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## CHRISTIANITY AND THE FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE.

Among the many thrusts that are made at Christianity in Gibbon's great work, there is one that we do not remember to have seen noticed as it deserves, charging it, as far as he dared, with the decline of the Roman Empire. In the general observations that he makes on the Roman Empire in the West, at the close of Chapter XXXVIII, there occur the following characteristic sentences, which gleam all over with his own malignant mockery. "As the happiness of a *future* life is the great object of religion, we may hear without surprise or scandal, that the introduction, or at least the abuse, of Christianity had some influence on the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. The clergy successfully preached the doctrines of patience and pusillanimity; the active virtues of society were discouraged; and the last remains of military spirit were buried in the cloister; a large portion of public and private wealth was consecrated to the specious demands of charity and devotion; and the soldier's pay was lavished on the useless multitudes of both sexes who could only plead the merits of abstinence and chastity." He afterwards qualifies this sneering attack by the reluctant admission that its influence on the Barbarians was salutary, and tended to prevent the total ruin of society when the mighty empire fell to pieces.

There was nothing original in this insinuated charge. While the great Empire was slowly dying, there were not a few of the remaining adherents of Paganism who charged this gradual decay on the anger of the gods, who were offended at the introduction of Christianity, and the consequent neglect of their ancient altars. So loudly was this charge made, that Augustine found it necessary to write a refutation of it in his treatise

*De Civitate Dei*. This treatise, whilst it is professedly a refutation of this calumny, is really a rambling dissertation on all manner of questions—theological, mythological and philosophical—in the peculiar style and taste of the age, with much that is valuable, and much that is mere chaff. The elements of a refutation are scattered through it, and may exist there in a form that was adapted to the mental habits of the fourth century, but they are not sufficiently concentrated to meet the forms of thought that prevail in our day.

It is obvious that the proper refutation of the charge would be to show that the causes of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire were distinct from Christianity, either chronologically or logically, and that their nature was such that Christianity tended to counteract rather than to aggravate them. This is, of course, a very wide field of investigation, and one that we cannot expect fully to occupy in our assigned space. All, therefore, that we will aim at is to indicate the general track of the argument, giving the results of investigation, rather than the investigations themselves, in order that those who have leisure and ability for studies of this kind may follow out these suggestions at their leisure.

In enquiring after the causes of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, we must look far higher up in its history than the age of decrepitude that preceded its destruction, for the diseases of such a stupendous organism are usually chronic, and require generations for their development. Hence we must go backward at least as far as the date when Christianity came in contact with Roman civilization, and there determine the actual amount of inherent vitality that it possessed, before we shall have before us the elements necessary for the decision of this question.

When the chosen twelve went forth from Jerusalem to "preach the gospel to every creature," the Roman Empire had reached the acme of its magnificent greatness. It

had arisen from the great sea, the fourth form in the prophet's visions, dark, iron-teethed, terrible, stamping under foot the helpless, tearing down the strong, absorbing with a greed the most insatiable, and a rapidity the most startling, provinces, kingdoms and empires, until the bannered Eagle that bore those potent initials S. P. Q. R. gazed on the sun as it flashed from the waters of the Euphrates, and only lost sight of it when it sunk behind the misty shores of Britain. Those enduring roads, which centering at the Forum, stretched their rocky arms over mountain and valley, through the depths of primeval forests and onward to the remotest boundary of the Empire, were apt symbols of that crushing authority which radiated in stern and unbending might from Imperial city. Rome was the focus of the world, and all the costliest things of earth were poured into this august metropolis. And, at this period, as if to facilitate the spread of any new opinion, the temple of Janus, the second time in its history, was closed, and the world in a state of quiet and commercial activity that made intercourse between different nations easy. And such was the splendor of literature and art that marked this era, that it became the standard of all subsequent advancement; and the very name of the Augustan age has been since the most significant designation of the most brilliant period of a nation's literary history.

But whilst all this is true, it is also true that beneath this glittering exterior the inquiring eye may detect some of the elements of decay that finally caused this colossus of the nations to totter and fall before the fierce storms from the Northern forests, and fall with a crash that startled the world. We notice a few of these elements.

We believe that among the first and most potent of these defects was, a want of any strong and sincere faith in the principles of virtue and religion. The ancient Roman was a man of faith, and a man of virtue according to his faith, and hence was a man of power. Believing that unseen eyes were upon him, and unseen arms around him, he resolved from a higher than human motives, and he acted from a mightier than human strength. He went right forward in the pur-

suit of the right, like the iron man of the Fairy Queen, turning aside neither at the call of the Siren, or the menace of the Fury, but with an unflinching purpose pressing right onward, though his path should carry him to the shades of Orcus and the tribunal of Rhadamanthus, from which he believed he would surely pass to the sunny plains of Elysium. It was this sublime martyr faith in what he deemed to be duty to the gods and duty to men, that made the ancient Roman at once the model and monarch of his race, and rendered Roman arms and Roman policy invincible. The history of early Rome, even in the fabulous pages of Livy, is brilliant with unquestioned proofs of this fact.

But when we come to examine the Augustan era, we find a mournful change. As in Greece religion had degenerated into a mere love for the fine arts, as christianity did later in Italy, so in Rome the only residuum left of the ancient religion was a species of patriotism. All genuine faith in religion was extinct, so that Cicero, in spite of his disquisitions in favor of the existence of the gods, and the immortality of the soul, more than hints at his doubts of both, and openly expresses his wonder that the augurs could look each other in the face without laughing. The rhetorical treatise addressed to Herennius and ascribed to Cicero, evinces incidentally and unconsciously a corruption of society in every department of it, that is even more startling and appalling, than the direct evidences of depravity set forth in the caustic pages of Horace, Persius and Juvenal. Religion had degenerated, according to the nature of the mind with which it dealt, either into superstition or infidelity, and the sole renovators of society, were to be found in the sty of Epicurus or the kennel of Diogenes. There was no motive impelling the mass of society to virtue drawn from this life, for its only reward was privation and ridicule; and none drawn from the life to come, for that was deemed a fable. Hence passion and appetite in every form were let loose, in all their hideous shapes of brutality and ferocity, without a check, but that of bitter rivalry and hostile collision. The proofs of these allegations present themselves in sickening and disgusting detail, in almost every work re-

maining of that splendid but rotten age. Nor was the tendency of this condition of society unseen by philosophic observers. The pages of Livy, Sallust, Pliny the Elder, Plutarch and Tacitus evince a painful sense of the malady, without any knowledge of the remedy. That remedy must be a religion simple enough to be grasped by the faith of the poor and ignorant; lofty enough to command the faith of the intellectual and learned; sublime enough in its teachings to breathe a new life into the dying age; pure enough in its requisitions to cleanse the filthiness of this huge Augean stable; and strong enough in its hopes and influences to exorcise the unclean spirits, whose name was Legion; and such a religion alone was found in Christianity.

Another serious and fatal defect in this civilization, was the social position of woman, and the domestic relations of society. The family is the fountain of civilization, and woman is the tutelary spirit of the family. It is in the household that the purest and holiest affections take their earliest rise, and around the household that they will cling and twine with their longest and fondest attachment. It is in the sweet influences of family scenes, and family affections, that those pure and vestal principles of noble acts, are lit in the secret shrines of the human heart, that are the last to be quenched in the career of vice, and that often, casting their high and starry brightness on the troubled sea of ambition, debauchery and despair, gently lure the wayward and weary voyager back to the calm and peaceful track that leads to the happy isles of the blest. "The child is the father of the man;" and the mother is the moulding architect that forms the child. Let the homestead be a place of pure and holy breathings, embosomed in an atmosphere of virtue and truth; and the young heart will drink in their sunny influences like the opening flower, and develop them in the rich foliage and clustering fruit of purpling maturity and green old age. Hence a nation's households embosom a nation's destiny.

When we look at Rome in the high and palmy days of her prosperity, we find that although her households were never to be compared with a Christian home, or her

wives and mothers with Christian matrons, yet she possessed many such wives as Lucretia, and many such mothers as Cornelia. But at the period under discussion corruption the most loathsome and festering had reached the households of Rome, and poisoned society at its very fountain. It is a significant fact, that of all the touching and beautiful pictures given us, in the undying literature of this period, there occur so few delineations of the domestic affections; so few recognitions of anything like a home; so few of those artless touches of deep and thrilling emotion that cause the eye to glisten, and the heart to swell over pages of a Burns, a Wilson, or an Irving. On the contrary, in the pages of Juvenal and Horace, and especially of Tacitus, we have some pictures of Roman homes, sketched in colors so ghastly and horrible, that the pencil seems dipped in the lurid flames of the pit. Licentiousness, jealousy, discord and hate; plots of husband against wife, and wife against husband; mothers sacrificing their own children, to their shameless and horrible lusts; divorces succeeding divorces with disgusting frequency; and in default of these the dagger or the poisoned bowl, made the ready pander to brutal appetites; murder, perjury, suicide, robbery and incest; these are the elements composing these horrible pictures. In the later days of the empire, marriage was deemed a degrading yoke, and children a curse; the wife was a mere slave, and learning, and cultivation of mind deemed only proper for the courtesan. Hence there was needed, that effeminacy should not lead to utter extinction, some agency that would purify the domestic relations; cause husband and wife, and parent and child, to regard each other with suitable affection; and lift the wife, the mother, the sister and the daughter to their proper position, as the golden links that sweetly and softly bind into one the jarring elements of society. Such an agency was Christianity, the only religion on earth that raises woman to her proper position, and thus creates a home.

Another serious defect was the gradual decrease of a hardy, robust, industrious middle class in Roman society, having an interest in maintaining her institutions in peace, and defending them in war. The import-

ance of such a class in every government, is too manifest to require a moment's remark. No good government can exist without it. It is true we do not find in any ancient government, a body of men corresponding to the vast middle class of modern society, the mighty *tiers etat*, who are now the real rulers of the world. But in ancient Rome we find perhaps a nearer approach to this class, than we do in any other community, except the Hebrew commonwealth under the judges and early kings. The hardy yeomanry of Latium, whose nerves and muscles were strung by agricultural toil, manly exercise and virtuous habits, were thus fitted to put on the massive armor of the legionary, and go forth to the conquest of the world. But when in the third and fourth century of the Christian era, the fierce barbaric hordes came down like the vulture on his prey, we look in vain for this class. They are extinct. The rich fields that once stretched along the Alps and Apennines, are deserted and barren, and the place that their hardy cultivators once occupied in the armies filled by the rude Dacian, the fierce Hun, and the barbaric Goth. Hence when these hired defenders chose to grasp the rich prize they had hitherto protected, there was no force adequate to resist them. What then produced this strange and fatal destruction of so important a class of men, and thus the destruction of the empire? We find all the causes at work during the Augustan age.

The first was the gratuitous distribution by the government to the people, first, of grain, then, of bread, and finally, of every necessary of life. These staples of subsistence were drawn from the rich and conquered provinces of Egypt, Lybia and Sicily, which by reason of their superior advantages of soil and climate, were able to undersell the Italian agriculturists, and thus drive them from the market. Discouraging native agriculture, and paying a premium to idleness, by this gratuitous distribution, we find that at this very period, Cicero testifies that not more than 2000 citizens, out of the vast population of Rome, possessed the means of independent subsistence. Hence the race of agriculturists gradually withdrew from this unequal and bootless contest, and forsaking their fields, became lost in the needy crowd of

hungry retainers in the city. As the barbarians began to make their pillaging incursions, the frontier districts became insecure, and were therefore gradually abandoned. But by the absurd municipal regulations of Rome, the amount of tax levied on these provinces remained precisely what it was when they were populous and flourishing. Hence as the population decreased, and the rewards of labor diminished, while the tax required from each province remained the same, it soon required all the labor of the husbandman to meet the enormous and increasing burden of taxation that fell to his share. This insane policy tended to depopulate entirely the agricultural districts, and destroy their hardy, rural, industrial population on which the state had once so much depended.

Another cause of the disappearance of this middle class of society, was the enormous increase of the slave population. By reason of the numerous captives taken in war, and the natural increase of the slaves, they at last numbered from 50 to 60,000,000 of souls, and single families in Rome possessed from 20 to 30,000. Labor thus became cheap and degrading, and the laboring class of freemen gradually disappeared. An enormous drain was made on the resources of the republic, for the maintenance of the slave population, and in consequence of their cruel treatment, a hardy and powerful race was created burdensome to the commonwealth, yet bitterly hostile to its interests. The natural result of this process was seen in the invasion of Rome by Alaric, when 40,000 slaves joined him in a body, and became his most desperate and ferocious soldiers.

There was therefore needed an agency that would remove these monstrous inequalities of society, and give to honest labor its proper dignity, and that agency was found alone in the religion that declared, "he that will not work shall not eat."

The last serious defect that we notice, is the want of any proper feelings of common humanity. The very etymology of the word humanity, suggests the social and political importance of the feelings included in the term. A nation that lacks these feelings, not only falls short of the proper standard of civilization, but ultimately procures its own destruction by one of the inevitable laws of

providence. It is true a Roman audience could rise up in admiration of that noble expression of human brotherhood "*homo sum, et nil humani a me alienum puto,*" but it is also true, that this same audience, perhaps, could the next hour raise a shout of equal applause over the shrieking victim, writhing in the jaws of wild beasts, or the bleeding form of the dying gladiator. Tens of thousands of wretched combatants were sometimes brought forward at a single gladiatorial show, to glut that savage and cowardly thirst for mangling and blood, that only grew with its gratification. When to this we add the brutal treatment received by the sickly infant; the decrepit parent; the hapless victim of disease and accident; the wounded soldier; the captive foe and the miserable slave; we see a savage ferocity that provoked the vengeance of both God and man, and that it might not work the utter ruin of the society that harbored it, required for its cure a religion that delighted not in blood; whose spirit was love, and whose model him that cried, "Father forgive them, they know not what they do."

We see from this rapid sketch of the defects of Roman civilization, there was ample scope for the exertion of the peculiar influences of Christianity; that the very causes that produced the downfall of this mighty power, were directly antagonistic to the whole spirit and temper of Christianity; and that hence if it exerted any influence at all on society, that influence must be adverse to these causes of ruin. and therefore conservative and salutary. But it was impossible for anything short of a miracle to arrest the downfall of the existing form of the Roman empire. It had passed from the budding vigor of its wolf-nursed youth, through the crowned and imperial strength of an iron maturity, to the driveling dotage of an effete and corrupt old age. Christianity might retard its dissolution, but possessed no Medean charm, or elixir of immortality to bring the vigor of youth back to its tottering frame. The doom of destiny was upon it, and it must go down to the grave.

Now, in looking at these causes of the decay of the Roman empire, we put it to any candid mind whether the tendency of Christianity was not to arrest this decay rather

than hasten it; and to any candid scholar, whether it did not in fact arrest it, and become a phoenix principle in this consuming body, gathering all of vitality and endurance that was left in the perishing frame, and arising at length from the ashes of its pyre, in the new and majestic form of modern civilization in Europe and America. If this be true, as the pages of Guizot, Stephen, Taylor and other writers of unchallenged ability, clearly demonstrate, how malignant was the stab that the Joab hand of the polished Gibbon sought to plant in the heart of the religion of Jesus Christ. T. V. M.

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### MY PLANET.

My heart! my heart! take all my heart—all, all,  
 O glorious planet from the Eastern home,  
 Of light—O dazzling splendor rise and come,  
 Rise and sail slowly upward at my call!  
 Sail slowly forth! thy Chaldean waits for thee,  
 Sail grandly out! A true heart dark and cold,  
 With watching waits to see thy glory rolled  
 Through the great heaven—a light, a mystery!  
 A light, a mystery! a new found world,  
 Radiant with youth, a fountain of delight!  
 Come golden planet! rise up on my height,  
 Rise in the East with cloud banners unfurled,  
 Or in the West—a new, more glorious day;  
 Long dreamed of, magical, like bright Cathay!

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### PASSAGES FOR A SENTIMENTALIST.

BY T. N.

—How refining—how elevating—how subduing are the influences of night! The external circumstances that may have had power to fret the spirit all the day, till it was ready to succumb under their dull weight, lose their importance with the twilight, and dwindle down to an insignificant pettiness that makes us wonder at our own weakness in having suffered ourselves to be so overborne by them. But in proportion as the outer life relaxes its hold upon us, does the inner assert its superiority, and invite all the pensive memories which the glare and noise of the busy day had scared away, to come forth like fairies from their hiding-places, and hold undisturbed revel under the quiet eye of night.