

THE FIRST INTELLECTUAL ATTACK ON CHRISTIANITY.

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During the first century of the Church's existence she was too poor, despised, and weak to merit refutation by the high and mighty intellects, whose scorn was well voiced by Tacitus the historian and Pliny the proconsul, who called Christianity *exitiabilis superstitio, prava et immodica superstitio, inflexibilis obstinatio*. That there could be anything to commend in the religion of a crucified Sophist and malefactor of Judea never entered their minds. In this day of catholic feeling and good-natured tolerance toward all religion we have no standards of measurement to estimate the worse than contempt in which the best spirits of paganism held Christianity, which to them was both utter folly and a crime. Perhaps the nearest approach to it was Luther's later reaction toward the papacy (not the Church), the Scottish Covenanters toward that and High Anglicanism, and of the ordinary American toward early Mormonism, especially after the Mountain Meadows Massacre in 1857. Outside of actual charges of evil doing, one reason of this was the atoning significance of the death of Christ, which became a part of the universal consciousness of His followers. To the Stoics, who otherwise should have been attracted by the lofty ethics of the gospel, this was a horrible stumbling block. One of the best of them, the emperor, Marcus Aurelius, has not only not the slightest respect for the Christians, but even attributes their heroic constancy in death to what Gwatkin thinks might be best translated into American as "pure cussedness".* In the face of this prejudice the winning of converts among

* *κατὰ ψιλὴν παράταξιν*, according to sheer obstinacy, *Medit.* 11.3. Gwatkin, *Early Church History*, i.153.

the educated and higher classes—and the Church won many—is one of the miracles of history. And in the face of it, it is not to be wondered at that it was not till about 178 A. D. that we have the first deliberate onslaught on Christianity in the arena of debate.

This was by Celsus, a Platonic philosopher, who published a book, *A True Discourse* (Ἀληθὴς λόγος), but of whom nothing is known. It is hardly fair to charge the loss of this book simply to Christian hatred, though Christians in the fifth century destroyed pagan books, for many defences of Christianity have also perished. Fortunately we have copious extracts in Origen's refutation, and we can therefore see how Christianity struck this keen thinker. We can do no better than give his own words:

Christians are punished justly, because they have borrowed their doctrines and palm them off as new. Their objections to idols are vain, for it is only the spiritual beings imaged by or resident in idols which are worshiped. The Christians themselves reverence demons, because they invoke them to perform miracles. [Does he refer to Christ?] They hold their doctrines in secrecy, so that they may impose on the ignorant and win reputation of possessing divine power. For this they are punished even unto death. Blind, irrational faith is the one essential requirement and bond. They hush inquiry by the words, 'Don't investigate, but believe'. The ancient writings of the Jews are full of absurdities. For instance, Moses makes the world less than ten thousand years old. Circumcision is represented as originated by Abraham, whereas it is of Egyptian origin. Moses' followers were not educated, but were agriculturists of low life. He taught the people also the worship of angels and introduced witchcraft. Jesus was born of a poor woman of a Judean village, who was put away by her husband for adultery. This bastard child went to Egypt where he learned arts and magical powers, returned to Palestine, and gave himself out as Son of God. When he suffered he was not helped by his alleged Father, nor could he help himself. Instead of living in a kingly way he begged his bread, and as disciples chose ten or eleven publicans or sailors of the lowest class. Ancient myths ascribed to Amphion and others a divine origin, and we disbelieved them, but they were more consistent than the Stoics about Jesus. The miracles of Jesus do not equal the wonders performed by magicians today. If they perform them they do so by demons. Why has his own nation rejected Jesus, and only Gentiles received him? He who is God cannot run away or be bound or delivered up by his associates. A good general is never betrayed. No one, either God or demon or rational man, if he foresaw suffering and death, would encounter them, if he could avoid them. If these things were foretold then God was under necessity of causing his own disciples to become wicked men. The disciples have made changes in the Scriptures, and modified the origi-

nal account. Prophecies do not prove Jesus, because there are thousands to whom they just as well apply. Nor was there anything in the ignoble doctrines and signs ascribed to Jesus to prove him a God or Son of God. If he were a God he should have done something to vindicate himself from insult and punish his insulters. It was common blood that flowed from him, not ichor of the immortals. He could not even endure thirst. Nor could he fully persuade anyone to receive him. Is it not absurd that he who could win no disciples when alive should win multitudes after his death? As to his miracles they prove nothing, because he warned his disciples that deceivers would come who would do the same works. Then there are many stories of resurrection. As to his being seen after his resurrection, that is explained psychologically as vision. Why did he not appear to his enemies? His free display would have produced conviction of his divinity. Christian doctrines are a rehash of Egyptian superstitions, principally exploded theories of last things, which have their power from threats of punishment or hopes of reward. They deny other gods, and they hold Christ as God. Upon mere faith in him they lay unreasonable stress, claiming that this faith determines disposition and destiny.

Men of education are not esteemed, but let every ignoramus and blockhead make his way to this faith. On public occasions their preachers do not go to the respectable to urge their doctrines, but where they find a knot of mean men, slaves, or lads, thither they resort and then they proselyte. The good teachers they revile, and exhort the youth to abandon their fathers and teachers and go with the women and other boys into the harem or shoe shop or fuller's room, and receive initiation. They confirm these in vice, for they teach that God was sent into the world to sinners and not to the righteous. They welcome only the godless. Nor does the claim hold that they do this for their reformation, for the change of confirmed sinners is most difficult, if not impossible. Neither severity nor mercy avails for the hardened. Even God cannot convert such sinners, for he cannot do anything against reason and nature. What folly to teach that the begging and lamenting sinner finds mercy, while a manly spirit who is above lamentation is passed by. The doctrine of God's descent is also absurd. Why did he come? To learn of human affairs? He knows already. To rectify them? He could do that without coming. Then if he should come down he would leave unoccupied his place, which is absurd. Besides such is the nice adjustment of things that if there should be such a supernatural interference of God or his Son, universal ruin would result. Is the descent for God's glory? But does God want to win applause? Is it to correct evil? But why was the world so long neglected, why God's care awoke so late?

Christians teach another descent of God to punish the ungodly and burn the world. This is taken for the Greek doctrine of cycles, each ended with a catastrophe. But it is unreasonable and immoral. Besides, in the nature of the case, God cannot change, for he is already perfect. And if he did come he must serve himself with an illusion and a phantasmal body, but that would be deception which is immoral. Then think of the Old Testament stories—so grotesque and puerile. [Celsus mentions several.] The most sensible try to explain these as allegories, but in vain, for there is no natural correspondence between the stories and their interpretations, which are more monstrous than the original stories. The doctrine that God created the universe is false and degrading, for God made only immortal entities, and these

made the mortal. God made the soul but not the body, which like all hyle (matter) is contemptible. Evil is inherent in the hyle, develops in a fixed cycle determined by changeless law, and therefore cannot be diminished. Divine interference is therefore unthinkable. Everything proceeds according to inevitable cycles. Equally absurd is the doctrine that God made all things for man, which is contradicted by the fact that ants and bees have governments, arts, wars, etc., superior to man.

Celsus proceeds to acute criticism of the resurrection of the body, of the pre-eminence or alone validity of Christian worship, of the inspiration of sacred writings, of the idea that the mass of men can understand truth, of the Christian teaching as to faith, as to poverty and humility, as to the devil, creation, prophecy, immortality, heaven, etc. The clever philosopher presses the battle to the gate with relentless sarcasm, plausible reasons, and hard blows, anticipating many of the objections against supernatural Christianity urged from that day to this. For the ordinary man, little has been added. The last part, to which space forbids reference, is more philosophical, more telling, more interesting than the first. If you want to get the point of view of the cultivated pagan of the second century, and thus understand the miracle of Christianity's growth, read the voluminous extracts from Celsus, and do not forget Origen's reply.

In the elegant Dialogue (*Octavius*) of Minucius Felix (last part of second century), Caecilius Natalis talks vigorously against our religion. He strikes out from the starting point of the New Academy that all knowledge is uncertain, and blames the presumption of the Christians that they without learning venture to say anything about the government of the universe, whose very existence, not to speak of a Providence, cannot be proved. The phenomenal world in which we live arose by accident, and many things, such as a stroke of lightning, pestilence, etc., speak against the being of a God. We cannot know truth, and what is most likely is that there reigns an arbitrary fate. In this uncertainty the best that we can do is to abide by the religion of those who in the childhood of

the world rejoiced (as they supposed) in fellowship with the gods, and therefore deserve the most faith. This religion has made Rome great, has founded and increased its rule. The gods of the Romans have often proved the reality of their administration when their will, auspices, oracles, or dreams have been observed or neglected. To destroy such an honorable and venerable faith is an unbearable presumption. And what kind of people and religion are to take its place? Ignorant men out of the dregs of folk and credulous women, a seditious, darkness-loving, fornication-guilty mob, who as a compensation for a melancholy existence, flatter themselves with the laughable consolation of a life after death. Repugnant also are their practices, for they worship the head of an ass,† the genitals of their priests, the cross, and—a transgressor nailed on a cross. Their ceremonies are the murder of innocent children and adultery under the cover of brotherly love. And even if all are not guilty, they all make themselves guilty of knowledge of such atrocities. Their secrecy is the best evidence of the baldness of their religion. Absurd is their idea of one God which they have taken over from the despised Jews, and who, over against the Roman deities, shows himself altogether weak. They represent him as invisible, omniscient, omnipresent, attributes which are inconceivable and very inconvenient. The doctrines of the end of the world, resurrection, and judgment cannot be just, as divine predestination does away with freedom just as surely as the heathen fate. The confessors of this religion get no advantage from it, for they suffer not only from the usual calamities but also

† The heathens caricatured the Christ worship of the Christians by an ass. In 1856 there was discovered in some excavations on or near the Palatine Hill in Rome a rough graffito representing a man with an ass's head on a cross, another man reverencing it, and this inscription in Latin, "Alexamenos prays to (his) god." For full information, with figures, see Kraus in his *Realencyk. der Christlichen Alterthümer*, ii. (1886), 774-6. Comp. Tertullian, *Apol.* 16. In 1870 there was found on an adjoining chamber a graffito which was probably an answer to the other, *Alexamenos fidelis*.

from torture, death by fire, and by the cross. Their pitiful condition is shown also by their abstaining from pleasures like shows and banquets, and they even have no favor to flowers and garlands. Caecilius closes with a depreciation of searching into divine things, which are always doubtful because they surpass our knowledge, as Socrates and Simonides have already warned us. But a farther growth of Christianity would set a contemptible superstition in the place of our paternal religion, if it would not stifle every religious feeling.†

The fairest critic was the learned and high-minded Porphyry, a native of Tyre or of Batanea, the pupil of Longinus at Athens, and after 263 of the celebrated Plotinus, the Neoplatonist philosopher, at Rome. He then went to Sicily where he wrote his famous book, *κατὰ Χριστιανῶν λόγοι*, in 15 books (about 268-72), one of the most valuable works in polemics ever written, burned, alas! by order of the Christian emperors, Theodosius II and Valentinian III in 448. Ah, such narrow fanaticism, but let us curb our indignation long enough to remember the action of those broad-minded Anglican High Churchmen who burned Froude's *Nemesis of Faith* in the court of Oriel College, Oxford, in 1848. No more thorough work against Christianity has probably ever appeared than this of Porphyry, and Harnack thinks that the field of battle has not shifted since, and even that that philosopher has never been answered and can never be answered except by reducing Christianity to its essence.§ Extracts have been preserved in the replies of Methodius, Eusebius, and Appollinaris, and especially of Macarius Magnes.

Porphyry was the first to subject the Bible to careful hostile criticism. He thought well of parts of it but claimed that it was contradictory and a large section of it valueless. He did not reject Christ, but only, like many moderns, the Christ of the Gospels. In one of his writ-

† Boenig's summary in Hauck, *Real Encyk.* 3 Aufl. 13.85 (1903).

§ Harnack, *Expansion of Christianity*, ii.135 (ed. 1905).

ings he distinguishes between his Christ and Christians. "What I am about to say will appear much beyond the ordinary judgment to some. The gods have declared Christ to have been most pious, to have been made immortal, and have remembered him with delight, whereas the Christians are a polluted set, and enmeshed in error."|| He held the Gospels were legendary and lying, the prophecies written after the event, and the Jesus of the records inconsistent and equivocating. He bitterly criticised Peter, and especially Paul, whom he thinks a ranting barbarian and insincere rhetorician, full of contradictions and solecisms, and whom he entirely fails to understand. In fact, if you approach Paul with a hostile spirit, your judgment will be, like Porphyry's, confounded; for here it is eminently true, to love is to understand. Harnack calls attention to the fact that Porphyry's criticism throws light on the much debated question whether Paul was mainly Jewish or Hellenist, for he, a "Hellenist of the first water, feels keener antipathy to Paul than to any other Christian."x As to the doctrines of Christianity, he fought against three mainly, that of creation, as separating God too much from the world (he also opposed the idea of the final destruction of the world), that of incarnation, as uniting God too much with the world, and that of the resurrection, which was a fearful pill to Platonists and other philosophers. In fact, with such an embargo as the resurrection of the body, it is a wonder that Christianity made any headway in the Greek world.

The emperor Julian (360-3) stands behind the first line of attack, but he deserves a word or two for his amazing spectacle of a Roman emperor seriously devoting himself to a refutation of Christianity. He condemns the Christians for leaving the Jewish law, and calls Paul the greatest impostor and charlatan that ever lived. Bap-

|| Quoted in Aug., *De Civit. Dei*, 19.23 (PNF 419).

x *Ib.* 137.

tism is supposed to remove all the transgressions of the soul, and yet it cannot cure leprosy, gout, or dropsy, nor any bodily infirmity. The Old Testament prophecies are refuted in detail as relating not to Christ, but to the Jews alone. The divinity of Christ is a special offense. The first three Gospels know nothing about it, but John seeing that it was infecting the Greek and Italian cities and that Christians were secretly worshiping the tombs of Peter and Paul, brought this worship of Christ in too. When you do not adore the sun, the beneficent image of the spiritual and intelligible Father, why should you adore a man? A Galilean peasant, who did nothing worth recording, unless you reckon it a great act to have cured a few halt and blind people and exorcised demoniacs. You assume altogether too much in destroying temples, persecuting your own heretics, etc., for Jesus and Paul never expected you to fill so important a place, but were satisfied with converting a few maidservants and slaves, and by that means to get hold of their mistresses, and men like Cornelius and Sergius. Did they convert a single distinguished person under Tiberius and Claudius?

Literature.—Voluminous extracts from Celsus in Origen, *Contra Celsum*, gathered into one in German with notes by Keim, *Celsus Wahres Wort*, 1873, and in English by Caldwell in *Baptist Quar.* 1868. See the admirable study of Patrick, *The Apology of Origen Against Celsus*, 1892, and Bindemann's study in *Zeithschr. f. hist. Theol.* 1842, Heft 2, 58-146. For Caecilius see any ed. of Minucius Felix or transl. in ANF iv.173ff. For Porphyry see collection in Fabricius, *Biblioth. Graeca*, tome iv.207ff., and the essays in *Theol. Stud. u. Krit.* 1832, and *Theol. Quartelschr.* 1865. Julian's objections are in Cyril of Alex.'s answer.