

PAGANISM AND CHRISTIANITY

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Paganism and Christianity by J. A. Farrer

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"Res ipsa, quae tunc religio Christiana mutabatur, erat apud antiquos nec defuit ab initio generis humani."—*St. Augustine.*

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INTRODUCTION

If any great classical writers of the ancient world, like Seneca or Cicero, could come to life again, nothing surely would astonish them more than the descriptions they might read in our books of the state of the world when they left it, of its moral depravity, and the absence of all religious ideas. One would gladly hear what they would say to it all; but, failing that, it only remains to enter as much as possible into their tone of thought, and to present the case between Christianity and Paganism as they might do if they could now speak for themselves, and had at their command eighteen centuries of Church history and all the writings of the Fathers and theologians.

In assuming on their behalf and in their stead this advocacy of a literature and philosophy, representing a civilisation to which we still owe the main and better elements of our own, I have simply endeavoured to put the case of pre-Christian Paganism in its best and truest light, and to meet and controvert a legion of writers from the time of

Eusebius to our own, who, in the zeal of their piety, have been wont to misrepresent the state of the older world, by the simple process of adding black to its places of darkest shadow, and of noticing in historical Christianity none but the regions of its higher lights. The task of correcting this view involves no reference whatever to Christianity as a religion; its sole concern is with such aspects of the history and teaching of the Church as touched, and therefore can be compared with, earlier systems of theology and ethics. For the claims of truth and justice must be paramount even here, though the matter only regards a long extinct philosophy and a system of belief or fancy whose sole remaining friends are among the poets. It must no longer suffice to conduct to a triumphant issue the comparison between Paganism and Christianity to contrast the worst practices or superstitions of the lower Pagans, not with the practices or superstitions of the Christians at all, but with the highest and unapproached ideals of the foremost Christian teachers; to be fair we must compare ideals with ideals, the best teaching of the one with the best teaching of the other, the Philosophers with the Fathers, in order to arrive at results which may correspond with real truth, not merely with foregone conclusions.

The fashion alluded to, of conveying a false impression of classical literature, coincides with that other modern fashion of depreciating its utility,

and both are phases of that ever-encroaching sacerdotalism of our time which is hostile to free inquiry into Church history or to a free use of the human reason in matters of doctrine. But a Protestant Christian who holds aloof from that vortex, and looks, with the complacency of a landsman on the toilers of the sea, upon the frivolities of theological controversy and upon the anathemas of the sects, may still assert the same freedom to form his opinion about the Fathers as about the Popes, and to scrutinise the primitive as closely as the mediæval Church. And from that standpoint it is necessary to refer briefly to the general history of the Catholic Church, in order to justify the conclusions suggested by the subsequent comparison between her teaching and the teaching of Philosophy.

It has long been a matter of general admission that, from the very infancy of the Church, questions of dogma and discipline came to be of paramount importance, whilst purity of life and action fell into a secondary position. A man's Christianity was measured less by his works than by his faith; and to think wrongly about the Trinity was soon esteemed more unchristian than to deal wrongly with a neighbour. Consequently the history of the Church became and remained the history of its extreme and more illiterate section; and, though in its turgid stream there always flowed a thin streak of the truer

Christianity, and of the spirit of its Founder, the gentler and more rational votaries of the new religion were too few or too weak to affect either its colour or its character; they either kept in the background or became outcasts and heretics. The fanatics carried all before them, and Christianity came to be represented in history, not by the more tolerant and liberal spirit of Origen, Hosius of Cordova, Synesius, Paul of Samosata, Vigilantius, or Pelagius, men who in becoming Christians still continued to recognise and retain the virtues of Paganism, but by the narrow, intolerant spirit which has made the names of Tertullian, Athanasius, Augustine, Jerome, Dominic, or Torquemada a disgrace, no less to human nature itself, than to the religion they so shamefully misconstrued and perverted. Whether the world would have fared any better had men of this latter type never been produced, no one of course can say with certitude; but I need not suppress my humble but strong conviction in favour of the opinion that it would.

The progress of the Church, till at least quite recent times, has ever been one uninterrupted triumph over the Broad Church or Rational school. Since the days when the bones of Origen were exhumed for imputed heresy—one of the most hateful incidents in the annals of orthodoxy—the more liberal school of theology has been in a constant minority. The purer ideas of the Divine attributes held by Marcion

gave way before the bad reasoning of Tertullian. The protests of Jovinian and Vigilantius against the abuses of monasticism and relic-worship were drowned in the torrent of Jerome's vituperation. The mere rational conclusions of Pelagius succumbed to the narrow notions of Augustine; whilst Cyril of Alexandria achieved an easy victory over his intellectual superior, Nestorius. Of course had it been otherwise, had the broader spirit prevailed, the history of Catholicism might have been, and no doubt would have been, a less appalling narrative than it is; but for purposes of comparison we must take facts as they are, nor seek to blink their significance by arbitrarily representing what is bad therein as only illustrative of the abuses, and not of the essence, of Catholicism as a factor in history.

Looking, however, in this way at the history of the Catholic Church as a whole, and perceiving therein between the spirit of Christ and the spirit of historical Christianity a difference amounting to absolute antithesis, I am free to doubt the extent of the benefit claimed for the world as a consequence of the triumph of the Church under Constantine and Theodosius, and to dispute the moral revolution said to have been effected by the final overthrow of Philosophy under Justinian. The problem is one chiefly of historical speculation, the interest of which is at least equalled by its complexity, and on which one