

BULL PREPARED FOR SACRIFICE

## CHAPTER XXXVII. THE PAGAN CREEDS AND THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY

If Marcus Aurelius could not save the world, who shall save it? — RENAN.

To whoever knows anything of human intelligence it is evident that a revolution of consciences is outside and above the duties and the power of a government. In their quality of high priest, the Cæsars desired two contradictory things — to maintain the national cult, and to make Rome the city of the gods, or a kind of universal pantheon. This was the only reform and the only religious unity of which they could conceive. Thus, little by little, all the gods of the conquered nations came to be honoured at the Capitol. In spite of their distrust of Asiatic cults, which were always connected with confraternities that gave them offence, the Cæsars had their hands forced by popular superstitions, and all the divinities of Asia and of Egypt took their places side by side with the Greek and Roman gods.

This was certainly the unity the genius of Rome sought in everything; but it was a coarse, factitious, material unity, whose least defect was that all the polytheistic religions were disfigured and neutralised by one another, without satisfying the religious sentiment of the people or the intellect of the higher classes from henceforth too enlightened to accept a too evident polytheism. Where was the faith, the sincerity of adoration, and the life of the soul in this patched-up religion? And did this, the worst kind of unity that Roman policy voluntarily admitted, put an end to the fatal separation between philosophers and people, between the head and the heart of society? Strange blindness of those who give all to politics! The emperors, without knowing it and without wishing it, ended by discrediting the ancient national belief by this confusion of all religions, and yet what efforts did they not make to animate and purify it?

We hardly believe in the faith of the cæsars; but we can understand that they wished to preserve the ancient worship as a part of public order. Thus we see Augustus (although he amused himself, in the most scandalous orgies, by making a mock of the twelve great gods) devoutly rebuilding the temples, celebrating religion and piety by the agency of Horace the epicurean, honouring the vestals and the priests, burning thousands of apocryphal sibyl-

line books, and severely repressing the usurpations of the Judaic and Egyptian worships, which were forbidden the city of Rome. Tiberius amused the senate during long sittings by the examination and consecration of the privileges of the ancient sanctuaries. Claudius complained bitterly that the arts of Etruria had fallen into disuse owing to the indifference of the patricians, and endeavoured to revive superannuated studies for which he had a historian's and an archæologist's passion. Domitian complied with the cruel requirements of the old faith by burying unfortunate vestals alive. All showed themselves zealous defenders of the gods and the empire, and there was reason to be thankful when, recalling the words of Tiberius, that it is for the gods alone to avenge their injuries, they refrained from sacrificing those they feared to the sacrosanct majesty of their deified predecessors; or abstained from making themselves persecutors of the new faith, which embodied the principle of the moral and religious unity they vainly sought for.

But their conduct did not show either sincere faith, or hypocrisy, or weakness and infirmity of mind; it was purely political. They were convinced that the people needed a religion. Then, what religion was preferable to the one of which the senate had so cleverly availed itself, and which had presided over the birth and growth of the Eternal City? But, as if the gods were not yet sufficiently discredited, they were obliged to share their sacred honours with the vilest and most execrable of mortals. The apotheosis of the cæsars was the last insult inflicted on the masters of Olympus. In truth it deceived neither the servile worshippers nor those destined to be worshipped. Seneca and Juvenal were doubtless not the only ones to laugh at men like Claudius, whom some poor wretch had degraded to the rank of the gods, and we may suppose that the other emperors would have had the good sense to admit, with Tiberius, that they were but mortal men, not at all anxious to enjoy their false divinity the other side of the grave.

But these scandalous consecrations had the drawback of confirming the impious belief of the votaries of Evemerus, who, as it appears, were very numerous at Rome, even from the time of the first of the Scipios. On seeing, as Lucan says, the civil wars giving peers to the inhabitants of heaven, and Rome tricking out shades with thunderbolts and shooting stars and swearing by the shadows in the temples of the god, what could men think, but that Jupiter and his fellows had the same title to our adoration as Caligula and Tiberius? Claudius, the learned but imbecile pupil of Titus Livius, was perhaps the only Roman who was devoted to the gods of the empire. Politics saw in religion nothing but fraudulent inventions to deceive and coerce the people; the philosophers either professed atheism or, having formed higher and purer beliefs for themselves, turned the ancient superstitions into ridicule; the ignorant took refuge with the charlatans and foreign divinities.

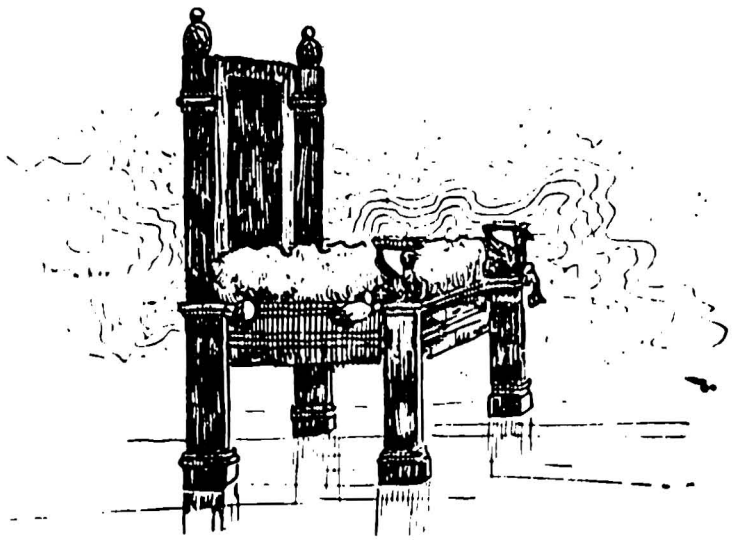
#### STOICISM AND THE EMPIRE

Stoicism, according to its doctrines, was rather favourable than hostile to the revolution represented by the empire, but the proud and free sentiments it developed in the soul were necessarily contrary to tyranny, which the worst cæsars confounded with the rights of power; to that exaggeration of obedience, to that servility to which their subjects were too much inclined and of which they were only too eager to make a false duty or an infamous merit. The philosophers were therefore odious to all that surrounded and was subservient to the early cæsars.

Their accusers flung vehement eloquence against them and persecuted in them what they called the mimics of Brutus and Cato. The centurions delighted in turning their wisdom to ridicule, whilst waiting to cut their throats by order of their masters. Nero, Vespasian, and Domitian did them the honour of driving them from Rome and from Italy. Agrippinus, Rusticus, Thraseas, Helvidius Priscus, Seneca, Dion, Epictetus, and many others expiated by exile or by death the glorious crime of not consenting to slavery, and of displeasing imbecile tyrants, who aimed at stifling even the conscience of the human species.

Stoicism flourished in this struggle between intellect and brute force. It became an ardent and vigorous faith, a kind of religion of great souls with its followers and martyrs. This transformation is noticeable even in the provinces, where there was less cause to murmur against the savage tyranny of the emperors than to rejoice at the benefits of the empire and of the Roman peace. It was because there also the people felt that they were dependent, that these honours, these dignities, these appearances of liberty, given to the conquered by policy as a consolation for their servitude, were but a vain show made to amuse fools, and that an archon or other native magistrate was of very little importance beside the Roman procurator or even his centurion. Thrown back upon themselves, by violence or the lack of interests, the souls of mankind studied the inner life more earnestly, and the essential qualities of its virtue and greatness.

Hence the new characteristics of stoicism — the preaching tone which took the place of philosophical discussion, a science of life unknown until then, and a peculiar art of disentangling the most obscure sophisms of vice and weakness, but above all a stern tenderness for humanity. The philosopher is no longer a logician who makes dissertations, nor a fine speaker aiming at applause. He is a master who teaches, a public censor charged with the care of consciences; God's witness, who owes men nothing but truth, or, if you prefer, a physician whose duty is to touch boldly the sick or healthy parts of the soul, in order to cure or to strengthen it. Deep and subtle arguments must not be expected from these philosophers, but affectionate or severe counsels, remonstrances, exhortations, and earnest entreaties for conversion to virtue and the law of God. Listen to Epictetus and judge whether it is a philosopher or a believer and director of consciences who speaks: "My friend, you would become a philosopher? Begin with exercising yourself at home and in silence, spend time in observing your inclinations and your faults. To begin with, give your whole care to remaining unknown. Philosophise for a period only for yourself and not for others. Fruit ripens little by little; you are also a divine plant. If you blossom before your time, the winter will wither you. If you believe



ROMAN CHAIR OF STATE

yourself somebody, you will only be a madman amongst madmen. You will be killed by the cold, or rather you are already dead even to the roots. Let yourself then ripen little by little, according to nature. Why hasten? You cannot yet endure the air. Give the root time to develop and the buds time to open one after the other; then your nature will bear fruit of itself."

"Labour then," he says in another place, "to cure, to change yourself; do not delay until to-morrow. If you say, to-morrow I will pay heed to myself, know it is as if you should say, to-day I will be base, shameless, cowardly, angry, cruel, and envious. Observe the evil you allow yourself by this guilty indulgence. But if it is a good thing for you to be converted and to watch attentively over your actions and your will, how much more so it is to start to-day! If it is useful to-morrow, to-day it is far more so. For by starting to-day, to-morrow you will already be stronger, and will not be tempted to put off to a third day." This is the general tone of the philosophy of this period. Penetrating and familiar in Epictetus, it is more pompous and vague in the ex-rhetorician Dion Chrysostom,<sup>g</sup> more incisive, vehement, and varied in Seneca,<sup>h</sup> more elevated and touching in Marcus Aurelius. But with all of these we encounter pressing exhortations or lively remonstrances, and as might be expected the remonstrance prevails. They believed, in fact, that we are never, whatever our virtue, beyond the state of convalescence, and that those who wish to be healthy and well, as Musonius Rufus said, must live and behave toward themselves as if they were continually striving to be cured. They also wished that men should quit their school sad and discontented with themselves.

While the philosopher addresses these reprimands and exhortations to others in order to convert them, he continually makes reference to himself, and his words have often a familiarity and passion resembling feeling and confession. Horace, Seneca, Epictetus, Euphrates, habitually practised a genuine examination of their conscience, and the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius<sup>i</sup> are simply a monologue, in which the wise emperor has set down his hopes and discouragements; he continually speaks to console, to exhort, to rouse, to reproach, or to approve himself. But as if the stoic who had imagined an ideal too great and sublime had the bitter feeling that he could not attain it, without ceasing he complains of himself and of his want of heart. "O my soul!" he cries, "when wilt thou be good and simple, and always the same? When wilt thou have tender good will to all men? When wilt thou be rich enough of thyself to want for nothing? When, resigned to thy condition, wilt thou take pleasure in all that is, persuaded that thou hast in thyself all that thou needest, that all is well with thee, that there is nothing that does not come to thee from the gods and that all that it has pleased them to ordain or that they shall ordain can be but good for thee and in general for the preservation of the world? When wilt thou have prepared thyself to live with the gods and with man in such a manner that thou mayst never complain of them and that they may no longer have anything to blame in thine actions?"

Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius have a rough and familiar vividness in their speech which shows with what energy of conviction and of faith their souls were filled. Seneca, for whom stoicism was more a matter for imagination and for wit, appears to have a less persuasive eloquence, because he is himself less persuaded; but he has an incontestable superiority in the censure of manners as well as in the extent and variety of his experience. There is no vice, weakness, or eccentricity that he has not found out, and even amongst



our great French moralists I know of no shrewder or more profound observer of the human heart.

But the severe reproof of vice is not everything; the philosopher is only in truth "the messenger of God" to men when he knows how to console, encourage, and support them in times of depression and of faltering, and by generous and sympathetic pity to reawaken in their hearts the nearly extinguished sense of their own dignity and strength. "Oh!" exclaims Seneca, "this is not the time to amuse one's self with many words. Philosopher, those who summon you to go to them are the helpless and the miserable. You should carry help to the shipwrecked, the captives, the beggars, and the sick, to those whose heads are already on the block. You have promised this. To all the fine speeches you can utter, the afflicted and distressed answer but one thing: Help us! All stretch out their hands towards you; it is from you that they implore help for their life lost or on the verge of being lost. All their hope and resource is in you. They implore you to rescue them from the abyss towards which they are struggling and to throw the salutary light of truth before their erring footsteps." Suffering and tears had in fact instructed these masters in human life, and the sad lessons of experience, without lessening the pride of their courage, inspired them with that compassion for the misery of others which had perhaps at first been wanting to the stoic philanthropy:

"Non ignara mali, miseris succurrere disco."

Stoicism did not stop at the theory of universal justice or the equality of men and of the unity of our kind; it added to it that of universal charity. I shall not say that the stoics of the empire made innovations on this point, nor that they introduced into the doctrine new ideas or even simply original developments, which transformed philosophy by extending it. I do not believe it, and I have found nothing in Seneca or in Epictetus, either in the principles or in the results, that I have not already found in the early stoicism. But it is probable that ideas took a more practical form, that theories gave place to precepts and to rules for conduct; that, whilst getting free from the severe and logical machinery of discussion and taking the more effective form of eloquence, the morality became more popular and efficacious; and finally by force of constant repetition in the schools of the philosophers, in the *basilicas* of the orators, in the libraries where literary meetings were held, in the gymnasia where the sophists made their displays, and even in the public places of the large towns, where the cynics delivered the finest maxims in the midst of their coarse but often striking invectives, it ended by storming men's intellects and taking entire possession of them.

And it should be noticed that this morality is not at the struggling, reasoning stage, like a truth which is feeling its way and is not sure of itself, nor does it hover on the surface like those borrowed ideas that come from no one knows where and which are welcomed from time to time with curiosity, but which always remain strangers or passing novelties; it dominates and takes hold of the intellect with that firm, full, constant, insensible, and unquestionable possession which characterises the inveterate supremacy of habit. Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and Plutarch could not think or speak otherwise than as they did because the philanthropic ideas of stoicism have become an integral and essential part of their nature, or, to use an expression belonging to Marcus Aurelius, because these ideas are from henceforth for every intellect the air they are accustomed to breathe and which nourishes them.

According to the constant doctrine of the Stoa, it is impossible not to perceive that the author of all things made us for one another and put into our hearts the instinct of humanity. This principle had passed from the discussions of the philosophers into the declamations of the orators, into the verses of the poets, into the spirit of all the writers. "Is there a better sentiment than compassion," says Quintilian, "a sentiment which has a deeper origin in the venerable and sacred principles of nature? God, the author of mortal beings, wishes us to help one another mutually, and in helping one another we are guaranteed against the fickleness of fortune. It is not love nor charity, it is a foreseeing and, I venture to say, a religious fear of the misfortunes which may overtake us. In the want and hunger of others it is himself that each of us pities. To help the unfortunate is to deserve well of things human. What! if I had fed a stranger for the sake of this universal fraternity which unites all mortals under the common father of nature, would it not have been a good action to have saved a soul about to perish, had pity on humanity, and thrown, as it were, a propitiatory offering to fortune while adoring the divinity in the thought of our common lot? Humanity has been in all ages and amongst all nations the greatest and most sacred mystery." Juvenal expresses the same thing in a more vivid and more touching manner. "Nature, by giving us tears, avows that she has bestowed feeling hearts on men; tears are the best part of our conscience.

"Nature makes us weep over the misfortunes of an afflicted friend, at the sad countenance of an accused prisoner, at the dangers of a ward who is the victim of a guardian's frauds. It is by her ordinance that we lament when we meet the coffin of a virgin carried off in the flower of her youth, in seeing a little child shut in under the sod of the grave. Where is the good man, the religious man, who sees the ills of others as if they were strangers to him? This is what separates us from the herd of speechless animals; thus we possess a saintly nature and we alone are capable of divine things, having received from heaven conscience denied to the brutes whose faces are turned earthward. At the origin of the world, the common author of all beings gave to animals only life, whilst we were given a reasonable soul, in order that mutual affection should teach us to give and to expect from others assistance and help."

To all appearance we are far indeed from Chrysippus and Zeno, but on the contrary entirely imbued with stoicism. I shall continue to repeat with Seneca and Montesquieu that there never existed a doctrine which, beneath the most rigid austerity, was more benevolent and more humane. It banished, I know, the weaknesses and the vain convulsions of pity, but never did a stoic deny that those sympathetic instincts by which we suffer for the woes of others and which move us to relieve them are good and natural; it was never forbidden to follow reasonably these first instincts of our nature and to practise all the deeds and even all the refinements of compassion and of humanity.

If we knew how to despise false blessings, said stoicism, we should not be continually at odds with one another, and aversion, unjust contempt, slander, calumny, anger, hatred, vengeance would no longer have a place in our hearts. The blessings we covet, being small and poor, cannot be acquired by one save at the expense of another. But real blessings can belong to one and all at the same time, and the more we divide them with our fellows the more fully and securely do we possess them. Then our real nature which is sociability can develop without any obstacle, and instead of the ferocious passions which divide us, tolerance, indulgence, and love, which reconcile and unite us with one another, are seen to appear.<sup>b</sup>

Such were the doctrines that held sway when the new faith from the Old Orient invaded the Roman world. Some aspects of that new faith in its relations to the Roman environment must now claim our attention.

#### CHRISTIANS AND THE EMPIRE

If we seriously consider the purity of the Christian religion, the sanctity of its moral precepts, and the innocent, as well as austere, lives of the greater number of those who, during the first ages, embraced the faith of the gospel, we should naturally suppose that so benevolent a doctrine would have been received with due reverence, even by the unbelieving world; that the learned and the polite, however they might deride the miracles, would have esteemed the virtues of the new sect; and that the magistrates, instead of persecuting, would have protected an order of men who yielded the most passive obedience to the laws, though they declined the active cares of war and government. If, on

the other hand, we recollect the universal toleration of polytheism, as it was invariably maintained by the faith of the people, the incredulity of philosophers, and the policy of the Roman senate and emperors, we are at a loss to discover what new offence the Christians had committed, what new provocation could exasperate the mild indifference of antiquity, and what new motives could urge the Roman princes, who beheld without concern a thousand forms of religion subsisting in

peace under their gentle sway, to inflict a severe punishment on any part of their subjects, who had chosen for themselves a singular but an inoffensive mode of faith and worship.

The religious policy of the ancient world seems to have assumed a more stern and intolerant character, to oppose the progress of Christianity. About fourscore years after the death of Christ, his innocent disciples were punished with death by the sentence of a proconsul of the most amiable and philosophic character, and according to the laws of an emperor distinguished by the wisdom and justice of his general administration. The apologies which were repeatedly addressed to the successors of Trajan are filled with the most pathetic complaints that the Christians, who obeyed the dictates and solicited the liberty of conscience, were alone among all the subjects of the Roman Empire excluded from the common benefits of their auspicious government. The deaths of a few eminent martyrs have been recorded with care; and from the time that Christianity was invested with the supreme power, the governors of the Church have been no less diligently employed



THE PANTHEON

in displaying the cruelty than in imitating the conduct of their pagan adversaries.

The sectaries of a persecuted religion, depressed by fear, animated with resentment, and perhaps heated by enthusiasm, are seldom in a proper temper of mind calmly to investigate or candidly to appreciate the motives of their enemies, which often escape the impartial and discerning view even of those who are placed at a secure distance from the flames of persecution.<sup>1</sup> A reason has been assigned for the conduct of the emperors towards the primitive Christians, which may appear the more specious and probable as it is drawn from the acknowledged genius of polytheism. It has already been observed that the religious concord of the world was principally supported by the implicit assent and reverence which the nations of antiquity expressed for their respective traditions and ceremonies. It might, therefore, be expected that they would unite with indignation against any sect of people which should separate itself from the communion of mankind, and, claiming the exclusive possession of divine knowledge, should disdain every form of worship except its own as impious and idolatrous. The rights of toleration were held by mutual indulgence; they were justly forfeited by a refusal of the accustomed tribute. As the payment of this tribute was inflexibly refused by the Jews, and by them alone, the consideration of the treatment which they experienced from the Roman magistrates will serve to explain how far these speculations are justified by facts; and will lead us to discover the true causes of the persecution of Christianity.

Without repeating what has been already mentioned of the reverence of the Roman princes and governors for the temple of Jerusalem, we shall only observe that the destruction of the temple and city was accompanied and followed by every circumstance that could exasperate the minds of the conquerors, and authorise religious persecution by the most specious arguments of political justice and the public safety. From the reign of Nero to that of Antoninus Pius, the Jews discovered a fierce impatience of the dominion of Rome, which repeatedly broke out in the most furious massacres and insurrections. Humanity is shocked at the recital of the horrid cruelties which they committed in the cities of Egypt, of Cyprus, and of Cyrene, where they dwelt in treacherous friendship with the unsuspecting natives;<sup>2</sup> and we are tempted to applaud the severe retaliation which was exercised by the arms of the legions against a race of fanatics, whose dire and credulous superstition seemed to render them the implacable enemies, not only of the Roman government, but of human kind. The enthusiasm of the Jews was supported by the opinion that it was unlawful for them to pay taxes to an idolatrous master; and by the flattering promise which they derived from their ancient oracles that a conquering Messiah would soon arise, destined to break their fetters and to invest the favourites of heaven with the empire of the earth. It was by announcing himself as their long-expected deliverer, and by calling on all the descendants of Abraham to assert the hope of Israel, that the famous Bar Kosiba collected a formidable army, with which he resisted during two years the power of the emperor Hadrian.

<sup>1</sup> The history of Christianity, in its earliest stage, is only to be found in the *Acts of the Apostles*; from no other source can we learn the first persecutions inflicted on the Christians. Limited to a few individuals and a narrow space, these persecutions interested none but those who were exposed to them, and have had no other chroniclers. — GURZOR.

<sup>2</sup> In Cyrene they massacred 220,000 Greeks; in Cyprus, 240,000; in Egypt, a very great multitude. Many of these unhappy victims were sawed asunder, according to a precedent to which David had given the sanction of his example. The victorious Jews devoured the flesh, licked up the blood, and twisted the entrails, like a girdle, round their bodies.®



Notwithstanding these repeated provocations, the resentment of the Roman princes expired after the victory; nor were their apprehensions continued beyond the period of war and danger. By the general indulgence of polytheism, and by the mild temper of Antoninus Pius, the Jews were restored to their ancient privileges, and once more obtained the permission to circumcise their children, with the easy restraint that they should never confer on any foreign proselyte that distinguishing mark of the Hebrew race. The numerous remains of that people, though they were still excluded from the precincts of Jerusalem, were permitted to form and to maintain considerable establishments, both in Italy and in the provinces, to acquire the freedom of Rome, to enjoy municipal honours, and to obtain at the same time an exemption from the burdensome and expensive offices of society. The moderation or the contempt of the Romans gave a legal sanction to the form of ecclesiastical police which was instituted by the vanquished sect. The patriarch, who had fixed his residence at Tiberias, was empowered to appoint his subordinate ministers and apostles, to exercise a domestic jurisdiction, and to receive from his dispersed brethren an annual contribution. New synagogues were frequently erected in the principal cities of the empire; and the sabbaths, the fasts, and the festivals, which were either commanded by the Mosaic law or enjoined by the traditions of the rabbis, were celebrated in the most solemn and public manner. Such gentle treatment insensibly assuaged the stern temper of the Jews. Awakened from their dream of prophecy and conquest, they assumed the behaviour of peaceable and industrious subjects. Their irreconcilable hatred of mankind, instead of flaming out in acts of blood and violence, evaporated in less dangerous gratifications. They embraced every opportunity of overreaching the idolaters in trade; and they pronounced secret and ambiguous imprecations against the haughty kingdom of Edom.

#### THE CHRISTIAN AND THE JEW

Since the Jews, who rejected with abhorrence the deities adored by their sovereign and by their fellow subjects, enjoyed however the free exercise of their unsocial religion, there must have existed some other cause which exposed the disciples of Christ to those severities from which the posterity of Abraham was exempt. The difference between them is simple and obvious; but, according to the sentiments of antiquity, it was of the highest importance. The Jews were a nation; the Christians were a sect; and, if it was natural for every community to respect the sacred institutions of their neighbours, it was incumbent on them to persevere in those of their ancestors. The voice of oracles, the precepts of philosophers, and the authority of the laws, unanimously enforced this national obligation. By their lofty claim of superior sanctity, the Jews might provoke the polytheists to consider them as an odious and impure race. By disdaining the intercourse of other nations, they might deserve their contempt. The laws of Moses might be for the most part frivolous or absurd; yet, since they had been received during many ages by a large society, his followers were justified by the example of mankind; and it was universally acknowledged that they had a right to practise what it would have been criminal in them to neglect. But this principle, which protected the Jewish synagogue, afforded not any favour or security to the primitive Church. By embracing the faith of the gospel, the Christians incurred the supposed guilt of an unnatural

and unpardonable offence. They dissolved the sacred ties of custom and education, violated the religious institutions of their country, and presumptuously despised whatever their fathers had believed as true or had revered as sacred. Nor was this apostasy (if we may use the expression) merely of a partial or local kind; since the pious deserter who withdrew himself from the temples of Egypt or Syria would equally disdain to seek an asylum in those of Athens or Carthage. Every Christian rejected with contempt the superstitions of his family, his city, and his province. The whole body of Christians unanimously refused to hold any communion with the gods of Rome, of the empire, and of mankind. It was in vain that the oppressed believer asserted the inalienable rights of conscience and private judgment. Though his situation might excite the pity, his arguments could never reach the understanding, either of the philosophic or of the believing part of the pagan world. To their apprehensions, it was no less a matter of surprise that any individuals should entertain scruples against complying with the established mode of worship than if they had conceived a sudden abhorrence to the manners, the dress, or the language of their native country.



BOWL USED IN RELIGIOUS SERVICES

The surprise of the pagans was soon succeeded by resentment; and the most pious of men were exposed to the unjust but dangerous imputations of impiety. Malice and prejudice concurred in representing the Christians as a society of atheists, who, by the most daring attack on the religious constitution of the empire, had merited the severest animadversion of the civil magistrate. They had separated themselves (they gloried in the confession) from every mode of superstition which was received in any part of the globe by the various temper of polytheism; but it was not altogether so evident what deity, or what form of worship, they had substituted for the gods and temples of antiquity. The pure and sublime idea which they entertained of the Supreme Being escaped the gross conception of the pagan multitude, who were at a loss to discover a spiritual and solitary God, that was neither represented under any corporeal figure or visible symbol, nor was adored with the accustomed pomp of libations and festivals, of altars and sacrifices. The sages of Greece and Rome, who had elevated their minds to the contemplation of the existence and attributes of the First Cause, were induced by reason or by vanity to reserve for themselves and their chosen disciples the privilege of this philosophical devotion. They were far from admitting the prejudices of mankind as the standard of truth, but they considered them as flowing from the original disposition of human nature; and they supposed that any popular mode of faith and worship which presumed to disclaim the assistance of the senses would, in proportion as it receded

from superstition, find itself incapable of restraining the wanderings of the fancy and the visions of fanaticism. The glance which men of wit and learning condescended to cast on the Christian revelation served only to confirm their hasty opinion, and to persuade them that the principle, which they might have revered, of the divine unity, was defaced by the wild enthusiasm and annihilated by the airy speculations of the new sectaries. The author of a celebrated dialogue which has been attributed to Lucian, whilst he affects to treat the mysterious subject of the Trinity in a style of ridicule and contempt, betrays his own ignorance of the weakness of human reason and of the inscrutable nature of the divine perfections.

It might appear less surprising that the founder of Christianity should not only be revered by his disciples as a sage and a prophet, but that he should be adored as a god. The polytheists were disposed to adopt every article of faith which seemed to offer any resemblance, however distant or imperfect, with the popular mythology; and the legends of Bacchus, of Hercules, and of Æsculapius, had, in some measure, prepared their imagination for the appearance of the son of God under a human form. But they were astonished that the Christians should abandon the temples of those ancient heroes who, in the infancy of the world, had invented arts, instituted laws, and vanquished the tyrants or monsters who infested the earth, in order to choose for the exclusive object of their religious worship an obscure teacher, who, in a recent age, and among a barbarous people, had fallen a sacrifice either to the malice of his own countrymen or to the jealousy of the Roman government. The pagan multitude, reserving their gratitude for temporal benefits alone, rejected the inestimable present of life and immortality which was offered to mankind by Jesus of Nazareth. His mild constancy in the midst of cruel and voluntary sufferings, his universal benevolence, and the sublime simplicity of his actions and character, were insufficient, in the opinion of those carnal men, to compensate for the want of fame, of empire, and of success; and, whilst they refused to acknowledge his stupendous triumph over the powers of darkness and of the grave, they misrepresented, or they insulted, the miraculous birth, submissive life, and agonising death, of the divine author of Christianity.

#### RELIGIOUS ASSEMBLIES OF THE CHRISTIANS

The personal guilt which every Christian had contracted in thus preferring his private sentiment to the national religion, was aggravated in a very high degree by the number and union of the criminals. It is well known, and has been already observed, that Roman policy viewed with the utmost jealousy and distrust any association among its subjects; and that the privileges of private corporations, though formed for the most harmless or beneficial purposes, were bestowed with a very sparing hand. The religious assemblies of the Christians who had separated themselves from the public worship appeared of a much less innocent nature: they were illegal in their principle, and in their consequences might become dangerous; nor were the emperors conscious that they violated the laws of justice when, for the peace of society, they prohibited those secret and sometimes nocturnal meetings. The pious disobedience of the Christians made their conduct, or perhaps their designs, appear in a much more serious and criminal light; and the Roman princes, who might perhaps have suffered themselves to be disarmed by a ready submission, deeming their

honour concerned in the execution of their commands, sometimes attempted, by rigorous punishments, to subdue this independent spirit, which boldly acknowledged an authority superior to that of the magistrate. The extent and duration of this spiritual conspiracy seemed to render it every day more deserving of his animadversion. We have already seen that the active and successful zeal of the Christians had insensibly diffused them through every province, and almost every city, of the empire. The new converts seemed to renounce their family and country; that they might connect themselves in an indissoluble band of union with a peculiar society which everywhere assumed a different character from the rest of mankind. Their gloomy and austere aspect, their abhorrence of the common business and pleasures of life, and their frequent predictions of impending calamities, inspired the pagans with the apprehension of some danger which would arise from the new sect, the more alarming as it was the more obscure. Whatever (says Pliny<sup>j</sup>) may be the principle of their conduct, their inflexible obstinacy appeared deserving of punishment.

The precautions with which the disciples of Christ performed the offices of religion were at first dictated by fear and necessity; but they were continued from choice. By imitating the awful secrecy which reigned in the Eleusinian mysteries, the Christians had flattered themselves that they should render their sacred institutions more respectable in the eyes of the pagan world. But the event, as it often happens to the operations of subtle policy, deceived their wishes and their expectations. It was concluded that they only concealed what they would have blushed to disclose. Their mistaken prudence afforded an opportunity for malice to invent and for suspicious credulity to believe the horrid tales which described the Christians as the most wicked of human kind, who practised in their dark recesses every abomination that a depraved fancy could suggest, and who solicited the favour of their unknown god by the sacrifice of every moral virtue. There were many who pretended to confess or to relate the ceremonies of this abhorred society. It was asserted that a new-born infant, entirely covered over with flour, was presented, like some mystic symbol of initiation, to the knife of the proselyte, who unknowingly inflicted many a secret and mortal wound on the innocent victim of his error; that as soon as the cruel deed was perpetrated, the sectaries drank up the blood, greedily tore asunder the quivering members, and pledged themselves to eternal secrecy by a mutual consciousness of guilt. It was as confidently affirmed that this inhuman sacrifice was succeeded by a suitable entertainment, in which intemperance served as a provocative to brutal lust; till, at the appointed moment, the lights were suddenly extinguished, shame was banished, nature was forgotten; and, as accident might direct, the darkness of the night was polluted by the incestuous commerce of sisters and brothers, of sons and of mothers.

#### CHRISTIANITY AND THE LAW

But the perusal of the ancient apologies was sufficient to remove even the slightest suspicion from the mind of a candid adversary. The Christians, with the intrepid security of innocence, appeal from the voice of rumour to the equity of the magistrates. They acknowledge that if any proof can be produced of the crimes which calumny has imputed to them, they are worthy of the most severe punishment. They provoke the punishment, and they



challenge the proof. At the same time they urge, with equal truth and propriety, that the charge is not less devoid of probability than it is destitute of evidence; they ask whether anyone can seriously believe that the pure and holy precepts of the gospel, which so frequently restrained the use of the most lawful enjoyments, should inculcate the practice of the most abominable crimes; that a large society should resolve to dishonour itself in the eyes of its own members; and that a great number of persons of either sex, and every age and character, insensible to the fear of death or infamy, should consent to violate those principles which nature and education had imprinted most deeply in their minds. Nothing, it should seem, could weaken the force or destroy the effect of so unanswerable a justification, unless it were the injudicious conduct of the apologists themselves, who betrayed the common cause of religion to gratify their devout hatred to the domestic enemies of the Church. It was sometimes faintly insinuated, and sometimes boldly asserted, that the same bloody sacrifices and the same incestuous festivals, which were so falsely ascribed to the orthodox believers, were in reality celebrated by the Marcionites, by the Carpocratians, and by several other sects of the Gnostics, who, notwithstanding they might deviate into the paths of heresy, were still actuated by the sentiments of men and still governed by the precepts of Christianity. Accusations of a similar kind were retorted upon the Church by the schismatics who had departed from its communion; and it was confessed on all sides that the most scandalous licentiousness of manners prevailed among great numbers of those who affected the name of Christians. A pagan magistrate, who possessed neither leisure nor abilities to discern the almost imperceptible line which divides the orthodox faith from heretical depravity, might easily have imagined that their mutual animosity had extorted the discovery of their common guilt.

It was fortunate for the repose, or at least for the reputation, of the first Christians, that the magistrates sometimes proceeded with more temper and moderation than is usually consistent with religious zeal; and that they reported, as the impartial result of their judicial inquiry, that the sectaries, who had deserted the established worship, appeared to them sincere in their professions, and blameless in their manners; however they might incur, by their absurd and excessive superstition, the censure of the laws.

History, which undertakes to record the transactions of the past for the instruction of future ages, would ill deserve the honourable office, if she condescended to plead the cause of tyrants, or to justify the maxims of persecution. It must, however, be acknowledged that the conduct of the emperors who appeared the least favourable to the primitive church is by no means so criminal as that of modern sovereigns, who have employed the arm of violence and terror against the religious opinions of any part of their subjects. From their reflections, or even from their own feelings, a Charles V or a Louis XIV might have acquired a just knowledge of the rights of conscience, of the obligation of faith, and of the innocence of error. But the princes and magistrates of ancient Rome were strangers to those principles which inspired and authorised the inflexible obstinacy of the Christians in the cause of truth; nor could they themselves discover in their own breasts any motive which would have prompted them to refuse a legal, and as it were a natural, submission to the sacred institutions of their country. The same reason which contributes to alleviate the guilt, must have tended to abate the rigour of their persecutions. As they were actuated, not by the furious zeal of bigots but by the temperate policy of legislators, contempt must often have relaxed and humanity must frequently

have suspended the execution of those laws which they enacted against the humble and obscure followers of Christ. From the general view of their character and motives, we might naturally conclude: (1) that a considerable time elapsed before they considered the new sectaries as an object deserving of the attention of government; (2) that in the conviction of any of their subjects who were accused of so very singular a crime, they proceeded with caution and reluctance; (3) that they were moderate in the use of punishments; and (4) that the afflicted church enjoyed many intervals of peace and tranquillity. Notwithstanding the careless indifference which the most copious and the most minute of pagan writers have shown to the affairs of the Christians, it may still be in our power to confirm each of these probable suppositions by the evidence of authentic facts.

#### THE INFANCY OF THE CHURCH

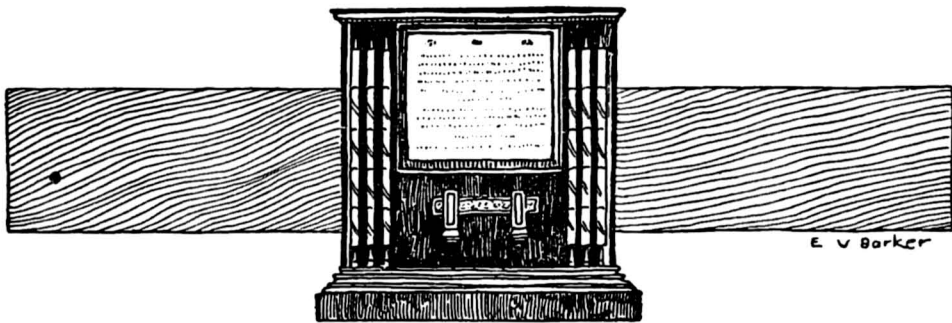
By the wise dispensation of providence, a mysterious veil was cast over the infancy of the church, which, till the faith of the Christians was matured and their numbers were multiplied, served to protect them not from the malice, but even from the knowledge, of the pagan world. The slow and gradual abolition of the Mosaic ceremonies afforded a safe and innocent disguise to the more early proselytes of the gospel. As they were by far the greater part of the race of Abraham, they were distinguished by the peculiar mark of circumcision, offered up their devotions in the temple of Jerusalem till its final destruction, and received both the law and the prophets as the genuine inspirations of the Deity. The Gentile converts, who by a spiritual adoption had been associated to the hope of Israel, were likewise confounded under the garb and appearance of the Jews; and as the polytheists paid less regard to articles of faith than to the external worship, the new sect, which carefully concealed or faintly announced its future greatness and ambition, was permitted to shelter itself under the general toleration which was granted to an ancient and celebrated people in the Roman Empire. It was not long, perhaps, before the Jews themselves, animated with a fiercer zeal and a more jealous faith, perceived the gradual separation of their Nazarene brethren from the doctrine of the synagogue; and they would gladly have extinguished the dangerous heresy in the blood of its adherents. But the decrees of heaven had already disarmed their malice; and though they might sometimes exert the licentious privilege of sedition, they no longer possessed the administration of criminal justice; nor did they find it easy to infuse into the calm breast of a Roman magistrate the rancour of their own zeal and prejudice. The provincial governors declared themselves ready to listen to any accusation that might affect the public safety; but as soon as they were informed that it was a question not of facts but of words, a dispute relating only to the interpretation of the Jewish laws and prophecies, they deemed it unworthy of the majesty of Rome seriously to discuss the obscure differences which might arise among a barbarous and superstitious people. The innocence of the first Christians was protected by ignorance and contempt; and the tribunal of the pagan magistrate often proved their most assured refuge against the fury of the synagogue. If, indeed, we were disposed to adopt the traditions of a too credulous antiquity, we might relate the distant peregrination, the wonderful achievements, and the various deaths, of the twelve Apostles; but a more accurate inquiry will induce us to doubt whether any of those persons who

had been witnesses to the miracles of Christ were permitted, beyond the limits of Palestine, to seal with their blood the truth of their testimony. From the ordinary term of human life, it may very naturally be presumed that most of them were deceased before the discontent of the Jews broke out into that furious war, which was terminated only by the ruin of Jerusalem.

#### PERSECUTIONS UNDER NERO

During a long period, from the death of Christ to that memorable Jewish rebellion, we cannot discover any traces of Roman intolerance, unless they are to be found in the sudden, the transient, but the cruel persecution which was exercised by Nero against the Christians of the capital, thirty-five years after the former and only two years before the latter of those great events. The character of the philosophic historian, to whom we are principally indebted for the knowledge of this singular transaction, would alone be sufficient to recommend it to our most attentive consideration.

We have seen that in the tenth year of the reign of Nero, Rome was afflicted by a fire which raged beyond the memory or example of former ages. The monuments of Grecian art and of Roman virtue, the trophies of the



ROMAN SARCOPHAGUS

Punic and Gallic wars, the most holy temples and the most splendid palaces were involved in one common destruction. Of the fourteen regions or quarters into which Rome was divided, four only subsisted entire, three were levelled with the ground, and the remaining seven, which had experienced the fury of the flames, displayed a melancholy prospect of ruin and desolation. The vigilance of government appears not to have neglected any of the precautions which might alleviate the sense of so dreadful a calamity. The imperial gardens were thrown open to the distressed multitude, temporary buildings were erected for their accommodation, and a plentiful supply of corn and provisions was distributed at a very moderate price. The most generous policy seemed to have dictated the edicts which regulated the disposition of the streets and the construction of private houses; and as usually happens in an age of prosperity, the conflagration of Rome, in the course of a few years, produced a new city, more regular and more beautiful than the former. But all the prudence and humanity affected by Nero on this occasion were insufficient to preserve him from the popular suspicion. Every crime might be imputed to the assassin of his wife and mother; nor could the prince who prostituted his person and dignity in the theatre be deemed incapable of the most extravagant folly. The voice of rumour accused the emperor as the incendiary of his own capital; and as the most

incredible stories are the best adapted to the genius of an enraged people, it was gravely reported, and firmly believed, that Nero, enjoying the calamity which he had occasioned, amused himself with singing to his lyre the destruction of ancient Troy. To divert a suspicion which the power of despotism was unable to suppress, the emperor resolved to substitute in his own place some fictitious criminals.

“With this view,” continues Tacitus,<sup>k</sup> “he inflicted the most exquisite tortures on those men who, under the vulgar appellation, of Christians, were already branded with deserved infamy. They derived their name and origin from Christ, who, in the reign of Tiberius, had suffered death by the sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate. For a while this dire superstition was checked; but it again burst forth, and not only spread itself over Judea, the first seat of this mischievous sect, but was even introduced into Rome, the common asylum which receives and protects whatever is impure, whatever is atrocious. The confessions of those who were seized discovered a great multitude of their accomplices, and they were all convicted, not so much for the crime of setting fire to the city, as for their hatred of human kind. They died in torments, and their torments were imbibed by insult and derision. Some were nailed on crosses; others sewn up in the skins of wild beasts and exposed to the fury of dogs; others again, smeared over with combustible materials, were used as torches to illuminate the darkness of the night. The gardens of Nero were destined for the melancholy spectacle, which was accompanied with a horse race, and honoured with the presence of the emperor, who mingled with the populace in the dress and attitude of a charioteer. The guilt of the Christians deserved indeed the most exemplary punishment; but the public abhorrence was changed into commiseration, from the opinion that those unhappy wretches were sacrificed not so much to the public welfare as to the cruelty of a jealous tyrant.”

Those who survey with a curious eye the revolutions of mankind may observe that the gardens and circus of Nero on the Vatican, which were polluted with the blood of the first Christians, have been rendered still more famous by the triumph and by the abuse of the persecuted religion. On the same spot a temple, which far surpasses the ancient glories of the Capitol, has been since erected by the Christian pontiffs; who, deriving their claim of universal dominion from a humble fisherman of Galilee, have succeeded to the throne of the cæsars, given laws to the barbarian conquerors of Rome, and extended their spiritual jurisdiction from the coast of the Baltic to the shores of the Pacific Ocean.

But it would be improper to dismiss this account of Nero's persecution, till we have made some observations that may serve to remove the difficulties with which it is perplexed, and to throw some light on the subsequent history of the church.

(1) The most sceptical criticism is obliged to respect the truth of this extraordinary fact and the integrity of this celebrated passage of Tacitus. The former is confirmed by the diligent and accurate Suetonius, who mentions the punishment which Nero inflicted on the Christians, a sect of men who had embraced a new and criminal superstition. The latter may be proved by the consent of the most ancient manuscripts; by the inimitable character of the style of Tacitus; by his reputation, which guarded his text from the interpolations of pious fraud; and by the purport of his narration, which accused the first Christians of the most atrocious crimes, without insinuating that they possessed any miraculous or even magical powers above the rest of mankind



(2) Notwithstanding it is probable that Tacitus was born some years before the fire of Rome, he could derive only from reading and conversation the knowledge of an event which happened during his infancy. Before he gave himself to the public, he calmly waited till his genius had attained its full maturity; and he was more than forty years of age when a grateful regard for the memory of the virtuous Agricola extorted from him the most early of those historical compositions which will delight and instruct the most distant posterity. After making a trial of his strength in the life of Agricola and the description of Germany, he conceived, and at length executed, a most arduous work — the history of Rome, in thirty books, from the fall of Nero to the accession of Nerva. The administration of Nerva introduced an age of justice and prosperity, which Tacitus had destined for the occupation of his old age; but when he took a nearer view of his subject, judging, perhaps, that it was a more honourable or a less invidious office to record the vices of past tyrants than to celebrate the virtues of a reigning monarch, he chose rather to relate, under the form of annals, the actions of the four immediate successors of Augustus. To collect, to dispose, and to adorn a series of fourscore years in an immortal work, every sentence of which is pregnant with the deepest observations and the most lively images, was an undertaking sufficient to exercise the genius of Tacitus himself during the greater part of his life. In the last years of the reign of Trajan, whilst the victorious monarch extended the power of Rome beyond its ancient limits, the historian was describing, in the second and fourth books of his annals, the tyranny of Tiberius; and the emperor Hadrian must have succeeded to the throne before Tacitus, in the regular prosecution of his work, could relate the fire of the capital and the cruelty of Nero towards the unfortunate Christians. At the distance of sixty years, it was the duty of the annalist to adopt the narratives of contemporaries; but it was natural for the philosopher to indulge himself in the description of the origin, the progress, and the character of the new sect, not so much according to the knowledge or prejudices of the age of Nero, as according to those of the time of Hadrian.

(3) Tacitus very frequently trusts to the curiosity or reflection of his readers to supply those intermediate circumstances and ideas which, in his extreme conciseness, he has thought proper to suppress. We may, therefore, presume to imagine some probable cause which could direct the cruelty of Nero against the Christians of Rome, whose obscurity, as well as innocence, should have shielded them from his indignation, and even from his notice. The Jews, who were numerous in the capital, and oppressed in their own country, were a much fitter object for the suspicions of the emperor and of the people; nor did it seem unlikely that a vanquished nation, who already discovered their abhorrence of the Roman yoke, might have recourse to the most atrocious means of gratifying their implacable revenge. But the Jews possessed very powerful advocates in the palace, and even in the heart of the tyrant — his wife and mistress, the beautiful Poppæa, and a favourite prayer of the race of Abraham, who had already employed their intercession in behalf of the obnoxious people. In their room it was necessary to offer some other victims; and it might easily be suggested that, although the genuine followers of Moses were innocent of the fire of Rome, there had arisen among them a new and pernicious sect of Galilæans, which was capable of the most horrid crimes. Under the appellation of Galilæans, two distinctions of men were confounded, the most opposite to each other in their manners and principles; the disciples who had embraced the faith of Jesus of Nazareth, and the zealots who had followed the standard of Judas the Gaulonite. The former

were the friends, the latter were the enemies, of human kind; and the only resemblance between them consisted in the same inflexible constancy which, in the defence of their cause, rendered them insensible of death and tortures. The followers of Judas, who impelled their countrymen into rebellion, were soon buried under the ruins of Jerusalem; whilst those of Jesus, known by the more celebrated name of Christians, diffused themselves over the Roman Empire. How natural was it for Tacitus, in the time of Hadrian, to appropriate to the Christians the guilt and the sufferings which he might, with far greater truth and justice, have attributed to a sect whose odious memory was almost extinguished!

(4) Whatever opinion may be entertained of this conjecture (for it is no more than a conjecture), it is evident that the effect, as well as the cause, of Nero's persecution was confined to the walls of Rome; that the religious tenets of the Galilæans, or Christians, were never made a subject of punishment, or even of inquiry; and that, as the idea of their sufferings was for a long time connected with the idea of cruelty and injustice, the moderation of succeeding princes inclined them to spare a sect oppressed by a tyrant whose rage had been usually directed against virtue and innocence.<sup>c</sup>

Thus the massacre of the year 64 is not, strictly speaking, a religious persecution, although, in the opinion of the pagans, there remained a stain on the Christians. Their name came out of the darkness in an inauspicious manner. It remained linked with a great public disaster, and perhaps with a terrible crime in which authority pretended to trace their influence. The second traditional persecution took place in the last year of the reign of Domitian. We have seen to what it has been reduced. There is no trace of any edict, no explicit evidence in profane or ecclesiastical literature, until the middle of the second century. Several passages must be subtly combined to draw the inference of actions brought against many of the Christians, and we are reduced to suppositions to decide the cause. The accusation of impiety appears, but it cannot be said whether this charge is of a religious character; and it seems doubtful.

#### PERSECUTION UNDER TRAJAN AND THE ANTONINES

It is under the reign of Trajan that the persecution of Christianity is really inaugurated. A thick cloud hovers over this new crime, however, and over the proceedings which are to follow. Pliny does not know where to find the proof of the crime. Trajan, in his reply, points to the statute law. The Christians, from this time, are beyond the reach of the law. However, if there are no complaints and no accusers come forward, the authorities will leave them in peace. If they are impeached in the court of justice they will be condemned unless they forswear themselves. This equivocal law regulated the position of the Christians under the rule of the first three successors of Trajan. Neither Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, nor Marcus Aurelius softened or aggravated it.

Under the rule of these princes, the best, most just, and most humane the empire ever knew, the condemnations of the Christians are more frequent. It is because the Christians are more numerous, and here and there bolder, doubtless, and more imprudent; it is also because there is a new actor on the stage, an anonymous actor, passionate, capricious, easily irritated, and formidable in anger—the crowd, whose injunctions and whose cries for death sometimes take the place of that accuser required by the

edict of Trajan. Or in public calamities it is on the Christians that the wrath of the crowd falls. A terrible fate overtakes their convocations and sacred rites. They hide themselves and avoid all feasts, they smile when others weep, and seem sad in times of prosperity.

Neither their altars, the name, nor the symbol of their god is known. Blood is shed at their nocturnal meetings. Children are sacrificed, devoured by the initiated, and there are scenes of unspeakable debauchery. This is what is said, and in certain circumstances the least spark is sufficient to kindle the fury of the multitude assembled in the amphitheatres or the circus. Will the magistrates contend with the rioters? Will they take up the cause of men legally outside the common law? The voice of the public speaks, and they obey. This, together with certain enmities and private grudges, is, doubtless, the explanation of the sentences pronounced in Rome, and especially in the provinces, under the Antonines. This is what would seem to have taken place in Smyrna in the year 155, and at Lyons in 177. The crowd is the accuser.

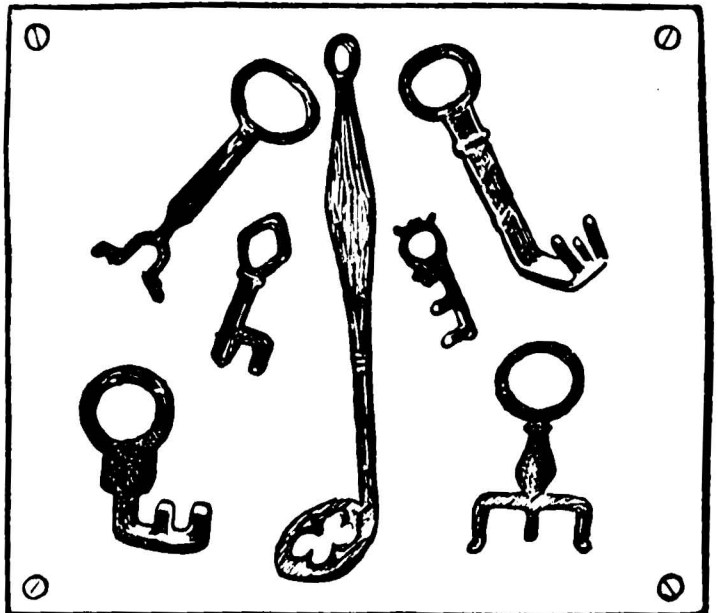
It is the crowd that singles out the Christians and sentences them to death, and it is only occasionally that the sentence which it has pronounced is not fulfilled.

Three rescripts have been drawn up which Hadrian, Antoninus, and Marcus Aurelius successively are said to have made out in favour of the Christians, and from one to the other of these edicts there is, as it were, a *crescendo* of kindness and toleration. The first of these princes forbids the legates to condemn the Christians to satisfy the clamouring of the people.

The last, Marcus Aurelius, testifies to the power of the Christians, whose kindness he has experienced and whom he fears to see turned against him, and grants them full liberty of worship. In our opinion these edicts are manifestly apocryphal, although it is perhaps true that the emperors, supreme guardians of the law, saw with displeasure the violent caprices of popular brutality take the place of legal measures, and violate, as it were, the majesty of Roman justice; and they may have written in this sense to their agents. Hadrian especially, the most vigilant guardian of order in the provincial administration, may have done this.

But the sentences pronounced against the Christians under the rule of the Antonines, and the numerous defences in which the apologists, even at this moment, make an appeal to the justice of the emperors, claiming common law for the Christians, prove clearly that the law which condemned them on account of their profession of faith had not been repealed.

The Antonines invariably made kind and humane princes, lovers of justice, sparing of the lives of their subjects. Marcus Aurelius, in particular, went too far in his complaisance and goodness of heart. The principle of the



ROMAN DOOR KEYS, IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

stoical philosophy he had embraced, and which he was proud to follow, taught the inviolability of liberty in private life, and far from advising the persecution of opinions, it must rather have taught respect for them.

On the other hand, in spite of a visible tendency on the part of the authorities at this time to restore or to strengthen the old Roman discipline, in spite of the alliance entered upon between philosophy and the popular religion, multifarious worships flourished freely throughout the empire. The emperors, whose official devoutness has nothing exclusive, are admitted, like Hadrian, into the alien churches; or, like Marcus Aurelius, do not fear to make an appeal in urgent cases to all known religions. Amongst the philosophers, some, regarding such matters with contempt, state that the diversity matters but little provided that the heavenly sentiment is in the soul; others, incredulous and sceptical like Lucian, scoff with impunity at all the gods and religious symbols, sparing none. There is nothing in the empire resembling a state religion; it would even be difficult to say precisely which is the religion of the majority of the citizens.

Polytheism means diversity and confusion. There is no common formulary, or catechism, nothing resembling the doctrinal teaching of a fixed and definite theology. All the gods are accounted good, and the newest seem to possess extraordinary virtues. Whence comes it that Christianity alone is excluded from universal toleration and is legally without the rights of the law? Whilst striving to answer this question, there is the risk of defining and exaggerating ideas which hovered vaguely in the minds of the princes and statesmen of that time, and of reducing dim notions to too fixed formulas. The Christians in the second century are usually taxed with atheism and impiety. It is certain that the apologists have fair play in replying to this imputation, and answer it triumphantly. The fact however remains that Christianity was the absolute negation of all the symbols of pagan naturalism, that it condemned and repudiated without exception all the gods and all worships, and aspired to destroy and replace them. Lucian, it is true, was not more respectful to the various prevailing superstitions, but Lucian's invectives were an individual piece of wit. He did not attempt to raise altar against altar, he did not do the work of destruction in view of propaganda. He did not work against the institutions in the name of a new community. He remained faithful to the old philosophical tradition. His burst of laughter was as the last hostile note uttered by philosophy, before disarming and offering a hand to the popular religion.

The Christian objectors, also bitter, were far more in earnest and more formidable. Their attacks amounted to a general assault, and cloaked a manifestly subversive design. They did not scoff for the mere sake of scoffing, but to overthrow and to make a distinct place for their own community, establishing it on new foundations. Authority respects the individual conscience, and grants it the greatest license, but the general conscience is what is called conspiracy.

There is here no room for doubt. Impiety and atheism are in fact not purely religious names, in the modern sense, but political imputations. Religions in the empire are matters of state, or rather religion and the state form only one commonwealth, of which the emperor is the head. Lucian was free to be impious or atheistical. No inference is to be drawn from this, however, though he may here and there have either imitators or disciples.

But the Christian is not an individual unit, his name is legion; he is a member of an association, a party which cannot be confounded with a



philosophical school. He belongs to an organised body which has its members everywhere ; which possesses a distinctive language, rallying signs, a hierarchy, and a common purse maintained by voluntary contributions ; which holds clandestine meetings, celebrates nocturnal rites of which popular imagination is afraid, and possesses certain means of operation at a distance by means of delegates or circulars. And what an organisation it is ! Its members in Gaul have communication with Rome, and with the cities of Asia and Phrygia. It covers the entire empire with an invisible network. Philosophy, the daughter of curiosity and the work of the brain, divides ; Christian belief unites.

Do not these associates, these *collegiati* of a new species, whose secret designs and whose nearest hopes are unknown, but are in any case manifestly in accordance with hatred of the morals, the customs, and the institutions of the empire, form the beginning of a state within a state ? Are they not a menace to the public class, that which at all times is reported inseparable from the preservation of existing institutions ? These are enemies ; the more so that community of faith, hatred of the state, and the bond of a common fear in the presence of danger and of proscription holds them together.

Pertinax, on attaining to the imperial dignity, gave this for the first watchword : " Let us fight "—a virile watchword, and one suited also to the reign of Marcus Aurelius. In fact, on the frontiers the barbarians are hastening to arm. Of the thirty legions of which he has the disposal, the emperor is forced to muster twenty with numerous auxiliaries to drive them beyond the Danube, and hold them in awe. During this time, other peaceful barbarians, as they are called, profess contempt for their country, enervate their minds by an unnerving mysticism, detaching themselves from masculine duties and the rough obligations of civil and military life, and by their attacks and their counsels noiselessly lay the mine which will engulf the fortunes of Rome.

They respect, they say, the established powers, and offer up prayers to their gods on behalf of the emperor ; but they are heard to say that marriage is a corruption, and a Christian slave dares to reply to the judge that Christ has freed him, and amongst the foundations on which the state and society, decency, family ties, and religion rest, there is not one institution which finds favour in their sight.

The state has need of the devotion of all. It is a critical moment. A war, which all good citizens must consider as a holy war, is added to the scourge which devastates the empire. The stake is, perhaps, civilisation itself. The Christians are reluctant to serve the country at home or abroad. They wish to be neither soldiers nor magistrates. They glory in being citizens of heaven. They wrap themselves up in meditation, controversy, and the exercises of their piety. The community is threatened. In every town they have made for themselves a city of their own chosing, a society separate and apart, of which, they say, God himself is the founder, which they call their church, and to which they dedicate all their attention and their zeal. The service of their church is the sole thing which moves them. The duties it imposes are, in their eyes, the only essential and necessary duties.

The prince, their country, the public good, civilisation, Roman splendour, are to them merely resounding names or vain idols. The church is their country, their city, and their camp. This doubtless is the meaning of the accusation, " enemies of the public," which is applied to the Christians. Doubtless neither the princes nor the magistrates saw it in precisely that

light. The Christian prophets foretold the end of the world in the year 195. They did not foresee Constantine and Theodosius, the old religion persecuted in its turn, and forced to hide from the revenge of the Christians, the apologists returned, Libanius imploring in the name of art that the temples and statues of the gods might be spared, and Simmachus in the name of Roman splendour asking mercy for the threatened altar of victory.

The danger was neither so urgent nor so clear in the second century. Melito of Sardis was wont to say with the gravity of conviction that the power and splendour of the empire had augmented with Christianity. Others, with equal sincerity, protested that the Christians did not think of agitating the state, that they had never been found amongst those who stirred up seditious and military revolutions; that, on the contrary, they kept themselves aloof from all parties, and rendered unto Cæsar that which was his due — neither adoration nor incense, but civil submission and obedience. Several times since the destruction of their temple in the year 70, the Jews had risen in arms to shake off the Roman despotism, to save or avenge their independence. The Christians could not be reproached with any revolt; it is true that, sprung from every race, and for the greater part from pagan families, they had no nationality to vindicate or re-establish. None of them, moreover, had asserted a mission to revolutionise society.

Saving the spiritual jurisdiction, they freely abandoned all other matters, or held them of small account. During the first two centuries despised, maltreated, spat upon, under the ban of opinion and of the law, and often put to death, they were everywhere seen to be patient and resigned, speaking less of the world than of heaven, and full of confidence in a master who does no wrong and who can repair injustice.

Thus no precise explanation can be advanced to account for their being styled public enemies. They were the seeds of a new society; one of their doctors stated that their presence deferred the terrestrial judgment and preserved the empire from ruin and corruption.

The true and philosophical significance of the persecutions is thus the defence of the empire and its institutions, threatened by a new and incomprehensible spirit. The emperors during the second century did not see this public danger clearly; they felt it instinctively, and on its account they strove to fortify or to awaken religion and patriotism.<sup>d</sup>