once maintaining religion and tolerance: but this is a very modern notion. The passions, which mingle themselves with opinions, made the Pagans very often intolerant and persecutors; witness the Persians, the Egyptians even the Greeks and Romans.

1st. The Persians.--Cambyses, conqueror of the Egyptians, condemned to death the magistrates of Memphis, because they had offered divine honors to their god. Apis: he caused the god to be brought before him, struck him with his dagger, commanded the priests to be scourged, and ordered a general massacre of all the Egyptians who should be found celebrating the festival of the statues of the gods to be burnt. Not content with this intolerance, he sent an army to reduce the Ammonians to slavery, and to set on fire the temple in which Jupiter delivered his oracles. See Herod. iii. 25--29, 37. Xerxes, during his invasion of Greece, acted on the same principles: he destroyed all the temples of Greece and Ionia, except that of Ephesus. See Paus. i. vii. p. 533, and x. p. 887.

Strabo, l. xiv. b. 941. 2d. The Egyptians.--They thought themselves defiled when they had drunk from the same cup or eaten at the same table with a man of a different belief from their own. "He who has voluntarily killed any sacred animal is punished with death; but if any one, even involuntarily, has killed a cat or an ibis, he cannot escape the extreme penalty: the people drag him away, treat him in the most cruel manner, sometimes without waiting for a judicial sentence. * * * Even at the

time when King Ptolemy was not yet the acknowledged friend of the Roman people, while the multitude were paying court with all possible attention to the strangers who came from Italy * * a Roman having killed a cat, the people rushed to his house, and neither the entreaties of the nobles, whom the king sent to them, nor the terror of the Roman name, were sufficiently powerful to rescue the man from punishment, though he had committed the crime involuntarily." Diod. Sic. i 83. Juvenal, in his 13th Satire, describes the sanguinary conflict between the inhabitants of Ombos and of Tentyra, from religious animosity. The fury was carried so far, that the conquerors tore and devoured the quivering limbs of the conquered.

Ardet adhuc Ombos et Tentyra, summus utrinque Inde furor vulgo, quod numina vicinorum Odit uterque locus; quum solos credat habendos Esse Deos quos ipse colit. Sat. xv. v. 85.

3d. The Greeks.--"Let us not here," says the Abbe Guenee, "refer to the cities of Peloponnesus and their severity against atheism; the Ephesians prosecuting Heraclitus for impiety; the Greeks armed one against the other by religious zeal, in the Amphictyonic war. Let us say nothing either of the frightful cruelties inflicted by three successors of Alexander upon the Jews, to force them to abandon their religion, nor of Antiochus expelling the philosophers from his states. Let us not seek our proofs of intolerance so far off. Athens, the polite and learned Athens, will supply us with sufficient examples. Every citizen made a public and solemn vow to conform to the religion of his country, to

defend it, and to cause it to be respected. An express law severely punished all discourses against the gods, and a rigid decree ordered the denunciation of all who should deny their existence. * * * The practice was in unison with the severity of the law. The proceedings commenced against Protagoras; a price set upon the head of Diagoras; the danger of Alcibiades; Aristotle obliged to fly; Stilpo banished; Anaxagoras hardly escaping death; Pericles himself, after all his services to his country, and all the glory he had acquired, compelled to appear before the tribunals and make his defence; * * a priestess executed for having introduced strange gods; Socrates condemned and drinking the hemlock, because he was accused of not recognizing those of his country, &c.; these facts attest too loudly, to be called in question, the religious intolerance of the most humane and enlightened people in Greece." *Lettres de quelques Juifs a Mons. Voltaire*, i. p. 221. (Compare Bentley on Freethinking, from which much of this is derived.)--M.

4th. The Romans.--The laws of Rome were not less express and severe. The intolerance of foreign religions reaches, with the Romans, as high as the laws of the twelve tables; the prohibitions were afterwards renewed at different times. Intolerance did not discontinue under the emperors; witness the counsel of Maecenas to Augustus. This counsel is so remarkable, that I think it right to insert it entire. "Honor the gods yourself," says Maecenas to Augustus, "in every way according to the usage of your ancestors, and compel others to worship them. Hate and punish those who introduce strange gods, not only for the sake of the gods, (he who despises them will respect no one,) but because those who

introduce new gods engage a multitude of persons in foreign laws and customs. From hence arise unions bound by oaths and confederacies, and associations, things dangerous to a monarchy." Dion Cass. l. ii. c. 36. (But, though some may differ from it, see Gibbon's just observation on this passage in Dion Cassius, ch. xvi. note 117; impugned, indeed, by M. Guizot, note in loc.)--M.

Even the laws which the philosophers of Athens and of Rome wrote for their imaginary republics are intolerant. Plato does not leave to his citizens freedom of religious worship; and Cicero expressly prohibits them from having other gods than those of the state. *Lettres de quelques Juifs a Mons. Voltaire*, i. p. 226.--G.

According to M. Guizot's just remarks, religious intolerance will always ally itself with the passions of man, however different those passions may be. In the instances quoted above, with the Persians it was the pride of despotism; to conquer the gods of a country was the last mark of subjugation. With the Egyptians, it was the gross Fetichism of the superstitious populace, and the local jealousy of neighboring towns. In Greece, persecution was in general connected with political party; in Rome, with the stern supremacy of the law and the interests of the state. Gibbon has been mistaken in attributing to the tolerant spirit of Paganism that which arose out of the peculiar circumstances of the times. 1st. The decay of the old Polytheism, through the progress of reason and intelligence, and the prevalence of philosophical opinions among the higher orders.

2d. The Roman character, in which the political always predominated over the religious party. The Romans were contented with having bowed the world to a uniformity of subjection to their power, and cared not for establishing the (to them) less important uniformity of religion.--M.

[Footnote 1: Dum Assyrios penes, Medosque, et Persas Oriens fuit, despectissima pars servientium. Tacit. Hist. v. 8. Herodotus, who visited Asia whilst it obeyed the last of those empires, slightly mentions the Syrians of Palestine, who, according to their own confession, had received from Egypt the rite of circumcision. See 1. ii. c. 104.]

[Footnote 2: Diodorus Siculus, l. xl. Dion Cassius, l. xxxvii. p. 121. Tacit Hist. v. 1--9. Justin xxxvi. 2, 3.]

[Footnote 3: Tradidit arcano quaecunque volumine Moses, Non monstrare vias cadem nisi sacra colenti, Quaesitum ad fontem solos deducere verpas. The letter of this law is not to be found in the present volume of Moses. But the wise, the humane Maimonides openly teaches that if an idolater fall into the water, a Jew ought not to save him from instant death. See Basnage, Histoire des Juifs, l. vi. c. 28. * Note: It is diametrically opposed to its spirit and to its letter, see, among other passages, Deut. v. 18. 19, (God) "loveth the stranger in giving him food and raiment. Love ye, therefore, the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt." Comp. Lev. xxiii. 25. Juvenal is a satirist, whose

strong expressions can hardly be received as historic evidence; and he wrote after the horrible cruelties of the Romans, which, during and after the war, might give some cause for the complete isolation of the Jew from the rest of the world. The Jew was a bigot, but his religion was not the only source of his bigotry. After how many centuries of mutual wrong and hatred, which had still further estranged the Jew from mankind, did Maimonides write?--M.]

[Footnote 4: A Jewish sect, which indulged themselves in a sort of occasional conformity, derived from Herod, by whose example and authority they had been seduced, the name of Herodians. But their numbers were so inconsiderable, and their duration so short, that Josephus has not thought them worthy of his notice. See Prideaux's Connection, vol. ii. p. 285. * Note: The Herodians were probably more of a political party than a religious sect, though Gibbon is most likely right as to their occasional conformity. See Hist. of the Jews, ii. 108.--M.]

[Footnote 5: Cicero pro Flacco, c. 28. * Note: The edicts of Julius Caesar, and of some of the cities in Asia Minor (Krebs. Decret. pro Judaeis,) in favor of the nation in general, or of the Asiatic Jews, speak a different language.--M.]

[Footnote 6: Philo de Legatione. Augustus left a foundation for a perpetual sacrifice. Yet he approved of the neglect which his grandson Caius expressed towards the temple of Jerusalem. See Sueton. in August.

c. 93, and Casaubon's notes on that passage.]

[Footnote 7: See, in particular, Joseph. Antiquitat. xvii. 6, xviii. 3; and de Bell. Judiac. i. 33, and ii. 9, edit. Havercamp. * Note: This was during the government of Pontius Pilate. (Hist. of Jews, ii. 156.) Probably in part to avoid this collision, the Roman governor, in general, resided at Caesarea.--M.]

[Footnote 8: Jussi a Caio Cesare, effigiem ejus in templo locare, arma potius sumpsere. Tacit. Hist. v. 9. Philo and Josephus gave a very circumstantial, but a very rhetorical, account of this transaction, which exceedingly perplexed the governor of Syria. At the first mention of this idolatrous proposal, King Agrippa fainted away; and did not recover his senses until the third day. (Hist. of Jews, ii. 181, &c.)]

This inflexible perseverance, which appeared so odious or so ridiculous to the ancient world, assumes a more awful character, since Providence has deigned to reveal to us the mysterious history of the chosen people. But the devout and even scrupulous attachment to the Mosaic religion, so conspicuous among the Jews who lived under the second temple, becomes still more surprising, if it is compared with the stubborn incredulity of their forefathers. When the law was given in thunder from Mount Sinai, when the tides of the ocean and the course of the planets were suspended for the convenience of the Israelites, and when temporal rewards and punishments were the immediate consequences of their piety

or disobedience, they perpetually relapsed into rebellion against the visible majesty of their Divine King, placed the idols of the nations in the sanctuary of Jehovah, and imitated every fantastic ceremony that was practised in the tents of the Arabs, or in the cities of Phoenicia. [9]

As the protection of Heaven was deservedly withdrawn from the ungrateful race, their faith acquired a proportionable degree of vigor and purity.

The contemporaries of Moses and Joshua had beheld with careless indifference the most amazing miracles. Under the pressure of every calamity, the belief of those miracles has preserved the Jews of a later period from the universal contagion of idolatry; and in contradiction to every known principle of the human mind, that singular people seems to have yielded a stronger and more ready assent to the traditions of their remote ancestors, than to the evidence of their own senses. [10]

[Footnote 9: For the enumeration of the Syrian and Arabian deities, it may be observed, that Milton has comprised in one hundred and thirty very beautiful lines the two large and learned syntagmas which Selden had composed on that abstruse subject.]

[Footnote 10: "How long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the signs which I have shown among them?" (Numbers xiv. 11.) It would be easy, but it would be unbecoming, to justify the complaint of the Deity from the whole tenor of the Mosaic history. Note: Among a rude and barbarous people, religious impressions are easily made, and are as soon effaced. The ignorance which multiplies

imaginary wonders, would weaken and destroy the effect of real miracle. At the period of the Jewish history, referred to in the passage from Numbers, their fears predominated over their faith,--the fears of an unwarlike people, just rescued from debasing slavery, and commanded to attack a fierce, a well-armed, a gigantic, and a far more numerous race, the inhabitants of Canaan. As to the frequent apostasy of the Jews, their religion was beyond their state of civilization. Nor is it uncommon for a people to cling with passionate attachment to that of which, at first, they could not appreciate the value. Patriotism and national pride will contend, even to death, for political rights which have been forced upon a reluctant people. The Christian may at least retort, with justice, that the great sign of his religion, the resurrection of Jesus, was most ardently believed, and most resolutely asserted, by the eye witnesses of the fact.--M.]

The Jewish religion was admirably fitted for defence, but it was never designed for conquest; and it seems probable that the number of proselytes was never much superior to that of apostates. The divine promises were originally made, and the distinguishing rite of circumcision was enjoined, to a single family. When the posterity of Abraham had multiplied like the sands of the sea, the Deity, from whose mouth they received a system of laws and ceremonies, declared himself the proper and as it were the national God of Israel and with the most jealous care separated his favorite people from the rest of mankind. The conquest of the land of Canaan was accompanied with so many wonderful and with so many bloody circumstances, that the victorious Jews were

left in a state of irreconcilable hostility with all their neighbors. They had been commanded to extirpate some of the most idolatrous tribes, and the execution of the divine will had seldom been retarded by the weakness of humanity.

With the other nations they were forbidden to contract any marriages or alliances; and the prohibition of receiving them into the congregation, which in some cases was perpetual, almost always extended to the third, to the seventh, or even to the tenth generation. The obligation of preaching to the Gentiles the faith of Moses had never been inculcated as a precept of the law, nor were the Jews inclined to impose it on themselves as a voluntary duty.

In the admission of new citizens, that unsocial people was actuated by the selfish vanity of the Greeks, rather than by the generous policy of Rome. The descendants of Abraham were flattered by the opinion that they alone were the heirs of the covenant, and they were apprehensive of diminishing the value of their inheritance by sharing it too easily with the strangers of the earth. A larger acquaintance with mankind extended their knowledge without correcting their prejudices; and whenever the God of Israel acquired any new votaries, he was much more indebted to the inconstant humor of polytheism than to the active zeal of his own missionaries. [11] The religion of Moses seems to be instituted for a particular country as well as for a single nation; and if a strict obedience had been paid to the order, that every male, three times in the year, should present himself before the Lord Jehovah, it would have

been impossible that the Jews could ever have spread themselves beyond the narrow limits of the promised land. [12] That obstacle was indeed removed by the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem; but the most considerable part of the Jewish religion was involved in its destruction; and the Pagans, who had long wondered at the strange report of an empty sanctuary, [13] were at a loss to discover what could be the object, or what could be the instruments, of a worship which was destitute of temples and of altars, of priests and of sacrifices.

Yet even in their fallen state, the Jews, still asserting their lofty and exclusive privileges, shunned, instead of courting, the society of strangers. They still insisted with inflexible rigor on those parts of the law which it was in their power to practise. Their peculiar distinctions of days, of meats, and a variety of trivial though burdensome observances, were so many objects of disgust and aversion for the other nations, to whose habits and prejudices they were diametrically opposite. The painful and even dangerous rite of circumcision was alone capable of repelling a willing proselyte from the door of the synagogue. [14]

[Footnote 11: All that relates to the Jewish proselytes has been very ably by Basnage, *Hist. des Juifs*, l. vi. c. 6, 7.]

[Footnote 12: See *Exod.* xxiv. 23, *Deut.* xvi. 16, the commentators, and a very sensible note in the *Universal History*, vol. i. p. 603, edit. fol.]

[Footnote 13: When Pompey, using or abusing the right of conquest, entered into the Holy of Holies, it was observed with amazement, "Nulli intus Deum effigie, vacuum sedem et inania arcana." Tacit. Hist. v. 9. It was a popular saying, with regard to the Jews, "Nil praeter nubes et coeli numen adorant."]

[Footnote 14: A second kind of circumcision was inflicted on a Samaritan or Egyptian proselyte. The sullen indifference of the Talmudists, with respect to the conversion of strangers, may be seen in Basnage Histoire des Juifs, l. xi. c. 6.]

Under these circumstances, Christianity offered itself to the world, armed with the strength of the Mosaic law, and delivered from the weight of its fetters. An exclusive zeal for the truth of religion, and the unity of God, was as carefully inculcated in the new as in the ancient system: and whatever was now revealed to mankind concerning the nature and designs of the Supreme Being, was fitted to increase their reverence for that mysterious doctrine. The divine authority of Moses and the prophets was admitted, and even established, as the firmest basis of Christianity. From the beginning of the world, an uninterrupted series of predictions had announced and prepared the long-expected coming of the Messiah, who, in compliance with the gross apprehensions of the Jews, had been more frequently represented under the character of a King and Conqueror, than under that of a Prophet, a Martyr, and the Son of God. By his expiatory sacrifice, the imperfect sacrifices of the temple

were at once consummated and abolished. The ceremonial law, which consisted only of types and figures, was succeeded by a pure and spiritual worship, equally adapted to all climates, as well as to every condition of mankind; and to the initiation of blood was substituted a more harmless initiation of water. The promise of divine favor, instead of being partially confined to the posterity of Abraham, was universally proposed to the freeman and the slave, to the Greek and to the barbarian, to the Jew and to the Gentile. Every privilege that could raise the proselyte from earth to heaven, that could exalt his devotion, secure his happiness, or even gratify that secret pride which, under the semblance of devotion, insinuates itself into the human heart, was still reserved for the members of the Christian church; but at the same time all mankind was permitted, and even solicited, to accept the glorious distinction, which was not only proffered as a favor, but imposed as an obligation. It became the most sacred duty of a new convert to diffuse among his friends and relations the inestimable blessing which he had received, and to warn them against a refusal that would be severely punished as a criminal disobedience to the will of a benevolent but all-powerful Deity.