

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

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CHRISTIANITY AND PROGRESS.

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I.

CHRISTIANITY'S triumph over Paganism is considered by Christians as itself a miracle. They cannot otherwise understand "the victory of the world's babes and striplings over its philosophers and scholars, and the serried array of emperors, aristocracies, and statesmen." But look at Mormonism, look at the Salvation Army. These systems have grown faster than Christianity did. True, they have arisen in a period of vital and progressive civilization, and, consequently, their spread is limited. Christianity spread while the Roman Empire was decaying, and the ancient civilization was slowly breaking up for reconstruction. Paganism itself had broken up also. The old national religions had perished, because the Empire had annihilated the national barriers. But the instinct and the material of superstition were still left. There was a splendid opportunity for a new, universal religion. Christianity arose and occupied the field, and had it not done so another system would have taken its place. It was victorious by adjustment. Its ecclesiastics altered and improved it judiciously, adding here and lopping there, until it fitted the superstition of every race in the Empire. Christianity incorporated from all preceding creeds, and its triumph is a striking illustration of the Darwinian law of Natural Selection.

Against the wave of Eastern superstition which swept over the Roman Empire, allied as it was with that of the native population, Roman culture was ultimately impotent. The philosophic schools had no direct influence on the masses who were left to the priests of

the popular religion. Printing was required to make knowledge and reflection democratic. No doubt great names exerted an indirect influence over the people, but all the great names had vanished before Christianity was victorious. Science, art, philosophy, and literature died out with the Empire, and Christianity arose in almost universal darkness.<sup>1</sup> This is another proof of Schopenhauer's accuracy in saying that "Religions are like glow-worms; they require darkness to shine in."

There is no basis in fact for the popular religious teaching that Christianity brought a new life and a healthier vigour to Pagan society. It served rather as one of the most important factors in its decadence and decline. What renovation took place after the age of Justinian, when Christianity had everything at its feet? The decadence continued as before. Not until the Northern barbarians carved out fresh kingdoms from the old ruins, and poured new life into the veins of Europe, was there any sign of improvement. It was not religion that wrought the change, but the savage strength of virgin races. From the German forests and the Scandinavian ice-fields poured down the living tide that fertilized the barren fields of a decrepit civilization. Christianity had reviled nature, and nature avenged the insult. She flung her barbaric brood upon the effeminate religionists; the healthy blood and brawn triumphed, and Europe was reborn.

## II.

Many readers of this pamphlet may recollect a once famous article by the late Mr. W. E. Gladstone on Mrs. Humphrey Ward's novel, *Robert Elsmere*. In that essay Mr. Gladstone drew a picture of society before and after the introduction of Christianity, which is recalled here

<sup>1</sup> See a fine statement of the case in J. C. Morison's *The Service of Man*, pp. 174-177

because it contains, in a small compass, all, or nearly all, that Christian apologists are constantly saying. Of the influence of Christianity on Roman civilization, he says:—

It both produced a type of character wholly new to the Roman world, and it fundamentally altered the laws and institutions, the tone, temper, and tradition of that world. For example, it changed profoundly the relation of the poor to the rich, and the almost forgotten obligations of the rich to the poor. It abolished slavery, abolished human sacrifice, abolished gladiatorial shows, and a multitude of other horrors. It restored the position of woman in society. It proscribed polygamy; and put down divorce, absolutely in the West, though not absolutely in the East. It made peace, instead of war, the normal and presumed relation between human societies. It exhibited life as a discipline everywhere and in all its parts, and changed essentially the place and function of suffering in human experience. Accepting the ancient morality as far as it went, it not only enlarged but transfigured its teaching, by the laws of humility and forgiveness, and by a law of purity perhaps even more new and strange than these.

This is the Christian side of the picture. But the other side must also be painted for the sake of contrast, and Mr. Gladstone painted it hideously in the darkest colours. He did the trick dexterously, but it was more worthy of a party orator than an historical student:—

What civilization could do without Christianity for the greatest races of mankind, we know already. Philosophy and art, creative genius and practical energy, had their turn before the Advent; and we can register the results. I do not say that the great Greek and Roman ages lost—perhaps even they improved—the ethics of *meum* and *tuum*, in the interests of the leisured and favoured classes of society, as compared with what those ethics had been in archaic times. But they lost the hold which some earlier races within their sphere had

had of the future life. They degraded, and that immeasurably, the position of woman. They effaced from the world the law of purity. They even carried indulgence to a worse than bestial type, and they glorified in the achievement.

Anything cruder, more one-sided or distorted, is hard to conceive. Mr. Gladstone, with little regard to truth, says the best he can of Christianity; with as little regard to truth, he says the worst he can of Paganism; and he fancies it a fair comparison.

Let us examine these two pictures. The Pagan picture is simply ludicrous. Philosophy and art are treated as mere trifles, and not a word is said about the ancient science which modern Europe could not parallel before the days of Galileo. Nor is there an allusion to the daily life of the people; the people who loved, married, reared children, and were buried in tombs, on which we may still read touching inscriptions. The apologist rushes to Rome in its worst days, when a luxuriant aristocracy, fed on the spoils of a hundred provinces, committed the worst excesses. But even there he sees no light and shade. The indignant satire of Juvenal is regarded as true of all Roman society. What if an historian should take the satire of Dryden as true of all English society? Would it not be the grossest blunder? Charles the Second, and his Rochesters and Nell Gwynnes, were as bad as any Roman profligates; but there was still a good deal of sound morality in the nation, as there doubtless was in the worst days of Nero or Caligula.

A Christian treads on dangerous ground when he talks of the profligacy and bestiality of Greeks and Romans. Can he name a vice that has not been amply illustrated by Christian practitioners? Can he name a crime in which Christians have not equalled Pagans? Was not Rome, under some of the Popes, worse than

Rome under any of the Emperors? Was there not more general debauchery in the Middle Ages than at any other period in history? Did not the rapid spread of syphilis in Christendom, as soon as it was imported, testify to the promiscuous license of the believers in Jesus? Are the Christian chapters in the history of prostitution less foul than the Pagan? Cannot Christendom show a hundred filthy books for every one that Greece and Rome have bequeathed us? Do not portions of our Christian capitals reek with as much moral pestilence as ever befouled Athens or Rome? And was not the state of things far worse a century or two ago? How long is it since the most stupid debauchee in England was called the first gentleman in Europe? There is bitter truth in Thackeray's remark that our mouths may be cleaner than our ancestors' without our lives being purer.

That Pagan civilization degraded woman "immeasurably" is the reverse of truth. Does it mean that socially or politically, woman occupied a superior position in some remote era, when piety and justice were supreme? No, it cannot mean this, for it is simply absurd. What, then, *does* it mean? The statement would imply that as Greek and Roman civilization advanced, woman sank lower and lower. But nothing could be falser than this. With regard to Rome, in especial, it is a singular fact that the corrupt period of the Empire was precisely the time when the legal rights of women were firmly established. "That very immorality," says Thulié,<sup>1</sup> "that gangrened civilization, served to ameliorate her social condition." Every step taken in our own day to emancipate woman from political and social bondage is a return to the laws passed under Roman emperors, before Christianity had

<sup>1</sup> *La Femme*, p. 45.

made any sensible progress. The property of married women was secured, and its misappropriation by the husband was punishable as theft. Divorce was granted to both on the same conditions,<sup>1</sup> and in every respect the legal equality of the sexes was admitted. The Justinian code, compiled in the sixth century, made marriage a Christian sacrament; but the Bible was not appealed to for its social regulations. "The emperor," as Gibbon remarks, "consulted the unbelieving civilians of antiquity."

Christians may be reluctant to accept the authority of an infidel like Gibbon, but they cannot repudiate the authority of Sir Henry Maine. This profound and accomplished writer deals with the history of woman's condition, from a legal point of view, in the fifth chapter of his *Ancient Law*. After referring to the expedients which the later Roman lawyers devised for enabling women to defeat the slavery of the ancient rules, and the gradual falling into disuse of the three ancient forms of marriage, which rendered the wife completely subject to her husband, and even to his will after his death, this eminent jurist goes on to say:—

Sir H. Maine  
 The consequence was that the situation of the Roman female, whether married or unmarried, became one of great personal and proprietary independence, for the tendency of the later law, as I have already hinted, was to reduce the power of the guardian to nullity, while the form of marriage in fashion conferred on the husband no compensating superiority. But *Christianity tended somewhat from the first to narrow this remarkable liberty*. Led at first by justifiable disrelish for the loose practices of the decaying heathen world, but afterwards hurried on by a passion of ascetism, the professors of the new faith looked with disfavour on a marital tie

<sup>1</sup> Gibbon, chap. xliv.

which was in fact the laxest the Western world has seen.

The latest Roman law, so far as it is touched by the Constitutions of the Christian Emperors, bears some marks of a reaction against the liberal doctrines of the great Antonine juriconsults. And the prevalent state of religious sentiment may explain why it is that modern jurisprudence, forged in the furnace of barbarian conquest, and formed by the fusion of Roman jurisprudence with patriarchal usage, has absorbed, among its rudiments, much more than usual of these rules concerning the position of women which belong peculiarly to an imperfect civilization.<sup>1</sup>

Roman jurisprudence, in the modern law of Southern and Western Europe, was the influence which gave comparative freedom to spinsters and widows; while the Canon Law, which chiefly controlled the marriage relations, was the influence which imposed disabilities on married women. "This was in part inevitable," says Sir Henry Maine, "since no society which preserves any tincture of Christian institution is likely to restore to married women the personal liberty conferred on them by the middle Roman law."<sup>2</sup>

When we are told that the Pagan civilizations "effaced from the world the law of purity," it is difficult to regard the statement as serious. That gross immorality existed among the idle and wealthy, and often, though certainly not always, at the imperial court, we frankly allow. But may not the same be alleged of every age and every country? Catherine de Medici was extremely pious, but this did not prevent her giving a banquet to her royal son, at which her handsomest maids of honour officiated naked to the waist. Brantôme utters pious ejaculations amid his incredible filth. The court he paints was horrified at the thought of heresy, and

<sup>1</sup> Sir Henry Maine. *Ancient Law*, p. 156. The italics are ours.

<sup>2</sup> P. 158.

rejoiced at the burning of Freethinkers; yet, as Mr. Morison says, "one fails to see how it differed, except for the worse, from the court of Caligula or Commodus."<sup>1</sup> Centuries earlier, before the Renaissance, when the Church was supreme and Christianity unquestioned, Europe sent army after army to wrest the Holy Land from the Mohammedans. Those enterprises were religious. The Christian warriors were soldiers of the Cross. They carried the "sacred emblem" on their shoulders. Yet history attests that they were the vilest savages that ever disgraced the earth. They were cannibals, and their bestiality is beyond description. Might not a Mohammedan have said that "Christianity had effaced from the world the law of purity"?

Christians may reply that the law of purity was not *effaced*; it was taught though not practised. But this argument can be used against both ways. Purity was equally taught (and practised) by Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus, to say nothing of minor moralists. The wise Emperor wrote: "Such as are thy habitual thoughts, such also will be the character of thy mind; for the soul is dyed by the thoughts."<sup>2</sup> Does not this carry the law of purity into the very citadel of man's nature? Epictetus said: "For since the Gods by their nature are pure and free from corruption, so far as men approach them by reason, so far do they cling to purity and to a love of purity."<sup>3</sup> Seneca wrote: "If sensuality were happiness, beasts were happier than men; but human felicity is lodged in the soul, not in the flesh."<sup>4</sup> Such was the effacement of the law of purity in the Pagan world!

<sup>1</sup> *The Service of Man*, p. 152.

<sup>2</sup> *Thoughts of M. Aurelius Antoninus*. Translated by G. Long. P. 112.

<sup>3</sup> *Discourses of Epictetus*. G. Long. P. 366.

<sup>4</sup> *The Morals of Seneca*. Edited by Walter Clode. P. 68.



The above cited panegyric on Christianity is as false as its censure on Paganism. Some parts of it are too vague to be answered, but where it is definite an answer is easy. Christianity, it declares, abolished slavery. It did nothing of the kind. Before Christianity influenced the Roman Empire, the evils of slavery were mitigated, and the institution was thus tending to extinction. Slaves were protected by the laws, and if they were ill-treated they obtained their freedom or a less cruel master. Manumission became so frequent that the law had to impose some restraint, lest the free citizens should be overwhelmed by the multitude of new comers.<sup>1</sup> Learned and artistic slaves sat at their masters' tables and educated their children. Slavery was, in fact, a caste and not a traffic, though slaves were bought and sold. They were the offsprings of captives of war, and not kidnapped like negroes. It was reserved for Christianity to steal men from distant countries for the express purpose of making them slaves. No such infamy as the African slave-trade, carried on by Christians under the protection of Christian laws, ever disgraced the nations of antiquity.

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 Slavery

Constantine was the first Christian emperor. Did he abolish slavery? No. He liberated the slaves owned by Jews, if they embraced Christianity, but the slaves of Christian masters enjoyed no such advantage. According to the old law, a free woman who had intercourse with a slave was reduced to servitude; but Constantine humanely decreed that the free woman should be executed and the slave burnt to death.

Stoicism branded slavery as immoral, but where does the New Testament say a word against that institution? Jesus never once whispered it was wrong. He could vigorously denounce what he disapproved. His objur-

<sup>1</sup> Gibbon, chap. ii.

gation of the Scribes and Pharisees is almost without a parallel. Those who rejected his teaching and opposed his claims were overwhelmed with vituperation, but never did he censure those who held millions in cruel bondage.

Saint Paul also never said a word against slavery, but many words that lent it a sanction. He tells slaves (servants. in our Authorised Version) to count their owners worthy of all honour (1 Tim. vi. 1); to be obedient unto them, with fear and trembling, as unto Christ (Ephesians vi. 5); and to please them in all things.

All Greek scholars clearly understand that the word which Paul uses signifies *slave*, and not servant. The great Apostle was brought face to face with slavery, yet he uttered no word of condemnation. There is a certain pathetic tenderness in his letter to Philemon, if we suppose he took the institution of slavery for granted, but it vanishes if we suppose he felt the institution to be unjust. Professor Newman justly remarks that "Onesimus, in the very act of taking to flight, showed that

he had been submitting to servitude against his will."

Nor is there any escape from this writer's conclusion that, although Paul besought Philemon to treat Onesimus as a brother, "this very recommendation, full of affection as it is, virtually recognizes the moral rights of Philemon to the services of his slave." "Paul and Peter," he adds, "deliver excellent charges to masters in regard to the treatment of slaves, but without any hint to them that there is an injustice in claiming them as slaves at all. That slavery, as a system, is essentially immoral, no Christian of those days seems to have suspected."<sup>1</sup>

Century followed century, and the Church never once raised its voice against slavery as an institution. It

<sup>1</sup> Professor F. W. Newman, *Phases of Faith*, p. 105.

excommunicated heretics, but not slaveholders. Christian divines invariably justified slavery from Scripture. Ignatius (who is said to have seen Jesus), Saint Cyprian, Saint Basil, Tertullian, Saint Augustine, Gregory the Great, Saint Isidore, Saint Bernard, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and Bossuet, all taught that slavery is a divine institution. Christian jurisprudents, even in the eighteenth century, defended negro slavery, which it was reserved for the sceptical Montesquieu and the arch-heretic Voltaire to condemn.

Church Councils rivetted the slave's fetters. The Council of Laodicea actually interdicted slaves from Church communion without the consent of their masters. The Council of Orleans (541) ordered that the descendants of slave parents might be captured and replaced in the servile condition of their ancestors. The Council of Toledo (633) forbade bishops to liberate slaves belonging to the Church. Jews having made fortunes by slave-dealing, the Councils of Rheims and Toledo both prohibited the selling of Christian slaves except to Christians. Slavery laws were also passed by the Council of Pavia (1082) and the Lateran Council (1179). During all those ages, priests, abbots, and bishops held slaves. The Abbey of St. Germain de Prés owned 80,000 slaves, the Abbey of St. Martin de Tours 20,000.<sup>1</sup>

Negro slavery was likewise defended by the pulpit and the divinity chair in America. Mrs. Beecher Stowe said the Church was so familiarly quoted as being on the side of slavery, that "Statesmen on both sides of the question have laid that down as a settled fact."<sup>2</sup> Theodore Parker said that if the whole American Church had "dropped through the continent

<sup>1</sup> See Tourmagne's *Historie de l'Esclavage Ancien et Moderne*.

<sup>2</sup> Key to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p. 533.

and disappeared altogether, the Anti-Slavery cause would have been further on."<sup>1</sup> He pointed out that no Church ever issued a single tract among all its thousands, against property in human flesh and blood; and that 80,000 slaves were owned by Presbyterians, 225,000 by Baptists, and 250,000 by Methodists.

Wilberforce himself declared that the American Episcopal Church "raises no voice against the predominant evil; she palliates it in theory, and in practice she shares in it. The mildest and most conscientious of the bishops of the South are slaveholders themselves."<sup>2</sup>

The Harmony Presbytery of South Carolina deliberately resolved that slavery was justified by Holy Writ. The college church of the Union Theological Seminary, Prince Edward County, was endowed with slaves, who were hired out to the highest bidder for the pastor's salary. Lastly, Professor Moses Stuart, of Andover, who is accounted the greatest American theologian since Jonathan Edwards, declared that "the precepts of the New Testament respecting the demeanour of slaves and their masters beyond all question recognize the existence of slavery."

The Northern States were even more bigoted to slavery than the Southern States. Boston, the classic home of American orthodoxy, closed all its churches and chapels to William Lloyd Garrison, who delivered his first Anti-Slavery lecture in that city in Julian Hall, which was offered him by Abner Kneeland, an infidel who had been prosecuted for blasphemy.

American slavery was not terminated by the vote of the Churches; it was abolished by Lincoln as a strategic act in the midst of a civil war. England abolished slavery in the West Indies, and honourably or quixotically

<sup>1</sup> Theo. Parker, Works, vol. vi., p. 233.

<sup>2</sup> Wilberforce, *History of the Protestant Episcopal Church in America*, p. 421.

paid for it; but she was not the first nation to move in this matter. Professor Newman rightly observes that "the first public act against slavery came from republican France, in the madness of atheistic enthusiasm." But it is a memorable fact that Bonaparte, who set up the Catholic Church again, gave a fresh lease of life to slavery.

To assert that Christianity abolished slavery is, therefore obviously false. The statement is made but no proof is furnished, nor can it be, until history is rewritten. The Bible never condemns nor censures slavery; Christianity tolerated it without reproach for a period as long as the whole history of ancient Rome; Church Councils regulated it, and Church dignitaries reckoned slaves among their possessions. When slavery died a natural death in Europe, Christian nations continued it in America, with no hereditary excuse, but animated by the most brutal spirit of avarice; nor were divines wanting to prove that negroes might be fitly oppressed, as they were not included in the descendants of Adam. It is not so long ago to remember when slavery was legal in our West Indian colonies. Men under thirty may remember its abolition in the United States. It has only recently been abolished in Brazil. To declare these things the tardy results of a religion which was established by a divine personage nearly two thousand years ago, is to invite ridicule and laughter.

The next assertion is that Christianity "abolished human sacrifice." When and where? Does anyone suppose that human sacrifice was tolerated in the Roman Empire? Or is it believed that the stories of Abraham and Jephthah had any special tendency to discredit human sacrifice?

The "multitude of other horrors" abolished by Christianity are too vague for refutation. Reply is

impossible until these apologists condescend to be explicit. But it must be allowed, as an historical fact, that the gladiatorial shows were suppressed by Honorius.<sup>1</sup> Let Christianity receive the credit of that, if you will; but set against it the frightful severity which Christianity imported into the laws. Burning alive was first inserted into the Roman penal code by Constantine. "He appointed this punishment," says Jortin, "for various offences. To burn men alive became thenceforward a very common punishment, to the disgrace of Christianity."<sup>2</sup>

Christianity does not appear to have extinguished cruelty with the gladiatorial shows. Fourteen centuries have rolled by since then, but cock-fighting has only just died out, and bull-fights are still popular in Spain. What moral difference is there between such a sport and the old Roman shows? The lust of cruelty is gratified in both; the arena is reddened with blood; and what matter whether it flows from animal or human veins?

But all this is trivial in comparison with the positive cruelty which Christianity inflicted in the name of God. The bloodshed of the gladiatorial shows sinks into insignificance beside the bloodshed of Christian persecution. When Rome was Pagan thought was free. Gladiatorial shows satisfied the bestial craving in vulgar breasts, but the philosophers and the poets were unfettered, and the intellect of the few was gradually achieving the redemption of the many. When Rome was Christian she introduced a new slavery. Thought

<sup>1</sup> The "fact," however, seems somewhat doubtful. We allow it on the authority of Gibbon; but Dr. Smith, in a footnote to his edition of the *Decline and Fall* (vol. iv., p. 41), asserts that "the gladiatorial shows continued even at a later period."

<sup>2</sup> Archdeacon Jortin, *Remarks on Ecclesiastical History*, vol. ii., p. 137.

was chained and scourged, while the cruel instincts of the multitude were gratified with exhibitions of suffering, compared with which the bloodiest arena was tame and insipid. No longer gladiators, but heretics, were "butchered to make a Roman holiday." What hypocrisy, to denounce the bloody sports of Paganism, and call the mob to see men burnt alive! Eleven centuries after Honorius, John Calvin was burning Servetus with *green* wood to prolong his torment.<sup>1</sup> Alva was perpetrating atrocities which Tacitus would have deemed incredible. Here is a Christian picture from Lisbon, so late as 1706, beheld by Bishop Wilcox. A woman and a man were burnt for heresy.

The woman was alive in the flames half an hour, and the man above an hour.....Though the favour he begged was only a *few more faggots*, yet he was *not able to obtain it*. The wind being a little fresh, the man's hinder parts were perfectly wasted; and as he turned himself *his ribs opened*.<sup>2</sup>

Amongst the "multitude of horrors" which Christianity "abolished," was there one to equal this? Physician heal thyself! Cease denouncing others while your own hand is red enough to incarnadine the multitudinous seas.

Christianity "restored the position of women in society." We have already seen what was the position of woman under the best Roman law. In what respect did Christianity improve it? As a matter of fact, Christianity degraded woman by two methods; first, by adopting the Jewish story of the Fall; secondly, by preaching up virginity. Paul's view of woman's position is contemptible; she is as inferior to man as man is to God. Saint Jerome called her "the demon's door, the road of iniquity, the scorpion's sting." Saint

<sup>1</sup> R. Willis, *Servetus and Calvin*, p. 487.

<sup>2</sup> Chandler, *History of Persecution*, p. 827.

Chrysostom called her "a sovereign pest." "When you see a woman," said Saint Anthony, "be sure you have before you not a human being, not even a wild beast, but the Devil in person." Saint Augustine's insults were nearly as extravagant. Saint John of Damascus styled her "a child of lying, the advanced sentinel of the Devil," and "a malignant she-ass." Gregory the Great denied her "any moral sense."<sup>1</sup> That is how Christianity "restored the position of woman in society."

Christianity sought to destroy the family. "No religion," says Thulié, "has combated marriage with such ardour as Christianity." The Christian doctors despised it. Saint Jerome cried "Let us take the axe, and cut up by the roots the sterile tree of marriage. God permitted marriage at the beginning of the world, but Jesus Christ and Mary have consecrated virginity." Saint Chrysostom railed at woman for having brought about the Fall and the propagation of mankind by sexual intercourse, which he called a pollution. Tertullian told her she should wear mourning or rags, for she was the cause of the death of Christ. The triumph of Christianity meant the degradation of motherhood, and the subjection of the wife as a tolerated concession to the weakness of man's flesh. Marriage sank into gratified lust, and women fell back into the abject position they occupied in barbarous ages.

Polygamy was not proscribed by Christianity, because it did not exist in the Pagan civilization which Christianity supplanted. Monogamy was legal in Greece and Rome, and had been so for centuries. When Christianity opposed polygamy among the barbarians it simply carried forward the morality of Pagan civilization. The Bible itself never censures polygamy or enjoins monogamy.

<sup>1</sup> Thulié, pp. 201-206.



That Christianity "put down divorce" is undoubtedly true, but the result was of questionable value. The Church still brands divorce with its anathema, but the secular law, even in the most Catholic countries, has been constrained to permit it under certain conditions.

Christianity certainly did not put down war, nor did it make "peace, instead of war, the normal relation between human societies." The *Pax Romanus* was a reality, which Christendom has never equalled. At no time did the Roman armies number four hundred thousand men; yet now, after eighteen centuries of the gospel of peace, Europe is armed to the teeth, millions of soldiers are grasping arms, and every Christian nation anxiously increases its defences. On a *peace* footing, Europe spends nearly two hundred millions every year on armies and navies, and another two hundred millions are required to pay the interest on debts incurred over past wars. New rifles, new artillery, new explosives, crowd upon us every few years. Surely, in the face of these facts, the Christian's eulogy of his creed is the idlest verbiage.

Christians are right, however, in saying that Christianity "changed essentially the place and function of suffering." Suffering was always regarded as an evil before Christianity preached it as a blessing. Fortunately, the modern world is returning to the old opinion, and the party of progress is everywhere warring against the evils of this life, without waiting for the rectifications of another world.

Charity itself has been narrowed by Christianity into mere almsgiving. Paul's great panegyric on this virtue is perhaps the finest thing in the New Testament, but the very word he uses (*caritas*) was borrowed from Pagan moralists. Cicero anticipated him before the birth of Christ in his *caritas generis humani*.

"Humility and forgiveness" are fine phrases, but they are seldom more. Generally, they are little else than cheap devices for popular oppression. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth," is a sweet text; but, as a matter of fact, the soil of England is chiefly owned by the House of Lords. The clergy, also, have taught humility by enjoining the "lower orders" to remain contented in that state of life to which Providence has called them, and to order themselves lowly and reverently to all their betters. As for "forgiveness," we have simply to point out that, until recently, the criminal jurisprudence of Christendom was a ghastly scandal. Even in England, in the early part of the present century, men and women were hung in batches for small felonies; and when Romilly tried to terminate this infamy, he was vigorously opposed by the bench of Bishops.

Improvements in life are the offspring of civilization, not of religion. Why was there so little civilization in Europe when Christianity was supreme? Why did Europe wait so long for the advent of what we call "progress"? Why was every new idea baptized in blood? Why was every reform opposed by the Church of Christ? Why have scepticism and civilization moved forward with an equal pace? Why does Christianity fade as men become wiser and happier? Why is this age of progress the age of unbelief?

Let Christians pluck out the heart of this mystery; a mystery indeed on his principles, though sun-clear to the Freethinker, who sees in the history of Christianity and civilization the perpetual strife of irreconcilable opposites.

## MOHAMMEDANISM AND THE SWORD.\*

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### I.

Now that the "Eastern Question" is once more burning, and all sorts of charges are made against the Turk—not only *as* a Turk, but also as a *Mohammedan*—it will be as well, at least for Freethinkers, to get a clear view of the *facts* of the case; since it is only the *facts* that are of any importance whatever to men of judgment who think for themselves.

The Christians in the south-east of Europe are represented as ethnologically and morally superior to the Mohammedans. They are thus represented, that is, by their partisans in the pulpit and the press. But they are not thus represented by travellers. It is almost the universal testimony of those who have visited that part of the world that the Mohammedans are, on the whole, superior to the Christians in chastity, temperance, self-control, veracity, and sincerity; in all the virtues that build up a strong, wholesome, and dignified manhood.

The superiority of the Mohammedans in the fundamental virtues of human life is a very old story. The testimony of the chroniclers of the Crusades on this point is very striking. It was a commonplace amongst Protestant preachers on salvation by faith, who were fond of declaring that if good works could save a man, Turks would go to heaven before Christians. John Wesley said the same thing in slightly altered words. Half a century later, Byron seized on this very

\* Written October, 1903.

point in that splendid battle scene in the eighth canto of *Don Juan*, where the old Turk, whose five sons have all fallen around him, still wields his blade, and refuses to surrender, in spite of the entreaties of the rough Russians who were touched by the only thing that could touch them—his serene bravery. Was the poet describing the son of Priam, or Peleus, or Jove?

Neither—but a good, plain, old temperate man.

Byron saw with his own eyes and knew what he was talking about. A recent traveller has observed that the honest business men in Salonica are mostly Turks: Byron noticed the same characteristic nearly a hundred years ago. In a note to the second canto of *Childe Harold* he said:—

In all money transactions with the Moslems, I ever found the strictest honour, the highest disinterestedness. In transacting business with them, there are none of those dirty peculations, under the name of interest, difference of exchange, commission, etc., etc., uniformly found in applying to a Greek consul to cash bills, even on the first houses in Pera.

The same sincerity was apparent in their religious devotions. Renan was so impressed whenever he stood within a mosque that he could hardly help wishing himself a Mussulman. Byron wrote thus of the Mohammedans he had often beheld at their prayers:—

On me the simple and entire sincerity of these men, and the spirit which appeared to be within and upon them, made a far greater impression than any general rite which was ever performed in places of worship, of which I have seen those of almost every persuasion under the sun.

Speaking of the Turks in general, Byron said with great energy:—

It is difficult to pronounce what they are, we can at least say what they are *not*: they are *not* treacherous,

they are *not* cowardly, they do *not* burn heretics, they are *not* assassins, nor has an enemy advanced to *their* capital. They are faithful to their sultan till he becomes unfit to govern, and devout to their God without an inquisition. Were they driven from St. Sophia (Constantinople) to-morrow, and the French or Russians enthroned in their stead, it would become a question whether Europe would gain by the exchange. England would certainly be the loser.

Byron praises the toleration of the Turks in this passage. Strange as it may sound to orthodox Christian ears, Mohammedanism is not a persecuting religion; and, as a matter of fact, there is far more religious freedom in Turkey than in Russia—more, indeed, than has obtained until quite recently in progressive countries in England and France. Carry the comparison back a hundred, or even fifty years ago, and you will find that Turkey was in this respect the most enlightened and liberal country in Europe.

Some plain truth on this matter was lately expressed by Professor Syed All Bilgrami, lecturer in the Marathi language at the University of Cambridge. This gentleman was interviewed by a representative of the *Daily News*; and one passage in the interviewer's report is well worth quoting:—

Then you claim that Islam is tolerant?

It is the most tolerant faith of all. There has never been such absolute toleration under any other religion. In Turkey, if a subject pays his taxes and discharges his civil obligations, he is absolutely free as to faith. Missionaries of all religions are tolerated. Why, if I preached Islam here in Norwood you know I should be mobbed.

With regard to one important point—however much it may be considered as by the way—Professor Bilgrami made a statement which cannot be too often

repeated. "I think," he said, "the Mohammedans suffer even more than the Christians for want of firm and equitable government." A number of testimonies to this effect are quoted by Professor T. W. Arnold in his able, and, in some respects, noble, book, *The Preaching of Islam* (pp. 132, 133). Finlay, the great historian of Greece, remarked that "The central government of the Sultan has generally treated its Mussulman subjects with as much cruelty and injustice as the conquered Christians." Forsyth, writing as late as 1876, said that Turkish misgovernment falls with a heavy hand on all alike. "In some parts of the kingdom," he added, "the poverty of the Mussulmans may be actually worse than the poverty of the Christians, and it is *their* condition which most excites the pity of the traveller." Bryce, writing still later of the north of Asia Minor, said, "All this oppression and misery falls upon the Mohammedan population equally with the Christian." The real truth is that the condition of the Christians in Turkey is not primarily a religious question at all, but a purely political one. Had this truth been steadily borne in mind, and firmly represented to the public opinion of the Western world, the "Eastern Question" might long ago have ceased to exist—that is, if the Western Powers had also been sincere in their expressions of desire for a reformation in the state of affairs in Turkey, instead of aiming at its dismemberment and spoliation.

It is that "The propagation of his faith by the sword is part of the religion of the Turk." This is devoutly believed by the vast majority of Christians. But, like a good many other things they devoutly believe, it rests upon a very flimsy foundation. Professor Bilgrami denied it most emphatically:—

Propagation of religion by the sword? That is entirely an exploded view. No Mohammedan ever thinks that religion is to be propagated by the sword.

Professor Bilgrami took the opportunity to add something that will astonish the Christians who read it. They have been taught that Mohammedans call them "infidels"—which, by the way, is their *own* favourite term for those who differ from *them*. But this, Professor Bilgrami said, is wholly incorrect:—

The "infidels" referred to in the Koran were the cruel, idolatrous pagans of Arabia. The Christians are called "the people of the Book," and we believe in the sinless life and prophetic mission of Christ, though not in his Divinity,

The statement that it is a part of the Turk's religion to propagate his faith by the sword is a very old calumny. Its justification has always been that it served the turn. That it was a lie was a matter of little importance. When our English Pocock visited the great Christian apologist Grotius, in the seventeenth century, and asked him his authority for the story that Mohammed kept a tame pigeon to pick peas out of his ear, and pretended that it whispered him messages from God, Grotius admitted that he had no authority for it at all. Yet the lie lived on for another two hundred years.

If we go back to Lord Bacon we shall find him giving classic expression to this old charge against the Turk of conquest in the name of religion. In the Essay "Of Kingdoms and Estates" his lordship says: "The Turk hath at hand, for cause of war, the propagation of his law or sect, a quarrel that he may always command." In the Essay "Of Unity in Religion" he amplifies this statement:—

There be two swords amongst Christians, the spiritual and the temporal; and both have their due office in the maintenance of religion. But we may not take up the third sword, which is Mahomet's sword, or like unto it:

that is, to propagate religion by wars, or by sanguinary persecutions to force consciences ; except it be in cases of overt scandal, blasphemy, or intermixture of practice against the State.

It is common for the advocates of Christianity against other religions to display craftiness, and Lord Bacon was no exception to the rule. Courage, indeed, as well as cunning, was necessary to write such a passage as this while Christendom was being torn to pieces with religious wars. There is even a positively atrocious subtlety in the idea that, while it is wrong to declare war against another country for the purpose of propagating your own religion, it is quite right to carry on a war, for the same object, against your fellow citizens.

Lord Bacon deals with this subject again, from a political point of view, in his tractate on "War with Spain" :—

In deliberation of war against the Turk it hath been often, with great judgment, maintained that Christian princes and States have always a sufficient ground of invasive war against the enemy ; not for cause of religion, but upon a just fear ; forasmuch as it is a fundamental law in the Turkish Empire that they may, without any further provocation, make war upon Christendom for the propagation of their law ; so that there lieth upon Christians a perpetual fear of war, hanging over their heads, from them ; and therefore they may at all times, as they think good, be upon the preventive.

What a detestable doctrine—built upon what a foundation of falsehood ! Whenever you feel disposed to cut the Turk's throat, however long he may have been living at peace with you, all you have to do is recollect that if he were logical he would be trying to cut your throat, and then you may logically proceed to cut his in self-defence.



Dr. Johnson was just the man to repeat this doctrine, although the lapse of a hundred and fifty years compelled him to be more cautious in his expressions. In a note on Shakespeare's *Henry IV.*, he says :—

If it be a part of the religion of the Mohammedans to extirpate by the sword all other religions, it is, by the laws of self-defence, lawful for men of every other religion, and for Christians among others, to make war upon Mohammedans, simply as Mohammedans as men obliged by their own principles to make war upon Christians, and only lying in wait till opportunity shall promise them success.

The "if" in this passage destroys the force of all that follows. But a truer knowledge of Mohammedanism was beginning to prevail, and Johnson had to be more circumspect than his great predecessor.

## II.

Long before Johnson, and soon after Bacon, the wise and witty, and generally humane, Thomas Fuller dealt with this point in his *History of the Holy War*—that is, of the Crusades. Fuller gives the arguments for and against the "lawfulness of the Holy War" without positively committing himself to either side. Amongst the affirmative arguments, he perhaps implies, but he does not assert, that the Mohammedans were bound to propagate their religion by the sword. "A preventive war," he says, "grounded on a just fear of invasion is lawful; but such was this holy war." The only "fear" he actually alleges, however, is based upon the Saracenic conquests, which had driven Christianity out of Africa and Asia, and were threatening it in Europe. This might have justified the Christian nations in joining together to keep the Saracens out of Europe: but, as a matter of fact,

they did not join together for that object; their aim was simply to wrest Palestine—and with it Jerusalem and the Sepulchre of Christ—from the hands of the “unbelievers,” who had been peaceably settled there for four hundred and sixty years!

Fuller, although a doctor of divinity, was so little of a bigot that he not only slurred over the popular Christian belief so openly adopted by Bacon, but often put in a good word for the Mohammedans. The following admission, touching the state of the Christians in Palestine, is quite remarkable:—

Now the condition of the Christians under these Saracens was as uncertain as April weather. Sometimes they enjoyed the liberty and public exercise of their religion; and to give the Mohammedans their due, they are generally good fellows on this point, and Christians amongst them may keep their consciences free, if their tongues be fettered not to oppose the doctrine of Mahomet.

We do not believe that such an honest sentence concerning Mohammedanism can be found in the pages of any contemporary writer. Fuller probably felt in his heart that Christianity was the more intolerant religion of the two.

Historically, it is quite true that the Mohammedans have always allowed Christians to live amongst them in peace—at least to a far greater extent than Christians have tolerated Mohammedans. Mohammed himself never oppressed the Christians who would live at peace with him. Gibbon justly observes that he “readily granted the security of their persons, the freedom of their trade, the property of their goods, and the toleration of their worship.” Christian churches were permitted in Mohammedan States, although no Christian State would have tolerated a Mohammedan mosque. The Mohammedan conquerors of India

showed religious toleration to the inhabitants; and the first empire in modern times in which perfect religious freedom was universal, was that of Akbar, whose magnanimity has been sung by Tennyson. The Arabian caliphs gave freedom to all the oriental sects, employed Christians as secretaries and physicians, appointed them collectors of the revenue, and sometimes raised them to the command of cities and provinces. Saladin, on recapturing Jerusalem from the Crusaders, treated the Latin Christians as foreigners, and therefore as captives of war; but he regarded the Greek and Oriental Christians as inhabitants of the locality, and therefore permitted them to remain as his subjects, and to worship their gods in their own fashion. Nor has this tolerant tradition ever been violated. Many a fugitive from Christian bigotry has found shelter in Turkey. Jews and Christians enjoy equal liberty of conscience throughout the Turkish Empire. Latin and Greek Christians are both allowed to worship in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem. Yet their hatred of each other is still so great that a line of Turkish soldiers stand between them to prevent their flying at each other's throats. What a spectacle! And how the Turk, who worships one God, without a rival or a partner, must look down with contempt on these quarrelsome superstitionists!

### III.

With regard to the Turks in particular, it is a common Christian notion that they were always brutal conquerors, who upheld and extended their religion simply by the sword. This is a very mistaken notion. When the Turkish power was flourishing, before it began to decay under the attacks and diplomacy of Russia, and the general pressure of the

European governments, it was renowned for its liberality.

Let us pause here to tell a story—a true one. During the bitter persecution of the inoffensive Quakers in England in the seventeenth century, many women were stripped and flogged on their naked backs in public places. This suffering and indignity was inflicted upon them by their fellow Christians; not tumultuously, but deliberately, in the name of the law, and by the order of the authorities. One simple young woman was flogged from town to town, and frequently imprisoned under shocking conditions. Being an invincible enthusiast, she took it into her head to go off to the East and speak to the Sultan of Turkey. She succeeded in making her way there, and found the Sultan encamped before Adrianople. She was brought before him, and he listened courteously to her “message from God.” When she had finished he told her that what she had said was very good, and thanked her for her trouble, although he could not quite believe all that she did. He then asked her how she came so far alone. She replied that she trusted in God. Whereupon he smiled, and said he hardly thought this protection enough for a lonely maid. He saw that her wants were supplied, and appointed a guard to conduct her safely through his own dominions.

What a fine gentleman! If men must have kings, this is the sort they should have. We could do with a few like him in modern Europe. And just think of the two different experiences of that Quaker maiden. Brutally ill-treated in her own country by her fellow-Christians, and treated with the noblest courtesy by a Mohammedan ruler in a foreign land!

The spirit displayed by that Sultan was far from singular in the great days of the Turkish Empire.

There was, indeed, a tradition of magnanimity in the Mohammedan world. It was remembered how finely the Caliph Omar had acted after his capture of Jerusalem; how the lives, liberties, possessions, and churches of the Christians were respected. It was remembered how the Crusaders, hundreds of years afterwards, recaptured Jerusalem, and turned it into a slaughter-house. It was remembered how, in spite of this terrible provocation, Saladin listened to the voice of humanity when he won Jerusalem back from the Christians; how he shed no unnecessary drop of blood, and showed the tenderest compassion to his captives. Never had the great Mohammedan rulers dealt with the Christians after the method so often employed in Europe. They could have swept Christianity out of their dominions as easily as Ferdinand and Islam drove Islam out of Spain, or as Louis XIV. drove Protestantism out of France. But they did nothing of the kind. If they had, there would have been no Christian Churches, or Christian provinces, left to give rise to the present-day troubles in the Turkish Empire.

When the Turks took Constantinople, in 1453, the first thing Mohammed did, after re-establishing order in the city, was to issue a decree of toleration to the Christians, who were practically allowed to regulate their own affairs. Indeed, the majority of them found the change a welcome relief, after their experience of Christian misrule.

Mohammedanism spread in South-east Europe subsequently without compulsion. The fact is that freedom and toleration were only to be found under the Sultan's government. Jews fled to it from persecution; persecuted Protestants looked towards it with longing eyes. Even the Russians praised it when the Catholic Poles, in the seventeenth century, inflicted frightful

atrocities on the members of the orthodox Eastern Church. It was in reference to these horrors that Macarius, the Patriarch of Antioch, exclaimed "God perpetuate the empire of the Turks for ever! For they," he added, "take their impost and enter into no account of religion, be their subjects Christians or Nazarenes, Jews or Samaritans."

It may be objected that the Turks carved out an empire with the sword, and that this is tantamount to the spread of Mohammedanism by the same means. But is not this objection nonsensical? With what, pray, did the British carve out an empire in India? And is that empire, won as it was, a proof that Christianity is spread by the sword?

#### IV.

Now, if Mohammedanism has, as a matter of fact, been far more tolerant than Christianity, there must be something wrong somewhere when Christians stand up and address Mohammedans as persecutors, represent them as being under a fatal necessity of propagating their religion by the sword, and accuse them of being a perpetual menace to all their neighbours.

Mohammed distinctly says in the Koran, "Let there be no compulsion in religion." "Wilt thou," he asks, "compel men to become believers? No soul can believe but by the permission of God." The Prophet of Islam never said anything really contrary to this. All the texts that are cited about war with unbelievers were, as we shall see presently, of local and special application.

That the Mussulman faith never forced consciences was emphasized by one of the Spanish Mohammedans who was driven out of Spain in the last expulsion of the Moriscoes in 1610, at the instigation of the bloody

Inquisition. Here are some of his words :—

Did our victorious ancestors ever once attempt to extirpate Christianity out of Spain, when it was in their power? Did they not suffer your forefathers to enjoy the free use of their rites at the same time that they wore their chains? Is not the absolute injunction of our Prophet, that whatever nation is conquered by Mussulman steel, should, upon payment of a moderate annual tribute, be permitted to persevere in their own pristine persuasion, how absurd soever, or to embrace what other belief they themselves best approved of? If there may have been some examples of forced conversions, they are so rare as scarce to deserve mentioning, and only attempted by men who had not the fear of God, and the Prophet, before their eyes, and who, in so doing, have acted directly and diametrically contrary to the holy precepts and ordinances of Islam, which cannot without sacrilege, be violated by any who would be held worthy of the honourable epithet of Mussulman.....You can never produce, among us, any bloodthirsty, formal tribunal, on account of different persuasions in points of faith, that anywise approaches your execrable Inquisition. Our arms, it is true, are ever open to receive all who are disposed to embrace our religion; but we are not allowed by our sacred Kuran to tyrannise over consciences."

This very toleration was urged against them as one of their principle crimes by the Archbishop of Valencia, who presented Philip III., in 1602, with an account of the "Apostacies and Treasons of the Moriscoes," with a view to their expulsion from the Christian soil of Spain. One article against them was: "That they commended nothing so much as liberty of conscience, in all matters of religion, which the Turks, and all other Mohammedans, suffer their subjects to enjoy."

In spite of all this it is urged that the Jihad, or Holy War, is taught in the Koran, and is a part of the law

and faith of Islam.

Professor Arnold, who devotes a chapter to this subject, shows conclusively that the meaning of the verb *jahada* is really to "strive, labour, toil, exert oneself, take pains, be diligent." "Primarily," he says, "the word bears no reference to war or fighting, much less to fighting against unbelievers or forcible conversion of them, but derives its particular application from the context only." This he proves by citing all the passages in the Koran in which the word occurs.

There is no higher English authority than Lane, and his verdict is clear and decisive. "No precept," he says, "is to be found in the Koran which, taken with the context, can justify unprovoked war."

Professor Arnold's summary of the whole matter is as follows:—

It is due to the Muhammedan legists and commentators that jihad came to be interpreted as a religious war against unbelievers, who might be attacked even though they were not the aggressors; but such a doctrine is wholly unauthorised by the Qur'an, and can only be extracted therefrom by quoting isolated portions of different verses, considered apart from the context and the special circumstances under which they were delivered and to which alone they were held to refer, being in no way intended as positive injunctions for future observance or religious precepts for coming generations. But though some Muhammedan legists have maintained the rightfulness of unprovoked war against unbelievers, none (as far as I am aware) have ventured to justify compulsory conversion, but have always vindicated for the conquered the right of retaining their own faith on payment of jizyah.

The only point to be added is that "some legists" are not all legists. As far as we can ascertain, the majority of Mohammedan legists have been *against* unprovoked war on unbelievers.

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