

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

The rich provinces that extend from the Euphrates to the Ionian Sea, were the principal theatre on which the apostle of the Gentiles displayed his zeal and piety. The seeds of the gospel, which he had scattered in a fertile soil, were diligently cultivated by his disciples; and it should seem that, during the two first centuries, the most considerable body of Christians was contained within those limits. Among the societies which were instituted in Syria, none were more ancient or more illustrious than those of Damascus, of Berea or Aleppo, and of Antioch. The prophetic introduction of the Apocalypse has described and immortalized the seven churches of Asia; Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamus, Thyatira, [154] Sardes, Laodicea and Philadelphia; and their colonies were soon diffused over that populous country. In a very early period, the islands of Cyprus and Crete, the provinces of Thrace and Macedonia, gave a favorable reception to the new religion; and Christian republics were soon founded in the cities of Corinth, of Sparta, and of Athens. [155] The antiquity of the Greek and Asiatic churches allowed a sufficient space of time for their increase and multiplication; and even the swarms of Gnostics and other heretics serve to display the flourishing condition of the orthodox church, since the appellation of hereties has always been applied to the less numerous party. To these domestic testimonies we may add the confession, the complaints, and the apprehensions of the Gentiles themselves. From the writings of Lucian, a philosopher who had studied mankind, and who describes their manners in the most lively colors, we may learn that, under the reign of Commodus,

his native country of Pontus was filled with Epicureans and Christians. [156] Within fourscore years after the death of Christ, [157] the humane Pliny laments the magnitude of the evil which he vainly attempted to eradicate. In his very curious epistle to the emperor Trajan, he affirms, that the temples were almost deserted, that the sacred victims scarcely found any purchasers, and that the superstition had not only infected the cities, but had even spread itself into the villages and the open country of Pontus and Bithynia. [158]

[Footnote 154: The Alogians (Epiphanius de Haeres. 51) disputed the genuineness of the Apocalypse, because the church of Thyatira was not yet founded. Epiphanius, who allows the fact, extricates himself from the difficulty by ingeniously supposing that St. John wrote in the spirit of prophecy. See Abauzit, Discours sur l'Apocalypse.]

[Footnote 155: The epistles of Ignatius and Dionysius (ap. Euseb. iv. 23) point out many churches in Asia and Greece. That of Athens seems to have been one of the least flourishing.]

[Footnote 156: Lucian in Alexandro, c. 25. Christianity however, must have been very unequally diffused over Pontus; since, in the middle of the third century, there was no more than seventeen believers in the extensive diocese of Neo-Caesarea. See M. de Tillemont, Memoires Ecclesiast. tom. iv. p. 675, from Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, who were themselves natives of Cappadocia. Note: Gibbon forgot the conclusion of this story, that Gregory left only seventeen heathens in his diocese.

The antithesis is suspicious, and both numbers may have been chosen to magnify the spiritual fame of the wonder-worker.--M.]

[Footnote 157: According to the ancients, Jesus Christ suffered under the consulship of the two Gemini, in the year 29 of our present aera. Pliny was sent into Bithynia (according to Pagi) in the year 110.]

[Footnote 158: Plin. Epist. x. 97.]

Without descending into a minute scrutiny of the expressions or of the motives of those writers who either celebrate or lament the progress of Christianity in the East, it may in general be observed, that none of them have left us any grounds from whence a just estimate might be formed of the real numbers of the faithful in those provinces. One circumstance, however, has been fortunately preserved, which seems to cast a more distinct light on this obscure but interesting subject.

Under the reign of Theodosius, after Christianity had enjoyed, during more than sixty years, the sunshine of Imperial favor, the ancient and illustrious church of Antioch consisted of one hundred thousand persons, three thousand of whom were supported out of the public oblations. [159] The splendor and dignity of the queen of the East, the acknowledged populousness of Caesarea, Seleucia, and Alexandria, and the destruction of two hundred and fifty thousand souls in the earthquake which afflicted Antioch under the elder Justin, [160] are so many convincing proofs that the whole number of its inhabitants was not less than half a million, and that the Christians, however multiplied by zeal and

power, did not exceed a fifth part of that great city. How different a proportion must we adopt when we compare the persecuted with the triumphant church, the West with the East, remote villages with populous towns, and countries recently converted to the faith with the place where the believers first received the appellation of Christians! It must not, however, be dissembled, that, in another passage, Chrysostom, to whom we are indebted for this useful information, computes the multitude of the faithful as even superior to that of the Jews and Pagans. [161] But the solution of this apparent difficulty is easy and obvious. The eloquent preacher draws a parallel between the civil and the ecclesiastical constitution of Antioch; between the list of Christians who had acquired heaven by baptism, and the list of citizens who had a right to share the public liberality. Slaves, strangers, and infants were comprised in the former; they were excluded from the latter.

[Footnote 159: Chrysostom. Opera, tom. vii. p. 658, 810, (edit. Savil. ii. 422, 329.)]

[Footnote 160: John Malala, tom. ii. p. 144. He draws the same conclusion with regard to the populousness of antioch.]

[Footnote 161: Chrysostom. tom. i. p. 592. I am indebted for these passages, though not for my inference, to the learned Dr. Lardner. Credibility of the Gospel of History, vol. xii. p. 370. * Note: The statements of Chrysostom with regard to the population of Antioch,

whatever may be their accuracy, are perfectly consistent. In one passage he reckons the population at 200,000. In a second the Christians at 100,000. In a third he states that the Christians formed more than half the population. Gibbon has neglected to notice the first passage, and has drawn by estimate of the population of Antioch from other sources. The 8000 maintained by alms were widows and virgins alone--M.]

The extensive commerce of Alexandria, and its proximity to Palestine, gave an easy entrance to the new religion. It was at first embraced by great numbers of the Therapeutae, or Essenians, of the Lake Mareotis, a Jewish sect which had abated much of its reverence for the Mosaic ceremonies. The austere life of the Essenians, their fasts and excommunications, the community of goods, the love of celibacy, their zeal for martyrdom, and the warmth though not the purity of their faith, already offered a very lively image of the primitive discipline. [162] It was in the school of Alexandria that the Christian theology appears to have assumed a regular and scientific form; and when Hadrian visited Egypt, he found a church composed of Jews and of Greeks, sufficiently important to attract the notice of that inquisitive prince. [163] But the progress of Christianity was for a long time confined within the limits of a single city, which was itself a foreign colony, and till the close of the second century the predecessors of Demetrius were the only prelates of the Egyptian church. Three bishops were consecrated by the hands of Demetrius, and the number was increased to twenty by his successor Heraclas. [164] The body of the natives, a people distinguished by a sullen inflexibility of temper, [165] entertained the new doctrine

with coldness and reluctance; and even in the time of Origen, it was rare to meet with an Egyptian who had surmounted his early prejudices in favor of the sacred animals of his country. [166] As soon, indeed, as Christianity ascended the throne, the zeal of those barbarians obeyed the prevailing impulsion; the cities of Egypt were filled with bishops, and the deserts of Thebais swarmed with hermits.

[Footnote 162: Basnage, *Histoire des Juifs*, l. 2, c. 20, 21, 22, 23, has examined with the most critical accuracy the curious treatise of Philo, which describes the Therapeutae. By proving that it was composed as early as the time of Augustus, Basnage has demonstrated, in spite of Eusebius (l. ii. c. 17) and a crowd of modern Catholics, that the Therapeutae were neither Christians nor monks. It still remains probable that they changed their name, preserved their manners, adopted some new articles of faith, and gradually became the fathers of the Egyptian Ascetics.]

[Footnote 163: See a letter of Hadrian in the *Augustan History*, p. 245.]

[Footnote 164: For the succession of Alexandrian bishops, consult Renaudot's *History*, p. 24, &c. This curious fact is preserved by the patriarch Eutychius, (*Annal.* tom. i. p. 334, Vers. Pocock,) and its internal evidence would alone be a sufficient answer to all the objections which Bishop Pearson has urged in the *Vindiciae Ignatianae*.]

[Footnote 165: Ammian. Marcellin. xxii. 16.]

[Footnote 166: Origen contra Celsum, l. i. p. 40.]

A perpetual stream of strangers and provincials flowed into the capacious bosom of Rome. Whatever was strange or odious, whoever was guilty or suspected, might hope, in the obscurity of that immense capital, to elude the vigilance of the law. In such a various conflux of nations, every teacher, either of truth or falsehood, every founder, whether of a virtuous or a criminal association, might easily multiply his disciples or accomplices. The Christians of Rome, at the time of the accidental persecution of Nero, are represented by Tacitus as already amounting to a very great multitude, [167] and the language of that great historian is almost similar to the style employed by Livy, when he relates the introduction and the suppression of the rites of Bacchus. After the Bacchanals had awakened the severity of the senate, it was likewise apprehended that a very great multitude, as it were another people, had been initiated into those abhorred mysteries. A more careful inquiry soon demonstrated, that the offenders did not exceed seven thousand; a number indeed sufficiently alarming, when considered as the object of public justice. [168] It is with the same candid allowance that we should interpret the vague expressions of Tacitus, and in a former instance of Pliny, when they exaggerate the crowds of deluded fanatics who had forsaken the established worship of the gods. The church of Rome was undoubtedly the first and most populous of the empire; and we are possessed of an authentic record which attests the state of religion in

that city about the middle of the third century, and after a peace of thirty-eight years. The clergy, at that time, consisted of a bishop, forty-six presbyters, seven deacons, as many sub-deacons, forty-two acolythes, and fifty readers, exorcists, and porters. The number of widows, of the infirm, and of the poor, who were maintained by the oblations of the faithful, amounted to fifteen hundred. [169] From reason, as well as from the analogy of Antioch, we may venture to estimate the Christians of Rome at about fifty thousand. The populousness of that great capital cannot perhaps be exactly ascertained; but the most modest calculation will not surely reduce it lower than a million of inhabitants, of whom the Christians might constitute at the most a twentieth part. [170]

[Footnote 167: *Ingens multitudo* is the expression of Tacitus, xv. 44.]

[Footnote 168: T. Liv. xxxix. 13, 15, 16, 17. Nothing could exceed the horror and consternation of the senate on the discovery of the Bacchanalians, whose depravity is described, and perhaps exaggerated, by Livy.]

[Footnote 169: Eusebius, l. vi. c. 43. The Latin translator (M. de Valois) has thought proper to reduce the number of presbyters to forty-four.]

[Footnote 170: This proportion of the presbyters and of the poor, to the rest of the people, was originally fixed by Burnet,

(Travels into Italy, p. 168,) and is approved by Moyle, (vol. ii. p. 151.) They were both unacquainted with the passage of Chrysostom, which converts their conjecture almost into a fact.]

The western provincials appeared to have derived the knowledge of Christianity from the same source which had diffused among them the language, the sentiments, and the manners of Rome.

In this more important circumstance, Africa, as well as Gaul, was gradually fashioned to the imitation of the capital. Yet notwithstanding the many favorable occasions which might invite the Roman missionaries to visit their Latin provinces, it was late before they passed either the sea or the Alps; [171] nor can we discover in those great countries any assured traces either of faith or of persecution that ascend higher than the reign of the Antonines. [172] The slow progress of the gospel in the cold climate of Gaul, was extremely different from the eagerness with which it seems to have been received on the burning sands of Africa. The African Christians soon formed one of the principal members of the primitive church. The practice introduced into that province of appointing bishops to the most inconsiderable towns, and very frequently to the most obscure villages, contributed to multiply the splendor and importance of their religious societies, which during the course of the third century were animated by the zeal of Tertullian, directed by the abilities of Cyprian, and adorned by the eloquence of Lactantius.

But if, on the contrary, we turn our eyes towards Gaul, we must content

ourselves with discovering, in the time of Marcus Antoninus, the feeble and united congregations of Lyons and Vienna; and even as late as the reign of Decius, we are assured, that in a few cities only, Arles, Narbonne, Thoulouse, Limoges, Clermont, Tours, and Paris, some scattered churches were supported by the devotion of a small number of Christians. [173] Silence is indeed very consistent with devotion; but as it is seldom compatible with zeal, we may perceive and lament the languid state of Christianity in those provinces which had exchanged the Celtic for the Latin tongue, since they did not, during the three first centuries, give birth to a single ecclesiastical writer. From Gaul, which claimed a just preeminence of learning and authority over all the countries on this side of the Alps, the light of the gospel was more faintly reflected on the remote provinces of Spain and Britain; and if we may credit the vehement assertions of Tertullian, they had already received the first rays of the faith, when he addressed his apology to the magistrates of the emperor Severus. [174] But the obscure and imperfect origin of the western churches of Europe has been so negligently recorded, that if we would relate the time and manner of their foundation, we must supply the silence of antiquity by those legends which avarice or superstition long afterwards dictated to the monks in the lazy gloom of their convents. [175] Of these holy romances, that of the apostle St. James can alone, by its singular extravagance, deserve to be mentioned. From a peaceful fisherman of the Lake of Gennesareth, he was transformed into a valorous knight, who charged at the head of the Spanish chivalry in their battles against the Moors. The gravest historians have celebrated his exploits; the miraculous shrine

of Compostella displayed his power; and the sword of a military order, assisted by the terrors of the Inquisition, was sufficient to remove every objection of profane criticism. [176]

[Footnote 171: *Serius trans Alpes, religione Dei suscepta.* Sulpicius Severus, l. ii. With regard to Africa, see Tertullian *ad Scapulam*, c. 3. It is imagined that the Scyllitan martyrs were the first, (*Acta Sincera* Rumart. p. 34.) One of the adversaries of Apuleius seems to have been a Christian. *Apolog.* p. 496, 497, edit. Delphin.]

[Footnote 172: *Tum primum intra Gallias martyria visa.* Sulp. Severus, l. ii. These were the celebrated martyrs of Lyons. See Eusebius, v. i. Tillemont, *Mem. Ecclesiast.* tom. ii. p. 316. According to the Donatists, whose assertion is confirmed by the tacit acknowledgment of Augustin, Africa was the last of the provinces which received the gospel. Tillemont, *Mem. Ecclesiast.* tom. i. p. 754.]

[Footnote 173: *Raræ in aliquibus civitatibus ecclesiae, paucorum Christianorum devotione, resurgerent.* *Acta Sincera*, p. 130. Gregory of Tours, l i. c. 28. Mosheim, p. 207, 449. There is some reason to believe that in the beginning of the fourth century, the extensive dioceses of Liege, of Treves, and of Cologne, composed a single bishopric, which had been very recently founded. See *Memoires de Tillemont*, tom vi. part i. p. 43, 411.]

[Footnote 174: The date of Tertullian's Apology is fixed, in a

dissertation of Mosheim, to the year 198.]

[Footnote 175: In the fifteenth century, there were few who had either inclination or courage to question, whether Joseph of Arimathea founded the monastery of Glastonbury, and whether Dionysius the Areopagite preferred the residence of Paris to that of Athens.]

[Footnote 176: The stupendous metamorphosis was performed in the ninth century. See Mariana, (Hist. Hispan. l. vii. c. 13, tom. i. p. 285, edit. Hag. Com. 1733,) who, in every sense, imitates Livy, and the honest detection of the legend of St. James by Dr. Geddes, Miscellanies, vol. ii. p. 221.]

The progress of Christianity was not confined to the Roman empire; and according to the primitive fathers, who interpret facts by prophecy, the new religion, within a century after the death of its divine Author, had already visited every part of the globe. "There exists not," says Justin Martyr, "a people, whether Greek or Barbarian, or any other race of men, by whatsoever appellation or manners they may be distinguished, however ignorant of arts or agriculture, whether they dwell under tents, or wander about in covered wagons, among whom prayers are not offered up in the name of a crucified Jesus to the Father and Creator of all things."

[177] But this splendid exaggeration, which even at present it would be extremely difficult to reconcile with the real state of mankind, can be considered only as the rash sally of a devout but careless writer, the measure of whose belief was regulated by that of his wishes. But neither

the belief nor the wishes of the fathers can alter the truth of history. It will still remain an undoubted fact, that the barbarians of Scythia and Germany, who afterwards subverted the Roman monarchy, were involved in the darkness of paganism; and that even the conversion of Iberia, of Armenia, or of Aethiopia, was not attempted with any degree of success till the sceptre was in the hands of an orthodox emperor. [178] Before that time, the various accidents of war and commerce might indeed diffuse an imperfect knowledge of the gospel among the tribes of Caledonia, [179] and among the borderers of the Rhine, the Danube, and the Euphrates. [180] Beyond the last-mentioned river, Edessa was distinguished by a firm and early adherence to the faith. [181] From Edessa the principles of Christianity were easily introduced into the Greek and Syrian cities which obeyed the successors of Artaxerxes; but they do not appear to have made any deep impression on the minds of the Persians, whose religious system, by the labors of a well disciplined order of priests, had been constructed with much more art and solidity than the uncertain mythology of Greece and Rome. [182]

[Footnote 177: Justin Martyr, *Dialog. cum Tryphon.* p. 341. Irenaeus *adv. Haeres.* 1. i. c. 10. Tertullian *adv. Jud.* c. 7. See Mosheim, p. 203.]

[Footnote 178: See the fourth century of Mosheim's *History of the Church.* Many, though very confused circumstances, that relate to the conversion of Iberia and Armenia, may be found in Moses of Chorene, 1. ii. c. 78--89. Note: Mons. St. Martin has shown that Armenia was the first nation that embraced Christianity. *Memoires sur l'Armenie*, vol. i.

p. 306, and notes to Le Beae. Gibbon, indeed had expressed his intention of withdrawing the words "of Armenia" from the text of future editions. (Vindication, Works, iv. 577.) He was bitterly taunted by Person for neglecting or declining to fulfil his promise. Preface to Letters to Travis.--M.]

[Footnote 179: According to Tertullian, the Christian faith had penetrated into parts of Britain inaccessible to the Roman arms. About a century afterwards, Ossian, the son of Fingal, is said to have disputed, in his extreme old age, with one of the foreign missionaries, and the dispute is still extant, in verse, and in the Erse language. See Mr. Macpher son's Dissertation on the Antiquity of Ossian's Poems, p. 10.]

[Footnote 180: The Goths, who ravaged Asia in the reign of Gallienus, carried away great numbers of captives; some of whom were Christians, and became missionaries. See Tillemont, Memoires Ecclesiast. tom. iv. p. 44.]

[Footnote 181: The legends of Abgarus, fabulous as it is, affords a decisive proof, that many years before Eusebius wrote his history, the greatest part of the inhabitants of Edessa had embraced Christianity. Their rivals, the citizens of Carrhae, adhered, on the contrary, to the cause of Paganism, as late as the sixth century.]

[Footnote 182: According to Bardesanes (ap. Euseb. Praepar. Evangel.) there were some Christians in Persia before the end of the second

century. In the time of Constantine (see his epistle to Sapor, Vit. 1. iv. c. 13) they composed a flourishing church. Consult Beausobre, *Hist. Critique du Manicheisme*, tom. i. p. 180, and the *Bibliotheca Orientalis* of Assemani.]