

Chapter XXI: Persecution Of Heresy, State Of The Church.--Part I.

Persecution Of Heresy.--The Schism Of The Donatists.--The Arian Controversy.--Athanasius.--Distracted State Of The Church And Empire Under Constantine And His Sons.--Toleration Of Paganism.

The grateful applause of the clergy has consecrated the memory of a prince who indulged their passions and promoted their interest. Constantine gave them security, wealth, honors, and revenge; and the support of the orthodox faith was considered as the most sacred and important duty of the civil magistrate. The edict of Milan, the great charter of toleration, had confirmed to each individual of the Roman world the privilege of choosing and professing his own religion. But this inestimable privilege was soon violated; with the knowledge of truth, the emperor imbibed the maxims of persecution; and the sects which dissented from the Catholic church were afflicted and oppressed by the triumph of Christianity. Constantine easily believed that the Heretics, who presumed to dispute his opinions, or to oppose his commands, were guilty of the most absurd and criminal obstinacy; and that a seasonable application of moderate severities might save those unhappy men from the danger of an everlasting condemnation. Not a moment was lost in excluding the ministers and teachers of the separated congregations from any share of the rewards and immunities which the emperor had so liberally bestowed on the orthodox clergy. But as the sectaries might still exist under the cloud of royal disgrace, the conquest of the East was immediately followed by an edict which

announced their total destruction. [1] After a preamble filled with passion and reproach, Constantine absolutely prohibits the assemblies of the Heretics, and confiscates their public property to the use either of the revenue or of the Catholic church. The sects against whom the Imperial severity was directed, appear to have been the adherents of Paul of Samosata; the Montanists of Phrygia, who maintained an enthusiastic succession of prophecy; the Novatians, who sternly rejected the temporal efficacy of repentance; the Marcionites and Valentinians, under whose leading banners the various Gnostics of Asia and Egypt had insensibly rallied; and perhaps the Manichaeans, who had recently imported from Persia a more artful composition of Oriental and Christian theology. [2] The design of extirpating the name, or at least of restraining the progress, of these odious Heretics, was prosecuted with vigor and effect. Some of the penal regulations were copied from the edicts of Diocletian; and this method of conversion was applauded by the same bishops who had felt the hand of oppression, and pleaded for the rights of humanity. Two immaterial circumstances may serve, however, to prove that the mind of Constantine was not entirely corrupted by the spirit of zeal and bigotry. Before he condemned the Manichaeans and their kindred sects, he resolved to make an accurate inquiry into the nature of their religious principles. As if he distrusted the impartiality of his ecclesiastical counsellors, this delicate commission was intrusted to a civil magistrate, whose learning and moderation he justly esteemed, and of whose venal character he was probably ignorant. [3] The emperor was soon convinced, that he had too hastily proscribed the orthodox faith and the exemplary morals of the Novatians, who had

dissented from the church in some articles of discipline which were not perhaps essential to salvation. By a particular edict, he exempted them from the general penalties of the law; [4] allowed them to build a church at Constantinople, respected the miracles of their saints, invited their bishop Acesius to the council of Nice; and gently ridiculed the narrow tenets of his sect by a familiar jest; which, from the mouth of a sovereign, must have been received with applause and gratitude. [5]

[Footnote 1: Eusebius in Vit. Constantin. l. iii. c. 63, 64, 65, 66.]

[Footnote 2: After some examination of the various opinions of Tillemont, Beausobre, Lardner, &c., I am convinced that Manes did not propagate his sect, even in Persia, before the year 270. It is strange, that a philosophic and foreign heresy should have penetrated so rapidly into the African provinces; yet I cannot easily reject the edict of Diocletian against the Manichaeans, which may be found in Baronius. (Annal Eccl. A. D. 287.)]

[Footnote 3: Constantinus enim, cum limatius superstitionum quaeroret sectas, Manichaeorum et similium, &c. Ammian. xv. 15. Strategius, who from this commission obtained the surname of Musonianus, was a Christian of the Arian sect. He acted as one of the counts at the council of Sardica. Libanius praises his mildness and prudence. Vales. ad locum Ammian.]

[Footnote 4: Cod. Theod. 1. xvi. tit. 5, leg. 2. As the general law is not inserted in the Theodosian Code, it probable that, in the year 438, the sects which it had condemned were already extinct.]

[Footnote 5: Sozomen, 1. i. c. 22. Socrates, 1. i. c. 10. These historians have been suspected, but I think without reason, of an attachment to the Novatian doctrine. The emperor said to the bishop, "Acesius, take a ladder, and get up to heaven by yourself." Most of the Christian sects have, by turns, borrowed the ladder of Acesius.]

The complaints and mutual accusations which assailed the throne of Constantine, as soon as the death of Maxentius had submitted Africa to his victorious arms, were ill adapted to edify an imperfect proselyte. He learned, with surprise, that the provinces of that great country, from the confines of Cyrene to the columns of Hercules, were distracted with religious discord. [6] The source of the division was derived from a double election in the church of Carthage; the second, in rank and opulence, of the ecclesiastical thrones of the West. Caecilian and Majorinus were the two rival prelates of Africa; and the death of the latter soon made room for Donatus, who, by his superior abilities and apparent virtues, was the firmest support of his party. The advantage which Caecilian might claim from the priority of his ordination, was destroyed by the illegal, or at least indecent, haste, with which it had been performed, without expecting the arrival of the bishops of Numidia. The authority of these bishops, who, to the number of seventy, condemned Caecilian, and consecrated Majorinus, is again weakened by the infamy

of some of their personal characters; and by the female intrigues, sacrilegious bargains, and tumultuous proceedings, which are imputed to this Numidian council. [7] The bishops of the contending factions maintained, with equal ardor and obstinacy, that their adversaries were degraded, or at least dishonored, by the odious crime of delivering the Holy Scriptures to the officers of Diocletian. From their mutual reproaches, as well as from the story of this dark transaction, it may justly be inferred, that the late persecution had embittered the zeal, without reforming the manners, of the African Christians. That divided church was incapable of affording an impartial judicature; the controversy was solemnly tried in five successive tribunals, which were appointed by the emperor; and the whole proceeding, from the first appeal to the final sentence, lasted above three years. A severe inquisition, which was taken by the Praetorian vicar, and the proconsul of Africa, the report of two episcopal visitors who had been sent to Carthage, the decrees of the councils of Rome and of Arles, and the supreme judgment of Constantine himself in his sacred consistory, were all favorable to the cause of Caecilian; and he was unanimously acknowledged by the civil and ecclesiastical powers, as the true and lawful primate of Africa. The honors and estates of the church were attributed to his suffragan bishops, and it was not without difficulty, that Constantine was satisfied with inflicting the punishment of exile on the principal leaders of the Donatist faction. As their cause was examined with attention, perhaps it was determined with justice. Perhaps their complaint was not without foundation, that the credulity of the emperor had been abused by the insidious arts of his favorite Osius. The

influence of falsehood and corruption might procure the condemnation of the innocent, or aggravate the sentence of the guilty. Such an act, however, of injustice, if it concluded an importunate dispute, might be numbered among the transient evils of a despotic administration, which are neither felt nor remembered by posterity.

[Footnote 6: The best materials for this part of ecclesiastical history may be found in the edition of Optatus Milevitanus, published (Paris, 1700) by M. Dupin, who has enriched it with critical notes, geographical discussions, original records, and an accurate abridgment of the whole controversy. M. de Tillemont has bestowed on the Donatists the greatest part of a volume, (tom. vi. part i. ;) and I am indebted to him for an ample collection of all the passages of his favorite St. Augustin, which relate to those heretics.]

[Footnote 7: Schisma igitur illo tempore confusae mulieris iracundia peperit; ambitus nutrit; avaritia roboravit. Optatus, l. i. c. 19. The language of Purpurius is that of a furious madman. Dicitur te necasse lilios sororis tuae duos. Purpurius respondit: Putas me terreri a te.. occidi; et occido eos qui contra me faciunt. Acta Concil. Cirtenais, ad calc. Optat. p. 274. When Caecilian was invited to an assembly of bishops, Purpurius said to his brethren, or rather to his accomplices, "Let him come hither to receive our imposition of hands, and we will break his head by way of penance." Optat. l. i. c. 19.]

But this incident, so inconsiderable that it scarcely deserves a place

in history, was productive of a memorable schism which afflicted the provinces of Africa above three hundred years, and was extinguished only with Christianity itself. The inflexible zeal of freedom and fanaticism animated the Donatists to refuse obedience to the usurpers, whose election they disputed, and whose spiritual powers they denied. Excluded from the civil and religious communion of mankind, they boldly excommunicated the rest of mankind, who had embraced the impious party of Caecilian, and of the Traditors, from which he derived his pretended ordination. They asserted with confidence, and almost with exultation, that the Apostolical succession was interrupted; that all the bishops of Europe and Asia were infected by the contagion of guilt and schism; and that the prerogatives of the Catholic church were confined to the chosen portion of the African believers, who alone had preserved inviolate the integrity of their faith and discipline. This rigid theory was supported by the most uncharitable conduct. Whenever they acquired a proselyte, even from the distant provinces of the East, they carefully repeated the sacred rites of baptism [8] and ordination; as they rejected the validity of those which he had already received from the hands of heretics or schismatics. Bishops, virgins, and even spotless infants, were subjected to the disgrace of a public penance, before they could be admitted to the communion of the Donatists. If they obtained possession of a church which had been used by their Catholic adversaries, they purified the unhallowed building with the same zealous care which a temple of idols might have required. They washed the pavement, scraped the walls, burnt the altar, which was commonly of wood, melted the consecrated plate, and cast the Holy Eucharist to the dogs, with

every circumstance of ignominy which could provoke and perpetuate the animosity of religious factions. [9] Notwithstanding this irreconcilable aversion, the two parties, who were mixed and separated in all the cities of Africa, had the same language and manners, the same zeal and learning, the same faith and worship. Proscribed by the civil and ecclesiastical powers of the empire, the Donatists still maintained in some provinces, particularly in Numidia, their superior numbers; and four hundred bishops acknowledged the jurisdiction of their primate. But the invincible spirit of the sect sometimes preyed on its own vitals: and the bosom of their schismatical church was torn by intestine divisions. A fourth part of the Donatist bishops followed the independent standard of the Maximianists. The narrow and solitary path which their first leaders had marked out, continued to deviate from the great society of mankind. Even the imperceptible sect of the Rogatians could affirm, without a blush, that when Christ should descend to judge the earth, he would find his true religion preserved only in a few nameless villages of the Caesarean Mauritania. [10]

[Footnote 8: The councils of Arles, of Nice, and of Trent, confirmed the wise and moderate practice of the church of Rome. The Donatists, however, had the advantage of maintaining the sentiment of Cyprian, and of a considerable part of the primitive church. Vincentius Lirinensis (p. 532, ap. Tillemont, Mem. Eccles. tom. vi. p. 138) has explained why the Donatists are eternally burning with the Devil, while St. Cyprian reigns in heaven with Jesus Christ.]

[Footnote 9: See the sixth book of Optatus Milevitanus, p. 91-100.]

[Footnote 10: Tillemont, Mem. Ecclesiastiques, tom. vi. part i. p. 253.

He laughs at their partial credulity. He revered Augustin, the great doctor of the system of predestination.]

The schism of the Donatists was confined to Africa: the more diffusive mischief of the Trinitarian controversy successively penetrated into every part of the Christian world. The former was an accidental quarrel, occasioned by the abuse of freedom; the latter was a high and mysterious argument, derived from the abuse of philosophy. From the age of Constantine to that of Clovis and Theodoric, the temporal interests both of the Romans and Barbarians were deeply involved in the theological disputes of Arianism. The historian may therefore be permitted respectfully to withdraw the veil of the sanctuary; and to deduce the progress of reason and faith, of error and passion from the school of Plato, to the decline and fall of the empire.

The genius of Plato, informed by his own meditation, or by the traditional knowledge of the priests of Egypt, [11] had ventured to explore the mysterious nature of the Deity. When he had elevated his mind to the sublime contemplation of the first self-existent, necessary cause of the universe, the Athenian sage was incapable of conceiving how the simple unity of his essence could admit the infinite variety of distinct and successive ideas which compose the model of the intellectual world; how a Being purely incorporeal could execute that

perfect model, and mould with a plastic hand the rude and independent chaos. The vain hope of extricating himself from these difficulties, which must ever oppress the feeble powers of the human mind, might induce Plato to consider the divine nature under the threefold modification--of the first cause, the reason, or Logos, and the soul or spirit of the universe. His poetical imagination sometimes fixed and animated these metaphysical abstractions; the three archical or original principles were represented in the Platonic system as three Gods, united with each other by a mysterious and ineffable generation; and the Logos was particularly considered under the more accessible character of the Son of an Eternal Father, and the Creator and Governor of the world. Such appear to have been the secret doctrines which were cautiously whispered in the gardens of the academy; and which, according to the more recent disciples of Plato, [1 1a] could not be perfectly understood, till after an assiduous study of thirty years. [12]

[Footnote 11: Plato Aegyptum peragravit ut a sacerdotibus Barbaris numeros et coelestia acciperet. Cicero de Finibus, v. 25. The Egyptians might still preserve the traditional creed of the Patriarchs. Josephus has persuaded many of the Christian fathers, that Plato derived a part of his knowledge from the Jews; but this vain opinion cannot be reconciled with the obscure state and unsocial manners of the Jewish people, whose scriptures were not accessible to Greek curiosity till more than one hundred years after the death of Plato. See Marsham Canon. Chron. p. 144 Le Clerc, Epistol. Critic. vii. p. 177-194.]

[Footnote 11a: This exposition of the doctrine of Plato appears to me contrary to the true sense of that philosopher's writings. The brilliant imagination which he carried into metaphysical inquiries, his style, full of allegories and figures, have misled those interpreters who did not seek, from the whole tenor of his works and beyond the images which the writer employs, the system of this philosopher. In my opinion, there is no Trinity in Plato; he has established no mysterious generation between the three pretended principles which he is made to distinguish. Finally, he conceives only as attributes of the Deity, or of matter, those ideas, of which it is supposed that he made substances, real beings.----According to Plato, God and matter existed from all eternity. Before the creation of the world, matter had in itself a principle of motion, but without end or laws: it is this principle which Plato calls the irrational soul of the world, because, according to his doctrine, every spontaneous and original principle of motion is called soul. God wished to impress form upon matter, that is to say, 1. To mould matter, and make it into a body; 2. To regulate its motion, and subject it to some end and to certain laws. The Deity, in this operation, could not act but according to the ideas existing in his intelligence: their union filled this, and formed the ideal type of the world. It is this ideal world, this divine intelligence, existing with God from all eternity, and called by Plato which he is supposed to personify, to substantialize; while an attentive examination is sufficient to convince us that he has never assigned it an existence external to the Deity, (hors de la Divinite,) and that he considered the as the aggregate of the ideas of God, the divine understanding in its relation to the world.

The contrary opinion is irreconcilable with all his philosophy: thus he says that to the idea of the Deity is essentially united that of intelligence, of a logos. He would thus have admitted a double logos; one inherent in the Deity as an attribute, the other independently existing as a substance. He affirms that the intelligence, the principle of order cannot exist but as an attribute of a soul, the principle of motion and of life, of which the nature is unknown to us. How, then, according to this, could he consider the logos as a substance endowed with an independent existence? In other places, he explains it by these two words, knowledge, science, which signify the attributes of the Deity. When Plato separates God, the ideal archetype of the world and matter, it is to explain how, according to his system, God has proceeded, at the creation, to unite the principle of order which he had within himself, his proper intelligence, the principle of motion, to the principle of motion, the irrational soul which was in matter. When he speaks of the place occupied by the ideal world, it is to designate the divine intelligence, which is its cause. Finally, in no part of his writings do we find a true personification of the pretended beings of which he is said to have formed a trinity: and if this personification existed, it would equally apply to many other notions, of which might be formed many different trinities. This error, into which many ancient as well as modern interpreters of Plato have fallen, was very natural. Besides the snares which were concealed in his figurative style; besides the necessity of comprehending as a whole the system of his ideas, and not to explain isolated passages, the nature of his doctrine itself would conduce to this error. When Plato appeared, the uncertainty of

human knowledge, and the continual illusions of the senses, were acknowledged, and had given rise to a general scepticism. Socrates had aimed at raising morality above the influence of this scepticism: Plato endeavored to save metaphysics, by seeking in the human intellect a source of certainty which the senses could not furnish. He invented the system of innate ideas, of which the aggregate formed, according to him, the ideal world, and affirmed that these ideas were real attributes, not only attached to our conceptions of objects, but to the nature of the objects themselves; a nature of which from them we might obtain a knowledge. He gave, then, to these ideas a positive existence as attributes; his commentators could easily give them a real existence as substances; especially as the terms which he used to designate them, essential beauty, essential goodness, lent themselves to this substantialization, (hypostasis.)--G. ----We have retained this view of the original philosophy of Plato, in which there is probably much truth. The genius of Plato was rather metaphysical than impersonative: his poetry was in his language, rather than, like that of the Orientals, in his conceptions.--M.]

[Footnote 12: The modern guides who lead me to the knowledge of the Platonic system are Cudworth, Basnage, Le Clerc, and Brucker. As the learning of these writers was equal, and their intention different, an inquisitive observer may derive instruction from their disputes, and certainty from their agreement.]

The arms of the Macedonians diffused over Asia and Egypt the language

and learning of Greece; and the theological system of Plato was taught, with less reserve, and perhaps with some improvements, in the celebrated school of Alexandria. [13] A numerous colony of Jews had been invited, by the favor of the Ptolemies, to settle in their new capital. [14] While the bulk of the nation practised the legal ceremonies, and pursued the lucrative occupations of commerce, a few Hebrews, of a more liberal spirit, devoted their lives to religious and philosophical contemplation. [15] They cultivated with diligence, and embraced with ardor, the theological system of the Athenian sage. But their national pride would have been mortified by a fair confession of their former poverty: and they boldly marked, as the sacred inheritance of their ancestors, the gold and jewels which they had so lately stolen from their Egyptian masters. One hundred years before the birth of Christ, a philosophical treatise, which manifestly betrays the style and sentiments of the school of Plato, was produced by the Alexandrian Jews, and unanimously received as a genuine and valuable relic of the inspired Wisdom of Solomon. [16] A similar union of the Mosaic faith and the Grecian philosophy, distinguishes the works of Philo, which were composed, for the most part, under the reign of Augustus. [17] The material soul of the universe [18] might offend the piety of the Hebrews: but they applied the character of the Logos to the Jehovah of Moses and the patriarchs; and the Son of God was introduced upon earth under a visible, and even human appearance, to perform those familiar offices which seem incompatible with the nature and attributes of the Universal Cause. [19]

[Footnote 13: Brucker, Hist. Philosoph. tom. i. p. 1349-1357. The Alexandrian school is celebrated by Strabo (l. xvii.) and Ammianus, (xxii. 6.) Note: The philosophy of Plato was not the only source of that professed in the school of Alexandria. That city, in which Greek, Jewish, and Egyptian men of letters were assembled, was the scene of a strange fusion of the system of these three people. The Greeks brought a Platonism, already much changed; the Jews, who had acquired at Babylon a great number of Oriental notions, and whose theological opinions had undergone great changes by this intercourse, endeavored to reconcile Platonism with their new doctrine, and disfigured it entirely: lastly, the Egyptians, who were not willing to abandon notions for which the Greeks themselves entertained respect, endeavored on their side to reconcile their own with those of their neighbors. It is in Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon that we trace the influence of Oriental philosophy rather than that of Platonism. We find in these books, and in those of the later prophets, as in Ezekiel, notions unknown to the Jews before the Babylonian captivity, of which we do not discover the germ in Plato, but which are manifestly derived from the Orientals. Thus God represented under the image of light, and the principle of evil under that of darkness; the history of the good and bad angels; paradise and hell, &c., are doctrines of which the origin, or at least the positive determination, can only be referred to the Oriental philosophy. Plato supposed matter eternal; the Orientals and the Jews considered it as a creation of God, who alone was eternal. It is impossible to explain the philosophy of the Alexandrian school solely by the blending of the Jewish theology with the Greek philosophy. The

Oriental philosophy, however little it may be known, is recognized at every instant. Thus, according to the Zend Avesta, it is by the Word (however) more ancient than the world, that Ormuzd created the universe. This word is the logos of Philo, consequently very different from that of Plato. I have shown that Plato never personified the logos as the ideal archetype of the world: Philo ventured this personification. The Deity, according to him, has a double logos; the first is the ideal archetype of the world, the ideal world, the first-born of the Deity; the second is the word itself of God, personified under the image of a being acting to create the sensible world, and to make it like to the ideal world: it is the second-born of God. Following out his imaginations, Philo went so far as to personify anew the ideal world, under the image of a celestial man, the primitive type of man, and the sensible world under the image of another man less perfect than the celestial man. Certain notions of the Oriental philosophy may have given rise to this strange abuse of allegory, which it is sufficient to relate, to show what alterations Platonism had already undergone, and what was their source. Philo, moreover, of all the Jews of Alexandria, is the one whose Platonism is the most pure. It is from this mixture of Orientalism, Platonism, and Judaism, that Gnosticism arose, which had produced so many theological and philosophical extravagancies, and in which Oriental notions evidently predominate.--G.]

[Footnote 14: Joseph. Antiquitat, l. xii. c. 1, 3. Basnage, Hist. des Juifs, l. vii. c. 7.]

[Footnote 15: For the origin of the Jewish philosophy, see Eusebius, Praeparat. Evangel. viii. 9, 10. According to Philo, the Therapeutae studied philosophy; and Brucker has proved (Hist. Philosoph. tom. ii. p. 787) that they gave the preference to that of Plato.]

[Footnote 16: See Calmet, Dissertations sur la Bible, tom. ii. p. 277. The book of the Wisdom of Solomon was received by many of the fathers as the work of that monarch: and although rejected by the Protestants for want of a Hebrew original, it has obtained, with the rest of the Vulgate, the sanction of the council of Trent.]

[Footnote 17: The Platonism of Philo, which was famous to a proverb, is proved beyond a doubt by Le Clerc, (Epist. Crit. viii. p. 211-228.) Basnage (Hist. des Juifs, l. iv. c. 5) has clearly ascertained, that the theological works of Philo were composed before the death, and most probably before the birth, of Christ. In such a time of darkness, the knowledge of Philo is more astonishing than his errors. Bull, Defens. Fid. Nicen. s. i. c. i. p. 12.]

[Footnote 18: Mens agitatur molem, et magno se corpore miscet. Besides this material soul, Cudworth has discovered (p. 562) in Amelius, Porphyry, Plotinus, and, as he thinks, in Plato himself, a superior, spiritual upercosmian soul of the universe. But this double soul is exploded by Brucker, Basnage, and Le Clerc, as an idle fancy of the latter Platonists.]

[Footnote 19: Petav. Dogmata Theologica, tom. ii. l. viii. c. 2, p. 791. Bull, Defens. Fid. Nicen. s. i. c. l. p. 8, 13. This notion, till it was abused by the Arians, was freely adopted in the Christian theology. Tertullian (adv. Praxeam, c. 16) has a remarkable and dangerous passage. After contrasting, with indiscreet wit, the nature of God, and the actions of Jehovah, he concludes: Scilicet ut haec de filio Dei non credenda fuisse, si non scripta essent; fortasse non credenda de l'atre licet scripta. * Note: Tertullian is here arguing against the Patripassians; those who asserted that the Father was born of the Virgin, died and was buried.--M.]