

‘THOSE OTHER LABOURERS’

‘Look at the fields, they are white with the promise of harvest already . . . The harvest I have sent you out to reap is one on which you best owed no labour; others have laboured and it is their labours you have inherited.’

THE ground about to receive the seeds of Christianity was ploughed by the furrows of dissatisfaction and watered by rare streams of truth running through certain philosophic, ethical and religious systems. The greater part of the then known world formed the unity of the Roman Empire—renowned for its legislation and organization. Through its centre at Rome, the farthest corners of the Empire were connected in such a way as to ensure comparatively safe and speedy travel. Moreover messengers, traders, and soldiers were constantly circulating within its boundaries. Little wonder that news whether of wars, philosophic or religious systems spread like wildfire over vast stretches of land.

Though it was the centre of government, Rome allowed a considerable amount of freedom to the provinces, to conduct affairs according to their own customs and traditions, when these presented no danger to the state. Particularly was this so in the realm of religion. The Romans respected all creeds and not only tolerated religious rites of the most gruesome kind but prayed foreign divinities to extend their patronage to Rome. Soldiers returned from their conquests bearing Greek and oriental gods complete with legends, rites and sacrifices. Thus was Mithras transported by his Roman devotees to England. At the same time, foreign merchants and freed slaves set up places of worship to their own gods in every city of the Empire performing their rites under the protection of the law for religious ‘colleges’. Only in extreme cases was there any official interference, as when the worshippers of Isis set up a temple to her in the Capitol—the heart of Roman worship. Such was Roman awe for matters religious that no workman could be found, in this instance, to tear down the building, until the consul started the work of demolition with his own hands. By the time of the Emperors, the foundation and scope of ‘colleges’ were limited. Christian communities could not, therefore, set themselves up as new ‘colleges’. But the Jewish ghettos were protected, eastern religions well established and the Greek deities accepted as a popular contribution to Roman worship. Yet the Greeks had ceased to believe in them and were blighting the Roman aristocracy with the scepticism suffusing their literature, philosophy and education—a scepticism which the patricians increased by the misuse of their religious privileges.

The popularity of oriental rites corresponded to the rapid spread

of immorality among both plebs and patricians of Empire days. After Augustus's final victory, Rome was at peace to consolidate her Empire and increase her wealth. Nobles at home enlarged their establishments and added large numbers to the slave power they already possessed. In Italy land was turned to pasture while corn was imported from the plains of Egypt. Peasants seeking work in the city could not compete with the cheapness of slave labour. They swelled the crowd of paupers subsisting on a pittance from the state treasury or lived as fawning 'clients' to wealthy patrons. Idleness for the poor and luxury for the rich soon bore their natural fruit in dissipation of the worst kind. Aristocratic scepticism added to this fuel a libertine spirit which charred the last remnants of nobility and the last shreds of decency in Rome. Seneca strongly condemns the citizens of his day. Juvenal, listing the current evils, bewails that :—

'Luxury more to be dreaded than the sword, has fallen upon us and is avenging the conquered universe.'

Family life was gone and selfishness was rife in a land which had placed all its hope on family pride and all its power in the hands of the few. These were out for pleasure and were followed by retinues of clients seeking their wealth. Legacy hunters enhanced the life of a celibate and belittled the dignity of fatherhood. Many refused to marry and set up families.

'Their only boast is of their barrenness, they do not even want an only son', reports Pliny. Augustus tried to remedy the wrong by legislating in favour of the married man. This only increased the evil for many seeking its advantages married very young girls or killed or disinherited their unwanted offspring. To check this practice the Emperor offered greater privileges to family men. In this atmosphere women lost their dignity. They vied with men for privileges; attended games and libertine feasts; lived in their own establishments apart from their husbands and refused to accept permanent ties. Divorce was so common that a tombstone, which has been found, bears an inscription of special praise to a lady for living with her husband all her life.

Oriental and Asiatic religions each had its separate appeal to a people satiated with immorality, yet thirsting for more sensation. Those tired of pleasure-seeking found diversion in the worship of Cybele or Mithras, and eased probable guilt-complexes with scourgings and immersions in the warm blood of sacrificial bulls. Some, disgusted by all this excess, found relief in the clean worship of Isis, with its suggestions of monotheism. Their goddess was addressed as 'Isis of the Thousand Names' signifying her true worship in all other deities, or 'The Only One who Art All'. Others, in smaller numbers sought refuge in Stoicism. The moral and philosophical strain running through it showed the Greek mind reaching for a standard which could not generally be

attained when supported solely by the cold light of reason. Forming a select few the Stoics were half admired and half derided by the mass who could not follow them.

The Jews were in a different position. Many of them, far from the Temple, followed a simple form of Judaism in which sacrifice played no part. Their frugal and industrious life displayed a height of purity in sharp contrast to that of their contemporaries. Strong family and racial ties gave them a sense of security which overflowed into a radiant and sincere joy in their feastings and ceremonies. These were so free from the coarseness, hysteria and materialism found in pagan worship that Jews were accused of atheism by Roman writers and politicians. At the same time their religion was dubbed superstitious by no less a writer than Seneca, probably owing to the stubbornness with which they adhered to moral and religious practices in everyday life. These very elements of spirituality and morality, so often misinterpreted, attracted numerous proselytes to be seen wherever Jews met together in prayer. The nature of their one Ineffable God corresponded to their inner craving for beauty and truth. His care of the Jewish race appealed to the Gentile's utter loneliness and desolation. From the time of the Babylonian Captivity, Jewish emigration had gone on all over the Eastern Mediterranean regions. Keen business men, these Jews had helped trade to flourish and had generally insinuated themselves into the good graces of their masters. They, in turn, heaped privileges upon the communities and exempted them from Civil law where necessary for the observance of their own law. Alexander, Julius Cæsar, Augustus, each in turn became beneficent patrons to win their loyalty. Thus Jewish communities flourished in every city and port of the civilized world, haughtily secluded from the citizens yet mingling with them in commerce. Great as was the jealousy, ignorance and even hatred surrounding these ghettos, they none the less exercised an influence over the Gentile world.

For immorality was not confined to Rome. Indeed Rome accused Eastern religions of their corrupting influence, while it diffused the evil of its own decayed greatness throughout the Empire. As we follow the footsteps of the Apostles we find the same depravity everywhere. At Antioch in Syria where Peter first established his Apostolic See, East and West met in an impact of peoples and religions retaining the worst of both Greek and Syrian practices, while the Romans, far from home, threw themselves without reserve into the race for pleasure. Eastern magic was rife. Mystery religions thrived here as in the rest of the Empire. At Tarsus, Paul's birthplace, the prevalent morality could be seen incised on a monument to Sardanapalus 'Pilgrim, eat, drink and be merry ; nothing else is of value'.

All over the Empire the same ill demanded the same remedy. The Jews were laughed at by the envious but imitated by many. Horace

Persius, and Seneca each witness to the fact that, in the words of the last named :—

‘The customs of this most criminal people are received throughout the world.’

Jews encouraged this and went so far as to forge sayings of the pagan Sybil in favour of monotheism. More effective, however, was the Septuagint version of the Scriptures completed over a century before the coming of Christ, which spread the doctrine of the Jews in the popular language of the day. Romans who did not attend the synagogue learnt to respect these beliefs. As Juvenal notes in his Satires ‘Some adore nothing but the clouds and the deity of heaven’.

All this did not constitute Judaism but formed a climate of opinion ready to welcome Christianity as it extended a helping hand towards the proselyte struggling under a load of petty restrictions, or the Gentile sinking in the mire of materialism. The world was gorged with the fruits of its own self-sufficiency and was athirst for a knowledge of God. Greedily it snatched scraps of truth from any system offering them. Judaism like a mirage in the desert only intensified that thirst, offering a glimpse of the Truth—a reflection of that which was yet further afield. When Christianity came, Jewish communities offered a foothold and presented the Apostles with an audience of enquiring Gentiles in every city and port of the Empire.

‘The harvest is great but the labourers are few.’

B. JONES.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Is the ‘Millennium’, or ‘Thousand Years’ of the Apocalypse the peaceful expansion of the Church from the sixth to the sixteenth centuries?’

The answer might very well be an affirmative, if it were agreed that the way to interpret the Apocalypse is to regard it as St John’s inspired prophecy of the future chronological history of the Church. But such an approach is not verified by facts. The world continues seated in wickedness (I John v, 19), and the Church continues to pray that God will ‘thrust down to hell Satan and all wicked spirits who wander through the world for the ruin of souls’. Moreover, such an approach is comparatively modern. Joachim, Abbot of Flora in southern Italy (d. 1202), a saintly man, was the first to parcel out the Apocalypse into descriptions of seven succeeding periods of the history of the Church. The seventh age, the final one, would be the golden age of the Church, when the contemplative life would be spread everywhere. This age would begin in the year 1260 (cf. xi, 3 : 1260 days), and it would close with the final judgement. Nicholas of Lyra (d. 1340) followed the same

¹ See Editorial.