

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

In consequence of this opinion, it was the first but arduous duty of a Christian to preserve himself pure and undefiled by the practice of idolatry. The religion of the nations was not merely a speculative doctrine professed in the schools or preached in the temples. The innumerable deities and rites of polytheism were closely interwoven with every circumstance of business or pleasure, of public or of private life; and it seemed impossible to escape the observance of them, without, at the same time, renouncing the commerce of mankind, and all the offices and amusements of society. [40] The important transactions of peace and war were prepared or concluded by solemn sacrifices, in which the magistrate, the senator, and the soldier, were obliged to preside or to participate. [41] The public spectacles were an essential part of the cheerful devotion of the Pagans, and the gods were supposed to accept, as the most grateful offering, the games that the prince and people celebrated in honor of their peculiar festivals. [42] The Christians, who with pious horror avoided the abomination of the circus or the theatre, found himself encompassed with infernal snares in every convivial entertainment, as often as his friends, invoking the hospitable deities, poured out libations to each other's happiness. [43] When the bride, struggling with well-affected reluctance, was forced into hymenaeal pomp over the threshold of her new habitation, [44] or when the sad procession of the dead slowly moved towards the funeral pile; [45] the Christian, on these interesting occasions, was compelled to desert the persons who were the dearest to him, rather than contract the guilt inherent

to those impious ceremonies. Every art and every trade that was in the least concerned in the framing or adorning of idols was polluted by the stain of idolatry; [46] a severe sentence, since it devoted to eternal misery the far greater part of the community, which is employed in the exercise of liberal or mechanic professions. If we cast our eyes over the numerous remains of antiquity, we shall perceive, that besides the immediate representations of the gods, and the holy instruments of their worship, the elegant forms and agreeable fictions consecrated by the imagination of the Greeks, were introduced as the richest ornaments of the houses, the dress, and the furniture of the Pagan. [47] Even the arts of music and painting, of eloquence and poetry, flowed from the same impure origin. In the style of the fathers, Apollo and the Muses were the organs of the infernal spirit; Homer and Virgil were the most eminent of his servants; and the beautiful mythology which pervades and animates the compositions of their genius, is destined to celebrate the glory of the daemons. Even the common language of Greece and Rome abounded with familiar but impious expressions, which the imprudent Christian might too carelessly utter, or too patiently hear. [48]

[Footnote 40: Tertullian has written a most severe treatise against idolatry, to caution his brethren against the hourly danger of incurring that guilt. *Recogita sylvam, et quantae latitant spinae. De Corona Militis, c. 10.*]

[Footnote 41: The Roman senate was always held in a temple or consecrated place. (Aulus Gellius, xiv. 7.) Before they entered on

business, every senator dropped some wine and frankincense on the altar.
Sueton. in August. c. 35.]

[Footnote 42: See Tertullian, De Spectaculis. This severe reformer shows no more indulgence to a tragedy of Euripides, than to a combat of gladiators. The dress of the actors particularly offends him. By the use of the lofty buskin, they impiously strive to add a cubit to their stature. c. 23.]

[Footnote 43: The ancient practice of concluding the entertainment with libations, may be found in every classic. Socrates and Seneca, in their last moments, made a noble application of this custom. Postquam stagnum, calidae aquae introiit, respergens proximos servorum, addita voce, libare se liquorem illum Jovi Liberatori. Tacit. Annal. xv. 64.]

[Footnote 44: See the elegant but idolatrous hymn of Catullus, on the nuptials of Manlius and Julia. O Hymen, Hymenae Io! Quis huic Deo compararier ausit?]

[Footnote 45: The ancient funerals (in those of Misenus and Pallas) are no less accurately described by Virgil, than they are illustrated by his commentator Servius. The pile itself was an altar, the flames were fed with the blood of victims, and all the assistants were sprinkled with lustral water.]

[Footnote 46: Tertullian de Idololatria, c. 11. * Note: The exaggerated

and declamatory opinions of Tertullian ought not to be taken as the general sentiment of the early Christians. Gibbon has too often allowed himself to consider the peculiar notions of certain Fathers of the Church as inherent in Christianity. This is not accurate.--G.]

[Footnote 47: See every part of Montfaucon's Antiquities. Even the reverses of the Greek and Roman coins were frequently of an idolatrous nature. Here indeed the scruples of the Christian were suspended by a stronger passion. Note: All this scrupulous nicety is at variance with the decision of St. Paul about meat offered to idols, 1, Cor. x. 21--32.--M.]

[Footnote 48: Tertullian de Idololatria, c. 20, 21, 22. If a Pagan friend (on the occasion perhaps of sneezing) used the familiar expression of "Jupiter bless you," the Christian was obliged to protest against the divinity of Jupiter.]

The dangerous temptations which on every side lurked in ambush to surprise the unguarded believer, assailed him with redoubled violence on the days of solemn festivals. So artfully were they framed and disposed throughout the year, that superstition always wore the appearance of pleasure, and often of virtue. Some of the most sacred festivals in the Roman ritual were destined to salute the new calends of January with vows of public and private felicity; to indulge the pious remembrance of the dead and living; to ascertain the inviolable bounds of property; to hail, on the return of spring, the genial powers of fecundity; to

perpetuate the two memorable areas of Rome, the foundation of the city and that of the republic, and to restore, during the humane license of the Saturnalia, the primitive equality of mankind. Some idea may be conceived of the abhorrence of the Christians for such impious ceremonies, by the scrupulous delicacy which they displayed on a much less alarming occasion. On days of general festivity, it was the custom of the ancients to adorn their doors with lamps and with branches of laurel, and to crown their heads with a garland of flowers. This innocent and elegant practice might perhaps have been tolerated as a mere civil institution. But it most unluckily happened that the doors were under the protection of the household gods, that the laurel was sacred to the lover of Daphne, and that garlands of flowers, though frequently worn as a symbol of joy or mourning, had been dedicated in their first origin to the service of superstition. The trembling Christians, who were persuaded in this instance to comply with the fashion of their country, and the commands of the magistrate, labored under the most gloomy apprehensions, from the reproaches of his own conscience, the censures of the church, and the denunciations of divine vengeance. [50]

[Footnote 49: Consult the most labored work of Ovid, his imperfect *Fasti*. He finished no more than the first six months of the year. The compilation of Macrobius is called the *Saturnalia*, but it is only a small part of the first book that bears any relation to the title.]

[Footnote 50: Tertullian has composed a defence, or rather panegyric, of

the rash action of a Christian soldier, who, by throwing away his crown of laurel, had exposed himself and his brethren to the most imminent danger. By the mention of the emperors, (Severus and Caracalla,) it is evident, notwithstanding the wishes of M. de Tillemont, that Tertullian composed his treatise De Corona long before he was engaged in the errors of the Montanists. See Memoires Ecclesiastiques, tom. iii. p. 384. Note: The soldier did not tear off his crown to throw it down with contempt; he did not even throw it away; he held it in his hand, while others were it on their heads. Solus libero capite, ornamento in manu otioso.--G

Note: Tertullian does not expressly name the two emperors, Severus and Caracalla: he speaks only of two emperors, and of a long peace which the church had enjoyed. It is generally agreed that Tertullian became a Montanist about the year 200: his work, de Corona Militis, appears to have been written, at the earliest about the year 202 before the persecution of Severus: it may be maintained, then, that it is subsequent to the Montanism of the author. See Mosheim, Diss. de Apol. Tertull. p. 53. Biblioth. Amsterd. tom. x. part ii. p. 292. Cave's Hist. Lit. p. 92, 93.--G. ----The state of Tertullian's opinions at the particular period is almost an idle question. "The fiery African" is not at any time to be considered a fair representative of Christianity.--M.]

Such was the anxious diligence which was required to guard the chastity of the gospel from the infectious breath of idolatry. The superstitious observances of public or private rites were carelessly practised, from education and habit, by the followers of the established religion. But as often as they occurred, they afforded the Christians an opportunity

of declaring and confirming their zealous opposition. By these frequent protestations their attachment to the faith was continually fortified; and in proportion to the increase of zeal, they combated with the more ardor and success in the holy war, which they had undertaken against the empire of the demons.

II. The writings of Cicero [51] represent in the most lively colors the ignorance, the errors, and the uncertainty of the ancient philosophers with regard to the immortality of the soul. When they are desirous of arming their disciples against the fear of death, they inculcate, as an obvious, though melancholy position, that the fatal stroke of our dissolution releases us from the calamities of life; and that those can no longer suffer, who no longer exist. Yet there were a few sages of Greece and Rome who had conceived a more exalted, and, in some respects, a juster idea of human nature, though it must be confessed, that in the sublime inquiry, their reason had been often guided by their imagination, and that their imagination had been prompted by their vanity. When they viewed with complacency the extent of their own mental powers, when they exercised the various faculties of memory, of fancy, and of judgment, in the most profound speculations, or the most important labors, and when they reflected on the desire of fame, which transported them into future ages, far beyond the bounds of death and of the grave, they were unwilling to confound themselves with the beasts of the field, or to suppose that a being, for whose dignity they entertained the most sincere admiration, could be limited to a spot of earth, and to a few years of duration. With this favorable prepossession

they summoned to their aid the science, or rather the language, of Metaphysics. They soon discovered, that as none of the properties of matter will apply to the operations of the mind, the human soul must consequently be a substance distinct from the body, pure, simple, and spiritual, incapable of dissolution, and susceptible of a much higher degree of virtue and happiness after the release from its corporeal prison. From these specious and noble principles, the philosophers who trod in the footsteps of Plato deduced a very unjustifiable conclusion, since they asserted, not only the future immortality, but the past eternity, of the human soul, which they were too apt to consider as a portion of the infinite and self-existing spirit, which pervades and sustains the universe. [52] A doctrine thus removed beyond the senses and the experience of mankind, might serve to amuse the leisure of a philosophic mind; or, in the silence of solitude, it might sometimes impart a ray of comfort to desponding virtue; but the faint impression which had been received in the schools, was soon obliterated by the commerce and business of active life. We are sufficiently acquainted with the eminent persons who flourished in the age of Cicero, and of the first Caesars, with their actions, their characters, and their motives, to be assured that their conduct in this life was never regulated by any serious conviction of the rewards or punishments of a future state. At the bar and in the senate of Rome the ablest orators were not apprehensive of giving offence to their hearers, by exposing that doctrine as an idle and extravagant opinion, which was rejected with contempt by every man of a liberal education and understanding. [53]

[Footnote 51: In particular, the first book of the Tusculan Questions, and the treatise De Senectute, and the Somnium Scipionis, contain, in the most beautiful language, every thing that Grecian philosophy, on Roman good sense, could possibly suggest on this dark but important object.]

[Footnote 52: The preexistence of human souls, so far at least as that doctrine is compatible with religion, was adopted by many of the Greek and Latin fathers. See Beausobre, Hist. du Manicheisme, l. vi. c. 4.]

[Footnote 53: See Cicero pro Cluent. c. 61. Caesar ap. Sallust. de Bell. Catilina 50. Juvenal. Satir. ii. 149. ----Esse aliquid manes, et subterranea regna, -----Nec pueri credunt, nisi qui nondum aere lavantae.]

Since therefore the most sublime efforts of philosophy can extend no further than feebly to point out the desire, the hope, or, at most, the probability, of a future state, there is nothing, except a divine revelation, that can ascertain the existence, and describe the condition, of the invisible country which is destined to receive the souls of men after their separation from the body. But we may perceive several defects inherent to the popular religions of Greece and Rome, which rendered them very unequal to so arduous a task. 1. The general system of their mythology was unsupported by any solid proofs; and the wisest among the Pagans had already disclaimed its usurped authority. 2.

The description of the infernal regions had been abandoned to the fancy of painters and of poets, who peopled them with so many phantoms and monsters, who dispensed their rewards and punishments with so little equity, that a solemn truth, the most congenial to the human heart, was opposed and disgraced by the absurd mixture of the wildest fictions.

[54] 3. The doctrine of a future state was scarcely considered among the devout polytheists of Greece and Rome as a fundamental article of faith. The providence of the gods, as it related to public communities rather than to private individuals, was principally displayed on the visible theatre of the present world. The petitions which were offered on the altars of Jupiter or Apollo, expressed the anxiety of their worshippers for temporal happiness, and their ignorance or indifference concerning a future life. [55] The important truth of the of the immortality of the soul was inculcated with more diligence, as well as success, in India, in Assyria, in Egypt, and in Gaul; and since we cannot attribute such a difference to the superior knowledge of the barbarians, we we must ascribe it to the influence of an established priesthood, which employed the motives of virtue as the instrument of ambition. [56]

[Footnote 54: The xith book of the *Odyssey* gives a very dreary and incoherent account of the infernal shades. Pindar and Virgil have embellished the picture; but even those poets, though more correct than their great model, are guilty of very strange inconsistencies. See Bayle, *Responses aux Questions d'un Provincial*, part iii. c. 22.]

[Footnote 55: See xvith epistle of the first book of Horace, the

xiiiith Satire of Juvenal, and the iid Satire of Persius: these popular discourses express the sentiment and language of the multitude.]

[Footnote 56: If we confine ourselves to the Gauls, we may observe, that they intrusted, not only their lives, but even their money, to the security of another world. *Vetus ille mos Gallorum occurrit* (says Valerius Maximus, l. ii. c. 6, p. 10) *quos, memoria proditum est pecunias montuas, quae his apud inferos redderentur, dare solitos.* The same custom is more darkly insinuated by Mela, l. iii. c. 2. It is almost needless to add, that the profits of trade hold a just proportion to the credit of the merchant, and that the Druids derived from their holy profession a character of responsibility, which could scarcely be claimed by any other order of men.]

We might naturally expect that a principle so essential to religion, would have been revealed in the clearest terms to the chosen people of Palestine, and that it might safely have been intrusted to the hereditary priesthood of Aaron. It is incumbent on us to adore the mysterious dispensations of Providence, [57] when we discover that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is omitted in the law of Moses it is darkly insinuated by the prophets; and during the long period which clasped between the Egyptian and the Babylonian servitudes, the hopes as well as fears of the Jews appear to have been confined within the narrow compass of the present life. [58] After Cyrus had permitted the exiled nation to return into the promised land, and after Ezra had restored the ancient records of their religion, two celebrated sects,

the Sadducees and the Pharisees, insensibly arose at Jerusalem. [59] The former, selected from the more opulent and distinguished ranks of society, were strictly attached to the literal sense of the Mosaic law, and they piously rejected the immortality of the soul, as an opinion that received no countenance from the divine book, which they revered as the only rule of their faith. To the authority of Scripture the Pharisees added that of tradition, and they accepted, under the name of traditions, several speculative tenets from the philosophy or religion of the eastern nations. The doctrines of fate or predestination, of angels and spirits, and of a future state of rewards and punishments, were in the number of these new articles of belief; and as the Pharisees, by the austerity of their manners, had drawn into their party the body of the Jewish people, the immortality of the soul became the prevailing sentiment of the synagogue, under the reign of the Asmonaeen princes and pontiffs. The temper of the Jews was incapable of contenting itself with such a cold and languid assent as might satisfy the mind of a Polytheist; and as soon as they admitted the idea of a future state, they embraced it with the zeal which has always formed the characteristic of the nation. Their zeal, however, added nothing to its evidence, or even probability: and it was still necessary that the doctrine of life and immortality, which had been dictated by nature, approved by reason, and received by superstition, should obtain the sanction of divine truth from the authority and example of Christ.

[Footnote 57: The right reverend author of the Divine Legation of Moses as signs a very curious reason for the omission, and most ingeniously

retorts it on the unbelievers. * Note: The hypothesis of Warburton concerning this remarkable fact, which, as far as the Law of Moses, is unquestionable, made few disciples; and it is difficult to suppose that it could be intended by the author himself for more than a display of intellectual strength. Modern writers have accounted in various ways for the silence of the Hebrew legislator on the immortality of the soul. According to Michaelis, "Moses wrote as an historian and as a lawgiver; he regulated the ecclesiastical discipline, rather than the religious belief of his people; and the sanctions of the law being temporal, he had no occasion, and as a civil legislator could not with propriety, threaten punishments in another world." See Michaelis, *Laws of Moses*, art. 272, vol. iv. p. 209, Eng. Trans.; and *Syntagma Commentationum*, p. 80, quoted by Guizot. M. Guizot adds, the "ingenious conjecture of a philosophic theologian," which approximates to an opinion long entertained by the Editor. That writer believes, that in the state of civilization at the time of the legislator, this doctrine, become popular among the Jews, would necessarily have given birth to a multitude of idolatrous superstitions which he wished to prevent. His primary object was to establish a firm theocracy, to make his people the conservators of the doctrine of the Divine Unity, the basis upon which Christianity was hereafter to rest. He carefully excluded everything which could obscure or weaken that doctrine. Other nations had strangely abused their notions on the immortality of the soul; Moses wished to prevent this abuse: hence he forbade the Jews from consulting necromancers, (those who evoke the spirits of the dead.) Deut. xviii. 11. Those who reflect on the state of the Pagans and the Jews, and on

the facility with which idolatry crept in on every side, will not be astonished that Moses has not developed a doctrine of which the influence might be more pernicious than useful to his people. Orat. Fest. de Vitae Immort. Spe., &c., auct. Ph. Alb. Stapfer, p. 12 13, 20. Berne, 1787. ----Moses, as well from the intimations scattered in his writings, the passage relating to the translation of Enoch, (Gen. v. 24,) the prohibition of necromancy, (Michaelis believes him to be the author of the Book of Job though this opinion is in general rejected; other learned writers consider this Book to be coeval with and known to Moses,) as from his long residence in Egypt, and his acquaintance with Egyptian wisdom, could not be ignorant of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. But this doctrine if popularly known among the Jews, must have been purely Egyptian, and as so, intimately connected with the whole religious system of that country. It was no doubt moulded up with the tenet of the transmigration of the soul, perhaps with notions analogous to the emanation system of India in which the human soul was an efflux from or indeed a part of, the Deity. The Mosaic religion drew a wide and impassable interval between the Creator and created human beings: in this it differed from the Egyptian and all the Eastern religions. As then the immortality of the soul was thus inseparably blended with those foreign religions which were altogether to be effaced from the minds of the people, and by no means necessary for the establishment of the theocracy, Moses maintained silence on this point and a purer notion of it was left to be developed at a more favorable period in the history of man.--M.]

[Footnote 58: See Le Clerc (Prolegomena ad Hist. Ecclesiast. sect. 1, c. 8) His authority seems to carry the greater weight, as he has written a learned and judicious commentary on the books of the Old Testament.]

[Footnote 59: Joseph. Antiquitat. 1. xiii. c. 10. De Bell. Jud. ii. 8.

According to the most natural interpretation of his words, the Sadducees admitted only the Pentateuch; but it has pleased some modern critics to add the Prophets to their creed, and to suppose that they contented themselves with rejecting the traditions of the Pharisees. Dr. Jortin has argued that point in his Remarks on Ecclesiastical History, vol. ii. p. 103.]

When the promise of eternal happiness was proposed to mankind on condition of adopting the faith, and of observing the precepts, of the gospel, it is no wonder that so advantageous an offer should have been accepted by great numbers of every religion, of every rank, and of every province in the Roman empire. The ancient Christians were animated by a contempt for their present existence, and by a just confidence of immortality, of which the doubtful and imperfect faith of modern ages cannot give us any adequate notion. In the primitive church, the influence of truth was very powerfully strengthened by an opinion, which, however it may deserve respect for its usefulness and antiquity, has not been found agreeable to experience. It was universally believed, that the end of the world, and the kingdom of heaven, were at hand.

[591] The near approach of this wonderful event had been predicted by the apostles; the tradition of it was preserved by their earliest disciples,

and those who understood in their literal senses the discourse of Christ himself, were obliged to expect the second and glorious coming of the Son of Man in the clouds, before that generation was totally extinguished, which had beheld his humble condition upon earth, and which might still be witness of the calamities of the Jews under Vespasian or Hadrian. The revolution of seventeen centuries has instructed us not to press too closely the mysterious language of prophecy and revelation; but as long as, for wise purposes, this error was permitted to subsist in the church, it was productive of the most salutary effects on the faith and practice of Christians, who lived in the awful expectation of that moment, when the globe itself, and all the various race of mankind, should tremble at the appearance of their divine Judge. [60]

[Footnote 591: This was, in fact, an integral part of the Jewish notion of the Messiah, from which the minds of the apostles themselves were but gradually detached. See Bertholdt, *Christologia Judaeorum*, concluding chapters--M.]

[Footnote 60: This expectation was countenanced by the twenty-fourth chapter of St. Matthew, and by the first epistle of St. Paul to the Thessalonians. Erasmus removes the difficulty by the help of allegory and metaphor; and the learned Grotius ventures to insinuate, that, for wise purposes, the pious deception was permitted to take place. * Note: Some modern theologians explain it without discovering either allegory or deception. They say, that Jesus Christ, after having proclaimed the

ruin of Jerusalem and of the Temple, speaks of his second coming and the signs which were to precede it; but those who believed that the moment was near deceived themselves as to the sense of two words, an error which still subsists in our versions of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, xxiv. 29, 34. In verse 29, we read, "Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened," &c. The Greek word signifies all at once, suddenly, not immediately; so that it signifies only the sudden appearance of the signs which Jesus Christ announces not the shortness of the interval which was to separate them from the "days of tribulation," of which he was speaking. The verse 34 is this "Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass till all these things shall be fulfilled." Jesus, speaking to his disciples, uses these words, which the translators have rendered by this generation, but which means the race, the filiation of my disciples; that is, he speaks of a class of men, not of a generation. The true sense then, according to these learned men, is, In truth I tell you that this race of men, of which you are the commencement, shall not pass away till this shall take place; that is to say, the succession of Christians shall not cease till his coming. See Commentary of M. Paulus on the New Test., edit. 1802, tom. iii. p. 445,--446.--G. ---Others, as Rosenmuller and Kuinoel, in loc., confine this passage to a highly figurative description of the ruins of the Jewish city and polity.--M.]