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*THE INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIANITY UPON
THE ROMAN EMPIRE*

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It has commonly been taken for granted that Christianity must have had a great and beneficent influence upon the Roman Empire, within which it had its origin and whose official religion it finally became. This not unnatural assumption is, however, very difficult to substantiate. One may recognize that the religion of Christ was a great advance upon the paganism of antiquity, and that its final victory was a blessing to the world, and yet find it far from easy to show how and to what extent the Roman world was benefited by it. It is simple enough to point to individual lives within the Christian church that were purified and helped. But to prove that the common level of life within the Empire was raised, that society at large was bettered, that the general moral standard was elevated, that political principles and civil institutions and economic ideals were improved by its influence, is altogether another matter. It is not enough to content ourselves with the assumption that Christianity being in itself a good thing must have been good for the Roman world; it is incumbent upon us to show that it actually proved so.

If this is to be done, it would seem necessary first of all to show that the Empire was better in its later days, after it had felt for centuries the leaven of Christianity, than it was before the new religion appeared upon the scene. It is notoriously difficult to compare the life of one age with that of another and determine with which the advantage lies. So much depends upon the temperament and point of view of those observers whose comments upon their own times have happened to come down to us that it is almost impossible to speak with assurance. And yet we know enough about the Roman Empire, early and late, to be rea-

sonably confident that no general and permanent improvement, political, economic, social, and moral, marked its history from the second century on; that is, from the earliest date when Christianity may be supposed to have exerted an influence upon its life. The notion that the Empire was steadily declining during all this period may be exaggerated, but it is in general true. Chrysostom and Jerome and Augustine and Orosius and Salvian may in their Christian zeal paint contemporary morals blacker than the facts warrant. But the Christian apologetic undertaken by Augustine in his *City of God* and by Orosius in his *History of the World* shows that there was general agreement both among Christians and pagans that the Empire was growing steadily worse instead of better; and no one can read Salvian's work on the *Government of God* and the poems *Conjugis ad Uxorem* and *De Providentia Divina* ascribed to Prosper of Aquitaine without realizing that, even though the pictures may be overdrawn, conditions were as bad as they had ever been, if not worse. All the evidence of the period goes to show that in the political world order was increasingly giving way to chaos, and that economically the Empire was on the down grade; while socially and morally there was at any rate no improvement sufficiently marked or general to leave any traces. Such writings as those of Symmachus, Ausonius, and Apollinaris Sidonius show that there was still domestic virtue in the world in the fourth and fifth centuries, as there was in the age of Pliny, and political honor, as in the days of Cato; but society at large seems to have been no better, if it was not worse, than in earlier times.

In certain respects it is true there was a difference easily observable. Christian monasticism, unknown in the first century, had spread far and near both in East and West before the fifth century, and society was unquestionably widely affected by it. Here we have a direct fruit of Christianity. It is true that monasticism has had a large development in other religions as well. It neither took its rise originally within the Christian church nor has Christianity had a monopoly of it, but Christian monasticism was a native development on Christian soil, the natural result of principles which existed within the church as early even as the time of Paul. Quite apart, however, from the question of its origin,

it may well be doubted whether its growing prevalence in the early centuries of the Christian era was really a benefit to the Roman Empire. It argued the wide-spread existence of a certain form of religious devotion and moral heroism, but it argued also an all too common moral weakness. The impulse to leave the world, to turn one's back upon its pleasures, its occupations, its responsibilities, and its opportunities, sometimes meant strength, sometimes the lack of it. It might be due to moral enthusiasm or to mere pessimism and thwarted desires. It did undoubtedly tend to promote the ideal of personal purity and sexual morality, though the influence even here was not always as uplifting as it might have been—witness for instance many of the letters of Jerome. The spectacle of the life of celibacy and chastity practised by an ever-increasing number of men and women must impress beholders with the importance of purity; but on the other hand the contempt, either tacit or avowed, thrown by the whole movement upon family life, and the notion that the highest thing a man could do was to separate himself from neighbors and friends, from the world and all its interests, rather than to devote himself to the service of his fellows and to the improvement of society and the state, could hardly fail to be pernicious. Instead of enlisting the religious and moral enthusiasm of the age for the betterment of society, monasticism turned much of that enthusiasm into an altogether different channel, and diminished rather than multiplied the forces making for the transformation of this world into the kingdom of God.

Another marked difference between the earlier and later Empire was the gradual decrease in the number of slaves and the diminishing importance of the slave class in the life of the Roman world. Whether Christianity had anything to do with this decline in the institution of slavery is doubtful. It is true that the overthrow of slavery is commonly attributed to the Christian church, but it was not overthrown in the Roman world. The institution was still firmly intrenched in the later Empire, even though the relative number of slaves was less than in earlier days. Christianity in the days of the Roman Empire made no protest against slavery. Christians accepted it without question, just as they accepted the state, the prevailing differences in social rank, and

the common inequalities in economic conditions. They preached the principle of Christian brotherhood, but they no more thought of putting an end to slavery than they thought of destroying private property. Attempts might be made—as they often were, by pagans as well as Christians—to ameliorate the suffering and distress which slavery often caused, but of a war upon the institution itself nobody thought. In Stoicism the principle of human brotherhood and equality was preached before Christianity and independently of it; and under its influence there were pagans here and there who freed their slaves, as there were Christians who did the same under the influence of the like Christian principle. As the idea and practice of penance grew within the church, the manumission of slaves took its place with the giving of alms and other forms of self-sacrifice as a means of making atonement for one's sins. Moreover, the general hostility of the more ascetic Christians to luxury and display voiced itself occasionally in denunciation of the practice of holding large numbers of slaves, as in attacks upon large possessions of any kind.¹ But the practice of manumission was not new, and it is by no means certain that it was more common in the Christian than in the pagan Empire. In any case it did not mean the condemnation of slavery or the destruction of it as an institution. As a matter of fact, the church itself, after it had become a legalized corporation within the Roman Empire, was a large holder of slaves, as of other kinds of property.

The attitude of the leaders of the church from Paul on was such as to confirm rather than to destroy slavery. Christians were not to desire a change in their earthly condition. They were to accept their lot in life, whether bond or free, without complaint, and were to realize that they were all at the same time freedmen of the Lord and bond-servants of Christ. There was inculcated the same indifference towards one's condition in this respect as in all respects. It was not for a change in their earthly lot or a betterment of their worldly state that Christians were to seek, but for righteousness and eternal salvation. The church, to be sure, preached the brotherhood of all Christians in Christ,

¹ See Chrysostom, Homily xl, 5, on First Corinthians, who thinks two or three slaves enough for anybody.

but this was not commonly interpreted to mean the abolition of slavery or even any criticism of it as an institution. Christian brotherhood was to manifest itself in mutual kindness, forgiveness, forbearance, and charity. Christian masters were to treat their slaves mercifully, and Christian slaves were to be faithful and dutiful to their masters. Thus the Christian spirit was to find expression both among bond and free, but an equality of condition or estate in this world it was not supposed to involve. How the idea of Christian brotherhood and the equality of all Christians before God could consist with the continuance of slavery is suggested, for instance, in Augustine's *City of God*, where the realization of the Christian ideal is put in heaven rather than on earth.²

The real secret of the growing decline of slavery in the Roman Empire—a decline which began already in its early days before the Gospel had gained a hearing and a following—is to be found not in the influence of Christianity but in changed economic conditions. The political revolution resulting in the establishment of the Empire was but one phase of a larger social revolution which expressed itself in the increasing power of the commercial and industrial classes of the community and the growing displacement of the old landed aristocracy. Slavery could not possibly flourish under the new social conditions as it had under the old, and the steady decline of the institution and the steady increase of free labor were inevitable. Then, too, as the conquests of Rome in the world outside ceased, the supply of slaves diminished; and later, as wealth decreased, and particularly as the great estates of earlier days fell into decay, the ability to hold slaves in large numbers was lessened, and manumission often became an economic necessity. To attribute to Christianity any controlling influence in this general and inevitable process is altogether to mistake the situation.³

One more notable change in the life of the later Empire is the

² See Book xix, chap. 10 ff; especially chapters 15 and 16.

³ See the admirable essay by Overbeck, "Ueber die Verhältniss der alten Kirche zur Sklaverei im Römischen Reiche," in his *Studien zur Geschichte der alten Kirche*, pp. 158 ff., and Dill's *Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius*, p. 251 ff.

growing disrepute and final disappearance of the gladiatorial combats which formed so important a part of the public amusements of the Roman populace. This change, too, is commonly attributed to the influence of Christianity, and is said to be the fruit of the new emphasis which the Christians were laying upon the value of human life. In 325 the Emperor Constantine issued an edict prohibiting gladiatorial combats in time of peace (Theodosian Code, xv, 12, 1). Efforts had often been made by the government to regulate the sport and to reduce its dimensions, but this was apparently the first attempt to put a stop to it. That Constantine was led to issue his edict by the influence of Christianity is implied by Eusebius (*Vita Constantini*, iv, 25), and is commonly taken for granted by historians. But it should be noticed that it is not against gladiatorial combats in particular that the early Fathers directed their attacks, but against theatrical performances and public shows in general; the principal ground of offence being, not cruelty, but worldliness, licentiousness, and particularly the idolatry in which all the shows were involved (see, for instance, Tertullian's *De Spectaculis*). It may well be doubted, indeed, whether the early Christians in general actually attached any higher value to human life than their pagan contemporaries. Murder they regarded as a mortal sin, but so did every moralist of the age; and the notion of the sacredness and inviolability of human personality as such, which commonly underlies modern sentiment upon the subject, was as foreign to the Christian Fathers as to most of their contemporaries. Other sports and spectacles which Christian moralists denounced as vigorously as gladiatorial combats, Constantine apparently made no effort to suppress; and it may well be that in this case some other motive than Christianity moved him to the action he took. Gladiatorial shows were a survival of the age when Rome had large numbers of barbarian captives to draw upon for such purposes, and it may have seemed to a man of Constantine's wisdom, who was not afraid to break with old customs of which he did not approve, and who was interested to re-establish the peace of the Empire and to develop its resources, that such shows were bad both economically and socially. It is interesting to notice that it is only the occurrence of gladiatorial contests in times of

peace that seems to trouble him. He did not succeed in putting an end to them; they were still common later in the fourth century, at any rate in the West (compare the interesting account in Augustine's *Confessions*, vi, 8). According to Theodoret (*Church History*, v, 26) they were suppressed by Honorius in 404, and after that time we actually hear nothing more of them, though combats with beasts, often as bloody and almost as dangerous to human life as the gladiatorial contests, still continued, and the old theatrical performances, against which the Fathers, early and late, protested so vigorously, were apparently as popular and as largely attended as ever.

There are other lines along which it is commonly claimed that Christianity affected the Roman world for good. Thus it is said that it had large influence in promoting charity and in the establishment of public institutions of mercy such as hospitals, asylums, and houses of refuge of one kind and another. Undoubtedly this assertion is justified by the facts. From the very beginning, the Fathers laid emphasis on charity as a leading Christian virtue, insisting that Christians were under obligation to assist and befriend their fellow-disciples in all possible ways. And as the theory and practice of penance developed in the second and following centuries, charity became with prayer and fasting one of the principal means of securing atonement for one's sins. As Augustine remarks, almsgiving and fasting are the two wings upon which prayer flies to God. That this idea promoted the exercise of charity, particularly within the circle of Christian brotherhood, and that it did much to relieve suffering and distress, there can be no doubt. Such a work as Uhlhorn's *Christian Charity* gives abundant information, and in Harnack's *Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* there is an admirable and sympathetic presentation of the whole matter (Book ii, chapter 3).

It should not be imagined, indeed, that the pagan world was unfamiliar with philanthropy. Many of the great pagan moralists preached humanitarian principles of a high order, and humanitarian impulses existed then as always in civilized nations, and found expression in many private and public charities. At the same time it cannot be doubted that Christianity did much to

promote and foster such philanthropy. And although the interest of Christians was chiefly confined to relieving the necessities of their own Christian brethren, either by giving them work or helping them when they could not work, yet not infrequently, especially in times of public calamity, their good offices transcended the bounds of the church and took in the pagan world outside. The mutual love of Christian brethren and their exercise of charity toward those in need attracted the attention of pagan observers, and doubtless was one of the most engaging features of Christianity, especially to the poorer classes, and one of the most effective means of propaganda among them.

But there is another and less agreeable side to the matter. We come frequently upon the notion that charity is for the sake, not of the one that receives, but of the one that dispenses it; and the tendency of this idea was naturally to tolerate poverty, and to think of it with considerable complacency because it provided Christians with the opportunity of gaining merit for themselves by coming to its relief.⁴ Christian charity was not always directed toward the betterment of the condition of those whom it helped. The effect upon them was often a matter of indifference. The result of this kind of charity could in the long run only be disastrous economically and socially. The exercise of charity is in itself a beautiful thing, but, unless it looks consciously and intelligently to the permanent improvement of the lives of those it helps and to the ultimate removal of the conditions which make it necessary, it is inevitably pauperizing and economically demoralizing. That this was actually one of the results of the victory of Christianity within the Roman Empire there can scarcely be room for doubt. Poverty and suffering, at any rate within the Christian church, were relieved on a scale not seen before. And for this all credit is to be given to those Christians who thus manifested the spirit of Christian brotherhood. But that the Roman world at large and Roman civilization in general were permanently benefited more than harmed by this development is not altogether certain.

Again the influence of Christianity in elevating the position of

⁴See e.g. Cyprian, *On Work and Alms*; Chrysostom, *On Penance*, *Hom.* iii and vi; Salvian, *Against Avarice*.

woman and in promoting the sanctity and purity of home life is often referred to. But there is no evidence that the position of woman was appreciably higher in the later than in the earlier days of the Roman Empire. Her status under the Empire, both early and late, was better than it had once been. Her emancipation had begun long before the opening of the Christian era. But of a marked change between the first and fourth Christian centuries we have no knowledge. The idea of the equality of all Christians in the sight of God had probably as much influence in this regard as in the matter of slavery, but no more. And, on the other hand, the prevailing ascetic character of the Christianity of the age could not fail to react unfavorably at least in some respects upon the general estimate of woman and of her place in the world. Not simply was unchastity denounced as the worst of sins, but marriage itself was regarded as morally on a lower plane than celibacy and as little better than a concession to human weakness (see 1 Corinthians 7 9, which is simply an anticipation of the common patristic attitude on the subject). Such an opinion was hardly calculated to promote the dignity of woman, who was thus looked upon chiefly as a temptation to sin, and as a creature to be avoided by all who wished to live lives of special holiness. The effects of this ascetic spirit upon home life cannot have been altogether beneficial. Doubtless the vigorous and persistent campaign against sins of the flesh had good results; though the complacency of so noble a Christian woman as Monica toward the illicit relation sustained for many years by her son Augustine shows that the general standard of morality was not very different at the end of the fourth century from the beginning of the first. Many were undoubtedly kept from immorality by the influence of Christian principles; but the effect of the church's long insistence upon chastity as the supreme virtue seems to have been almost as much to break up the home by sending men and women into monasteries and convents as to promote the sanctity of the home itself and the purity of the marriage relationship.

It should not be overlooked in this connection that in the matter of divorce and remarriage the church took a strict position, and

threw the weight of its influence against the all-too-lax marriage laws of the Empire. But it is interesting to notice that this was not so much for the sake of preserving the sanctity of home and of the marriage bond as to hinder second marriages, which were regarded by many Fathers, even when the first marriage had been dissolved by death, as little better than adultery. Their teaching was, not that the marriage bond has eternal significance, but that to marry at all is less noble than to remain a celibate, and to marry twice is still worse.⁵ Ultimately, when marriage had come to be regarded as a sacrament—a development foreshadowed by the custom, which arose as early as the second century, of bringing Christian marriages under the control of the church—divorce leading to remarriage was prohibited altogether as a profanation of a sacred bond. But this belongs to a later period.

If, then, we can constitute with certainty no general and marked improvement in the social conditions of the Roman Empire the credit for which can be given unquestionably to Christianity, may we at least claim that the later Empire would have been much worse than it really was, had it not been for Christianity? This is a common assumption among historians. If the Roman Empire was not appreciably better in the fifth century than in the first, at least it would have been much worse had not Christianity exercised a restraining and conserving influence. Of course, in the very nature of the case, this opinion can neither be proved nor disproved. What might have been had Christianity not appeared upon the scene we can at best only conjecture. But the opinion is based upon a conception of the nature and purposes of the Christianity of that day whose soundness may be tested. Were the purposes and the ideals of Christianity, as it existed within the Roman world, of such a sort as to justify us in assuming that it must have constituted a preserving and conserving social force, that because of it the Empire lasted longer and was actually better than would otherwise have been the case? The investigation of this question will bring us nearer an answer to our general problem. We shall be in a better position to determine what Christianity actually did for the Roman Empire when we know what it tried

⁵ See Tertullian, *Ad Uxorem*, Book i; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, Book iii, chap. 1; Augustine, *De Bono Viduitatis*, etc.

to do; when we know what it was that its adherents, and particularly its leaders, set before themselves as their great end.

One of the most striking things about the early Christians is their almost total lack of social interests and ideals. The gospel of Jesus was pre-eminently a social gospel, but in the hands of his followers it lost its social emphasis and became individualistic and other-worldly to the last degree. Jesus was interested to promote the Kingdom of God, the reign of the spirit of brotherhood here and now. But to his immediate disciples the Kingdom was merely a future reality, to be established after the close of the present world. They lived wholly in the future, striving for nothing in the present except to prepare their friends and neighbors for the consummation by inducing them to repent and accept Jesus as the Messiah.

In the hands of Paul, Christianity became a means of redemption from sin. All men are evil, and doomed to destruction. Becoming united to Christ by faith, they are transformed from corrupt to holy beings, from sinners to saints, and are freed from death and made possessors of eternal life. The Christian is a supernatural being, superior to and separate from the things of this world, living still in the flesh to be sure, but waiting and yearning for his release from it and his enjoyment of the true life of the spirit in another sphere. Paul had large views about the conversion of the Roman Empire and the subjection of all things to the authority of Christ, but the world as he viewed it was essentially evil, and salvation, for Romans as well as Jews, lay only in escape from it by the power of the indwelling Spirit. He learned from Christ to make love the supreme virtue of the Christian life. It is in love for one's fellows, and particularly for one's Christian brethren, that the spirit of Christ in the disciple chiefly manifests itself. But even so, it is not in the improvement of social conditions, or in the promotion of the welfare of human life in this world, that he is interested. Love has significance rather for the one who loves than for the one who is loved. Its value lies not so much in what it effects as in what it expresses. And, in spite of Paul's emphasis upon love, and his assertion of its supreme place in Christian character, the subjection of the flesh to the spirit, manifesting itself in personal purity and holiness, is

equally essential. In fact, it is just this domination of the natural by the supernatural in the life of the individual in which salvation really consists. Paul was not an ascetic in any strict sense, but his underlying principle was ascetic in its tendency, and he showed distinctly ascetic leaning at times; and it is not an accident, nor is it due to the example of other movements, that asceticism early developed within the Christian church. The contrasts which Paul drew between the spirit and the flesh, between divine and human nature, between holiness and sin, between this world and another, all promoted the idea that the Christian life consists primarily in separation from this world and its interests, and in abstinence from its pleasures and indulgences. It was under the influence of his teaching that the author of the First Epistle of John wrote: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the vain-glory of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away and the lust thereof." From men dominated by such a conception as this little could be expected in the way of social service, or of effort for the amelioration of earthly conditions, economic, civil, or political. A man might be a useful citizen, he might interest himself in public affairs and devote his time and attention to the general good; but if he did, it was rather in spite of his Christianity than because of it. It was just this absence of public spirit, this indifference to the present because of absorption in the future, this disregard for or even hatred of earth because of love of heaven, that constituted the chief fault of Christianity in the eyes of its more intelligent opponents. Instead of making a man a better citizen and a more efficient public servant, Christianity often made him the opposite. That it did not always do so was because it was not always taken with sufficient seriousness by its adherents and was not always given complete control over their lives. In Macrobius's commentary on Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*, a pagan work of the early fifth century, there is an interesting illustration of the way in which religious contemplation, love of heaven, and superiority to the pleasures of earth, could yet be combined with a concern for the welfare of the present world and with a sense of obligation to labor for its

good.⁶ The contrast between this work and the common Christian attitude of the day is striking. Even after asceticism had developed into monasticism, not all Christians were monks; but monasticism was recognized as the one complete and consistent expression of the prevailing Christian ideal, and its leading representatives became the great heroes of the church. Nearly all the principal Fathers of the fourth and following centuries spent at least a part of their lives in the monastery, and many of them came back into the world to assume ecclesiastical positions of activity and responsibility only under protest and with the greatest reluctance.

It was the same general ideal of the Christian life that found expression in the celibacy of the clergy, which became common as early as the fourth century. If the clergy, charged as they were with active ecclesiastical duties in parish and diocese, could not live apart from the world, they could at any rate eschew the pleasures of the flesh, and by their chastity exemplify in a higher degree than the ordinary layman the Christian ideal shared by all. The sacredness of their calling demanded of them as consistent and thorough-going an expression of Christian principles as their duties permitted. Thus the bishop and the parish priest supplemented the inmate of the monastery in emphasizing and holding up before the world the Christian ideal of abstinence. Not to be a part of the world, but to be separate from it—this meant Christian holiness; and not to serve the world, but to rescue from its toils as many of one's fellows as possible—this meant Christian love.

For a long time the Christian church was a small institution, a mere handful of men and women in the midst of the teeming life of the vast Empire. And if it attracted notice at all, it was only to be hated by the populace and proscribed by the authorities. Under these circumstances it could perhaps hardly be expected that it would entertain any large ideals for the transformation of the life of the Empire and for the betterment of its social and economic conditions, and the utter lack of any hint of such ideals in the Christian literature of the second and third centu-

⁶ See an account of it in Dill's *Roman Society in the Last Century of the Western Empire*, p. 108 ff.

ries need not cause surprise. But the striking fact is that the Fathers of the fourth and following centuries, after Christianity had become the official religion of the Empire and was in a position to dictate imperial legislation and to dominate the life of the Roman world, are as silent as their predecessors. In their writings, too, there is a complete absence of any suggestion of a comprehensive ideal of social or economic reform. There is plenty of denunciation of vice in high and low life, plenty of commendation of the Christian virtues, particularly of purity and charity, but of anything like a notion that the life of the Empire is to be transformed there is not a trace. The victory of the church found it entirely unprepared to take advantage of its new opportunity. If, before the opportunity came, it had been really interested in the transmutation of this world into the Kingdom of God, if it had placed this before itself as an ideal and had reflected seriously upon it, it would have seized with enthusiasm the great chance given it by Constantine and his successors, and the Empire would really have been changed into some semblance, at least, of a truly Christian state. But of transformation on any large and comprehensive scale none of the Fathers of the day seems to have thought. They had plenty of interest in the church, in the purity of its doctrines, in the strictness of its discipline in the splendor of its ritual, in the perfection of its administration, in its general efficiency as a divine institution existing for the purpose of rescuing men out of a perishing world. But to the world itself they gave little heed. The government's change of attitude toward the church, and the final recognition of Christianity as the state religion, they regarded as a blessing chiefly because it involved advantages to the church. It was of the church they thought rather than of the Empire. To secure for the church protection from its enemies and freedom to do its own work, to secure the backing of the government and the credit and the influence which such backing meant, this is what the Fathers of the fourth and following centuries chiefly wished. Augustine's great work, *The City of God*, is a classic illustration of the general attitude. Not one kingdom, the Kingdom of God, of which all the kingdoms of the world are to be made a part, and into whose likeness they are all to be transformed, but two kingdoms, a heavenly and an earthly,

the Civitas Dei and the Civitas Terrena, representing two opposing principles and permanently alien to each other. Not the regeneration of the latter, but its subjugation and ultimate destruction, is the final purpose of God.

In view of the somewhat negative conclusions of the present paper the question may be asked, How did it happen that Christianity spread so rapidly within the Roman world, and eventually crowded paganism out and became itself the state religion? In throwing doubt upon the social benefits which accrued to the Empire from Christianity do we not make the explanation of its victory correspondingly difficult? It is impossible in this paper to enter into a detailed discussion of this large question, but a few suggestions may not be out of place.

In the early days of the Roman Empire conditions were altogether favorable to the spread of any religious movement. It was a time of restlessness, of curiosity, and of avidity for things new and strange. It was a time when the world was alive to many needs of which it had not hitherto been conscious. The sense of sin, the recognition of the evil of the present world and the desire for release from it, the craving for redemption from the corruption and limitations of the flesh, the longing for immortality—all these, and others of a less spiritual and ethical character, were becoming very common under the growing influence of the dualism and pessimism of the Orient, the shifting of old landmarks, and the breaking down of time-honored traditions and customs. The new needs were demanding satisfaction, and the result was a great revival of religious faith and sentiment. Old cults became vigorous again, taking on new forms fitted to meet the new needs, and foreign cults which had hitherto had little or no vogue beyond their native land were now seized upon eagerly and gained a world-wide following. The ease of communication within the bounds of the Empire, the great Roman roads binding the provinces together, the excellent police protection making travel safer than ever before, the prevalence of a common language, and the increasing uniformity of culture, made the growth of any world-wide movement easy, and promoted the spread of many faiths. From Syria and Persia and Egypt they swept over the Empire, finding ready access and eager acceptance

everywhere. The remarkable spread of Mithraism during the first three centuries of the Empire is an illustration of the general situation, and an instructive parallel to—and commentary upon—the growth of Christianity. Its popularity in some regions was for generations equal to that of Christianity or even greater, and at one time it seemed about to become the state religion. Christianity was thus one of many faiths appealing to the Roman world, and shared with them the favoring influence of existing conditions. But it is no accident that it became ultimately dominant and crowded all the others off the field. The consciousness of unity among its adherents, however widely separated, and the magnificent organization in which that unity early found expression, making of the movement a compact and well-disciplined army of aggression, undoubtedly had much to do with its great success. The self-consciousness and exclusiveness of the church, and the assured conviction of Christians that they and they alone were the chosen people of God—a conviction inherited from Judaism—was immensely imposing and impressive in that age of religious syncretism and of the easy tolerance of all sorts of divergent faiths. Here was a movement that claimed everything and granted nothing. Bitter hostility was aroused of course, but also fanatical devotion.

But it would be a great mistake to imagine that this was the whole of it. As a matter of fact, ancient Christianity won its victory chiefly because it had far more of the elements of power and permanence, combined a greater variety of attractive features, and satisfied a greater variety of needs than any other system. However alive we may be to its defects, and however much we may deplore them, we must recognize that its victory in the Roman Empire was fairly earned by sheer superiority.

When we look at the matter more closely we find that Christianity appealed to the ancient world in many ways and along many lines. For instance it made a strong and varied religious appeal. Its revelation of one God and of the possibility of communion with him, its promise of redemption from sin and from the evils of the flesh and the world, its assurance of a blessed future in heaven, its spiritual fervor and its mystical rites, all had influence. It was interpreted by its supporters both legally

and mystically. It was given by some a predominantly Jewish, by others an Oriental, by others a Greek character, and so it addressed itself to a great diversity of temperaments.

Then, too, although the interest of the early Christians in social reform was very slight, as has been seen, Christianity did make an appeal to the social instincts of multitudes, especially of the lower classes. The emphasis upon the principle of Christian brotherhood, the idea which existed from the beginning that all Christians were members of one family, the closely knit federation, the intimate association within the local churches, the common care for those in sickness or distress or poverty—all this, matter of common knowledge as it was, must have proved immensely attractive.

Again, Christianity appeared before the world as a philosophy, claiming to offer a solution of the great problems of the ages and to meet as no other system did the intellectual needs of man. There was, for instance, its monotheism, at a time when the tendency of the thinking world was all away from the traditional polytheism of the past; its definite account, based upon alleged divine revelation, of the origin and consummation of the present world; its clear conception of man's place in the universe; its recognition of virtue as the doing of God's will; its doctrine of immortality and of future rewards and punishments; its idea of Christ as a divine being come down from heaven, which made possible the development of an elaborate cosmology and system of redemption; its sacred books, inherited from the Jews, which might be interpreted allegorically, as the great Jewish sage Philo had already interpreted them, and thus constituted a rich storehouse of knowledge and abundant food for speculation. And with all this, it claimed to be the fruit, not of human reflection, but of immediate divine revelation, and thus to be in possession, as no other system was, of the qualities of universality and finality. To philosophers of very diverse interests and tendencies Christianity made its appeal, and thus became a religion, not for the ignorant and uneducated only, but for the learned and cultured of the earth. Its greatest rivals for the conquest of the world were Mithraism, which addressed itself particularly to the instincts and desires of the common man and offered practically nothing

to the philosopher, and Neoplatonism, which appealed to the philosophical classes of the Empire, but not to the populace. Christianity made the double appeal, appearing on the one side as a religion with a practical message to every man, low or high, and on the other side as a philosophy, rivalling the great systems of antiquity, supplementing and correcting them, and at the same time assimilating many of their most persuasive features. No movement can spread rapidly and widely unless it appeals to the common man; and no movement can establish itself firmly and permanently unless it wins the thinking classes, the intellectual leaders of the world. Christianity did both, and it achieved a victory denied to rival faiths.

Still more important was the moral appeal of Christianity. At a time when the need of moral reformation was becoming ever more widely felt, and when both religion and philosophy were beginning to take on an ethical character, Christianity proclaimed with emphasis a strenuous ideal, urged motives of the most compelling character, and offered new and efficient moral power. It came just at a time when the world was most alive to its moral need and most ready to respond to a vigorous moral summons. It is here that we are to find Christianity's greatest and most beneficent influence upon the life of the Roman Empire. Though the Fathers seem to have been devoid of any idea of recreating the Empire in the likeness of Jesus Christ, and though we may be unable to discover that Christianity was actually instrumental in raising the general level of life within the Roman world, or that it promoted in any appreciable degree its change into the Kingdom of God, we are justified in assuming that the lives of multitudes, even of those who did not embrace monasticism, were affected by it, and that for good. It is not so much that Christianity taught an entirely new moral ideal, for many of the virtues that seemed important to the Christian Fathers were recognized by other moral teachers of their own and earlier days. The principle of the brotherhood of man, and the resultant virtues of charity and humanity, were inculcated by the Stoics; and the superiority to the pleasures and pains of the present world evinced by them and by the Cynics was equal to that urged by the Christian Fathers, while asceticism of an extreme type was zealously

preached and practised by the Neopythagoreans. The difference between the Christians and the more serious-minded of their contemporaries was in part simply a matter of emphasis, chastity for instance being given greater ethical importance than it commonly had in the paganism of the age; in part it was due to the special merit attached by the Christians to certain virtues of the gentler sort, which were not always regarded as virtues in the Roman world, such as humility, self-distrust, patience under suffering, forbearance, forgiveness of injuries, self-effacement rather than self-assertion. Here, too, we find anticipations in the pagan systems of the age; but in general the Christian ideal of the good man is different at this point from the pagan, and the tendency of it was to develop a different type of character. This tendency was noticed already by Celsus in the second century, and was the ground of a severe criticism of Christianity for inculcating and cultivating a "slave morality." The general development of Roman life, involving the rise of the lower classes and the gradual breaking down of the old social distinctions, was favorable to the prevalence of the new ideal; and just how much influence in effecting the change is to be attributed to Christianity it is impossible to say. To what degree, indeed, the change was accomplished within the Roman world nobody knows. There can be no doubt that there is a difference, at least in the respect just mentioned, between the Christian ideal, as commonly understood both in the middle and modern age, and the prevailing ideals of the pagan world of antiquity; yet it is difficult to say even now to what extent our modern life is actually controlled by the self-denying or by the self-asserting impulse, and to determine the matter for the later Roman Empire is quite out of the question. One thing, however, is clear enough. The interpretation of the Christian life as primarily and controllingly a life of social service, an interpretation so wide-spread today, was practically unknown among the Christians of the Roman world, and whatever the contrast between the pagan and the Christian ideals of that day may have been, it did not lie here.

But of greater practical importance than any difference of ideal were the new moral enthusiasm and the new moral impulses which Christianity brought to the Roman world. The preaching

of the Christian system as a direct divine revelation, the emphasis upon future rewards and punishments, the insistence upon virtue as a means of salvation, the interpretation of God in moral terms, the appeal to the example of Christ and the saints, the idea of the Christian life as involving moral duties and obligations, and the exhortation to Christians to be worthy of their calling, although not all new to the pagan world, in their combination meant much for the promotion of better living. And, above all, the recognition of the moral possibilities of the lowest, and the belief that every man may be if he will a child of God, had tremendous influence in arousing moral enthusiasm among those classes to which the great pagan moralists made little or no appeal. To the power of these and similar motives within the Christian church itself we have abundant testimony in the writings of the Fathers, both early and late. However difficult it may be to show any large effect of Christianity upon the life of the Empire as a whole, there were certainly multitudes of men and women whom it led to strive, as they would not otherwise have striven, after virtuous living. It is in its effect upon such individual lives, whether it drove them into the monastery or quickened their moral impulses for their daily conduct in the world outside, that we are to see the real influence of Christianity within the Roman world, as we are to see the real interest of the Christians themselves. Even if society in general may not have been much improved, and even if the forces making for the increase of the public weal may not have been largely multiplied, still the lives of many individuals were made better and holier.

It is undoubtedly a great pity that the social interest of Jesus did not live on in his followers. And yet we should not too lightly condemn them. They did a great work in the moral sphere. Even though from the modern point of view their ethical ideals seem defective, and in some respects unwholesome, they actually succeeded in impressing upon their own and all succeeding ages the need of moral reformation, and in supplying new moral enthusiasm and power, and that certainly meant much.

But perhaps more directly effective than all the specific appeals of ancient Christianity, religious, social, philosophical and moral, was the contagion of its personal loyalty to Jesus. Multitudes

who but imperfectly understood his ideals and were far from being controlled by his spirit were devoted to him and to what they believed to be his cause. And the conviction of his divinity but strengthened this devotion and gave a peculiarly exalted character to it. Even martyrdom seemed easy to many. It was no mere abstract principle for which they suffered, but a revered leader, who they believed was really with them, and whose face they looked upon in the rapture of ecstatic vision. As has been already said, the victory of Christianity was not an accident. There was abundant reason why it should attract the people of the Roman world and why it should lay hold upon the consciences and hearts of multitudes.

The Emperor Augustus and many of his successors realized that the Roman Empire needed a common religion to bind together its many and heterogeneous elements. The worship of the Genius of Rome and the Emperor was developed in its early days, and did actually constitute for a long time a religious bond, typifying the unity of the Roman world and nourishing loyalty to it. But at best it was an artificial thing, superimposed upon existing faiths; and it promoted rather official and formal than inner and vital unity. But Christianity was a different thing. Christians were actually bound together in the closest possible fashion. Loyalty to Christ and to the Christian church and to their Christian brethren was a passion with them. There was in the new movement a principle of unity which fitted it to do for the Roman Empire what no other religion of the age possibly could; and the action of Constantine and his successors was inevitable. Once become too strong to be crushed and strong enough to be used by the imperial power, its destiny as the Roman state religion was assured. But the alliance after all was but external. Christianity had been too long an individualistic religion to become in any real and vital sense the religion of a state; and the Empire never became anything more than nominally Christian. Present as it was at the birth of the new Western civilization and of the new Western nationalities, Christianity has dominated modern Europe as it never did the Roman Empire. It is in this modern world, and not in the ancient world, that its influence on any large scale is to be discovered. Here it has actually been a force from the

beginning. We live in an age in which the social conscience has been highly developed, and in which the gospel, in accordance with the spirit of Jesus himself, is interpreted largely in social terms. From this point of view the Christianity of Europe and America is still evidently very defective, and yet our civilization may be called a Christian civilization, not to be sure in any very thoroughgoing sense, but, even so, far more truly than the civilization of the Roman world.