

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

The eloquence of Plato, the name of Solomon, the authority of the school of Alexandria, and the consent of the Jews and Greeks, were insufficient to establish the truth of a mysterious doctrine, which might please, but could not satisfy, a rational mind. A prophet, or apostle, inspired by the Deity, can alone exercise a lawful dominion over the faith of mankind: and the theology of Plato might have been forever confounded with the philosophical visions of the Academy, the Porch, and the Lycaeum, if the name and divine attributes of the Logos had not been confirmed by the celestial pen of the last and most sublime of the Evangelists. [20] The Christian Revelation, which was consummated under the reign of Nerva, disclosed to the world the amazing secret, that the Logos, who was with God from the beginning, and was God, who had made all things, and for whom all things had been made, was incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth; who had been born of a virgin, and suffered death on the cross. Besides the general design of fixing on a perpetual basis the divine honors of Christ, the most ancient and respectable of the ecclesiastical writers have ascribed to the evangelic theologian a particular intention to confute two opposite heresies, which disturbed the peace of the primitive church. [21] I. The faith of the Ebionites, [22] perhaps of the Nazarenes, [23] was gross and imperfect. They revered Jesus as the greatest of the prophets, endowed with supernatural virtue and power. They ascribed to his person and to his future reign all the predictions of the Hebrew oracles which relate to the spiritual and everlasting kingdom of the promised Messiah. [24] Some of them might

confess that he was born of a virgin; but they obstinately rejected the preceding existence and divine perfections of the Logos, or Son of God, which are so clearly defined in the Gospel of St. John. About fifty years afterwards, the Ebionites, whose errors are mentioned by Justin Martyr with less severity than they seem to deserve, [25] formed a very inconsiderable portion of the Christian name. II. The Gnostics, who were distinguished by the epithet of Docetes, deviated into the contrary extreme; and betrayed the human, while they asserted the divine, nature of Christ. Educated in the school of Plato, accustomed to the sublime idea of the Logos, they readily conceived that the brightest Aeon, or Emanation of the Deity, might assume the outward shape and visible appearances of a mortal; [26] but they vainly pretended, that the imperfections of matter are incompatible with the purity of a celestial substance.

While the blood of Christ yet smoked on Mount Calvary, the Docetes invented the impious and extravagant hypothesis, that, instead of issuing from the womb of the Virgin, [27] he had descended on the banks of the Jordan in the form of perfect manhood; that he had imposed on the senses of his enemies, and of his disciples; and that the ministers of Pilate had wasted their impotent rage on an ury phantom, who seemed to expire on the cross, and, after three days, to rise from the dead. [28]

[Footnote 20: The Platonists admired the beginning of the Gospel of St. John as containing an exact transcript of their own principles. Augustin de Civitat. Dei, x. 29. Amelius apud Cyril. advers. Julian. l. viii. p.

283. But in the third and fourth centuries, the Platonists of Alexandria might improve their Trinity by the secret study of the Christian theology. Note: A short discussion on the sense in which St. John has used the word Logos, will prove that he has not borrowed it from the philosophy of Plato. The evangelist adopts this word without previous explanation, as a term with which his contemporaries were already familiar, and which they could at once comprehend. To know the sense which he gave to it, we must inquire that which it generally bore in his time. We find two: the one attached to the word logos by the Jews of Palestine, the other by the school of Alexandria, particularly by Philo. The Jews had feared at all times to pronounce the name of Jehovah; they had formed a habit of designating God by one of his attributes; they called him sometimes Wisdom, sometimes the Word. By the word of the Lord were the heavens made. (Psalm xxxiii. 6.) Accustomed to allegories, they often addressed themselves to this attribute of the Deity as a real being. Solomon makes Wisdom say "The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was." (Prov. viii. 22, 23.) Their residence in Persia only increased this inclination to sustained allegories. In the Ecclesiasticus of the son of Sirach, and the Book of Wisdom, we find allegorical descriptions of Wisdom like the following: "I came out of the mouth of the Most High; I covered the earth as a cloud;... I alone compassed the circuit of heaven, and walked in the bottom of the deep... The Creator created me from the beginning, before the world, and I shall never fail." (Eccles. xxiv. 35- 39.) See also the Wisdom of Solomon, c. vii. v. 9. [The latter book is clearly

Alexandrian.--M.] We see from this that the Jews understood from the Hebrew and Chaldaic words which signify Wisdom, the Word, and which were translated into Greek, a simple attribute of the Deity, allegorically personified, but of which they did not make a real particular being separate from the Deity. The school of Alexandria, on the contrary, and Philo among the rest, mingling Greek with Jewish and Oriental notions, and abandoning himself to his inclination to mysticism, personified the logos, and represented it a distinct being, created by God, and intermediate between God and man. This is the second logos of Philo, that which acts from the beginning of the world, alone in its kind, creator of the sensible world, formed by God according to the ideal world which he had in himself, and which was the first logos, the first-born of the Deity. The logos taken in this sense, then, was a created being, but, anterior to the creation of the world, near to God, and charged with his revelations to mankind.----Which of these two senses is that which St. John intended to assign to the word logos in the first chapter of his Gospel, and in all his writings? St. John was a Jew, born and educated in Palestine; he had no knowledge, at least very little, of the philosophy of the Greeks, and that of the Grecizing Jews: he would naturally, then, attach to the word logos the sense attached to it by the Jews of Palestine. If, in fact, we compare the attributes which he assigns to the logos with those which are assigned to it in Proverbs, in the Wisdom of Solomon, in Ecclesiasticus, we shall see that they are the same. The Word was in the world, and the world was made by him; in him was life, and the life was the light of men, (c. i. v. 10-14.) It is impossible not to trace in this chapter the ideas which the Jews had

formed of the allegorized logos. The evangelist afterwards really personifies that which his predecessors have personified only poetically; for he affirms "that the Word became flesh," (v. 14.) It was to prove this that he wrote. Closely examined, the ideas which he gives of the logos cannot agree with those of Philo and the school of Alexandria; they correspond, on the contrary, with those of the Jews of Palestine. Perhaps St. John, employing a well-known term to explain a doctrine which was yet unknown, has slightly altered the sense; it is this alteration which we appear to discover on comparing different passages of his writings.----It is worthy of remark, that the Jews of Palestine, who did not perceive this alteration, could find nothing extraordinary in what St. John said of the Logos; at least they comprehended it without difficulty, while the Greeks and Grecizing Jews, on their part, brought to it prejudices and preconceptions easily reconciled with those of the evangelist, who did not expressly contradict them. This circumstance must have much favored the progress of Christianity. Thus the fathers of the church in the two first centuries and later, formed almost all in the school of Alexandria, gave to the Logos of St. John a sense nearly similar to that which it received from Philo. Their doctrine approached very near to that which in the fourth century the council of Nice condemned in the person of Arius.--G.----M. Guizot has forgotten the long residence of St. John at Ephesus, the centre of the mingling opinions of the East and West, which were gradually growing up into Gnosticism. (See Matter. Hist. du Gnosticisme, vol. i. p. 154.) St. John's sense of the Logos seems as far removed from the simple allegory ascribed to the Palestinian Jews as

from the Oriental impersonation of the Alexandrian. The simple truth may be that St. John took the familiar term, and, as it were infused into it the peculiar and Christian sense in which it is used in his writings.

--M.]

[Footnote 21: See Beausobre, Hist. Critique du Manicheisme, tom. i. p. 377. The Gospel according to St. John is supposed to have been published about seventy years after the death of Christ.]

[Footnote 22: The sentiments of the Ebionites are fairly stated by Mosheim (p. 331) and Le Clerc, (Hist. Eccles. p. 535.) The Clementines, published among the apostolical fathers, are attributed by the critics to one of these sectaries.]

[Footnote 23: Stanch polemics, like a Bull, (Judicium Eccles. Cathol. c. 2,) insist on the orthodoxy of the Nazarenes; which appears less pure and certain in the eyes of Mosheim, (p. 330.)]

[Footnote 24: The humble condition and sufferings of Jesus have always been a stumbling-block to the Jews. "Deus... contrariis coloribus Messiam depinxerat: futurus erat Rex, Judex, Pastor," &c. See Limborch et Orobio Amica Collat. p. 8, 19, 53-76, 192-234. But this objection has obliged the believing Christians to lift up their eyes to a spiritual and everlasting kingdom.]

[Footnote 25: Justin Martyr, Dialog. cum Tryphonte, p. 143, 144. See Le

Clerc, Hist. Eccles. p. 615. Bull and his editor Grabe (Judicium Eccles. Cathol. c. 7, and Appendix) attempt to distort either the sentiments or the words of Justin; but their violent correction of the text is rejected even by the Benedictine editors.]

[Footnote 26: The Arians reproached the orthodox party with borrowing their Trinity from the Valentinians and Marcionites. See Beausobre, Hist. de Manicheisme, l. iii. c. 5, 7.]

[Footnote 27: Non dignum est ex utero credere Deum, et Deum Christum.... non dignum est ut tanta majestas per sordes et squalores muli eris transire credatur. The Gnostics asserted the impurity of matter, and of marriage; and they were scandalized by the gross interpretations of the fathers, and even of Augustin himself. See Beausobre, tom. ii. p. 523, * Note: The greater part of the Docetae rejected the true divinity of Jesus Christ, as well as his human nature. They belonged to the Gnostics, whom some philosophers, in whose party Gibbon has enlisted, make to derive their opinions from those of Plato. These philosophers did not consider that Platonism had undergone continual alterations, and that those who gave it some analogy with the notions of the Gnostics were later in their origin than most of the sects comprehended under this name Mosheim has proved (in his Instit. Histor. Eccles. Major. s. i. p. 136, sqq and p. 339, sqq.) that the Oriental philosophy, combined with the cabalistical philosophy of the Jews, had given birth to Gnosticism. The relations which exist between this doctrine and the records which remain to us of that of the Orientals, the Chaldean and

Persian, have been the source of the errors of the Gnostic Christians, who wished to reconcile their ancient notions with their new belief. It is on this account that, denying the human nature of Christ, they also denied his intimate union with God, and took him for one of the substances (aeons) created by God. As they believed in the eternity of matter, and considered it to be the principle of evil, in opposition to the Deity, the first cause and principle of good, they were unwilling to admit that one of the pure substances, one of the aeons which came forth from God, had, by partaking in the material nature, allied himself to the principle of evil; and this was their motive for rejecting the real humanity of Jesus Christ. See Ch. G. F. Walch, *Hist. of Heresies in Germ.* t. i. p. 217, sqq. Brucker, *Hist. Crit. Phil.* ii. p 639.--G.]

[Footnote 28: *Apostolis adhuc in saeculo superstitionibus apud Judaeam Christi sanguine recente, et phanasma corpus Domini asserebatur.* Cotelerius thinks (*Patres Apostol.* tom. ii. p. 24) that those who will not allow the Docetes to have arisen in the time of the Apostles, may with equal reason deny that the sun shines at noonday. These Docetes, who formed the most considerable party among the Gnostics, were so called, because they granted only a seeming body to Christ. * Note: The name of Docetae was given to these sectaries only in the course of the second century: this name did not designate a sect, properly so called; it applied to all the sects who taught the non- reality of the material body of Christ; of this number were the Valentinians, the Basilidians, the Ophites, the Marcionites, (against whom Tertullian wrote his book, *De Carne Christi,*) and other Gnostics. In truth, Clement of Alexandria

(l. iii. Strom. c. 13, p. 552) makes express mention of a sect of Docetae, and even names as one of its heads a certain Cassianus; but every thing leads us to believe that it was not a distinct sect. Philastrius (de Haeres, c. 31) reproaches Saturninus with being a Docete. Irenaeus (adv. Haer. c. 23) makes the same reproach against Basilides. Epiphanius and Philastrius, who have treated in detail on each particular heresy, do not specially name that of the Docetae. Serapion, bishop of Antioch, (Euseb. Hist. Eccles. l. vi. c. 12,) and Clement of Alexandria, (l. vii. Strom. p. 900,) appear to be the first who have used the generic name. It is not found in any earlier record, though the error which it points out existed even in the time of the Apostles. See Ch. G. F. Walch, Hist. of Her. v. i. p. 283. Tillemont, Mempoür servir a la Hist Eccles. ii. p. 50. Buddaeus de Eccles. Apost. c. 5 & 7--G.]

The divine sanction, which the Apostle had bestowed on the fundamental principle of the theology of Plato, encouraged the learned proselytes of the second and third centuries to admire and study the writings of the Athenian sage, who had thus marvellously anticipated one of the most surprising discoveries of the Christian revelation. The respectable name of Plato was used by the orthodox, [29] and abused by the heretics, [30] as the common support of truth and error: the authority of his skilful commentators, and the science of dialectics, were employed to justify the remote consequences of his opinions and to supply the discreet silence of the inspired writers. The same subtle and profound questions concerning the nature, the generation, the distinction, and the equality

of the three divine persons of the mysterious Triad, or Trinity, [31] were agitated in the philosophical and in the Christian schools of Alexandria. An eager spirit of curiosity urged them to explore the secrets of the abyss; and the pride of the professors, and of their disciples, was satisfied with the sciences of words. But the most sagacious of the Christian theologians, the great Athanasius himself, has candidly confessed, [32] that whenever he forced his understanding to meditate on the divinity of the Logos, his toilsome and unavailing efforts recoiled on themselves; that the more he thought, the less he comprehended; and the more he wrote, the less capable was he of expressing his thoughts. In every step of the inquiry, we are compelled to feel and acknowledge the immeasurable disproportion between the size of the object and the capacity of the human mind. We may strive to abstract the notions of time, of space, and of matter, which so closely adhere to all the perceptions of our experimental knowledge. But as soon as we presume to reason of infinite substance, of spiritual generation; as often as we deduce any positive conclusions from a negative idea, we are involved in darkness, perplexity, and inevitable contradiction. As these difficulties arise from the nature of the subject, they oppress, with the same insuperable weight, the philosophic and the theological disputant; but we may observe two essential and peculiar circumstances, which discriminated the doctrines of the Catholic church from the opinions of the Platonic school.

[Footnote 29: Some proofs of the respect which the Christians entertained for the person and doctrine of Plato may be found in De la

Mothe le Vayer, tom. v. p. 135, &c., edit. 1757; and Basnage, Hist. des Juifs tom. iv. p. 29, 79, &c.]

[Footnote 30: Doleo bona fide, Platonem omnium hereticorum condimentarium factum. Tertullian. de Anima, c. 23. Petavius (Dogm. Theolog. tom. iii. proleg. 2) shows that this was a general complaint. Beausobre (tom. i. l. iii. c. 9, 10) has deduced the Gnostic errors from Platonic principles; and as, in the school of Alexandria, those principles were blended with the Oriental philosophy, (Brucker, tom. i. p. 1356,) the sentiment of Beausobre may be reconciled with the opinion of Mosheim, (General History of the Church, vol. i. p. 37.)]

[Footnote 31: If Theophilus, bishop of Antioch, (see Dupin, Bibliotheque Ecclesiastique, tom. i. p. 66,) was the first who employed the word Triad, Trinity, that abstract term, which was already familiar to the schools of philosophy, must have been introduced into the theology of the Christians after the middle of the second century.]

[Footnote 32: Athanasius, tom. i. p. 808. His expressions have an uncommon energy; and as he was writing to monks, there could not be any occasion for him to affect a rational language.]

I. A chosen society of philosophers, men of a liberal education and curious disposition, might silently meditate, and temperately discuss in the gardens of Athens or the library of Alexandria, the abstruse questions of metaphysical science. The lofty speculations, which

neither convinced the understanding, nor agitated the passions, of the Platonists themselves, were carelessly overlooked by the idle, the busy, and even the studious part of mankind. [33] But after the Logos had been revealed as the sacred object of the faith, the hope, and the religious worship of the Christians, the mysterious system was embraced by a numerous and increasing multitude in every province of the Roman world. Those persons who, from their age, or sex, or occupations, were the least qualified to judge, who were the least exercised in the habits of abstract reasoning, aspired to contemplate the economy of the Divine Nature: and it is the boast of Tertullian, [34] that a Christian mechanic could readily answer such questions as had perplexed the wisest of the Grecian sages. Where the subject lies so far beyond our reach, the difference between the highest and the lowest of human understandings may indeed be calculated as infinitely small; yet the degree of weakness may perhaps be measured by the degree of obstinacy and dogmatic confidence. These speculations, instead of being treated as the amusement of a vacant hour, became the most serious business of the present, and the most useful preparation for a future, life. A theology, which it was incumbent to believe, which it was impious to doubt, and which it might be dangerous, and even fatal, to mistake, became the familiar topic of private meditation and popular discourse. The cold indifference of philosophy was inflamed by the fervent spirit of devotion; and even the metaphors of common language suggested the fallacious prejudices of sense and experience. The Christians, who abhorred the gross and impure generation of the Greek mythology, [35] were tempted to argue from the familiar analogy of the filial and

paternal relations. The character of Son seemed to imply a perpetual subordination to the voluntary author of his existence; [36] but as the act of generation, in the most spiritual and abstracted sense, must be supposed to transmit the properties of a common nature, [37] they durst not presume to circumscribe the powers or the duration of the Son of an eternal and omnipotent Father. Fourscore years after the death of Christ, the Christians of Bithynia, declared before the tribunal of Pliny, that they invoked him as a god: and his divine honors have been perpetuated in every age and country, by the various sects who assume the name of his disciples. [38] Their tender reverence for the memory of Christ, and their horror for the profane worship of any created being, would have engaged them to assert the equal and absolute divinity of the Logos, if their rapid ascent towards the throne of heaven had not been imperceptibly checked by the apprehension of violating the unity and sole supremacy of the great Father of Christ and of the Universe. The suspense and fluctuation produced in the minds of the Christians by these opposite tendencies, may be observed in the writings of the theologians who flourished after the end of the apostolic age, and before the origin of the Arian controversy. Their suffrage is claimed, with equal confidence, by the orthodox and by the heretical parties; and the most inquisitive critics have fairly allowed, that if they had the good fortune of possessing the Catholic verity, they have delivered their conceptions in loose, inaccurate, and sometimes contradictory language. [39]

[Footnote 33: In a treatise, which professed to explain the opinions

of the ancient philosophers concerning the nature of the gods we might expect to discover the theological Trinity of Plato. But Cicero very honestly confessed, that although he had translated the *Timaeus*, he could never understand that mysterious dialogue. See Hieronym. *praef. ad l. xii. in Isaiam*, tom. v. p. 154.]

[Footnote 34: Tertullian. in *Apolog.* c. 46. See Bayle, *Dictionnaire*, au mot *Simonide*. His remarks on the presumption of Tertullian are profound and interesting.]

[Footnote 35: Lactantius, iv. 8. Yet the *Probole*, or *Prolatio*, which the most orthodox divines borrowed without scruple from the *Valentinians*, and illustrated by the comparisons of a fountain and stream, the sun and its rays, &c., either meant nothing, or favored a material idea of the divine generation. See *Beausobre*, tom. i. l. iii. c. 7, p. 548.]

[Footnote 36: Many of the primitive writers have frankly confessed, that the Son owed his being to the will of the Father.----See Clarke's *Scripture Trinity*, p. 280-287. On the other hand, Athanasius and his followers seem unwilling to grant what they are afraid to deny. The schoolmen extricate themselves from this difficulty by the distinction of a preceding and a concomitant will. *Petav. Dogm. Theolog.* tom. ii. l. vi. c. 8, p. 587-603.]

[Footnote 37: See *Petav. Dogm. Theolog.* tom. ii. l. ii. c. 10, p. 159.]

[Footnote 38: Carmenque Christo quasi Deo dicere secum invicem. Plin. Epist. x. 97. The sense of Deus, Elohim, in the ancient languages, is critically examined by Le Clerc, (Ars Critica, p. 150-156,) and the propriety of worshipping a very excellent creature is ably defended by the Socinian Emlyn, (Tracts, p. 29-36, 51-145.)]

[Footnote 39: See Daille de Usu Patrum, and Le Clerc, Bibliotheque Universelle, tom. x. p. 409. To arraign the faith of the Ante-Nicene fathers, was the object, or at least has been the effect, of the stupendous work of Petavius on the Trinity, (Dogm. Theolog. tom. ii.;) nor has the deep impression been erased by the learned defence of Bishop Bull. Note: Dr. Burton's work on the doctrine of the Ante-Nicene fathers must be consulted by those who wish to obtain clear notions on this subject.--M.]