

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

The cruel and arbitrary disposition of Constantius, which did not always require the provocations of guilt and resistance, was justly exasperated by the tumults of his capital, and the criminal behavior of a faction, which opposed the authority and religion of their sovereign. The ordinary punishments of death, exile, and confiscation, were inflicted with partial vigor; and the Greeks still revere the holy memory of two clerks, a reader, and a sub-deacon, who were accused of the murder of Hermogenes, and beheaded at the gates of Constantinople. By an edict of Constantius against the Catholics which has not been judged worthy of a place in the Theodosian code, those who refused to communicate with the Arian bishops, and particularly with Macedonius, were deprived of the immunities of ecclesiastics, and of the rights of Christians; they were compelled to relinquish the possession of the churches; and were strictly prohibited from holding their assemblies within the walls of the city. The execution of this unjust law, in the provinces of Thrace and Asia Minor, was committed to the zeal of Macedonius; the civil and military powers were directed to obey his commands; and the cruelties exercised by this Semi- Arian tyrant in the support of the Homoiousion, exceeded the commission, and disgraced the reign, of Constantius. The sacraments of the church were administered to the reluctant victims, who denied the vocation, and abhorred the principles, of Macedonius. The rites of baptism were conferred on women and children, who, for that purpose, had been torn from the arms of their friends and parents; the mouths of the communicants were held open by a wooden engine, while the

consecrated bread was forced down their throat; the breasts of tender virgins were either burnt with red-hot egg-shells, or inhumanly compressed between sharp and heavy boards. [154] The Novatians of Constantinople and the adjacent country, by their firm attachment to the Homoousian standard, deserved to be confounded with the Catholics themselves. Macedonius was informed, that a large district of Paphlagonia [155] was almost entirely inhabited by those sectaries. He resolved either to convert or to extirpate them; and as he distrusted, on this occasion, the efficacy of an ecclesiastical mission, he commanded a body of four thousand legionaries to march against the rebels, and to reduce the territory of Mantinium under his spiritual dominion. The Novatian peasants, animated by despair and religious fury, boldly encountered the invaders of their country; and though many of the Paphlagonians were slain, the Roman legions were vanquished by an irregular multitude, armed only with scythes and axes; and, except a few who escaped by an ignominious flight, four thousand soldiers were left dead on the field of battle. The successor of Constantius has expressed, in a concise but lively manner, some of the theological calamities which afflicted the empire, and more especially the East, in the reign of a prince who was the slave of his own passions, and of those of his eunuchs: "Many were imprisoned, and persecuted, and driven into exile. Whole troops of those who are styled heretics, were massacred, particularly at Cyzicus, and at Samosata. In Paphlagonia, Bithynia, Galatia, and in many other provinces, towns and villages were laid waste, and utterly destroyed." [156]

[Footnote 154: Socrates, 1. ii. c. 27, 38. Sozomen, 1. iv. c. 21. The principal assistants of Macedonius, in the work of persecution, were the two bishops of Nicomedia and Cyzicus, who were esteemed for their virtues, and especially for their charity. I cannot forbear reminding the reader, that the difference between the Homoousion and Homoiousion, is almost invisible to the nicest theological eye.]

[Footnote 155: We are ignorant of the precise situation of Mantinium. In speaking of these four bands of legionaries, Socrates, Sozomen, and the author of the acts of St. Paul, use the indefinite terms of, which Nicephorus very properly translates thousands. Vales. ad Socrat. 1. ii. c. 38.]

[Footnote 156: Julian. Epist. lii. p. 436, edit. Spanheim.]

While the flames of the Arian controversy consumed the vitals of the empire, the African provinces were infested by their peculiar enemies, the savage fanatics, who, under the name of Circumcellions, formed the strength and scandal of the Donatist party. [157] The severe execution of the laws of Constantine had excited a spirit of discontent and resistance, the strenuous efforts of his son Constans, to restore the unity of the church, exasperated the sentiments of mutual hatred, which had first occasioned the separation; and the methods of force and corruption employed by the two Imperial commissioners, Paul and Macarius, furnished the schismatics with a specious contrast between the maxims of the apostles and the conduct of their pretended successors.

[158] The peasants who inhabited the villages of Numidia and Mauritania, were a ferocious race, who had been imperfectly reduced under the authority of the Roman laws; who were imperfectly converted to the Christian faith; but who were actuated by a blind and furious enthusiasm in the cause of their Donatist teachers. They indignantly supported the exile of their bishops, the demolition of their churches, and the interruption of their secret assemblies. The violence of the officers of justice, who were usually sustained by a military guard, was sometimes repelled with equal violence; and the blood of some popular ecclesiastics, which had been shed in the quarrel, inflamed their rude followers with an eager desire of revenging the death of these holy martyrs. By their own cruelty and rashness, the ministers of persecution sometimes provoked their fate; and the guilt of an accidental tumult precipitated the criminals into despair and rebellion. Driven from their native villages, the Donatist peasants assembled in formidable gangs on the edge of the Getulian desert; and readily exchanged the habits of labor for a life of idleness and rapine, which was consecrated by the name of religion, and faintly condemned by the doctors of the sect. The leaders of the Circumcellions assumed the title of captains of the saints; their principal weapon, as they were indifferently provided with swords and spears, was a huge and weighty club, which they termed an Israelite; and the well-known sound of "Praise be to God," which they used as their cry of war, diffused consternation over the unarmed provinces of Africa. At first their depredations were colored by the plea of necessity; but they soon exceeded the measure of subsistence, indulged without control their intemperance and avarice, burnt the

villages which they had pillaged, and reigned the licentious tyrants of the open country. The occupations of husbandry, and the administration of justice, were interrupted; and as the Circumcellions pretended to restore the primitive equality of mankind, and to reform the abuses of civil society, they opened a secure asylum for the slaves and debtors, who flocked in crowds to their holy standard. When they were not resisted, they usually contented themselves with plunder, but the slightest opposition provoked them to acts of violence and murder; and some Catholic priests, who had imprudently signalized their zeal, were tortured by the fanatics with the most refined and wanton barbarity. The spirit of the Circumcellions was not always exerted against their defenceless enemies; they engaged, and sometimes defeated, the troops of the province; and in the bloody action of Bagai, they attacked in the open field, but with unsuccessful valor, an advanced guard of the Imperial cavalry. The Donatists who were taken in arms, received, and they soon deserved, the same treatment which might have been shown to the wild beasts of the desert. The captives died, without a murmur, either by the sword, the axe, or the fire; and the measures of retaliation were multiplied in a rapid proportion, which aggravated the horrors of rebellion, and excluded the hope of mutual forgiveness. In the beginning of the present century, the example of the Circumcellions has been renewed in the persecution, the boldness, the crimes, and the enthusiasm of the Camisards; and if the fanatics of Languedoc surpassed those of Numidia, by their military achievements, the Africans maintained their fierce independence with more resolution and perseverance. [159]

[Footnote 157: See Optatus Milevitanus, (particularly iii. 4,) with the Donatis history, by M. Dupin, and the original pieces at the end of his edition. The numerous circumstances which Augustin has mentioned, of the fury of the Circumcellions against others, and against themselves, have been laboriously collected by Tillemont, Mem. Eccles. tom. vi. p. 147-165; and he has often, though without design, exposed injuries which had provoked those fanatics.]

[Footnote 158: It is amusing enough to observe the language of opposite parties, when they speak of the same men and things. Gratus, bishop of Carthage, begins the acclamations of an orthodox synod, "Gratias Deo omnipotenti et Christu Jesu... qui imperavit religiosissimo Constanti Imperatori, ut votum gereret unitatis, et mitteret ministros sancti operis famulos Dei Paulum et Macarium." Monument. Vet. ad Calcem Optati, p. 313. "Ecce subito," (says the Donatist author of the Passion of Marculus), "de Constantis regis tyrannica domo.. pollutum Macarianae persecutionis murmur increpuit, et duabus bestiis ad Africam missis, eodem scilicet Macario et Paulo, execrandum prorsus ac dirum ecclesiae certamen indictum est; ut populus Christianus ad unionem cum traditoribus faciendam, nudatis militum gladiis et draconum praesentibus signis, et tubarum vocibus cogereetur." Monument. p. 304.]

[Footnote 159: The Histoire des Camisards, in 3 vols. 12mo. Villefranche, 1760 may be recommended as accurate and impartial. It requires some attention to discover the religion of the author.]

Such disorders are the natural effects of religious tyranny, but the rage of the Donatists was inflamed by a frenzy of a very extraordinary kind; and which, if it really prevailed among them in so extravagant a degree, cannot surely be paralleled in any country or in any age. Many of these fanatics were possessed with the horror of life, and the desire of martyrdom; and they deemed it of little moment by what means, or by what hands, they perished, if their conduct was sanctified by the intention of devoting themselves to the glory of the true faith, and the hope of eternal happiness. [160] Sometimes they rudely disturbed the festivals, and profaned the temples of Paganism, with the design of exciting the most zealous of the idolaters to revenge the insulted honor of their gods. They sometimes forced their way into the courts of justice, and compelled the affrighted judge to give orders for their immediate execution. They frequently stopped travellers on the public highways, and obliged them to inflict the stroke of martyrdom, by the promise of a reward, if they consented, and by the threat of instant death, if they refused to grant so very singular a favor. When they were disappointed of every other resource, they announced the day on which, in the presence of their friends and brethren, they should cast themselves headlong from some lofty rock; and many precipices were shown, which had acquired fame by the number of religious suicides. In the actions of these desperate enthusiasts, who were admired by one party as the martyrs of God, and abhorred by the other as the victims of Satan, an impartial philosopher may discover the influence and the last

abuse of that inflexible spirit which was originally derived from the character and principles of the Jewish nation.

[Footnote 160: The Donatist suicides alleged in their justification the example of Razias, which is related in the 14th chapter of the second book of the Maccabees.]

The simple narrative of the intestine divisions, which distracted the peace, and dishonored the triumph, of the church, will confirm the remark of a Pagan historian, and justify the complaint of a venerable bishop. The experience of Ammianus had convinced him, that the enmity of the Christians towards each other, surpassed the fury of savage beasts against man; [161] and Gregory Nazianzen most pathetically laments, that the kingdom of heaven was converted, by discord, into the image of chaos, of a nocturnal tempest, and of hell itself. [162] The fierce and partial writers of the times, ascribing all virtue to themselves, and imputing all guilt to their adversaries, have painted the battle of the angels and daemons. Our calmer reason will reject such pure and perfect monsters of vice or sanctity, and will impute an equal, or at least an indiscriminate, measure of good and evil to the hostile sectaries, who assumed and bestowed the appellations of orthodox and heretics. They had been educated in the same religion and the same civil society. Their hopes and fears in the present, or in a future life, were balanced in the same proportion. On either side, the error might be innocent, the faith sincere, the practice meritorious or corrupt. Their passions were excited by similar objects; and they might alternately abuse the



favor of the court, or of the people. The metaphysical opinions of the Athanasians and the Arians could not influence their moral character; and they were alike actuated by the intolerant spirit which has been extracted from the pure and simple maxims of the gospel.

[Footnote 161: Nullus infestas hominibus bestias, ut sunt sibi ferales plerique Christianorum, expertus. Ammian. xxii. 5.]

[Footnote 162: Gregor, Nazianzen, Orav. i. p. 33. See Tillemont, tom vi. p. 501, qua to edit.]

A modern writer, who, with a just confidence, has prefixed to his own history the honorable epithets of political and philosophical, [163] accuses the timid prudence of Montesquieu, for neglecting to enumerate, among the causes of the decline of the empire, a law of Constantine, by which the exercise of the Pagan worship was absolutely suppressed, and a considerable part of his subjects was left destitute of priests, of temples, and of any public religion. The zeal of the philosophic historian for the rights of mankind, has induced him to acquiesce in the ambiguous testimony of those ecclesiastics, who have too lightly ascribed to their favorite hero the merit of a general persecution.

[164] Instead of alleging this imaginary law, which would have blazed in the front of the Imperial codes, we may safely appeal to the original epistle, which Constantine addressed to the followers of the ancient religion; at a time when he no longer disguised his conversion, nor dreaded the rivals of his throne. He invites and exhorts, in the most

pressing terms, the subjects of the Roman empire to imitate the example of their master; but he declares, that those who still refuse to open their eyes to the celestial light, may freely enjoy their temples and their fancied gods. A report, that the ceremonies of paganism were suppressed, is formally contradicted by the emperor himself, who wisely assigns, as the principle of his moderation, the invincible force of habit, of prejudice, and of superstition. [165] Without violating the sanctity of his promise, without alarming the fears of the Pagans, the artful monarch advanced, by slow and cautious steps, to undermine the irregular and decayed fabric of polytheism. The partial acts of severity which he occasionally exercised, though they were secretly promoted by a Christian zeal, were colored by the fairest pretences of justice and the public good; and while Constantine designed to ruin the foundations, he seemed to reform the abuses, of the ancient religion. After the example of the wisest of his predecessors, he condemned, under the most rigorous penalties, the occult and impious arts of divination; which excited the vain hopes, and sometimes the criminal attempts, of those who were discontented with their present condition. An ignominious silence was imposed on the oracles, which had been publicly convicted of fraud and falsehood; the effeminate priests of the Nile were abolished; and Constantine discharged the duties of a Roman censor, when he gave orders for the demolition of several temples of Phoenicia; in which every mode of prostitution was devoutly practised in the face of day, and to the honor of Venus. [166] The Imperial city of Constantinople was, in some measure, raised at the expense, and was adorned with the spoils, of the opulent temples of Greece and Asia; the sacred property was confiscated;

the statues of gods and heroes were transported, with rude familiarity, among a people who considered them as objects, not of adoration, but of curiosity; the gold and silver were restored to circulation; and the magistrates, the bishops, and the eunuchs, improved the fortunate occasion of gratifying, at once, their zeal, their avarice, and their resentment. But these depredations were confined to a small part of the Roman world; and the provinces had been long since accustomed to endure the same sacrilegious rapine, from the tyranny of princes and proconsuls, who could not be suspected of any design to subvert the established religion. [167]

[Footnote 163: *Histoire Politique et Philosophique des Etablissemens des Europeens dans les deux Indes*, tom. i. p. 9.]

[Footnote 164: According to Eusebius, (in *Vit. Constantin.* l. ii. c. 45,) the emperor prohibited, both in cities and in the country, the abominable acts or parts of idolatry. 1 Socrates (l. i. c. 17) and Sozomen (l. ii. c. 4, 5) have represented the conduct of Constantine with a just regard to truth and history; which has been neglected by Theodoret (l. v. c. 21) and Orosius, (vii. 28.) *Tum deinde* (says the latter) *primus Constantinus justo ordine et pio vicem vertit edicto; siquidem statuit citra ullam hominum caedem, paganorum templa claudi.*]

[Footnote 165: See Eusebius in *Vit. Constantin.* l. ii. c. 56, 60.

In the sermon to the assembly of saints, which the emperor pronounced when he was mature in years and piety, he declares to the idolaters (c.

xii.) that they are permitted to offer sacrifices, and to exercise every part of their religious worship.]

[Footnote 166: See Eusebius, in Vit. Constantin. l. iii. c. 54-58, and l. iv. c. 23, 25. These acts of authority may be compared with the suppression of the Bacchanals, and the demolition of the temple of Isis, by the magistrates of Pagan Rome.]

[Footnote 167: Eusebius (in Vit. Constan. l. iii. c. 54-58) and Libanius (Orat. pro Templis, p. 9, 10, edit. Gothofred) both mention the pious sacrilege of Constantine, which they viewed in very different lights. The latter expressly declares, that "he made use of the sacred money, but made no alteration in the legal worship; the temples indeed were impoverished, but the sacred rites were performed there." Lardner's Jewish and Heathen Testimonies, vol. iv. p. 140.]

The sons of Constantine trod in the footsteps of their father, with more zeal, and with less discretion. The pretences of rapine and oppression were insensibly multiplied; [168] every indulgence was shown to the illegal behavior of the Christians; every doubt was explained to the disadvantage of Paganism; and the demolition of the temples was celebrated as one of the auspicious events of the reign of Constans and Constantius. [169] The name of Constantius is prefixed to a concise law, which might have superseded the necessity of any future prohibitions. "It is our pleasure, that in all places, and in all cities, the temples be immediately shut, and carefully guarded, that none may have the power

of offending. It is likewise our pleasure, that all our subjects should abstain from sacrifices. If any one should be guilty of such an act, let him feel the sword of vengeance, and after his execution, let his property be confiscated to the public use. We denounce the same penalties against the governors of the provinces, if they neglect to punish the criminals." [170] But there is the strongest reason to believe, that this formidable edict was either composed without being published, or was published without being executed. The evidence of facts, and the monuments which are still extant of brass and marble, continue to prove the public exercise of the Pagan worship during the whole reign of the sons of Constantine. In the East, as well as in the West, in cities, as well as in the country, a great number of temples were respected, or at least were spared; and the devout multitude still enjoyed the luxury of sacrifices, of festivals, and of processions, by the permission, or by the connivance, of the civil government. About four years after the supposed date of this bloody edict, Constantius visited the temples of Rome; and the decency of his behavior is recommended by a pagan orator as an example worthy of the imitation of succeeding princes. "That emperor," says Symmachus, "suffered the privileges of the vestal virgins to remain inviolate; he bestowed the sacerdotal dignities on the nobles of Rome, granted the customary allowance to defray the expenses of the public rites and sacrifices; and, though he had embraced a different religion, he never attempted to deprive the empire of the sacred worship of antiquity." [171] The senate still presumed to consecrate, by solemn decrees, the divine memory of their sovereigns; and Constantine himself was associated, after his

death, to those gods whom he had renounced and insulted during his life. The title, the ensigns, the prerogatives, of sovereign pontiff, which had been instituted by Numa, and assumed by Augustus, were accepted, without hesitation, by seven Christian emperors; who were invested with a more absolute authority over the religion which they had deserted, than over that which they professed. [172]

[Footnote 168: Ammianus (xxii. 4) speaks of some court eunuchs who were *spoliis templorum pasti*. Libanius says (*Orat. pro Templ.* p. 23) that the emperor often gave away a temple, like a dog, or a horse, or a slave, or a gold cup; but the devout philosopher takes care to observe that these sacrilegious favorites very seldom prospered.]

[Footnote 169: See Gothofred. *Cod. Theodos.* tom. vi. p. 262. Liban. *Orat. Parental* c. x. in *Fabric. Bibl. Graec.* tom. vii. p. 235.]

[Footnote 170: *Placuit omnibus locis atque urbibus universis claudi protinus empla, et accessu vetitis omnibus licentiam delinquendi perditis abnegari. Volumus etiam cunctos a sacrificiis abstinere. Quod si quis aliquid forte hujusmodi perpetraverit, gladio sternatur: facultates etiam perempti fisco decernimus vindicari: et similiter adfligi rectores provinciarum si facinora vindicare neglexerint.* *Cod. Theodos.* l. xvi. tit. x. leg. 4. Chronology has discovered some contradiction in the date of this extravagant law; the only one, perhaps, by which the negligence of magistrates is punished by death and confiscation. M. de la Bastie (*Mem. de l'Academie*, tom. xv. p.

98) conjectures, with a show of reason, that this was no more than the minutes of a law, the heads of an intended bill, which were found in Scriniiis Memoriae among the papers of Constantius, and afterwards inserted, as a worthy model, in the Theodosian Code.]

[Footnote 171: Symmach. Epistol. x. 54.]

[Footnote 172: The fourth Dissertation of M. de la Bastie, sur le Souverain Pontificat des Empereurs Romains, (in the Mem. de l'Acad. tom. xv. p. 75- 144,) is a very learned and judicious performance, which explains the state, and prove the toleration, of Paganism from Constantino to Gratian. The assertion of Zosimus, that Gratian was the first who refused the pontifical robe, is confirmed beyond a doubt; and the murmurs of bigotry on that subject are almost silenced.]

The divisions of Christianity suspended the ruin of Paganism; [173] and the holy war against the infidels was less vigorously prosecuted by princes and bishops, who were more immediately alarmed by the guilt and danger of domestic rebellion. The extirpation of idolatry [174] might have been justified by the established principles of intolerance: but the hostile sects, which alternately reigned in the Imperial court were mutually apprehensive of alienating, and perhaps exasperating, the minds of a powerful, though declining faction. Every motive of authority and fashion, of interest and reason, now militated on the side of Christianity; but two or three generations elapsed, before their victorious influence was universally felt. The religion which had

so long and so lately been established in the Roman empire was still revered by a numerous people, less attached indeed to speculative opinion, than to ancient custom. The honors of the state and army were indifferently bestowed on all the subjects of Constantine and Constantius; and a considerable portion of knowledge and wealth and valor was still engaged in the service of polytheism. The superstition of the senator and of the peasant, of the poet and the philosopher, was derived from very different causes, but they met with equal devotion in the temples of the gods. Their zeal was insensibly provoked by the insulting triumph of a proscribed sect; and their hopes were revived by the well-grounded confidence, that the presumptive heir of the empire, a young and valiant hero, who had delivered Gaul from the arms of the Barbarians, had secretly embraced the religion of his ancestors.

[Footnote 173: As I have freely anticipated the use of pagans and paganism, I shall now trace the singular revolutions of those celebrated words. 1. in the Doric dialect, so familiar to the Italians, signifies a fountain; and the rural neighborhood, which frequented the same fountain, derived the common appellation of pagus and pagans. (Festus sub voce, and Servius ad Virgil. Georgic. ii. 382.) 2. By an easy extension of the word, pagan and rural became almost synonymous, (Plin. Hist. Natur. xxviii. 5;) and the meaner rustics acquired that name, which has been corrupted into peasants in the modern languages of Europe. 3. The amazing increase of the military order introduced the necessity of a correlative term, (Hume's Essays, vol. i. p. 555;) and all the people who were not enlisted in the service of the prince were



branded with the contemptuous epithets of pagans. (Tacit. Hist. iii. 24, 43, 77. Juvenal. Satir. 16. Tertullian de Pallio, c. 4.) 4. The Christians were the soldiers of Christ; their adversaries, who refused his sacrament, or military oath of baptism might deserve the metaphorical name of pagans; and this popular reproach was introduced as early as the reign of Valentinian (A. D. 365) into Imperial laws (Cod. Theodos. l. xvi. tit. ii. leg. 18) and theological writings.

5. Christianity gradually filled the cities of the empire: the old religion, in the time of Prudentius (advers. Symmachum, l. i. ad fin.) and Orosius, (in Praefat. Hist.,) retired and languished in obscure villages; and the word pagans, with its new signification, reverted to its primitive origin. 6. Since the worship of Jupiter and his family has expired, the vacant title of pagans has been successively applied to all the idolaters and polytheists of the old and new world. 7. The Latin Christians bestowed it, without scruple, on their mortal enemies, the Mahometans; and the purest Unitarians were branded with the unjust reproach of idolatry and paganism. See Gerard Vossius, *Etymologicon Linguae Latinae*, in his works, tom. i. p. 420; Godefroy's *Commentary on the Theodosian Code*, tom. vi. p. 250; and Ducange, *Mediae et Infimae Latinitat. Glossar.*]

[Footnote 174: In the pure language of Ionia and Athens were ancient and familiar words. The former expressed a likeness, an apparition (Homer. *Odys.* xi. 601,) a representation, an image, created either by fancy or art. The latter denoted any sort of service or slavery. The Jews of Egypt, who translated the Hebrew Scriptures, restrained the use of

these words (Exod. xx. 4, 5) to the religious worship of an image. The peculiar idiom of the Hellenists, or Grecian Jews, has been adopted by the sacred and ecclesiastical writers and the reproach of idolatry has stigmatized that visible and abject mode of superstition, which some sects of Christianity should not hastily impute to the polytheists of Greece and Rome.]