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XXII. Christianity in the Roman empire

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XXII.

Christianity in the Roman empire.*)

1 Dear Sir,

You have asked my opinion about the relation between the Christian Church and the Roman government of the pagan epoch, and especially about the development of the hostility between the two powers — questions never out of debate, and recently treated carefully and skilfully by my friend Professor Ramsay in his interesting lectures on „the Church and Roman Empire before A. D. 170.“ I am well aware that neither in theory nor in arguments there is much to add by me to what I set forth in my paper „Religionsfrevel nach roemischem Recht“, published two years ago,**) and agreeing in the main with Ramsay's views. Nevertheless it may not be amiss to sum up the case in the sense required by you, and to state some points where I am obliged to differ from him.

The intense hatred in which the Christians were held in the Roman empire is a fact so well established and so well known that it is not necessary to dwell upon it. Tacitus and Suetonius, Lucian and Aristides, are there to attest it, and still more fully the shout into which the mob translated their invectives: *Christianos ad leones*. It is a general feeling pervading the whole empire, the aristocracy and the populace, Italy alike and the Greek provinces of higher civilization. How early it developed itself is evident from the policy of Nero, who sought to avert from himself the fury of the rabble for a great disaster by offering up to it these unhappy sectaries. This popular hatred, bitter, universal, lasting — whence did it spring?

2 Certainly the Christians, as offspring of the Jews, came in for the same aversion which this race has always met with in the whole

*) [The Expositor, 4. ser. vol. 8 (1893) S. 1—7 (Brief Mommsens an den Herausgeber).]

**) [Historische Zeitschrift n. F. B. 28, 1890 S. 389 ff. = Ges. Schriften 3 S. 389 ff.]

Occident — an aversion which, though restrained by a higher standard of humanity, still to the present day dominates the *canaille*, titled or not titled. They came in for the ancient hatred, but not for the time-honoured position and secular privileges of the followers of Moses. The conviction that the Christian conventicles were orgies of lewdness and receptacles of every crime got hold on the popular mind with all the terrible vehemence of aversion that resists all argument and heeds not refutation. Two of the best Romans, Tacitus excusing the emperor, who condemned the Christians of the capital for false crimes by admitting their turpitudes not requiring to be proved, Pliny wondering at finding the Christian congregations innocent and moral, give us an idea what their contemporaries of inferior order thought of these sectaries.

But these are only the outworks. It must be acknowledged that the hatred against the Christian was better founded and better deserved than the repulsive feeling against the Jew. What I am about to say may be commonplace, but it cannot be omitted.

The political order of the ancient world, and especially of the Roman state, rested on the nationality of the religion. He who imagines that the gods of Rome did not survive to the imperial epoch, may as well say that the Roman *res publica* was not restored by Augustus. The spread of doubt and disbelief is, especially in a political view, not sufficient to abolish an established religion; the Roman paganism remained, to use Ramsay's (p. 324) words, the keystone of the imperial policy. As the *cives Romani* of the imperial epoch were a different institution from those who conquered Italy, so the Capitoline Jupiter was adored in a different way by those who carried the blocks for his temple up the Tarpeian mound, and by those who founded imitation capitols throughout the *orbis Romanus*; but the national religion was the foundation as well of Latin Rome as of the *Roma communis omnium patria*, the spiritual symbol of the political union.

Now this foundation was sapped, this symbol rejected by the Christians, and by the Christians first and alone. The severing of the nationality from the creed, the basing the religion on humanity is the very essence of the Christian revolution. The mighty words, „there is no difference between Jew and Greek, between slave and freeman“, are the political and the social negation of the established order; the Christian proselytism, extinct long ago in the Jews, a systematic warfare against it. War too has its laws and its outlaws. The Christian „atheism“, the negation of the national gods, was, as

I have shown elsewhere,*) the contempt of the *dii publici populi Romani*, in itself high treason, or as the Christians express it (thoughts being free, but words not), the mere Christian Name, the „testimony“ of such atheism, constitutes a crime in the eye of the law. It is practically unwise to carry out this principle to its full consequences; good politics must not be too logical. But it has always to be borne in mind that every follower of Scaevola and Labeo must have ranged contempt of the public gods among the crimes deserving death, and that it was a sheer impossibility in principle for any Roman statesman to accord to those guilty of it even toleration. Christianity at this stage may well be compared with republican opinion in a monarchical country. There is nothing morally to blame in it; nothing inconsistent with the highest views of patriotism and public duty; nevertheless even the most liberal monarchy cannot acknowledge a republican party. Self-defence rules the world. As long as imperial Rome continued its stay in the eternal city and maintained the tradition of national government, it regarded the Christian creed rightly as its slayer.

- 4 This general, and in a certain sense lawful, base of the Christian persecutions by the Roman empire will, I should think, be admitted generally; certainly my friend Ramsay enters fully in these views. But the question at issue lies less in the principle than in the execution. The wishes of the great majority of the Roman public, to see worked out that persecution in full force, we have glanced at; how far the Roman government did or did not give way to them? I have stated in my paper that, admitting of course many deviations from the rule occasioned by local and individual influences, generally a system of toleration prevailed, the government neither risking direct opposition to the popular feeling, nor giving way fully and completely to the logical hate or the unruly rage of the opposition party. Ramsay (p. 143) differs from this view. „When Mommsen implies that the emperors would gladly have tolerated Christianity, but were occasionally forced by popular feeling and popular clamour to depart from their proper policy and persecute Christianity, I cannot follow him.“ In the explanation that follows the author is not so much in variance with my statement as it seems here; still, I shall have to defend it.

In the first place what I have averred is, I should think, so necessary in itself that special pleading is almost superfluous. Warfare against religious or political ideas, however implacable in theory,

*) [Ges. Schr. 3 S. 395.]

is not easily put in practice. A thoroughbred monarchist, though desirous to hang every republican, if he has the power of the galleys, will find some difficulty in using his power. The most certain cure for antisemitism, though unhappily not of general application, is to name the „Jew-eater“ minister; his humanity will not be the better for it, but he cannot but understand the dangers of carrying his ill-will into execution. The same fact must have manifested itself in the government of the Roman empire; good rule and policy prevented even those magistrates, who shared the feeling of aversion against the Christians, from giving way to the passion of the mob. 5 This must have been the case especially in the government of the epoch treated by Ramsay. There never has been a fanatic at the head of the Roman empire. The rulers were not far-sighted nor did they aim at reforming their world; they were quite satisfied to let things go on as they had gone before, and to defend the actual state of society, ignoring its dangerous under-currents. It is true, that Christianity ruined the base of the existing society; but thence it does not follow that the statesmen of the epoch made war on it *à la russe*. Enough of cruelty was enacted to justify the complaints uttered in the Apocalypse; but still the strong wishes of the enemies of Christianity were not appeased, and on the whole the system of ignoring and of leniency dominated.

Full details alone could enlighten us about the balance held between the two scales, and reliable facts are scarce in the rubbish which has been handed down to us under the heading of history of imperial Rome. Augustus and Tiberius being out of the question, it is probable that the separation of Jews and Christians by the general public, and the rise of animosity against the latter took place under the second dynasty, as Nero's measures show it fully developed. The double foundation on which the persecution rested, the general contempt of the Roman gods and the belief in special crimes of lewdness and other misdemeanours attributed to their conventicles, the *nomen Christiani* and the *flagitia Christianorum*, without doubt sprang up together. I have already shown, that the first, innate and undeniable, was the necessary consequence of the juxtaposition of Christian Church and Roman State; I cannot understand how Ramsay (p. 243 n.), on arguments evidently unsolid, attributes this discovery to Vespasian. That practically in the administrative treatment of the new sectaries, the special crimes attributed to them were much more urged than their ideal disrespect to the Roman 6 divinities, is applicable to every stage of the persecution; and it is

not to be wondered at, that in the history of Nero's reign these crimes are dwelt upon, though Suetonius' sober statement shows that Nero's government did not confine itself in its measures of repression against the Christians to those accused of arson. We may safely assume that they began under Nero partly in defence of the public gods, partly against the excesses said (and probably not in all cases unjustly) to reign among them.

The huge proportions and the cruel features, which this repression assumed in the worst years of this reign, form an exception to the general preponderance of toleration or, what comes to the same, of moderate persecution, which confirms the rule. This in my opinion continued under the Flavian dynasty. There is, as Ramsay himself admits (p. 256), no trace of recrudescence under its first two emperors. If the political dissolution of the Jewish nation and the laying waste of its centre were aimed at the Christians too, as Ramsay is inclined to admit, following Bernays, the imperial government must have been extremely ill-informed on the real state of things; though the Jews thus lost the base of their social position, the Christians were the gainers by it, being freed finally from the national trammels of their origin. Be that as it may, Ramsay is wrong in regarding Vespasian as the true originator of the warfare against the Christian creed in itself; he was far too practical for such a crusade. Much better does it agree with the sombre but intelligent despotism of Domitianus; and the persecution attributed to him I think with Ramsay (p. 259) founded in fact, though the few details handed down to us point not so much to the abstract defence of the religion of the state as to the repression of Christian proselytism arriving at the ladies in court and the imperial family itself.

7 I have nothing more to add. For the reign of Trajan, Hadrian and Pius, Ramsay admits freely, that the system of toleration, in the sense determined above, prevailed; the evidence of their letters preserved to us is there to attest it. Marcus may have introduced harsher measures, especially the searching for believers in the Christian creed, though the tone in which his younger contemporary Tertullian speaks of him prevents us from stretching this repression too far. The scanty details known to us may be regarded in either sense, as rule or as exception; I pass over them the more readily as here I am happy not to be at variance with my friend and epigraphical collaborator.

Less still I dwell upon the later epoch, to which Ramsay's book does not extend. It shows us the Christians increasing in

number and influence, combated in literary discussion by pagan writers of high standing, and victorious in the end. The great final result of the Roman government, the union of all the widely different nations under it in a uniform body of *cives Romani*, required, in replacement of their different creeds, a religion adapted to the new order of things, to the united empire; and thus the Christian religion became the religion of civilized humanity, the slayer of the Roman religion its substitute and heir. But this great event does not enter into the present discussion, nor form a proper part of my already too lengthy answer on the question you proposed to me. The details will always remain disputable and disputed; but, on the main points, with a little common sense and a little good will, we need not despair of arriving at a general understanding.
