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## The Effect of Peace, Wealth and Luxury on Christianity

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## CHAPTER III.

### THE EFFECT OF PEACE, WEALTH AND LUXURY ON CHRISTIANITY.

Disastrous as the persecutions of the early Christian centuries were, still more mischievous to the church were those periods of tranquility which intervened between the outbursts of rage that prompted them. Peace may have her victories no less renowned than those of war; and so, too, she has her calamities, and they are not less destructive than those of war. War may destroy nations, but ease and luxury mankind corrupt—the body and the mind. Especially is peace dangerous to the church. Prosperity relaxes the reins of discipline; people feel less and less the need of a sustaining providence; but in adversity the spirit of man feels after God, and he is correspondingly more devoted to the service of religion.

We shall find the early Christians no exception to the operation of this influence of repose. Whenever it was accorded them, either through the mercy or the indifference of the emperors, internal dissensions, the intrigues of aspiring prelates and the rise of heresies characterized these periods. Even Milner, who wrote his great work to counteract the influence of the too candid Mosheim; who takes to task other ecclesiastical writers for making too much of the wickedness that has existed in the church; who declares in the introduction of his Church History that genuine piety is the only thing he intends to celebrate, and announces it to be his purpose to write the history of those men only, irrespective of the external church to which they belonged, who have been

real, not nominally, Christians<sup>a</sup>—even Milner, I say, admits and deplures the mischief wrought by these periods of peace which came to the church between the storms of persecution which plagued it; and refers in several places to the marked and steady declension of the Christian spirit in those centuries with which at present I am dealing. He admits that a gloomy cloud hung over the conclusion of the first century; and argues that the first impressions made by the effusion of the spirit are generally the strongest; that human depravity, overborn for a time, arises afresh, particularly in the next generation—hence the disorders of schism and heresy that arose in the church, the tendency of which was to destroy the work of God.<sup>b</sup>

The same writer upon the authority of Origen says that the long peace granted the church in the third century produced a great degree of luke-warmness and religious indecorum. “Let the reader,” says he, “only notice the indiffer-

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<sup>a</sup>Milner's “Church History,” Vol. i, Introduction. In justification of his course, in a foot note he argues that “A history of the perversions and abuses of religion is not properly a history of the church; as absurd were it to suppose a history of the highwaymen that have infested their country to be a history of England.” He appears oblivious to the fact that he throws himself open to the retort: A history of the blessedness and charity of the purely good Christian men alone is not properly a history of the church; as absurd were it to suppose a history alone of the honest men of England, men that have blessed their race, to be a history of that country. Milner's work is more properly a history of piety than of the church. In every age and country he seeks out the good men who have nearest conformed their lives to Christian precepts and celebrates them in his pages. Therefore, whatever admissions we find this author making as to the corruptions and abuses which found their way into the church; we shall be justified in considering as of special weight since they are admitted by him only on compulsion, and when there is no chance of either denying or excusing them. I have already called attention to the same disposition in Eusebius, p. 37; and hence his testimony may also be regarded as of special value in relation to the decline of the true Christian spirit.

<sup>b</sup>Ch. Hist., Vol. i, ch. xv.

ence which he [Origen] here describes, and the conduct of the Christians both in the first and second centuries, and he will be affected with the greatness of the declension." Then follows the picture drawn by Origen:

"Several come to church only on solemn festivals; and then not so much for instruction as diversion. Some go out again as soon as they have heard the lecture, without conferring or asking the pastors questions. Others stay not till the lecture is ended; and others hear not so much as a single word; but entertain themselves in a corner of the church."

Coming to the middle of the third century, just previous to that severe persecution inaugurated by the Emperor Decius, and speaking of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, Milman exclaims: "A star of the first magnitude! when we consider the times in which he lived. Let us recreate ourselves with the contemplation of it. *We are fatigued with hunting for Christian goodness; and we have discovered but little and that little with much difficulty.* We shall find Cyprian to be a character who partook indeed of the declension which we have noticed and lamented; but who was still far superior, I apprehended, in real simplicity and piety to the Christians of the East."<sup>c</sup> This same Cyprian, in whom Milner delights, speaking of the effects of the long peace which preceded the Decian persecution, says:

"Each had been bent on improving his own patrimony; and had forgotten what believers had done under the apostles, and what they ought always to do. They were brooding over the arts of amassing wealth: the pastors and the deacons each forgot their duty; works of mercy were neglected, and discipline was at the lowest ebb; luxury and effeminacy prevailed; meretricious arts in dress were cultivated; fraud and deception practiced among brethren. Christians would unite themselves in matri-

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<sup>c</sup>Milner's "Ch. Hist.," vol. i., cent. iii, ch. vi.

mony with unbelievers; could swear not only without reverence but even without veracity. With haughty asperity they despised their ecclesiastical superiors; they railed against one another with outrageous acrimony, and conducted quarrels with determined malice. Even many bishops, who ought to be guides and patterns to the rest, neglected the peculiar duties of their stations, gave themselves up to secular pursuits. They deserted their places of residence and their flocks; they traveled through distant provinces in quest of pleasure and gain; gave no assistance to the needy brethren; but were insatiable in their thirst of money. They possessed estates by fraud and multiplied usury. What have we not deserved to suffer for such conduct? Even the divine word hath foretold us what we might expect: 'If his children forsake my law and walk not in my judgments, I will visit their offenses with the rod and their sins with scourges.' These things had been denounced and foretold, but in vain. Our sins had brought our affairs to that pass, that because we had despised the Lord's directions, we were obliged to undergo a correction of our multiplied evils and a trial of our faith by severe remedies."<sup>d</sup>

The last forty years of the third century were years of peace to the church. That period began with the ascension of Gallienus, a man of taste, indolence, philosophy and toleration, to the throne; and his example was followed by the emperors to the end of the century. A new scene this, Christianity tolerated by a pagan government for forty years! "This new scene did not prove favorable to the growth of grace and holiness," writes Milner. "In no period since the apostles was there ever so great a general decay as in this; not even in particular instances can we discover during this interval much of lively Christianity."<sup>e</sup>

Though conscious of having already quoted copiously upon the point under consideration, I cannot withhold the testimony of Eusebius who was a witness of the effects of

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<sup>d</sup>Milner's "Ch. Hist.," vol. i, cent. iii, ch. viii.

<sup>e</sup>Milner's "Ch. Hist.," vol. i, cent. iii, ch. xvii.

that peace granted the church previous to the last great pagan persecution, the Diocletian. After describing the multitudes which flocked into the church before the declension in the spirit of true Christianity so greatly prevailed, he remarks :

“Nor was any malignant demon able to infatuate, no human machinations prevent them so long as the providential hand of God superintended and guarded his people as the worthy subjects of his care. But when by reason of excessive liberty, we sunk into negligence and sloth, one envying and reviling another in different ways, and we were almost, as it were, upon the point of taking up arms against each other with words as with darts and spears, prelates inveighing against prelates, and people rising up against people, and hypocrisy and dissimulation had arisen to the greatest height of malignity, then the divine judgment, which usually proceeds with a lenient hand, whilst the multitudes were yet crowding into the church, with gentle and mild visitation began to afflict the episcopacy; the persecution having begun with those brethren in the army. But as if destitute of all sensibility, we were not prompt in measures to appease and propitiate the Deity; some indeed like atheists, regarding our situation as unheeded and unobserved by a Providence, we added one wickedness and misery to another. But some that appeared to be our pastors deserting the law of piety, were inflamed against each other with mutual strifes, only accumulating quarrels and threats, rivalry, hostility and hatred to each other, only anxious to assert the government as a kind of sovereignty for themselves.”<sup>f</sup>

Let it be remembered that this is quoted from a writer contemporary with the events, and who says in the very chapter following the one from which the foregoing is taken that it was not for him to record the dissensions and follies which the shepherds of the people exercised against each other before the persecution. He also adds: “We shall not

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<sup>f</sup>Eusebius' "Eccl. Hist.," Bk. viii, ch. i.

make mention of those that were shaken by the persecution, nor of those that suffered shipwreck in their salvation, and of their own accord were sunk in the depths of the watery gulf."<sup>g</sup> Then in his "Book of Martyrs," referring to events that occurred between the edicts ordering the persecution, he says:

"But the events that occurred in the intermediate times, besides those already related, I have thought proper to pass by; I mean more particularly the circumstances of the different heads of the churches, who from being shepherds of the reasonable flocks of Christ, that did not govern in a lawful and becoming manner, were condemned, by divine justice, as unworthy of such a charge, to be the keepers of the unreasonable camel, an animal deformed in the structure of his body; and condemned further to be the keepers of the imperial horses. \* \* \* Moreover, the ambitious aspirings of many to office, and the injudicious and unlawful ordinations that took place, the divisions among the confessors themselves, the great schisms and difficulties industriously fomented by the factions among the new members, against the relics of the church, devising one innovation after another, and unmercifully thrusting them into the midst of all these calamities, heaping up affliction upon affliction. All this, I say, I have resolved to pass by, judging it foreign to my purpose, wishing, as I said in the beginning, to shun and avoid giving an account of them."<sup>h</sup>

Hence, however bad the condition of the church is represented to be by ecclesiastical writers, we must know that it was still worse than that; however numerous the schisms, however unholy the ambition of aspiring prelates; however frequent and serious the innovations upon the primitive ordinances of the gospel; however great the confusion and apostasy in the church is represented to be; we must know that it is still worse than that, since the church historians

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<sup>g</sup>Eusebius' "Eccl. Hist.," Bk. viii, ch. ii.

<sup>h</sup>"Book of Martyrs," ch. xii.

contemporaneous with the events refused to record these things in their fullness lest it should prove disastrous to the church; just as some of our modern scholars professing to write church history express their determination to close their eyes to the corruption and abuses which form the greater part of the melancholy story of ecclesiastical history, for fear that relating these things would make it appear that real religion scarcely had any existence.<sup>i</sup> But it is all in vain. "It is idle, it is disingenuous," remarks the editor<sup>j</sup> of Gibbon's great work, "to deny or to dissemble the early depravations of Christianity, its gradual but rapid departure from its primitive simplicity and purity, still more from its spirit of universal love."

If the intermittent peace accorded to the church in the first three troubled centuries of its existence was productive of the evils admitted by the writers who have felt that the cause of religion demanded that these evils as much as possible should be covered up, naturally enough one exclaims, what then must have been the result of that repose which came to the church after the elevation of Constantine to the imperial throne! When from a proscribed religion Christianity was exalted to the dignity of the state religion of the empire; and her prelates and clergy, recalled from exile and suffering, poverty and disgrace, were loaded with the wealth and the honors that the lords of the Roman world could bestow! Let imagination do her best or worst in picturing the rapid decline of whatever remained of true Christianity, conjecture can scarcely outrun the facts. If when the office of bishop was attended with danger and scant revenues it aroused the inordinate ambition of men to possess it,

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<sup>i</sup>See Milner's Introduction to his Church Hist., Vol. i.

<sup>j</sup>This is the Rev. H. H. Milman who edited and annotated Gibbon's "Decline and Fall." The above quotation will be found in the editor's preface.



how infinitely more must it have become the object of envy, strife and ambition when by the patronage of Constantine it became not only free from danger but endowed with revenues that a prince might envy, and accorded an influence in the palace scarcely second to that granted to the governors of the provinces!

“If before the Decian persecution the rivalry between the bishops of Rome and Carthage prompted a bitter controversy which threatened the unity of the church, how much more likely were such conflicts to arise between the bishops of Rome and Constantinople—rival bishops or rival cities, Rome proud of her past, Constantinople vain of her present glory; the former jealous of the place she had filled in the world’s history; the latter ambitious of future influence! If heresies were fomented and schisms created when to be a Christian invited espionage and perhaps death, what an increase there must have been in these and other disintegrating influences when it became a reproach rather than a praise *not* to be a Christian, and the door of the church stood wide open to the evil-minded, who sought membership, not to enjoy the consolation of religion but for worldly advantage!”