

of Christianity who justify the innocence of their brethren, and the writers of a later period who celebrate the sanctity of their ancestors, display, in the most lively colors, the reformation of manners which was introduced into the world by the preaching of the gospel. As it is my intention to remark only such human causes as were permitted to second the influence of revelation, I shall slightly mention two motives which might naturally render the lives of the primitive Christians much purer and more austere than those of their Pagan contemporaries, or their degenerate successors; repentance for their past sins, and the laudable desire of supporting the reputation of the society in which they were engaged. [83]

[Footnote 83: These, in the opinion of the editor, are the most uncandid paragraphs in Gibbon's History. He ought either, with manly courage, to have denied the moral reformation introduced by Christianity, or fairly to have investigated all its motives; not to have confined himself to an insidious and sarcastic description of the less pure and generous elements of the Christian character as it appeared even at that early time.--M.]

It is a very ancient reproach, suggested by the ignorance or the malice of infidelity, that the Christians allured into their party the most atrocious criminals, who, as soon as they were touched by a sense of remorse, were easily persuaded to wash away, in the water of baptism, the guilt of their past conduct, for which the temples of the gods refused to grant them any expiation. But this reproach, when it is

cleared from misrepresentation, contributes as much to the honor as it did to the increase of the church. [83] The friends of Christianity may acknowledge without a blush, that many of the most eminent saints had been before their baptism the most abandoned sinners. Those persons, who in the world had followed, though in an imperfect manner, the dictates of benevolence and propriety, derived such a calm satisfaction from the opinion of their own rectitude, as rendered them much less susceptible of the sudden emotions of shame, of grief, and of terror, which have given birth to so many wonderful conversions. After the example of their divine Master, the missionaries of the gospel disdained not the society of men, and especially of women, oppressed by the consciousness, and very often by the effects, of their vices. As they emerged from sin and superstition to the glorious hope of immortality, they resolved to devote themselves to a life, not only of virtue, but of penitence. The desire of perfection became the ruling passion of their soul; and it is well known, that while reason embraces a cold mediocrity, our passions hurry us, with rapid violence, over the space which lies between the most opposite extremes.

[Footnote 83: The imputations of Celsus and Julian, with the defence of the fathers, are very fairly stated by Spanheim, *Commentaire sur les Césars de Julian*, p. 468.]

When the new converts had been enrolled in the number of the faithful, and were admitted to the sacraments of the church, they found themselves restrained from relapsing into their past disorders by another

consideration of a less spiritual, but of a very innocent and respectable nature. Any particular society that has departed from the great body of the nation, or the religion to which it belonged, immediately becomes the object of universal as well as invidious observation. In proportion to the smallness of its numbers, the character of the society may be affected by the virtues and vices of the persons who compose it; and every member is engaged to watch with the most vigilant attention over his own behavior, and over that of his brethren, since, as he must expect to incur a part of the common disgrace, he may hope to enjoy a share of the common reputation. When the Christians of Bithynia were brought before the tribunal of the younger Pliny, they assured the proconsul, that, far from being engaged in any unlawful conspiracy, they were bound by a solemn obligation to abstain from the commission of those crimes which disturb the private or public peace of society, from theft, robbery, adultery, perjury, and fraud. [84] [841] Near a century afterwards, Tertullian with an honest pride, could boast, that very few Christians had suffered by the hand of the executioner, except on account of their religion. [85] Their serious and sequestered life, averse to the gay luxury of the age, inured them to chastity, temperance, economy, and all the sober and domestic virtues. As the greater number were of some trade or profession, it was incumbent on them, by the strictest integrity and the fairest dealing, to remove the suspicions which the profane are too apt to conceive against the appearances of sanctity. The contempt of the world exercised them in the habits of humility, meekness, and patience. The more they were persecuted, the more closely they adhered to each other. Their

mutual charity and unsuspecting confidence has been remarked by infidels, and was too often abused by perfidious friends. [86]

[Footnote 84: Plin. Epist. x. 97. * Note: Is not the sense of Tertullian rather, if guilty of any other offence, he had thereby ceased to be a Christian?--M.]

[Footnote 841: And this blamelessness was fully admitted by the candid and enlightened Roman.--M.]

[Footnote 85: Tertullian, Apolog. c. 44. He adds, however, with some degree of hesitation, "Aut si aliud, jam non Christianus." * Note: Tertullian says positively no Christian, nemo illic Christianus; for the rest, the limitation which he himself subjoins, and which Gibbon quotes in the foregoing note, diminishes the force of this assertion, and appears to prove that at least he knew none such.--G.]

[Footnote 86: The philosopher Peregrinus (of whose life and death Lucian has left us so entertaining an account) imposed, for a long time, on the credulous simplicity of the Christians of Asia.]

It is a very honorable circumstance for the morals of the primitive Christians, that even their faults, or rather errors, were derived from an excess of virtue. The bishops and doctors of the church, whose evidence attests, and whose authority might influence, the professions, the principles, and even the practice of their contemporaries, had

studied the Scriptures with less skill than devotion; and they often received, in the most literal sense, those rigid precepts of Christ and the apostles, to which the prudence of succeeding commentators has applied a looser and more figurative mode of interpretation. Ambitious to exalt the perfection of the gospel above the wisdom of philosophy, the zealous fathers have carried the duties of self-mortification, of purity, and of patience, to a height which it is scarcely possible to attain, and much less to preserve, in our present state of weakness and corruption. A doctrine so extraordinary and so sublime must inevitably command the veneration of the people; but it was ill calculated to obtain the suffrage of those worldly philosophers, who, in the conduct of this transitory life, consult only the feelings of nature and the interest of society. [87]

[Footnote 87: See a very judicious treatise of Barbeyrac sur la Morale des Peres.]

There are two very natural propensities which we may distinguish in the most virtuous and liberal dispositions, the love of pleasure and the love of action. If the former is refined by art and learning, improved by the charms of social intercourse, and corrected by a just regard to economy, to health, and to reputation, it is productive of the greatest part of the happiness of private life. The love of action is a principle of a much stronger and more doubtful nature. It often leads to anger, to ambition, and to revenge; but when it is guided by the sense of propriety and benevolence, it becomes the parent of every virtue, and if

those virtues are accompanied with equal abilities, a family, a state, or an empire, may be indebted for their safety and prosperity to the undaunted courage of a single man. To the love of pleasure we may therefore ascribe most of the agreeable, to the love of action we may attribute most of the useful and respectable, qualifications. The character in which both the one and the other should be united and harmonized, would seem to constitute the most perfect idea of human nature. The insensible and inactive disposition, which should be supposed alike destitute of both, would be rejected, by the common consent of mankind, as utterly incapable of procuring any happiness to the individual, or any public benefit to the world. But it was not in this world, that the primitive Christians were desirous of making themselves either agreeable or useful. [*871]

[Footnote 871: Et que me fait cette homelie semi-stoicienne, semi-epicurienne? t'on jamais regarde l'amour du plaisir comme l'un des principes de la perfection morale? Et de quel droit faites vous de l'amour de l'action, et de l'amour du plaisir, les seuls elemens de l'etre humain? Est ce que vous faites abstraction de la verite en elle-meme, de la conscience et du sentiment du devoir? Est ce que vous ne sentez point, par exemple, que le sacrifice du moi a la justice et a la verite, est aussi dans le coeur de l'homme: que tout n'est pas pour lui action ou plaisir, et que dans le bien ce n'est pas le mouvement, mais la verite, qu'il cherche? Et puis * * Thucy dide et Tacite. ces maitres de l'histoire, ont ils jamais introduits dans leur recits un fragment de dissertation sur le plaisir et sur l'action. Villemain Cours de Lit.

Franc part ii. Lecon v.--M.]

The acquisition of knowledge, the exercise of our reason or fancy, and the cheerful flow of unguarded conversation, may employ the leisure of a liberal mind. Such amusements, however, were rejected with abhorrence, or admitted with the utmost caution, by the severity of the fathers, who despised all knowledge that was not useful to salvation, and who considered all levity of discours eas a criminal abuse of the gift of speech. In our present state of existence the body is so inseparably connected with the soul, that it seems to be our interest to taste, with innocence and moderation, the enjoyments of which that faithful companion is susceptible. Very different was the reasoning of our devout predecessors; vainly aspiring to imitate the perfection of angels, they disdained, or they affected to disdain, every earthly and corporeal delight. [88] Some of our senses indeed are necessary for our preservation, others for our subsistence, and others again for our information; and thus far it was impossible to reject the use of them. The first sensation of pleasure was marked as the first moment of their abuse. The unfeeling candidate for heaven was instructed, not only to resist the grosser allurements of the taste or smell, but even to shut his ears against the profane harmony of sounds, and to view with indifference the most finished productions of human art. Gay apparel, magnificent houses, and elegant furniture, were supposed to unite the double guilt of pride and of sensuality; a simple and mortified appearance was more suitable to the Christian who was certain of his sins and doubtful of his salvation. In their censures of luxury, the

fathers are extremely minute and circumstantial; [89] and among the various articles which excite their pious indignation, we may enumerate false hair, garments of any color except white, instruments of music, vases of gold or silver, downy pillows, (as Jacob reposed his head on a stone,) white bread, foreign wines, public salutations, the use of warm baths, and the practice of shaving the beard, which, according to the expression of Tertullian, is a lie against our own faces, and an impious attempt to improve the works of the Creator. [90] When Christianity was introduced among the rich and the polite, the observation of these singular laws was left, as it would be at present, to the few who were ambitious of superior sanctity. But it is always easy, as well as agreeable, for the inferior ranks of mankind to claim a merit from the contempt of that pomp and pleasure which fortune has placed beyond their reach. The virtue of the primitive Christians, like that of the first Romans, was very frequently guarded by poverty and ignorance.

[Footnote 88: Lactant. Institut. Divin. 1. vi. c. 20, 21, 22.]

[Footnote 89: Consult a work of Clemens of Alexandria, entitled The Paedagogue, which contains the rudiments of ethics, as they were taught in the most celebrated of the Christian schools.]

[Footnote 90: Tertullian, de Spectaculis, c. 23. Clemens Alexandrin. Paedagog. 1. iii. c. 8.]

The chaste severity of the fathers, in whatever related to the commerce

of the two sexes, flowed from the same principle; their abhorrence of every enjoyment which might gratify the sensual, and degrade the spiritual, nature of man. It was their favorite opinion, that if Adam had preserved his obedience to the Creator, he would have lived forever in a state of virgin purity, and that some harmless mode of vegetation might have peopled paradise with a race of innocent and immortal beings. [91] The use of marriage was permitted only to his fallen posterity, as a necessary expedient to continue the human species, and as a restraint, however imperfect, on the natural licentiousness of desire. The hesitation of the orthodox casuists on this interesting subject, betrays the perplexity of men, unwilling to approve an institution which they were compelled to tolerate. [92] The enumeration of the very whimsical laws, which they most circumstantially imposed on the marriage-bed, would force a smile from the young and a blush from the fair. It was their unanimous sentiment, that a first marriage was adequate to all the purposes of nature and of society. The sensual connection was refined into a resemblance of the mystic union of Christ with his church, and was pronounced to be indissoluble either by divorce or by death. The practice of second nuptials was branded with the name of a egal adultery; and the persons who were guilty of so scandalous an offence against Christian purity, were soon excluded from the honors, and even from the alms, of the church. [93] Since desire was imputed as a crime, and marriage was tolerated as a defect, it was consistent with the same principles to consider a state of celibacy as the nearest approach to the divine perfection. It was with the utmost difficulty that ancient Rome could support the institution of six vestals; [94] but the primitive

church was filled with a great number of persons of either sex, who had devoted themselves to the profession of perpetual chastity. [95] A few of these, among whom we may reckon the learned Origen, judged it the most prudent to disarm the tempter. [96] Some were insensible and some were invincible against the assaults of the flesh. Disdaining an ignominious flight, the virgins of the warm climate of Africa encountered the enemy in the closest engagement; they permitted priests and deacons to share their bed, and gloried amidst the flames in their unsullied purity. But insulted Nature sometimes vindicated her rights, and this new species of martyrdom served only to introduce a new scandal into the church. [97] Among the Christian ascetics, however, (a name which they soon acquired from their painful exercise,) many, as they were less presumptuous, were probably more successful. The loss of sensual pleasure was supplied and compensated by spiritual pride. Even the multitude of Pagans were inclined to estimate the merit of the sacrifice by its apparent difficulty; and it was in the praise of these chaste spouses of Christ that the fathers have poured forth the troubled stream of their eloquence. [98] Such are the early traces of monastic principles and institutions, which, in a subsequent age, have counterbalanced all the temporal advantages of Christianity. [99]

[Footnote 91: Beausobre, *Hist. Critique du Manicheisme*, l. vii. c.

3. Justin, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustin, &c., strongly incline to this opinion. Note: But these were Gnostic or Manichean opinions. Beausobre distinctly describes Augustine's bias to his recent escape from Manicheism; and adds that he afterwards changed his views.--M.]

[Footnote 92: Some of the Gnostic heretics were more consistent; they rejected the use of marriage.]

[Footnote 93: See a chain of tradition, from Justin Martyr to Jerome, in the *Morale des Peres*, c. iv. 6--26.]

[Footnote 94: See a very curious Dissertation on the Vestals, in the *Memoires de l'Academie des Inscriptions*, tom. iv. p. 161--227. Notwithstanding the honors and rewards which were bestowed on those virgins, it was difficult to procure a sufficient number; nor could the dread of the most horrible death always restrain their incontinence.]

[Footnote 95: *Cupiditatem procreandi aut unam scimus aut nullam*. Minutius Faelix, c. 31. Justin. *Apolog. Major*. Athenagoras in *Legat.* c. 28. Tertullian *de Cultu Foemin.* 1. ii.]

[Footnote 96: Eusebius, l. vi. 8. Before the fame of Origen had excited envy and persecution, this extraordinary action was rather admired than censured. As it was his general practice to allegorize Scripture, it seems unfortunate that in this instance only, he should have adopted the literal sense.]

[Footnote 97: Cyprian. *Epist.* 4, and Dodwell, *Dissertat. Cyprianic.* iii. Something like this rash attempt was long afterwards imputed to the founder of the order of Fontevrault. Bayle has amused himself and his

readers on that very delicate subject.]

[Footnote 98: Dupin (Bibliothèque Ecclesiastique, tom. i. p. 195) gives a particular account of the dialogue of the ten virgins, as it was composed by Methodius, Bishop of Tyre. The praises of virginity are excessive.]

[Footnote 99: The Ascetics (as early as the second century) made a public profession of mortifying their bodies, and of abstaining from the use of flesh and wine. Mosheim, p. 310.]

The Christians were not less averse to the business than to the pleasures of this world. The defence of our persons and property they knew not how to reconcile with the patient doctrine which enjoined an unlimited forgiveness of past injuries, and commanded them to invite the repetition of fresh insults. Their simplicity was offended by the use of oaths, by the pomp of magistracy, and by the active contention of public life; nor could their humane ignorance be convinced that it was lawful on any occasion to shed the blood of our fellow-creatures, either by the sword of justice, or by that of war; even though their criminal or hostile attempts should threaten the peace and safety of the whole community. [100] It was acknowledged, that, under a less perfect law, the powers of the Jewish constitution had been exercised, with the approbation of Heaven, by inspired prophets and by anointed kings. The Christians felt and confessed that such institutions might be necessary for the present system of the world, and they cheerfully submitted to

the authority of their Pagan governors. But while they inculcated the maxims of passive obedience, they refused to take any active part in the civil administration or the military defence of the empire. Some indulgence might, perhaps, be allowed to those persons who, before their conversion, were already engaged in such violent and sanguinary occupations; [101] but it was impossible that the Christians, without renouncing a more sacred duty, could assume the character of soldiers, of magistrates, or of princes. [102] This indolent, or even criminal disregard to the public welfare, exposed them to the contempt and reproaches of the Pagans who very frequently asked, what must be the fate of the empire, attacked on every side by the barbarians, if all mankind should adopt the pusillanimous sentiments of the new sect. [103] To this insulting question the Christian apologists returned obscure and ambiguous answers, as they were unwilling to reveal the secret cause of their security; the expectation that, before the conversion of mankind was accomplished, war, government, the Roman empire, and the world itself, would be no more. It may be observed, that, in this instance likewise, the situation of the first Christians coincided very happily with their religious scruples, and that their aversion to an active life contributed rather to excuse them from the service, than to exclude them from the honors, of the state and army.

[Footnote 100: See the *Morale des Peres*. The same patient principles have been revived since the Reformation by the Socinians, the modern Anabaptists, and the Quakers. Barclay, the Apologist of the Quakers, has protected his brethren by the authority of the primitive Christian; p.

542-549]

[Footnote 101: Tertullian, Apolog. c. 21. De Idololatria, c. 17, 18.

Origen contra Celsum, l. v. p. 253, l. vii. p. 348, l. viii.

p. 423-428.]

[Footnote 102: Tertullian (de Corona Militis, c. 11) suggested to them the expedient of deserting; a counsel which, if it had been generally known, was not very proper to conciliate the favor of the emperors towards the Christian sect. * Note: There is nothing which ought to astonish us in the refusal of the primitive Christians to take part in public affairs; it was the natural consequence of the contrariety of their principles to the customs, laws, and active life of the Pagan world. As Christians, they could not enter into the senate, which, according to Gibbon himself, always assembled in a temple or consecrated place, and where each senator, before he took his seat, made a libation of a few drops of wine, and burnt incense on the altar; as Christians, they could not assist at festivals and banquets, which always terminated with libations, &c.; finally, as "the innumerable deities and rites of polytheism were closely interwoven with every circumstance of public and private life," the Christians could not participate in them without incurring, according to their principles, the guilt of impiety. It was then much less by an effect of their doctrine, than by the consequence of their situation, that they stood aloof from public business. Whenever this situation offered no impediment, they showed as much activity as the Pagans. Proinde, says

Justin Martyr, (Apol. c. 17,) nos solum Deum adoramus, et vobis in rebus aliis laeti inservimus.--G. -----This latter passage, M. Guizot quotes in Latin; if he had consulted the original, he would have found it to be altogether irrelevant: it merely relates to the payment of taxes.--M. -- --Tertullian does not suggest to the soldiers the expedient of deserting; he says that they ought to be constantly on their guard to do nothing during their service contrary to the law of God, and to resolve to suffer martyrdom rather than submit to a base compliance, or openly to renounce the service. (De Cor. Mil. ii. p. 127.) He does not positively decide that the military service is not permitted to Christians; he ends, indeed, by saying, Puta denique licere militiam usque ad causam coronae.--G. ----M. Guizot is. I think, again unfortunate in his defence of Tertullian. That father says, that many Christian soldiers had deserted, aut deserendum statim sit, ut a multis actum. The latter sentence, Puta, &c, &c., is a concession for the sake of argument: what follows is more to the purpose.--M. Many other passages of Tertullian prove that the army was full of Christians, Hesterni sumus et vestra omnia implevimus, urbes, insulas, castella, municipia, conciliabula, castra ipsa. (Apol. c. 37.) Navigamus et not vobiscum et militamus. (c. 42.) Origen, in truth, appears to have maintained a more rigid opinion, (Cont. Cels. l. viii. ;) but he has often renounced this exaggerated severity, perhaps necessary to produce great results, and he speaks of the profession of arms as an honorable one. (l. iv. c. 218.)--G. ----On these points Christian opinion, it should seem, was much divided Tertullian, when he wrote the De Cor. Mil., was evidently inclining to more ascetic opinions, and Origen was of the same class.

See Neander, vol. 1 part ii. p. 305, edit. 1828.--M.]

[Footnote 103: As well as we can judge from the mutilated representation of Origen, (1. viii. p. 423,) his adversary, Celsus, had urged his objection with great force and candor.]